

The “Nearby” Exaggeration in Real Estate

A Position Paper

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Mary recently moved to Washington, D.C. and is looking to rent an apartment near where she is to attend college. As a first step, she consults a local classifieds web application to explore housing listings within her budget. Upon selecting the first listing in her search results she reads the description. What luck! Not only is the posted apartment near her college, but it is also close to a number of D.C.’s attractions, namely the Lincoln Memorial, National Arboretum, Smithsonian Zoological Park and the trendy U-street district. Reading further, the listing states that the property is close to numerous metro stations and three large grocery stores. Surely this is the apartment for her. On examining the other listings, however, she discovers that virtually all of them state that they are near to many of these same attractions, as well as a few others. Can Mary really be this lucky?

The unfortunate reality is that none of these attractions are what most adults would consider *near* to one another, with locations on opposite sides of D.C. While this scenario is an exaggeration, it is not far off from the reality of many classified housing listings (as will be demonstrated later in this paper). So what is going on? Do real estate agents truly have a unique understanding of proximity or is *nearby* such a valuable term that its inherent vagueness can be exploited for financial gain in the housing market?

In this position paper we suggest that *nearby*, and other proximity-related terms are used more liberally and with a more relaxed definition in the housing advertising market than other domains. We argue that the term elicits positive reactions from potential renters or home buyers as it is used only in relation to places with positive lifestyle (e.g., parks), institutional (e.g., grocery stores) or social (e.g., bars, attractions) capital. In many ways, *Nearby* is the real estate equivalent of *Natural* in the food industry. *Natural* has been adopted by food advertisers as a term loaded with positive assumptions related to the health and quality of the item to which it has been labeled. In the United States, however, there are no regulations on foods labeled as *natural*, meaning there is no guarantee that the food is any different than non-natural food. Contrast that with *Organic* [5], a term that requires the labeled item to adhere to specific FDA and USDA regulations. No, we are not arguing for a “spatial proximity certification” (National Association of Realtors / USGS possibly?) but reminding

the reader that not only are proximity terms context dependent, they are also highly influenced by outside factors and vary substantially between domains.

Nearness

Nearness is more than a concept related to topological structures [4,9]. In today's communication, it maintains a degree of colloquialism and is often synonymous with terms such as *close*, *neighboring*, and *beside*. As an inherently vague term, it relies on additional details specified by the user or that those details be inferred given contextual information. For example, *near* in itself does not indicate intent to travel (e.g., to the reference location), mode of transportation (e.g., walking, flying), or abilities of the one who employed the term (e.g., physical or cognitive). *Near* also does not speak to the geometry (e.g., center or border of the reference location) or topography of the reference location (e.g., top of a mountain) or path between the location of the observer and the reference location (e.g., through dense vegetation). In other words, employing the term *near* necessitates additional detail to be of any real value.

Realtors, rental listing agents, or those involved in advertising rental properties, take significant liberties with the term, inviting potential renters to interpret the term for themselves, based on their own definition. We posit that the average spatial distance between what a rental listing agent defines as near and what a potential property renter defines as near is substantially different. While we will not attempt to prove this in this position paper, we hypothesize that this difference between realtors and renters is larger on average than any other relationship that employs proximity terms (e.g., local and tourist, taxi cab driver and passenger), let alone a set of random individuals.

Defining *nearness* in a geographical sense, is not a new area of research and numerous researchers have explored the concepts and terms related to proximity in various ways. Worboys [7] conducted a human subjects experiment on understanding *near* in environmental space finding that formal theories are important in reasoning with such a concept. We make the argument in this case that in real estate advertising, the boundaries (both spatial and cognitive) of the concept are substantially relaxed and can be manipulated in virtually any way that the advertiser sees fit. Human-participant research has examined factors influencing usage of terms such as near and close [2] while others have examined the role of such proximity terms in identifying imprecise spatial relationships [6]. Recent research on this topic [1,8] has mined located and reference objects related by proximity terms in order to better understand how humans conceptualize proximity as well as the contexts that influence this conceptualization.

A Real-World Example

To exemplify the issue, we show here a real-world *craigslist* rental listing in Los Angeles, California. The listing indicates close proximity to 24 specific places and a number of non-specific place types. In fact, the majority of the text in the

listing is focused on places and attractions that are nearby rather than on the actual features of the apartment.

...approximately one mile to Downtown Los Angeles' employment opportunities, theaters, restaurants, and countless entertainment options... just down the hill from the famous Dodger Stadium, next to local favorite, The Short Stop, minutes from Chinatown, adjacent to trendy Silver Lake, and all the new hip bars, restaurants, and shops in Echo Park... Close to Larchmont Village, Central LA, Koreatown, Silver Lake, Chinatown, Los Feliz, Downtown, Miracle Mile, Cypress Park, Atwater Village, North-east Los Angeles, Montecito Heights, Hollywood and Glendale.

We geocoded 14 of the places specified in the listing¹ and visualized the on the map shown in Fig. 1. The mean distance between each point location and the actual apartment is 4.7km in Euclidean distance with a maximum distance of over 10km. While previous research has shown that individuals define *near* as anything from centimeters to kilometers in distance [3], our interpretation is that the individual or group that listed this property is using a surprisingly liberal definition of near in order to entice potential renters.

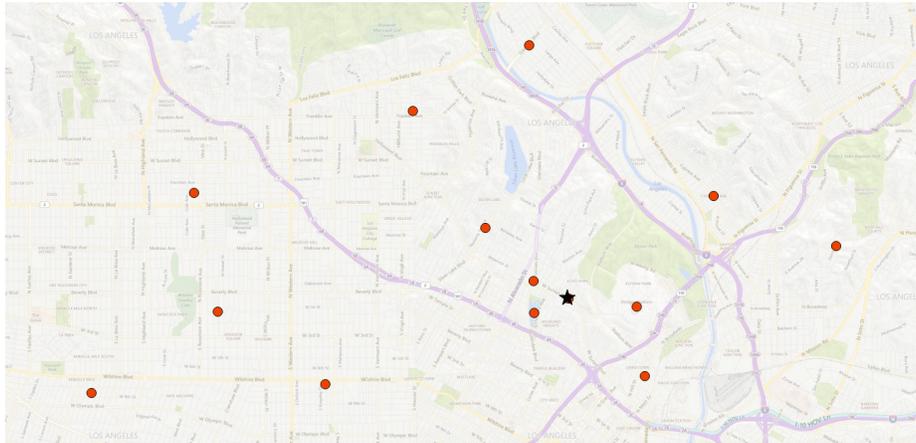


Fig. 1. Geocoded locations from a craigslist apartment listing in Los Angeles, California. Black star represents the location of the property and the orange circles are the locations listed as *nearby*. Scale is 1:52700. Base map by Bing Maps. Craigslist listing ID: 5989012116

¹ Note that markers are placed at the centroid of neighborhoods. This obviously has an impact on distance as a neighborhood is typically represented as a polygon.

Discussion

To summarize, the purpose of this position paper is to draw attention to the ways in which proximity terms such as *nearby* are used in real-world scenarios. Specifically, this paper points to an extreme case of taking liberties with this term and employing it as an advertising tool. While considerable work has identified the vagueness of these types of proximity terms, we hope that this domain-specific example will spur discussion on the boundaries (or lack thereof) and context within which this, and many other terms, are used.

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