The Role of Alternative Propositions in Uses of English *At Least*[*]

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Kang, Sang-gu. (2023). The role of alternative propositions in uses of English *at least*. *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal, 31*(2), 63-79. In the literature, *at least* has been claimed to be responsible for not only focusing and invoking a pragmatic scale, but also requiring at least two propositional alternatives, one higher and the other lower on the pragmatic scale than the prejacent. This paper investigates the issue of whether both of the alternative propositions are necessary for felicitous uses of *at least*. In order to verify the presence of the alternative propositions in the context, we examine various discourse data sourced from movies. The findings suggest that the two alternative propositions are not equal in terms of their information status in the concessive use of *at least*. Specifically, the proposition lower on the pragmatic scale than the prejacent is consistently salient in the contexts of *at least*, but the proposition higher on the scale is not. The paper accordingly proposes to exclude the requirement of an alternative proposition to the prejacent higher on the pragmatic scale from the semantics of *at least*.

Key Words: alternative proposition, pragmatic scale, *at least*, presupposition, preference

1. Introduction

In the literature, English *at least* has been studied with respect to its two main uses: epistemic and concessive. Nikanishi and Rullmann (2009) uses the following sentences to illustrate them.

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(1) a. Mary has at least two children.
   b. At least Mary has two children.

The use of *at least* in (1a) indicates that the speaker of the sentence is unsure exactly how many children Mary has; all she knows is that the number is larger than 1. This interpretation owes to the scalarity inherent in number expressions.

(2), which is the same as (1a) except that it is without the particle, carries a different meaning in that the speaker is generally assumed to implicate that Mary doesn't have three or more children.

(2) Mary has two children.

Hence, the presence of *at least* in (1a) is said to suspend this implicature. This suspension of upper bounding scalar implicature is considered the hallmark of epistemic *at least*.

On the other hand, *at least* in (1b) can be interpreted as either an epistemic particle or a concessive particle. We can say that the latter interpretation is more likely because the concessive *at least* prefers the clause initial position. Once the right context is provided as in (3), the particle is clearly taken to be concessive.

(3) Mary doesn't have three children, but at least she has two children.

At least in (3) cannot be seen as an epistemic particle, because the first conjunct would cancel the scalar implicature of the second conjunct. As is shown by (1b) and (3), the use of *at least* as a concessive particle requires adequate background information for it to be felicitous. Note that epistemic *at least* does not need such information for its proper use and interpretation.

According to Baranzini and Mari (2019, p. 117), concessivity is a notion typically used for cases where the speaker concedes to the addressee that the prejacent[2] is true while not endorsing it. They present (4) as a good example of concessivity conveyed by Italian future tense marking.

(4) sarò stupida, ma mi sono laureate con il massimo dei be-fut.1sg stupid but me am

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2) I use the term for the proposition conveyed by the sentence with *at least* taken out.

graguated with the maximum of the voti. honors. 'I might be stupid, but I graduated with honors.'

The speaker of (4) apparently seems to acknowledge the truth of the proposition, 'the speaker is stupid,' but in actuality she is distancing herself from it. Applying the notion of concessivity to English *at least* underscores the view that the particle is understood as conveying the meaning of 'settle for less.' That is, the speaker of (3) does not find Mary having two children desirable, preferring the situation of Mary having three children.

To examine the workings of concessive *at least*, it is useful to think of it as a scalar focus particle. König (1991, p. 29) lays out two main components of a sentence containing a focus particle: scope and focus.

(5) a. FRED also bought a new car.
    b. Someone other than Fred bought a new car.
(6) a. Fred also bought a NEW CAR.
    b. Fred bought something other than a new car.[3]

In (5) and (6), *also* is seen as a focus particle. While (5a) carries the presupposition (5b), (6a)'s presupposition is like (6b). In both (5a) and (6a), also has the entire sentence as its scope. The difference in the presuppositions is due to the difference in the focused materials; in (5a), the focus of *also* falls on *Fred*, while the particle's focus is on *a new car* in (6a).

