

Polar meaning and “expletive” negation in approximative adverbs

Spanish *por poco* (*no*)

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In this paper we provide a synchronic and diachronic analysis of an instance of so-called “expletive” negation in the Spanish approximative adverb *por poco*. Synchronically, we show that this adverb, when combined with the sentence negator *no*, is ambiguous between $\sim p$ (“expletive”) and $\sim\sim p$ (“canonical”) meanings. Diachronically, we show that this ambiguity arose due to a change in the negation system of Spanish around the fifteenth century. As a result, the supposed instances of “expletive” negation found in present-day uses of *por poco* are not really expletive at all, but rather are a holdover from the Old Spanish requirement of preverbal negative concord.

Keywords: expletive negation, negative concord, approximative, adverb, Spanish

1. Introduction: The synchronic puzzle

The Spanish adverbial *por poco* ‘almost, nearly’ (literally ‘by/for little’) is usually considered to be synonymous with its more well-known and more textually frequent counterpart *casi* ‘almost’, and indeed in examples like (1) this seems to be the case:

- (1) *Marta por poco/casi llega a tiempo.*
‘Marta almost arrived on time.’

In (1), both *por poco* and *casi* reverse the polarity of the predicate. Thus, what is entailed by (1) is that Marta did NOT arrive on time, even though she “came close to” arriving on time.¹ Like other approximative particles, e.g. English *almost* (Hitze-man 1992; Horn 2002; Sadock 1981; Sevi 1998; Ziegeler 1998, 2000), both of the Spanish forms in (1) express both a PROXIMAL meaning, indicating an unspecified closeness to the situation described by the predicate, as well as a POLAR meaning

— specifically, a NEGATIVE polar meaning — indicating that this closeness is to be located in some spatio-temporal sense “anterior to” the realization of that situation. Adverbs such as these contrast with their positive polar counterparts, such as Spanish *apenas* or its English translation equivalent *barely*. These forms also express proximal closeness to some situation, but unlike *casi/por poco/almost*, the approximatives *apenas/barely* entail the realization of the situation in question:

- (2) *Marta apenas llegó a tiempo.*
‘Marta barely arrived on time.’

Thus, (2) is understood as expressing that Marta did indeed arrive on time, but she did so in a way that minimized her punctuality, i.e. she approximated NOT being on time. The two types of particles illustrated in (1) and (2) therefore share ‘approximation to some situation X’ as part of their encoded meaning, but differ with respect to the (non-)realization of X. Particles such as *apenas/barely* encode POSITIVE polar meaning, i.e. *apenas/barely* p entail the truth of p, whereas *casi/por poco/almost* p entail ~p as part of their conventional semantic content.

However, if now we add to this mix the case where *por poco* co-occurs with the negation particle *no*, three possible interpretations arise:

- (3) *Por poco sale.*
‘She almost left.’
- (4) *Por poco no sale.*
‘She almost didn’t leave.’
- (5) a. *Por poco se mata.*
‘She was almost killed.’
b. *Por poco no se mata.* (= same semantic interpretation as [5a])
‘She was almost killed.’

Examples (3) and (4) appear to respect compositionality, in that the addition of the sentence negator *no* to (4) does nothing more than reverse the polarity of the sentence in (3). Thus, since *por poco* p entails ~p, the addition of *no* results in the logical double negation ~~p, which of course is logically equivalent to p. However, this same negator does not affect the interpretation of (5b) in the same way, since its “normal”² interpretation remains simply ~p, just like that of (5a), despite the presence of two otherwise negative-meaning-expressing forms, i.e. *por poco* and *no*. These distinct interpretations are shown more clearly by their respective paraphrases in (3’), (4’) and (5b’):

- (3’) *No ha salido* (‘She has not left’)
- (4’) *Ha salido* (‘She has left’)
- (5) b. *No se ha matado* (‘She hasn’t been killed’)

Thus, the problem that we find when comparing (4) and (5b) is that, in the first of these examples, the negation appears to function “normally”, simply reversing the polarity of the corresponding non-negated sentence in (3). By contrast, in (5b), the negative does not, or at least not “normally”, lead to the interpretation — expected on compositional grounds — that the woman in question DID actually get killed (or kill herself; see fn. 2 above), but she almost didn’t. Instead, the interpretation of (5b) is much the same as the counterpart version without *no* in (5a): the woman came close to being killed, but she wasn’t killed.

Putting these interpretations in more logical terms, the differences above can be understood as follows, where *p* = the proposition modified by *por poco* (*no*):

- (3'') *por poco p* ⇒ ~*p*
 (4'') *por poco no p* ⇒ ~~*p* (“canonical” negation)
 (5) a''. *por poco p* ⇒ ~*p*
 b''. *por poco no p* ⇒ ~*p* (“expletive” negation)

As illustrated, *por poco* itself can be considered a negative word, since it reverses the polarity of the proposition over which it takes scope. The addition of *no* in cases where, at least from a present-day perspective, this negative particle is functioning “canonically”, results in the double logical negation seen in (4''), or, equivalently, the following bracketing: [~[~*p*]]. But such is not the case in (5''), where the negative particle *no* does not appear to function normally ([~[...*p*]]), and therefore could be characterized as an instance of what is commonly known (Horn 1989; Sánchez López 1996) as “expletive” negation.

Hence, we are left with an intriguing synchronic puzzle which, as we will show below, can be more clearly explained through reference to the diachronic trajectory of both *por poco* (*no*), on the one hand, and the overall system of negation in Spanish, on the other. Both synchronically and diachronically, the absence or presence of negation in examples like (5a) and (5b), respectively, is not random, even though such examples share the common ~*p* semantic interpretation.

