The morphosyntax of exclusives and the underspecificity of *just*

Framework & Goals. The family of exclusive/scalar adverbs discussed in the literature including English *only, merely*, and *just* share a common quantificational meaning (Rooth 1985, 1992; Beaver & Clark 2008; Coppock & Beaver 2011). In this paper, I propose a morphosyntactic framework to represent the variations in meaning and selection among exclusives in terms of a single quantificational core, EXCL, on top of which are built additional restrictions for particular lexical items ($C_{\leq}$ represents an ordered pair $\langle C, \leq \rangle$ of an alternative set C, along with an ordering $\leq$ on that set).

(1) $[\![\text{EXCL}]\!] = \lambda C_{\leq}.\lambda p.\lambda w.\forall q[(q \in C_{\leq} \wedge w \in q) \to p \leq q]$ (Rooth 1992; Chierchia 2013)

I argue that among the exclusives in English, *just* is the least morphosyntactically complex, in that it lacks any presuppositional operator and lacks the morphological feature that enforces association with focus.

Data & Analysis. A distinction between exclusives *merely* and *only* has been discussed in the literature, whereby *merely* seems restricted to a 'depreciatory' use, often represented as a restriction to an evaluative/normative ordering on the alternative set (Lee 1987; Coppock & Beaver 2011). I formalize this restriction as a morphosyntactic presupposition, M (a Kratzerian ordering source is used to explicate the nature of evaluative scales).

(2) $[\![\text{M}]\!] = \lambda F.\lambda K[F(K) \wedge \partial(\text{K is an evaluative scale})]$

(3) $\text{merely}(\phi) = [\text{M}]([\text{EXCL}])(\phi)$:

$$\lambda w.\forall q[(q \in C_{\leq} \wedge w \in q) \to \phi \leq q] \wedge \partial(C_{\leq} \text{ evaluative scale})]$$

$$\lambda p.\lambda w.\forall q[(q \in C_{\leq} \wedge w \in q) \to p \leq q] \wedge \partial(C_{\leq} \text{ evaluative scale})] \quad \phi$$

$$\lambda K.\lambda p.\lambda w.\forall q[(q \in K \wedge w \in q) \to p \leq q] \wedge \partial(\text{K evaluative scale})] \quad\quad C_{\leq}(\phi)$$

$$\text{EXCL}:= \lambda C_{\leq}.\lambda p.\lambda w.\forall q[(q \in C_{\leq} \wedge w \in q) \to p \leq q] \quad \text{M}:= \lambda F.\lambda K[F(K) \wedge \partial(\text{K evaluative scale})]$$

While *just* can pattern like *merely* and *only*, it has several additional uses involving quantification over explanations (4) and elaborations (5).

(4) Unexplanatory *just*:
   a. I was sitting there and the lamp just broke!
   b. He just stopped texting me (I don't know why).

(5) Unelaborative (Emphatic) *just*:
   a. It was just impossible!
   b. That fish was just gigantic!

I represent the alternative set for uses of unexplanatory *just* as causation relationships with the prejacent. The base sentence contains a covert minimal cause, CAUSE_0, (cf. Orenstein (2015) and analysis of Hebrew *stam* with a covert modifier). So, for (4a), we get the following alternative set: {lamp broke CAUSE_0, lamp broke because the cat knocked it down, lamp broke because the wind, ... }; *just* quantifies over this set, yielding a speaker assertion of no (known) explanation for the lamp breaking. Unelaborative *just* is one step further, where *just* quantifies over necessary elaborations by the speaker, yielding the 'emphatic' effect where the prejacent is all that needs to be said.

The puzzle here is that unexplanatory *just*, unlike overt and covert *only*, does not associate with prosodic focus. So, I argue that this covert modifier CAUSE_0 (and the parallel elaboration modifier) produces a semantically identical effect to the $\sim$ operator presented in (Rooth 1992), in that it combines with the prejacent to produce an alternative set C over which the exclusive can operate, but without the presence of a grammatical focus feature.

Implications. Under this framework, even "basic" operators like *only* have morphologically coded constraints on their complements. The Focus Principle requires that alternative sets be subsets of the focus alternatives (Rooth 1985, 1992); I reformulate this as a restriction present for *only* and *merely*, but absent with *just*. This provides a compositional account of exclusives with a single semantics encoding both presuppositions and subcategorization requirements as morphosyntactic restrictions. The lack of morphosyntactic complexity of *just* is what allows it to exhibit such a wide variety of uses and interpretations that are still reducible to the core exclusive meaning.

This phenomenon also seems to shed light on the relationship between contrastive topic and focus, as the unexplanatory use of *just* also seems sensitive to contrastive antecedents:

(6) I damaged the space heater by spilling water on it. The lamp just broke.

The extension of alternative semantics to cover these and other uses could provide insight into how and at what level different types of alternatives can interact with semantic operators.

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