1-28-2013

Liketa is not Almost

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Abstract

In this paper, I analyze the syntax and semantics of the approximative liketa as found in Appalachian English. Liketa is commonly translated to standard American English as almost. I present syntactic facts from extrapostion, yes/no question response, and hierarchy of projections which suggest that liketa is in fact a verb and not an adverb like almost. I use this syntactic analysis to show that a verbal decomposition analysis of the semantics of almost and German fast is not sufficient to explain liketa's unique set of interpretations. Instead I propose that liketa's interpretations are best captured with an analysis which says that liketa is best analyzed as an expression which generates sets of ordered alternatives following Penka (2006). I suggest that the alternatives receive their structure from the aspectual structure of the verb under liketa.

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1 Introduction

Liketa in (1a), pronounced /lɑktə/, is an option for expressing approximative meaning in Appalachian English (Wolfram and Christian 1976). The form has also been observed in AAVE speakers in New York, the English of Alabama, as well as British English (Labov 1972, Feagin 1979, Kytö and Romaine 2005). For the purposes of this paper, I will limit the data and discussion to Appalachian English.

As shown in (1b), *liketa* is commonly translated as *almost*.

(1)   a. John *liketa* built a chair.
      b. John *almost* built a chair.

However, there are differences between *liketa* and *almost*. Research has shown that *almost* exhibits ambiguous interpretations with certain types of verbs (McCawley 1971). Specifically, *almost* is ambiguous with accomplishment verbs (Dowty 1979), while *liketa* is not. The phrase *John almost built a chair* is commonly assumed to have the following interpretations:

(2)   a. John came close to starting to build the chair but he did not start to build the chair.
      b. John started building a chair but he didn't finish it.

On the other hand, the phrase *John liketa built a chair* only has the interpretation in (2a) and the interpretation in (2b) is infelicitous, a fact also noted by Wolfram and Christian (1976). This suggests that although *liketa* may be similar to *almost* in some ways, they are not always interchangeable.

In this paper, I argue that *liketa* is verbal rather than adverbial and I argue in support of the notion that *liketa* has only a subset of the possible interpretations associated with *almost*. Further, I argue that the meaning of *liketa* is best captured with an alternatives based approach where structure for the alternatives is supplied by the aspectual structure of *liketa*'s complement.

This paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, I argue that *liketa* is verbal based upon its behavior in response to yes/no questions, extraposition, and its appearance in the hierarchy of functional projections. I also show that *liketa* behaves like a raising verb, thus suggesting that it is indeed bi-clausal. In Section 3, I briefly present Rapp and von Stechow (1999), one prominent semantic account of verbal approximative interpretations involving verbal decompositions and scope of the approximative. I show that given the syntactic facts I present about *liketa* in this paper, the verbal decomposition analysis is insufficient to explain the range of interpretations that arise with *liketa*. In Section 4, I outline the scalar alternatives analysis as found in Penka (2006) in order to extend it to *liketa*. Then, in Section 5, I lay out my proposed extension of the alternatives analysis for verbal interpretations to *liketa*. Finally, the last section contains concluding remarks.

2 The Syntax of *liketa*

In this section, I argue a particular syntax for *liketa*, treating it as a verb. This is contrary to a previous analysis (Labov 1972), which treated liketa as an adverb synonymous to *almost*. Here, I present evidence to the contrary which strengthens the argument that the two are different.

I propose that *liketa* has the structure in (3).

