

## A Syntactic Anomaly : the Status of 'Almost'

Alan Bunyan

### A. INTRODUCTION

In a previous article<sup>1)</sup>, a considerable degree of inconsistency was noted with regard to information carried in various reference sources concerning the possible range of grammatical functions attributable to the word 'as'. In the present article attention will be focused on a similar, if less complex, classificatory problem concerning the word 'almost'.

On the one hand, we have sources such as Webster's<sup>2)</sup>, with two separate entries for 'almost' (p.59) : (1) \*<sup>1</sup> an adverb (exemplified by 'almost every man', (2) an adjective (ex. 'an almost failure'). Collins<sup>3)</sup>, on the other hand, (p.42) lists it only once, classifying it only as an adverb meaning 'very nearly', while Oxford<sup>4)</sup> (p.58), despite having only one entry for the word, sees fit to divide it up under several distinct headings : (1) an adjective OR adverb (my capitals), meaning 'mostly all/for the most part', exemplified by (archaic) '...almost Northmen', (2) an adverb meaning 'very nearly' (ex. ...'almost blind'), (3) an adjective OR adverb, meaning 'close to being' (ex. '...an almost Quaker'), (4) an archaic intensifier to a rhetorical interrogative (to which use, however, since no clear grammatical classification is provided, no further consideration will be given).

All of the above might seem rather inexplicable given, for example, the fact that 'nearly' – as close a synonym of 'almost' as one could hope to find – is listed unequivocally in all three reference sources as an adverb, pure and simple \*<sup>2</sup>. However, that would be to overlook the fact that, regarding 'almost', there is a very real analytical problem.

### B. THE DILEMMA

When we consider phrases such as 'almost anyone', 'almost everything' etc., it would appear that they can be explicated from a structural viewpoint in one of only two ways – either

**Construal (A)** : that an adverb (almost) is modifying a pronoun (anyone, everything)

or

**Construal (B)** : that 'almost' here, standing ostensibly as a modifier to a pronoun, must therefore be functioning as an adjective (just as it does in obsolescent expressions such as *an almost Christian*).

The dilemma, however, is that to accept (A) would essentially require a radical redefinition of the term ‘adverb’, which is universally understood to refer to a word capable of modifying a verb, adjective or other adverb (ial), but *not* one that modifies a substantive <sup>\*3</sup>.

To accept (B), on the other hand, would entail an equally anomalous analysis, one necessitating a drastic revision of what we mean by the term ‘adjective’. For if we compare this supposedly adjectival ‘almost’, in terms of privilege of occurrence, to other cases where it is patently adverbial (*almost five hundred, almost finished, almost dead*, etc.), we find no real difference beyond the strange fact that ‘anyone’ and ‘everything’ are pronouns, and not adjectives <sup>\*4</sup>. (‘Almost’ in *an almost Christian*, as archaic as that may sound, does at least occupy exactly the position midway between article and noun that we would expect of an adjective, cf. *a good Christian, an evangelical Christian*, etc.)

Given, then, that neither of the above, ostensibly exhaustive, alternatives seems in any way feasible within the accepted framework of grammatical analysis, what are we to make of this?

Herein lies the analytical problem with which we will here be concerned.

### C. OBJECTIVE

The objective of the present article is to endeavor to resolve the dilemma adumbrated above by demonstrating that, although ‘almost’ in the case of the problematic [almost + PRONOUN] structures cited is in fact adverbial rather than adjectival, this assertion nevertheless does not entail any real syntactic anomaly.

### D. ARGUMENT

One point regarding construal (B) that strikes us immediately as, to say the least, highly suspicious is that this apparent ability of ‘almost’ to “modify” pronouns does not, for some reason, extend to nouns (by far the more ‘natural’ objects of adjectival modification) occurring in syntactically identical positions. Thus, while we may have

[1] *Almost anybody can do this.*

, with ‘anybody’ in subject position, we cannot create a structurally parallel sentence by substituting any noun, singular or plural, countable or uncountable, either with or without an accompanying article, to wit e. g.

