

The meaning of *presque*

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Starting point : Anscombe & Ducrot.

(1) Peu d'automobiliste dépassent le 120, ? presque 20%.

Objective of the paper :

- Revisiting the initial presentation of the puzzle by Anscombe & Ducrot, and the solution proposed in Jayez & Tovenia (2008)
- Giving arguments for a new analysis of the puzzle in a classical semantic framework dispensing of any recourse to « argumentative » properties.

The proposal rests on a view of the puzzle as an instantiation of a syntactic construction, *apposition*, and not as a small (reduced) discourse, which is the basic assumption common to AD and JT.

It gives argument for an analysis of *presque* which is substantially different from the « argumentative » conception of AD, but also from the more sophisticated analysis of JT. The core of the proposition is that *presque* is an « intensional » determiner, *i.e.* a determiner comparing the actual quantity to a subjective norm.

1. Anscombe and Ducrot's argumentative puzzle.

When introducing example (1) Anscombe & Ducrot insist that it can be used as a test splitting determiners in two classes: some of them are acceptable in the position of *presque* others, like *presque* are not, unless *mais* is introduced.

They are also careful to note that it is the choice of the determiner, which is crucial, and not the precise quantity following *presque*. In (1), one might think that the example is awkward because *peu* (few) implies a quantity smaller than 20%. But the authors note that even if the proportion is very small, the sentence is not fully acceptable, and would require the presence of *mais* :

(2) ? Peu d'automobilistes dépassent le 120, presque 2%.

(3) Peu d'automobilistes dépassent le 120, mais presque 2%.

Anscombe and Ducrot's judgements :

Determiners acceptable in (1) : *Pas tout à fait, Pas plus de, Moins de, Guère plus de, Au plus, A peine.*

Determiners acceptable in (1) only if *mais* is inserted: *Presque, Plus de, Un peu plus de, Pas moins de, Guère moins de, Au moins*

The puzzle, then, for Anscombe & Ducrot themselves, illustrates a general constraint regarding the acceptability of determiners apposed to *peu*, and is not restricted to the couple *peu/presque*. They also observe that if *peu* is replaced by *beaucoup* (many) the acceptabilities are reversed. So, although they do not make a systematic study of the determiners acceptable/non-acceptable in the structure, it is clear for them that the puzzle illustrates a general constraint on the use of determiners in this construction.

As a whole, the puzzle raises two questions:

A) Why are some determiners acceptable/unacceptable in the structure illustrated by (1)?

B) Why are the distributions observed in (1) reversed by the adjunction of *mais*?

Anscombe & Ducrot's approach rests on the claim that the semantics of the determiners, what they mean, in the classical (vericonditional) sense, cannot provide answers to A and B questions. This motivates, in their view, the introduction of new layer of meaning,

independent of the denotational one, dealing with the “argumentative force” of lexical items. In a nutshell, their proposal rests on the implicit assumption that the structure (1) should be understood as the association of two propositions (*Peu d’automobilistes dépassent le 120/ 20% d’automobilistes dépassent le 120*) such that the second one is an argument supporting the first one.¹

In order for a proposition *Q* to argue in favor of another one *P*, *Q* must have an argumentative force “oriented in the same direction” than *P*. The authors introduce to show that this is (or not) the case, an argumentative description of *peu* and *presque* stipulating, roughly that *peu* has a “negative” (my term) argumentative force, in the sense that it argues in favor of the same set of conclusions than *not P*, although *presque* argues in favor of the same set of conclusions than *P*. This is why *presque P* cannot be interpreted as an argument in favor of *peu P*. The reason why the introduction of *mais* renders the sentence acceptable is that *P mais Q*, conveys that *Q* is not an argument in favor of *P*, but instead an argument in favor of *not P*. I will not go into the details here, and I do not fully justice the subtleties of the authors’ discussion of examples. My main point is to show that the cost of the initial claim (the semantics of determiners cannot explain their behavior in (1)) is very heavy: it leads to many extra stipulations regarding the structure of (1), the argumentative force of determiners, a full theory of argumentation. And very few of these stipulations are implemented in a formal proposal.

