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Optatives: Deriving Desirability from Scalar Alternatives*

María Biezma
UMass Amherst
maria@linguist.umass.edu

Abstract. A compositional analysis of *optative* sentences is challenging for at least two reasons: they encode desirability without having any overt marker, and they are *if*-clauses with or without consequents, raising the question of whether they are actually conditionals. In this paper I argue that optatives are conditionals even when they do not have overt consequents. With respect to desirability, I argue that in optatives modality is pragmatically derived. The investigation of optatives sheds light on the interaction between syntax, pragmatics and discourse.

1 Introduction: Where Does Desirability Come from?

Structures like (1) are known as *optatives* in the literature, and they present challenges in several respects.

(1) If only I had been taller*, I would have played in the NBA*.

The utterance of an optative like (1) signals the speaker's desires, and yet there is no lexical item encoding desirability. Notice that what is desired when a conditional optative is uttered is not the antecedent proposition, i.e. that the speaker were taller. What the speaker desires is the consequent, (2).

(2) A: If only I had been taller, I would have played in the NBA.
B: That would not have been necessary, you were such a great player! What would have made a difference was if you had been in a better college team.
A: Yeah. . . !, you are right. . . , If only I had played for UCLA, I would have played in the NBA.

The dialogue in (2) illustrates that what is really desired is not being taller or having played for UCLA. What the speaker really desires at the time of utterance is to have played in the NBA. The antecedent proposition is not desired *per se* but just as means to bring about the consequent, i.e to have played in the NBA.

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The main question this paper addresses is where desirability comes from. I will propose that the modal meaning in optatives comes about pragmatically. It arises from the discourse assumptions leading to the utterance of the optative, and is revealed by the topic-focus structure in optatives and the semantics of conditionals. Optatives illustrate the importance of investigating meaning within the larger context provided by discourse and paying attention to pragmatic meanings derived from different components.

Overview: in §2 I investigate the syntax of optatives, in §3 I argue that all optatives are conditionals, in §4 I show that optative conditionals differ with respect to topicality, in §5 I argue that the reversal of topicality brings about desirability by constraining the questions that license optatives in the discourse.

2 Scope and Structure

I will adopt the view that *if*-clauses restrict the domain of quantification of a modal (Lewis-inspired proposal by Kratzer 1977). For a conditional to bring about optativity, there must be a focus adverb in the antecedent that obeys certain distributional restrictions. Let us consider the contrast between (3) and (4).

(3) Optatives
If only I had left earlier/ If only he didn't have a gun/ If I had only left earlier/ If he had only always acted honorably/ If he only didn't have a gun/ If a hurricane only had razed the city/ If he had only not had a gun/ Had I only read a letter

(4) Not Optatives (ungrammatical or not optative meaning)
a. If he had always only acted honorably.
b. *If he did only not have a gun.
c. If he didn't only have a gun.
d. If he hadn't only had a gun.
e. *Had only I read a letter. (Rifkin 2000)

Only is an adverb, and can attach at any level in the structure that is semantically permitted. The data in (4) shows that in order to obtain an optative meaning, the adverb must adjoin higher than *v*P. In (4a) there is no optative meaning and *only* has attached either at the *v*P level or at the VP level (*always* is adjoined at the *v*P level and *only* adjoins below it). The same is illustrated by (4c) and (4d), in which negation is constituent negation at the *v*P level. The structure below offers a summary of the positions where *only* may show up with an optative interpretation (see Biezma in progress for details regarding

the structures).

(5) $[_{CP}[_{TP}$ only $[_{TP}[_{\overline{T}}$ only $[_{\overline{T}}\ [_{PerfP}$ only $[_{PerfP}\ [_{vP}\ldots\ ]]]]]]]]$

To sum up so far, we have seen that the syntax of conditional optatives involves a focus adverb scoping over a clause denoting a proposition (*v*P or TP). In what follows I argue that it also needs to associate with the entire proposition.

If *only* does not associate with the proposition there is not optativity, (6b).

(6) a. If only mom invited grandpa, he wouldn't come.
b. If only $[_{F}$ MOM] invited grandpa, he wouldn't come.

