

How Close Is a Close Counterfactual? The Avertive and Its Tense-Aspect-Modality Interface

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Abstract—The *avertive* is a semantically elaborate grammatical category encoding events that were on the verge of occurring but did not materialize. Its definition scope, determined by event types and contextual factors, distinguishes the broad-sense *avertive* from the narrow-sense variant, which takes counterfactual *almost* as its prototype. Avertive meaning emerges from the interaction of three dimensions: aspectually, it specifies the interrupted stage of event realization (the full event, preparatory stage, inner stage, or result stage); temporally, it requires past-tense anchoring to provide the necessary hindsight perspective; and modally, it encodes polarity reversal, whereby a positive construal of an event results in negative actualization. This tense-aspect-modality interface constitutes the distinctive semantic composition of the avertive, distinguishing it from related categories through the integration of aspectual imminence, past temporal anchoring, and counterfactual polarity reversal.

Index Terms—avertive, counterfactuality, proximative, non-realization, tense-aspect-modality interface

I. INTRODUCTION

Counterfactual thinking refers to the mental simulation of alternatives, specifically mental representations of past events, actions, or states (Byrne, 2005). Counterfactual statements enable interlocutors to conceive of alternatives to perceived reality. One core determinant of counterfactual thinking is outcome closeness, defined as the degree to which an individual retrospectively perceives the actual outcome as having nearly attained a more desirable alternative (Roese, 1997, p. 136). This perceived “closeness” or “distance” between the actual outcome and a possible alternative outcome is also reflected in the linguistic expression of counterfactual possibilities (Roese, 1997, pp. 136-137). For instance, a passenger who misses a flight by only five minutes is far more likely to be described using constructions such as Example (1a), (1b) or (1c), compared with a passenger who arrives 30 minutes late (Doan et al., 2024; Kahneman & Varey, 1990; Markman & Tetlock, 2000). Such constructions contrast with conditionals like (1d), which typically encode “far-fetched” or “distant” counterfactuals. These distinct linguistic strategies for framing reality stem from a universal human psychological sensitivity to closeness or proximity. Statements that highlight the “proximity” or “closeness” between alternative representations of reality are termed *close counterfactuals*, a concept first proposed by Kahneman and Varey (1990) from a social psychology perspective. Their framework has since exerted a profound influence on subsequent research on counterfactuals across psychology, philosophy, linguistics, and related disciplines.

Example 1:

- a. Mr. Wang almost caught his flight.
- b. Mr. Wang barely missed it.
- c. Mr. Wang could easily have caught it.
- d. If Mr. Zhang had left 30 minutes earlier, he would have caught his flight.

Many languages employ lexical items or syntactic structures to encode close counterfactuals. Cross-linguistic examples include the Chinese adverbs *chabuduo* (差不多, “almost”) and *cha(yi)dian(er)* (差(一)点(儿), “almost/nearly”) (Shen, 2015, p. 95); the English adverbs *almost* and *nearly* (Ziegeler, 2016); the French *s’en falloir de peu*, an auxiliary construction with the verb *faillir* (“to fail”) (Peyraube, 1979); the Spanish lexical construction *por poco (no)+VP* (Salvador & Schwenster, 2005); Japanese constructions such as the verbal suffix *もう少しで~そうになった* and the adverb *危うく+VP* (Yuan & Jung, 2015); Korean constructions including the auxiliary adjective *VP+뻔하다* and the adverb *가까스로/간신히+VP* (Lee & Jiao, 2018); and the German particle *fast* (Schwellenbach, 2019).

Example 2:

- a. 河水差不多结冰了。
The river is almost frozen.
- b. 河水差点儿结冰了。
The river almost froze.

Example 3:

- a. He almost fell when he went to open it. (William Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 1843)

- b. ... securing the anchor, and two of them were nearly drowned, though they swim like fish. (Lucie Duff Gordon, *Letters from Egypt*, 1866-9)

Example 4:

Il s'en est fallu de peu qu'il tombe.

He almost fell.

Example 5:

- a. Marta por poco llega a tiempo.

Marta almost arrived on time.

- b. Marta casi llega a tiempo.

Marta almost arrived on time.

Example 6:

- a. もう 少しで 転びそうになりました。

I almost fell.

- b. 私は 危うく つまづきそうになりながら。

I almost (nearly) fell.

Example 7:

- a. 차에 치일 뺨했다.

I was almost hit by a car.

- b. 그는 간신히 살아가고 있었다.

He was barely surviving.

As evidenced in Examples (1) to (7), the linguistic forms encoding close counterfactuals vary cross-linguistically. The diachronic sources of avertive markers are diverse, including proximatives, contrastive markers to volitional verb phrases and other irrealis constructions (Alexandrova, 2016; Caudal, 2023; Kuteva, 1998, p. 138; Overall, 2017). Despite the terminological variation in defining the lexical items and structures, all such linguistic forms denote the core meaning of “events that nearly occurred but did not actually happen” and thus fall under the broader category of counterfactuals (La Roi, 2024; Yong, 2016; Ziegeler, 2016). In the expression of close counterfactuals, the *avertive*¹ has been widely acknowledged as the prototypical category since Heine and Kuteva first defined it typologically as a “marker for an action or event that was on the verge of taking place but did not take place” (Heine & Kuteva, 2019; Kuteva, 1998; Kuteva et al., 2019). A range of terminologies have been proposed in existing literature to refer to this semantic category, including *approximator* (Quirk et al., 1985), *decompositional adverb* (Dowty, 1979), *avertive* (Heine & Kuteva, 2019; Kuteva, 1998; Kuteva et al., 2019; la Roi, 2024), *failed attempt/closely missed event* (Yong, 2016), *counterfactual almost* (Ziegeler, 2016), *proximative adverbs* (Yuan & Jung, 2015), *chadian(er)* redundant negation (Chen, 2018), *danger-evaluative adverbs* (Zhao & Ruan, 2020), *jinchā* (仅差)+negator+VP construction (Sato, 2003), *avertive format* (Chen & Gan, 2024), and *avertive constructions* (Wang, 2025). For the purposes of the present study, the term *avertive* is adopted to designate this category.