Now, as noted above, *por poco* also encodes a component of meaning which we will call *proximal*, following Hitzeman (1992), Sevi (1998), and Horn (2002). This component conveys information about the closeness of a situation to a reference point (prototypically, to a frontier; for instance, that between positive and negative sentences, occurrence or non-occurrence of some event, etc.). Combining the polar and the proximal components we arrive at the following configuration:

Table 1. The polar and proximal components of *por poco*

Sentence	Polar Component	Proximal Component
<i>Por poco sale</i>	negative (~)	closeness to <i>p</i>
<i>Por poco no sale</i>	positive (~~)	closeness to ~ <i>p</i>
<i>Por poco se mata</i>	negative (~)	closeness to <i>p</i>
<i>Por poco no se mata</i>	negative (~)	closeness to <i>p</i>

Again, notice the deviant characteristics of the last sentence (*Por poco no se mata*) when compared to the other sentences in the table.

Following the analyses by Horn (2002) and Schwenter (2002), we assume that the polar meaning of *por poco* is entailed but non-asserted, while the proximal meaning is both entailed and asserted. In a nutshell, what this means is that, even though the polar meaning is consistently present, and not felicitously cancelable in any context (and therefore not analyzable as a conversational implicature), what *por poco* (or *casi* or *almost*) asserts as its primary message is the closeness of some verbal situation to the truth of *p*. Thus, there is an important difference between (6) and (7):

- (6) *Por poco* llegó Juan.
‘Juan nearly arrived.’
- (7) *No* llegó Juan.
‘Juan didn’t arrive.’

While both examples entail that Juan did not arrive, the primary message conveyed by (6) is that Juan “came close to” arriving. No such message of approximation to *p* is expressed by (7), which could be no matter what the actual closeness of Juan’s arrival. Formal evidence for this asymmetry comes from the behavior of negative polarity items, which are felicitously licensed — as would be expected — by the canonical negator *no*, but never by *por poco*, despite the fact that in (6) and similar examples $\sim p$ is entailed. Thus, in (8) and (9) below there is a clear asymmetry, such that the negative polarity item *nadie* ‘nobody’ is licensed by *no* in (9), but not by *por poco* in (8):

- (8) **Por poco* llegó nadie.
‘Nobody nearly arrived.’
- (9) *No* llegó nadie.
‘Nobody arrived.’

Further comparison with the similarly approximative adverb *casi* reveals that, like *por poco* *p*, *casi* *p* also entails the negation of *p*. In other words, and as already illustrated in (1) above, both of these adverbial forms display polar and proximal components of meaning (cf. Sevi 1998):

- (10) *Casi/Por poco* se enfada.
‘(S)he almost got angry.’
- Entailed: (S)he didn’t get angry
Asserted: (S)he “came close to” getting angry

However, the crucial difference between the two forms is that, when *casi* is combined with negation, it ALWAYS effects a reversal of polarity, so that *casi* + *no* *p*

always entails the realization of *p*, unlike *por poco*, which only does so variably, as shown in the contrast between (4) and (5) above. Thus, example (11) below CANNOT EVER have the interpretation of $\sim p$ that (5b) above has normally.³ Instead, (11) must always be understood as the accretion of two polarity-expressing elements (*casi* + *no*), which together convey the logical double negation $\sim\sim p$:

- (11) *Casi no se mata en el accidente.*
'She nearly wasn't killed in the accident.'

Entailed: She was killed in the accident.

Asserted: She came close to **not** getting killed in the accident.

According to dictionary definitions (DRAE 2001) and also to more specialized studies (e.g. Pavón Lucero 1999), *por poco* and *casi* are synonymous. However, only *por poco*, when combined with negation, has the interpretive double possibility that was seen in (4b) and (5b) above.

A summary comparison of these two approximative adverbs is presented in Table 2. It shows that *casi* always conveys both proximal and polar meaning, invariably reversing the polarity of the proposition (affirmative or negative) over which it has scope (cf. García Medall 1993; Schwenter 2002). In contrast, the meaning of *por poco* depends crucially on the presence/absence of negation, and, in collocation with negation, only sometimes reverses the polarity of the proposition.

Table 2. Spanish approximatives and their meaning components

Form	Proximal meaning	Polar meaning
<i>casi (no) p</i>	Always	Always
<i>por poco p</i>	± Always	Always
<i>por poco no p</i>	Always	Sometimes

Again, then, herein lies the synchronic puzzle: why does *por poco no p* sometimes convey the negated $\sim p$, yet other times convey — as one would expect from the present-day perspective — the logical DOUBLE negation $\sim\sim p$ (= *p*)? How can exactly the same form express such obviously contradictory meanings?⁴

In the remainder of this paper we seek to provide answers to these questions, with special attention paid to the diachronic development of the polar component of meaning expressed by *por poco*. As we will show, the present-day “expletive” reading of *por poco no* actually has a very reasonable diachronic source, and as a result the possibility of such diametrically opposing interpretations for the same adverbial construction in present-day Spanish becomes a reality.

