

## Metalinguistic *just* and *simply*: exploring emphatic exclusives\*

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**Abstract** When occurring next to predicates located at the extreme of a scale, *just* and *simply* contribute an *emphatic* effect. In this paper, I propose to analyze these uses as exclusive operators over *metalinguistic alternatives*, whereby the speaker signals that no more complex alternative description is assertable in the context. On this account, emphasis emerges as an indirect effect of the interaction between exclusivity and scalar extremeness: because all the alternatives to extreme predicates happen to be weaker than the predicate itself, ruling them out will induce an *anti-weakening* effect, whereby the prejacent is interpreted in its full strength, and not merely as a possible alternative among weaker ones.

**Keywords:** alternatives, emphasis, extremeness, exclusives, scalar reasoning

### 1 The phenomenon

Exclusive particles normally rule out alternatives ranked higher on a contextual scale, yielding a *weakening* effect (Rooth 1985; Beaver & Clark 2008; Grosz 2011; Coppock & Beaver 2014; Orenstein & Greenberg 2013; Wiegand 2017).

- (1) a. Anna is a professor, while John is *just/simply/only* a student.  
b. Unfortunately, it was *just/simply/only* Bill on the phone.

In some contexts, however, *just* and *simply* can contribute the opposite effect, generating a stronger statement than the one with the bare adjective. This paper focuses on these particular occurrences; following Wiegand (2017), I label them Emphatic Exclusives (henceforth, EEs).<sup>1</sup>

- (2) a. The food was *just amazing*. Emphatic  
b. The pharmaceutical industry in Germany is *simply huge*.<sup>2</sup> Emphatic

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<sup>1</sup> Emphasis never arises with *merely* and *only*. I will take this as a basic empirical fact, leaving the investigation of why other exclusives cannot yield emphatic effects for further research.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.montrealassociates.com/news/sap-hana-consultants/20952/>

EEs present two distinctive properties. First, they are typically found next to predicates that are situated at the extreme of a scale, as discussed by [Morzycki \(2012\)](#). If we replace extreme adjectives with mid-scale predicates, the emphatic effect disappears, while only a regular exclusive reading is licensed.

- (3) a. # The food was *just* good. Emphatic  
 b. # The pharmaceutical industry in Germany is *simply* big. Emphatic

Second, their contribution can be intuitively paraphrased with phrases such as “with no need to add anything else” ([Wiegand 2017](#)), which suggests that the meaning of predicate ought to be taken *as is*, with no further qualifications. In this respect, EEs seem to be ruling out alternatives of some sort, similar to their non-emphatic counterparts.

These observations raise three puzzles. First, what semantics/pragmatics mechanisms underlie the emphatic effect of EEs? Second, how can the connection between EEs and adjectival extremeness be derived? Third, how do such mechanisms relate to the contribution of canonical exclusives? In a nutshell, I propose to analyze these expressions as exclusive operators over *metalinguistic alternatives*, whereby the speaker signals that no more complex alternative description is assertable in the context. On this account, emphasis emerges as an indirect effect of the interaction between exclusivity and scalar extremeness: because all the alternatives to extreme predicates happen to be weaker than the predicate itself, ruling them out will induce an *anti-weakening* effect, whereby the prejacent is interpreted in its full strength, and not merely as a possible alternative among weaker ones.

The paper is divided as follows: §2 critically reviews extant analyses of EEs; §3 introduces the key ingredients to the current proposal; §4 fleshes out the analysis and derives the empirical properties of EEs; §5 concludes.

## 2 EEs: reviewing previous proposals

Compared to other exclusives, EEs have received relatively little attention in the previous literature. In this section I first summarize a proposal by [Morzycki \(2012\)](#), which treats EEs as a special type of degree modifier; I then present several empirical arguments that call into question this analysis.

### 2.1 Morzycki’s analysis: EEs as degree words

[Morzycki \(2012\)](#) provides an extensive analysis of EEs, treating them as a special type of degree modifier geared towards targeting *extreme adjectives* such as *amazing*,

*huge, gigantic* (see Cruse 1986; Paradis 2001; Rett 2008).<sup>3</sup> Against this background, Morzycki suggests that EEs and ordinary degree modifiers such as *very* or *extremely* similarly manipulate the relationship between the degree to which the modified adjective holds and its standard, represented here as  $\theta$ . EEs, however, are special in that they encode two components that ordinary degree morphemes like *very* lack: (i) a presupposition that the standard of the modified adjective  $\theta$  is in  $C^+ - C$ , that is, the non-salient portion of the scale; (ii) a *domain widening* operator that expands the set of salient degrees to the domain  $C^+$ , requiring that the adjective hold to a greater degree than the standard. The former ingredient ensures the combinability of EEs with extreme adjectives; the latter makes extreme degrees available for modification and ensures that intensification goes through. By contrast, *very* has no such power of accessing non-salient degrees; it just requires that the degree to which the property holds be located in the upper portion of the contextually salient section of the scale (represented as  $\text{Max}(C) - d$  below), and that the relevant standard be exceeded.