I might be useful, then, to discuss the initial assumptions of the authors, and especially the more implicit one, *i.e.* the view of (1) as something like a small discourse combining two sentences *P* and *Q* (the second one being reduced to a determiner), such that *Q* should be interpreted as an argument, or to what discourse theorists would call a *justification*.

As I see it (1) is a syntactic structure, a case of apposition, and the intuition that the correct analysis of the relation between its two segments is *justification* is for me, not uncontroversial. It would be more accurate to say that the construction (1) is used to be “more precise”.

If one does not share the analysis of the crucial construction, the claim that the classical semantics of the determiners involved cannot explain the acceptabilities/unacceptabilities should be itself reconsidered on this new basis. On the contrary, it would be interesting to consider in details how the whole range of determiners (intensional or not) behave in this construction. It might be the case that the observed constraints on the intensional determiners *peu* and *presque* can be accommodated as a manifestation of a more general constraint on the construction.

Even the kind of complementary distribution pointed to by Anscombre and Ducrot between “bare versions” of (1) and versions with *mais* deserves a more careful examination in this perspective. It is not established that the superficially close sentences with and without *mais* illustrate the same syntactic structure. (1) is a case of apposition, but *mais* is classically analyzed as a conjunction. And even a theory-independent and rather rough survey of examples involving parenthetical *mais*, shows a behavior very different from apposition:

(4) Moins de 50%, mais plus de 30%, roulent à 120.

(5) ? Moins de 50%, plus de 30%, roulent à 120.

(6) Peu d’étudiants, 5 exactement, sont acceptés.

(7) ?Peu d’étudiants, mais 5 exactement, ont été acceptés.

A worth testing hypothesis is that *mais* in (superficially) close counterparts of (1) is a case of

¹ This implicit assumption is inherited by Jayez & Toven (2008), which explains that they see (1) as a case of « justification » (a discourse relation), and that they use A. Merin’s formalisation of Anscombre and Ducrot’s « argumentative force » in terms of positive/negative relevance (see *infra*).

reduced conjunction, with many common features with other conjunctions like *et* (and also idiosyncratic features). See the parallelism :

(8) Moins de 50%, et plus de 30%, roulent à 120.

(9) ? Peu d'étudiants, et 5, sont accepté.

This shows that cases of genuine apposition, like (1) should be carefully distinguished from reduced conjunctions illustrated by :

(10) Peu d'automobilistes, mais plus de 20% dépassent le 120.

(11) Plus de 40% d'automobilistes, et moins de 50%, dépassent le 120.

(12) Moins de 5% d'automobilistes, donc une proportion insignifiante, roulent à 120.

2 A previous account of the puzzle : Jayez & Tovenà (1988)

The only attempt to propose a solution to the puzzle in the framework of formal semantics is Jayez & Tovenà (1988).

Their proposal rests on the assumption inherited from Anscombe and Ducrot that the considered construction is argumentative in nature, and what they try to do is explaining that the "argumentative properties" of *presque* prevent this item from playing the role devoted to the apposed constituent in the construction illustrated by (1).

A very interesting claim of the paper is that argumentative properties can be derived from « comparative meanings », and that *plus* (more) for instance, has the same "argumentative properties than *presque*", but they do not implement any explicit derivation from "comparative meanings" to "argumentative meanings". For instance, they do not give any proof establishing why superiority comparatives like *plus de* are acceptable in the construction, and why inferiority comparatives like *moins de* are not.

Their analysis of Anscombe and Ducrot's original example (1) is based on the explicit claim that the construction rests on a discourse relation of *justification*, which cannot be satisfied by *presque* because this item has *no positive relevance* (Merin 1999) for the initial *few*. Both claims put the burden of explaining the unacceptabilities on discourse relation theories (*justification*) and on decision theoretic approaches of language (*relevance*) i.e. increases the theoretical complexity needed for dealing with the facts and depends crucially, as a consequence, of the precise definition of notions like *justification* and *positive relevance*. Before making this step, it is worth trying to explore how the puzzle could be solved in a more conservative and parsimonious framework.

Moreover, I must say that what I know of the relation of *justification*, does not fit exactly my intuitions about the construction under consideration. My own intuition about the construction is that APP makes ANCH "more precise", and is not understood as a *justification* for ANCH.