According to Rooth (1992), focusing yields a set of propositions. For any utterance containing a focus particle, there can be a set of entities whose membership is restricted by the context. By replacing the focused element with each of the entities, we obtain alternative propositions. In the case of (5a), supposing the domain of contextually relevant entities comprise {Fred, Ginger, Sam}, we get three alternative propositions, namely {'Fred bought a new car,' 'Ginger bought a new car,' 'Sam bought a new car'}. When (5a) is preceded by one of the latter two propositions, as in (7), the sentence is deemed felicitous, since its presupposition is met.

(7) Ginger/Sam bought a new car. FRED also bought a new one.

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3) Capitalization of Fred and new car represents their prosodic prominence in uttering the sentences.

However, if the context does not have either of the propositions as a salient piece of background information, (5a) becomes infelicitous.

In a similar fashion, with (3), we can say that the focus of *at least* is on *two children*, in due consideration of the first conjunct of the sentence. The alternative propositions will be {'Mary has one child,' 'Mary has two children,' 'Mary has three children,'...}4). Assuming at least invokes a pragmatic scale of favorability, we can say that the prejacent is ranked lower on the scale than the contextually salient proposition, 'Mary has three children,' but higher than 'Mary has one child.'

Focused materials need not be noun phrases; they can be a predicate or even a whole clause. Geurts and Nouwen (2007, p. 544) discusses the following, where the focus of the particle is the entire sentence.

(8) At least it isn't raining.

They state that the speaker of (8) considers something better than the prejacent as a possibility. They do not provide the context the sentence is uttered in, and therefore, we do not know how a particular set of relevant alternative propositions can obtain which will make (8) felicitous.

Let us examine a movie dialogue where a similar construction appears. (9) is from a restaurant scene in the movie *I'm Your Woman* (2020). The waiter brings two coffees to the table and mentions the weather, and the two patrons sitting at the table are too absorbed in their conversation to respond to it.

(9) Here you go. At least it stopped raining, right?

Here, three alternative propositions seem to be at play: 'it is raining,' 'it stopped raining,' and 'it is sunny and bright.' The three propositions will occupy the scale in that order; the first is considered the least positive, the last the most positive, and the prejacent will be positioned between the two. Note that the speaker knows that the most positive proposition is not true at the time of utterance, which makes this use of *at least* distinct from its epistemic use.

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4) Without more contextual information, we have no way of knowing exactly which propositions will be in the set.

(9) is different from (3) in an important respect. While (3) explicitly introduces an alternative proposition, the waiter's second sentence in (9) is uttered out of the blue, and hence there is no context that explicitly introduces any of the alternative propositions. Nonetheless, the use of at least is perfectly understandable, thanks to the circumstance regarding the weather. For the speaker and the addressees, how the weather was a short time ago and how it is now are salient information available. That is why even without mentioning the weather prior to the moment of the utterance, (8) is deemed felicitous.

Given the two distinct uses of *at least*, the current paper limits its discussions to the concessive use. Hence, the issue of how to treat the two uses of *at least* is beyond the scope of the paper. As we have seen so far, theories of concessive *at least* typically assume a pragmatic scale of favorability and rank the prejacent as both higher and lower than some other alternative propositions on it. This means, for concessive *at least* to be felicitous, we need *at least* two salient propositions salient in the context for the comparison, either by being explicitly mentioned as in (3), or by being actively shared by the discourse participants as relevant circumstances as in (9).

The current paper is focused on the question of whether the two alternative propositions, one higher than the prejacent on the pragmatic scale and the other lower, play equally important parts in the uses of concessive at least. To answer the question, it examines movie dialogues—like (9) above—since movies provide enough contextual information for us to see which proposition is salient and which is not. It turns out that the two alternative propositions are not equal in terms of the information status of being salient. While the proposition lower than the prejacent on the scale is robustly salient in the discourses, the one higher than the prejacent is far less available.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, I review three studies on *at least*. Section 3 discusses the information status of the two alternative propositions in some discourses taken from movies. Section 4 concludes the paper.

2. Previous Studies

Here, I survey three previous studies on *at least*, namely, Kay (1992), Grosz (2011), and Biezma (2013). In particular, I examine how, despite their different approaches, they share one common aspect of its meaning: the salience of the alternative proposition higher than the prejacent on the pragmatic scale.