- (4) a.  $\llbracket \text{EE} \rrbracket = \lambda \text{Adj}_{\langle e, dt \rangle} \lambda x: \theta(\text{Adj}) \in C^+ - C. \exists d[\text{Adj}_{C^+}(x)(d) \wedge d > \theta(\text{Adj}_{C^+})]$   
 b.  $\llbracket \text{VERY} \rrbracket = \lambda \text{Adj}_{\langle e, dt \rangle} \lambda x: \exists d[\text{small}(\text{Max}(C) - d) \wedge \text{Adj}(x)(d) \wedge d > \theta(\text{Adj})]$

Once these premises are in place, the particular distribution of EEs follows straightforwardly. By virtue of denoting degrees that exceed contextual salience, extreme adjectives immediately satisfy the presupposition that the standard of the adjective be located outside the set of salient degrees. Regular adjectives like *big*, instead, fail to satisfy this presupposition, and are therefore predicted to be generally infelicitous with EEs. However, mid-scale adjectives can be felicitously targeted by EEs in situations in which they are *contextually extreme*. This happens, for example, when the speaker did not expect the adjective to hold in the first place; in such cases, the standard of the adjective does not belong to a contextually salient portion of the scale, pragmatically satisfying the extremeness requirement placed by EE.

- (5) a. # The food in this restaurant is *just* good.  
 b. You said this restaurant was bad; but hey, this food is *just* good!

## 2.2 Some challenges

This proposal offers a unified account of the semantic contribution of EEs and other intensifiers, capturing in an elegant way the connection between these types of exclusives and extreme degrees. Upon closer look, however, EEs display a cluster of

<sup>3</sup> For another analysis of EEs as directly composing with scales, see Laparle & Truswell (2018). As it also treats *just* and *simply* as degree words, I consider this account to be essentially in the same spirit as Morzycki's, and thus to be amenable to the same critical considerations that I outline in §2.2.

empirical properties that would be problematic to explain under an analysis that treats them as degree modifiers. Specifically, they fail to interact with logical operators in the descriptive content; they can co-occur with degree morphology; they are found with non-gradable predicates; and they impressionistically retain an exclusive core, which is not captured by the analysis just described.

### 2.2.1 EEs are not at-issue

Standard manipulators typically participate to the composition of the at-issue content of the utterance. EEs, however, do not seem to behave in the same way. To begin with, they are strongly degraded under negation, contrary to *very* and *extremely*.

- (6) a. # I'm disappointed. The food wasn't *just/simply* amazing.  
 b. I'm disappointed. The food wasn't *very/extremely* good.

Second, EEs cannot be targeted by denials independently from the rest of the propositional content. This feature, again, makes them different from degree words.

- (7) a. A: The food was *just/simply* amazing.  
 B: # No! It was certainly amazing, but not *just/simply* amazing.  
 b. A: The food was *very/extremely* good.  
 B: No! It was certainly good, but not *very/extremely* good.

Note that, when *just* and *simply* operate as ordinary exclusive particles, they can also be targeted by denials and interact with negation. This suggests that non-at-issueness is specific of emphatic uses, and not of exclusivity more broadly.<sup>4</sup>

- (8) a. The food wasn't *just/simply* good. It was amazing!  
 b. A: The food was *simply/just* good.  
 B: No. It wasn't *simply/just* good. It was good, and possibly amazing.

### 2.2.2 EEs can occur with saturated degree slots

Furthermore, EEs can be found in contexts in which degree arguments have already been saturated by degree morphology, including superlatives, and other intensifiers that denote extreme degrees.

- (9) a. The food in restaurant A is *just/simply* the best. Superlative

<sup>4</sup> Tomaszewicz (2012) discusses a use of Polish *aż* 'only' which is paraphrased as 'no less than' and resembles EEs in inducing an intensification effect. However, this use appears to be part of the at-issue content. We therefore take this use to be distinct from EEs as discussed in this paper.

- b. The food in restaurant A is *just/simply* extremely/super good. Intensifier

By contrast, *very* and *extremely*, by virtue of also competing for a degree argument, cannot occur in such positions.<sup>5</sup>

- (10) a. \*Food in restaurant A is *very/extremely* better than food in restaurant B.  
 b. \*The food in restaurant A is *very/extremely* the best.

### 2.2.3 EEs can occur with non-gradable predicates

Another property that distinguishes EEs from regular degree modifiers is that the former can productively occur with non-gradable linguistic expressions. In particular, they can be found across a wide array of syntactic categories, including universal quantifiers, adverbs of quantification, NPs, and VPs.

- |      |                                            |                          |
|------|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| (11) | a. <i>Simply/just</i> everybody hates us.  | Quantifier               |
|      | b. This <i>simply/just</i> never happens.  | Adverb of quantification |
|      | c. You're <i>simply/just</i> a genius.     | NP                       |
|      | d. I <i>just/simply</i> love this feeling. | VP                       |

Most of these categories cannot straightforwardly combine with standard manipulators. For instance, universal quantifiers and adverbs of quantification located at the end of a scale do not support degree modification and gradability more generally.

