

Emphatic *just* and *simply*: the semantics and pragmatics of metalinguistic exclusives.

Exclusives close off stronger alternatives compatible with what is asserted, typically engendering a *weakening* effect (1-2). Remarkably, *just* and *simply* (but not *only*) provide instead an *emphatic* effect when targeting Extreme Adjectives (3-4). We call these uses Emphatic Exclusives (EEs).

- (1) The food is {*just/simply/only*} good. (3) The food is {*just/simply/#only*} great.
 (2) Your shoes are {*just/simply/only*} big. (4) Your shoes are {*just/simply/#only*} huge.

The intensifying flavor of EEs in (3-4) motivated the claim that here *just* and *simply* do not operate as exclusives. In particular, Morzycki (2012) suggests that EEs compositionally boost the standard of a gradable adjective, similar to *very*. Their preference for extreme adjectives is explained by the fact that EEs additionally encode a domain widening operator that *very* lacks, which allows them to access degree beyond contextual salience. Against this view, we argue that EEs are instead *metalinguistic* exclusives, which signal the unassertability of alternative prejacent. Emphasis follows from the interaction between this contribution and scalar extremeness.

Novel data - We first present several empirical properties of EEs do not follow from M's analysis.

(I). If EEs manipulate the standard of a gradable adjective, they should interact with operators in the descriptive content. Yet, unlike *very* and bare extreme adjectives, they are strongly degraded under negation, and cannot be challenged via denials. Note that canonical exclusive uses of *just* and *simply* are instead felicitous in these contexts (6).

- (5) a. #The food wasn't {(#*just/simply*) amazing/*very* good}.
 b. A: The food's *just/simply* amaz. B: # No! It's amaz., but not *that* amazing.
 c. The food's *very* good. B: No! It's good, but not *that* good.
 (6) a. The food isn't *just/simply* good. It's possibly amazing.
 b. A: The food's *just/simply* good. B: No! It's good, and possibly amazing.

(II). EEs can co-occur with comparatives and superlatives, suggesting that they aren't filling the same slot as canonical degree morphemes. As for degree modifiers compatible with *very* (e.g., *so*), EEs always occupy a higher position, while *very* has to occur between *so* and the adjective.

- (7) This food is {*just/simply/*very*} better/the best.
 (8) This food is {*just/simply/*very/*extremely*} so / so {**just/*simply/very/extremely*} good!

(III). When the adjective occurs in a DP, EEs occur externally, while degree modifiers internally.

- (9) It was {*just/simply* an amazing dinner vs. a **just/??simply* amazing dinner}.
 (10) It was {**very/*extremely* a good dinner vs. a(n) *very/extremely* good dinner}.

(IV). EEs can modify any form that is located at the end of a strength scale, and not just gradable adjectives. Verbs like *hate* can be modified by *very* only via "much support"; universal quantifiers resist degree modifiers across the board, providing more evidence against M' analysis.

- (11) I {*just/simply/*very (much)*} hate it. (12) {*Just/simply/*very*} everybody likes us.

The analysis. We suggest to paraphrase EEs' contribution as follows: "I assert *p*, and no alternative proposition to *p* is assertable". We model this intuition by treating EEs as *metalinguistic* exclusives, which rule out alternative speech acts that could have been performed to describe the same state of affairs. The first step to model this contribution is positing the following: asserting a proposition is the result of a contingent choice. For instance, suppose I liked the food very much. I could choose to utter "The food is amazing!". But there are other propositions I could have resorted to to describe my experience, each of which could be in principle felicitous. One could opt to be specific and utter (a); or to be cautious and utter (b). The upshot is that any assertion comes with a set of Alternative Prejacent (AP). AP contains all prejacent that could have been used

to perform alternative speech acts to describe the same state of affairs, and among which, due to limited vocabulary and conflicting pragmatic pressures, we had been forced to make a choice. Crucially, the fact that we picked one reflects a contextual decision; choosing to assert one does not rule out the fact that some of the non-asserted alternatives could have been equally viable choices.