2.1. Kay (1992)

Kay (1992) stresses that concessive[5] *at least* indicates "a less than maximal degree of positive evaluation" (Kay, 1992, p. 315).

(10) At least in that big trainwreck several people were saved.

He says that the prejacent of (10) is contrasted with two hypothetical events: one where no one was saved in the accident and the other where many people were saved in the accident. Note that the two events are not explicitly introduced earlier in the context. However, these events seem to arise without difficulty out of the quantity scale invoked by the lexical item several in the sentence, under the assumption that *at least* has its focus on this particular word.

If the focus of *at least* does not fall on a quantity expression, you can still get the alternative propositions if the context is set up the right way. Kay (1992) uses the following to illustrate this point (Kay, 1992, p. 317).

(11) a. #This hotel's quiet, and at least it's comfortable.
    b. This hotel's noisy, but at least it's comfortable.

He argues that the reason (11a) is infelicitous is that since the prejacent is about a situation which is better than a contextually relevant situation, i.e., 'this hotel is noisy and/or uncomfortable,' it does not allow a contextually relevant situation which is better than that to obtain. (11b) is felicitous because it does allow for the comparison both between the prejacent and an inferior alternative, i.e., 'this hotel is noisy and uncomfortable,' and between that and a superior alternative, i.e., 'this hotel is quiet and comfortable.' He claims that, for concessive *at least*, "there are two context propositions required (either explicitly stated or furnished by pragmatic accomodation [sic]): one representing a less desirable event than the one described and one representing a more desirable event" (Kay, 1992, p. 318).

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5) Kay uses the term "evaluative" instead of "concessive."

2.2. Grosz (2011)

In his study of optative particles, Grosz (2011, p. 575) lays out the denotation of *at least* used in (6) in (7). (8) defines the scale involved.

(12) Well, at least you won something!

(13) a. $\| \text{AT LEAST}_{(concessive)} \|^{g,c} = \lambda S. \lambda C. \lambda p$:

    b. S is a bouletic ordering $\wedge$ BOULETIC

    c. $\exists r \in g(C) \, [r >_S p] \, \wedge$ NOT THE BEST

    d. $\exists q \in g(C) \, [p >_S q]$.   NOT THE WORST

    e. p   IDENTITY

(14) a. A scale S is defined as a set of ordered pairs of propositions ($S \subseteq \wp(W) \times \wp(W)$).

    b. For any S, I use $p_1 >_S p_2$ to mean 'p1 is strictly higher than p2 on S'.

Grosz makes it clear through (13e) that *at least* does not add to the truth conditions of the sentence it has its scope over. Of particular importance to our discussion is (13c) and (13d), where C is a set of contextually salient propositions. They say that *at least* "presupposes that there is a contextually salient proposition that is more preferable than the modified proposition p...as well as a contextually salient proposition that is less preferable" (Grosz, 2011, p. 575). Note that Grosz uses the term "presupposition" to ensure that the two propositions obtain in the context. This means that the context must provide for propositions like 'you won nothing' and 'you won the prize that you wanted to win,' so that they can contrast with the prejacent of (12).

2.3. Biezma (2013)

Biezma (2013) offers a univocal approach to *at least*; she proposes that epistemic *at least* and concessive *at least* are in fact semantically one and the same, and that the distinction arises from pragmatic considerations. She takes examples from Nakanish & Rullmann (2009) to discuss how lexical scalarity helps retrieve alternative propositions and arrange them on a pragmatic scale invoked by *at least* (Biezma, 2013, p. 12).

(15) Mary didn't win a gold medal, but at least she won a silver medal.

Assuming that the focus of *at least* is on *silver medal*, two alternative propositions easily obtain due to the scalarity inherent in the nominal expression: 'Mary won a bronze medal' and 'Mary won a gold medal.' These propositions will occupy the pragmatic scale of preference, the former lower than the latter, and the prejacent will be positioned between them. The context makes it clear that the latter is untrue.

Biezma (2013, p. 15) turns to other cases of concessive *at least* where such lexical scalarity is not at work, including the following. John is talking to Alice, a journalist who has been covering the swimming matches at the Beijing Olympics.