2. A corpus study of *por poco no* in synchrony

As a first step in our analysis of the phenomenon in question, it is necessary to have a clear handle on present-day occurrences of *por poco no*. A total of 22 examples of *por poco no* were extracted from the Real Academia Española’s CREA⁵ corpus, which contains both spoken and written language texts dating from 1975 until the present day. Much to our initial surprise, in fully 15 of these 22 examples (68%), the negation in *por poco no* could only be given the “expletive” interpretation. Thus, in only seven of 22 examples (32%) did the negation appear to behave “canonically”, i.e. to lead to the $\sim\sim p$ interpretation. Therefore, the end result of this search is that the most common interpretation of *por poco no* is actually the one in which it is presumed that the negative does not function normally! A representative example of each type — “expletive” negation and “canonical” negation — appears in (12) and (13), respectively, below:

- (12) *-¡Qué te pasa, hermano, tienes la cara descompuesta!*
 ‘What’s wrong, brother, you’ve got a funny look on your face!’
-No, no es nada. Ando un poco abstraído, crucé la calle sin fijarme y por poco no me atropella un coche. Todavía tengo el susto...
 ‘No, it’s nothing. I’m a little bit out of sorts, I crossed the street without paying attention and I nearly got run over by a car. I’m still in shock...’
 (CREA, Costa Rica, 1985, Anacristina Rossi, *María la noche*)
- (13) *Hablando de su ahijada, por poco no nos permiten bautizarla porque nos tocó en suerte un juez terco que insistía en que el poder no era válido para el caso, sin embargo mi mujer, con su dulzura lo convenció - le contó Jacinto.*
 ‘Talking about her goddaughter, they nearly did not allow us to baptize her because we were unlucky enough to get a stubborn judge who insisted that the power wasn’t valid for the case, however my wife with her sweetness convinced him - Jacinto said.’
 (CREA, Colombia, 1993, Cristina Bain, *El dolor de la Ceiba*)

In (12), it is patently clear that the speaker was not in fact run over by a car while crossing the street — if he had been, then presumably he would not be recounting the event. Thus, in this case, the *por poco + no* combination does not result in the logical double negation ($\sim\sim p$) interpretation. In contrast, example (13) can only be given the $\sim\sim p$ interpretation: the stubborn judge nearly did not permit the baptism of Jacinto’s goddaughter, but in the end Jacinto’s wife, using her sweetness as a persuasive tool, managed to convince the judge to allow the baptism to take place.

A battery of linguistic tests confirms the differential interpretation of (12) and (13). First of all, only in (12) is it possible to remove the negative morpheme *no* and still conserve the same (desired) interpretation. Thus, as (12’) shows, the negated

version seen in (12) is semantically equivalent to its non-negated counterpart. However, such is not the case for (13), as shown in (13'), where the version without *no* would necessarily be understood as implying that Jacinto's goddaughter in (13) was NOT in the end baptized.

(12') *por poco no me atropella un coche* = *por poco* Ø *me atropella un coche*

(13') *por poco no nos permiten bautizarla* ≠ *por poco* Ø *nos permiten bautizarla*

Secondly, note that the realization of *p* in *por poco no p* can only be reinforced by an adversative *pero* (but) conjunct in examples like (13) (see Horn 1991 for the importance of the notion of adversative reinforcement). In (12'') the addition of the *pero*-clause results in contradiction, but in (13'') it adds a rhetorically, though not propositionally, opposed conjunct that extracts the positive outcome from the situation in which Jacinto's goddaughter nearly did not get baptized:

(12'') *Por poco no me atropella un coche, #pero sí me ha atropellado.*
'A car nearly ran me over, but it did run me over.'

(13'') *Por poco no nos permiten bautizarla, pero sí la hemos bautizado (al final).*
'They nearly didn't allow us to baptize her, but we did baptize her (in the end).'

Lastly, if *por poco* is postposed to the verb, only the "expletive negation" example (12) preserves the desired interpretation. The example with "canonical negation" (13), on the other hand, undergoes a reversal of polarity. This contrast is illustrated in (12''') and (13'''):

(12''') *No me atropella un coche por poco.* (~*p*; Same interpretation as [12] above)

(13''') *#No nos permiten bautizarla por poco.* (~*p*; Different from [13] above)

Though there is not enough space available here for a full synchronic account of the meaning/function of "expletive" *por poco no*, it is important to note some of the additional pragmatic regularities of such cases.

First of all, as in (12) above, the truth of the negated proposition ~*p* is already established in the prior discourse context (or, alternatively, *p* is wholly implausible). Thus, obviously, if the speaker is recounting the event of nearly being run over by a car, then he or she was not in fact run over by that car. Note that the same cannot be said for (13) above, where nothing in the preceding context (including additional co-text not included in example [13] as presented above) can be understood as establishing the truth of ~*p* before the occurrence of the token of *por poco no*. Thus, the truth of ~*p* in the "expletive" case is typically already entailed by some other element in the discourse context (whether strictly linguistic or not).

Secondly, in nearly all of the examples examined, the non-negated proposition *p* — the affirmative counterpart of $\sim p$ — is one that is undesirable for some human entity at the center of the verbal situation (cf. Li 1976). This human entity is not necessarily the subject of the sentence in which *por poco no* occurs, e.g., in (12) above the person who was almost run over by the car — an obviously undesirable situation — is the speaker, and is realized as a dative object (*me*) in the relevant sentence.

