

**Almost and**

**Barely in**

**Rhetoric**

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## 1. Introduction

Compare the following two sentences:

- (1) Richard almost passed his UG exam, he will probably get his bachelor's degree by the end of the year.
- (2) Richard barely passed his UG exam, he will have trouble getting his bachelor's degree by the end of the year

In the first sentence, the subject technically did not pass his exam. The word *almost* implies that he came close, but failed. Despite this negative result, a positive prediction for the rest of his studies is a logical follow-up to this statement. If we look at the second sentence, we see that the exact opposite is the case. The word *barely* implies that Richard did pass his UG exam, albeit not very convincingly. Even though the grade was sufficient in this case, the logical follow-up is a negative prediction for the rest of his studies.

The observation made above forms the basis for this paper. I am especially interested in the reasons why people formulate sentences with semantic elements like *almost* and *barely*. In the example sentences it seems as if the first parts are statements that are used as indirect arguments for the second parts, which in turn can be seen as conclusions. So the fact that Richard almost passed his exam supports the conclusion that he will receive his bachelor's degree by the end of the year. In normal everyday language use, however, the argumentation does not necessarily have to be as clear and complete as in these examples. The following sentence was taken randomly from the internet:

- (3) Jakob Nielsen's site has *almost* no graphics because fast download times are the number one criterion for Web usability [italics added, RvG]

From (3) we can conclude two things, in the first place that Jakob Nielsen's site is fast to download and from this conclusion it also follows that it must be a good site. These conclusions, however, are left implicit in the source text.

In this paper I will start out with a brief sketch of the semantics of *barely* and *almost*, and I will show that the semantics alone does not provide a satisfying answer to the question why people would want to use these words. After the semantics has been discussed, the focus

of this paper will shift towards argumentation theory. I will discuss the role that these words can play in argumentation and I will explain how this actually works from the perspective of a speaker with the help of Optimality Theory. This paper will provide an answer to the question why people would want to make use of these particular words in the context of their argumentation.

## **2 The semantics of *almost* and *barely***

In this chapter I will try to determine the exact meaning of *almost* and *barely*. As will become clear, the two words have a lot in common. *Almost* will be under discussion first, after that, the focus will shift towards *barely*. I will conclude the chapter with a discussion of how the exact meanings of *barely* and *almost* can help us in determining why a language user would want to use either of these words.

### **2.1 *Almost***

To begin, take a look at the following sentence pairs:

- |                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| (4) a. It is six o'clock         | b. It is <i>almost</i> six o'clock         |
| (5) a. The victim was dead       | b. The victim was <i>almost</i> dead       |
| (6) a. John scored a goal        | b. John <i>almost</i> scored a goal        |
| (7) a. Hugh never drives his car | b. Hugh <i>almost</i> never drives his car |

The a-sentences all contain simple statements in which something happens or occurs. If we now turn to the b-sentences, one might say that by implementing an instance of 'almost' the statements of the a-sentences have been negated on a logical level in the b-sentences. In (4), 'almost six o'clock' means that it is *not* six o'clock (yet); in (5) 'almost dead' means that the victim was *not* dead (yet); in (6) 'almost scored a goal' in effect comes down to the fact that John did not score a goal and in (7) 'almost never' means that Hugh does drive his car occasionally. Everything that comes to pass in the a-sentences technically does not come to pass in the b-sentences. However, as the instances of 'yet' in parentheses already indicated, *almost* does entail that the event which it seems to negate is never far away from occurring. In formal semantics it is said that the b-sentences constitute a world that is minimally different from the world of the a-sentences. If the world of the b-sentences were to be changed just the tiniest bit, it would be exactly the same as the world of the a-sentences.

In Penka (2006) it is attempted to come to a formal semantic definition of *almost*. Penka argues that the semantics for *almost* is similar to that of other operators like *only*, *at least*, *at most* and *more than*.