II. WHAT A CLOSE COUNTERFACTUAL IS: AVERTIVE’S DEFINITION AND STATUS

From a typological perspective, Kuteva initially referred to this category as “action narrowly averted” (Kuteva, 1998) and later renamed it the *avertive* (Kuteva, 2001; Kuteva et al., 2019). She posits that the avertive is a semantically elaborate grammatical category characterized by four core meaning components: (i) imminence (aspect); (ii) past (tense); (iii) counterfactuality/non-realization (modality); and (iv) the non-realization of the entire verb situation. While the first three components pertaining to aspect, tense, and modality are widely recognized as the defining features of the avertive, the fourth, “non-realization of the entire verb situation”, has not been universally accepted as an invariable feature.

In line with Kuteva’s framework, the avertive concerns the non-realization of the verb situation as a whole, which was about to take place in the past (Kuteva et al., 2019, p. 861). The avertive (Example 9) falls under the broader domain of “non-realization,” which also includes *apprehensional* (Example 8), *frustrated initiation* (Example 10), *frustrated completion* (Example 11), and *inconsequential* (Example 12) (Kuteva et al., 2019, p. 852).

Example 8:

He was put in a cell with no clothes and shoes lest he injure himself. (*apprehensional*) (Collins COBUILD English Grammar, p. 355)

Example 9:

¹ In the present study, the term *avertive* designates a linguistic construction that encodes a verb situation which was on the verge of occurrence yet ultimately unrealized (i.e., was on the verge of V-ing but did not V). It denotes the non-realization of a past verb situation that was once imminent, where the verb situation is viewed as a whole. This category is exclusively employed in past-tense contexts (Kuteva, 2019, pp. 857-858). This understanding of the avertive differs from the usage of the same term by Lichtenberk (1995, pp. 298-302), who applied it to label a functional category closely analogous to the subordinator *e-V...kwajejje-kwanijje*, a morpheme bearing the meaning of “lest”. Lichtenberk’s avertive encodes a semantic link between an undesirable event and a responsive action intended to “avert” that event. He argued that *fear*-complements express this so-called “avertive” meaning, and referred to the use of a *lest*-marked element in precautionary or apprehension-causing contexts as an instance of the avertive.

A sudden pang seized him, and his knees felt so weak that he almost fell. (*avertive*) (*The Moon and Sixpence*, Chapter 39)

Example 10:

a. Before Gallacher could catch up with the ball, Nadlovu had beaten him to it. (*frustrated initiation*) (Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary)

b. I almost wrote a dissertation on Chopin's works. (*frustrated initiation*)

Example 11:

I think this gave him a bit of heart. So he stayed and almost won the Championship. He got beaten by a shot by Kel Nagle. (*frustrated completion*) (British National Corpus)

Example 12:

The doctors tried their best to save the patient, but to no avail. (*inconsequential*)

The concept “non-realization²” as employed in this study refers to a conceptual-semantic continuum that encodes situations which have not been (fully) realized in some way or other. This concept concerns the degree of realization of a verb situation and/ or its expected/resultant state. Non-realization may involve different aspects of the verb situation: the non-realization of the verb situation as a whole (*apprehensional*, *avertive*); the non-realization of its initial stage (*frustrated initiation*); the non-realization of its final stage (*frustrated completion*); or the non-realization of its expected/desired result or resultant state (*inconsequential*) (Kuteva, 2019, p. 961). While these five subcategories all pertain to the non-realization of an event, they differ in their degree of closeness or proximity to the conceptual boundary of the situation denoted by the main verb, and to actual reality itself.

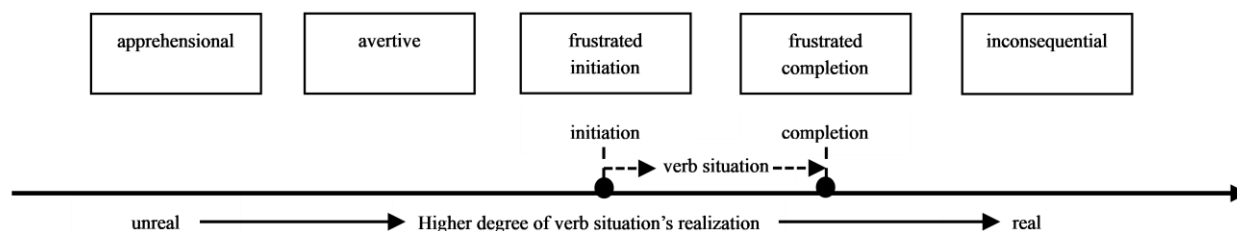


Figure 1. The Different “Closeness” of Non-Realization Subcategories to the Boundary of a Verb Situation (adapted from Kuteva et al., 2019, p. 862)

Several questions arise in interpreting the subcategories of non-realization, which in turn creates difficulty in identifying the avertive. First, the avertive should be distinguished from the proximative, as the two categories share certain core structural features in expressing the meaning of “imminence”. For instance, the English adverb *almost* can function as a proximative, triggering the predictive modality of possibility in the utterance “The project is almost done”; in this context, the project may or may not be completed imminently. The adverb *almost* can also function as an avertive, triggering a counterfactual modal meaning of “almost happened but actually did not” in the utterance “The project almost failed, but succeeded in avoiding failure”. This raises a key question: what criteria can be used to rigorously identify the avertive category?