(3)   [$_{TP}$ *Subj$_i$* [$_{perfP}$ (had) [$_{VP}$ like(ta$_j$) [$_{TP}$ t$_i$ [$_T$ t$_j$ [$_{perfP}$ (have) [$_{VP}$ *verb+pp*]]]]]]]]

Notice that in this structure *liketa* is verbal and takes a perfect infinitival complement. The infinitival complement contains a perfect head which is responsible for the past morphology on the embedded verb. I assume there is also an optionally overt perfect head in the matrix clause based on the fact that subject auxiliary inversion for question formation is only possible if an overt perfect moves over the subject. I have analyzed *liketa* as (optionally) undergoing contraction of infinitival-to to the matrix verb. To my knowledge, the contraction does not have any discernible effects on the semantics of these phrases. That is, *liketa* does not exhibit the syntactic restrictions found between *wanna/want to* (see Goodall 2006). In the next few sections, I argue two main points in support of this structure: (i) *liketa* is a verb and (ii) it patterns with raising verbs thus making *liketa* structures bi-clausal.

2.1 *Liketa* is Verbal

It is commonly assumed that adverbs have a greater range of syntactic distributions in utterances than other syntactic categories. For instance, adverbs can be extraposed as in (4a). On the other hand, though there are common enough instances of verb movement, *liketa* in (4b) cannot be extraposed to the right edge in the same way that *almost* can be.

(4) a.   John died *almost*.
     b. * John died *liketa*.

It is also commonly known that adverbs such as *almost* can be used alone in response to yes/no questions. As shown in (5), *almost* is an acceptable response to such questions while *liketa* is not an acceptable response.

(5) Did you finish your work?

     a.   *Almost*
     b. * *Liketa*

Finally, example (6) shows that the uncontracted form that *liketa* is derived from can appear between two perfect auxiliaries though the adverb *almost* cannot (see Kytö and Romaine 2005 for data concerning the uncontracted form). This suggests that *liketa* constructions are bi-clausal and *liketa* takes a TP complement.

(6) a.   John had *like to* have finished his work.
     b. * John had *almost* have finished his work.

Next, I present data which suggests that *liketa* is a raising verb.

2.1.1 *Liketa* is a Raising Verb

Having disposed of the question of category, there is evidence to suggest that *liketa* is a raising verb. *Liketa* can license expletive *there* and it can appear with a passivized complement.

(7) a. There had *liketa* been a man killed in the mines today.
     b. John had *liketa* been shot.

To summarize, *liketa* cannot undergo extraposition to the right edge, while *almost* can. *Liketa* cannot be a stand-alone answer to a yes/no question and *almost* can. *Liketa* can appear sandwiched between an overt perfect and an infinitival perfect like a verb, while *almost* cannot. Finally, *liketa* takes expletive subjects and allows a passivized complement; two traditional features of raising verbs.

3 A Verbal Decomposition of Approximatives

Rapp and von Stechow (1999) offer a syntactic and semantic account for the different verbal interpretations that have been associated with approximatives. They differentiate between three interpretations, a counterfactual, a scalar, and a resultative, the labels for which will be adopted here.

For a phrase like *John almost killed Harry* the interpretations are as follows:

(8)   *counterfactual:* John almost does something that causes Harry to die.
        scalar: John does something that almost causes Harry to die.
        resultative: John does something that causes Harry to almost die.

Specifically, they argue that the interpretations of the German approximative *fast* ('almost') vary with the scope of the approximative in relation to the decomposed verbal heads. They argue that English *almost* can be handled in the same way.

For instance, the verb *kill* can be decomposed into more basic pieces.

