

Nearly or *almost* ? The concept of « status » in grammar.

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In a letter sent to British grammarian Randolph Quirk (1920-2017) in 1992, prior to an interview to be published in a journal in 1993, the sender had mentioned that R. Quirk's 1985 *Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* contained « almost 2000 pages ». In his reply R. Quirk seemed irritated at « *almost* 2000 pages », as if it meant that the book had missed its goal. In his grammar R. Quirk described *nearly* and *almost* as « approximators », but nothing was said as to what differentiates them, as if they were synonyms, which is what dictionaries imply. Car dealers in Britain sell « *nearly* new cars » and never « *almost* new cars. » Depending on the context, one can say « I am *nearly* 15 » or « I am *almost* 15 » ; in both cases the person is a few weeks away from the age of 15, but the two sentences are not interchangeable. Depending on the context, when the two hands of the clock are close to 12, one can say it is « *nearly* 12/midnight » or « *almost* 12/midnight » but the two sentences are used for different reasons. Saying that *nearly* and *almost* mean the same would be like saying that « *a* car » and « *the* car » mean the same. Articles *a* and *the* may not affect the object *car* in the real world, but depending on the context, and of course on the addressee, the speaker can only use either *a* or *the*.

When faced with the following pairs :

a vs the ; some vs any ; this vs that ; till vs until ; shall vs will ; may vs can ; *nearly* vs *almost* etc. the same recurring feature is at stake. This feature is the concept of *status*. When saying, « The tin is *nearly* empty. » or « The tin is *almost* empty. », *nearly* and *almost* give *empty* a different *status*, and thus, the two sentences do not mean the same and each conveys a different meaning. We propose to shed a new light on how *nearly* and *almost* are used and will do so using the theoretical framework known as meta-operational grammar.