

Remus Gergel & Sarah Nickles

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(But Not Tightly Enough to Change a Parameter)



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***Almost* in Early and Late Modern English: Turning on the Parametric Screw (But Not Tightly Enough to Change a Parameter)**

Remus Gergel & Sarah Nickles

Saarland University

remus.gergel@uni-saarland.de, s9shnick@stud.uni-saarland.de

1 Introduction

This paper offers some initial diachronic results regarding the decompositional profile of the English adverb *almost*. The larger goal in the background is to clarify a further part in the empirical as well as theoretical puzzle of how the well-known class of so-called functional or decompositional adverbs (Beck, 2005; Beck & Snyder, 2001; Dowty, 1979; Maienborn & Schäfer, 2011; McCawley, 1971; Pedersen, 2014; Rapp & von Stechow, 1999; von Stechow, 1995; Xu & Snyder, 2017) develops over time. In synchronic terms, *almost* can have (a minimum of) two major types of readings relevant for our purposes. We introduce them in preliminary fashion on the basis of (1) and will return to them in Section 2.2.

(1) *Sally has almost killed Amy.*

In one reading, Amy has become almost dead (e.g., lost conscience, blood, etc.) after Sally's action. We refer to this as the resultative reading, on which the result state of the telic (accomplishment) verb *kill* is modified. In a second reading, Sally has almost caused something, or acted in such a way, that Amy became dead – e.g., she almost ran Amy over. But in fact nothing happened to Amy, except for the distress (i.e., she did not have to become 'almost dead'). There may be two sub-types of reading beyond the non-resultative reading (see 2.2.2 and Rapp & von Stechow (1999) in more detail in connection with the German subjunctive), but what they have in common is that they have higher scope than the purely resultative reading. We may refer to this second possible reading (or set of possible readings) as high or wide scope. To clarify terminology, then, rather simply for current empirical purposes: we understand decompositionality as the interpretive flexible property of an adverb to be able to modify the result state of a usually telic predicate (accomplishments and achievements), in addition to the (presumably default) property, which is to modify the denotation of the full predicate to which it attaches. There are thus a minimum of two readings involved and the question is how to deal with them. In Sections 2.1.1 and 2.2.2, we introduce more of the synchronic essentials of decompositionality.

Beck et al. (2009), Beck & Gergel (2015), Gergel (2017), Gergel et al. (2016) are studies that deal with the diachrony of decompositionality. However, all previous studies have been concerned with different aspects in the development of iteratives, i.e., in simplified terms: the trajectories of repetitive/restitutive readings of adverbs like *again* (see von Stechow (1995, 1996) for the classical structural analysis developed for German *wieder*, and Fabricius-Hansen (1983, 2001) for an alternative based on counterdirectionality which finds support e.g., in Early Modern English, EModE, data – see Gergel & Beck (2015) on this). Beyond the particular implementations of the different contributions, a general finding that emerges from

the earlier corpus-based studies concerned with language change is that for *again*, the overall tendency is to **reduce the ratio of decompositionality** over time.

This means quite simply that, comparing a historical stage 1 of the English language and a later stage 2 with respect to the proportion of the readings of *again*, there will be a high likelihood that the later stage 2 will provide less evidence for a decompositional behavior of the adverb, and specifically a lower incidence of so-called restitutive or counterdirectional readings than the earlier stage 1. An immediate question is why this should hold. In a nutshell (cf. Section 2 below), such developments have been attributed to a change in a parameter at the syntax-semantics interface operative in Late Modern English (Beck et al., 2009) or to a lexical reanalysis and a distinct semantic entry in earlier English (Gergel & Beck, 2015). Either way, such suggestions pertaining to *again* immediately lead to the question how other items that have been claimed to be decompositional behave; that is: are there any larger generalizations to be drawn?