The sentence in (6a) has an optative meaning, i.e. it is inferred that the speaker wants grandpa not to come. The contrast in (7) illustrates the meaning of (6a):

(7) a. I wish so much to see grandpa, # If only mom invited grandpa, he wouldn't come.
b. I do not want to see grandpa this weekend, $\surd$ If only mom invited grandpa, he wouldn't come.

I assume that the intonation in (6a) is just neutral intonation and as we see in (7), with neutral intonation there is optative meaning. (6b), however, is not an optative, i.e. it is not understood that the speaker does not want grandpa to come. In (6b) the small caps on *mom* indicate emphatic intonation. In this case, *only* associates with *mom*, and the optative meaning disappears.

(8) A: Grandpa is getting old. He only travels when the whole family tries to convince him to get together.
B: Well, there is a possibility that mom ask him to visit us next week.
A: Don't be stupid! If only $[_{F}$MOM] invited him, he wouldn't come.

In (8) the conditional does not carry an optative meaning even though there is a focus adverb in the antecedent. The meaning of A's utterance is that *were mom to be the only person inviting, he would not feel compelled to visit at all*.

A second related argument to claim that optativity arises only when the focus adverb associates with the entire proposition comes from the possibility of having silent consequents.[1] When the focus adverb does not associate with the entire antecedent propositions, the absence of the consequent is ungrammatical.

[1] In §3 I argue that optatives with and without spelled-out consequents are indeed conditionals.

(9) a. If only mom invited grandpa.
b. *If only MOM invited grandpa.

If we use the strategy of placing emphasis on a constituent to mark focus, (9b), thus forcing the association of *only* with something that is not a proposition, the result is a regular conditional and the consequent needs to be spelled out. If there is no special intonation, (9a), and *only* can associate with the entire proposition, it's understood as an optative and the consequent can be silent.

In this section we have seen that optativity only arises when there is a focus adverb c-commanding a proposition level constituent, and associating with the entire proposition. In the next section we will see that, despite the absence of consequents in some cases, optatives are always conditionals.

3 Optatives Are Conditionals

One of the main characteristics of optatives is that they are fine with a consequent that is not spelled out. Indeed, this is even preferred and has been taken to cast doubt on their characterization as conditionals. In what follows I review Rifkin's (2000) arguments against the view that optatives without consequents (*if only!*[2]) are conditionals, showing that a closer look at the data undermines Rifkin's conclusions. The main claim made in this section is that in spite of appearances, *if only!* constructions have a conditional structure (cf. Rifkin 2000). We do not see a conditional because the structures denote properties of propositions with a variable ranging over propositions that have been abstracted over.[3]

(10) Proposal: *if only!* constructions are abstractions over propositions
$\overline{\lambda p.q \Rightarrow p}$ (where '$\Rightarrow$' stands for the semantics of the modal)

In order to support the proposal in (10) I offer arguments to show that *if only!* constructions do not denote propositions, but denote instead properties of propositions, and to show that *if only!* constructions are conditionals. Arguments of the first kind are presented in §3.1 and §3.2, of the second kind in §3.3.

3.1 Embedding

Rifkin (2000) argues against *if only!* optatives being conditionals by showing that they cannot be embedded, whereas regular conditionals can.

(11) a. Avi thinks that if it would snow, things would be good.
b. *Avi thinks that if only it would snow.

[2] I adopt Rifkin's (2000) label for optatives without spelled-out consequents in the rest of the paper.
[3] See Biezma (in progress) for details.

c. Avi thinks that if only it would snow, things would be good.

The data in (11a) illustrates a regular embedded conditional. (11b) shows that *if only!* constructions cannot be embedded. The example in (11b) contrasts with (11c), in which an optative spelling out the consequent can be embedded. According to Rifkin, if *if only!* constructions were conditionals without consequents they should behave like regular conditionals, but they don't.

Rifkin's (2000) observations regarding embeddability actually lend support for the view presented above according to which *if only!* constructions do not denote propositions. This is the reason why they cannot be embedded in the same way as optatives in which the consequent is spelled out, which do denote propositions. The predicate *think* takes a proposition as argument, and *if only!* constructions are not of the right type to instantiate this argument.

3.2 Conjunction

Rifkin (2000) claims that if *if only!* constructions were conditionals, they should behave as conditionals across the board, and signals (12) as a counterexample.

