

The Hebrew *be-sax ha-kol*: An exclusive analysis of an approximative reading

Abstract: This paper proposes a unified definition of the Hebrew *besax ha-kol*. In particular, we look at two apparently unrelated readings of this particle, which we label the 'exclusive' and the 'approximative' readings (typically found with adjectives) and suggest that in both of them *besax ha-kol* functions as an exclusive operator, under a new definition of exclusives that we propose. Our definition is inspired by previous definitions of *only* suggested in Beaver & Clark 2008 and Kadmon & Sevi 2011, but it avoids some of the problems in these definitions and can account for some novel observations concerning *only*. Applied to *besax ha-kol*, this definition can capture correctly its interpretation and distribution, on the assumption that unlike *only*, this particle can operate on both classical scaled sets of alternatives to the prejacent, as well as on a scale of alternatives involving different degrees to which the adjectival predicate holds.

Data: We discuss two salient readings of *besax hakol*.¹ The first, which we label 'the exclusive reading' patterns like '*only*', is seen in (1) and (2):

(1) *Rina besax ha-kol pkida.* (*rina is besax hakol a clerk*) (\approx "Rina is only a clerk")

(2) *Danny besax hakol ben 5.* (*Danny is besax hakol 5 years old*) (\approx "Danny is only 5 years old")

The second reading is the 'approximate reading' as in (3), typically found with adjectives:

(3) *haxeder besax ha-kol naki / yaveS* (\approx "The room is more or less clean/dry")

This latter reading is constrained, as there are adjectives with whom *besax ha-kol* is infelicitous:

(4) *??/#haxeder besax hakol meluxlax / ratuv* (\approx "The room is more or less clean/dry")

To account for the data, we propose that *besax ha-kol* is an exclusive, under the modified definition of exclusives that we suggest below, which is a modification of Clark's (B&C, henceforth) 2008, and Kadmon & Sevi (K&S, henceforth) 2011.

Background: "Scalar" analyses of *only*: Unlike traditional theories of *only* which hold that *only p* excludes all alternatives to *p*, 'scalar' theories assume that, in some way or other, *only p* excludes only 'stronger' alternatives. Zeevat 2003 takes *only* to be a mirative particle, which (weakly) presupposes that stronger alternatives than *p* are expected to be true. B&C 2008 also explicitly claim that *only* is mirative, rejecting stronger expectations, as indicated by the contrast in (5):

(5) *a. I expected 40 students, but only 30 arrived. b. #I expected 40 students, but only 50 arrived.*

Formally, however, B&C do not encode 'expectations' in their definition, but take the relevant alternatives to be members of the Current Question constrained by a presupposed and asserted lower (MIN) and upper bounding operators in the presupposition and content (assertion) of *only p*, as in (6):

(6) **Presupposition:** $\text{MIN} (p) = \lambda w \forall p' \in \text{CQ } p'(w) \rightarrow p' \geq p$ **Content:** $\text{MAX} (p) = \lambda w \forall p' \in \text{CQ } p'(w) \rightarrow p \geq p'$

Notice that as .g. Horn 1996, Ippolito 2005, in B&C's definition *only p* neither asserts or presupposes *p*. Among other things this is because *p* does not always survive under negation of *only p*:

(7) *This is not only a shoot-'em-up movie* (no implication that it *is* a shoot-'em-up movie)

Instead, B&C claim that *p* is indirectly inferred by *only p* since it is the only alternative in the CQ left open after both the presupposed MIN and asserted MAX operators are computed.

Finally, based on Sevi's 2005 definition of the exhaustivity operator, K&S propose that the meaning of *only p* has three components: 1) *p* holds 2) *p* is the maximal element in the relevant scale which is true (Similar to B&C's MAX operator) and 3) *p* is considered 'not that many' (as a conventional implicature). Notice that K&S's definition does not assume the presence of stronger alternatives in the context against which *only p* is uttered (i.e. B&C's MIN operator). However, one can take this intuition to result from the need to avoid a trivial statement. E.g., (8) would be taken to be infelicitous, since asserting that 20 students arriving is the maximal proposition which is true is trivial, if given the context this is the maximal proposition which *can* be true (i.e. if no higher alternative is possible) (Sevi, p.c.):

(8) *#John has 20 students in his course and only 20 arrived today*

Motivations for an alternative analysis of exclusives: We follow Orenstein & Greenberg 2011 in pointing out two problems in B&C's definition: Consider a scenario in which the status of getting a single room with a Jacuzzi is as strong on a scale as that of getting a double room with a bath. First,