Translated to *almost*, the question becomes: is there a decreasing tendency in the narrow-scope readings over time? If so, is an entirely distinct semantic representation or are parametric switches noticeable and responsible for the relevant changes? We will return to precisely these issues below. More specifically, the paper is structured as follows. It continues with giving the necessary minimal background and formulating the research questions more precisely in Section 2, after which Sections 3 and 4 will present the methods and findings of the current study, respectively. We conclude with a discussion of further-going issues in Section 5.

2 Analytical tools and research questions

2.1 The counterfoil of *again*

In this subsection, we discuss the necessary background of iterative adverbs like *again*, with which most of the synchronic and almost the entirety of the diachronic literature thus far has been concerned.

2.1.1 The synchronic analysis of decompositionality in *again*

The readings of *again* are usually referred to as repetitive and resultative/counterdirectional (the choice between the latter alternative names depends on the analysis different authors favor). Neither label is quite appropriate for *almost*, but the descriptive generalization holds that the result state or something else (presumably higher in structural terms) can be modified. As introduced in Section 1, we will hence call result-state modifying readings more generally low-scope in the case of *almost* to indicate the *potential* for a decompositional analysis (but nothing hinges on that) and we lump other readings under the rubric of wide scope (*again*, descriptively).

A classical analysis of *again* and its German counterpart *wieder* that has been transferred in the meantime to several, but not all languages goes back essentially to von Stechow (1995) and considers there to be only one lexical entry for such ambiguous adverbs. However, the structural attachment site of the adverb (cf., e.g., Johnson (2004) for an implementation) – usually understood in terms of the structured level of Logical Form – can vary, i.e., within one and the same language when two interpretations are available. A simplified entry runs as follows:

$$(2) \quad [[\text{again}_{\text{rep}}]] = \lambda P. \lambda e: \exists e' [e' < e \ \& \ P(e')].P(e)$$

The crucial part of the entry, which is given in the style of Heim & Kratzer (1998) (and refined e.g., in Beck & Gergel, 2015) is its presupposition, which states that the relevant property must have held in an earlier event *e'* as well.

An opposing analysis (e.g., Fabricius-Hansen, 1983, 2001) has suggested that there are in fact two entries for *again*. Rather than recycling the repetitive entry discussed above at a lower LF-position, on this proposal, a second, so-called counterdirectional reading comes into play, which is given in parallel (i.e., simplified) fashion in (3) below.

$$(3) \quad [[\text{again}_{\text{ctrdir}}]] = \lambda P. \lambda e: \exists e' [e' < e \ \& \ P_c(e')]. P(e)$$

What is presupposed in this case, is the existential of a counterdirectional event $P_c(e')$ that must precede (usually in temporal vicinity but distinctness) the actual event. For the majority of cases, the two analyses make very similar predictions, but they can be distinguished in some interesting cases on the diachronic dimension. As we will see in the next subsection, this distinct lexical entry has been motivated and assumed with EModE data.

2.1.2 The diachronic dimension

The study that has first pointed out distinctions between Present-day English (PDE) and the second half of the Late Modern English (LModE) period with respect to the use of *again* is Beck et al. (2009). While we cannot go into all the methodological issues involved in this contribution (cf. Beck & Gergel (2015) for a wider review and perspective on *again*), let us point out its main results. A first observation is that the overall frequency of restitutive readings decreases significantly in PDE to 12.6 %, which is almost half of the ratio the reading had during the 19th century (21.1 %). This seems remarkable given the relatively short time span of this development in diachronic comparison terms. A second point is that predicates that are reported to be available on restitutive readings only for a proper subset of PDE speakers by Beck et al. (2009), such as *return* or *connect*, are found on such uses in the 19th century correspondence. Nonetheless, synonymous but morphologically more transparent predicates are still unquestionably available with restitutive readings in PDE, e.g., verb-particle combinations like *come back* or *put together*. This lends some motivation to Beck et al.'s (2009) suggestion that a parametric change in visibility is involved in the change from the 19th century, in the sense of the parameter summarized in (4).

(4) The visibility parameter for adverbs (Beck, 2005):

- An adverb can modify
- (i) only independent syntactic phrases
 - (ii) any phrase with a phonetically overt head
 - (iii) any phrase

The default setting is (i).