Second, the non-realization of an event's initial phase appears to imply the non-realization of the event as a whole, just as the non-realization of the complete event appears to imply the non-realization of its initial phase. For instance, in the utterance “John almost closed the door”, it is not easy to differentiate whether the event of “close the door” has a zero degree of realization, or whether its realization was interrupted at the initial stage. A critical unresolved question thus emerges: at which stage of event realization should an event encoded by the avertive be deemed to have been interrupted?

In addition, as the avertive embodies the dual meaning of “being on the verge of V-ing but not V”, the avertive reading often seems semantically incomplete without an explicit or implied cancelling clause, i.e., contextual information. For instance, the utterance “He almost died” can be strongly interpreted as avertive (he did not die) due to its past-tense marking and perfective predicate. However, a concessive *but*-clause in “He almost died, but the doctors saved him” can make the avertive meaning explicit. This prompts another core inquiry: what role do contextual factors play in the interpretive process of the avertive?

As a semantically elaborate grammatical category, the avertive exhibits distinct yet interfaced features across the dimensions of tense, modality, and aspect. To identify the type of non-realization described by the avertive, it is therefore necessary to clarify how its aspectual, temporal, and modal features interact with one another.

² Discussions of the event “non-realization” were first introduced by Talmy (1985, pp. 130-131), who defined the “degree of realization” as a semantic category concerned with how languages mark the extent to which an event's “essential core features” (those necessary for the event to be construed as “completed”) and “peripheral associated features” (common but non-essential accompaniments) are actualized. The “degree of realization” can be expressed via lexical devices such as *almost* and *barely*, which represent two distinct manifestations of incomplete or minimally complete event realization.

III. HOW THE EVENT WAS INCOMPLETE: THE AVERTIVE'S FEATURES IN ASPECT

Aspect in the avertive highlights the non-realization of the event and emphasizes the specific stage (preparatory, inner, result) at which the event failed to reach realization. This aspectual property interacts closely with verb actionality (telic/atelic) to shape the interpretive reading of the avertive.

A. Imminence in Aspect: From and Beyond the Proximative

In aspectuality, the semantics of the avertive subsumes that of the proximative, with imminence (being on the point/verge of V-ing) as its core defining feature (Kuteva, 1998, p. 130; Kuteva et al., 2019, p. 860). Imminence is inherently an aspectual feature tied to the *proximative*, which Heine (1994, p. 36) defined as “a temporal phase which is located close to the boundary of the situation described by the main verb”.

Imminence does not directly assert whether the event happened or did not happen; instead, it marks the final stage of an event's progression from gradual proximity to inevitable occurrence, a critical cognitive node connecting event preparation and final outcome, emphasizing the event's critical temporal boundary. Medvec and Savitsky (1997) refer to this critical turning point as a *categorical cutoff point*. Based on Medvec and Savitsky's (1997, pp. 1284-1285) “categorical boundary effects,” Kühberger et al. (2011) argue that counterfactual thinking is triggered when an actual outcome falls near a categorical boundary. This closeness effect in counterfactual reasoning relies on the interpretation of a counterfactual's proximity to reality as close as possible. This requires a perceptually salient and cognitively accessible “reference value” to serve as the critical point for assessing the margin by which the target event was missed. This “reference value” is termed by Kühberger et al. (2011, p. 141) as the *category boundary*, which is the point at which an event is “realized/unrealized.” The category boundary represents the divide between two opposing event outcomes, such as catching vs. missing a plane, winning vs. missing a medal, or life/death. Missing this critical point results in two distinct event outcomes, a distinction central to interpreting the point at which an event is averted.

Unlike the prototypical proximative, the avertive is semantically more elaborate and is regarded as a highly grammaticalized, semantically specialized subtype of the proximative. The two categories share the core feature of “proximity to an event boundary” but differ in the actualization status of the event (Ziegeler, 2016; Wu & Li, 2025).

Example 13:

- a. He *is almost* there. (*proximative*)
- b. He *almost fell* (*avertive*)
- c. I hadn't worked for about a year and a half, and I *was about to compromise* — to take a part in a stupid comedy. (*proximative*) (BNC)

Example (13a) and (13b) both mark an event's proximity to a critical boundary (e.g., the initiation, completion, or occurrence of the event). In (13a), however, the event is merely close to its intended endpoint, with no implication of subsequent realization or non-realization. In (13b), by contrast, the event is close to the boundary of “falling,” and the construction carries an explicit entailment of non-realization. The notion of “proximity” or “closeness” in the avertive is often conceptualized via a spatial metaphor — the progression toward an action is like physical movement toward a location. This metaphorical mapping naturally yields modal inferences (e.g., prediction, counterfactuality), since temporal closeness implies proximity to factuality (Ziegeler, 2006, p. 139).

In sum, the proximative is the broader aspectual category denoting temporal proximity to an event boundary. Unlike the avertive, however, the proximative is a pure aspectual expression of imminence, carrying no inherent modal (e.g., counterfactuality) or temporal (e.g., pastness) meaning. Its modal implications (prediction or counterfactuality) are primarily pragmatic and context-dependent. For instance, in (13c), the speaker ultimately did not compromise or take a role in a stupid comedy; this illustrates that in past-tense contexts, the proximative can generate a conversational implicature of non-occurrence (Ziegeler, 2006). In essence, the proximative merely indicates that an event is on the verge of occurring, with no commitment to the event's eventual realization (the event may or may not happen).