- (13) **Assertion:** “The food is amazing!” **AP:** {a = “The food is well-cooked, tasty, and nicely presented in the plate”; b = “The food is good”, c=. . . }

A speaker using an EE eliminates this contingency; that is, they signal that the produced assertion is actually the only one that can be asserted, flagging all its alternatives as infelicitous. In prose, by modifying an assertion with an EE, the speaker achieves two goals: (i) they assert p , as in a regular assertion; (ii) they signal that any alternative prejacent q is not assertable. Note that (ii) is missing with a with an unmodified assertion, as shown above: the fact that the speaker picked one prejacent doesn’t rule out the possibility that other prejacent could have been assertable.

- (14) **Assertion:** The food is *just/simply* amazing! **AP:** {a = “~~The food is well-cooked, tasty, and nicely presented in the plate~~”; b = “The food is good”.}

The lexical entry for an EE is the following: it takes a proposition p , an assertion A and its AP as input; it ranges over proposition q in the AP; and it rules out assertions of such propositions via \sim , a *denegation* operator whereby a speaker explicitly refrains from performing a speech act (Cohen and Krifka (2014)).

- (15) $[[EE]] = \lambda p.\lambda AP.\forall q[q \in AP] \rightarrow \sim \text{Assert}_{\text{Speaker}}(q)$

The proposed entry retains the same skeleton of a regular exclusive, which asserts that there is no true proposition in an alternative set C that is stronger (\geq) than p (Wiegand (2017), based on Rooth (1985), Chierchia 2013 a.o.), with strength grounded in entailment or another ordering.

- (16) $[[EXC]] = .\lambda p\lambda w.\lambda C.\forall q[q \in C \ \& \ w \in q] \rightarrow p \geq q.$

The crucial difference is that, in the case of EE, propositions are excluded not (necessarily) for being false, but for failing to be suitable prejacent of a felicitous speech act. On this view, EEs are effectively *metalinguistic*: they are ultimately concerned with the suitability of *linguistic choices* to describe the world, rather than with the world per se, similar to metalinguistic negation (Horn (1985)).

- (17) The food is **not** good; it’s amazing

Finally, note that no strength ordering is present for EE. Since there are multiple, orthogonal reasons that could determine unassertability, there is no monotonicity pattern: a weaker proposition could be unassertable *qua* underinformative; a stronger one could be unassertable *qua* false.

Deriving the properties. On this view, the intensifying effect of EE is not hardwired into their lexical entry, *pace* Morzycki; by contrast, it arises via the interaction of metalinguistic exclusivity and scalar extremeness. Because adjectives like *amazing* are the strongest lexical option to express an evaluation, propositions containing them will always be stronger than their salient alternatives. This has a crucial consequence: if all the alternative prejacent that we rule out are weaker than the asserted prejacent, it follows that, verbosity being equal, the reason why those prejacent are unassertable is that they are under-informative. Emphasis follows accordingly. For instance, it must be the case that the food is so good that any proposition short of “the food is amazing” would not be assertable, generating the intensification effect. A crucial prediction of this account is that emphatic effects should not be limited to gradable adjectives, but should arise any time an EE is used with a scalar extreme, whether a superlative, a quantifier, or another category. As shown in properties (I-IV), this is borne out. By contrast, the effect of EEs with a mid-scale expression will **not** be emphatic: since there are stronger alternatives, and since such alternatives are also closed off by the EE, there won’t be any intensification effect, making EEs hard to tease apart from regular exclusives

in this case. Finally, modeling EEs in terms of speech act operators allows us to make sense of properties problematic for a degree modification account, including the requirement of occurring to the left of DPs and degree modifiers, the lack of interaction with truth-conditional operators, and non-at-issueness. As for why exclusives like *only* and *merely* cannot be used metalinguistically, we see it as another case of variability within the notoriously heterogeneous landscape of exclusives (Beaver and Clark (2008); Coppock and Beaver (2013); Wiegand (2017)).

References

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