Verb-particle constructions, for instance, have a phonetically overt head, but there is an interdependence between verb and particle, and they are not independent. The idea is that PDE is undergoing a change from setting (iii) to setting (ii) of the visibility parameter. In synchronic terms, lexical telic predicates are already specially interesting from this perspective. A setting (iii) of the parameter allows an adverb like *again* to modify the results stated of such predicates, but a setting (ii) will not suffice. For the setting (ii), predicates with overt result states such as particle or resultative constructions are required for result-state modification.

Gergel & Beck (2015) extend this line of research by studying Early Modern English correspondence. On the one hand, this study is able to corroborate the declining trend in the incidence of apparent restitutive *again*. In a nutshell, the relevant frequency for EModE lies at 41.5 %, i.e., nearly twice as high as LModE. But trying to model the change offers a new puzzle. EModE shows readings that are restitutive, or rather counterdirectional (Fabricius-Hansen, 2001, cf. 2.2.1), but they cannot be accounted for easily through a parametric change. The relevant readings supported by historical contexts do not seem to be available to speakers of PDE at all and they do not have plausible result states; consider, for instance, the example in (5) below:

- (5) *Tis like people that talk in their sleep, nothing interrupts them but talking to them again*
[...] = 'to reply to them'

(Dorothy Osborne, 17th c., PCEEC-OSBORNE,37.017.774)

Given that there is no plausible result state that is restituted, based on such examples, Gergel & Beck (2015) give preference to the counterdirectional analysis in the EModE period. Finally, Gergel (2012) notes that the qualitative and the quantitative differences observed in the above-mentioned studies for correspondence are not an artefact of the genre, but are largely confirmed in mixed-genre corpora, such as the Penn-Helsinki series of data bases for English (Kroch et al., 2004; Kroch et al., 2016; Kroch & Taylor 2000), which range from Middle English to Late Modern English. While we cannot go into the full debate here, suffice it to state that the Early Modern English data that make a result state implausible are the ones that essentially motivate assuming a different semantic analysis for *again* at this (and some earlier) stages for the adverb *again*. (The relevantly cognate preposition *against* has a different representation, of course; cf. Beck & Gergel (2015) for the details of this connection.)

To summarize: earlier studies have shown declining trends in the availability of restitutive readings of *again*. The reason chiefly invoked in the literature has been a parametric change in one case (transition LModE-PDE) and a distinct lexical entry in the other (transition EModE-LModE).

2.2 Synchronic essentials regarding *almost*

2.2.1 Two components of meaning

Having considered the necessary background for trajectories of decompositionality with illustration from *again*, we now turn to a few synchronic assumptions about *almost* first. One feature of *almost* that is generally acknowledged (cf. Amaral, 2010; Horn, 2002; Sevi, 1998, 2017; Xu, 2016, among several other studies) is that it contains two layers of meaning: a proximal and a polar component:

- (6) *Amy almost ordered the shelf.*
a. Amy came close to ordering the shelf.
b. Amy did not order the shelf.

The formulation ‘components of meaning’ is deliberately vague above (as in most of the careful literature), as there is no agreement to this day on its exact nature (cf. Horn, 2002; Penka, 2006; Sadock, 1981; Tonhauser et al., 2013, among others). The suggestions on where to locate the relevant meanings have ranged from a conjunctive analysis and entailment to conventional or conversational implicatures and presuppositions or more generally to aspects of not-at-issue meaning; cf. Amaral (2010) for experimental evidence pointing at least to a relative asymmetry of the two components and Horn (2017) for a recent take with a historical perspective on the still generally inconclusive state of affairs in this respect at the pragmatics-semantics interface.

While not much hinges on this for the purposes of the corpus study, we put the meaning of *almost* on a concrete footing on the basis of a cross-categorial entry in the sense of Penka (2006) as follows:

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

This states that the proposition *p* is not true in the evaluation world but a nearby alternative *q* to *p* exists that is true in the evaluation world. (The symbol \approx is used by Penka (2006: 279) ‘to signify the ‘close by’-relation and as the corresponding restrictor variable’, the latter following Schwarz, 2005).