TABLE 1
PROXIMATIVE AND AVERTIVE'S ASPECT, TENSE AND MODALITY

	<i>Proximative</i>	<i>Avertive</i>
Imminence	+	+
Pastness	-	+
Counterfactuality	-	+

The proximative thus provides the general framework of “boundary proximity,” and the avertive fills the niche of “non-realized proximity.” Imminence therefore functions as a pivotal aspectual feature: proximity to an event readily triggers counterfactual modal readings that encode what could or would have happened.

B. Event Types: Bounded or Unbounded?

The event type described by the predicate, alongside contextual features, may influence the interpretation of the avertive. As mentioned previously, the avertive embodies the property of imminence featuring a “critical turning point”. In line with the avertive's definition “was on the verge of V-ing but did not V,” the verb situation described by the avertive is compatible with bounded situations, i.e., an event or action with an endpoint. The endpoint may be a natural

one as in the telic event with an inherent, bounded goal or completion, or a conceptualized one as in the perfective event viewed as a single bounded whole with no ongoing process.

In telic events, when used with past-tense telic predicates (i.e., actions with a terminal endpoint), the same language form can yield two distinct interpretations. For instance, the English adverb *almost* permits two readings: (i) the event was about to happen but actually did not occur at all, or (ii) the event started but did not reach its endpoint.

In Example (14), English lacks dedicated linguistic expressions to distinguish readings (14a) and (14b), so the adverb *almost* serves as a single form encoding both meanings. In (14a), the preverbal *almost* modifies the accomplishment verb “close”: in the utterance “John almost closed the door,” John came close to initiating the action of closing the door, yet did not perform it at all. In (14b), by contrast, John initiated the action of closing the door, but failed to achieve the result state of a fully closed door (Xu, 2016).

Example 14:

John almost closed the door.

a. John almost closed the door. He planned to close the door but forgot to do it the last minute because of an emergency phone call. (*achievement* or *accomplishment*)

b. John almost closed the door. He got close to fully closing the door because it was too heavy. (*accomplishment*)

Accomplishment predicates ([+durative], [+telic]), which denote actions that unfold over time and possess a terminal endpoint, accommodate both readings of (14a) and (14b). Achievement predicates ([–durative], [+telic]), which denote instantaneous actions with a terminal endpoint by contrast, only permit reading (14a). Utterances featuring perfective achievement predicates therefore only yield avertive interpretations pertaining to the non-realization of the entire event or its resultant state.

In perfective events, perfectivity is associated with the “boundedness” of a verb situation, while imperfectivity correlates with “unboundedness”. Based on a typological analysis of avertive constructions, Kuteva et al. (2019) note that in languages with a grammatical distinction between perfectivity and imperfectivity, the main verb in an avertive construction is invariably perfective. In their definition of *avertive*, the verb situation it describes is viewed as a complete, bounded whole, a feature that entails the use of the perfective form for the main verb, and a bounded construal of the situation denoted by that verb. However, in cases such as Example (15), the entire past situation is not fully realized. For instance, the utterance “John almost won the race” presupposes that John participated in the race and performed well, implying he was the runner-up or that the outcome was extremely close (e.g., losing by a split second, tripping just before the finish line). He thus came very close to winning the race yet ultimately failed, establishing a scenario that was on the verge of being true (John winning) and asserting that this scenario did not in fact materialize.

Example 15:

John almost won the race. (*frustrated completion*)

Kuteva et al. (2019) explain that due to the modal counterfactuality inherent in avertive constructions, such constructions can combine with the perfective aspect of verbs to generate counterfactual meaning in languages that grammatically distinguish perfective and imperfective aspects. They add that even in languages lacking dedicated grammatical markers for perfectivity and imperfectivity, the avertive still entails a semantic meaning of perfectivity, carrying an implicature of semantic perfectivity. This phenomenon is attested in some European languages, which encode such meaning via dedicated lexical or morphological markers (Arkadiev, 2019; Caudal, 2023; Kuteva et al., 2019, pp. 858-859).

The boundedness tendency of VPs in Chinese avertive construction “*cha(yi)dian(er)+VP*” is attested in several studies (e.g., Chen & Gan, 2024). Similar to English adverb *almost*, the Chinese construction *cha(yi)dian(er)* (literally “miss by a little”) also exhibits the dual meaning of “approaching the realization of VP yet failing to achieve it.” Semantically, it displays this duality in two distinct ways: first, when *cha(yi)dian(er)* applies to the predicate as a whole, it conveys that an event came close to occurring but ultimately did not. In Example (16), *chayidian* modifies the entire predicate “majored in mathematics”, indicating that the act of majoring in mathematics was nearly realized but not fulfilled.

Example 16:

当年他差一点读了数学专业。

In those years, he almost majored in mathematics. (Lu, 2014)

Second, when the meaning of *cha(yi)dian(er)* only targets the quantity element within the predicate, it conveys that a certain degree of an event was nearly attained but not fully achieved. In Example (17), the predicate denotes an event that did in fact occur, yet the degree of “running out” was not completely reached. Although *cha(yi)dian(er)* can target the quantity element within a predicate, this does not mean it will necessarily do so whenever a quantity element exists in the predicate; the construction may still modify the entire predicate. Its specific semantic scope is therefore context-dependent.

Example 17:

钱差一点花完了。

The money almost ran out. (Lu, 2014)

In sum, the event type plays a pivotal role in interpreting the avertive. The avertive is compatible with past, telic, perfective, punctual achievement events. Unbounded actions or events lack such a boundary and are not typical instances of the avertive, unless they are coerced into a bounded interpretation by context, which will be discussed in next section.