The relation of justification is used, for instance in the following examples :

(13) Pierre est sorti prendre l'air. Il avait mal à la tête.

(14) Les voisins sont sortis. Leurs volet sont fermés.

(15) Marie n'a pas de voiture. Elle ne saurait pas où la garer.

The relation between ANCH and APP is not the same. APP can always be preceded or followed by the expression "*pour être plus précis...*" (*to be more precise...*) :

(16) Peu d'automobilites dépassent le 120, moins de 20% pour être (plus) précis.

(17) J'ai parcouru moins de 100 km, 96 pour être précis.

But this expression, "to be more precise", cannot be used in the classical cases of the justification relation:

(18) Pierre est sorti prendre l'air. ? Pour être précis, il avait mal à la tête.

(19) Les voisins sont sortis. ?Pour être précis, leurs volet sont fermés.

(20) Marie n'a pas de voiture. ? Pour être précis, elle ne saurait pas où la garer.

In order to render the examples acceptable with “pour être précis”, the second sentence should be more what discourse theorists call an “elaboration” than a justification :

(21) Pierre est sorti prendre l’air. Pour être précis, il a fait quelques pas dans le hall.

(22) Les voisins sont sortis. Pour être précis, ils sont partis aux courses.

(23) Marie n’a pas de voiture. Pour être précis, elle n’a pas de voiture en état de fonctionnement

It is doubtful, then, that an explanation based on *justification* can capture the specificity of cases like (1).

Jayez & Tovenà’s analysis is that *presque a* means « superior to a left proximity threshold of *a* », *a’* which they take to be « indiscernible from » *a* . The notion of “indiscernibility” is also an extra feature, argumentative in nature, and explicitly given as inspired by the original analysis of Anscombe and Ducrot who claim that “*presque a*” argues in the same direction than *a*.

A few comments are in order on this part of the proposal. A general comment is that the notion of indiscernability itself can only regard the “argumentative” properties of *presque*, not its semantics, since it is obvious that *presque a*, in denotational terms, is not equivalent to *a*. To use this notion, then is to keep the analysis in the argumentative paradigm, although we try to find a semantic basis for the analysis of examples like (1).

Leaving aside indiscernability, what is new in the proposal is that *presque a* means “superior to *a’*, *a’* being inferior to *a*, and very close to *a*”. This is the part of its meaning which makes it a comparative of superiority, and explains that it has properties similar to “plus de *a*” with regard to cases like (1).

Of course, *presque a* implies as well “inferior to *a*” and it might be analyzed as well as a comparative of inferiority. So one might also expect that it should behave as a comparative of inferiority like “less than *a*”, which is not the case. Jayez and Tovenà eliminate this potential problem by claiming that this part of the meaning of *presque* is a conventional implicature and is thus, so to speak “invisible” for argumentative mechanisms. This is a crucial point for maintaining the correlation they postulate between being a comparative of superiority and being unacceptable in (1) in the position of *presque*.

Note that without this assumption, if the semantics of *presque* is the conjunction ‘more than a close predecessor of *a*, *a’*, and less than *a*’, the expectation is that it should have the properties of expressions like “more than *a* and less than *b*” or “between *a* and *b*”, which is not the case. The considered expressions are perfectly acceptable in the context (1) whereas *presque* is not.

Again, even for justifying the correlation “unacceptable in (1)”/ “comparative of superiority”, one has to accept the extra-assumption that the “less than *a*” meaning component of *presque* is a conventional implicature, something one might want to do reluctantly.

The JT’s underlying empirical analysis of *presque a* , disregarding the distinction content/implicature, is not itself uncontroversial. I share the intuition that *presque* implies, as a part of its meaning a comparative of superiority, but I am not sure the relevant standard of comparison is just a very close predecessor of *a* as Jayez and Tovenà assume.

When asked what are the implications of *presque a* , French speakers answer :

1- (strictly) inferior to *a*

2- very close to *a*

3- but not that small, could have been worse...