A final pragmatic property of the *por poco no* construction is that the person or persons involved in the described event or situation are prototypically not agentive. Rather, the event or situation that is depicted as “undesirable” for the person(s) is one that is outside their active control. This non-agentivity can be seen clearly in examples like (12), where the act of (not) being run over by a car is clearly beyond the control of the speaker. Indeed, part of the effect of employing *por poco no* in such “dangerous” examples is to highlight the fact that the person affected by the described situation was not able to avoid the danger involved. Note however that this property of non-agentivity is not necessarily restricted to “expletive” uses of *por poco no*. In (14), an instance of “canonical” *por poco no*, the host of a Spanish TV show is talking about how his guest almost did not make it in time for the program:

- (14) *Yo supongo que hay cosas que en televisión no deben contarse, pero yo tengo la manía de contarlos todo, y por poco no llega el señor Cebrián, porque había niebla en el aeropuerto de de Barajas y creo que el avión siguiente no ha salido o no, decían que se iba a cerrar Barajas.*

‘I suppose there are things that on television should not be told, but I always tell everything, and Mr. Cebrián almost did not arrive, because there was fog at Barajas Airport and I think the next plane didn’t take off, they were saying that Barajas was going to be closed.’

(CREA, Spain, 12/12/89, *La Luna*, TVE 1)

In the case of (14), neither the host of the TV show nor the guest (Cebrián) possess the ability to influence the circumstances that nearly caused Cebrián to miss his appearance on the program. This non-agentive interpretation can be seen to affect the preferred form of other examples as well, such as (15), which is to be interpreted in the context of a mother who is recounting an episode with her children:

- (15) *Cuando vi que mis hijos me habían roto el jarrón, por poco (*no) los mato.*
‘When I saw that my children had broken my vase, I nearly killed them.’

In (15), the mother is clearly agentive, and the non-negated version is preferred over the negated version. However, it is not clear how conventionalized this restriction on non-agentivity actually is, since, as pointed out to us by Assela Reig (p.c.), a slight modification of this example would make *por poco no* much more acceptable:

- (16) *Cuando vi que mis hijos me habían roto el jarrón, por poco (no) les doy una bofetada.*
 ‘When I saw that my children had broken my vase, I nearly slapped them.’

Both of these examples describe counterfactual situations. The difference between (15) and (16) is one of degree, and specifically is tied to the kind of punishment meted out by the mother, which is more extreme in (15) than in (16). Therefore, the consequences for the child — however figurative they may be — are clearly of lesser gravity in (16) than in (15). Obviously, as well, it is more likely (*ceteris paribus*) that a mother would slap her children instead of killing them for breaking a vase. Thus, the structural possibility of *no* in (16) versus its infelicity in (15) is also linked to the differential likelihood of one punishment versus another.

Finally, the crucial question that can be asked with respect to “expletive” *por poco no* is this: Why would a speaker, given that both non-negated *por poco p* and “expletive” *por poco no p* lead to the same semantic interpretation, namely $\sim p$, choose one form of expression over another? A full answer to this question requires much more space and argument than can be given here, but strikingly, our querying of at least ten native speakers of Spanish from both Spain and Latin America has invariably led to the same intuition: “expletive” *por poco no p* conveys that the approximation to the realization of *p* was closer or greater than would be the case had the speaker used the non-negated *por poco p*. Thus, when a speaker elects to utter *por poco no me mato esta mañana* (I almost killed myself this morning [by accident]) instead of *por poco me mato esta mañana* (same translation), that speaker is choosing, albeit subconsciously, to intensify the approximative component of the adverbial expression, presumably for the rhetorical purpose of making the ensuing explanation more “newsworthy”. This sort of explanation would also help to explain why both *por poco* and *por poco no* appear possible in (16) above, but not in (15), which only admits *por poco*: presumably, a mother will not approximate too closely an intentional action that will result in the death of her children (15) (even if speaking hyperbolically),⁶ but will come much closer to the described action in a case like (16), where slapping (but not killing) the children is the mother’s reaction to the broken vase.

3. Expletive negation? Or variability in *por poco*?

The overwhelming assumption of researchers working on cases of so-called expletive negation such as the one exemplified above by *por poco no* is that the ambiguity of interpretation resides strictly in the negative morpheme (in this case, *no*). In cases of “canonical” negation, the negative element conveys its standard polarity-reversing meaning. In cases of “expletive” negation, the negative does not express polarity reversal.

The problem with this approach is that it does not provide an explanation: saying that a given token of negation is “expletive” is, in fact, a negative characterization, which does not provide an explanation for why the negative morpheme appears in a context where it does not display a negative function. At the most, explanations accord to the expletive negator some kind of largely unspecified pragmatic function, such as the marking of “intensity” or “emphasis” (Sánchez López 1996). But these kinds of (non-) explanations do nothing more than beg the question of what the true meaning/function of the negative, or more generally, the construction displaying “expletive” negation, really is. With no principled definition of wholly intuitive notions like “emphasis” or “intensity” — and there are few if any such definitions in the literature — it is impossible to make reliable predictions about the occurrence or non-occurrence of the “expletive” element.

Notice, however, that another possibility exists for the analysis in the present case (and presumably others as well). Instead of assuming that the variability of interpretation lies in the negative morpheme, one could instead look for this variability in other elements of linguistic structure (cf. Portner & Zanuttini 2000). Thus, instead of assuming that the variability in the interpretation of *por poco no* is due to the contribution (or lack thereof) of the negative morpheme *no*, it could also be possible that the adverb *por poco* itself is variable, at times conveying polar meaning, other times not. Indeed, this is an alternative interpretation for the display shown in Table 2 above. This alternative interpretation would take advantage of the polar/proximal dichotomy outlined in the discussion above. The “expletive” construction (5b”) selects only the proximal component of *por poco*, whereas the “canonical” construction (4”) selects both its proximal and polar component. Such an interpretation provides an alternative to the “expletive negation” analysis and also preserves compositionality to a greater extent, in the sense that the negative morpheme *no* invariably expresses its encoded meaning whenever it occurs.