C. Context: Decisive or Optional?

Contextual factors may also influence aspectual construal when interpreting the avertive as one of the subcategories of non-realization. In Example (18), the adverb *almost* can modify past perfective VPs and convey the meanings of *avertive*, *frustrated initiation*, *frustrated completion*, and *inconsequential* in four distinct contexts (Kuteva et al., 2019, pp. 887-888).

Example 18:

I almost cleaned the house.

- a. I almost cleaned the house. I hate cleaning the house. But I hate boredom even more. Fortunately, your proposal to go have coffee saved me. (*avertive*)
- b. I almost cleaned the house. But you came to get me to go have coffee with you just as I was about to start. (*frustrated initiation*)
- c. I almost cleaned the house. When you came to get me to go have coffee with you, I had already gotten down to the last room. (*frustrated completion*)
- d. I almost cleaned the house. I dusted and vacuumed for hours and hours but no matter how much I had at it, the place just looks grimy. (*inconsequential*)

For *frustrated initiation*, whose focus is on the initial or preparatory stage of the event described by the verbal predicate, it is difficult to determine whether the subject has clearly initiated the action. A key factor in distinguishing these non-realization subcategories is the subject control³. In Example (18b), for instance, a frustrated initiation reading is only possible when the context shows the agent was actively preparing to clean the house. Simply saying “I was about to start” is insufficient to yield a frustrated initiation interpretation of “I almost cleaned the house.” Some visible preparatory behavior is required, e.g., holding a broom or a vacuum cleaner, which guarantees the agent’s active preparation for the cleaning action. The non-realization of an event’s initial phase thus implies the non-realization of the event as a whole.

Conversely, the non-realization of a complete event also implies the non-realization of the initial phase. For the *inconsequential* subcategory, an event may unfold in three ways: (i) it never reaches its typical outcome, (ii) it reaches the outcome but incurs unwanted side-effects that compromise it, or (iii) it reaches the outcome, but the result fades quickly or fails to persist as expected (Caudal, 2023). This type of result-stage non-realization is similar to *antiresultativity*, a verbal category that marks a situation in which the expected resultant state fails to materialize even after the action itself has been completed (Plungian, 2001; Overall, 2017, pp. 8-9). While *antiresultative* can be found to be expressed in the same way as the avertive in some languages (e.g., Amazonian languages) (Overall, 2017, pp. 488-490), many avertive markers do not encode this meaning. The avertive focuses on an action that was imminent yet narrowly averted, whereas *antiresultative* emphasizes the non-realization or cancellation of an expected resultant state. For clauses that do not encode event outcomes and focus solely on “imminence before occurrence,” the final realization status of the event (happened or not) must be clarified by subsequent context (e.g., a *but*-clause, modal verbs). For example, (19a) implies interruption or prevention of an intended or imminent event, while (19b) implies the action itself may have been completed, but the resultant state failed to hold. Adaskina (2005, p. 8) further notes that the avertive is distinguished from *antiresultative* by the presence of subjective evaluation (surprise, relief, frustration, etc.) in its interpretation.

Example 19:

- a. He almost fell (from the tree). (*avertive*)
- b. He fell, but didn’t get hurt. (*antiresultative*)

Therefore, *antiresultative* can be seen as a subtype of the avertive in a broad sense (corresponding to Plungian’s second type *result not achieved*⁴, 2001). Kuteva’s definition of *avertive* operates in a narrow sense, with the outer reading of *almost* (counterfactual or non-scalar *almost*) as its prototype. The *avertive* in the broad sense should further encompass at least *frustrated initiation* and *frustrated completion* (Arkadiev, 2020).

³ According to Caudal (2023), *subject control* refers to the degree to which the clausal subject can intentionally initiate, sustain, or terminate the event. It functions as a semantically relevant parameter for the avertive, influencing the aspectual interpretation (which stage is interrupted), the modal flavor (volition/attempt vs. expectation/proximity), and thus determining which type of avertive reading arises.

⁴ Plungian (2001) identifies three subtypes of the *antiresultative*: (i) process interrupted (action incomplete); (ii) process completed, but result state absent (this constitutes the antiresultative proper); (iii) result state attained but later nullified.