(16) John: The USA swim team did very badly in the Olympics, didn't it?
   Alice: At least Phelps won 8 gold medals.

Although having the same construction as the second clause of (15), Alice's utterance does not have *gold medals* focused. In fact, the concessive use of *at least* works only if its focus is on the entire sentence, not on *gold medals*. The discourse requires the relevant alternative propositions to be quite unlike those for (15). The following (Biezma, 2013, p. 15) shows some exemplary propositions that can be retrieved from the particular discourse.

(17) nobody won any medal < Phelps won 8 medals < Phelps won 5 medals + other team members performed well < all team members performed well

This arrangement makes sure that 'Phelps won 8 medals' stands somewhere between other alternative propositions, while those above it on the scale are considered not true.

Biezma stresses the important role of questions or demands pertaining to the discourse at hand in retrieving relevant alternative propositions and adopts Roberts's (1996) discourse model in her proposal. The following is the denotation of *at least*. It is divided into (18a) and (18b) to handle the lexically induced scale separately from the cases where the whole sentence is focused.

(18) a. Let α be a proposition, and $[\alpha]A,i$ the set of alternatives of α ordered according to $\leq i$, where $\leq i$ is a contextually salient order of alternatives and $\forall \gamma \in [\alpha]A,i, \ \gamma \in QuD$[6].

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6) It is short for "Question under Discussion."

$$⟦ \text{at least } α ⟧ = λ w. ∃ β, \ γ ∈ [α]A,\text{is.t. } γ <_i \ α <_i \ β \ \& \ [α(w) ∨ β(w)] \ \&$$
$$∀ μ ∈ [α]A,i, \ μ <_i \ α ; \ [μ(w) ∨ \ α \text{ entails } μ]$$

b. If $α$ in ⟦ at least $α$ ⟧ is not a proposition, $α$ is of type $⟨ a, \ ⟨ s, t ⟩ ⟩$, where a is any type,

$$⟦ \text{at least } α ⟧ = λ X ⟨_a⟩ . λ w. ∃ β, \ γ ∈ [α]_{A,} ≤_i^{\text{s.t.}} \ γ <_i \ α <_i \ β \ \& \ [α(X)(w)$$
$$∨ \ β(X)(w)] \ \& \ ∀ μ ∈ [α]_{A, ≤i} ; \ μ <_i \ α , \ [¬μ(X)(w) ∨ \ α(X) \text{ entails } μ(X)]$$

She makes sure that the elements of the set of alternative propositions conform to the demand of the discourse; they are possible answers to the discourse's question. Note that the denotation requires the existence of at least two alternate propositions, one higher and the other lower on the scale than the prejacent. If the alternative propositions higher on the scale are known not to be true, we get the concessive interpretation; otherwise, the epistemic reading obtains.

The three studies may be different in the details, but they share important aspects. The pragmatic scales are characterized in terms of "preference," "desire," or "favorability," which I believe can be subsumed under Kay's more neutral term, "positive evaluation." More importantly for us, they all require at least two salient alternative propositions for concessive *at least* to work, one more positive than the prejacent and the other less so. Kay's example (11a) shows that when the context is not amenable to drawing an alternative proposition higher on the scale than the prejacent, the sentence becomes unacceptable. Grosz uses the notion of presupposition to ensure the existence of such an alternative proposition. Biezma states that the concessive use of *at least* comes about when the alternative propositions higher on the scale are known to be untrue.[7] In the next section, I examine some other discourse examples to see whether this requirement is viable.

3. Discourse Data

In this section, we look into some examples which do not conform to the requirements of the previous studies. In 3.1, we discuss discourse examples which do not yield the alternative proposition higher on the scale than the prejacent due to the nature of the lexical item being focused. In 3.2, we consider examples which fail to provide for

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7) Unless we have particular propositions on hand, there is no knowing whether they are true or not.

the more favorable propositional alternative to the prejacent because of the particulars of the situations. In 3.3, I discuss what it means to dispense with the requirement of the more favorable proposition.