- |      |                                                |                 |
|------|------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| (12) | a. * <i>Very/Extremely</i> everybody hates us. | Quantifier      |
|      | b. *This <i>very/extremely</i> never happens.  | Temporal adverb |

Regarding NPs and VPs, the case has been made that some instances of these categories can be modeled as gradable, in a similar fashion to their adjectival counterparts (Nouns: [Morzycki 2009](#); Verbs: [Bochnak 2010](#)); however, these expressions are typically modified by different classes of modifiers than those targeting adjectives – e.g., size adjectives such as *big* for nouns – or require the presence of additional material in the composition – “much support” ([Solt 2009](#)). By contrast, EEs can freely occur across these types of expressions.

<sup>5</sup> In principle, a possible explanation to reconcile these observations with the proposal that EEs are degree words could be to posit that EEs occupy a higher degree head position than *extremely*. However, the very same explanation has been proposed to account for the combinability of *so* with other intensifiers, which lead to the prediction that both EEs and *so* should occupy the same slot, and hence be incompatible. But this is crucially not what we observe.

- (i) The food in restaurant A is *just so* good.

- (13) a. You're *\*very (much)* a genius. **NP**  
 b. I *\*very (much)* love this feeling. **VP**

Along these lines, it is also worth observing that, while not being gradable, predicates like *never* or *everybody* pick out the endpoint of a closed scale, beyond which no further points are possible. This makes them extreme, though in a broader sense than the one intended by Morzycki; these forms do not lexicalize extreme degrees, but nevertheless represent the strongest lexicalized option available to describe a certain state of affairs. We will return to this point in the analysis.

#### 2.2.4 Connection to other exclusives

A final point concerns the conceptual connection between emphatic and non-emphatic uses of exclusive. Morzycki's analysis treats them as essentially homophonous; yet, at least impressionistically, EEs do seem to retain a core that makes them more similar to other exclusives than to intensifiers. Specifically, they seem to highlight the literal meaning of the modified predicate, suggesting that no further qualification needs be added to adequately describe the current state of the world: this intuitive difference does not directly follow under an analysis that treats EEs as standard manipulators alike. Note, furthermore, that emphatic uses of exclusives are found cross-linguistically, as shown by *einfach* in German and *semplicemente* in Italian; this provides further evidence that the connection between emphasis and exclusivity is likely not an accident. Similar patterns, among other languages, are attested in Dutch, French, Hebrew, Polish, and Spanish.

- (14) a. Il cibo era *semplicemente* favoloso.  
 The food was simply amazing.  
 'The food was simply amazing'. **Italian**
- b. Das Essen war *einfach* wunderbar.  
 The food was simply amazing.  
 'The food was simply amazing'. **German**

### 3 The proposal: preliminaries

The data presented in this section highlight a number of empirical properties that do not directly follow from an account of their contribution in terms of degree modification, suggesting that an alternative analysis should be entertained. In the remainder of the article, I delineate an account of EEs as metalinguistic exclusive operators, whose contribution can be paraphrased as follows: "I assert *p* and any more complex description is unassertable". In this section, I introduce the crucial



**Figure 1 Scenario 1:** Approaching extremeness

ingredients of the analysis: the notion of metalinguistic alternative and structural complexity; and the relationship between complexity and strength.

### 3.1 Metalinguistic alternatives and complexity rankings

Let us begin with a concrete example. Suppose I intend to describe the quality of a meal I just had, and that the lexicon of English gives me only three adjectives to cover the relevant scale: *ok*, *good*, and *amazing*. Suppose, furthermore, that the meal in question is of very high quality – one that definitely ranks in the upper portion of a quality scale, just below the indifference portion associated with extremeness, as shown by the blue dot in the picture below.<sup>6</sup>

Among many possibilities, this state of affairs could be described in three ways.

- (15) **Scenario 1:** the food approximates extremeness
- a. The food is extremely good, and almost qualifies as amazing.
  - b. The food is extremely good.
  - c. The food is amazing.

If we want to pinpoint the exact point of the scale, the adjectives at our disposal are not sufficiently fine-grained; we thus need to verbalize our description via a somewhat complex formulation, such as (15a). This solution, however, is obviously costly; an alternative is modifying one of the available adjectives with an intensifier, reducing the complexity of the utterance and losing some accuracy (in 15b). Finally, one can opt to maximize brevity and force themselves to use only one word to describe the food. In this case, *amazing* is the adjective of choice (15c): the distance of the point from the extreme portion of the scale is so minimal that a speaker would hardly be accused of lying if they used this formulation. On the other hand, this strategy entails a higher loss in accuracy: by using only one adjective, we have no way of conveying that the food lies *just below* the extreme portion of the scale.