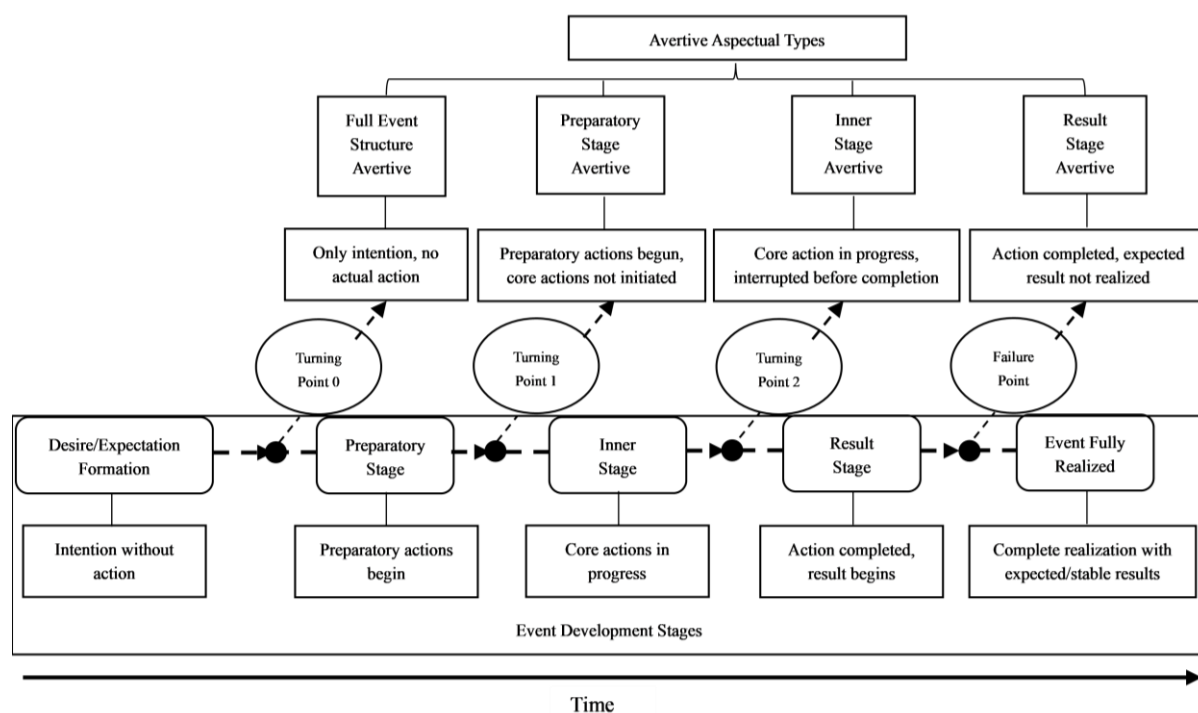


Figure 2. The Event Development Stages and Avertive Aspectual Types

In sum, to yield an avertive reading, the aspectual features of the avertive interact closely with event types and contextual factors, highlighting the specific event stage (full event, preparatory, inner, result) at which the event failed to reach realization (Caudal, 2023, p. 7). Based on this, Kuteva's classification of *avertive* is revised in alignment with its aspectual types, as follows (Fig. 2):

- (i) *Full event structure avertive*: the event was merely at the stage of intention or expectation formation, with no overt action initiated; it is interrupted at the *Turning Point 0*, prior to the start of preparatory actions;
- (ii) *Preparatory stage avertive*: the event merely reached the planning or preparation phase, with no execution of the core action; it is interrupted at the *Turning Point 1*, prior to the start of core actions;
- (iii) *Inner stage avertive*: the event was in progress, with core action underway; it was interrupted at the *Turning Point 2*, prior to the completion of core actions;
- (iv) *Result stage avertive*: the event was fully executed, with core action completed, yet failed to achieve the expected result state (or a stable open state) at the *Failure Point*.

IV. WHEN THE EVENT WAS ANCHORED: THE AVERTIVE'S FEATURES IN TEMPORALITY

Tense in the avertive is explicitly framed as “when the potential event could have occurred,” and the category is thus inherently paired with the past-tense marking (including simple past tense and past perfective) by virtue of its necessary “hindsight perspective”, a temporal reference to the past required to confirm the non-occurrence of the event. In line with the core definition of “on the verge of happening but not occurring”, avertive markers are attested to be predominantly anchored in the past tense (Kuo, 2016; Yong, 2016; Kuteva et al., 2019; Caudal, 2023; la Roi, 2024). The past tense provides a temporal anchor for counterfactuality, ensuring its unambiguous semantic reference, while counterfactuality endows the past tense with the modal feature of “irrealis”. This interaction forms the core semantics of the avertive, describing events that “almost happened but did not” or “were intended to happen but failed” in the past.

Within the temporal framework of past tense, the avertive negates the realization of the event, clarifying that “the event was on the verge of happening but ultimately did not occur”. For example, in the Chinese utterance “差点儿跌倒” (chàdiǎner diēdǎo, “almost fell”), past tense anchors the potential occurrence of the action “falling” in the past, while the counterfactual meaning negates the actual occurrence of the action. Past-tense marking alone, however, does not entail counterfactuality: the Chinese utterance “他昨天跌倒了” (tā zuótiān diēdǎo le, “he fell yesterday”) carries past tense but no counterfactual meaning. The realization of counterfactual meaning thus requires the presence of avertive markers such as “险些” (xiǎnxiē, “almost”) and “差点儿” (chàdiǎner, “almost”). In Example (20), for instance, the avertive “险些” (xiǎnxiē) helps convey the meaning of “I came close to falling, but did not”.

Example 20:

我险些跌倒。

I almost fell.

The counterfactual meaning of the avertive is not inherently bound to past tense; rather, this association is a diachronic development formed through “context absorption”⁵ (Kuteva, 2001, pp. 151-152; Kuo, 2016). Early avertive constructions (such as the usage of “危” (wēi, “danger”; “almost”)) appear mostly in classical Chinese historical texts (e.g., *Hanshu* (汉书, *History of the Han Dynasty*) and *Shiji* (史记, *Records of the Grand Historian*)). In Example (21), for instance, the text conveys that the country was on the verge of destruction, but the ruler’s advisors dared not remonstrate.

Example 21:

百官荒乱，诸侯并侵，国且危亡，在于旦暮，左右莫敢谏。

Officials in this country were in disarray, while other feudal princes were invading it together. The country was now threatened by destruction (or almost destroyed), which could happen soon (more literally, between dawn and dusk). But the prince’s advisors did not dare to admonish him. (*Shiji*, 91 BC)

Such classical texts naturally focus on “events that happened in the past” and often supplement the fact that “the event did not occur” through subsequent narratives. In long-term use, the temporal property of past tense and the irrealis property of counterfactuality have gradually entrenched as inherent features of the avertive schema, establishing a conventionalized association of “past tense → counterfactual”.

