

Just think about it already! *Already* in English and Swedish

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In English, the adverbial *already* can be used in (at least) two ways, which we refer to as ALREADY A (1) and ALREADY B (2).

- (1) ALREADY A: He has *already* done his homework.
- (2) ALREADY B: Get off the phone *already*.

In (1), *already* “induces a focus interpretation by contrasting the described situation with a possible alternative situation”. (Lee 2008: 344). The example in (2) illustrates an innovative usage of the adverb, typical of spoken American English, which presumably has its origins in Yiddish (Feinsilver 1962).

In this paper, we will argue that ALREADY B in fact shows the properties of a modal particle of sorts. As such, it has direct equivalents in other Germanic languages. In a language such as Swedish, (1) and (2) correspond to different lexemes: *redan* ‘already’ (3) and *nångång* ‘sometime’ (4):

- (3) Han har redan gjort sin läxa
he has already done his homework
- (4) Lägg på luren nångång
put on the phone sometime
‘Get off the phone already!’

It will be shown that ALREADY B, in (2), as well as Swedish *nångång* in (4), indeed have the distribution of a modal particle:

The prototypical context for such elements is the imperative. If they appear in other environments, such as the conditional clauses of (5a-b) or the embedded questions of (6a-b), they are usually “directive”, in the sense that they express implicit command:

- (5) a. If you could get off the phone *already* we could finally leave.
b. Om du kan lägga på luren *nångång* kan vi äntligen komma iväg.
- (6) a. I was just wondering if you could do it *already*
b. Jag undrade bara om du kan göra det *nångång*.

The only *wh*-question in which such elements are licit is a *why*-question and only if it is negated, as in (7a-b):

- (7) a. Why can't you do it *already*?
b. Varför kan du inte göra det *nångång*?

Furthermore, ALREADY B / *nångång* cannot be focused and can only appear in clause-final position. The obvious parallel between spoken American English and continental Germanic has a natural explanation if ALREADY B indeed originates in L2 English.

References

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