A key independent reason for testing the validity of this alternative hypothesis is that it has recently been noted by a number of scholars that the proximal component of approximatives appears to be much more central to the meaning of these forms cross-linguistically (and cross-dialectally) than the polar component (e.g. Sevi 1998; Horn 2002; Schwenter 2002). Thus, for example, Schwenter (2002) has shown that Spanish *casi*, in the dialect of Spain’s Valencian Community, has both its canonical meaning (‘almost’) and also a much more discourse-contextually restricted meaning where the negative polar component associated with the ‘almost’ meaning has been lost. Nonetheless, this non-canonical meaning still retains its meaning of approximation to *p*, even though *p* is now entailed instead of $\sim p$. Amaral (2003) has presented a mirror-image case from the meaning and use of Portuguese *mal* ‘barely’, where the canonical polar meaning is affirmative (*mal p* normally entails the truth of *p*), but in certain discourse-pragmatic contexts this polar component does not enter into interpretation. In this case as well, the proximal meaning of the form persists in its non-canonical uses.

Does clear evidence exist for one or another analysis of *por poco (no)*? Is it possible to tell what the source of the “expletive” interpretation might be? Our answer would be “yes” on both counts — but it is necessary to examine the diachronic trajectory of this adverbial expression in order to reach the correct conclusion. We turn to this task in the following section.

4. The diachronic evidence

For the diachronic analysis of the meaning of *por poco no*, we examined data from the Real Academia Española’s CORDE (“Corpus Diacrónico del Español” [Diachronic Corpus of Spanish]) corpus,⁷ from which we initially extracted 49 examples of *por poco no*, distributed by time period in the following fashion:

1200–1500: 15 examples

1501–1700: 15 examples

1701–1990: 19 examples

The first example of *por poco no* dates from the year 1205. During the period spanning the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, there are 15 examples of *por poco no*, or alternatively, *por poco non*, since during this period the negative morpheme was variably realized as *no(n)*. However, in NONE of these examples can *por poco* be interpreted as conveying polar meaning. In other words, all 15 examples of *por poco no p* from this period are understood as expressing ~p — the “expletive” meaning from a present-day perspective — instead of the present-day expected meaning ~~p.

Note however that our original search for the fixed sequence *por poco no* was not fully adequate, since we also extracted an additional 26 examples from this period in which *por poco* and *no* co-occurred in the same sentence, but were not adjacent syntactically. Still, even in these cases, none could be interpreted as conveying the present-day expected ~~p meaning, but only the single negation ~p. Thus, from a total of 41 tokens with or without intervening material between the two elements *por poco + no* from the period 1200–1500, exactly NONE of them can be interpreted “canonically”; rather, every single one constitutes a case of so-called “expletive” negation! Two representative examples from this period can be seen in (17) and (18):

(17) *fueron tan desconortados & tan maltrechos; que por poco non perdieron los sesos*

‘they were so upset and so hurt; that they nearly lost their minds/brains’
(CORDE, Spain, 1270, *Estoria de España*)

(18) *el fue tan triste dela partida de su madre & del grand dolor de su padre que por poco no desmajo.*

‘he was so sad about the death of his mother and about his father’s great pain that he nearly fainted.’

(CORDE, Spain, 1489, *Melasina*)

The first example of *por poco no* from the CORDE in which *por poco* conveys the “canonical” meaning of both the proximal and polar components dates from the year 1605, and can be seen in (19) below. The desired interpretation here is that the persons in question ‘almost did not’ (i.e. “almost ~~p”) look like “children of Adam” (i.e. humans), not, alternatively, that they did not look like them, as would be expected on the “expletive” reading:

- (19) *Encomendaronlo a nuestro Señor muy de veras, suplicaronle les alumbrasse, de lo que en esto mas conuenia para su santo seruicio, y el bien de aquellas cuytadas almas, tan derribadas a la miseria de su brutez, que por poco no parecieran hijos de Adan.*

‘They entrusted it to our Lord very earnestly, they begged him to enlighten them, of what was most suitable for their holy service, and the well-being of those troubled souls, so downtrodden by the misery of their ignorance, that they nearly did not seem like sons of Adam.’

(CORDE, Spain, Fray José Sigüenza, *Tercera parte de la Historia de la orden de San Gerónimo*, 1605)

Note that the interpretation of this example, if it is to make any sense in context, must be that the persons in question “nearly did NOT seem to be sons of Adam” i.e. ~~p instead of the simple negative ~p. Another example from a couple of centuries later makes this double logical negation meaning even clearer, since the prior linguistic context (underlined) strongly implicates that Custodio had already come out of the nearby forest:

- (20) *Vadeaba el Amaimito a tiempo que oí se me llamaba, y divisé a mi compadre Custodio saliendo de un bosque inmediato. [...]*

‘I waded through the Amaimito [river] at the same time as I heard someone calling me, and I saw my companion Custodio coming out of a nearby forest’

— *Dios me lo guarde, compadrito — me dijo el viejo cuando estuvo cerca* — . [...]

‘God help me, friend — the old man said to me when he came close — ’

— *A su casa iba, compadre.*

‘I was on my way to your house, my friend.’

— *No me lo diga. Y yo que por poco no salgo de estos montarrones* [...]

‘You don’t say. And I almost didn’t make it out of those woods.’