2.2.2 Decompositionality in *almost*

In addition to being a marker of proximity and polarity, *almost* is – on this, similarly to *again* – usually considered a decompositional adverb in synchronic studies of Modern English conducted at the syntax-semantics interface, as previewed in the introduction. Compare the crucial reading (8a) below in the context of paraphrases in the style of Rapp & von Stechow (1999), going back to von Stechow’s earlier analysis of *again* and essentially to Dowtlan lexical decomposition:

- (8) *Loris almost closed the door.*
- a. Loris did something that caused the door to become almost closed.
 - b. Loris almost caused the door to become closed.
 - c. Loris almost acted in such a way that he caused the door to become closed.

As mentioned in the introduction, the difference between (8b) and (8c) is secondary for our immediate purposes; the latter is in fact more clearly counterfactual. (Notice, furthermore, that German *fast* shows some differences here. See Beck (2005) for a parametric proposal modelling the distinction in the German approximator.)

We will capitalize on a twofold distinction (solely). Further subdivisions are possible, but this suffices to start investigating decompositionality. Additional, for instance discourse-based and hence potentially particularly high-scope uses are also possible in some cases with iteratives, cf., e.g., Gergel et al. (2016) for the Old English predecessor of *again*; cf. also the Modern High German adversative *aber*, which was originally an iterative, as is still visible in the meaning of *abermals*, ‘again’.

A final set of notes of clarification is on order with respect to the term decompositionality. First, notice that it is a lexical property that some adverbs in a language may have and others even in the same language may lack. Second, note that the term cannot be (including on structural analyses) just about the overt syntactic attachment site of an adverb. While certain correlations may exist (e.g., von Stechow (1996) points out some for German, McCawley (1971) for Modern English, and Gergel (2017) for Middle English), to our knowledge, they seem to be language-specific. Presumably the best way a reader less familiar with the literature might have to think about decompositionality is in terms of interpretation. The central question is this: can an adverb “see” into the internal structure of the predicate it attaches to, in the sense of being able to modify a subpart of it, such as the result state? The answer to this is not a simple yes or no, but a matter of degrees, as Beck (2005) points out, and sometimes such an analysis may not be suitable, after all, due to additional interpretive reasons (Gergel & Beck, 2015).

2.3 Refining the research questions

In view of what we have learnt about decompositionality and the trajectories of *almost*’s sister, *again*, our research questions can be now summarized as follows:

- 1) Is *almost* as shown in the data over four centuries (16th-19th) decompositional? So, can we find evidence in the data of the relevant time span that *almost* is decompositional? (Of course, even larger time spans are desirable in the long run, but given some of the most critical studies on *again*, this seems to be an appropriately motivated beginning.)
- 2) Is there a decreasing tendency for decompositionality, i.e., a numerical profile ranging from evidence favoring more towards less narrow-scope readings? We formulate three subquestions: Is there such evidence in particular in (2a) EModE; (2b) LModE; (2c) between EModE and LModE? The latter question means, is there a contrast between EModE and LModE (as was the case with *again*) detectable?
- 3) Is there evidence for a parametric change?

For the purposes of orientation, we preview our answers. They will be affirmative to the first question, as well as to (2a) and (2b), but negative to the third one and we cannot confirm (2c) either. Specifically, disentangling questions 2) and 3) seems justified on the basis of our findings. Our interpretation is that a notion of gradability of decomposition is needed on the basis of historical data, i.e., in addition to the already fine-grained theoretical approaches (e.g., Beck, 2005; diachronically see Beck et al., 2009).