*Almost* operates on a certain scale:

A sentence in which *almost* modifies an expression P entails the truth of a corresponding sentence without almost in which P is replaced by a value close by, but lower on the scale associated with P. (Penka 2006, pp 4-5)

With an example:

(8) John picked almost 1000 apples yesterday.

Sentence (8) entails that a certain number of apples was picked by John, that certain number being close to but lower than 1000. Penka stipulates furthermore that the semantics of *almost* involves alternatives that are ordered on a so-called Horn scale. This scale is ordered by the entailment relation in such a way that a certain element on the scale entails all the elements that are ranked lower on that scale as well. In Horn (1972) these scales are related to quantifiers as well as scalar predicates. An example of such a scale is the following list of quantificational elements: *one – some/a few – several – many – half – most/the majority – all/every*. Every item on this list logically entails the items to the left of it. So if it is the case that ‘many girls are clever and seductive’, then it is also the case that ‘some girls are clever and seductive’ (Horn 1972, pp 57-61). Taking all of this into consideration, Penka composes the following formula for the semantics of *almost*:

(9)  $[[\text{almost}_{\approx}]] = \lambda w. \lambda p_{\langle s, t \rangle}. \neg p(w) \ \& \ \exists q [ q \approx p \ \& \ q(w) ]$

The symbol  $\approx$  is used to signify the ‘close-by’ relation.

The formula in (9) ensures that the proposition *almost p* is true if and only if p itself is false in the actual world, but there is an alternative proposition that is close by to p and that is true. The requirement in 7 that p is false ensures that only alternatives that are lower on the scale can be true. If we try to apply this formula to our example in (8), we get the following analysis (assuming that *almost* means a deviation of 10, for convenience):

- (10) a     John picked almost 1000 apples yesterday  
       b     { p | p = that John picked n apples,  $990 \leq n \leq 1010$  }  
       c      $\neg$  (John picked a 1000 apples) & John picked n apples,  $990 \leq n < 1000$

Penka concludes her article with:

According to this semantics, *almost* refers to alternatives on a Horn scale and signifies that some alternative close by on the scale is true. (Penka 2006, pp 10-11)

So according to this formal definition, the semantics of *almost* holds that there is a certain scale that is associated with proposition *p* (for example a number of apples that has been picked), and *almost p* means that an alternative value that is close to *p* and that is lower on the scale than *p* itself is true. This certain proposition can be seen as a context specific end point (in our example the number of one thousand apples) on the scale that is approximated by these alternative values.

A somewhat less strict definition of the semantics of *almost* can be found in Nouwen (2006). Nouwen makes a distinction between two different approaches to the semantic definition of *almost*: (I) the intensional approach and (II) the scalar alternative approach. The latter is the same as Penka's, the intensional approach, however, is defined as follows:

*Almost p* is true if and only if there is a world which is not very different from the actual world in which *p* is true (Nouwen 2006, pp 4-5)

At first glance, the intensional approach seems far more difficult to use, because it is harder to determine how closely two possible worlds resemble each other, than it is to compare two values on a certain scale to each other. Consider for example the next sentence, found in an online version of the film script of the movie *Almost Famous*:

(11) She's *almost* to her bedroom down the hall when mom catches her [italics added, RvG]

In (11) there is a certain end point, the bed room, and the proximity to it can be easily placed on an imaginary scale. Say that the distance from the front door to the bed room door is 15 meters, then according to the scalar alternative approach 'almost to her bed room' would be true once the girl is within two metres from her bed room door. A problem is posed, however, once *almost* modifies a proposition that is not so easily placed on a certain scale. Take for example the next sentence, taken from random Google-searches on instances of *almost*:

(12) This blog has become *almost* a diary [italics added, RvG]

It is very difficult to imagine a scale of proto-typicality for diaries. For such an analysis one would like measurable or quantifiable exemplars which one can place on this scale. For these cases the intensional approach comes in handy. Analyzing ‘almost a diary’ becomes less troublesome if we try to imagine a world in which we have a diary and if we compare this world to a world where we have a blog that has a lot of the characteristics that we would normally ascribe to diaries, yet the blog does not have all characteristics. Even though this approach still requires some imaginative power for analyzing *almost p*, it is still more workable than to try and think up a scale for a set of properties that cannot be scalarized easily.

