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THÈME : L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE LA LANGUE

L'hiver est froid, il a beaucoup de tempêtes et beaucoup de neiges. J'aime l'hiver. J'aime les flocons. les toitures son pleine de neiges.

Dominique, 2^e année



- ARTICLES ■ MÉMOIRES DE DEUXIÈME CYCLE
- TRAVAUX DE PREMIER CYCLE
- COMPTES RENDUS ■ ACTUALITÉS LINGUISTIQUES

NEARLY AND ALMOST: ALMOST THE SAME OR NOT NEARLY THE SAME?

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1. THE PROBLEM

One look in grammar books is enough to convince most readers that there is little difference between «almost» and «nearly». Quirk et al. (1985, 597) classify the two adverbs together, calling them 'approximators' or, more precisely, «downtoning approximators». Most other grammarians also lump the two together. In fact, preliminary research was unable to turn up any study devoted to differentiating the two. This raises a number of questions, including the following: Are the two adverbs interchangeable in all instances? If not, when and why do they assume different roles? What do «almost» and «nearly» mean?

2. THE EVIDENCE

A preliminary examination of the evidence in the «almost» and «nearly» case reveals that there is indeed a good deal of overlap between the two adverbs. For instance, it is extremely difficult to see a difference in meaning between the following pairs of sentences:

- (1a) I'm almost done with my book.
- (1b) I'm nearly done with my book.

- (2a) She was nearly crying.
- (2b) She was almost crying.

In each case, the subject is close to realizing the targeted event (i.e. finishing the book or crying), but still short of realization.

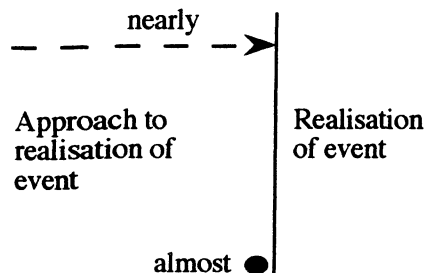
However, there are certain circumstances in which «almost» and «nearly» are not interchangeable. Consider the following utterances:

- (3a) You very nearly killed my friend.
- (3b) *You very almost killed my friend.

Although 3a is grammatically acceptable, 3b is impossible. This shows us that «nearly» is a degree word, a word which can be modified by an intensifying adverb, while «almost» is not. This difference in turn allows us to further distinguish between the two words. In order for «nearly» to operate as a degree word, we must be able to apply it to any one of a variety of different positions as long as they are approaching a goal. After all, one needs to postulate the existence of a number of possible positions to make room for both «nearly» and 'very nearly'. «Almost», on the other hand, has no such potential. The fact that it does not accept intensification suggests that it can only be said of a single position in the approach to a goal and its apparent synonymy with 'very nearly' suggests that this position is the final one before realization of an event or attainment of a goal. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers support for this hypothesis when it gives 'very nearly' as a possible definition of «almost».

The following diagram, Fig. 1, provides an illustration of the differences between «nearly» and «almost» outlined thus far:

Figure 1



Negation is another key which allows us to see a difference between «almost» and «nearly». When «nearly» is negated, as in 4a, the movement towards the targeted event is reversed and the subject ends up far from realization of the event, as opposed close to it. Negating «almost», however, produces some very strange results indeed. In fact, in most instances, the negation of «almost» results in an unacceptable utterance.

- (4a) That is not nearly enough.
 (4b) *That is not almost enough.

The negation of «nearly» is grammatically acceptable since the reversal of the movement towards the targeted event is possible. However, the negation of «almost» cancels the only position which the word can occupy, thus leaving it with no position at all, whence the unacceptability of 4b.

Another argument in favour of seeing «almost» as distinct from «nearly» emerges from utterances in which a sense of comparison is conveyed. Consider the following examples:

- (5a) It's almost as if you had some personal stake in this matter.
 (5b) It's nearly as if you had some personal stake in this matter.

While both utterances are grammatically acceptable, 5b is somewhat peculiar. Moreover, examples in which «nearly» plays a comparative role proved hard to find. This would suggest that «nearly» is somehow unsuited to sentences in which comparing two elements is the goal. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides a clue to this mystery when it offers the phrase 'all but' as a definition of «almost». Since a comparison of very similar things involves a search for the 'closest thing to', «almost», the closest point to complete identicalness, is the logical choice. On the other hand, «nearly», which can be applied to a variety of positions in the approach to the targeted event, is poorly suited to comparison of two very similar elements because it leaves room for an undetermined number of differences. This is brought out in the following examples:

- (6a) The dog is almost a regular member of the family now.
 (6b) The dog is nearly a regular member of the family now.

The first utterance suggests that the dog has virtually attained the status of «regular member of the family» by being the next thing to it. However, 6b implies that the dog is actively working its way towards that status, whence its unusualness. (Dogs do not normally work towards being a member of the family).

Another piece of the «almost» and «nearly» puzzle can be found in the following pair of sentences in which «almost» and «nearly» produce quite distinct expressive effects:

- (7a) Is this almost enough?
(7b) Is this nearly enough?

In 7a the speaker probably feels that there is enough of whatever is being collected and is simply seeking confirmation of his view from someone else. «Almost» conveys the idea that the speaker wishes to indicate that he is as close as possible to the target amount. In fact, the utterance is very close in meaning to *Is this enough?* The presence of «almost» is merely a rather polite addition which leaves room for the person responsible for making a decision to call for a bit more. With «nearly» we have the feeling that the speaker is far from certain that he has enough. He is in his approach to the goal, does not know exactly where, and does not consider himself to be at the end of his labours, hence the nuance of speaker frustration which one can feel with 7b, but not with 7a. Quite clearly, «nearly» is much more of a true approximator than «almost». While «nearly» evokes one position out of many possible positions, «almost» evokes a single position which is the final one in the approach to realization of the event. It is probably owing to these differences that it is more common to find «nearly» when approximations are made using figures (ex. nearly one in twenty, nearly thirty-five times a day), and «almost» when the speaker has a clear position in mind (ex. *Are you almost done?* meaning Have you reached the end? as opposed to *Are you nearly done?* meaning Are you getting near the end?)

3. CONCLUSION

Many of the questions raised earlier can now be answered. First of all, «almost» and «nearly» are not interchangeable in all instances. In fact, the adverbs are interchangeable only in cases in which we have an event that can be situated either in a movement towards a limit or in the final instant before the limit with little or no change in expressive effect. As soon as specialization is called for, one adverb or the other usually proves to be more appropriate. «Almost», being the final point in the movement towards a limit or goal, is better suited for comparison and for suggesting virtual attainment of a target. On the other hand, «nearly», evoking a possible point in the movement towards a goal, is more appropriate when it comes to approximating and to focussing on the act of approaching a goal. In light of this evidence, we can conclude that the term «downtoning approximator», suggested by Quirk et al. for both «almost» and «nearly», is more accurately applied to «nearly» alone, the truer approximator of the pair.