3 Methodological issues

Extraction of tokens containing instances of *almost* was conducted by using *CorpusSearch* (Randall, 2010) on the Penn parsed corpora of historical English for EModE and LModE (Kroch et al., 2004, 2016). For the periods at stake in this contribution, extraction only involved the following spelling variants (naturally more spelling variation appears in Middle and Old English, cf. Nickles (2017) for the selection of forms and further elaboration):

(9) *almost; almoste; all most; al most; allmost; almoost; a most*

Similarly, the syntax is during EModE and LModE largely identical to PDE, but there are also a few postmodification uses¹:

(10) *and paid all my old dettes **almoste*** (FORMAN-DIARY E2-P1, 23.408)

Following the practice of the earlier studies on iteratives discussed above, the analysis is based on the context-sensitive evaluation of tokens containing the relevant item, i.e., *almost* with its variants in our case. The total number of instances of the adverb under consideration was slightly over 1000 with $N_1 = 422$ from the EModE corpus (PPCEME) and $N_2 = 600$ from the LModE corpus (PPCMBE). The number of tokens in the later period is higher (at 835). Hence a randomized selection of 200 items per subperiod of LModE (i.e., L1, L2, and L3) was conducted for practical reasons and to keep sample sizes closer to one another.

Individual readings were taken to have narrow scope – or be “resultative” – if there was contextual evidence that the result state was almost attained and a reading in which the entire event almost took place (e.g., as in a counterfactual) is less plausible. Examples of such relevant readings are in (11) - (13) below:

(11) *The hospitale and the chapelle is buildid al in length under one roofe from west to est. Nicolas Budwith Bisshop of Bath was founder of this, and brought it **almost** to the perfection, and that that lakkid was completid by one John Storthwayt, one of the executors of the testament of Bubwith.* (LELAND-E1-H,145.372)

(12) *...but instead of doing so, he brought me before the King, which had **almost** frightened me out of my seven senses.* (PENNY- E3- P1,28.107)

(13) *Before five years I had **almost** trebled my fortune.* (WILDE-1895- 1,45.148)

In (11), the Bishop of Bath is reported to have brought the hospital and chapel nearly to the point of perfection. The reader is informed that it only lacked few things, which were then later added by John Storthwayt. In (12), the reader is informed that the subject was trembling and even fell on his knees to beg pardon; the narrow-scope reading, on which having been frightened out of one’s seven senses is nearly reached. Finally, in (13), the result with the help of fortune, good advice etc. is a fortune almost three times higher after the action of the first-person subject of the sentence.

So-called wide readings are those that in basic and for our purposes sufficient terms modify the entire VP (or perhaps additionally some of the tempo-aspectual architecture on top of

¹ While postmodification uses of *almost* appear to be less common in current usage, see Johnson (2018) for a claim in favor of their grammaticality in Present-day Appalachian as well as mainstream American English.

the VP in theoretical terms). This includes those examples that attach syntactically to the VP and do not modify a subpart which we illustrate briefly in (14) - (15):

(14) *I had almost forgott to observe to yo=r= Ex=cy=, that it is sayd Co=ll= Talbot with-drew his Petition a few minutes before His Maj=tie= went yesterday to Councill, ...*
(AUNGIE R-E3- P1,75,A.3 1)

(15) *This Spider was small and flat, almost resembling a tick.* (ALBIN- 1736- 1,16.434)

In (14), a counterfactual or nearly-counterfactual situation obtains. The speaker addresses his Excellency claiming to almost have forgotten to tell that Talbot withdrew his Petition. But it is clear that he did not forget and there is no positive evidence whatsoever for a resultative reading. In (15), the spider is described to have an appearance which is almost comparable to the one of a tick. There is no result state, hence a narrow-scope reading lacks both any salience via contextual support and what would in most cases be its most basic linguistic ingredient, i.e., the result state.

4 Findings

4.1 General context and data profile

The two main corpora on which this study is based each contain a variety of genres – namely 16 – and are thus not only restricted to say, drama, letters, travelogues, biblical texts etc. The types of tags used for the genre composition of the two corpora are identical, i.e., roughly the same types of genres occur. That means that even though there certainly can be stylistic and ultimately fine-grained genre differences, say between a scientific text from the EModE period and one from the LModE period, the overall total range of genre variation is the same. The point is non-trivial as later texts might be expected to show a larger variation after all; cf. Nevalainen (2006), Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2009), van Gelderen (2014). However, a further note (of caution) is also in order. While the range of text genres is the same, the weight of the individual genres is not. Thus, there is considerably more correspondence in the earlier corpus. We do not see a particular pressing issue with this point (and did not extrapolate such data separately), but it is nonetheless an issue that could potentially cause differences in the data profiles, in the sense that certain genres may theoretically have a higher propensity for certain readings. A larger specialized investigation of EModE and LModE correspondence in future research could help clarify this potential caveat further. For the time being, we report, however, the results of the two parsed corpora (Kroch et al., 2004, 2016) as they are.

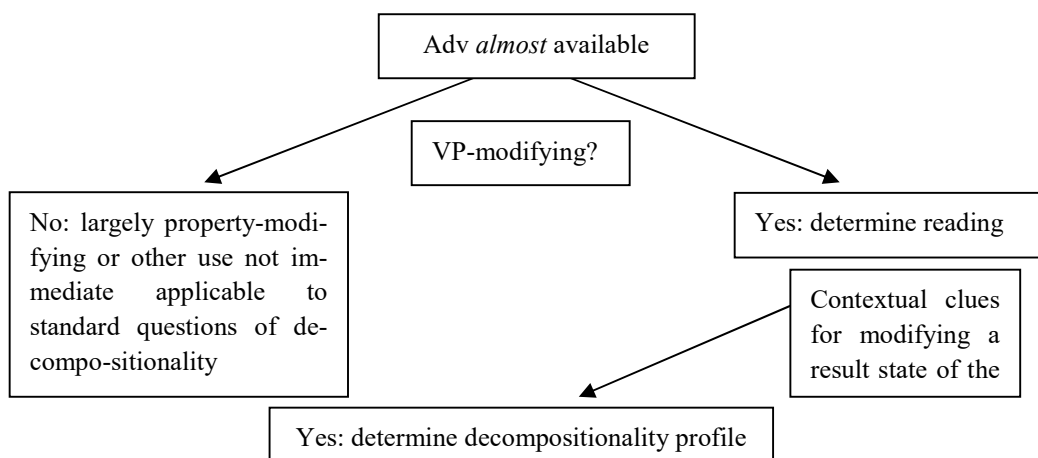


Figure 1. Main types of *almost* from the perspective of decompositionality

While the focus in this paper – namely to understand the development of decomposition-ality – is necessarily on VP modifying uses of *almost*, *almost* modifies other categories in the majority of its attestations in Early and Late Modern English. Some examples are numeral and quantifier modifying uses (cf., e.g., Penka (2006) and the literature cited there for their theoretical relevance synchronically) and large amounts of property modifying uses. The latter includes *almost* modifying adjectives like *innumerable* or *impossible*, prepositional phrases such as *at the center* or *in the middle*, time-indicating noun phrases such as *night* and *dinner time* and adverbs like *naturally* and *miraculously*. Of course, different types of properties are involved in such cases, but we refrain from going deeper into the taxonomies of properties here; cf., e.g., Xu (2016) and references cited there. The simplified decision tree for our purposes is as schematized in Figure 1.

4.2 Early Modern English

We focus on the ratio of resultative or narrow readings in the data with respect to the overall numbers available for *almost*. Predicates that encode accomplishments and achievements lexically are abbreviated as LA. The subdivisions E1-E3 are imported from the corpus we have used and they roughly indicate slices of 70 years (the same will hold for L1-L3 in the next subsection). Table 1 then illustrates the basic distribution in the overall population of EModE numerically:

Table 1. EModE narrow scope *almost* in entire population (including non-verbal modification)

Period	Instances <i>almost</i>	Resultative <i>almost</i>	% res. <i>almost</i> in overall population	Res. <i>almost</i> with LA predicates	% res. <i>almost</i> with LA predicates
E1	80	10	12.5 %	9	11.3 %
E2	153	18	11.8 %	14	9.2 %
E3	189	16	8.5 %	8	4.2 %
Total	422	44	10.43 %	31	7.35 %

