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RESEARCH ARTICLE

At (*the* (*very*)) *least* in English

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Abstract

The article critically reviews the main claims in the recent literature on the semantics of English *at least*, *at the least* and *at the very least*, as members of a larger family of scalar markers, and it focuses on the common meaning of *at least*, *at the least* and *at the very least.* This semantic 'common core' is described in terms of a scalar component, a positive component and a restrictive component. The context can highlight the latter two components and this is argued to explain the distinction described in the literature in terms of a positive evaluation and a rhetorical retreat. The article also proposes to explain the emphatic character of *at the very least* in terms of a double scalar comparison.

Keywords: superlative scalar modification; scalarity; *at least*; concessivity

The epithets are sweetly varied, like a scholar at the least.
(Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost* IV.ii.90)

1. Introduction

In the last two decades the semantics of the English phrase *at least* has received a fair amount of scholarly attention, especially the contrast between the uses illustrated in (1) and (2) – examples taken from Kay (1992), probably the first study that focuses on the semantics of English *at least.*

(1) Mary has at least three children.
(2) Stay in that hotel; it's noisy but at least it's comfortable.

Kay (1992) calls (1) a 'scalar' use and (2) an 'evaluative' use. There is also a use or a set of uses which has received very little attention. These uses are illustrated in (3) to (5). Kay (1992) calls them 'rhetorical'.

(3) Mary will help me, at least for a short time.
(4) Mary is at home, at least John's car is in the driveway.
(5) Mary is at home, at least I think so.

Almost nothing has been written about the alternative expressions *at the least* and *at the very least.*

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(6) Stay in that hotel; it's noisy but at the least it's comfortable.
(7) Stay in that hotel; it's noisy but at the very least it's comfortable.

This article reviews the important ideas presented in the literature on these constructions, it offers an analysis of the core meaning of the three constructions, it confirms Kay's analysis of the rhetorical nature of the uses in (3) to (5) and shows how the rhetorical meaning relates to the core meaning.

In section 2 I introduce *at least* as a member of a family of constructions and offer a preliminary account of its meaning. Section 3 aims to take this semantic analysis to a higher level, largely in terms of the scalar nature of the meaning of *at least.* What I present as the 'core meaning' will be illustrated with *at least* pairings with cardinal numbers, but I claim that this core meaning characterizes all uses of *at least*, as well as of *at the least* and *at the very least.* Section 4 broadens the analysis to non-numerical constructions. Section 5 focuses on uses such as (2), and section 6 is about the uses illustrated in (3) to (5). Section 7 deals with the special meaning of *at the very least* and with the different usage profiles of *at least*, *at the least* and *at the very least.* Section 8 is the conclusion.

Some of the example sentences come from the English Sketch Engine *TenTen* corpus. Sketch Engine, founded by Adam Kilgarriff and Pavel Rychlý, is an online corpus tool (www.sketchengine.eu) and the *TenTen* corpus (Jakubíček *et al.* 2013; English Web 2021) is a text collection that was crawled from the web between December 2021 and January 2022. On the negative side, web crawling collects materials that are of variable acceptability and from different varieties. For our data, however, I have no evidence that false or unreliable hits give us a distorted picture of present-day usage, but regional differences or preferences may well remain undetected. On the positive side, the corpus is enormous: it has more than 52 billion words. Sketch Engine includes a sampling routine. The interpretation of the examples was the author's and it was always straightforward, in part because Sketch Engine provides examples with a context. The Sketch Engine examples, extracted between November 2024 and February 2025, are marked with '<SkEng>'. Other examples come from the literature. I also make up simple examples innocently based on sentences either from the Sketch Engine corpus or from the literature; (6) and (7) are such variations.

2. *At least* and related constructions

In this section I present *at least* followed by a numeral, as illustrated in (1), as a member of a family of constructions, and I give it a preliminary semantic description.

(1) Mary has at least three children.

