Only only marks exclusion

Grégoire Winterstein
Laboratoire de Linguistique Formelle, Université Paris Diderot-Paris 7
gregoire.winterstein@linguist.jussieu.fr

Formal approaches to discourse particles workshop – ESSLLI 2011

1 The interpretation of only

(1) Lemmy only drinks Jack Daniels.
   a. \( \sim \text{Lemmy drinks nothing apart from JD.} \)
   b. \( \sim \text{Lemmy drinks JD.} \)

• The content (1-a) is analyzed as the main content of (1)

• The content (1-b) is analyzed in different ways:
  – As a main content (Atlas, 1993) (and Pierre d’Espagne)
  – As a presupposition (Horn, 1972; Rooth, 1992; Klinedinst, 2005; Singh, 2008; Beaver and Clark, 2008; Beyssade, 2010)
  – As a scalar implicature (van Rooij and Schulz, 2004)
  – Both as a standard and a weak presupposition (Zeevat, 2011)

• I assume that (1-b) is a non-main content.

(2) Does Lemmy only drink Jack Daniels?
   a. \( \sim \text{Lemmy drinks JD.} \)

Only vs. exhaustification

• What is the difference between (3-a) and (3-b)?

(3) Who came to the rehearsal?
   a. Lemmy.
   b. Only Lemmy.
   c. \( \sim \text{Nobody came apart from Lemmy.} \)

• If the meaning of only is limited to an exclusion, what is the difference with a pragmatic exhaustification mechanism?
 Scalarity of *only*

- **Usual answer:** the associate of *only* must be interpreted as being low on some scale (= the mirative aspect of *only*)

  (4) a. #Lemmy only has a royal flush.
     b. #It only costs two euros, and two euros that’s a lot. (Beyssade, 2010)

- ⇒ difference between (3-a) and (3-b): in (3-b), more people were expected for rehearsal.

- The exclusion is only relative to elements located higher up on the scale (or elements that are distinct):

  (5) Lemmy only has a master’s degree.
     a. ⌐Lemmy has no bachelor’s degree.

- Many observations in this direction: (van Rooij and Schulz, 2004; Klinedinst, 2005; Raynal, 2008; Singh, 2008; Beaver and Clark, 2008; Beyssade, 2010; Zeevat, 2011) about *only* and various operators marking restriction in French (*seul, ne . . . que. . . *)

The argumentative dimension of *only*

- Ducrot (1973, pp. 272–273): French *seulement* (=*only*) is an argumentative operator, it marks an inversion of the orientation of its prejacent.

  (6) a. Lemmy has a master’s degree.  \(\arg\) Hire him.
     b. Lemmy only has a master’s degree.  \(\neg \arg\) Do not hire him.

- The intuition appears correct if we look at the combination of *only* with *but* (that marks two opposed arguments) and *too* (which marks similar arguments):

  (7) a. Lemmy solved some problems, but only some of them.
     b. #Lemmy solved some problems, Ritchie solved only some of them too.

Today

1. Analogy between scalarity and argumentative inversion.
2. Problematic examples.
3. Proposition: *only* only marks exclusion, it is not necessary to postulate a scale or argumentative effects.
4. Comparison with (Zeevat, 2011)
2  Inversion and being low

2.1  Argumentative inversion argumentative and being low

There is no need to postulate a distinct argumentative component.

- To be interpreted *only* needs to exclude some alternatives (at least one).
- The exclusion negates a stronger proposition, for which we can assume that it is argumentatively stronger than \( p \), the prejacent: \( \exists z (z > p \land \neg z) \)
- Negation is an argumentative operator that inverts the orientation of its argument.
- Negating elements argumentatively stronger than the prejacent means inverting the orientation of the prejacent: if \( p \) argues for \( r \), then \( \neg p' \) argues against \( r \), for \( p' > p \).
- \( \Rightarrow \) it is not necessary to postulate an argumentative dimension of *only*. Its argumentative effects are a consequence of its semantics, as soon as its prejacent belongs to an argumentative scale.

2.2  Puzzling examples

- The previous explanation entails that if the excluded alternatives are not co-oriented with the prejacent, there should not be an argumentative inversion. (8) is a case in point:

\[(8) \quad \text{Ronnie likes good whisky.} \]
\[a. \quad \text{He drinks single malt scotches.} \]
\[b. \quad \text{He only drinks single malt scotches.} \]

- In the context of (8), (8-b) argues like (8-a), and even appears to be a better argument:

\[(9) \quad \text{He drinks single malt scotches, and he even drinks only that.} \]

- Intuitively, if there is a scale here, *only* marks the upper-end rather than the lower one: i.e. it seems to go against what the mirative component would convey.

Discussion

- *Only* excludes lower quality whiskies, not superior ones.
- If *only* marks a low value on a scale, what is this scale in (8)?
- \( \langle \text{Bad whisky, Moderate whisky, Good whisky} \rangle \): no problem.
- Then *only* marks that it is expected that Ronnie owns lower quality whiskies/that Ronnie is low on a scale of liking bad whiskies.
- Then, why not do the same with (10-a)?

\[(10) \quad \#\text{Lemmy only has a royal flush.} \]
\[a. \quad \text{Scale: } \langle \text{Nothing, one pair, . . . , royal flush} \rangle \]

- Intuitive difference between (10-a) and (8-b):
  1. In (10-a), *only* does not give a better argument.
  2. In (8-b), *only* improves the argumentation by exclusively marking the top of the scale.
3 Proposition

• *Only* marks an exclusion, but does not encode anything about the scalarity of the elements it excludes.