What we can observe descriptively from the table are mainly two things. The range of resultative *almost* decreases slightly, but relatively continuously in the overall set of instances of *almost*. The second observation is that the ratio of resultative readings with LA predicates also decreases slightly and continuously. The increase is more prominent if we consider that within the class of resultatives, the decline ranges from around 90 % based on LA predicates (9/10) to 50 % (8/16) in the course of the EModE period. A high degree of caution, however, is in order when it comes to drawing further conclusions. Notice, for instance, that while the range of modified phrases is large, as we have illustrated briefly in the previous subsection, the cases of verb-phrase modification are low. Thus, during the E1, E2, E3 subperiods there are 10, 18 and 16 instances of narrow-scope and 9, 8, 32 instances of wide scope readings. Given decompositionality as our main focus, narrow scope is the relevant category. We have chosen to compute the ratio relative to the overall population above for two reasons: first, recall the fact that wide-scope readings are a mixed bag, so their number could be reduced further and numbers become incrementally smaller and less reliable even for descriptive statistics. Second, the overall population is conversely more stable, asymptotically constant, when we have enough data and it is easier to compare with. Finally, compared with work on other decompositional adverbs, it may after all be that some of the other uses may be relevant that are not strictly and obviously attached to the VP (cf., e.g., Gergel et al. (2016) on discourse uses of *eft*, i.e., the Old and Middle English version of *again*) and our discussion below allows for some thoughts on how interaction may have played a role in the rise of *almost* in the first place.

At the same time, the predicates that appear with lexical accomplishments/achievements on resultative readings in EModE are not fundamentally distinct from predicates available for

such readings at later stages; cf. (16) and contrast with the situation of *again* discussed in 2.1.2 above for EModE.

- (16) *amaze, break, choke, close, decay, dispatch, drown, eat, encompass, entitle, environ, erase, exclude, extinguish, find, give, leave, lose, pay, perforate, slay, spend, spoil, touch, undo*

Overall, there is a slim descriptive tendency to reduce decompositional behavior of *almost* over time. It will require further research to test this further and one way to do this may be to increase the numbers by drawing from additional and non-overlapping corpora. For instance, the corpus of Early Modern English correspondence would be a largely overlapping one, but we submit that the Early English Books Project is a venue that could be approached for ampler testing when better resources are available in future research.

4.3 Late Modern English

Similar to the earlier historical period, we introduce the tabular overview first for narrow or resultative readings of *almost* in LModE in Table 2 below:

Table 2. LModE narrow scope *almost* in entire population (including non-verbal modification)

Period	Total instances <i>almost</i>	Resultative <i>almost</i>	% res. <i>almost</i> in overall population	Res. <i>almost</i> with LA predicates	% res. <i>almost</i> with LA predicates
L1	200	24	12.0 %	15	7.5 %
L2	200	21	10.5 %	13	6.5 %
L3	200	17	8.5 %	10	5.0 %
Total	600	62	10.33 %	38	6.33 %

Here too, two tendencies can be observed, namely the decrease of resultative *almost* in the overall population and the decrease in the use of resultative *almost* with LA predicates. The development is to be taken with an even larger grain of salt than the previous one. On the one hand, the verbal predicates are still scarce in the obviously VP-modifying uses: there are 24, 21, and 17 instances of narrow-scope and 13, 23, 35 instances of wide scope. What is more, if we consider the ratio of lexical accomplishments/achievements within the class of resultatives, then hardly anything is noticeable this time (from ca. 62 % at the beginning to ca. 58 % at the end of the period, i.e. it could be pure chance). The list of predicates modified is as given in (17):

- (17) *annihilate, become, bless, change, choke, close, confess, cure, destroy, discard, disperse, drink, forget, include, lose, occur, overpower, perish, poison, procure, prove, raise, recount, remember, sacrifice, say, spell, subdue, suffocate, take, touch, treble, understand, waste*