What this example shows is that, due to limited vocabulary, we often have to make non-trivial decisions when it comes to describe a state of affairs. Among

<sup>6</sup> This representation is conveniently simplified. First, it's hardly the case that we know *exactly* where a certain item lies on the scale; second, other adjectives are available as well to cover the scale.

others, two pressures inform the process whereby we navigate our options (Krifka 2002, 2007). One pressure, which can be traced back to the Manner maxim, puts a premium on *brevity*: all things being equal, it is preferable to make our descriptions as simple as possible. The other pressure, which can be traced back to a combination of Quality and Quantity, puts a premium on *precision*: all things being equal, it is preferable to make our descriptions as detailed as possible. Because our lexicon is not fine-grained enough to cover every single possible state of the world, such two constrains effectively work against each other: the briefer we are, the higher the likelihood that we leave out details; the more detailed we are, the higher the likelihood that we assert verbally complex utterances. As such, the availability of multiple options crucially entails that asserting a proposition can be the result of a *contingent* choice: the fact that a speaker decided to draw the line at a certain point doesn't preclude that other ways of describing the world would have been viable, and perhaps felicitous. I implement this idea by suggesting that an asserted proposition evoke a set of *metalinguistic* alternatives  $Alt_{ML}$ , which contains the propositions that, if asserted in lieu of  $p$ , would have truthfully represented the same state of affairs.<sup>7</sup> Returning to the previous example, the set of metalinguistic alternatives associated with asserting (15c) could be characterized as follows.

- (16)  $p$  = The food is amazing.  
 $Alt_{ML}(p) = \{ \text{"The food is extremely good"}, \text{"The food is extremely good, and almost qualifies as amazing"} \}$

To capture this intuition, I propose that the metalinguistic alternatives to a proposition  $p$  are all the propositions that are equivalent to it with respect to the Quality Maxim – i.e., those propositions that, if used to replace  $p$ , would preserve the truthfulness of the speaker, not exposing them to the risk of being accused of lying or providing unsupported information. The notation  $[q/p]$  indicates the proposition  $q$  in replacement of  $p$ .

- (17) a. **Quality Compliance:**  
 An assertion of a proposition  $p$  is Quality Compliant if  $p$  is believed by the speaker to be true, relevant, and supported by the evidence.  
 b. **Metalinguistic alternative set of  $p$ :**  
 $Alt_{ML}(p) = \{ q: \text{asserting } [q/p] \text{ is Quality Compliant} \}$

We can now consider a crucial property of metalinguistic alternatives: because these propositions represent different avenues to strike a balance between brevity and pre-

<sup>7</sup> In this respect, this type of alternatives is crucially different from scalar and focus alternatives traditionally discussed in the literature, which are crucially not assumed to be truthful descriptions of the world – in fact, canonical exclusive operators precisely aim at ruling out them as false, making sure that they are not entertained as possibility.

cision, and because precise statements tend to require more complex verbalizations than less precise ones, they will likely present different degrees of formal complexity. Throughout the paper, I follow Katzir (2007) in defining structural complexity in the following way: a structure  $\psi$  is no more complex than  $\phi$  if  $\psi$  can be obtained from  $\phi$  by a finite number of operations of deletion and replacement with elements of the same syntactic category.<sup>8</sup>

(18) **Structural complexity:**

Let  $\phi$ ,  $\psi$  be parse trees. If we can transform  $\phi$  into  $\psi$  by a finite series of deletions, contractions, and replacements of constituents in  $\phi$  with constituents of the same category taken from the lexicon, we will write  $\psi \leq_{Com} \phi$ .

Following this definition, the ranking would yield the following order for the utterance above.

(19)  $p$  = The food is amazing.

$Alt_{ML}(p) = \{ \text{"The food is extremely good"}, \text{"The food is extremely good, and almost qualifies as } amazing \}$

Complexity Ranking =  $\{ \mathbf{p} \leq_{Com} \text{"The food is extremely good"} \leq_{Com} \text{"The food is extremely good, and almost qualifies as } amazing \}$

As we will see shortly, this ranking is precisely what emphatic *just* and *simply* operate on. Before discussing how exclusivity interacts with complexity, however, let us introduce an issue that will be crucial to the account provided in the paper.

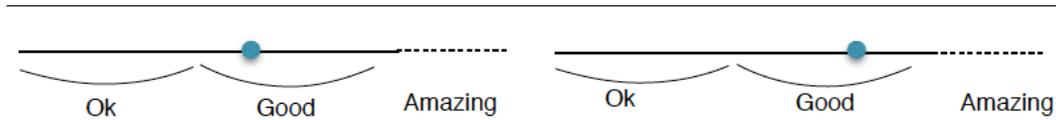
### 3.2 Metalinguistic alternatives and strength

We have seen that metalinguistic alternatives can be compared to the prejacent – as well as to the other alternatives in the set – according to their relative structural complexity. But what is the strength relationship between metalinguistic alternatives and the prejacent? The intuitive answer is that metalinguistic alternatives can either be weaker or stronger than the prejacent: as such, neither brevity nor precision seem to be directly correlated with strength. Let us consider the proposition in (20) in the two scenarios above: in Scenario 2A, the food quality is located in the lower portion of the region covered by *good*; in Scenario 2B, the food quality is instead in the upper portion of this area, while far from the area associated with *amazing*.

(20)  $p$  = The food is *good*.

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<sup>8</sup> In Katzir's proposal, complexity is treated a *filter* on pragmatic reasoning, suggesting that scalar implicatures are calculated on sets that exclusively contain alternatives that are at least as simple as the uttered one, and possibly simpler. Positing this filter solves what is known as the *symmetry problem* in the literature on scalar implicatures. See Katzir (2007) for further discussion.