(CORDE, Colombia, Jorge Isaacs, *María*, 1867)

As these examples of the “new” $\sim\sim p$ meaning of *por poco* begin to appear in the language, the “older” $\sim p$ (= “expletive”) meaning does not disappear, but rather persists, indeed all the way up to the present day. At first glance, then, it appears that *por poco* in construction with the negative particle *no* is polysemous (both diachronically and today) between one meaning that conveys only proximal meaning — leading to “expletive” interpretations of the negative in *por poco no* — and another meaning that conveys both proximal and polar (i.e. polarity-reversing) meaning. The proximal meaning, moreover, also appears to be diachronically anterior to the polar meaning.

Notice, however, that there is a crucial problem with this particular analysis for positing polysemy in *por poco*. If there really do exist two distinct *por poco* meanings, one that does not reverse polarity (diachronically older) and one that does (newer), then we should expect to find that both meanings are also available when negation is NOT present. Let us consider the simple constructed example from present-day Spanish in (21) to understand how this would play out:

- (21) *Por poco viene a la fiesta.*
 ‘She almost came to the party.’
 a. = “*no vino a la fiesta, pero casi vino*” ‘she didn’t come to the party but she almost did’
 b. ≠ “*vino a la fiesta pero casi no vino*” ‘she came to the party but she almost didn’t’

The first interpretation of (21), seen in (21a), is the intended or “normal” reading of (21), whereby the truth of $\sim p$ is entailed. By contrast, the second “potential” interpretation of (21) in (21b), whereby *por poco* does NOT reverse the polarity of the proposition (i.e. where p is entailed), is wholly unattested, in both synchrony and diachrony. If the hypothetical polysemy analysis proposed above were correct, the second meaning, in which *por poco* only expresses proximal, not polar, meaning, should also be (or at least should have been historically) an option. But it is not a possible interpretation of (21), neither now nor ever before in the diachronic development of *por poco*. Indeed, no such interpretation can be accorded to any example of *por poco* that we have found, from the thirteenth century to the present day.

Thus, the polar meaning of *por poco* is not attested in the presence of negation until relatively recently (namely, not until 1605; see example [19] above), but in affirmative sentences this component of meaning has been associated in some fashion with the sentential-scope use of this adverb ever since its emergence in Spanish.

Examining diachronic data on non-negated *por poco* closely, however, shows that the development of the polar meaning component in *por poco* is not as straightforward as one might expect. Although it is true, as stated above, that there are no examples of *por poco p* from any period in which p is entailed (i.e. the only interpretation possible for each example is $\sim p$), of the 14 examples we found of *por poco p* during the period 1200–1500,⁸ a total of 13 of these (93%) occur in the context

of a verb form in the imperfect subjunctive mood over which *por poco* has scope, a combination which strongly conveys a counterfactual (i.e. $\sim p$) meaning. Two examples of this particular coincidence of forms are given in (22) and (23):

- (22) *Quando Oliveros conoció la grande lealtad de Artús, por poco le reventara el corazón del grande enojo que tenía por la injuria que le había fecho.*
 ‘When Oliveros learned of Artús’ great loyalty, his heart nearly exploded from the great anger he had because of the harm he had caused him.’
 (CORDE, Spain, 1499, Anónimo, *La historia de los nobles caballeros Oliveros de Castilla y Artús d’Algarbe*)
- (23) *Cuando él oyó mentar a su señora, estremeciósele el corazón tan fuertemente, que por poco cayera del cavallo.*
 ‘When he heard mention of his wife/lady, his heart shook so violently that he nearly fell off of his horse.’
 (CORDE, Spain, 1482–1492, Garci Rodriguez de Montalvo, *Amadís de Gaula, libros I y II*)

The significance of this finding is that these particular modal constructions may very well be important elements for conveying the $\sim p$ meaning, either in conjunction with *por poco*, or on their own. The question therefore becomes the following: Is it possible that it is the imperfect subjunctive form, instead of *por poco*, that is conveying the negative polar meaning in these early periods? The answer to this seems to be “no”: if we were to remove the adverbial *por poco* from examples such as (22) and (23) above, the $\sim p$ interpretation would not necessarily be the one arrived at. This result is actually expected, given that the meaning of the imperfect subjunctive only implicates counterfactuality, it does not entail it. Moreover, there do exist other diachronic examples, albeit fewer of them, where *por poco* in affirmative contexts occurs with indicative verb forms that could never trigger counterfactual interpretations on their own:

- (24) a. *Quantos njnyos jallauan todos los descabeçauan*
 ‘However many children fell they beheaded them all’
Por las manos los tomauan por poco gelos tirauan
 ‘By the hands they took them, they nearly pulled off their arms.’
 (CORDE, Spain, 1230–1260, Anónimo, *Tres reys. Escorial K.III.4*)
- b. *libres de la muerte, que por tan cierta tenían, por poco cayeron en el peligro della*
 ‘free from death, that they so surely were going to encounter, they nearly fell in its danger.’
 (CORDE, Spain, 1587, Fernando de Mena, *Traducción de la Historia etiópica de los amores de Teágenes y Cariclea de Heliodoro*)

So, given this situation for non-negated *por poco*, how can we solve the puzzle posed by *por poco no*? As a first step towards a solution, note that in sentences without overt negation (i.e. those without *no*), *por poco* actually shows a similar distribution to other members of the class of Negative Indefinite (NI) words (cf. Bosque 1980; Aranovich 1996; Sánchez López 1999). Compare for instance *por poco* with a “classic” NI like *nadie* ‘no one’. The judgment patterns of (25) and (26) are exactly the same:

- (25) a. *Por poco viene a la fiesta.*
 ‘She almost came to the party.’
 b. **(No) viene a la fiesta por poco.*
- (26) a. *Nadie vino a la fiesta.*
 ‘Nobody came to the party.’
 b. **(No) vino nadie a la fiesta.*

Just like prototypical NIs in present-day Spanish, *por poco* expresses negative polar meaning in preverbal position on its own, without the need for an additional marker of negation. But in postverbal position, again just like other NIs, *por poco* requires a preverbal negative trigger in order to be grammatical: compare again the parallel behavior of *por poco* and *nadie* in (25b) and (26b), respectively.

