

# *Almost* and *almost* are not even approximately the same: Evidence from Hungarian<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. MAIN CLAIMS

- Hungarian has two almost-approximators: *majdnem* ('almost-M') and *szinte* ('almost-S')
- synchronic claim: *majdnem* encodes epistemic vagueness (possible worlds), *szinte* encodes scalar vagueness (scales of varying granularity or a contextually given precision standard) → support for the dualistic view of vagueness
- diachronic claim: *majdnem* grammaticalized from temporal adverb *majd* 'soon' plus a pleonastic negator *nem* 'not', *szinte* from adverb *szín-te* 'by appearance, by superficial similarity'

## 2. DATA

- Hungarian has two words which are usually rendered as *almost* in English: *majdnem* és *szinte*.
- Often taken to be just stylistic alternatives (with *szinte* considered the more refined alternative)
- Reality is more complicated (figures denote attestations in the Hungarian National Corpus: a smallish but reasonably parsed corpus):

- (1) a. *János és Máté majdnem egyidősek.* (HNC=40)  
John and Matthew almost-M same.age<sub>Adj;PL</sub>
- b. *János és Máté szinte egyidősek.* (HNC=48)  
John and Matthew almost-S same.age<sub>Adj;PL</sub>  
'John and Matthew are almost the same age.'

- Both (1a) and (1b) are completely felicitous.

- (2) a. *Majdnem első lettem a futóversenyen.* (HNC=10)  
almost-M first became:1SG the running.competition:on
- b. *#Szinte első lettem a futóversenyen.* (HNC=0)<sup>2</sup>  
almost-S first became:1SG the running.competition:on  
'I almost came first in the running competition.'

- #(2b), if uttered, would probably met with a rejoinder along the lines: 'Well, you cannot be almost the first, you are either first or not first, there is no in-between.'

- (3) a. *Majdnem pap lettem.* (HNC=5)  
almost-M priest become.PAST.1SG
- b. *#Szinte pap lettem.* (HNC=0)<sup>3</sup>  
almost-S priest become.PAST.1SG  
'I almost became a priest.'

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2 Includes: *első* 'first', *bajnok* 'champion', *aranyérmes*, 'gold medallist', *dobogós* 'one who earned the right to stand on the podium reserved for the first three', *listavezető* 'first in the list of contenders'

3 Includes: *szerezetes* 'monk', *apáca* 'nun', *katona* 'soldier'

- Again, normally you are either a priest or you are not.

- (4) a. #*A mozaikok majdnem véletlenül kerültek Ravennába.* (HNC=6)  
 the mosaics almost-M by.accident got Ravenna:into  
 b. *A mozaikok szinte véletlenül kerültek Ravennába.* (HNC=136)  
 the mosaics almost-S by.accident got Ravenna:into  
 ‘The mosaics ended up in Ravenna almost by accident.’

- (4a) can only receive a felicitous reading in the rather absurd scenario where there was a devious plan to get the mosaics to Ravenna in an accidental manner, but in the end, this plan failed, and the mosaics got to Ravenna in a non-accidental manner.

- (5) a. #*Majdnem testvérek vagyunk.* (HNC=2)  
 almost.M siblings be-1PL  
 b. *Szinte testvérek vagyunk.* (HNC=27)  
 almost-S siblings be-1PL  
 ‘We are almost brothers.’

- (5b) is felicitous with the reading ‘We are as close to each other as siblings typically are.’ (5a) is not felicitous.

- (6) a. #*10 év alatt majdnem soha nem láttam a főnököt.* (HNC=10)  
 ten year under almost-S never not see.PAST.1SG the boss.ACC  
 b. *Tíz év alatt szinte soha nem láttam a főnököt.* (HNC=1.061)  
 ten year under almost-S never not see.PAST.1SG the boss.ACC  
 ‘In my ten years at the company, I almost never saw the boss.’

- (6a) is only felicitous under a convoluted scenario: This is my last day at work. So far, I have never met the boss. And then, unexpectedly, the boss steps into my office, so on my very last working day, I do meet the boss. I almost managed never to see the boss, but I did in the end.

### 3. PREVIOUS PROPOSALS

- Some instances of the non-interchangeability of *majdnem* and *szinte* has been noted by some authors (e.g. Halm 2016, Dékány and Csirmaz 2018)
- No semantic analysis of this contrast has been proposed so far to the best of my knowledge
- Piñón (2008) discuss the semantics of *majdnem* ‘almost-M’ in passim and sketched a possible-world analysis not dissimilar to ours, without discussing *szinte* ‘almost-S’

### 4. BACKGROUND

- Following various authors, I assume that two components need to be considered when it comes to approximators such as *almost*:

- (7) *John is almost 30 years old.*  
 Proximal component: John is close to being 30 years old.  
 Polar component: John is not 30 years old.