Least is the superlative of *little* and constructions such as *at least* have been called 'SUPERLATIVE modifiers' (e.g. Geurts & Nouwen 2007; Chen 2018). *At least* is not the only superlative strategy: even just restricting ourselves to modifiers with an alternative for *at least* that precedes the numeral *three*, there are at least eleven more constructions:

(8) *at the least, at the very least, at very least, leastways, leastwise, minimally, at minimum, a minimum, at the minimum, at the very minimum, at a very minimum*

Each of these words or phrases is attested in front of the numeral *three* in the *TenTen* corpus, but all except *at least three* have a frequency below 0.01 per million, compared to a frequency of 4.67 per million for *at least three.* These constructions are worthy of being investigated, but in this article I restrict myself to *at the least* and *at the very least.*

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Next to superlative modifiers there are also COMPARATIVE ones, illustrated in (9).

(9)
(a) Mary has three or more children.
(b) Mary has no less/fewer than three children.
(c) Mary has three if not more children.
(d) Mary has more than two children.

In constructions with cardinal numerals, the superlative and comparative strategies are (close to) synonymous, but I will not go into this matter here – for an analysis of the relation between *at least three* and *more than two*, see e.g. Geurts & Nouwen (2007), Nouwen (2008) or Alexandropoulou (2018). There are also combinations of superlative and comparative modifiers, illustrated in (10).

(10)
(a) Mary has at least three children or more.
(b) Mary has at least three if not more children.

The latter have not been discussed in the literature at all and though I will not discuss them either, they should not be disregarded. *At least three or more* appears 394 times in the *TenTen* corpus, which is double the frequency of *at the very least three*, and 10 out of the 22 occurrences of *three if not more* are preceded by *at least.*

In the reading of (1) that comes to mind first, *at least* relates to a simple numerical scale, with Mary having three children, possibly more, and thus also (by entailment) two children as well as one child. In conformity with the literature, *three* will be called the 'FOCUS VALUE' or the 'FOCUS CONSTITUENT'; it refers to the part of the proposition for which propositions that are higher or lower on a scale offer alternatives. The scale is visualized in figure 1 and the arrow stands for the entailments from the higher to the lower values. The proposition without *at least*, i.e. *Mary has three children*, is commonly called the 'PREJACENT'. The prejacent finds a place on the scale, and above and below are propositions with an alternative value.

With *at least three*, speakers express a partition on the scale, with the focus value of three siding with the values higher than three. Both when Mary has three children and when she has four, five or more, (1) is true. When we are below the partition, i.e. when Mary has fewer than three children, (1) is false. Note that the scale starts with a proposition with *one*, so it does not include propositions with zero or with negative numbers. Note also that I take it that *three*, in *Mary has three children*, is ambiguous between 'exactly three' and 'at least three'. Thus I do not endorse the Gricean view that *three* means 'at least three' (e.g. Horn 1972;

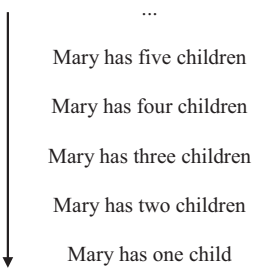


Figure 1. A scale for *Mary has at least three children*

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Levinson 1983: 106–7; Chierchia 2004). This non-Gricean vagueness view applies to my metalanguage, too. Thus the *three* on the scale in figure 1 is also ambiguous between 'at least three' and 'exactly three' and I assume that ambiguous 'at least three or exactly three' of sentence (1) entails 'at least two or exactly two'.[1] I further take it for granted that the counterarguments to the Gricean view are successful (see esp. Bultinck 2005, but also e.g. Carston 1988; Horn 1992; Krifka 1999: 260; Ariel 2015) and I will not go into this issue.

Finally, *at least* is related to *even if only*, another construction that has not been discussed much and that needs more work.

(11) Mary has children, even if only three.