Given that the past tense provides a temporal reference for the avertive, and the counterfactual meaning of the avertive relies on the past-tense anchoring, the avertive is limited to “potential events that occurred in the past”, excluding future or immediate present events (e.g., one cannot say “明天差点下雨” (míngtiān chàdiǎner xià yǔ, “tomorrow almost rained”). Past-tense marking delimits the scope of counterfactual meaning, thereby avoiding interpretive ambiguity: if separated from past tense, the counterfactual meaning may be vague. For example, “他差点儿及格” (tā chàdiǎner jí gé, “he almost passed”) requires contextual cues to determine whether the event is anchored in past or future, whereas “昨天他差点儿及格” (zuótiān tā chàdiǎner jí gé, “yesterday he almost passed”) clarifies the past-tense anchoring of the counterfactual meaning via the time adverb “昨天” (zuótiān, “yesterday”). By emphasizing the irrealis of the event, counterfactuality further specifies the particularity of the past tense in the avertive, i.e., the past events in the avertive are not general past events, but specific events with a clear potential outcome that was not realized.

The counterfactual as a broader category originates in the past but freely extends to present or future via contextual cues or dedicated markers. The avertive, by contrast, is strictly bound to the past, with no such extension to present or future. The avertive exclusively targets past time, as illustrated in Examples (22) and (23), where the construction “past + perfective + *almost*” conveys the avoided event of “missing the flight”. Future avoidance is merely prediction in nature, while present avoidance contradicts the hindsight perspective inherent to the avertive’s realized past events; neither future nor present thus qualifies for avertive counterfactuality.

Example 22:

- a. She almost missed the flight yesterday.
- b. *I almost am late now.
- c. *I will nearly succeed tomorrow.

Example 23:

- a. 昨天她差点错过航班。
- b. *我现在差点迟到。
- c. *我明天险些成功。

In (22a) and (23a), past-tense anchoring is achieved via both the simple past verbal form (“almost missed”/ “差点错过”) and the time adverb “yesterday”/ “昨天”. Examples (22b), (22c), (23b), and (23c) are ungrammatical due to the absence of valid present or future extension for the avertive. Consequently, the avertive rarely stands alone in present or future tenses, even with contextual extension.

In sum, tense anchors the event firmly in the past, with avertive meaning derived from the contrast between the intended or imminent action and its negative outcome. Interlocutors employ past tense to express scenarios that contradict current or expected reality, a usage that relies on the conceptual link between past (known reality) and counterfactuality (hypothetical irrealis). This is a link foundational to the avertive’s tense-semantic interface.

V. WHY THE NON-REALIZATION MATTERS: THE AVERTIVE’S FEATURES IN MODALITY

The avertive, typically composed of a scalar adverb such as *almost* and a past-tense marker (mostly the perfective), conveys the meaning of “a past event that was imminent but not realized.” Unlike counterfactual conditionals, which have long been regarded as the prototype of counterfactuals, avertives lack an antecedent and a consequence linked by a tight cause-and-effect relationship. In terms of modality, the *avertive* is classified as a type of counterfactual by virtue of

⁵ *Context absorption* is mentioned by Kuteva (2001, p. 150) in her analysis of the “past volition” chain and the emergence of the counterfactual function of the future-in-past. It constitutes an observable result of semantic reinterpretation, whereby lexical forms acquire new functional meanings in new contexts.

their shared feature of “polarity⁶ reversal.” This feature has been proposed to identify counterfactual markers (Van Linden & Verstraete, 2008, p. 1869) and is an integral part of counterfactuality’s definition (Verstraete & Luk, 2021, p. 288).

Example 24:

He let her go so suddenly that she *almost fell*. (Ziegeler, 2016, p. 17)

As illustrated in Example (24), the avertive exhibits the feature of polarity reversal, entailing a switch from a positive event construal to a negative one. Polarity reversal in the avertive does not derive from a dedicated negation marker; instead, it emerges from the combination of two elements: a past perfective tense, which frames an event as a bounded situation, and a scalar adverb carrying negative implicatures. The semantic tension between these two components triggers the reversal of polarity (cf. Ziegeler, 2016, on English counterfactual *almost*). When speakers use this combination to assert that an event came very close to occurring, they draw on the past imminence of an unrealized situation to achieve specific pragmatic goals. In Example (25), “almost” conveys that the protagonist was on the verge of abandoning hope after a prolonged waiting and disappointment. The adverb “almost” highlights the emotional weight of the protagonist’s long-awaited joy at the birth of his baby; the construction “had almost given up” serves as a narrative foreshadowing for the subsequent positive outcome of the baby’s birth, creating a strong contrast between near despair in the past and a later turning point, thereby enhancing the vividness and affective resonance of the protagonist’s happiness.

Example 25:

“I’ve got some news; Arlene had a baby boy yesterday; nine pounds, one ounce.” “Kip, congratulations; that’s wonderful news! You’ve waited a long time.” “We’re thrilled, of course. I had *almost* given up.” “Now that you know you can do it, you’ll have to have some more kids.” (The Corpus of Contemporary American English)

Ziegeler (2016) argues that polarity reversal occurs when a scalar adverb with negative implicature combines with a past perfective event and takes the entire event as its semantic scope. According to Ziegeler’s framework, interlocutors convey counterfactual meanings via the counterfactual *almost*. By using the combination of a scalar adverb with a past perfective event to assert that an event nearly occurred, interlocutors leverage the scenario of a past event that came close to realization yet ultimately failed to materialize, thereby achieving specific pragmatic purposes. This is the reason why Ziegeler designates the scalar adverb *almost* as “counterfactual *almost*”, which can encode counterfactual meaning.