**Figure 2** Scenario 2A: *Good*, lower part; Scenario 2B: *Good*, upper part;

In both these contexts, (20) can be used as the briefest option to describe the relevant state of affairs. However, the strength of its possible metalinguistic alternatives will crucially vary depending on the scenario. For 2A, more complex propositions will be those outlining with greater precision the status of approximating the middle of the area covered by *good*; as such, they will be (slightly) weaker than (20).

(21) **Scenario 2A**

$\text{Alt}_{ML}(p) = \{ \text{"The food is fairly good"}, \text{"The food is a close to average good"} \}$

For 2B, instead, more complex propositions will be those outlining with greater precision the status of narrowly exceeding the middle of the area covered by *good*; as such, they will be (slightly) stronger than (20).

(22) **Scenario 2B:**

$\text{Alt}_{ML}(p) = \{ \text{"The food is very good"}, \text{"The food is more than average good"} \}$

As a result, the interlocutor of a speaker uttering (20) in a neutral context will have to entertain the option that the precision cost associated with brevity might either mean being slightly underinformative or slightly overinformative: not having direct access to the actual bit of reality that is being described, both classes of propositions will need to be considered. This crucially entails that, whenever a proposition like (20) is asserted, its set of metalinguistic alternatives contains both propositions in which *good* is hedged (in blue) and propositions in which *good* is intensified (in red).

(23) **Across the board:**

$\text{Alt}_{ML}(p) = \{ \text{The food is ... "fairly good"; "close to being average good" "very good"}, \text{"more than average good"} \}$

Let us now consider extreme adjectives again. As argued by Morzycki, these lexical items denote a portion of the scale that is so high that it is pragmatically indifferent to any distinctions therein contained (see Section 2.1 for further details). From the perspective of metalinguistic alternatives, this carries a crucial implication: the set of alternatives invoked by a proposition containing *amazing* will include more

granular descriptions of scalar points situated below the standard of the adjective; by contrast, it will presumably *not* contain granular descriptions of scalar points situated above, given that they wouldn't matter. As a result, the metalinguistic alternatives of extreme adjectives *do* present a strength asymmetry with respect to their prejacent: they will always be weaker than it, and never stronger.<sup>9</sup> As we'll see shortly, this asymmetry plays a crucial role in licensing the emphatic effect of *simply* and *just* with extreme predicates, but not with mid-scale ones.

- (24)  $p =$  The food is amazing.  
 $\text{Alt}_{ML}(p) = \{ \text{"The food is extremely good"}, \text{"The food is extremely good, and almost qualifies as amazing"} \}$

#### 4 Assembling the pieces

Thus far, we have introduced the following ideas: assertions evoke a set of metalinguistic alternatives that could have been used to describe the same state of affairs; such metalinguistic alternatives can be ranked according to complexity; while there is no direct relationship between complexity and strength, extreme predicates feature the distinctive property of only evoking metalinguistic alternatives that are weaker than the original proposition. I now proceed to spell out the proposal for EEs, recasting these particles as operators that signal the unassertability of more complex metalinguistic alternatives.

##### 4.1 Exhaustive vs. non-exhaustive assertions

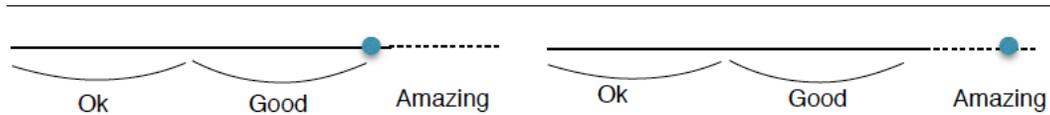
As a first step, let us first return to the discussion in Section 3.1. There, we suggested that, in a situation in which an item approximates scalar extremeness, the use of *amazing* is contingent: it represents one of multiple linguistic choices that could have been used, each of which would have been viable in the context. Let us now contrast that scenario with a different one, in which the food is well within the zone that corresponds to the portion of the scale that exceed salience.

- (25) The food is amazing.

It is self-evident that (25) is, once again, a viable descriptor of the relevant state of affairs. However, here, the use of the adjective is not only the briefest option; it is also the one that is best positioned to adequately capture the state of affairs

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<sup>9</sup> This, of course, does not mean that stronger propositions would not be *possible*. As is well known, extreme adjectives can be intensified with a variety of linguistic means; yet, such stronger forms will not be pragmatically salient for the computation of the alternatives.



**Figure 3** Scenario 1A: approaching *amazing*; Scenario 1B: reaching *amazing*

with respect to any more complex formulation. More verbose alternatives such as those discussed above, while still truthful, are clearly underinformative, and as such non-viable linguistic choices to describe reality.

- (26) **Scenario 1B:** the food reaches extremeness.
- a. # The food is extremely good and almost qualifies as amazing.
  - b. # The food is extremely good.
  - c. ✓ The food is amazing.

More specifically, I suggest that what distinguishes viable from non-viable alternative descriptions is essentially the notion of *assertability*, which, for the purpose of the analysis, I treat as equivalent to Cooperativity in a Gricean and neo-Gricean sense.<sup>10</sup> More formally, I follow Katzir 2007's in suggesting the following definition.