- I assume that directionality (the less-than/before effect with numerals and temporal or spatial expressions) is a by-product of polarity (cf. Penka 2005 and Amaral and Del Prete 2010 a.o.)
- I leave aside for now the issue of which of these components is asserted, presupposed (at issue or not at issue), for a discussion, cf. Roberts (2011), Horn (2011) a.o.
- Traditionally, the proximal (and also the polar) component of *almost* (and other approximators) has been defined in possible world terms (Sadock 1981, Nouwen 2006 a.o): While in  $w_0$ , John is not 30 years old, there is  $w_1$  close to  $w_0$  in which John is 30 years old.
- Alternative: define proximity in terms of granularity of a scale or a contextually given precision standard (Sevi 1998, Penka 2005, Sauerland and Stateva 2007, Amaral and del Prete 2010, Greenberg and Ronen 2013 a.o.): under the current precision standard, it is untrue that John is 30 years old, but there is a slightly laxer precision standard under which it is true that John is 30 years old.
- Simplifying somewhat, one might label the first approach as epistemic vagueness and the second approach as scalar vagueness (using the terminology of Sauerland and Stateva 2007).
- One possible formalizations is as follows (cf. Greenberg and Ronen 2013 for a similar approach to *almost*, *more-or-less* and *be-gadol*):
- EPISTEMIC VAGUENESS (one proposition, alternative possible worlds, distance between possible worlds):

- (8) a. POLAR  $\neg p_{w_0}$   
 b. PROXIMAL  $\exists w_1 \in S_{ALT}(w). \text{close}_s(w_1, w_0) \wedge p_{w_1}$

- SCALAR VAGUENESS (alternative propositions, one possible world, distance between precision standards):

- (9) a. POLAR  $\neg p_{preC, w_0}$   
 b. PROXIMAL  $\exists pre' \in S_{ALT}(preC). \text{close}_s(pre', preC) \wedge p_{pre', w_0}$

## 5. PROPOSAL

- *majdnem* is an approximator defined in epistemic vagueness terms (8)
- *szinte* is an approximator defined in scalar vagueness terms (9)
- (2a) is felicitous if the speaker ended up second but would have ended up first in a slightly different possible world, e.g. one in which he did not happen to lose his shoes in the last metres before the finish line
- (2b) is infelicitous since there does not exist a meaningful precision standard, however lax, under which someone who lost the race may be truthfully asserted as having won the race
- (1a) and (1b) are both felicitous. If John is only 3 days older than Matthew, than it is the case that under a somewhat lax precision standard, they are of the same age. Also, if two possible worlds only differ in whether the age differential between John and Matthew is 0 days or 3 days, then these two possible worlds are likely to be close.
- (4b) is felicitous in case the manner in which the mosaics got into Ravenna was not fully accidental strictly speaking, but can be characterized as accidental under a slightly vaguer precision standard
- (4a) is infelicitous since the counterfactual reading is not compatible with our world knowledge
- Consider also:

- (10) a. *János majdnem pontosan érkezett...*  
 John almost-M on.time arrive.PAST.3SG  
 'John almost arrived on time, ...'  
 i. *alig egy percet késett.*  
 just one minute.ACC be.late.PAST.3SG  
 'he was only a minute late.'  
 ii. *de pár kilométerrel a cél előtt lerobbant a kocsija,*  
 but couple km.INS the goal before stopped.working the car.his  
 'but a couple of kilometres before his destination, his car broke down,  
*és végül egy jó órát késett.*  
 and eventually a good hour.ACC be.late.PAST.3SG  
 'and he ended up being more than an hour late.'
- b. *János szinte pontosan érkezett...*  
 John almost-S on.time arrive.PAST.3SG  
 'John almost arrived on time, ...'  
 i. *alig egy percet késett.*  
 just one minute.ACC be.late.PAST.3SG  
 'he was only a minute late.'  
 ii. *#de pár kilométerrel a cél előtt lerobbant a kocsija,*  
 but couple km.INS the goal before stopped.working the car.his  
 'but a couple of kilometres before his destination, his car broke down,  
*és végül egy jó órát késett.*  
 and eventually a good hour.ACC be.late.PAST.3SG  
 'and he ended up being more than an hour late.'

- English *almost* has been claimed to involve epistemic vagueness (Greenberg and Ronen 2013 a.o.) or to involve scalar vagueness (Sevi 1998 and Sauerland and Stateva 2007 a.o.)
- Hungarian, neat division of labour between *majdnem* 'almost-epistemic vagueness' and *szinte* 'almost-scalar vagueness': dualistic view of vagueness
- Cf. Kagan and Wolf's (2015) similar proposal for the two almost-words in Russian (*čut' ne* and *počti*).