Polarity reversal in the avertive arises from the interplay between subjective intention/expectation and objective reality. In everyday cognition, humans consistently form intentions (volition), assess abilities (capacity), or predict outcomes (expectation). When these subjective states conflict with objective outcomes (e.g., desiring to act but being unable to do so), avertive markers encode this conflict as modal meaning. When paired with past-tense telic predicates, *almost* as an avertive marker encodes both modal and counterfactual meaning. The polyfunctional feature of the avertive reflects a deep level of grammatical integration: counterfactuality depends on modal markers to signal non-actuality, while modal markers expand their functional scope by absorbing counterfactual meaning. This may be attributed to the diachronic development of approximative adverbs, which undergo grammaticalization and develop into counterfactual markers. For instance, *almost* originated as a modifier of quantifying determiners, deriving from the Old English *mæst ealle/ealle mæst*, formed by the fusion of *eal* (“all”) and *mæst* (“most”), with the core meaning of roughly “most all/mostly all.” It subsequently grammaticalized into a counterfactual marker encoding the meaning of “it was on the verge of P, but P did not occur” (Ziegeler, 2006). The polyfunctional feature of the avertive is also attested cross-linguistically, as some languages exhibit irrealis-avertive inflections that simultaneously encode counterfactuals and other irrealis meanings (e.g., Australian languages) (Caudal, 2023).

The avertive offers a clear illustration of the hierarchical relationship “counterfactual $\subset$ irrealis $\subset$ modality”. As the prototypical avertive marker, the proximative adverb *almost* in utterance such as “I almost fell, but I didn’t” has a dual function: as a counterfactual, it posits the event of falling in a hypothetical world; as a proximative, it marks the near-occurrence of the event in the actual world. This dual function confirms counterfactuality as a specialized subtype of irrealis.

VI. THE INTEGRATED TENSE-ASPECT-MODALITY MECHANISM: AVERTIVE AS A SEMANTICALLY ELABORATE GRAMMATICAL CATEGORY

The avertive does not encode a single semantic category (e.g., only aspect, only time, or only modality); instead, it simultaneously integrates three layers of meaning, namely, aspectual (describing the structural stage of an event), temporal (describing the temporal anchoring) and modal (describing counterfactuality). This integration is not accidental but rooted in the functional logic of the avertive. Constructions such as “almost did X” and “should have done X but did not” inherently require linking “how an event unfolded over time” (aspectual), “when an event was anchored” (temporal), and “whether or why an event deviated from actual reality” (modal).

Drawing on the framework “The Event Development Stages and Avertive Aspectual Types” (Fig. 2), Example (26) instantiates the Result Stage Avertive: at the aspectuo-temporal layer, the event is anchored in the past, with *almost*

⁶ The term *polarity* refers to whether a statement is negative or affirmative, which is closely linked to “negation,” the linguistic means of marking a polarity distinction (e.g., sentential, constituent, lexical, and metalinguistic negation) (Penka & Zeijlstra, 2010).

specifying the core stage of the event (“missing the train”), namely, the event was imminent (near future in the past) and incomplete (not realized). At the modal layer, *almost* further encodes the meaning of “possibility + non-actuality”, signifying that the event of “missing the train” was likely but did not occur in reality (the core avertive meaning). In this sense, *almost* cannot be split into only an aspectual or only a modal element; it fuses the aspectuo-temporal feature of past imminence with the modal feature of near-miss possibility.

Example 26:

She almost missed the train, but sprinted through the station just in time. (Result Stage Avertive)

Example 27:

我们本该昨天出发（但因为暴雨延误了），现在已经快到目的地了。(Preparatory Stage Avertive)

We should have left yesterday (but were delayed by heavy rain), and would have almost reached the destination by now.

Example (27) instantiates the Preparatory Stage Avertive: the construction “本该” (běngāi) anchors the event to the past future (with “yesterday” as the intended time of occurrence) and implies the event was “planned yet unfulfilled” and situated at the preparatory stage. “本该” encodes a composite meaning of “deontic modality + counterfactuality”, which signals an obligation or planned action, while simultaneously marking that this action did not occur in reality. By fusing the temporal feature of a past plan with the modal feature of an unfulfilled obligation, “本该 (běngāi)” blurs the conceptual boundary between “when the event was supposed to happen” and “why it did not”.

Across all examples, the avertive does not encode aspectual, temporal or modal meanings in isolation. Instead, it fuses these three semantic dimensions into a single, efficient semantic package — a form-meaning pairing driven by the communicative need to describe unfulfilled events (e.g., events that nearly happened, or were tried but failed). This fusion erases the traditional boundaries between aspect, tense and modality, as the avertive markers cannot be logically decomposed into purely aspectual or purely modal components.

VII. CONCLUSION

The *avertive* is a semantically elaborate grammatical category characterized by the interactive integration of temporal anchoring, event stage and modal attitude. Aspectually, it specifies the exact stage at which an imminent event was interrupted. This research identifies four distinct aspectual types: full event structure, preparatory stage, inner stage, and result stage avertives. Temporally, the avertive is exclusively anchored in the past tense, which provides the necessary hindsight perspective to confirm non-realization, and serves as the temporal anchor for counterfactuality. Modally, it encodes polarity reversal, shifting a positive event construal into a negative actualization. The findings regarding the avertive’s TAM interface demonstrate that the avertive functions as a specialized subtype of irrealis, positing an event in a hypothetical world while marking its near-occurrence in the actual one. For future research, systematic corpus-based comparisons of avertive markers across different languages would help test the universality of the four aspectual stage types proposed here.

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