- (27) **Assertability:** A proposition  $p$  is assertable if there is no alternative  $q$  that:
- a.  $q$  is Quality-Compliant
  - b.  $q$  is better than  $p$  ( $q \prec p$ )

In Katzir's account, geared towards canonical alternatives, two factors determine the computation of "better than": informativity and complexity. More specifically,  $p$  is at-least-as-good-as  $q$  ( $p \preceq q$ ) if  $p$  is at least as simple as and at least as informative as  $q$ . "Better" can be taken to mean the irreflexive  $\prec$ , defined as  $\preceq / \preceq^{-1}$ .

- (28) **Canonical alternatives**
- $$\preceq := \{(p, q) \mid p \preceq_{Com} q \wedge p \subseteq q\}$$

When it comes to metalinguistic alternatives, I suggest that the same criterion can be used to determine the assertability of a proposition. The only difference is the nature of the "better than" relation. While the pragmatic pressure determining calculations

<sup>10</sup> By including compliance with all Gricean Maxims, this way of intending assertability somewhat departs from other proposals in the semantic and philosophical literature, which have been for the most part concerned with Quality and Truthfulness.

on canonical alternatives are truthfulness and informativity, those underlying metalinguistic alternatives are complexity and precision: as such, it seems reasonable to posit that these two elements are the defining criteria to compare propositions that belong to this type of alternatives. Specifically, I suggest that a proposition  $p$  is at-least-as-good-as its metalinguistic alternative  $q$  ( $p \preceq_{ML} q$ ) if  $p$  is at least as simple as and at least as precise as  $q$ . For convenience, I represent precision as  $\geq_{Prec}$ .<sup>11</sup> Again, "better" can be taken to mean the irreflexive  $\prec$ , defined as  $\preceq_{ML} / \preceq_{ML}^{-1}$ .

$$(29) \quad \preceq_{ML} := \{(p, q) \mid p \leq_{Com} q \wedge p \geq_{Prec} q\}$$

We can now return to the comparison between Scenario 1, in which we want to describe a world in which the quality of the food closely approximates the extreme of the scale, and 1B, in which it is located well within it.

$$(30) \quad p = \text{The food is amazing.}$$

$$\text{Alt}_{ML}(p) = \{(q = \text{"The food is extremely good"}, z = \text{"The food almost qualifies as amazing"})\}$$

In Scenario 1A,  $p$  has an edge in simplicity over both  $q$  and  $z$ ; this edge, however, is counterbalanced by the fact that both  $q$  and  $z$  provide more precise descriptions of the quasi-extreme status of the food. As a result, the comparison between  $p$  and each metalinguistic alternative ends in a tie, represented as  $\approx$ : there is no alternative that is better than the other two, making all three propositions assertable. Henceforth, I will adopt the term (*metalinguistically*) *non-exhaustive* to label the assertion of a proposition in a context in which other metalinguistic alternatives are assertable.

(31) **Scenario 1A:  $p$  is non-exhaustive**

- $p \approx q: p \leq_{Com} q \wedge q \geq_{Prec} p$
- $p \approx z: p \leq_{Com} z \wedge z \geq_{Prec} p$

Let us now consider Scenario 2. Here, the simplicity edge of  $p$  over the alternatives obviously remains; however,  $q$  and  $z$  come with no precision advantage: they both fall short of providing an accurate description of the facts; as such, their contribution is not going to be accurate than the one provided by  $p$ . As such, neither  $q$  nor  $z$  are assertable: for each of them, there exists a Quality-Compliant, better alternative.

(32) **Scenario 1B:  $p$  is exhaustive**

- $p \succ q: p \leq_{Com} q \wedge p \geq_{Prec} q$
- $p \succ z: p \leq_{Com} z \wedge p \geq_{Prec} z$

<sup>11</sup> The current account is agnostic as to how precision can be further decomposed. See Lasersohn (1999); Sauerland & Stateva (2007); Solt (2014); Klecha (2018) for possible proposals.

In sum, the fact that a proposition is assertable in a context such as 1A does not mean that its metalinguistic alternatives are also assertable in the same situation. This crucially creates a space of communicative indeterminacy: because the listener does not have direct access to the state of the affairs that the speaker is describing, they have no way of knowing, just on the basis of the propositional content, which metalinguistic alternatives are really viable, and which ones are not. In the remainder of this section, I argue that an exclusive can be used by the speaker as a tool to resolve this indeterminacy: by using this particle, a speaker signals indeed that (salient) more complex metalinguistic alternatives are not assertable – that is, that more complex propositions, contrary to what the hearer might think, are not viable candidates to replace the proposition that has been uttered.