3.1. Binary Choices Driven by Certain Lexical Items

Consider the following dialogue from the TV series *24* (Season 2 Episode 6). Tony is interrogating Reza, who he believes is involved in a recent terror attack. He thinks that the attack was committed by some religious fanatics from the Middle East.

(19) Tony: You're doing business with a known terrorist, and you sit there with a straight face and tell me you don't know what's going on?
Reza: I grew up in London. I'm marrying an American girl, a Protestant. So, if you're going to racially profile me, you should at least get it right.

Since *it* in the last sentence refers to 'racially profiling,' we can say that Reza is accusing Tony of not doing the profiling the right way. Given this contextual cue, the focus of *at least* should be on *right*. The obvious and the perhaps the only alternative to 'right' is 'wrong;' they are in an antonymic relation. Thus, we obtain two apparent propositions at play here: 'Tony get the profiling right,' which is the prejacent, and 'Tony get the profiling wrong.' The two propositions can be on the pragmatic scale of positive evaluation accordingly. The prejacent will rank higher on the scale than its alternative. This is problematic for the previous studies since there is no salient proposition available from the given context which can appear higher on the scale than the prejacent.

The following dialogue, taken from the movie *Superhost* (2021), illustrates a similar case.

(20) Teddy: I know how hard you've been working on this channel. But we're gonna have a great series here. I know it.
Claire: Our numbers are dropping. What if we've peaked, and that's it?
Teddy: Then, at least we've peaked together.
Claire: Yeah. You're so corny.

The couple are travel vloggers whose channel is losing its subscribers. Claire worries that they might not regain their past popularity ever again. Teddy does not seem too worried

about the future of their channel, as long as he has Claire. Teddy's second remark contains *at least*, and it begins with *then*, which indicates his acceptance of the possibility that their channel has peaked. This contextual information strongly suggests that the focus of *at least* is on *together*. Hence, Teddy is comparing 'Teddy and Claire have peaked together' with 'Teddy and Claire have peaked separately,' the latter of which is viewed as less favorable. Under this analysis, there is no salient alternative proposition describing a more favorable situation.

The following is from the movie *The Suicide Theory* (2014). Steve is a patron of Paul's convenience store. Once he found what he was looking for inside the brand new freezer, he comments on how hard the product got in it.

(21) Steve: Hey, Paul, where's the cookie dough?
　　　Paul: Had a freezer malfunction. Lost a lot of what we had. Just had the new one installed yesterday.
　　　Steve: Well, I think this one's working a little too well.
　　　Paul: Well, at least it's working.

In the last sentence, let us assume that the focus of *at least* falls on *working*. Since the context shows that the issue at hand is whether the freezer works or not, the only relevant and salient proposition other than the prejacent appears to be 'the freezer is not working.' This proposition should be located lower on the scale than the prejacent, 'the freezer is working.' Again, retrieving a third proposition out of the context is not feasible. One might argue that Steve's earlier remark provides the lacking proposition. However, if we are to accept Steve's statement as true, the proposition, 'the freezer is working too well' cannot be the third proposition ranking higher than the prejacent, since the more preferable situation is not supposed to be known to be true. We are only left with one situation where the freezer works and the other where it does not work, and I believe this stems from the nature of the focused expression, which triggers the binary choice.

Here is another example, which is similar to the earlier ones, but in a more complicated fashion. This dialogue, from the movie *A Crooked Somebody* (2017), is between a self-proclaimed psychic, Michael, and his father, Sam. Sam appears at one of Michael's book tour events and asks him to help out his brother. Not having expected such an encounter with his father, Michael refuses to help his brother, giving excuses about his busy schedule.

(22) Michael: Nice of him to think of me, but my hands are pretty full. I got a lot of cities to go to, a lot of people counting on my help.
Sam: Mike, when you were a birthday party magician, at least those folks knew they were being bullshitted.

With disgust, the father alludes to Michael's former career as a birthday party magician. I will assume that the focus of *at least* is on *knew*. This triggers the alternative proposition 'those folks did not know they were being bullshitted,' which is deemed as less positive than the prejacent. As long as we confine the purview to Michael's younger years working as a magician, these are the only propositions that come by, since it is the father's firm belief that whatever his son does, he ends up duping others.