It contains two particles, viz. the scalar additive particle *even* and the restrictive particle *only*. The first one scopes over a conditional element *if* and the second over the numeral. Example (11) trivially entails that Mary has children; this is contributed by the *Mary has children* part. *Even if only three* adds that there may be three children, but maybe not more. *Even if only* is thus similar to *at most*, illustrated in (12).[2]

(12) Mary has at most three children.

Like with *at most*, it is possible that Mary only has three children; however, like with *at least*, it is also possible that Mary has more than three children. Interestingly, there are contexts in which this use of *if* is given a factive reading. Thus (11) is felicitous when the speaker knows that Mary definitely has three children and allows that there could be more. This comes very close to what *at least three* means. But there is still a difference: the restrictive particle *only* has the effect of making a higher number less probable. One could reflect this by saying that this meaning does not so much convey that more than three is possible but rather that no more than three is possible. *At least three* looks up the scale and reflects an optimistic speaker attitude (about a value higher than three), whereas with *even if only three*, in the right context, the speaker is pessimistic. Also, according to a reviewer, in the most prominent reading *even if only three* just means 'only three'. Be that as it may, *even if only* phrases deserve a place on the research agenda, together with the other alternatives for *at least.*

3. The core meaning of numerical *at least*

The numerical use of *at least* has been studied in cognitive semantics (Kay 1992, building on Ducrot 1980 and Anscombre & Ducrot 1983), mostly in formal semantics (e.g. in Krifka 1999; Geurts & Nouwen 2007; Büring 2008; Nakanishi & Rullmann 2009; Schwarz 2013, 2016), and also in an approach that profits from both traditions (Gast 2013). These accounts are similar. Thus when Geurts & Nouwen (2007: 533) write that

> an utterance of *At least three girls snored* conveys two things: first, that it is CERTAIN that there was a group of three snoring girls, and, second, that more than three girls MAY have snored

[1] 'At least three or exactly three' can itself be seen as a type of 'at least three' reading, and it has been claimed that there are thus two different, though related 'at least' readings (see van der Auwera 1985: 109–10). This may appease the reviewer who argues that only an 'at least three' reading will allow (1) to entail a proposition with a lower value, similarly taken with its 'at least' reading.

[2] *At most* is sometimes considered to be the 'opposite' of *at least* (Kay 1992: 312) and it has superlative variants (*at the most three*), comparative ones (*less than four*) and variants that are neither superlative nor comparative (*up to three*).

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this is close to Büring (2008: 114) writing that "'at least n" is essentially "exactly n or more than n"'. Kay's (1992: 312) approach, phrased in terms of *at least* entailing that Mary has three children and blocking an implicature that Mary has no more than three children, is compatible too (compare also Gast 2013: 116; Schwarz 2013: 187, 2016: 2). There are also many differences between these accounts, especially on deciding which aspects of the meaning of *at least* are semantic and which are pragmatic. Some of these differences will be discussed in sections 5 and 6.

In this section I focus on the semantics of the 'CORE MEANING' (or the 'GESAMTBEDEUTUNG'). This core is defined in terms of three components, viz. a scalar one, a positive one and a restrictive one – see table 1. I claim that all uses of *at least* involve these three components.

I will now discuss each of the nine features of the definition. Note also that though I take the core meaning hypothesis to be valid for all uses of *at least*, in this section I only discuss numerical uses. The first four properties define the scale. (i.α) seems unnecessarily complex. At least, for the *at least three children* of sentence (1), I used the simple scale of figure 1, which I didn't call 'contextually defined'. But the account has to be valid also for sentences like (13), a variant of a sentence discussed by Huang (2010: 412).

(13) John has cut down his smoking to at least three cigarettes a day.