## 4.2 Modeling metalinguistic exclusion

We are now in the position of modeling the contribution of *just* and *simply*. I propose that EEs exhaustify the metalinguistic alternatives to the prejacent, signaling the unassertability of any proposition that is structurally more complex than the one that the speaker opted to use. The denotation capturing this effect is proposed below: the emphatic exclusive combines with a proposition  $p$  and signals that every metalinguistic alternative  $q$  that is assertable is simpler than or as complex as  $p$ ; it follows that any alternative that ranks higher in complexity, by contrast, is not assertable. For convenience, I use  $\text{Ass}(q)$  as an abbreviation of “ $q$  is assertable”, following the definition above.

$$(33) \quad \llbracket \text{EMPHATIC EXCLUSIVE} \rrbracket = \lambda p: \forall q \in \text{Alt}_{ML}(p) [\text{Ass}(q) \rightarrow q \leq_{Com} p]$$

We can now see this entry applied to the our working example below, where strikethrough indicates unassertability.

- (34) a.  $p$  = The food is amazing.  
 $\text{Alt}_{ML}(p) = \{ \mathbf{p} \leq_{Com} \text{The food is extremely good.} \leq_{Com} \text{The food almost qualifies as “amazing”.} \leq_{Com} \dots \}$
- b.  $p$  = The food is *just* amazing.  
 $\text{Alt}_{ML}(p) = \{ \mathbf{p} \leq_{Com} \text{The food is extremely good.} \leq_{Com} \text{The food almost qualifies as “amazing”.} \leq_{Com} \dots \}$

We can now return to the issue that we presented in the beginning of the paper: how can we derive the distinctive pragmatic contributions that are linked to the use of these particles – specifically, intensification effects and preference for expressions located at the extreme of a scale?

### 4.3 From extremeness to emphasis

As discussed in the introduction, EEs display a somewhat paradoxical behavior. On the one hand, they highlight the meaning of the adjacent predicate *as is*, discarding further qualifications that could possibly be attached to it. On the other hand, EEs give rise to a stronger proposition than the one featuring a bare, unmodified occurrence of the predicate. The first part of the effect can be explained straightforwardly: if the prejacent represents the most complex description that the speaker can provide, it follows that the suitability of any modification of its meaning is ruled out – be that in the form of adverbial modification, or other linguistic means. Concerning the second part, emphasis emerges as a side effect of the interaction between exclusivity and scalar extremeness: because all the metalinguistic alternatives to scalar extremes happen to be weaker than the prejacent, using *just* and *simply* will prevent the listener from entertaining them, forcing a reading in which the extreme predicate is the best linguistic description *tout court*, and not just the briefest one.

To see this, let us return to the what we suggested in Section 3.2: while complexity isn't directly correlated with strength, the salient metalinguistic alternatives of extreme adjectives present a peculiarity: given the special pragmatic properties of extremeness, they are all weaker than the prejacent. This, in turn, explains why exclusives yield emphasis: the elimination of metalinguistic alternatives would only involve propositions that, in terms of strength, are located below the asserted one. Because of this, using *just* and *simply* will ensure a reading in which the predicate is interpreted in its full strength and not, more loosely, as an option among a set of weaker, potentially assertable alternatives. Crucially, this effect should be more properly referred to as *anti-weakening* rather than as *intensification*: it is generated not by modifying the contribution of the prejacent, but by preventing it from receiving a weaker interpretation than the one invited by its lexical meaning. By contrast, non-extreme predicates such as *good* do not present this property: they can be part of a non-exhaustive assertion in a scenario in which more complex alternatives would be weaker; but they can be likewise used in a non-exhaustive assertion in a scenario in which more complex alternatives are actually stronger. As a result, the use of an exclusive will not produce the anti-weakening effect that we observed for extreme predicates. As a matter of fact, the contribution of a metalinguistic exclusive will be overlapping with the one of an ordinary one, making the two difficult to tease apart.

If this account is on the right track, it yields the prediction that, whenever a strength asymmetry between the prejacent and its alternatives is present, EEs should produce emphasis, including when used next to predicates that do not have the lexical semantics of extreme adjectives. One obvious candidate are occurrences of mid-scale adjectives that violate the interlocutors' expectation, as already pointed out by [Morzycki \(2012\)](#).

(35) You said this restaurant was bad; but hey, this food is *just* good!

A second type of expression confirming this prediction are non-gradable predicates located at the endpoint of a scale, including superlatives, quantifiers and temporal adverbs.

- (36) a. *Simply/just* everybody hates us.  
 b. This *simply/just* never happens.  
 c. You're *simply/just* the best!

While they do not denote degrees, these predicates satisfy the crucial condition required for metalinguistic exclusion to have an emphatic effect. Because they are the strongest lexical items available on their respective scales, there is no expression that could make a stronger contribution. This means that, whatever the metalinguistic alternatives to these forms are, none of them will actually be stronger than the bare form; hence, the emphatic effect of exclusives.

We can thus now consider EEs' distributional pattern under a new light. Contrary to what was previously suggested, it is not the case that EEs directly track extreme degrees – in fact, they do not track degrees at all. However, their emphatic effect is crucially contingent on a strength asymmetry between the prejacent and the alternatives. Extreme adjectives do meet this requirement, emerging as a sufficient condition for the licensing of EEs; however, other types of predicate satisfy this requisite as well, including types of expressions that would not be predicted to license EEs under an analysis that treat them as degree modifiers.