The three examples show that in some of the cases where the focus of *at least* falls on lexical items such as *right, together, work* and *know*, the alternative proposition higher on the scale than the prejacent may not be available. This may seem to concern only a small subset of the cases involving *at least*, but they are high frequency lexical items and get associated with the scalar operator often. Moreover, the next discussion shows that there are further challenges to the approaches requiring such a proposition.

3.2 Contexts Not Providing for the More Favorable Proposition

The following is taken from the movie Z (2019). A mother of an eight-year-old son realizes that the boy is secretly communicating with an imaginary sinister being and at about the same time notices a huge black image of a scary presence on a wall in his room. Thinking that getting rid of the image could solve the problem, she get her friend, Kevin, to do some paint job over the image. The conversation takes place in the middle of painting the wall white.

(23) Kevin: Oh, this is going to take a few coats. Shit is dark. At least he's not playing with this thing anymore.
Beth: Yeah.

Here, the predicate *not playing with this thing* appears to be the focus, given that the issue at hand is whether the paint job will be effective or not. If the painting doesn't work, the kid will continue to play with the thing. This means we have two propositions being

contrasted on the pragmatic scale, 'the kid play with the thing' and 'the kid does not play with the thing,' and one of them is less favorable than the prejacent. This means, in this particular context, there isn't any alternative proposition available to rank higher on the scale than the prejacent. This is because preventing the kid from spending time with the evil being is the very purpose of the paint job.

The following dialogue from the movie *Greenland* (2020) is between a married couple in a car. The world is in turmoil in the face of a huge comet, Clarke, approaching the earth. The vast majority of the entire population is expected to perish upon the impact. The couple are trying to find ways of surviving the extinction-level disaster. When they turn on the radio, they hear a reporter saying "World leaders scramble to create makeshift shelters, as Clarke's largest fragment, already deemed a planet killer, is on target to hit less than 15 hours. Other elected officials are..." The wife changes the channel and hears another reporter saying, "The number of missing is up to a million after the Tokyo impact earlier today." She changes the channel yet again, and light and cheerful music is played.

(24) Allison: Finally.
     John: At least they're going down with the band still playing.
     Allison: That's true.

The best candidate to get focused by *at least* in the husband's remark appears to be *with the band still playing*, considering that the speaker is comparing the current music channel to the others which featured people going down in chaos and destruction. The prejacent describes a moderately positive event given the hopeless circumstances, and it is not feasible to find a more positive salient alternative that can be compared with it in the context. This is due to the fact that the situation the couple is in is nothing but grim and full of despair.

In both (23) and (24), the alternative proposition higher on the scale than the prejacent is not saliently present. According to Chafe (1994, 100), "Many identifiable referents achieve salience through their activation within the current conversation. On the other hand, a referent may have a salient presence in the external environment." For a proposition to be salient in the context, it needs to be mentioned explicitly, at least in part, or the situation needs to make it stand out. In the examples above, neither is the case.

Some might argue that pragmatic accommodation can explain away these cases, which is what Kay appears to assume, since the problem at hand bears on the unavailability of

the alternative proposition which is required by the existential presupposition *at least* triggers. I doubt that accommodation can remedy the situation here. In the literature, there is an agreement that discourse particles, such as *too, indeed*, and *again*, behave differently from other presupposition triggers, like definite descriptions or factive verbs with respect to accommodation. For instance, (22), from 3.1, reproduced below, shows that the factive verb *know* presupposes 'they were being bullshitted' as part of a common ground between the interlocutors. If the hearer, the son, didn't share the belief, which might as well be the case in this context, it will be accommodated easily.

(25) Sam: Mike, when you were a birthday party magician, at least those folks knew they were being bullshitted.

Discourse particles in general, however, do not behave in this fashion. Zeevat (2003) finds the reason for their reluctance to accommodate in the fact that they are overt markers of relating two propositions. Geurts and van der Sandt (2004) claims that such particles have a pronominal element as part of their meanings, which makes it hard to accommodate.