(9)
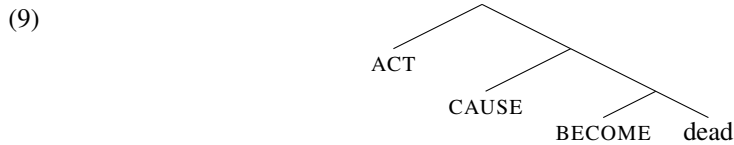
They find that two positions differentiate between the counterfactual and the scalar interpretation. For example, when *fast* or *almost* scopes over ACT (which is arguably little *v*) then only a counterfactual interpretation is possible.
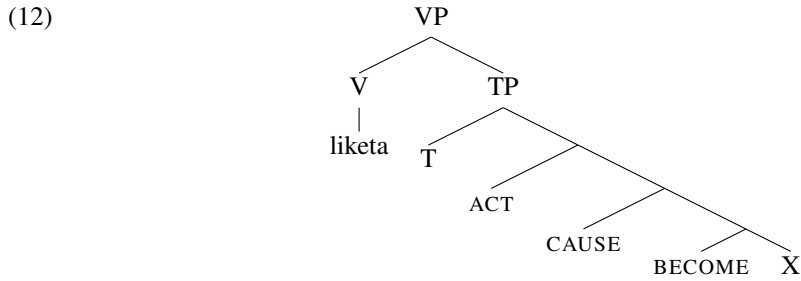
(10)
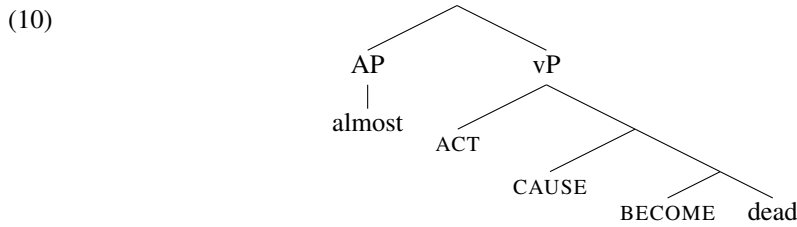
However, when approximatives scope under ACT, a scalar interpretation arises.

(11)
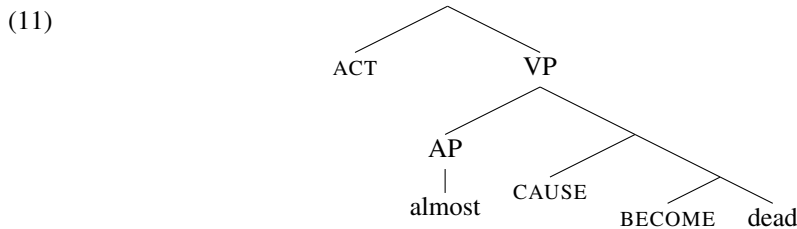
They argue that the resultative is not discernible from scope relations and verbal decomposition in their particular dialect of German, even though it is available in other dialects of German and with English *almost*. Thus for Rapp and von Stechow, the difference between the counterfactual and scalar interpretations comes down to whether *fast* scopes under or over ACT.

This predicts that having wide or narrow scope with regards to ACT is what differentiates between the counterfactual and scalar interpretations. Thus *liketa*, taking a TP complement, should never get a scalar reading because *liketa* can never scope under little *v* in its complement.

(12)

```
                          VP
                   ┌──────┴──────┐
                   V            TP
                   │       ┌─────┴─────┐
                liketa     T
                          ACT    ┌─────┴─────┐
                               CAUSE
                                    BECOME ── X
```

This in turn reveals why *liketa* does not get the resultative reading in (2b) either, since according to the authors, the proper scope relation for the resultative interpretation is below the scalar. In the next section, I explore this prediction and present more data which suggests that while the verbal decomposition analysis might provide insight for *fast* and *almost*, it offers no insight into an analysis of *liketa* as is.

3.1 More Data

At this point, more data is in order. We can see from the introductory data that *liketa* can get a counterfactual interpretation but not a resultative interpretation; examples (2a) and (2b) respectively. If you will remember, the prediction that I make hinges on the acceptability of the scalar interpretation. *Liketa* and the acceptability of all three interpretations are repeated below.
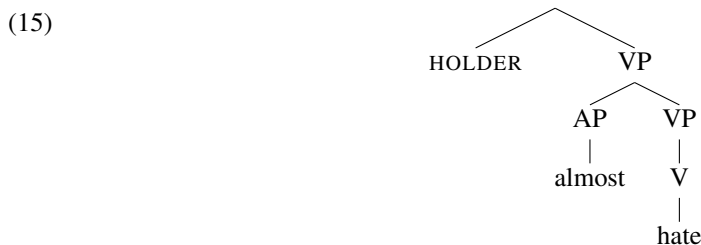
(13) John liketa built a chair.