(12) a. *If only Sue had money and if she had time, she would ski Mt. McKinley
b. *If Sue had money, she would ski Mt. McKinley, and if only she had money
c. If Sue had money, things would be good, and if she had time, she could ski Mt. McKinley (Rifkin 2000: ex. (31), (33) and (32))

Rifkin (2000) uses the data in (12) to argue that *if only!* constructions do not behave like regular antecedents of conditionals with respect to coordination. In principle we could conjoin two conditionals without *only*, (12c), but we cannot conjoin one with *only* and one without *only*, (12a) and (12b).

However, Rifkin himself points out that it is possible to conjoin two antecedents with *only*.

(13) I can't believe the picnic went so poorly!
a. If only Meg had brought a corkscrew and if only Jim had made a decent salad
b. If Meg had only brought a corkscrew and if Jim had only made a decent salad (Rifkin 2000: footnote 5, ex. (iv))

Rifkin's (2000) observations regarding coordination also provide support for the view according to which *if only!* constructions are properties of propositions. The contrast between (12a), (12b) and (13) is perfectly explained once

we consider that *if only!* constructions are properties of propositions and not propositions. The ungrammaticality of (12a) and (12b) is explained by the general impossibility of conjoining two objects of different semantic types (propositions, in the case of regular conditionals, and properties of propositions in the case of *if only!* constructions). This problem does not arise in (12c), since the two conjuncts are regular conditionals (and hence of the same type), and does not arise either in (13), where we have two *if only!* optatives conjoined.

3.3 Recovering the Consequent

Even though *if only!* constructions denote properties of propositions, they are used in contexts in which it is possible to recover a consequent, thus supporting the claim that they are conditionals. Example (14), where B's response shows that B has worked out the silent constituent in A's statement, illustrates this:

(14) A: If only I were taller.
B: Then your desires wouldn't have become true either.[4]

(14) illustrates that we process A's statement as giving sufficient conditions for a desired consequence to be brought about. After the utterance of an *if only!*, we accommodate a consequent. In the most general case, as in (14), such consequent is merely that the consequences of the antecedent being true are desired.

The fact that we can take B to be contradicting A's claim is important because B's claim is itself an overt conditional. The proform in B's statement provides the antecedent for the modal 'would'. In this context, it picks out the same antecedent as the one in A's statement. What follows in B's claim is the negation of the implicit consequent in A's claim, and thus we understand that B is disagreeing with A.[5] The shape of B's disagreement provides support for the view that upon hearing A's utterance, we process a conditionalized claim.

3.4 Summary and Further Data

In this section we have seen arguments that support the view that *if only!* constructions are conditionals and we have proposed that in these cases the consequent is a silent pronoun that is abstracted over to generate a property of propositions. With these ingredients we have been able to review Rifkin's (2000) original arguments and show that the data does not actually argue against a view of *if only!* constructions as conditionals. There are further arguments that can be provided to support the view that conditionals and optatives have the same underlying logical form (contra Rifkin 2000). These include the fact that

[4] I thank a Sinn und Bedeutung 15 anonymous reviewer for this data.

[5] B's utterance form is very telling since it is *if* $\alpha \Rightarrow \neg\beta$, the negation of the conditional statement.

counterfactuality is not obligatory in optatives, the fact that the same questions follow up conditionals and optatives, and the behavior of stacked antecedents. This discussion cannot be included for reasons of space (see Biezma in progress).

4 Reversed Topicality

In this section, we turn to the issue of why the consequent can remain silent in *if only!* constructions and take the first steps towards explaining desirability. It has been argued in the literature that the antecedents of conditionals are topics (Haiman 1978).[6] In the kind of regular conditionals that interest us here, the antecedent is an *aboutness* topic (Reinhart 1981).[7] When the conditionals are optatives, however, topicality is reversed. Since in optatives the focus adverb scopes and associates with the antecedent proposition, α, it is the antecedent proposition that is the focus. In these structures, the consequent, β, is now the topic. Recall that it is crucial for optativity that the focus adverb scopes and associates with the entire antecedent proposition. It is this that allows the (sentence level) information structure to be reversed in this type of conditional (we can also have focused elements in topic constituents, as in (6b) above, while the constituent itself remains the sentence topic).