This synchronic fact about the behavior of NIs as a class, and particularly among them, *por poco*, is crucially important for the diachronic account being offered here. This is because until at least the fifteenth century, NIs (with the exception of *nunca* [Llorens 1929]) could not occur in preverbal position without an accompanying *no(n)* (cf. Llorens 1929; Camus forthcoming):

- (27) *Nadie no(n) vino.*
 Interpretation A: ‘Nobody came.’ (fifteenth century meaning)
 Interpretation B: ‘Nobody didn’t come.’ (odd; but the only possible meaning in the twenty-first century)
- (28) *Nadie vino.*
 ‘Nobody came.’ (twenty-first century)

In Old Spanish, preverbal negative concord was obligatory. Thus, the seemingly (from the present-day perspective) doubly-negated (27) was actually the normal way to express the simple negation $\sim p$ up until the year 1450. However, from then on it became possible to do so preverbally with just the NI, which no longer required the additional negative support of the sentence negator *no* seen in (27). As a result, from the sixteenth century until the present day, sentences like (28) are grammatical in Spanish, and the earlier form with double negation in (27) must be understood (if at all) as it is in Interpretation B of (27), i.e. as expressing $\sim\sim p$. Similar to the other Spanish NIs, then, the combination of *por poco* + *no* evolved from obligatory preverbal negative concord, where two seemingly negative forms

(i.e. *por poco* and *no*) combined to express only one negation (the “expletive” reading). At this stage in the language, the presence of preverbal *no* effectively blocked the polar meaning of *por poco*, because of the syntactic requirement of preverbal negative concord. After the change in the Spanish negation system, whereby NIs could express negative polar meaning in preverbal position without the support of *no*, the interpretation of *por poco no* as logical double negation (i.e. the present-day “canonical” reading $\sim\sim p$), as in (19) and (20) above, became possible. In short, there was a diachronic reanalysis of the *por poco no p* construction from one that could only express simple negation ($\sim p$), to one that ALSO permitted a double negation reading ($\sim\sim p$).

Thus, the diachronic data lead to a clear solution for the synchronic puzzle posed at the outset. The approximative adverb *por poco* has always displayed the possibility of polarity-reversing meaning in affirmative sentences, but in negative sentences (i.e. *por poco no p*) the polarity-reversing capability of *por poco* is a relatively recent development, which was enabled by a broader change in the system of negation in Spanish. This result still provides support for a polysemy view, but for one in which there exist two kinds of *por poco no* constructions, specifically: one whose meaning is solely proximal and which still persists in the vast majority of tokens of *por poco no p*, and another whose meaning is BOTH proximal and polar whose frequency is lower than the former construction. And, while we might still call these different interpretations “expletive” and “canonical” negation, respectively, there is actually no evidence for ambiguity in the negation operator itself. At all times throughout the history of the construction, the meaning of *no* is compositional; the so-called “expletive” uses of *por poco no* that persist to this day are extremely old and extremely stable meanings, and Spanish speakers use their pragmatic knowledge to distinguish the desired interpretation of any given token of *por poco no*.

One last puzzle that needs to be solved in this discussion is why, in the earliest stages of the *por poco* lexeme, speakers even bothered to employ two different constructions whose meanings were semantically equivalent. For several centuries, both the affirmative *por poco p* and the negative *por poco no(n) p* had as their one and only semantic interpretation the same $\sim p$ entailment. So why did speakers sometimes choose one construction over the other? The answer to this question, we believe, must take into consideration both present-day synchronic as well as diachronic facts that we have already presented above. First, as we noted at the end of Section 2, present-day speakers of Spanish still intuit a clear pragmatic difference between semantically-equivalent pairs of sentences like those in (29):

- (29) a. *Por poco me muero de hambre en ese viaje.*
 b. *Por poco no me muero de hambre en ese viaje.*
 Both translatable as ‘I nearly died of hunger on that trip.’

While either example could be employed in discourse, the layperson’s explanation of the difference between them — which we find fully accurate — is that (29b) is

more “emphatic” or “expressive” than (29a). When asked to explain further this intuition, all the native speakers we queried (linguists and non-linguists alike) indicated that (29b) expresses greater approximation than (29a) to the hypothetical (and counterfactual) death-by-hunger situation. Presumably it is this pragmatic difference in the degree of approximation to the situation *p* that keeps “expletive” uses of *por poco no* like the one in (29a) around in the language till this day.