¹ We ignore here at least two other readings of *besax hakol*.

since the MIN operator requires that the open alternatives in the CQ are at least as strong as p, this wrongly predicts (9) to be felicitous in such a scenario:

(9) #*I expected a single room with a Jacuzzi, but only got a double room with a bath*

Second, unlike B&C's predictions, their definition does not guarantee that the truth of p. The MAX operator requires that the alternatives in the current question are at most as strong as p, which wrongly predicts (10) to be true in the scenario above, and in which I actually got a double room with a bath (since getting a single room with a Jacuzzi is as strong):

(10) *I only got a single room with a Jacuzzi*

In addition, unlike Zeevat's definition and B&C's claim, the use of *only p* does not always involve stronger expectations in the common ground. For example, (11) is perfectly felicitous in a context where me and my mother organize a family weekend, and discuss where each sub-family will stay.

(11) *Let's see: Danny (my brother) has four children so he will stay in this apartment, and Esti (my sister) has only three children, so she can stay in the smaller apartment.*

As we both know the number of children my sister has, there is no expectation that she has more children. (i.e. there is a stronger alternative in the background but crucially it is not an expectation).

In addition, we note that unlike what suggested in K&S's analysis, p cannot be asserted to be true (e.g. since it does not always survive under negation, as seen above). In addition, the MAX constraint alone cannot explain the infelicity of (12), since here it is not trivial to assert that 20 is actually the maximal number of students who arrived:

(12) #*John has at least 20 students in his course and only 20 arrived today.*

Notice also that we cannot claim that (12) is infelicitous because of the 'not that many' conventional implicature suggested in K&S since this implicature does not seem to be always present, as in (13):

(13) *John got 10000\$ and I only got 9999* (9999 cannot be considered 'not many' relative to 10000).

Our proposal: Given the data above, we emphasize that what *only p* requires is not that p expresses 'not that many', or that it is weaker than what is expected. Rather, it is lower relative to a salient member on the scale (which only in the null context is taken to be expected, similar to Krifka's 1998 suggestion w.r.t. *still*). This will yield the definition in (14):

(14) *Only p* presupposes that p is lower than a **salient** proposition in the scale of alternatives to p, and asserts that it is the actual maximal element in the scale. (\approx the MAX operator).

We take the truth of p to be derived as a conversational implicature, in the spirit of McCowly 1981 and van Rooij and Schultz 2005 (unlike asserting it, as suggested in Orenstein & Greenberg 2011). We show how (14) accounts for the full range of data without running into the problems noted above.

Applying the exclusive definition to *besax ha-kol*: Our claim is that *besax ha-kol* is uniformly an exclusive as defined in (14). Under the 'exclusive' reading it functions like *only*, where the scale contains alternative propositions to p, triggered by focus or the CQ (but see K&S regarding this last point). Crucially, however, *besax ha-kol* can also operate on other salient scales, e.g. the one triggered by the scale of degrees associated with adjectives. Given Kennedy & McNally 2005 (K&M) in (3), for example, p is "the degree to which this room is clean is \geq **stand**(d)" where **stand** is the salient standard, namely the maximal end point in a cleanness scale (since the scale for *clean* is U(pper)-closed). Here we have a scale of alternatives of the form "This room is clean to a degree d". But by the semantics of exclusives in (14) (3) should presuppose that the degree to which the room is clean is **lower** than the salient degree standard (i.e. than the maximal point), and assert that this lower degree is the maximal actual degree. This leads to a potential contradiction, which can be resolved if we relax our precision evaluation standard or use a coarse granularity for evaluating *clean*, as intuitively permitted in K&M and suggested more formally in Saurland & Stateva (2007). This leads exactly to the 'approximative' reading of (3) ("The room is not maximally clean, but it can be still considered clean"). In contrast to *clean*, *dirty* has an L(ower)-closed scale, and hence its salient standard is the minimal, non-zero point on the scale. Thus, in (4) we again get a potential contradiction: p asserts that the degree to which the room is dirty is non-zero or higher, and by (14), (4), with *besax ha-kol* presupposes that the degree to which this room is dirty is lower than the salient (non-zero) point (and asserts that this degree is actually the maximal one). We show that in this case using a more liberal precision or coarser granularity cannot 'save' the sentence and the contradiction remains (#"The room is not minimally dirty, but it can be still considered dirty"). This accounts for the infelicity of *besax ha-kol* with L-closed adjectives.