## 6. DIACHRONIC STORY – MAJDNEM

- In Modern Hungarian: *majd* 'soon', *nem* 'not'
  - *majd* functions as 'almost' in Modern Hungarian in some fossilized expressions and (for some speakers at least) with numerals:
- (11) a. *Majd(nem) elfelejtettem.*  
 almost-M PRT.forget.PAST.1SG  
 'I almost forgot.'
- b. *Majd(nem) elájultam.*  
 almost-M PRT.faint.PAST.1SG  
 'I almost fainted (with admiration/of fear).'
- c. *Majd(nem) felrobbantam.*  
 almost-M PRT.explode.PAST.1SG  
 'I almost exploded (with rage).'
- (12) *János majd(nem) két méter magas.*  
 John almost-M two meter high  
 'John is almost two meters tall.'

- *majdnem* is the amalgamation of *majd* ‘almost’ and pleonastic negator *nem* ‘not’ (Simonyi 1888, Historical Dictionary of Hungarian 2:819)
- earliest attestations:

(13) *a' mit én tegnap néktek mondtam, majd bogy nem elég arra,*  
 what I yesterday to.you say.past.1sg, almost-M that not enough for.that  
*bogy boldogul lenne dolgotok*  
 that happily would.be your.affairs  
 ‘What I told you yesterday is almost enough to make you content with the state of your affairs.’ (Ferenc Földi. 1790. Erkölc-skönyvecske, 44)

(14) *majdnem = vix non, fere, ferme, profermodum, paene* (Ferenc Verseggy. 1816. Analytica institutionum linguae hungaricae.)

- *majd* ‘almost’ attested very early:

(15) *zertelen tezon magaval, majd el vezti feiet*  
 unrestrained do.3SG with.himself almost PRT lose.3SG his.head.ACC  
 ‘He fails to restrain himself, he almost loses his head.’ Guary Codex (before 1508, 027)

- *majd* ‘almost’ a reanalysis of *majd* ‘soon’ (Historical Dictionary of Hungarian 2:819):
  - *Majd elájulok.* ‘I will faint soon.’ → there is a  $w_1$  close to  $w_0$  (a continuation world of  $w_0$ ) where I faint. → *majd* reinterpreted as approximator encoding epistemic vagueness

## 7. DIACHRONIC STORY - SZINTE

- *szín* ‘colour’ (Modern Hungarian)
- *szín* ‘outer appearance, surface’ (Old and Middle Hungarian), survives in fossils such *a víz színe* ‘the surface of the water’
- In Old Hungarian: *szinte* ‘by appearance, by superficial similarity’ (Historical Dictionary of Hungarian 3:760), cf. Modern Hungarian *színlég* ‘by creating a false appearance’
- Reinterpretation: ‘by appearance, by superficial similarity’ → ‘by a laxer standard of precision’
- *szinte egészséges* ‘healthy by the look of it’ → ‘approximately healthy’
- first attestation:

(16) *olian kemeniön [...] mint szinte a száraz föld az ő labái alatt*  
 so hard as almost the dry land the he foot.3SG.PL under  
 ‘Almost as hard as the dry land under his feet.’ (Debrecen Codex 1519, 177)

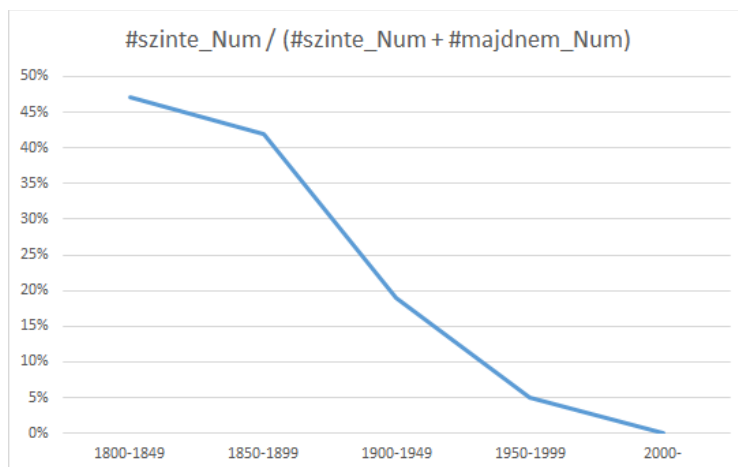
## 8. A COMPLICATION

- In almost+numeral environments, both *majdnem* and *szinte* are attested:

(17) *Majdnem két méter magas vagyok, és hozzá száz kilót nyomok*  
 almost-M two meter high be.1SG and to.that hundred kilo.ACC weigh.1SG  
 ‘I am almost two metres high and on top of that, I weigh a hundred kilos.’

(18) *Danny igazi ember-hegy: szinte két méter magas és hatalmas izmai vannak.*  
 Danny real man-mountain almost-S two meter high and huge muscle.3SG.PL be.3PL  
 ‘Danny is a real mountain of a man: he is almost two metres high and has huge muscles.’

- However, for most speakers, *szinte* is marked here, something which our proposal does not explain.
- Possible explanation: historically, in those environments where *majdnem* and *szinte* compete, *majdnem* appears to be in the process of crowding *szinte* out (data drawn from the Hungarian Historical Corpus):



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