Jayez and Tovenà’s standard of comparison for an underlying comparative of superiority is bound to the component (2) : “to be higher than a left indiscernability threshold”, as I see it is

a technical elaboration of “to be close to”. To formulate closeness as a superiority (with relation to an indiscernability threshold) is just a choice of formulation among others. But in my view, the substantial comparative of superiority embodied in *presque* comes from the component (3) and is intensional in nature.

Suppose your salary is 1925 € and I tell you :

(24), Vous gagnez donc presque 2000 euros

There are two ways for you to disagree on what I say, to claim that you would never say such a thing :

(25) Proximity objection : “Well, you know, 75 €, it’s something!”

(26) Intensional objection : “ I would never say that. 2000 € its nothing, considering what is needed to live in Paris.”

In other words, *presque a* is a vague determiner because the required degree of proximity to *a* is left unspecified, and it is an intensional determiner, because it implies the subjective judgement of the speaker that the quantity is superior to what it could have been in some possible world.

This intensional dimension of *presque* should be explicitly distinguished in any treatment of the semantics of *presque*.

I think that the main point made by Jayez & Tovenas is the correlation between superiority comparatives and the kind of unacceptability illustrated by (1). Their proposal nevertheless remains argumentative in nature, taking for granted that (1) rests on a justification relation, an assumption that is not confirmed by the data, and they do not provide any explicit derivation for the correlation they point to. We will try to provide an explicit derivation of the correlation in a more parsimonious framework deprived of any argumentative or discourse-oriented framework.

As for their analysis of *presque*, the discussion establishes that the comparative of superiority that they associate to the item, would be best located in an intensional layer of its semantics asserting that the actual quantity “is not that bad” or “could have been worse”, than in the proximity layer (more than a left threshold of *a*). Moreover, the claim that *presque a* is a comparative of superiority, depends crucially on the thesis that the “less than *a*” part of its meaning is a conventional implicature, and is kept a separate layer of meaning. Without this thesis, *presque* is not a superiority comparative, but the conjunction of an inferiority comparative and a superiority comparative (something close to “less than *x* and more than *y*”). But such forms do not behave like *presque* in (1): they are acceptable. And this thesis itself looks more like opening new discussions and problems than a firm support for the proposal. Again, it is worth trying to explain the facts without making the extra assumption that the “less than *a*” meaning component of *presque* is a conventional implicature.

The theory independent description of *presque* we are left with for such a try is thus the conjunction of : *less than a*, *close to a*, and *not that small in the subjective speaker’s judgment*.

3 *Presque* : an intensional determiner.

A working hypothesis for the semantic of *presque a* in a classical framework :

Presque a A B expresses a conjunction of three specifications of α , the intersection of B and A, or the proportion A/B.

- 1 - $\alpha < a$
- 2 - α is close to a
- 3 - $\alpha > n$

The vagueness of *presque a* has its main origin in (1) : more than one alternative is open by (1).

The determiner is intensional because of (2) and (3).

From (2) : « closeness » requires a mesure of the distance between α and a , and implies that for the speaker, this distance is « small » (an intensional notion).

From (3) : the speaker's judgement is that α is higher than n the value of α in some possible world.

n is called a *norm* : the only assumption I make on n is that it is a constant freely chosen by the speaker for any use of such determiners.

It seems that the previous analysis of *presque* discussed above relies heavily on (2) but makes no room for (3). This is true as well of many previous analyses of *almost* (for instance Nouwen 2006).

A common feature of such analyses is that they have, to « background » (Nouwen's term) the « negative » meaning of *almost*, the fact that *almost a*, means « (strictly) less than a » for explaining some obvious data². One of these data pointed to by Nouwen is related to the use of « fortunately » :

(26) Fortunately, almost all my friends attended my wedding.

What (26) asserts is not that the speaker is happy because some of her friends did not attend as does , for instance (27) :

(27) Fortunately, not quite all my friends attended my weddings.

Various theories use different strategies for backgrounding this negative content : conventional implicature, presupposition...

The introduction we make of an additional intensional new feature in the semantics of *presque* ($\alpha > n$) does not impose to background its negative content³, but paves the way for explaining the (26)/(27) contrast.

But I will focus here on its role for explaining the behavior of *presque* in AD's puzzle.

