

Minimal sufficiency readings in conditionals

Conditionals with *just* in the antecedent can have what Grosz (2012) terms ‘minimal sufficiency readings’ (MSRs) as in (1), or ordinary exclusive readings as in (2).

- (1) If he just worked out a little, he’d be hot.
- (2) He’d be too boring if he just used regular punches.

Removing *just* from (1), but not (2), preserves truth; in fact, *just* does not affect the truth-conditions in (1) (modulo presuppositions). And while (2) conversationally implicates that ‘he’ wouldn’t be boring if he used more than regular punches, (1) does not have the analogous implication (in fact, the opposite is more likely). According to Grosz (2012), exclusives that participate in MSRs have a bleached lexical meaning (ONLY₂) which contributes only the presupposition that the prejacent is low on the contextually given scale.

Coppock and Beaver (2013) offer a unified analysis of exclusives and MSRs, but only treat cases like:

- (3) Just the thought of him sends shivers down my spine.

Their analysis of (3) can be paraphrased, *something that is only the thought of him sends shivers down my spine*. This idea avoids lexical ambiguity, but does not straightforwardly extend to conditionals. Here, we propose a unified analysis in the same spirit, and argue that it has empirical advantages over Grosz’s (2012) account.

We adopt Beaver and Clark’s (2008) analysis of exclusives, as amended by Coppock and Beaver (2013), on which ‘only π ’ presupposes that there is some true answer to the question under discussion (QUD) ranked at least as high as π (the ‘at least’ component), and entails that there is no stronger one (the ‘at most’ component). Following Kratzer (1983), we assume ‘if α then β ’ is true if and only if augmenting the modal base (a set of assumed facts) with the assumption of α renders β a necessity (under normal circumstances, as per an ordering source).

For a case like (1), or any conditional of the form “if just α then β ”, we propose that the QUD is, effectively, ‘what assumptions are added to the modal base?’ The exclusive presupposes ‘assume at least α ’, and entails ‘assume no more than α ’. The analysis can thus be paraphrased, ‘if we assume no more than that he works out a little (presupposing that we assume at least this), it follows that he would be hot’. Hence the conditional is truth-conditionally vacuous, as desired, and has the right implicatures.

In contrast to a lexical ambiguity account, this strategy correctly predicts that MSRs should arise with diverse exclusives including *only* and *merely*, as well as *no more than*:

- (4) Everyone feels how his evil inclination ceases to exist even if he no more than focuses his mind and thought strongly upon God.

Furthermore, unlike Grosz’s (2012) analysis, this account also correctly predicts that MSRs require broad sentential focus (hence emphasis on *worked out*), because the answer to the QUD ‘what assumptions do we make?’ is given by the full antecedent clause. Allowing exclusives in the antecedent of conditionals to be sensitive to a QUD concerning the assumptions to be added to the modal base thus yields a unified analysis of exclusives and MSRs with good empirical predictions.

References

- Beaver, D. I. and Clark, B. Z. (2008). *Sense and Sensitivity: How Focus Determines Meaning*. Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester.
- Coppock, E. and Beaver, D. (2013). Principles of the exclusive muddle. *Journal of Semantics*, (online first).
- Grosz, P. (2012). *On the Grammar of Optative Constructions*. John Benjamins, Amsterdam/Philadelphia.
- Kratzer, A. (1983). The notional category of modality. In Eikmeyer, H.-J. and Rieser, H., editors, *Words, Worlds and Contexts: New Approaches to Word Semantics*, pages 38–74. Walter de Gruyter.