    a.   John came close to starting to build a chair but didn't do anything.   CF
    b.   John did something that came close to building a chair but he didn't start.   SC
    c.   # John started building a chair but didn't finish.   RS

This data shows that the verbal decomposition approach is not feasible with *liketa*. *Liketa*, which does not scope under ACT in its complement, receives a counterfactual and a scalar interpretation. This is not predicted by Rapp and von Stechow's analysis. Moreover, there is further evidence that the verbal decomposition approach is not sufficient with *liketa* as it has been formulated. Rapp and von Stechow go on to argue that psychological states and activities also receive scalar interpretations when *fast* or *almost* scope under the HOLDER or ACT relations respectively. This assumes that HOLDER is structurally analogous to ACT for these verbs. They have the following meaning in accordance with the scalar interpretation.

Thus both *liketa* and *almost* phrases have the following interpretation with psychological states and activities.

(14) John *liketa/almost* hated his teacher.

    a. John felt something that was close to hating his teacher, but he didn't hate his teacher.

The authors follow Kratzer (1994) and argue that verbs like *hate* have the decomposition below.

(15)

```
                 ┌──────┴──────┐
            HOLDER          VP
                        ┌─────┴─────┐
                       AP          VP
                        │           │
                     almost        V
                                    │
                                  hate
```

From (14a) we know that *liketa* also gets a scalar interpretation with such verbs, yet presumably can not scope under HOLDER as in (15). Again, the verbal decomposition account, as it stands, cannot account for the *liketa* data.

I want to make one further point about scalar interpretations. For the purposes of this paper, I set aside an explanation of the scalar reading with atelic psychological states and activities for the following reason. There seems to be a difference between scalar interpretations with telic phrases like *build a chair* and with atelic psychological states and activities like *hate his teacher* and *gallop* which, to my knowledge, is not mentioned in the literature. Notice that the scalar interpretation in (14a) is an interpretation of resemblance. That is to say, whatever John feels, it must be 'close to' or resemble hating. In a sense, this presupposes that John is in some state to begin with. On the other hand, there is no requirement of resemblance with telic verbs like *build*. In fact, if we look back to the scalar interpretations with *build* the only requirement seems to be that the eventuality has not been initiated and that the agent has done something which does not preclude initiation of the eventuality in question. I leave investigation of this resemblance interpretation to further research in to the semantics of imprecision (see Morzycki 2011). Next, I review an analysis of approximatives which is based on a scalar alternatives approach.

4 An Alternative Approach

Penka (2006) argues that the semantics of *almost* is best captured by a scalar alternatives approach which assumes that approximatives like *almost* generate sets of alternatives. She proposes that *almost* takes in two arguments: a proposition and a set of contextually supplied alternatives. Following general assumptions about alternatives, she notes that the alternatives generated under *almost* consist of propositions in which the focused constituent is replaced by entities of the same semantic type. Beyond this, she assumes that *almost* operates on a scale following Hitzeman (1992) and that this scale is structured like a Horn scale where all elements on the scale entail elements below them. For Penka, all of these assumptions converge to create the following semantics for *almost*.

(16)   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.

So, for the phrase *Almost 100 people died* there is an entailment that *almost n people died* where n is a value between 90 and 110. Penka proposes the following denotation for *almost*.

(17) $[\![almost_{\approx}]\!] = \lambda w \lambda p_{\langle s,t \rangle}. \neg p(w) \ \& \ \exists q \ [q \approx p \ \& \ q(w)]$

By this denotation, *almost* is an expression that ranges over a set of scalar alternatives via the restrictor variable $\approx$ following Schwarz (2005). The proposition of the complement is false in the actual world, but there is another proposition close by ($q \approx p$) in the set of alternatives which is true in the actual world. The alternatives ranged over by the restrictor variable $\approx$ are in (18a) and truth conditions in (18b).

(18)   a. $\{p \mid p = \text{that n people died}, 90 < n < 100\}$
       b. $\neg(100 \text{ people died}) \ \& \ \text{that n people died}, 90 < n < 100$

In the case at hand, Penka argues that the alternatives in the set are ordered by the sequence of natural numbers. The set contains all close alternatives of 100 with a range of plus or minus 10 for simplicity. The first conjunct $\neg p(w)$ rules out those alternatives greater than 100. Next, I extend this analysis to the *liketa* data.

5 Extending the Analysis

Following Penka, I propose that *liketa* is an expression which takes in its complement and a set of contextually supplied alternatives of the same semantic type. I adapt Penka's denotation for *almost*. However, since *liketa* complements are TPs, I propose that *liketa* applies to a property of events $\langle v,t \rangle$ and I assume aspectual structure can be read off of the event variable in order to provide the necessary alternatives.

(19) $[\![liketa_{\approx}]\!] = \lambda f_{\langle v,t\rangle}\lambda w.\, \neg f(w)\, \&\, \exists g\, [g \approx f\, \&\, g(w)]$

Along the lines of the proposal in Amaral (2007), I assume that the scalar structure of the alternatives is supplied by the aspectual structure of the event variable associated with the embedded verb. The commonly assumed aspectual structure for a verb like *build* is one where an initiation point separates a preparatory period from the event process and subsequent culmination point (Moens and Steedman 1988) leaving us with the following structure for alternatives.

(20)   PREPARATORY PERIOD < INITIATION POINT < CULMINATION POINT

If this structure is read off of the event variable of the complement, then the alternatives for a phrase like *John liketa built a chair* are in (21).

(21)   {John is in the preparatory period of building a chair,
         John has initiated building a chair,
         John has finished building a chair}

To summarize, *liketa* ranges over scales of expressions of type $\langle v,t\rangle$ and the denotation allows us to replace the expression in the complement with one from the set of alternatives. Just as with Penka's analysis, the first conjunct rules out the expression *f* of the complement along with any alternatives order above it. Here we have to say something about which alternative is represented by *f* and negated by the first conjunct. If we return to the data in (13), we see that *liketa* is infelicitous with any interpretation where the eventuality in the complement has been initiated. I take this to mean that *liketa* selects for the initiation point of the aspectual structure of its complement eventualities similar to how Amaral (2007) suggests that European Portuguese *quase* selects for a telic endpoint.

Secondly, there is evidence which suggests that event initiation is tied up with T and the agent (Rosen 1999). This aside, *liketa*'s selection of the initiation point of events in its complement leads to the following truth conditions.

(22)   ¬(John initiated building a chair) &
         There is another aspectual alternative of John building a chair,
         PREP < INIT < CULM

The data for *liketa*'s interpretations with verbs like *build* are then reflected in the truth conditions of the phrase. The assumption that *liketa* selects for the inception point of the event in its complement is justified by the fact that a *liketa* phrase alone cannot receive a resultative interpretation. The alternative CULM is ruled out by virtue of CULM entailing INIT. This leaves the preparatory period as the only alternative to be selected.

Notice that the alternative for the preparatory period does not differentiate between the counterfactual and the scalar interpretations with telic verbs like *build*. I take these readings to be stronger and weaker versions of what is essentially the same 'counterfactual' interpretation. I base this assumption on the fact that for *liketa* at least, the scalar interpretation is never available independently of the counterfactual interpretation. What is important for the interpretation of telic verbs with *liketa* is that the event in question is never initiated.

6 Conclusion

Liketa differs from *almost* in that it is a raising verb and the eventuality in the complement of *liketa* cannot receive an interpretation where the eventuality in question is initiated. This analysis poses a problem for Rapp and von Stechow's verbal decomposition account of how approximative adverb interpretations are derived generally, but especially in the case of approximative verbs like *liketa*. I argue that *liketa* is best analyzed as an expression which generates scalar alternatives which receive their structure from the aspectual structure of their complement.

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