• To interpret *only*, it is sufficient to determine which elements are excluded.

• Determining what is excluded is a matter of context:
  – Elements that are entailed by the associate, either logically or through world-knowledge are not excluded: *having only a master’s degree* does not exclude having a bachelor’s degree.
  – Only elements comparable with the associate are excluded: *having read only “War and Peace”* does not (usually) exclude having read the TV guide.
  – Elements excluded can be of different types: entities, propositions, arguments...

• Depending on the nature of the excluded elements, there can be some systematic argumentative effects (but these effects are not conventionally determined by *only*).

Argumentative strengthening

• How to explain the argumentative strengthening of (11)?

  (11) Ronnie only drinks single malt scotches.

• *Only* excludes that Ronnie drinks other types of whisky, e.g. blends.

• Argumentatively, *drinking only single malt* is stronger than *drinking blends and single malt* or than *drinking only blends*.

• By itself, *only* does not have any argumentative content, but it places Ronnie on an argumentative scale.

Remaining issues

If *only* only encodes an exclusion, one has to explain at least two things:

1. What is blocking (12)?

  (12) #Lemmy only has a royal flush.

2. What is the difference between the answers in (13)?

   (13) Who came to the rehearsal?
        a. Lemmy.
        b. Only Lemmy.
Determining the alternatives

\[ (14) \quad \begin{align*} &a. \text{ Lemmy only has two pairs.} \\
&b. \#\text{Lemmy only has a royal flush.} \end{align*} \]

- What is excluded by \textit{only} in the above examples?
  - \(\Rightarrow\) Probably poker hands. But having one hand already excludes having any other hand.
    - Example (14-a) suggests that what is excluded, is not just poker hands, but poker hands with a purpose: to win. I.e. the best Lemmy can do in (14-a) is to show two pairs.
    - Only hands that are better than the prejacent are excluded, i.e. in this particular case, an alternative \(p'\) is distinct from the prejacent \(p\) iff. it is better than \(p\).
    - Thus, in (14-b) there is nothing to exclude: \textit{only} cannot be interpreted.
  - By itself, \textit{only} still marks a simple exclusion in (14), but the \textit{distinctiveness} relation is, in this context, of a scalar nature (which is not always the case).

Differences between exhaustification and restriction

- The use of \textit{only} and a pragmatic exhaustification mechanism differ in the type of the conveyed contents:
  - With \textit{only} the prejacent is presupposed, and the restriction is a main content.
  - With exhaustification, the “prejacent” is a main content, and the restriction is a scalar implicature.
- The attachment possibilities differ between \textit{only} and exhaustification:

\[ (15) \quad \begin{align*} &a. \text{ Lemmy. So we managed to work on “Ace of Spades”.} \\
&b. \#\text{Only Lemmy. So we managed to work on “Ace of Spades”.} \\
&c. \#\text{Lemmy. So we were not enough to work.} \\
&d. \text{Only Lemmy. So we were not enough to work.} \end{align*} \]

- The potential argumentative effects of \textit{only} are another difference with an exhaustive interpretation.
  - Depending on the excluded alternatives, \textit{only} inverts or strengthens the argumentative effects of the prejacent.
  - Exhaustification has no such effects.

4 Comparison with (Zeevat, 2011)

4.1 (Zeevat, 2011): presupposition types

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Presupposition} \\
\text{Strong} \\
\text{Weak} \\
\text{“Soft”} \\
\text{Superweak}
\end{array}
\]
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accommodation</th>
<th>Binding</th>
<th>Trivialisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>Left context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superweak</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>Left context</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Trivialisation: ignore the presupposition if it is coherent with the Common Ground ⇔ add an individual that believes in the psp.
- Left context binding: characterized by the possibility to bind the presupposition to usually inaccessible contents:

A: My parents think I am in bed.
B: My parents think I am in bed too.

**The meaning of only**

'On the view of this paper, only expresses disappointment at the small size of a quantity expressed by its host'

(16) Only \( P(x) \):

\[
x, Px, \text{superweak}(x, y, Px, Py, \text{distinct}(x, y)) : \neg Py
\]

- superweak\((y, Py, \text{distinct}(x, y)) = \)before the assertion, it must be compatible with the common-ground that there is an alternative to \( x \) that might be conceivably have the property \( P \), i.e. *only* must have something to exclude.

- The prejacent is both a strong and superweak presupposition, which explains its peculiar projection properties:

(17) [ John did not sneeze ]

a. #But, not only John sneezed.
b. So John does not regret sneezing.

- The mirativity of *only* can be trivialised:

(18) If only John comes, then we will have enough to eat.

**Test on (19)**

(19) Ronnie only drinks single malt scotches.

- The mirative approach predicts a superweak presupposition of the form:

  *Ronnie drinks other whiskies than single malt scotches.*

- This can be trivialised, which sounds reasonable in (19).

**Comparison**

**Common points**: no inherent scalarity for *only*, but some semantic types can only be distinguished on scalar ground.

**Divergences**

- I do not predict specific expectations regarding Ronnie in (19), thus I do not have to explain why it becomes trivialised.

  - *Only* has a mirative effect when it runs on an argumentative scale.
5 Conclusions

- *Only* is not an argumentative operator.
- *Only* is not scalar.
- A “mirative” component is not intrinsic to the semantics of *only*.
- Nevertheless, one can find elements that seem to share the semantics of *only* and do impose such a content:

(20) Ronnie is a real connaisseur. # He merely drinks single malt scotches.

Thank you

References


