Broadening Alternative Semantics: Exclusivity of Discourse just
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1 Synopsis. While alternative semantics literature closely ties alternative sets with (English) prosodic focus (Rooth 1985, 1992; Beaver & Clark 2008), I argue that some constructions give rise to alternative sets which do not correspond so neatly with overt focus marking. Here, I analyze a specific use of just, which I label ‘unexplanatory’ just, to highlight that the structure of alternative sets can be more complex. Specifically, unexplanatory just involves quantification over covert causation relationships.

2 Analysis of unexplanatory just. Unexplanatory just occurs when the speaker denies or distances herself from the explanation for the eventuality expressed by the prejacent proposition.

(1) a. I was sitting there and the lamp just broke!

   (Implication: the lamp broke spontaneously/the speaker denies knowledge of how it broke)

b. I walked into the store, saw the necklace, and just took it. I don’t know what came over me.

c. He just stopped texting me. Maybe it’s because I made that quip about his mother.

Though quite distinct from the typical exclusive uses of just, e.g., Bill just went to the party (and nowhere else), I argue that unexplanatory just deserves a similar quantificational semantics over salient alternatives. In particular, it quantifies over statements of causality between the prejacent and (context-restricted) potential causes. This necessitates allowing exclusives to quantify over elements in more complicated alternative sets, such as propositions involving discourse relations, e.g., explanations.

I assume a standard exclusive semantics for just, mirroring previous treatments of only. (I include here only the quantificational (negative) part of the meaning—see, e.g., (Roberts 2011) for discussion of the prejacent.)

(2) \([\text{just } \phi]_{M,w} = \forall q(q \in ALT \land w \subseteq q) \rightarrow \phi \leq q\]

where \(\leq\) is the salient ordering relation over the alternative set ALT, read as “is stronger than” (and is in many cases filled in as an entailment relation \(\subset\))

In order to determine the set of alternatives for a given utterance, I appeal to the Question Under Discussion (QUD) framework (Roberts 2012; Simons et al. to appear), where the relevant question an utterance addresses determines the evaluated alternative set. For unexplanatory just, the alternatives are all of a form “\(\alpha \) because \(\beta\)”. This kind of application of just results in a quantificational assertion that for every non-minimal potential cause \(x\) for the eventuality \(e\) described by the prejacent, \(x\) is not the cause of \(e\).

(3) Utterance: The lamp just broke.

   \(e\): the event of the lamp breaking
   QUD: What caused the lamp to break?
   ALT = \{\(e\) because \(x\) | \(x\) is a contextually salient potential cause for \(e\)\}
   \(\phi = e\) because \(\text{CAUSE}_0\) where \(\text{CAUSE}_0\) is some “minimal cause”
   \([\text{just } (\phi)]_{M,w} = \forall q(q \in ALT \land w \subseteq q) \rightarrow \phi \leq q\]

   Resulting Quantificational Paraphrase: “For all explanations \(q = \text{The lamp broke because } x\) that are not entailed by \(\phi = \text{The lamp broke because } \text{CAUSE}_0\), \(q\) is not true in \(w\).”

However, as exhibited by (1c), this quantification over explanations is not a flat denial of the existence of a cause, but rather a refusal to commit to a particular cause. Thus, I ultimately include an epistemic necessity modal in the structured alternatives, yielding a quantificational statement like, for all (stronger-than-minimal) alternatives \(q, q\) is not necessarily the causal relationship in question.

3 Theoretical implications. Just exhibits a variety of uses that have been described as ‘polysemous’ (Lee 1987); however, under this broader view of acceptable alternatives, these uses can be accounted for with a single lexical entry for just as an exclusive operator. The distributional differences among exclusive operators is attributed to differing restrictions on alternative sets and orderings. As a relatively free exclusive operator, just provides insight into the typology of restrictions on exclusives—see (Orenstein 2015) for a related account regarding Hebrew.

Additionally, this evidence from unexplanatory just further highlights the importance of including the QUD in any analysis of focus-sensitive operators. The availability of explanation just as part of the alternative set is not predicted in a framework that looks solely at the compositional semantics absent a relevant question: by including the QUD framework, we get a general semantics for exclusive operators that accounts for a much wider array of data, including ‘discourse’ uses of exclusives.

Selected References