During LModE there is even less evidence for either a changing parametric setting or a lexical entry of *almost* than it was the case in EModE. What we see in both periods most likely is, we believe, a presumably usage-based, apparently numerical pressure on the marked interpretation of sub-phrasal modification when it comes to VP interpretations. We assume that speakers may tend towards the unmarked interpretation in their usage. A parameter-based interpretation of this fact is that there are tendencies towards the default setting that does not modify the result state. Notice, also, that there is no statistically significant difference between EModE and LModE as a whole with respect to the incidence of low-scope readings of *almost*. Hence, although some small tendencies may exist to decrease low-scope readings and especially with LA predicates, they do not suffice to re-set anything in the representation of *almost* in the four centuries under scrutiny in our paper.

5 Discussion

Recall the research questions from Section 2.3. We have seen evidence for *almost* being decompositional already in EModE, hence the first question is to be answered positively. However, we do not have evidence for either a new entry or a parametric switch (e.g., of the types that have been suggested for *again*), so the interesting third research question in 2.3 is to be answered entirely negatively. Nonetheless, we have seen that there are some cautious tendencies to decrease narrow-scope readings, i.e., those that only modify the result state both in EModE and LModE (individually, i.e., across their respective subperiods), even if the two developments do not seem to be connected. Hence, the strict research questions (2a) and (2b) find a cautious positive answer under the assumptions made, despite the fact that (2c) does not.

However, a further-going question that needs to be raised is this: where could the initially higher levels of low-scope readings come from in the first place? In the case of *again*, this was (relatively obviously) due to the precursor semantics originating in a preposition ('against') and yielding rather naturally counterdirectional readings only at the beginning. For *almost*, such an option does not become available as an explanation. There was nothing like a counterdirectional *almost* available at any time in the history of English. One lesson to be drawn from this is that while counterdirectionality played a role in the history of *again* (as described in Beck & Gergel (2015), among others), it cannot be *the* general answer to the larger topic of the development of decompositionality over time.

A potentially interesting option to explore instead, for *almost*, in further research is a connection between (A) the tendencies of reduction in the ratios of low-scope readings and decompositionality and (B) the original readings available at earlier stages of English. The morphology of *almost* still betrays a connection to the universal quantifying expression *all* and the superlative *most*. A simple paraphrase for *almost*'s ancestor in Old English is 'mostly all' or 'nearly all' (cf. Gergel & Stateva (2014) for a possible semantic connection with *die allermeisten*, 'nearly all' in German). Having a semantics for 'nearly all' in place, whatever its ultimate shape will turn out to be, also means that this needs to be 'of something' (i.e., quantified of some set, the restrictor in generalized-quantifier theory). This could then explain the high incidence of property-modifying uses and perhaps also the originally high result-*state* modifying uses. It could be the case that *almost* at the very beginning in (late) Old English was not so much decompositional per se, but rather transparently had a propensity of attaching to properties/states in the first place, which could have been capitalized on in usage later on during the Middle English period in combination with verbal heads. But needless to say, this must await another corpus investigation. For the time being, let's note that uses involving quantification in addition to *almost* in a VP modifying construction (as e.g., in (10) above) certainly continue to be attested in the two modern periods.

To conclude: if our answers are on the right track for the time we have focused on in this paper (starting roughly in the 16th century), then *almost* is decompositional in EModE at a time when *again* was not truly so (if Beck & Gergel (2015) and Gergel & Beck (2015) are correct). This supports, on a larger level, the view that decompositionality is primarily a lexical property of individual items and that it does not automatically stem from a global option in the grammar wholesale. In fact, if the approach in Beck & Gergel (2015) is on the right track, it might have been quite important for the evidence available to (native) speakers of English who might have re-interpreted a counterdirectional entry of *again* towards the end of EModE as 'restitutive' or genuinely decompositional, to have a model on which they could base their re-analysis of *again*, namely the one in the shape of the by then decompositional adverb *almost*.

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