Conditional Wishes as Exclamations:
Evidence from Greek

In this paper, it is proposed that conditional wishes of the form of the English if only p, q can serve as exclamations. In particular, I consider a particular case of unembeddable conditionals of Greek introduced by the traditionally-called subjunctive particle na. Na appears both in what looks like the antecedent p clause, as well as in the consequent q clause. It is shown that the na p clause denotes a wish, while the na q clause denotes a possibility or ability:

(1) (Makári) Na ímum plúsios, na taksíøeva ólo to xróno.
(Excl.particle) NA be.pst.1s rich, NA travel.pst.1s all the year
I wish/ If only I were rich, I could/ might travel year long.

My goal is to locate the source of this modality, conditionality and unembeddability, and offer a semantic account that derives this type of constructions. I argue that: (i) na simply functions as a marker for (semantically) embedded propositions; (ii) the trigger for each of these modal interpretations is a (possibly covert) operator; (iii) the conditionality comes about by assuming that na p originates low, in the antecedent position, but moves higher to convey desiderative meanings; (iv) the unembeddability of na p, na q is a result of the selectional restrictions associated with exclamations. In particular, it is shown that similar to if only p, the na p clause can occur either by itself or as the antecedent of the conditional na p, na q. In all cases, the wish na p denotes an exclamation, which can be embedded only under exclamatory wish particles (such as makári in ex. (1)), and interjections.

Turning to the semantic analysis, I adopt the typical tripartite conditional structure (Kratzer, 1986), where the antecedent if clause is assumed to be in the restriction of the modal operator, and the consequent clause in its nuclear scope. In a similar way, I assume that the antecedent na p starts off in the restriction of the modal operator of na q (see CP1, figure (1)). The consequent na q denotes an ability or possibility. In effect, the (possibly) covert operator is always existential, further specified as an ability or possibility operator. This structures accounts for the conditionality denoted in na p, na q.

The exclamatory wish meaning is assumed to come about by movement of na p to a higher CP. Hence, parallel to Portner and Zanuttini’s wh-exclamations (2003), it is suggested that there is an extra CP layer. The head of this CP is filled by a universal operator often realized as an exclamatory wish particle or interjection. The meaning assigned to it, is the same as the one proposed by Heim (1992) for the English wish. Based on this definition then, along with the analysis suggested for modal verbs (Kratzer, 1991), it is argued that the wish-operator first operates on its restriction and then takes a full sentence as its semantic argument. This assumption accounts for the wish-meaning of na p. Moreover, this CP cannot be embedded, since its exclamation specification blocks its selection by a higher verb.

Under this analysis, all the properties of the exclamatory conditional wish are accounted for in a simple syntactic-semantic fashion. What’s more though, this analysis also provides us with some interesting cross-linguistic effects. Similar constructions are attested in a variety of languages. Some seem to be embeddable (like the English if only p, q), while others (such as the Greek na p, na q) seem to be impossible to embed. Crucially, the difference between the two may be the exclamation property.
1 Structure

Figure 1: The structure of na p, na q*

*Due to space limitations the structure of the wish operator is not included in this figure.

References