In the remainder of this paper we will mainly see example sentences that can be analysed in the scalar alternative approach. It should also be noted that it is always possible for qualitative differences, like those between a blog and a diary, to be quantified so that they can be placed on a scale. Therefore the difference between the two approaches that Nouwen makes might be smaller than he assumes.

## **2.2 Barely**

We now turn to *barely*, which has been studied less than *almost*. This does not necessarily have to be a problem. In effect, *barely* can be analyzed in the exact same way as *almost*. It modifies the word group to which it attaches in precisely the same way, the only difference being that it has the exact opposite semantic effect on a sentence.

Again, take a look at the following sentence pairs:

- |                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| (13) a. It was six o'clock        | b. It was <i>barely</i> six o'clock       |
| (14) a. The victim was dead       | b. The victim was <i>barely</i> dead      |
| (15) a. John scored a goal        | b. John <i>barely</i> scored a goal       |
| (16) a. Hugh never drives his car | b. Hugh <i>barely</i> ever drives his car |

The difference between the a-sentences and the b-sentences in this case lies only in the extra information in the b-set that the event or happening *only just* were the case or has *only just*



will focus on the use of *barely* and *almost* in argumentation.

### **3 The rhetoric of almost and barely**

In this chapter I will start out with a brief sketch of argumentation theory. After that I will show how the words *almost* and *barely* exactly fit into an argumentation and what the rhetorical effect is. I will conclude this chapter with a discussion of how the argumentative value of these words explains why people would want to use either of them.

#### **3.1 Argumentation theory**

The basic idea of argumentation theory is that the speaker or writer makes a certain statement for which it is not the case that the hearer or reader will automatically believe that statement to be true. An argumentation in its most basic form consists of two parts: a statement (also known as claim or conclusion) and an argument that supports the statement. A reader should not only be able to spot an argumentation, he should also be able to decide whether an argumentation is valid. In order to make this decision, an argumentation has to obey the following rule (Van Eemeren 1996, pp 6-13):

- (19) the argumentation has to be valid, meaning that the conclusion has to follow from the arguments

An example of an argumentation that follows this rule can be analysed as follows:

- (20) premise 1: If I do not feel better by tonight, then I will call in sick tomorrow  
premise 2: I do not feel better by tonight
- 

conclusion: I will call in sick tomorrow

On a more abstract level, the scheme can be represented as follows, this particular argumentative scheme is also known as a modus ponens:

(21)           premise 1:    If A is the case then B is the case  
                  premise 2:    A is the case

---

                  conclusion:   B is the case

The validity of an argumentation does not guarantee that the argumentation is plausible nor that it is true. If you want an argumentation to have these characteristics, you have to have two premises that are true. If someone would argue the following:

(22)           premise 1:    If you hear a dog barking then it is a pit bull  
                  premise 2:    I hear a dog barking

---

                  conclusion:   It is a pit bull

We know that the barking does not necessarily have to be done by a pit bull, because it could have been any kind of dog that was barking. Even though in this case the argumentation is valid, the conclusion does not have to be true. In other words, premise 1 does not necessarily have to be true (in fact, it probably is not) and therefore the conclusion does not have to be true either. The argumentation, however, is still valid.

In everyday language use the first premise is often left implicit. Making every premise explicit for each argumentation would make everyday language a very tedious and lengthy business. This does however cause a problem: what should a hearer or reader make of all these incomplete and therefore invalid argumentations? The solution is simple, each hearer validates argumentations that lack the first premise themselves, making the argumentation sound, without the speaker having to make premise 1 explicit each and every time he wants to make his point. The possibility to leave this first premise implicit entails that speakers assume this premise to be a (universal) truth, one that is valid in general and that is shared at least by both speaker and hearer. And something that is already known by your conversational partner does not necessarily need to be spoken out loud.