#### 4.4 Deriving the other properties

What remains to be seen is how the proposed analysis derives EEs' intuitive connection to canonical exclusives, as well as their compositional properties discussed in Section 2.2. I now turn to briefly discuss each issue.

##### 4.4.1 The connection to exclusivity

The proposed account treats EEs as a genuine variant of exclusive operators, whose function is indeed to combine with a set of ordered alternatives and rule out (salient) members ranked higher than the prejacent; as such, it does not force us to posit two separate, unrelated meanings for the two uses. More specifically, the proposed denotation retains the same logical core shared across exclusives of different sorts (Coppock & Beaver 2014; Wiegand 2017). (37) reports the proposal by Coppock & Beaver (2014), where the "at most" component of exclusives' meaning is modeled as the function  $MAX_S$ . This function takes  $p$  as argument and requires that every true

proposition that addresses the same Question under Discussion as  $p$  (abbreviated as  $CQ_S$ ) must be lower on a contextually salient ordering  $\leq_S$ .  $S$  represents a free variable filled by the context.<sup>12</sup>

- (37) a.  $MAX_S(p) = \lambda w. \forall q \in CQ_S [q(w) \rightarrow q \leq_S p]$   
 b.  $[[EXC]]_S = \lambda p. MAX_S(p)(w)$  General exclusive template

Within this framework, metalinguistic alternatives can be modeled as a propositions answering a particular type of the  $CQ_S$ , while structural complexity can be captured as a type of ordering filling the  $\leq_S$  variable. To capture the third feature, namely the fact that EEs rule out alternative *qua* unassertable and not *qua* false, it is necessary to tweak the original template to allow for the presence of operations over alternatives other than truth-evaluation. While we leave a full formalization of this extended template for further work, we see this as a desirable and ultimately attainable goal.

#### 4.5 Deriving the other properties

Finally, both distinctive compositional properties of EEs discussed in Section 2.2 can be straightforwardly explained under the present account. Let us begin with EEs' availability above and beyond the linguistic environments that license degree modification. As can be recalled, EEs do not target some component encoded in the denotation of the adjacent predicate; more broadly, they operate over the metalinguistic alternatives evoked by propositions containing these predicates. As a consequence, they are not sensitive to lexical properties such as gradability, nor do they track whether degree arguments are open or saturated. This explains why their distribution is strongly cross-categorial, both in terms of the syntactic category and the lexical properties of the adjacent predicate.

By the same token, the status of EEs as metalinguistic operators can explain the incompatibility of these particles with logical operators. Under the current account, EEs do not directly contribute to representing the world; rather, they modulate the contextual appropriateness of the use of a specific linguistic choice. As such, they effectively operate on a higher-level dimension from the one to which negation and denials normally pertain, and thus escape the effect of these operators. If this explanation is on the right track, we should predict that, by contrast, the status of EEs should improve when embedded under the scope of operators that are likewise geared towards commenting on the speaker's linguistic choices. We can test this prediction with negation, an operator that has been long known to be amenable

<sup>12</sup> Their proposal includes also a MIN component, which is presupposed by all exclusives (see Beaver & Clark 2008 for further discussion). This part essentially ensures that there is a true proposition that addresses the QUD and is at least as strong as  $p$ . We will leave this part aside in our proposal.

metalinguistic uses (Ducrot 1972; Horn 1985). (38) provides an example: in this utterance, the use of *not* objects not to the truth-value of the proposition, but to the suitability of *some* to describe the current state of affairs. A distinctive trait of this use is the presence of focal stress on the word(s) under consideration (represented as small caps).

(38) You didn't eat *some* of the cookies, you ate ALL of them.

We can thus use this distinctive property to create a minimal pair between a descriptive and a metalinguistic negation, and check how the status of *simply* and *just* changes between the two. The negation is intended to deny the exclusive contribution, that is, the fact that no more complex descriptions are appropriate. As predicted, the EEs appear to be sound considerably better in the latter case.

- (39) a. # The food wasn't just amazing. One could also say it was extremely good, but a tiny bit undercooked. Descriptive negation
- b. The food wasn't JUST AMAZING. One could also say it was extremely good, but a tiny bit undercooked. Metalinguistic negation

## 5 Conclusion and further directions

By recasting EEs as exclusive operators operating over metalinguistic alternatives, the account outlined above provided an explanation of the mechanism underlying the emphatic effect of *simply* and *just* in combination with extreme predicates. Looking ahead, an especially intriguing avenue concerns the relationship between EEs and other variants of exclusives that are also not replaceable with *only* or *merely*, such as unexplanatory (Wiegand 2017, 2018) or indifference-marking uses (Rawlins 2015).

- (40) a. The vase *just/simply/#only* broke. Unexplanatory
- b. Alfonso *just/simply/#only* grabbed whatever tool was handy. Indifference

Intuitively, the contribution of these uses intuitively overlaps with the emphatic effects discussed here; as such, I believe that a systematic investigation of how emphasis and metalinguistic exclusion relates to the emergence of such other effects could provide a gateway to a more comprehensive view of the landscape of exclusivity, helping us connect the (impressive!) varieties of flavors that these operators can feature across languages (Coppock & Beaver 2014; Wiegand 2017).

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