3.3 Reconsidering the Need for the More Favorable Proposition

The discussions so far cast doubt on the viability of the existential presupposition accounts of *at least*. Specifically, the requirement of an alternative proposition on the pragmatic scale higher than the prejacent is deemed as too stringent a condition and hence do not belong to the semantics of *at least*. Hence, we can propose the following as the meaning of a clause containing the particle. Here, S is a bouletic ordering, and C is a set of contextually salient propositions.

(26) a. $\| \text{AT LEAST}_{\text{(concessive)}} \|_{g,c} = \lambda S. \lambda C. \lambda p:$
   b. assertion: p
   c. implication[8]: $\exists q \in g(C) \ [p >_S q]$

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8) Unlike Grosz, I term the information in (26c) "implication," an attempt to eschew the issue of whether it is a conventional implicature or presupposition. This issue is beyond the scope of the current paper.

Doing away with such a restriction in the semantics of at least may invite concerns based on the infelicity of sentences such as (5a), reproduced below.

(27)   #This hotel's quiet, and at least it's comfortable.

Kay's judgment of the sentence as infelicitous relies on the observation that both clauses describe positive assessments of the hotel.

I suspect that such descriptions containing *at least* can be considered apt if the circumstances are right. The following, from the movie *Dream Horse*, is such a case. Howard has had keen interest in horse racing for a long time and dabbled in syndicates for procuring and managing racehorses, which crippled him financially before he started working at a big accounting firm. Then he quits his the job and opens a small private business offering tax advice to the financially challenged. Jan, who is his partner in the current syndicate, pays him a visit for the first time after the business opened.

(28) Jan: How come, though? You had a good job in Cardiff, didn't you?
     Howard: Uh, well, I realized I couldn't do it anymore. And I wasn't gonna live a
     life of lost chances like my dad.
     Jan: What happened to him?
     Howard: ..."Don't let them crush your dreams," he used to say. And at least I've
     had plenty of time to keep on top of the syndicate finances.

Howard's last remark reveals two reasons why he is satisfied with the current job: it allows to pursue his dream and also lets him take care of the finances of the syndicate. The two sentences connected with *and* in his last remark both describe positive aspects of the current situation.

The following dialogue, from *Greenland* again, is between Allison and her father, Dale. They are watching a news report showing an old video footage which filmed the inside of the safety bunkers built in Greenland during the Cold War era in case of nuclear fallout.

(29)   Dale: The footage is older than me. Who knows what shape it's in?
        Allison: At least here we'll be together.

Dale's reaction to the report is not positive; he dismisses the bunkers questioning their current conditions. The inference we get from Dale's comment is that 'my house may be in a better condition than the bunkers.' Allison chimes in by pointing out a positive aspect of staying at her father's house: given that her father is adamant about not deserting the house, she can be with him and her family by staying there. Hence, the two propositions salient in the discourse are both positive aspects of the hunker-down strategy they are opting for, but *at least* is not odd here.

The discourse data examined so far suggest that the alternative proposition higher on the scale than the prejacent is not necessary for *at least*. On the other hand, the propositional alternative lower on the scale is requisite for *at least* to function properly; it requires a certain comparison between two propositions. Unlike the higher alternative, the lower alternative is consistently salient in the contexts examined so far.

4. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we have discussed the issue surrounding the requirement of two alternative propositions other than the prejacent of a sentence containing *at least*. Proponents of such requirements treat both the comparison between the prejacent and the more favorable alternative and that between the former and the less favorable one on an equal footing. The first comparison produces the sense that what the sentence containing *at least* describes is a less than optimal situation. On the other hand, the second comparison conveys the idea that the prejacent is about a situation which is better than nothing or the status quo. The discourse data introduced so far, however, shows that the first sense is not germane to the meaning of *at least*, but the second one is.

Unlike the sense of 'better than nothing,' I believe the sense of 'less than optimal' does not stem from *at least* itself, but from the way we make judgements in our everyday lives. We tend to want things to get better and aspire to a certain optimum, whether it is well-defined or vague. In a sense, the ideal state of affairs remains always elusive no matter what the current situation is like. That is, the comparison of what the prejacent denotes against some better situations is a given, not necessarily something at least imparts.

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