The fact that the consequent in optatives is the topic, thus treated as discourse old, explains why it can remain silent. The possibility of not spelling out the consequent in optative conditionals is the result of *topic drop* (and this also explains why speakers actually prefer not to spell out the consequent).[8]

The presence of focus adverbs in optatives plays a crucial role in explaining the reversal in topicality. So far we have only considered optatives containing *only* in the antecedent, but optativity can arise with other adverbs too:[9]

(15) a. English
If *at least* I had been taller, I would have played in the NBA.

b. Spanish
Si (*tan*) *siquiera* / *tan sólo* hubiera sido más alto, habría
if (as) least as only had been more tall would have

[6] Indeed, antecedents of conditionals can constitute topics of different kinds. See Ebert, Endriss & Hinterwimmer (2008) a.o.

[7] See Biezma (in progress) for arguments on this respect.

[8] Notice that in regular conditionals, in which the antecedent is the topic, the antecedent can remain silent (see Kasper 1992). This is the opposite of what we find in optatives, since in optatives information structure is reversed.

[9] Below there is data from English, Spanish and German. My account is meant to explain the case of English and Spanish. Further research would be needed to discuss the German data.

jugado en la NBA.
played in the NBA

c. German (optatives are preferred without a spelled-out consequent)
? Wenn er nur/ mal/ doch hier wäre, würden wir Fisch essen.
if he PRT PRT PRT *here be.subj would we fish eat*
√ Wenn er nur/ mal/ doch hier wäre.
if he PRT PRT PRT *here be.subj*

What about desirability? Where does this come from? The data in (15) shows that there is a range of focus adverbs whose presence in the conditional antecedent brings about desirability, (with the constraints in §2). Given that on the surface, optatives differ from conditionals only regarding the presence of a focus adverb in the antecedent, but do not depend on the semantics of that particular focus adverb (there are several that do the trick), desirability needs to be derived from the mere presence of a focus adverb, not from its truth conditions. In what follows I argue that desirability arises from the interaction between the types of interpretations associated with focus adverbs and the Immediate Question Under Discussion.

5 Deriving Desirability

In this section we will finally tackle the issue of how desirability arises in optatives. We have reached the following important conclusions: (i) in optatives a focus adverb scopes over and associates with a proposition, §2; (ii) optatives are conditionals that spell out the antecedent, §3; (iii) information structure in optative conditionals is reversed with respect to regular conditionals, §4. We will now bring these ingredients together to argue that desirability in optatives arises because the focus adverb appeals to a scale setting up discourse licensing conditions such that the question under discussion can only be a *goal oriented* question. Desirability is analyzed as an implicature arising from the discourse given an (implicit) *goal oriented* question.[10]

To reach this conclusion I proceed by first giving a brief overview of Roberts's (1996) discourse model, §5.1. Then I discuss the questions under discussion that license optatives, §5.2. Afterwards I establish a link with the scales in optatives, §5.3. Finally I show how desirability is derived, §5.4.

[10] I am using the term *goal oriented* in a very broad sense. *Goal oriented* is meant to indicate that the question inquires about how to bring about the desired state of affairs, without implying agentivity.

5.1 Topicality and the IQuD

Roberts' (1996) theory of discourse is devoted to the recognition of the interlocutor's intentions in understanding the meaning of the utterance. Roberts provides a framework for discourse as a sequence of intentional actions structured with a given goal. Following Stalnaker, Roberts considers that the main goal of a discourse is the communal inquiry to discover what the actual world is like. During discourse, the participants' goal is to reduce the context set (a set of possible worlds) characterized by the Common Ground (CG).

Roberts takes questions to be the obvious counterpart of an inquiry and uses them as the formal objects reflecting interlocutor's goals. In Roberts' system, we can track the speaker's intentions by assuming that every utterance is either an answer (*pay-off move*) to an (implicit) question that the speaker accepts to address (the *immediate question under discussion* (IQuD)), or a question itself (*set-up move*). Assertions are pay-off moves because they choose between the alternatives proffered by a set up move. In this system the interpretation of every move involves two aspects: (i) the presupposed content, which constrains the contexts in which an utterance can be made, and (ii) the proffered content, which corresponds with what is asserted (in assertions) and the non-presupposed content of questions and commands.

Besides recognizing that the primary goal of every discourse is a communal inquiry, Roberts also recognizes the existence of more particular goals, *domain goals*. These particular goals are ultimately what lies behind the type of conversational inquiry conducted by the speaker. In the next section I explore what are the domain goals behind the utterance of an optative (i.e. the IQuD).

5.2 Mention-Some and the IQuDs in Optatives

In this section we will discuss the role of optatives in the discourse. Our goal is to identify the IQuDs that can be answered (*paid off*) with an optative. This is important because my objective is to link desirability in optatives to the IQuD. Let us start by noting that, in general, in answers we find focus on the elements that are under question, (16).

(16) A: What did Lauren buy?
B: Lauren bought [$_F$ BANANAS]

Even if B's utterance is not preceded by an explicit question, we can assume, given the structural characteristics of B's utterance (syntax and intonation), that the utterance is answering the question *what did Lauren buy?*. This follows from the fact that the question under discussion has to be congruent with the utterance. So, in order to find out the IQuD in optatives, we first need to

understand the semantics of the conditional, since the implicit question has to be congruent with this too. A conditional *if* α, β claims (roughly) that *in the most similar worlds to the actual world in which* α *is true,* β *is true* (*à la* Lewis-Stalnaker). With this semantics in hand, and considering the information structure of regular conditionals as discussed above (α is the topic), the IQuD when a regular conditional is uttered would be as in (17).

(17) What does α bring about? *or* What would α have brought about?

The conditional uttered as answer to the question in (17) provides the answer via the consequent, β, which bears focus.

(18) A: What would happen after the fall of the dictatorial Government?
B: If the Government fell, a democratic system would be established.

The consequent proposition, *a democratic system is established*, is the answer.

As argued above, however, in optatives (*if only* α, β) topicality is reversed and β does not bear focus. The sentence focus is α, the antecedent, whereas β, the consequent, is now the topic. Given this, and considering the semantics of conditionals, I claim that the (implicit) IQuD for optatives is (19).

(19) How do we bring β about? or How would we have brought β about?

The IQuD when an optative is uttered asks what are sufficient conditions to bring about the consequent (the topic).

Notice that the questions in (19) are a special kind of question. They are *goal oriented* questions. We understand that the speaker wants to know about the *best* way to bring about β. In the case of *goal oriented* questions, we do not ask about all the alternatives that bring about the truth of the embedded proposition (β), but about the best alternative that the addressee is aware of.

The questions in (19) have another important characteristic, they imply that the proposition embedded in the question is desired by the speaker. To see that this is so, let us consider the questions in (20).

(20) a. How do I get to the supermarket?
b. How do I get to play in the NBA?
c. How do I get to die?

The question in (20a) implies that the questioner wants to get to the supermarket and asks about the best way to get there that the addressee is aware of, (21).

(21) John is walking on the street and John asks a passer-by a question.
John: How would I get to the supermarket?
Bill: Walk south and turn right on the next street.

If after Bill's directions John starts walking north, Bill would be perplexed, since he would wonder why he is going in the opposite direction to that of the supermarket. He would be even tempted to call him out and indicate that he is just walking opposite to what he indicated, south is in the other direction. This is because John's utterance implied that he wants to go to the supermarket. The same strategy would show that in (20b) it is implied that the speaker wants to play in the NBA. And (20c) is odd in most contexts because it implies that the speaker wants to die and that is an odd desire to have.

If the IQuD when an optative is uttered is a *goal oriented* question, this would provide us with an explanation for why we understand that optatives convey the desirability of the consequent: the IQuD asks how to bring the consequent about and implicates that the consequent is desired. However, we still need to provide arguments to support the claim that the IQuD addressed by an optative is of the kind in (19), i.e. *goal oriented*.

Notice that the claim that it is *goal oriented* questions that license optatives is not trivial. If we just consider the semantics of conditionals and their information structure, other types of questions may be expected to serve as IQuDs leading to optatives. Paying attention only to the semantics of conditionals and the reversal in information structure, one could also argue that (22) could serve as an IQuD licensing an optative answer.

(22) What are the circumstances that would bring about β?

Given (22), a conditional in which the antecedent is the sentence focus would be an appropriate answer, and this is exactly what we find in optatives given the presence of a focus adverb. But, of course, if the IQuD were something like (22), we would not explain desirability in optatives. (22) is not a *goal oriented* question and we do not understand that the embedded proposition is desired.

Why can't (22) be the IQuD for an optative? The important difference between the questions in (19) (*goal oriented*) and questions like (22) is that they privilege different readings. The questions in (19) privilege a *mention-some* reading, whereas in (22) a *mention-all* reading is prominent.[11] In the *mention-some* readings, the answerhood conditions for a question require that the answer meet the questioner's goals. The relevant answer is then the one

[11] How to account for these two readings in a theory of questions is a debate far from settled and beyond the scope of this paper.

indicating the best alternative for achieving the goal (*mention-some* questions are *goal oriented* questions). It has been argued that some questions are specialized for *mention-some* readings (e.g. Asher & Lascarides 1998) argue that *how* and *where* questions give rise to a *mention-some* reading in most of the cases). In what follows I argue that the IQuD in optatives has to be a question with a *mention-some* reading. Since such questions are typically *goal oriented* questions this explains the desirability effects in optatives. In my explanation I will appeal to the semantics of focus particles present in optatives. In the next sections I will argue that certain aspects of the semantics of the focus adverbs in optatives are crucial in establishing the IQuD addressed by an optative. In particular, I will appeal to the fact that these adverbs are scalar.

5.3 The Scale in Optatives

In this paper I adopt Beaver & Clark (2008) analysis of *conventionally focus sensitive* expressions (like *only* and *at least*). This analysis argues that such expressions encode a dependence on the IQuD. As these authors point out, their proposal is not the first proposal claiming that there is a relation between focus sensitive expressions and the IQuD. Other authors already established such link with the discourse topic or the IQuD (von Fintel 1994; Roberts 1996). However, Beaver & Clark (2008) go a step further and claim that this relationship is encoded in the meaning of the expressions and that these *must* comment on the IQuD. In what follows I focus on *only* and conditional optatives containing this adverb. According to Beaver & Clark (2008), "the function of exclusives like *only* is to say that the strongest true answer to the IQuD is weaker than some expected answer." Thus, utterances containing *only* trigger a partial rank of alternatives (the possible answers) ordered according to a contextually provided scale (see Beaver & Clark 2008 for details).[12] According to these authors, utterances containing *only* carry the presupposition that "the strongest true alternatives in the IQuD are *at least* as strong as the prejacent",[13] and that the descriptive content of utterances with exclusives indicates that "the strongest true alternatives in the IQuD are *at most* as strong as the prejacent". With the previous background in hand, let us see now how *only* works in optatives. Consider the optative in (23).

(23) John had a job interview this morning. He drove there but his car broke down. John called Tom, a mechanic friend, but by the time he got the car running it was too late for John to make it.

[12] The ordered alternatives do not need to logically entail alternatives lower in the scale.

[13] The prejacent of an utterance containing *only* is the proposition denotated by the sentence in which the exclusive is not present.

Tom:If *only* I had arrived earlier

In order to make use of Beaver & Clark's (2008) proposal, we need to adapt it to the case of conditionals. The optative uttered by Tom is "If only I had arrived earlier, John would have gotten to his interview on time". With the assumption that the antecedent proposition is focused, the prejacent itself is X. In the context of the optative conditional, we obtain (24):

(24) If X, John would have gotten to his interview on time.
(Where X= Tom arrives on time and repairs John's car)

The alternative values for X are presented in (25). The alternatives in (25) are ordered according to a scale provided by what could intuitively be thought of as *likelihood* (factors like the degree of deviation from the history of the actual world, the effort required to bring about the truth of the proposition, and plausibility can all play a role here). The strongest alternatives are the most likely ones, while the weakest alternatives are the ones that require more effort, are more implausible given the history of the world, etc.

(25)

$+(likely)$	John drove his car more carefully
	Tom arrived earlier and fixed the car
	Tom fixed the car faster
$-(likely)$	John went out and bought a new car

In (25) we find a variety of alternatives. The order is provided by likelihood and the amount of effort required to bring each about. Suppose that John is actually a careful driver and Tom is habitually late. It would have been more likely/easier for John to drive even more carefully than he actually did than for Tom to arrive on time. John is actually rather poor, so the amount of effort it would have taken for him to buy a new car, and the unlikelihood of that happening, is much greater than for the alternative of Tom arriving on time.

I will follow Beaver & Clark (2008) with respect to the presuppositions and descriptive content associated with *only*. Since we are dealing with alternatives that are antecedents of (counterfactual) conditionals, we cannot ask for the strongest true alternative. Instead, in the context of a conditional, we will look for the strongest sufficient alternative. When Tom utters the optative in (23), he presupposes that the strongest sufficient alternatives are at least as strong as the antecedent proposition. The descriptive content associated with Tom's claim is that the strongest sufficient alternatives are at most as strong as the antecedent.

Let us examine the predictions made by this proposal with respect to (23). Tom's utterance carries the presupposition that the sufficient alternatives are at least as strong as the chosen alternative. This is true, since the only other suffi-

cient alternative (that Tom fixed the car more quickly) is as strong as the chosen alternative (the other sufficient alternatives are weaker). The descriptive content associated with Tom's utterance is that the strongest sufficient alternatives are at most as strong as the chosen alternative. This is true given our scale, since the stronger alternatives are not sufficient (the car breaking down had nothing to do with John's driving style).

The proposal above makes correct predictions regarding unacceptable optatives in this context. Imagine that in the scenario above, Tom had uttered *If only you had driven more carefully!*. This would have been deviant in the context, since driving more carefully would not have had any useful consequences. We would be surprised by Tom's utterance. The deviancy is predicted. The descriptive content associated with such a claim would have been false. This is not the strongest sufficient alternative. Indeed, this is not a sufficient alternative at all. With the assumption (following Beaver & Clark 2008) that *only* marks the strongest sufficient condition, this optative is predicted to be deviant.

Let us turn now to another deviant optative. Suppose that in the scenario above, Tom had uttered *If only you had bought another car*. This optative would also have been deviant. John would have felt that Tom's utterance was a bit exaggerated. This is also predicted by the proposal above. The presuppositions associated with Tom's utterance would not be respected. There are sufficient alternatives that are stronger than the chosen alternative. Again, the proposal predicts that this optative is deviant.

The role of *only* in an optative is to signal the position that the antecedent proposition occupies on a scale. We have followed Beaver & Clark (2008) with respect to the presuppositions and descriptive content associated with *only*. Given that our interest lies in *only* in the antecedent of conditionals, we have not relativized the scale to truth, but to the sufficiency of the proposition to bring about the consequent. The scales we have adopted order the alternatives in terms of *likelihood*, with the most likely being considered stronger. This has the result that propositions that are harder to bring about, or wildly implausible, are characterized as weaker. This may appear rather unintuitive, but, as we have seen, this scale fits our intuitions regarding the acceptability of optatives.

We have not discussed Beaver & Clark's (2008) claim that *only* weakens salient or natural expectations. A discussion of this point remains for future work. It is worth noting that the case of conditionals is different from the case of assertions discussed in Beaver & Clark (2008). It is unclear how expectations would work in the antecedent of (counterfactual) conditionals. Notice that in Beaver & Clark's (2008) example *Brad only got a Soames*, getting a Soames is understood as being 'less' than was expected/hoped for. However, in the context of a conditional *If only Brady had gotten a Soames!* the judgment

disappears. Expectations seem to work differently in the case of conditionals, but this discussion lies outside the scope of the current work.

An optative provides the best/strongest alternative that a speaker knows would bring about the desired consequent. If an optative is considered a pay-off move, it requires an IQuD that asks for the best strongest alternative that brings about the consequent. These are *goal oriented /mention-some* questions.

5.4 Desirability Derived!

When uttering an optative the speaker indicates that he is answering a *mention-some/goal oriented* question. This is because of the congruence requirement between the optative and the IQuD. Optatives require a IQuD that asks about the *best* alternative amongst the set, and *mention-some/goal oriented* questions do exactly that. Since only *mention-some/goal oriented* questions can license optatives and these questions imply that the embedded proposition[14] is desired, we understand that the consequent in optatives is desired.

6 Conclusion

In this paper I have proposed an analysis of optatives that draws heavily on the interaction between syntax, semantics, pragmatics and discourse to explain the meaning of the construction. The focus of the paper has been the expression of desirability in optatives. I have shown that the modal meanings associated with desires can be derived pragmatically. There isn't a "desirability modal" in optatives. There is, however, a focus adverb that appeals to ordered alternatives and invokes a question under discussion with desirability implicatures.

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[14] The embedded proposition in the question is also the (implicit) consequent in the optative conditional.

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