4 The semantics of apposed determiners.

As suggested above, the semantics of apposed quantifiers in the structure :

ANCH –A-B, APP

is that APP makes « more precise » the quantification made by ANCH.

The associated semantic constraint is that APP must denote a subset of the alternatives introduced by ANCH.

I have shown in a previous work that this explains the difference between apposition and conjunction, and that it predicts very nicely the facts when ANCH and APP are extensional determiners.

(27) Moins de 15 étudiants se sont inscrit, * plus de 10.

² « I offer the weak conclusion that the polar component of *almost* is not part of conventional meaning. It is not generally cancellable, however, which suggests that it may interact with conventional meaning. » Nouwen (2006).

³ To be precise, note that in the semantics of *presque*, we postulate no polar component (no explicit negation). All we assume is that *presque* ranks on a scale stricly under a .

(28) Moins de 15 étudiants se sont inscrit, et plus de 10.

The special problem of intensional determiners like *presque* and *peu* is that they both introduce comparisons to subjective norms.

(29) Peu d'automobilistes dépassent le 120, *presque 20%

$\alpha < n$

1. $\alpha < 20\%$

2. α is close to 20%

3. $\alpha > n'$

The conjunction of (1) and (2) plays no role in the inacceptability since expressions having the same meaning are perfect, like : « un tout petit peu moins de 20% ».

Let us look at such cases in which only the first determiner is intensional :

(30) Peu d'automobilistes dépassent le 120, * plus de 20%

Moins de 20%

A peu près 20%

Entre 20 et 30%

The facts are direct predictions of the proposal :

Constraint : the sentence is acceptable iff APP introduces a subset of the alternatives introduced by ANCH.

No comparative of superiority can do that :

Peu : $\alpha < n$

plus de a : $\alpha > a$

Just because the intensional determiner *peu* is a comparative of inferiority. This is parallel to :

(31) Moins de 20 étudiants se sont inscrits, *plus de 15

Moreover, the proposal derives correctly the semantics of the whole sentence :

(32) Peu d'automobilistes dépassent le 120, moins de 20%

$\alpha < 20\% < n$

This is a direct consequence of the fact that APP is interpreted as denoting a subset of ANCH. By using such a sentence, the speaker let us a know that her subjective norm for *few* is more than 20%.

The case of ANCh *peu*/APP *presque* is more complicated because both quantifiers, if we are correct, involve a comparison to a subjective norm.

(33) Peu d'automobilistes dépassent le 120, *presque 20%

$\alpha < n$

1. $\alpha < 20\%$

2. α is close to 20%

3. $\alpha > n'$

By writing n and n' , we make the minimal assumption : each intensional determiner is based on the choice of a subjective norm and typically this norm vary from one utterance to the other.

Can we derive the unacceptability if the norms are different?

If *presque* is a comparative of superiority, it is bad for the same reason than *plus de 20%* is. But *presque* is not, under this analysis, a comparative of superiority : it is the conjunction of a comparative of inferiority (less than a) and a comparative of superiority (more than a norm n') and is extensionally equivalent to « between n' and a ».

So it is not for the same reason that *more than* and *presque a* are not acceptable as APP to *peu* :

- *more than a* is not acceptable because its logical denotation (a comparative of superiority) cannot be a subset of a comparative of inferiority :

----- <i>n</i> ----->	<i>peu</i>
----- <i>a</i> ----->	plus de a

- for assuming that *presque a* is ruled out for the same reason one has to forget that *presque a* implies *less than a*, and reduce its meaning to « more than *n'* » :

----- <i>n</i> ----->	<i>peu</i>
----- <i>n'</i> ----->	presque a

It is a part of JT's analysis, since they make the « less than a » feature of *presque a* conventional implicature.

But I do not find this stipulation very natural : there is no doubt that *presque a* implies « less than a » ; a part of its meaning is thus a comparative of inferiority, and there is nothing in its denotational meaning which prevent it from being an APP to *peu*, exactly as « between a and b » is a perfect APP.

I think, thus, that there is no way to predict the unacceptability of *presque* on the basis of its denotational properties and that a solution must be based on its intensional nature in relation to the specific construction concerned, i.e. apposition.

