Polysemy vs. monosemy and a pragmatic account of a range of interpretations
– the case of Hebrew day/dey

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A corpus based investigation of the colloquial Hebrew *day/dey* (roughly: "quite", "enough", "sufficient"), indicates that it has a broad distribution, occurring in adjectival, adverbial, verbal and nominal phrases, and that it displays 3 distinct readings: attenuation, reinforcement and approximation, as in the following sentences, respectively:

1) ha-ivrit šel dani dey tova. (efšar leha’asik oto) [ attenuation, less than OK]

'Danny's Hebrew is good enough' (=sufficient but not perfect command)

2) ha-iša hazot dey mevugeret. (ze lo yihye la kal). [ reinforcement, high on the age scale]

‘This woman is old enough/ quite old’

3) hayu šam dey harbe anašim (ani lo yodea beDIYUK kama) [approximation, non commitment]

'There were quite a lot of people there. (I don't know exactly how many.)'

The three readings have been assessed empirically along relevant scales representing the relative positions of the *dey X* vis a vis the *X* phrases, indicating the attenuation, enforcement and approximation parameters.

The claim is advanced in this presentation that Hebrew *day/dey* is not polysemous, with 3 arbitrary readings (2 of which are conflicting), but rather the range of its interpretations originates from a monosemous item meaning: ‘enough’, ‘sufficient (amount)’, and predictable Gricean principles (in whatever variety). All three readings involve scalar implicatures: **Attenuation** (as in 1 *dey tova*) is derived straightforwardly, since using *dey tova* indicates that the speaker could not have used the stronger - "tova". **Reinforcement** (as in 2 *dey mevugeret*) is likewise derived via a scalar implicature, but rather than being associated with an attenuation, a socially motivated parameter is involved in its interpretation – “understatement”. Thus, by using *dey mevugeret* “old enough /sufficiently old” the speaker attempts to avoid the less politically correct expression *mevugeret*, or even *zkena*, and in fact conveys “old to a significant degree”. This move might be accounted for by Grice’s Manner maxim (or Horn’s R principle). **Approximation** (as in 3) too is accounted for via a scalar implicature, only in this case using *dey X* (rather than *X*) the speaker absolves herself from the (Gricean) requirement to be maximally informative.

A comparison will be drawn between the synchronic and diachronic nature of the more open-ended Hebrew *dey X* and its more restricted English counterpart ‘quite X’ and some of the distributional distinctions between them will be accounted for by coercion.

The suggestion will be made that the transparency and naturalness of the pragmatic account of the range of interpretations of Hebrew *dey X* might shed light on its English counterpart.
Some references:


