Optativity in English and Other Languages*

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1 Overview

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2 Introduction to Optatives (based on Rifkin (2000))

We assume optatives to be constructions that express a wish without an explicit *wish* or *want* lexical item.
One recipe for optatives:

- Garden-variety counterfactual conditional, plus

- *only*

Conditional:

(1)   If John is home, he is watching TV.

Counterfactual conditional:

(2)   If John were home, he'd be watching TV.[1]

      Conveys:
          If John is home, he is watching TV.
          It is not the case that John is home.
          It is not the case that John is watching TV.

To make an optative, take a counterfactual conditional and add *only*:

(3)   a.   If I was rich (now) I would have a Porsche
      b.   If only I was rich (now) I would have a Porsche

(4)   a.   If I had been rich (when I was a kid) I would have had a Porsche
      b.   If only I had been rich (when I was a kid) I would have had a Porsche

In detail:

(5)   If only I was rich (now), I would have a Porsche.

      Conveys:
          If I am rich, then I have a Porsche.
          I am not rich.
          I don't have a Porsche.
          I want to have a Porsche.
          Being rich is a (good?) way of getting a Porsche.
          ? I want to be rich.

The counterfactual morphology in (5) parallels the counterfactual morphology in wishes:

(6)   a.   I wish I was rich (now).
      b.   I wish I had been rich (when I was a kid).

Unlike regular conditionals, optatives do not require a consequent:

(7)   a.   *If I was rich.
      b.   If only I was rich!

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[1]English speakers vary as to whether they prefer *were* (subjunctive) or *was* in counterfactual conditionals and optatives.

Optativity in *if only* optatives cannot be turned off:

(8)   a. #If only I had been run over by that bus (...I would have died right there and
          then)[2]
       b. #If only my son had been killed in 9-11 (...we would have had to bury him)
       c. #If only John had a speech impediment (...he would need speech therapy)

2.1   Compositionality Puzzle

The compositionality puzzle: How do you get optativity out of *if* plus *only*? Consider a
common (simplified) analysis of *only*:

(9)   Only John came.

       Presupposes: John came.

       Asserts: It is not the case that anyone other than John came.

With *if only* optatives this yields:

(10)   If only I was rich, I would have a Porsche.

       Presupposes: I was rich (alternatively "Counterfactually I am rich")

       Asserts: It is not the case that if I am not rich, I have a Porsche.

There is no obvious way to combine the ingredients of an *if only* optative to derive a wish
reading. But the fact that the combination of *if* and *only* in many languages forms optatives
suggests that there should be a compositional account of *if only* optatives.

2.2   Further Properties

2.2.1   What is desired

In *if only p, q* optatives q must be desired. A non-desired q results in oddness:

(11)   #If only I had a boat, I would have a boating license.   (Rifkin (2000), (51))

It is not clear whether p itself is desired or not. We will remain agnostic on this issue.[3]

2.2.2   Embedding properties

When an optative is not embedded, the speaker must be the wisher:

(12)   #If only John had prepared better, he would have gotten the job offer instead of me.

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[2]Here and later we use the pound mark (#) to indicate pragmatic oddness of a certain sort: desiring
things that are normally taken to be not desired.

[3]For the sake of simplicity, we will ignore this question below except where it is crucial.

When an *if only p, q* optative is embedded, the higher subject (and not the speaker) is the wisher:

(13)   a.   John is convinced that if only he had pulled the trigger in time, he would have killed me.

          b. #John is convinced that if only I had pulled the trigger in time, I would have killed him.

3   The Wish in Optatives: A Presupposition

As discussed above, there are at least two components to the meaning of an *if only p, q* optative:

1. someone wants q to hold

2. if p, q

We claim that the wish part of the meaning is *presupposed*, rather than asserted. Two types of arguments are provided:

1. Presupposition tests.

2. Projection properties.

3.1   Presupposition Tests

We will apply two tests for presupposition:

1. *Hey, wait a minute!* test (von Fintel (2003))

2. *What's more. . .* test (von Fintel (2003), citing Percus (1998) lecture notes)

3.1.1   *Hey, wait a minute!* test

A presupposition can be questioned with *Hey, wait a minute!*, but an assertion cannot. For example, (14) asserts that Sam broke the typewriter, and presupposes that someone did:

(14)   It was Sam who broke the typewriter.

We can use the *Hey, wait a minute!* test to confirm this:

(15)   **Speaker A:** It was Sam who broke the typewriter.

          Speaker B: Hey, wait a minute! I didn't know that the typewriter was broken.

          Speaker B: # Hey, wait a minute! I didn't know that Sam broke the typewriter.

Intuitively, it is OK to use, "Hey, wait a minute!" to question a background assumption, but not OK to question the core claim this way. Applying this test to *if only p, q* optatives:

(16)   **Speaker A:** If only I were rich, I would have a Porsche.

       Speaker B: Hey, wait a minute! I didn't know you wanted a Porsche.

       Speaker B: Hey, wait a minute! I didn't know you wanted to be rich and have a Porsche.

       Speaker B: # Hey, wait a minute! I didn't know that if you were rich, you would have a Porsche.

This is evidence that in an *if only p, q* optative, the wish is part of the presupposition, while the conditional relationship is part of the assertion.

3.1.2 *What's more. . .* test

The *What's more. . .* test says that it's inappropriate to expand on a previous statement by adding a presupposition to it. It should be fine, however, to assert something and follow it with a statement that presupposes the first assertion:

(17)   a. #Sam broke the typewriter. What's more, it was Sam who broke the typewriter.
      b.   The typewriter was broken. What's more, it was Sam who broke the typewriter.

Intuitively, adding a presupposition does not add any at-issue content, and it's infelicitous to "add" to an assertion without adding at-issue content. Applying this test to optatives:

(18)   a. #If I were rich, I would have a Porsche. What's more, if only I was rich, I would have a Porsche.
      b.   I want a Porsche. What's more, if only I was rich, I would have a Porsche.

This is further evidence that the wishing is presupposed, while the conditional statement is asserted.

3.2 Projection Properties

Presuppositions embedded under attitude predicates (typically) project, so that (19) presupposes that every student has had their typewriter broken:

(19)   Every student$_i$ is convinced that it was Mary who broke his$_i$ typewriter.

Now, consider an embedded optative:[4]

(20)   Every student$_i$ is convinced that if only he$_i$ was rich, he$_i$'d have a Porsche.

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[4]Thanks to Kai von Fintel for suggesting this example.

If the wish is part of the presupposition, we get the correct meaning for (20):

(21)   **Presupposition:** Every student$_i$ wishes that (he$_i$ were rich and) he$_i$ had a Porsche.

Assertion: Every student$_i$ is convinced that if he$_i$ were rich, he$_i$'d have a Porsche.

If the wish were part of the entailment, the meaning we'd get would be incorrect:

(22)   **Assertion:** Every student$_i$ is convinced that he$_i$ wishes that (he$_i$ were rich and) he$_i$ had a Porsche. Every student$_i$ is convinced that if he$_i$ were rich, he$_i$'d have a Porsche.

Thus the wishing component has the projection properties of a presupposition, not an entailment.

4   Cross-linguistic observations

In English *only* has at least two meanings (van Rooy (2002)):

(23)   a.   I only have a six. (in a game where high card wins)
           Meaning: The best card among those I have is a six.
       b.   I only have a six. (holding one card while looking for the other 51)
           Meaning: I have one card and it is a six.

(24)   a.   John only met Bono. (when bragging about which celebrities we know)
           Meaning: The most famous person John had ever met was Bono.
       b.   John only met Bono. (reporting on what happened at "meet the celebrities party")
           Meaning: John met one person at a party. That person was Bono.

The *only* in the (a) examples is sometimes called "scalar only," or "pragmatic only". Some contexts only allow the pragmatic *only* (Cleo Condoravdi, p.c. to Sabine Iatridou):

(25)   a.   My friend is coming from LA to Boston to see me. She is driving across the country. She calls me and I ask her, "You'll be here soon, right?" And she goes, "No, I won't. I am ONLY in Chicago."
       b.   A carpenter is supposed to fix my floor today. The plan was for her to get here at 8 AM. She is going to be late. I report the facts to my husband with, "She is ONLY arriving at 11." (meaning "she is arriving late")

Not all languages have the pragmatic *only*. While the English, Italian, and Hebrew *only* allow pragmatic readings, Arabic, Spanish, and Japanese *only* do not.

This difference correlates well with availability of *if only* optatives:

Language	only	Scalar?	If-only?	OPT Strategy
Arabic	*ghi(R)*	✗	✓	
Armenian	*mijajn*	yes/no	?	special word
English	*only*	✓	✓	
	just	?	✗	
French	*seulement*	✓	✓	
German	*erst*	✓	✗	
	nur	✗	✓	
	bloss	✗	?	
Greek		✗	✗	special word
Hebrew	*rak*	✓	✓	
Irish	no only?			
Italian	*solo*	✓	✓	special word
Japanese	*dake*	✗	✗	special word
Korean	*ocik*	✗	✓	
	man			
Kutchi Gujarati	*khali*	yes/no	✓	
Romanian	*numay*	✓	✓	
Russian	*tol'ko*	✓	✓	
	vsego	✓	✗	
Spanish	*solo*	✗	✗	
Vietnamese	*chỉ*[?]	✗	✗	special C
	moi	✓	✗	

Other strategies that languages have for expressing optativity:

- Conditional inversion (Russian)

- Intonation (Russian, Italian)

- Special word (Armenian, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Romanian)

  - Complementizer (Vietnamese)

5 Embedding Under Negative Elements

As seen previously, *if only* optatives can be embedded under attitude verbs:

(26)   a.   John believes that if only it rained tomorrow, his roses would bloom.
       b.   John thinks that if only it rained tomorrow, his roses would bloom.

But negating the sentences in (26) makes them sound odd:

(27)   a. ??John doesn't believe that if only it rained tomorrow, his roses would bloom.
        b. ??John doesn't think that if only it rained tomorrow, his roses would bloom.

It is also odd to embed optatives under "negative" attitude predicates:

(28)   a. ??John denies that if only it rained tomorrow, his roses would bloom.
        b. ??John doubts that if only it rained tomorrow, his roses would bloom.

The same generalization hold for "positive" vs. "negative" probability terms.

(29)   a.   It's (?? un)likely that if only it rained tomorrow, my roses would bloom.
        b.   It's (?? im)probable that if only it rained tomorrow, my roses would bloom.
        c. ??It is not the case that if only it rained tomorrow, my roses would bloom.

Note that regular counterfactual conditionals under negation are fine:

(30)   a.   John doesn't believe that if it rained tomorrow, his roses would bloom.
        b.   John doubts that if it rained tomorrow, his roses would bloom.

There is also no problem with embedding wishes under negation:

(31)   a.   John denies that he wishes his roses would bloom.
        b.   It's unlikely that John wishes that it would rain tomorrow and his roses would
              bloom.

6   Future Directions

6.1   Embedding Under Negative Elements

Why can't optatives be embedded under *doesn't think*, *deny*, *unlikely*, etc.? Observe that presuppositions generally project when embedded under these predicates. All the examples in (32) presuppose that someone broke the typewriter:

(32)   a.   John doesn't think that it was Sam who broke the typewriter.
        b.   John denies that it was Sam who broke the typewriter.
        c.   It's unlikely it was Sam who broke the typewriter.

We've seen that *if only p, q* presupposes the wishing, and it seems to assert the conditional relationship. So currently we have:

(33)   John doubts that if only it rained tomorrow, his roses would bloom.

        Presupposition: John wants for his roses to bloom.

        Assertion: John doubts that if it rained tomorrow, his roses would bloom.

There is nothing incoherent about the meaning in (33). But suppose *if only p, q* carried not just the wishing presupposition, but two presuppositions:

(34)   Where x is the speaker in unembedded contexts and the higher subject in embedded contexts. . .

    Presuppositions:
        x wishes for q
        x believes that $p \rightarrow q$

    Assertion:
        $p \rightarrow q$

In unembedded contexts and positive embedded contexts, the presupposition and assertion amount to the same thing:

(35)   If only it rained tomorrow, my roses would bloom.

    Presuppositions:
        I wish for my roses to bloom.
        I believe that if it rained tomorrow, my roses would bloom.

    Assertion:
        If it rained tomorrow, my roses would bloom.

(36)   John believes that if only it rained tomorrow, his roses would bloom.

    Presuppositions:
        John wishes for his roses to bloom.
        John believes that if it rained tomorrow, his roses would bloom.

    Assertion:
        John believes that if it rained tomorrow, his roses would bloom.

But in a negative context where presuppositions project, the resulting meaning is incoherent:

(37)   John doubts that if only it rained tomorrow, his roses would bloom.

    Presuppositions:
        John wishes for his roses to bloom.
        John believes that if it rained tomorrow, his roses would bloom.

    Assertion:
        John doubts that if it rained tomorrow, his roses would bloom.

Note that this proposal predicts that, barring other interfering factors, embedding optatives under negative predicates that block presuppositions should be fine. Verbs of saying block presuppositions:

(38)   John didn't say that it was Sam who broke the typewriter. As all of us know, the typewriter isn't broken at all.

Therefore embedding an optative under a negative verb of saying is predicted to be coherent:

(39)   John didn't say that if only it rained tomorrow, his roses would bloom.

       Presuppositions: none projected

       Assertion: John didn't say that if it rained tomorrow, his roses would bloom.

Examples:

(40)   a.   John didn't mention that if only it rained tomorrow, his roses would bloom.
       b.   John didn't tell his girlfriend that if only it rained tomorrow, his roses would bloom.

Of course, if the hypothesis above is correct, the challenge to compositionally derive these presuppositions remains.

6.2   Deriving Wishes

Recap: The puzzle is how to derive the wish meaning compositionally. The wish meaning is a presuppositional component of *if only* optatives. We need the following additional pieces:

- The *only* that appears in *if only* does not associate with a F-marked element.

- *Only* is above the source counterfactuality in the antecedent.

- Pragmatic *only* has a "merely" presupposition (the relevant item is low on a "better than" scale (Klinedinst (2005))).

The result we get is the fact that the antecedent is counterfactual is presupposed to be low on a on a desirability scale.

6.2.1   F-marking and Alternatives

It is traditional analysis of *only* (Rooth (1985), Horn (1969)) it is assumed that (the exclusive) *only* is associated with an intonationally-marked (F-marked) constituent:

(41)   a.   Only [$_F$ John] bought vegetables. (No one else bought vegetables.)
       b.   John only bought [$_F$ vegetables]. (John bought nothing else.)
       c.   John only [$_F$ bought vegetables]. (John didn't do anything else that day.)
       d.   I only know that [$_F$ John bought vegetables]. (I don't know anything else.)

Traditional analysis (roughly):

1. The sentence without the *only* (the *prejacent*) is presupposed.

2. Derive alternative propositions by replacing the F-marked constituent with its relevant alternatives.

3. Assert that the alternative propositions not entailed by the *prejacent* are false.

Example:

(42)   Only [F John] came. (relevant alternatives for John: Mary, John, Bill)
        Presupposition:
              John came.

        Assertion:
              It is not the case that Mary came.
              It is not the case that Bill came.

6.2.2   F-marking and the *only* of *if only*

Our assumption is that pragmatic *only* also associates with a F-marked element:

(43)   a.   I only have a [F six] (in a card game)
        b.   He only knows [F Kiergaard's] writings (in a pretentiousness contest)
        c.   John only graduated from [F Cal State] (nothing better) [example due to Klinedinst (2005)]

We think that *only* in *if only* optatives does not have to associate with a F-marked element:

(44)   a.   If only I was rich, I'd have a Porsche
        b.   If only I was rich!

When it does, the F-marked element is a contrastive focus:

(45)   a.   Yes, Mary bought the vegetables. But if only [F John] had bought vegetables then we'd have fresh ones.

If these assumptions are correct, then we have a puzzle — *only* in *if only* optatives does not behave the same way as a "regular" *only*. Our hypothesis is that the F-marked element is not phonetically realized.

6.2.3 Position of *only* with respect to counterfactuality

We assume that in a counterfactual conditional there is a source of counterfactuality inside the antecedent. Since Iatridou (2000) it has been commonly assumed that tense marking in counterfactual conditionals has something to do with counterfactuality. In *if only* optatives the wish is interpreted as a current wish (not a past wish):

(46)   a.   If only I had a Porsche now!
                Conveys: I wish (now) to have a Porsche now.
        b.   If only I have had a Porsche when I was a kid!
                Conveys: I wish (now) to have had a Porsche when I was a kid.

The source of optativity scopes above tense. If it is the *only* that is responsible for the optativity source (as we will claim) then it scopes above tense. Since tense is responsible for counterfactuality, *only* scopes above counterfactuality.

6.2.4 Low on the scale

Klinedinst (2005) argues that one presupposition of *only* is that the F-marked item is low on the relevant scale:

(47)   a. #Only John, Mary, and Sue came. (when I invited John, Mary, and Sue)
        b. #I only have a queen. (in a game where high card wins)

Klinedinst (2005) also provides arguments that the pragmatic scale is always "better than." We'll assume that this is true.

6.2.5 Putting this all together

Proposal: *Only* in *if only* optative takes the source of counterfactuality in the antecedent as its focus-marked element. The counterfactuality source has two relevant options: counterfactual and non-counterfactual.

Further assumption: Counterfactual propositions are ranked low on a pragmatic scale.

Consider:

(48)   If only I was rich!

There are two relevant alternatives:

- I am rich counterfactually.

- I am rich non-counterfactually.

Again the pieces are:

- *Only* has a presupposition that the proposition as given is ranked low on the relevant scale.

- The relevant scale is a "better than" scale.

- Counterfactual propositions are ranked low.

Result: Non-counterfactual version of the antecedent is presupposed to be ranked high on a "better than" scale. If the antecedent were to be true this would be is better than bad, i.e., good.

6.2.6   Is this good enough?

Rifkin argues that the wished-for-thing must be wanted, not just good:

(49)   a.   If only I had played Kasparov to a draw, I would have won 5,000 dollars.
         b.   If only I had beaten Kasparov, I would have won 10,000 dollars.

Rifkin argues that while both situations are good, one cannot (49a) if what one really wants is (49b). We however have hard time piecing out the goodness of a particular situation from one's desire to have the situation be true in the actual world.

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