

The Scalar Semantics of *Just*

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The particle *just* is extraordinarily pervasive in English. It appears in slogans (*‘just do it’*), self-help articles on what *not* to say in emails to your boss (Leanse 2015), and is the 34th most common word in the MICASE corpus of academic speak (Lindemann & Mauranen 2001). Most previous analyses (Cohen 1969; Grant 2011; König 1991; Kishner & Gibbs 1996; Lee 1987, 1991; Lindemann & Mauranen 2001) have treated *just* as lexically ambiguous, postulating as many as six distinct denotations to account for its polyfunctionality. However, even these studies have attempted to unite *just*’s disparate senses under a single core meaning of ‘restrictiveness’. This core meaning is developed further by Coppock & Beaver (2013), who treat *just* as an exclusive, and Duffley & Larivée (2012), who identify a core meaning in terms of ‘goodness of fit, i.e. something that neither undershoots nor overshoots the mark.’

We develop these unambiguous analyses by treating *just* as a modifier of scalar predicates and regulator of **pragmatic slack** (Lasersohn 1999), exhibiting behaviours not shared by other exclusives. The apparent polysemy of *just* is then a product of the heterogeneity of the contexts it occurs in, rather than a case of lexical ambiguity. Our scalar treatment of *just* not only improves upon our understanding of the particle itself, but can also reveal new details about the structure of scalar predicates.

The presentation will focus on a particularly revealing case, namely the dichotomous behaviour of *just* modifying evaluative adjectives denoting degrees of quality. For simplicity, we treat quality as a closed scale in Kennedy & McNally’s (2005) terms, with adjectives like *perfect* and *terrible* describing regions at the upper and lower bounds of the scale. We claim that the scale also has a designated midpoint, 0, that we call *mediocre*. Adjectives such as *good* and *bad* denote regions defined relative to that midpoint: *good* describes a degree of quality >0 , and *bad* does likewise for a degree <0 . Now, consider the effect of *just* when modifying such adjectives.

(1) The presentation is *just* good/bad/perfect/terrible.

With *good* and *bad*, the effect of *just* is to shrink the range of degrees in the direction of *mediocre*: *just good* describes an object as no better if not worse than *good*, and conversely for *just bad*; with *perfect* and *terrible*, *just* shrinks the range of degrees away from *mediocre* resulting in emphatic readings: *just perfect* is no worse, and maybe better, than *perfect*.

This behaviour is not shared by exclusives like *only*: because *only P* presupposes P and asserts $\sim Q$, where Q is a more informative alternative to P, *only* is incompatible with adjectives denoting scalar endpoints like *terrible* and *perfect*.

(2) The presentation is only good/bad/#terrible/#perfect

The different behaviour of *just* shows that *just* interacts with scales in a way which requires consideration of the midpoint of the scale, as well as the upper and lower bounds.

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