## **3.2 Almost and barely in argumentation**

### **3.2.1 Almost in argumentation**

We will now determine what kind of effect an instance of *almost* has on a sentence and how this can be interpreted in the context of an argumentation. If we now take a look at sentences that contain *almost* in the context of an argumentation we get an argumentative scheme that starkly resembles a modus ponens, since it follows the same line of argumentation. We are dealing, however, with a somewhat modified version of a modus ponens. The second premise is not A, but ‘almost A’, yet it still leads to the same conclusion B:

- (23) premise 1: (If it is six o'clock, then we have to go)  
premise 2: It is almost six o'clock
- 

conclusion: (We better go)

The parentheses indicate that these parts of the argumentation are left implicit. This means that hearers in this case not only need to construct premise 1 from the context, they also need to figure out the conclusion. As we can see in scheme (23), the use of *almost* causes some slight variation in the formulation of premise 2 and of the conclusion as compared to premise 1. The formulation of the argumentation is now less strict and a bit more suggestive than a formulation without *almost*. Also, when one would just say “It is six o'clock”, this sentence is harder to interpret in an argumentative context once the conclusion is left implicit.

It is, however, not always the case that an instance of *almost* can be interpreted in the context of an argumentation. Consider the next sentence, which we already know from the previous chapter, repeated here as (24):

- (24) She's *almost* to her bedroom down the hall when mom catches her [italics added, RvG]

The girl is coming home late and she is being caught by her mother, in this case *almost* is again used in combination with an end point (her bedroom), but there is no possibility of creating an argumentative context here. A plain and simple observation is made, nothing more

and nothing less. If we try and place (24) in an argumentation scheme, half of it would be empty:

- (25) premise 1: (If she is to her bedroom, then...?)  
premise 2: She is almost to her bedroom
- 

conclusion: (...?)

So we see that it is possible for a language user to use *almost* in an argumentative context as well as out of an argumentative context.

When *almost* is used in an argumentative context the rhetorical effect of *almost* is the following. The speaker wants to convince the hearer to come to a certain conclusion B. His tool for doing so is the argumentative scheme (21) that we have seen in the previous section:

- (21) premise 1: If A is the case, then B is the case  
premise 2: A is the case
- 

conclusion: B is the case

As long as the speaker can make use of premises that are true in the real world, there is not really a problem yet. A problem arises once there is a premise 2 that is not entirely true in the real world, while at the same time the speaker still wants his hearer to come to conclusion B. Were the speaker still to present premise 2 as a valid argument, he would be lying. This is of course not a preferable situation, since a lie is usually easy to detect and will not only result in the hearer not coming to the desired conclusion, it will even cause distrust in the hearer towards the speaker. The speaker also wants to keep his argumentation as valid as possible. If the argumentation is invalid, it is not logical for a hearer to come to the desired conclusion. So in the context of our problem, stating the truth (that A is not the case), will definitely not lead the hearer to conclusion B. The best solution to the problem of the hearer is to bend the truth in his advantage by stating ‘almost A’. Even though A is not the case, the speaker creates the illusion that it is the case, therefore leading the hearer to conclude that B is the case.

So in effect, *almost* helps in directing the interpretation of the hearer towards a certain conclusion that is not supported by reality. This conclusion can be left implicit. How the

speaker comes to a formulation with *almost* is discussed in the next chapter, but we will first take a look at *barely* in argumentation.