[2] *\* Almost a boy can do this.*

[3] *\* Almost mankind can do this.*

[4] *\* Almost people can do this.*

[5] *\* Almost the students can do this.*

This would seem to point us tentatively toward the inference that, as strange as it may seem, ‘almost’ in *almost anybody* is indeed an adverb, rather than an adjective of any kind. How, then, can this be?

The answer seems to lie in the origin of the indefinite pronoun group – *anybody, someone, nothing*, etc. – in respect of which this phenomenon occurs, which are all formed from a combination of indefinite adjective (*some, any, no, every*) and substantive (*thing, body, one*). The fact that we have come to *write* such phrases as single words, though, essentially does not change the way that certain other words relate to them grammatically, for, in terms of the spoken language, the two-word phrase ‘almost anybody’ is virtually identical (i.e. except regarding a minor discrepancy in vocal stress) to the three-word phrase ‘almost any body’, and – insofar as it constitutes the syntagm [[ADV + ADJ] + NP] – needless to say, perfectly grammatical. The same explanation ultimately applies to ‘none’, which, despite its evolution into a monosyllabic form, originates as two distinct OE words *ne an* (= ‘no(t) one’.) Hence the apparent anomaly of an adverb modifying a pronoun is seen to be essentially no more than an illusion arising from an orthographic convention – the chance coalescence in the *written* language of two morphemes into a single word.

Thus we have a situation in which a word is modifying an initial component, rather than the whole, of another word – an unusual state of affairs, granted, but certainly far less unpalatable from an analytical viewpoint than any of the alternatives.

The matter, however, cannot be completely laid to rest there, for we find also that ‘all’, an indefinite pronoun but not one originating as two words, and even (notwithstanding the above) some noun phrases can appear, on occasion, to be modified by ‘almost’, including ‘half’, ‘a quarter’ and ‘the whole’, e. g.

[6] **Almost all** of the money is gone.

[7] **Almost (a) half** of the students were absent.

[8] **Almost a quarter** of the members have expressed disapproval.

[9] **Almost the whole** of his life has been devoted to art.

Again, we instinctively sense that ‘almost’ here is functioning every bit as adverbially as in our previous examples, but how do we prove this in a case where, yet again, it seems to be modifying substantives?

Since explanations based on written vs. spoken forms will evidently get us nowhere here, we must instead look more closely at the words themselves, and, where that fails, at their syntactic context.

Regarding first the pronoun ‘all’, we are well aware that, although the structure of [6] above may be difficult to account for, no such difficulty applies when ‘all’ is used as a simple

adjective, as in

[10] *Almost ALL Englishmen* enjoy soccer.

(the italicized portion having the structure [[ADV + ADJ] + NP]).

Adverb 'almost' in [6] seems simply to be 'blind', as it were, to the fact that 'all' is here a pronoun and to be relating to it exactly as if it were an adjective as in [10].

But are there any precedents in English grammar for this phenomenon of a word's apparently interacting syntactically with foregoing words as if it were one part of speech, but with subsequent words as if it were another?

Surprising as it may seem, there are indeed: the most outstanding example is that of the gerund, such as 'seeing' in

[11] The advantage of our **seeing** him personally is that he will get to know our faces.

which stands, as might any nominal \*<sup>5</sup>, as the object of the preposition 'of' and the referent of possessive adjective 'our', yet relates exactly like a verb to that which follows, in that it both governs a direct object (him) and takes adverbial modification (personally).

This possibility for a word to enjoy effectively a dual syntactic status would seem then to account nicely for the case of [6]. But what of [7]–[9], whose subject phrases contain not a single adjective?

The solution in this case must clearly be sought outside the simple nouns themselves. Looking again at [7] and [8], we observe one rather peculiar thing about them, namely that, while the nouns *themselves* (half, quarter) are morphologically singular (having respective plural forms *halves* and *quarters*), the verbs of which they are apparently the subjects (were, have) are plural in form. Yet, we know that this is not simply one of those optional points, such as 'the family *is*' versus 'the family *are*', where the one tends to predominate in one variety of English and the other in another (respectively AmE and BrE), for there is no possibility, in any variety of English, of saying e. g.

[12] \* Almost (a) **half** of the students **was** absent.

or

[13] \* Almost a **quarter** of the members **has** expressed disapproval.

Why should this be? Is it not, after all, a cardinal rule of English syntax that a verb should agree in number with its subject? Of course, in general terms, it is, and this is in fact the only case where even the most formal register of usage admits – indeed positively requires! – an exception to be made, to wit where the noun that stands *ostensibly* as the nominative of the

verb, rather than constituting an independent subject, simply forms part of a QUANTIFIER PHRASE, that is, a phrase denoting quantity or number formed (typically) from a noun phrase followed by 'of', in which that constituent noun, while it may technically stand as sentence-subject, is actually devoid of its characteristic power to determine verbal number, that power devolving instead to the noun standing as object of the preposition (here 'students' and 'members'), or, as it is often consequently known, the *semantic* subject.

Thus quantifier nouns (which remain entirely unable to affect the form of the verb even when the of-phrase is merely implied, as in

[14] Half *were* in favour.

, meaning, e. g., 'half of the people', or

[15] Two-thirds *was* consumed.

, meaning, e. g., 'two-thirds of the coffee')

are effectively dispossessed of their nominal status, rather like attributive nouns, such as 'rubber' in 'rubber mat', which, lacking any of the normal syntactic powers or facilities of a noun, are in reality much closer to simple adjectives.

Thus, while superficially the structure of the subject-phrases of sentences [7]–[9] seems to be

[ADV + NP + PP]

(PP = *prepositional phrase*)

their true, underlying structure is revealed rather to be that of

[[ADV + QP] + NP]

(QP = *quantifier phrase*)

and, viewed in this way, they are now seen to bear a remarkable affinity to :

[16] *Almost no wine* was drunk.

, in which the italicized portion realizes the standard structure

[[ADV + ADJ] + NP].

Observing now that the quantifier phrases of [7]–[9] are serving precisely the same function as the determinative adjective ‘no’ of [16] – namely that of specifying the *quantity* of the NP in question – it seems only reasonable to expect an adverb to relate to them just as if they were simple adjectives, and that indeed is clearly what is happening : ‘almost’ here is modifying, not the constituent nouns of ‘half of’, ‘the whole of’ etc., but rather the *phrasal adjectives* of which they are merely a part.

## E. CONCLUSION

Examination of a number of syntactically parallel cases reveals that, regarding the problematic [almost + PRONOUN] structures exemplified by ‘almost anyone, almost everything’, we have, not the initially imagined syntactic anomaly of an adverb somehow modifying a pronoun, but rather the far less unprecedented case of an adverb (‘almost’) occurring, in accordance with normal grammatical relations, as a modifier to an adjective (‘any/every’) notwithstanding the fact of the latter’s being embedded *orthographically* in a word belonging to the form–class pronoun, and moreover that a comparable sort of syntactic dualism may be observed with regard to a number of other structural types, most notably that of the adverbially modified quantifier phrase.

## FOOTNOTES

- \* 1 The bracketed numbers here are my own but essentially reflect, albeit in simplified form, the various numbering systems used by the dictionaries in question.
- \* 2 On reaching the end of the present article, the attentive reader is unlikely to fail to note retrospectively that the syntactic “dualism” propounded in connection with ‘almost’ can equally well be asserted of ‘nearly’. The difference, however, lies in the extra level of complication furnished by the (true) *adjectival* possibilities of the former (as noted by the majority of the reference sources considered here), entirely lacking in the case of the latter.
- \* 3 I. e. a noun or pronoun.
- \* 4 I. e. words/phrases modifying, determining or otherwise descriptively relating to nouns (including true adjectives, numbers, participles, etc.)
- \* 5 I. e. A word/phrase having in any given instance the typical functionality of a noun (as sentence–subject, verbal object, etc.)

## REFERENCES

- 1) Bunyan, A. (2005), The Syntax of ‘As’. *Memoirs of Osaka Shin-ai College No. 39*, Osaka : Osaka Shin-ai College.
- 2) *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (1976), Philippines : G. & C. Merriam Co.
- 3) *Collins English Dictionary–Millennium Edition* (1998), Glasgow : HarperCollins.
- 4) *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1993), New York : OUP.

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