From the diachronic perspective, there is good evidence that this same distinction in terms of “greater versus lesser approximation to *p*” existed from the outset. Recall that, as explained above, affirmative *por poco p* occurred for several centuries not with the indicative mood as it does in the present-day language, but rather overwhelmingly with the imperfect subjunctive mood, as in examples (22) and (23) above. Contrariwise, *por poco no p*, from its first occurrences, has appeared nearly exclusively in combination with the indicative mood (whether past or present tense). This difference in collocational pattern appears to us to be motivated by the same factor that keeps the option of either (29a) or (29b) alive up till the present day: the imperfect subjunctive, as a form that strongly implicates hypotheticality and/or counterfactuality, presents the situation described in the proposition *p* of *por poco p* as one that is not to be located in the actual world, but rather in an alternative world that did not come to pass (i.e. in a counterfactual domain). By contrast, the indicative mood as found from the first examples in *por poco no p*, presents the situation in *p* as one that was located in the actual world and was approximated but did not come to pass. The distinct verbal moods chosen in the affirmative and negative forms, then, can be interpreted as isomorphic with the degree of approximation to *p* in a verbal situation in which $\sim p$ was entailed. That is, *por poco no p* entailing $\sim p$ has always conveyed greater approximation to *p* than *por poco p*, despite the fact that the latter also entails $\sim p$. Nowadays, the option of indicative versus (imperfect) subjunctive mood is no longer available in the verb that is under the scope of *por poco*, but the pragmatic difference between *por poco p* and “expletive” *por poco no p* — both of which semantically entail $\sim p$ — continues to be based in lesser versus greater approximation, respectively, to the counterfactual situation *p*.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have demonstrated that the polar meaning of the approximative adverb *por poco* in negative sentences does not become fully available until the seventeenth century, even though this polar meaning is present much earlier in affirmative sentences. This result provides strong diachronic support for some already-existing synchronic evidence (Sevi 1998; Horn 2002; Schwenter 2002) that the proximal meaning component of approximatives cross-linguistically is “more basic” than the polar meaning component. The delayed incorporation of the negative polar component of meaning affects, to this day, the interpretation of *por poco*

when it occurs in collocation with the negative morpheme *no*, resulting in two diametrically-opposed readings for *por poco no* in present-day synchrony and the impression that *no* is an “expletive” element in the singly-negated ($\sim p$) tokens of the construction.

More generally, to our knowledge, this is the first study to use diachronic data to document the rise (or fall) of so-called “expletive” negation, a phenomenon that is not limited to this construction in Spanish (Sánchez López 1996, 1999) and also extends to a wide range of constructions in many other languages (Horn 1978). We have shown, however, that, at least in this particular case, the “expletive” interpretation is actually a still-highly-active reflex of a historical phenomenon that occurred centuries ago in the system of negation in Spanish.

The majority opinion on how these kinds of form-meaning pairings arise appears to be clear: so-called “expletive” uses of negative morphemes are derived from, and therefore diachronically later than, non-expletive uses of these same negatives. In addition, expletive uses of negative morphemes are considered to constitute INSERTIONS into constructions that previously did not contain the negation. This position has been taken most explicitly by Croft (2000: 135), who presents what he terms “pleonastic negation” as a clear exemplar of the diachronic process he coins as “cryptanalysis”, whereby “the listener analyzes a covert semantic/functional property of a syntactic unit as not grammatically marked, and INSERTS an overt marker expressing its semantic value” (2000: 134; emphasis added). But, as we have shown in this paper, the rise of so-called “expletive” negation in the specific case of *por poco no* results from the further development of the polar meaning of the adverb when it occurs in collocation with negation, as well as from a change in the system of negation in Spanish, not from the insertion of the negative morpheme *no* into the construction. We believe that other cases of “expletive” negation ought to be examined diachronically for this same possible path of development.

Notes

1. Ziegeler (2000), following Sadock (1981), argues that the polar meaning of English *almost* constitutes a conversational implicature, not an entailment. However, the evidence that she uses to support this analysis is, in our opinion, inconclusive, and furthermore does not necessarily apply in the case of the Spanish translation equivalents under study in this paper.
2. We say “norma!” here to indicate that it would be possible to construct a (bizarre) context in which the $\sim\sim p$ meaning of (5b) could be made accessible, e.g. *Juana siempre trataba de suicidarse, pero cada vez que lo intentaba, no lo conseguía; por fin lo logró ayer, pero incluso esta vez por poco no se mata* ‘Juana was always trying to commit suicide, but every time she tried she wouldn’t succeed; she finally managed to do it yesterday, but even this time she nearly didn’t kill herself.’

3. There are a few marked contexts in which the ~p interpretation is possible, e.g. *Era casi un niño* 'He was almost a child', which entails that he wasn't a child. See also Schwenter (2002).
4. Though it may seem that a case of the same form expressing opposing meanings would be rare, there are actually a number of other examples of similar "ambiguous approximatIVES" already found in the literature. See Horn (2002) for a summary of such cases.
5. CREA = Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual 'Reference Corpus of Present-day Spanish'. This corpus consists of approximately 180 million words, and is accessible at www.rae.es.
6. It is important to note in the case of (15) that it is not specifically the verb *matar* 'to kill' that brings about the infelicity of the negative *no*, but rather the outcome of the situation described by the predicate, i.e. the hypothetical death of the children. The negative morpheme *no* is equally infelicitous when combined with other, semantically-distinct, predicates leading to similar outcomes-in-the-world, e.g. *Por poco (#no) los ahogo* 'I nearly drowned them' or *Por poco (#no) los fusilo* 'I nearly executed them'.
7. CORDE = Corpus Diacrónico del Español 'Diachronic Corpus of Spanish'. This corpus consists of approximately 180 million words, and is accessible at www.rae.es.
8. We found 66 examples of *por poco* p from the following period, 1501–1700. All of these tokens convey ~p unambiguously like those from the earlier period (1200–1500), but in addition the later examples are not primarily restricted to collocations with the imperfect subjunctive.

Sources

CORDE = Corpus Diacrónico del Español (online at <http://www.rae.es>)
 CREA = Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual (online at <http://www.rae.es>)

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