### 3.2.2 *Barely* in argumentation

Looking at sentences that contain *barely* in the context of an argumentation, we can analyze them in an argumentative scheme that does not exactly mirror that of *almost*. Where ‘almost A’ functions as an approximation of A, ‘barely A’ rather functions as an approximation of not A. In this light, in order to analyze *barely* we have to adapt the argumentation scheme in the following way to keep the argumentation neat and valid:

(26) premise 1: If A is not the case, then B is not the case  
premise 2: A is not the case

---

conclusion: B is not the case

With an example:

(27) premise 1: (If John does not score a goal, then he is not a good striker)  
premise 2: John barely scored a goal

---

conclusion: (John is not such a terrific striker)

We see here that *barely* has a similar argumentative effect as *almost*. In the case of argumentations that contain an instance of *barely* the first part of premise 1 is again not true in the real world (in (27) John did score a goal), therefore there is no solid argument for the hearer to come to conclusion ‘not B’. The problem for the speaker however, is that he does want the hearer to conclude ‘not B’ for whatever reason. In order to achieve his argumentative goal, he needs to alter premise 2 in a plausible way that the hearer will be led to conclude ‘not B’. The problem that the speaker is posed with is similar to the problem with *almost*. If the speaker would state that John did not score a goal, he would be lying. Were he to state that John did score a goal, the hearer will not conclude that John is a bad striker, so the best solution to the speaker’s problem is to state that John *barely* scored a goal. The speaker does tell the truth in a way, yet the hearer will conclude that John is a bad striker.

For the sake of completeness: just like *almost*, *barely* can also be used in a non-argumentative way. In a sentence like “He had barely finished his plate when his girlfriend called” we can imagine someone who has just finished his meal and then his girlfriend calls. In this context there is no clue whatsoever that we are dealing with an argumentation of any kind, it is just a plain account of what happened, nothing more, nothing less.

So *barely* helps in directing the hearer towards a certain conclusion that is not supported by reality. This conclusion can be left implicit. Again, how the speaker comes to a formulation with *barely* is discussed in the next chapter.

### 3.2.3 Why *almost* and *barely*?

As we have seen earlier on in this section, *almost* is not only used in argumentative contexts. The reason for a speaker to say *almost* can be merely of an economic nature. It is, for instance, far more efficient to say “This blog has become almost a diary” than “This blog has taken on a lot of properties that diaries have as well, yet it is still a blog”. It takes far less time to simply build the utterance around a certain end point than it takes to describe and fully spell out the comparison that is being made between a blog and a diary here. As we have seen in section 2, even though a diary might not be a clearly defined end point, as hearers, we are able to think up two comparable worlds. One world in which we have an object which has all the specific characteristics of a diary, and one world in which we have an object which has all the specific characteristics of a diary minus one of those characteristics. (Nouwen 2006, p 5). This last world is the world of ‘almost a diary’.

If we now turn to the use of *almost* in argumentation and the reasons for people to use *almost*, we see that it can sometimes be better to say ‘almost A’, than just plainly state B (see 21, repeated here for convenience) for other than economical reasons.

(21) premise 1: If A is the case, then B is the case  
premise 2: A is the case

---

conclusion: B is the case

To illustrate this point, take a look at the following example, which is a pretty transparent yet popular advertising strategy:

- (28)           premise 1:   If this box of cookies is cheap, then you should buy it  
                  premise 2:   This box of cookies is cheap
- 

                  conclusion:   You should buy this box of cookies

This is a pretty valid argumentative scheme, yet one might question its effectiveness in the real world. The speaker wants the hearer (and buyer in this case) to arrive at the conclusion that he should buy this product without having to be too explicit in his argumentation. As soon as one has to be too explicit, the advertisement will be less powerful and less convincing. Yet when one only states the conclusion B, one does not provide the hearer with a solid foundation for buying the product. There is not enough argumentative support for the hearer to be convinced that he should indeed buy that box of cookies; he does not automatically ‘buy’ the conclusion without any supporting arguments.

If we now reformulate the argumentation with an instance of *almost* we get something like the following scheme:

- (29)   premise 1:   If this box of cookies costs nothing, you want to buy it.  
          premise 2:   This box of cookies costs almost nothing
- 

                  conclusion:   You want to buy this box of cookies

If an advertiser would now use only premise 2 as a slogan, a hearer will be far more easily led to draw his own conclusions. He is provided with a tempting argument for buying the box of cookies. This line of argument is more convincing than the one in (28).