The assumption that the intensional constant introduced by *peu* and *presque* are unrelated in apposition structure should be questionned.

The intuitions is as follows : if APP must be interpreted as making ANCH more precise , a natural constraint is that APP should not introduce new normative constants in the semantic calculus.

The situation would be :

ANCH : α is inferior to my subjective norm *n*.

APP : to be more precise , α is less than a , and superior to another subjective norm *n'*.

The intuition is that the introduction of another constant *n'* is not a way of being more precise about *a* , but a way of delivering another information.

A confirmation of this diagnostic is that coordination by *mais*, which introduces new information is licensed (Cf. AD's initial observation.). The difference between *mais* and *et* is another issue not discussed here.

A simple implementation of the intuition amounts to impose that in apposition, normative constants must be unified : one and only one value for *n* is allowed. « To be more precise » about the localisation of α wrt a given norm *n*, is only open to quantifiers localizing α wrt the same norm.

Peu d'automobilistes

$\alpha < n$

Presque 20%

$\alpha > n$ & $\alpha < 20\%$

The structure is ill formed because it contains a contradiction : α is said to be higher and smaller than a given norm *n*.

A direct consequence is that APP is correct iff the intensional comparison it introduces is co-oriented with *ANCH*.

Our proposal, in a nutshell, states that *presque* is not acceptable because it *contains* a comparative of superiority, to a norm. It relies on the assumption, that in the relation ANCH/APP only one intensional norm can be used.

5 From one puzzle to one another :

- (34) a. Peu de gens sont venus, ? moins de 15 et plus de 10
b. Entre 10 et 15

The point is that (b) is perfect, but (a), extensionally equivalent, is not.

The present proposal predicts that (b) is acceptable : the key point is that APP in (b) does not contain any intensional constant.

The accommodation process gives the result.

-----10----- α -----15-----n----->

Judgements may diverge slightly about (a) but all speakers agree that it is less natural than (b). It is confirmed by *beaucoup* :

- (35) ? Beaucoup de gens se sont inscrits, plus de 500 et moins de mille.

The order of the conjuncts does not seem to change the judgments :

- (36) ? Beaucoup de gens se sont inscrits, moins de mille et plus de 500.

And it is not a problem with the conjunction *et* per se, since it is perfectly possible to use such conjoined NP in other sentences :

- (37) Il y avait plus plus de 500 étudiants et moins de 600 dans l'amphithéâtre.

- (38) Moins de 500 étudiants et plus de 400 se sont inscrits.

It is thus a problem regarding the use of such conjunctions in appositive constructions.

It cannot be a problem with the extensional content of the conjunction, since the equivalent «entre a et b » is acceptable.

Moreover if ANCH is not intensional, such a conjunction is fine :

- (39) Un certain nombre d'étudiants, moins de 200 et plus de 150, sont inscrits.

Hypothesis :

1. Apposition imposes the unification of intensional constants. (Already used)
2. Comparatives generate an intensional co-oriented implicature. (needed elsewhere)

Je gagne plus de 2000 euros

$\alpha > 2000$

content

$\alpha > n$

implicature

Consequence : in *et* conjoined APP to an intensional ANCH no coordination of divergent intensional comparatives is licensed.

The case of APP of structure *C1 mais C2* is interesting. In general, *mais* can be used with divergent comparatives :

- (40) Il y avait plus de 20 étudiants, mais moins de trente dans ce groupe.

It can be used in APP to extensional quantifiers :

- (41) Un certains nombre d'étudiants, plus de 20 mais moins de 30, étaient présents.

In appositive structures, the acceptability seems to depend on the order of elements :

(42) ? Peu d'étudiants ont composé, moins de 15 mais plus de 10.

(43) Peu d'étudiants ont composé, plus de 10 mais moins de 15.

If the second conjunct would be licensed if used alone, the sentence is more likely to be accepted, the first one being set apart by intonation, and so to speak interpreted as a

(44) Peu d'étudiants ont composé, plus de 10, certes, mais moins de 15.

These are directions of research to explore in relation to the semantics of *et* and *mais*. (see in particular Winterstein (2010).

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