If we try to apply this way of thinking to our example “It’s almost six o’clock”, we get a similar result. When you are sitting at home with your partner and you ‘suddenly’ say “We have to go”, it might be a bit confusing for your partner, and his or her first reaction might be “Why? What’s the matter?”, since you do not provide any reason at all for producing this bold statement. It is difficult for your partner to immediately understand where this utterance comes from and to see what is behind it. Whereas if you were to say “It’s almost six o’clock”, your partner will automatically try and look for a reason for you to say this and chances are that he or she will remember that you were going to a dinner party later on and that you were planning to leave at six and that you should probably get ready to go.

In the same vein, for *barely* it can be better to say ‘barely A’ than ‘not B’. This can be illustrated by the same example, with a little twist:

- (30) premise 1: If this box of cookies does not cost a thing, you do not want to leave it on the shelf  
premise 2: This box of cookies barely costs a thing
- 

conclusion: You do not want to leave it on the shelf

You still have to pay for the box of cookies, yet a formulation with *barely* guides the hearer straight towards conclusion ‘not B’. He now wants to purchase that box of cookies.

## **4. An Optimality Theoretic account**

In the previous sections we have seen how *almost* and *barely* work in rhetoric. We have also seen that in an argumentative context, formulation with *almost* and *barely* can be more convincing than formulations that do not contain an instance of *almost* or *barely*. We will now look more closely at the production part of both elements. We will discuss the different options that a speaker has in argumentation and we will see how he comes to an output containing *almost* or *barely*. The speaker's perspective will be analysed within an optimality theoretic framework, which will be introduced shortly first.

### **4.1 Optimality Theory**

Optimality Theory (OT) explains language phenomena in terms of violable constraints. These constraints express general statements with respect to language and they can be in conflict with each other. The constraints are ordered in a constraint hierarchy on the basis of their strength. Constraints that are higher in the hierarchy should be satisfied more than constraints that are lower in the hierarchy. OT specifies the relation between the input and output. For each input, several possible output candidates are evaluated against the constraints. The output that satisfies the ranked constraints best emerges as the optimal output for the given input (Prince and Smolensky 1993). Optimality Theory has been used first in the field of phonology and has later been applied to syntax and pragmatics/semantics as well. OT has not been applied to the field of argumentation theory or rhetoric before.

In an optimality theoretic account of rhetoric, the input is made up of the intention of the speaker to convince the hearer of a certain conclusion, given a certain situation in the real world. For instance, if a speaker wants to convince a hearer of the fact that John is a good striker and his argument is that John scored a goal, the situation in the real world must be in accordance with the intention of the speaker. If John has not scored a goal, the speaker's intention to reason that John is a good striker is not supported by reality, therefore his argumentation would be rather futile. The candidates in an optimality theoretic account of rhetoric are made up of possible arguments in the form of statements that should lead the hearer to come to the speaker's intended conclusion. In our example of John being a good striker, (relevant) possible candidates would be, for example, "John scored a goal", "John did not score a goal", "John almost scored a goal" or "John barely scored a goal". Let us now see how an OT analysis of rhetoric works in practice.

## 4.2 Producing almost and barely in rhetoric

In section 3.2.1 we have already seen the problems that arise in argumentation once there is a premise 2 that is not true in the real world, while at the same time the speaker still wants his hearer to come to conclusion B. The speaker does not want to lie, yet he still wants to keep as close to a valid argumentation as possible. In this communicative situation of the speaker there are several possible statements that he can make in order to try and convince the hearer of a certain conclusion. These statements and their consequences are summed up below:

For *almost*:

- 1) Stating “A” => you are lying, but the hearer will conclude “B”
- 2) Stating “not A” => you are telling the truth, but the hearer will not conclude “B”
- 3) Stating “almost A” => you are not lying, but the hearer will conclude “B”
- 4) Stating “B” => you are not lying, but the hearer will not be convinced, because you have not provided him with a proper argument

For *barely*:

- 1) Stating “A” => you are telling the truth, but the hearer will conclude “B”, which you do not want to happen
- 2) Stating “not A” => the hearer will conclude “not B”, but you are not telling the truth
- 3) Stating “barely A” => you are telling the truth and the hearer will conclude “not B”
- 4) Stating “not B” => you are not lying, but the hearer will not be convinced, because you have not provided him with a proper argument

These options for the speaker are the possible output candidates. An analysis of the consequences of each of these options gives us the following constraints that will regulate the output that the speaker will generate in order to convince the hearer of a certain conclusion:

\*LIE: speak the truth

GIVE-ARG: provide an argument for the conclusion

EFCY: efficiency; be as efficient as possible in your argumentation, do not use more argumentative elements than needed

EXPL: explicitness; be explicit in your argumentation, do not beat around the bush

If we now put the possible outputs that a speaker has for his argumentation in an OT tableau against the constraints, we get the following result for *almost*:

Tableau 1:

Input: intention to convince hearer of “B”; given that A is not true, that A is almost true and that if A then B all hold in the real world	*LIE	GIVE-ARG	EFCY	EXPL
A	*!			*
not A		*!		*
☞ almost A				*
B		*!		*
almost A, so B			*	

Under this ranking of the constraints, given the input, stating “Almost A” is the optimal output for a speaker to convince the hearer of B. Just uttering “A” is rejected, because this violates the highest ranked constraint \*LIE. Saying “not A” and stating “B” are rejected, because both outputs violate GIVE-ARG because they do not provide the hearer with a proper argument in favour of the conclusion “B”. Our optimal output, saying “almost A”, comes forward as the best option. In this tableau a fifth option stating “almost A, so B” is considered as well, yet this one is less optimal than “almost A”, because it is a less efficient argumentation: more argumentative elements are being used than should be needed to convince a hearer. Even though this last candidate output is more explicit than “almost A”, it is still rejected because it violates a higher ranked constraint (EFCY).

If we now try to apply this to the next sentence, found in a random Google search on instances of *almost*:

- (31) Good performance and almost no downtime. *Said in an advertisement for a certain web-server.*

The part “almost no downtime” can be analysed in an argumentative context as follows:

- (32) premise 1: If the server has no downtime, it is a good server  
 premise 2: The server has almost no downtime

conclusion: It must be a good server

And in an OT tableau:

Tableau 2:

Input: convince hearer that the server is good; given that the server does have downtime, but not a lot and given that if a server has no downtime, it is a good one	*LIE	GIVE-ARG	EFCY	EXPL
The server has no downtime	*!			*
The server has downtime		*!		*
☞ The server has almost no downtime				*
The server is good		*!		*
The server has almost no downtime, so it must be a good one			*	

As you can see, given that the input does reflect reality, the first candidate does not reflect the reality, so it is a lie. The second candidate will not convince the hearer to buy or use the server: it gives the feeling that the server is down more often than not. Candidate 4 makes you think “what makes this server that good then?” and simply does not provide enough information. Candidate 5 is a bit of a lengthy formulation, compared to candidate 3, the optimal one. This optimal output allows the hearer to draw his conclusions on his own, which is always better than being force-fed a certain conclusion.

For *barely* we get the following tableau:

Tableau 3:

Input: intention to convince hearer of “Not B”; given that A is true and that if Not A then Not B hold in the real world	*LIE	GIVE-ARG	EFCY	EXPL
A		*!		*
Not A	*!			*
☞ Barely A				*
Not B		*!		*
Barely A, so Not B			*	

Given that the input holds in the real world, the candidates all violate the constraints in the same way as in the *almost* tableau, with the difference that candidate 1 now does not provide an argument for the desired conclusion and that candidate 2 constitutes a blatant lie that does not correspond to reality. For the sake of completeness an example of an argumentation with *barely*:

- (33) premise 1: If an athlete does not jump 7 metres, he is not a good athlete.  
 premise 2: The athlete jumped barely 7 metres

---

conclusion: He is not a good athlete

Tableau 4:

Input: intention to convince hearer that he is not a good athlete; given that the athlete did jump 7 metres, but not a lot farther and given that if an athlete does not jump 7 metres, he is not a good athlete	*LIE	GIVE-ARG	EFCY	EXPL
He jumped 7 metres		*!		*
He did not jump 7 metres	*!			*
☞ He barely jumped 7 metres				*
He is not such a good athlete		*!		*
He barely jumped 7 metres, so he is not a good athlete			*	

Given that the input is true in the real world, the different candidates again violate the constraints in the same way as with the *almost* example. Except for candidate 1 and 2: stating that the athlete jumped 7 metres does not provide a decent argumentation for the conclusion that he is not a good athlete, so candidate 1 violates GIVE-ARG. Candidate 2, stating that the athlete did not jump 7 metres now violates \*LIE, since this output does not correspond to the situation in the real world.

## 5. Discussion

In the previous chapter we have seen how speakers arrive at formulations with *almost* and *barely* in order to support a particular line of argument. With the help of optimality theory we have explained how a formulation with *almost* and *barely* surfaces as the optimal form for convincing a hearer of a certain conclusion. Even though the focus initially lies on the production of utterances containing *almost* and *barely*, our solution can be placed in a broader perspective. The speaker does not only optimize the production of a sentence, in effect he optimizes his entire argumentation strategy. Given a situation where reality does not support a certain point he wants to make, the speaker can use a formulation with *almost* or *barely* to make a statement that twists reality in such a way that it does support the conclusion. Out of several possible formulations to convince the hearer of a certain conclusion, a formulation with *almost* or *barely* comes out as the optimal candidate.

In this paper we only focused on the production part of the story, however whenever language is being produced, there is also a comprehension part to it. We have mentioned the hearer a lot of times, mainly as an inactive element of the interaction. He simply underwent the argumentation and was directed in whatever way the speaker wanted to direct him. This is a simplified version of reality, because in every day language the hearer actually has an active role in communication and he is obviously not just the speaker's argumentative toy.

When confronted with the argumentative use of *almost* and *barely*, a hearer will most of the time not be as automatically and as easily convinced of the conclusion as has been sketched in this paper. For instance, it can be the case that a hearer has certain information about the world which makes it possible for him to judge the truth value of (*almost/barely*) proposition A in a way that the speaker has not foreseen. He might know more about the topic of discussion, or he even might have different beliefs about it than the speaker. It is also imaginable that a hearer has certain information, or a certain intuition about the speaker himself (that he is a well-known liar, for example) which will lead him to doubt the validity of the argumentation.

As we can see, there are different factors which attribute to the complexity of an argumentation and the complexity of explaining how a hearer comes to an optimal interpretation of the argumentation. Unfortunately explaining this lies beyond the scope of this paper, but it might be a very interesting mechanism to do further research on in the future.

Another topic of interest is determining whether a certain discourse that contains an instance of *almost* or *barely* is argumentative or not. It might not always be that easy for a

hearer to figure out the speaker's argumentative intentions, nor will a speaker always intend to use *almost* or *barely* argumentatively. This topic too lies beyond the scope of this paper and might be very interesting to do some further research on.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this paper we have examined the use of *almost* and *barely* in rhetoric. We have seen that especially in those cases where there is a proposition A that leads to conclusion B and proposition A is not (entirely) true in the real world, a speaker can use a formulation with *almost* to try and convince the hearer still that conclusion B is the case, without having to tell a lie. With *barely* this worked the other way around: there is a proposition “not A” which leads to conclusion “not B”, yet “A” is true in the real world. Here a formulation with *barely* helps to try and convince the hearer of “not B”, again without having to tell a blatant lie.

We have seen that from a speaker’s perspective, there are several constraints (\*LIE, GIVE-ARG, EFCY and EXPL) that work together in determining which formulation helps the speaker best in achieving his goal of convincing the hearer of a certain conclusion. Formulations with *almost* and *barely* surfaced as the optimal outputs for achieving the speaker’s goal.

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