For this use I need the scale in figure 2. The ordering of the values is the reverse of the one in figure 1.[3]

One could claim that the order of figure 1 is the natural one, the 'semantic' one, but the point is that we always need to consider the context to define the scale that is relevant for a use of *at least.* Even if one takes the order in figure 1 to be the natural one, it is still the context

Table 1. The core meaning of *at least*

The core meaning of *at least* has	
(i) a scalar component	(α) the prejacent with the focus value ('FV') is associated with a contextually defined scale; every rung contains a proposition with a value, which is either the focus value or an alternative value ('AV') that is higher by one or more rungs ('$AV^{\uparrow 1}$', '$AV^{\uparrow 2}$', etc.) or lower, again by one or more rungs ('$AV_{\downarrow 1}$', '$AV_{\downarrow 2}$', etc.) (β) propositions with higher values entail propositions with lower values (γ) the scale has to have two rungs, the one with the FV and one with the $AV^{\uparrow 1}$ or at least an AV↑ if there are contextual conditions (feature i.δ) prohibiting $AV^{\uparrow 1}$ (δ) the scale has to have enough rungs to satisfy contextual conditions, if any
(ii) a positive component	(α) the FV proposition is true (β) $AV_{\downarrow}$ propositions, if any, are true, as they are entailed by the FV proposition – see component (i.β) (γ) $AV^{\uparrow}$ propositions are possibly true – the possibility is either non-deontic participant-external or epistemic (δ) the possibility of the propositions mentioned in (ii.γ) entails the possibility of the negation of these propositions, but it is profiled as the possibility of the propositions, not of their negations
(iii) a restrictive component	only the FV proposition is true and, if any, the $AV_{\downarrow}$ propositions; $AV^{\uparrow}$ propositions are only possibly true

[3] The reversal effect has been noted already in Horn (1972: 42–3). With respect to the scale in figure 2 *at least* does not rule out a higher value like 'two'. As a reviewer has pointed out, with respect to a non-reversed scale this meaning can be expressed with *at most*, and this is certainly the more common way of conveying John's effort to limit his smoking.

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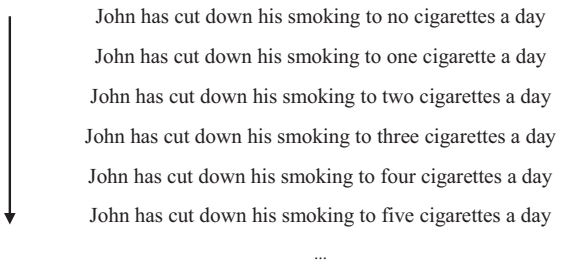


Figure 2. The scale of John's attempt to deal with his addiction to smoking

that has to allow it.[4] The notion of the 'contextually defined' scale corresponds to Gast & van der Auwera's (2011: 9) notion of 'contextual implications', due to Wilson & Sperber (2004: 608). It is a way of making explicit what Coppock & Brochhagen (2013: 3) have in mind with 'PRAGMATIC STRENGTH'. 'Pragmatic strength' may be based on semantic strength, as in (1), allegedly 'natural', or on something else. This 'something else' can be a simple reversal of the 'natural' order, as in figure 2, but we will see in section 3 that the contextual 'adaptation' may be more complex.[5]

Point (i.γ) says that the contextually defined scale must have two rungs and need not have more, one has the FV and the other one, *ceteris paribus*, the $AV^{\uparrow 1}$. Consider a context in which all that matters is whether or not Mary has one or two children. That context allows (14).

(14) Mary has at least one child.

Example (14) is also allowed when the context concerns the question whether Mary has one, two, three or more children. Note that the requirement for there to be an $AV^{\uparrow 1}$ effectively blocks *at least* from associating with a highest FV.[6] Obviously, there is no value higher than a highest one. This is illustrated in (15). Example (15a) sketches the context: in that context (15b) is fine, but (15c) is not. I use '#' for contextually unacceptable sentences; '*' would not do, because (15c) is grammatical.

(15) (a) I have exactly nine books to give away.
(b) Mary gets at least three books.
(c) #Mary gets at least nine books.

Note that this does not mean that the proposition with the highest value cannot be true, only that the highest value cannot be the focus value.

(15) (d) Mary gets at least eight books and possibly nine.

[4] Note also that it is the context that decides what to do with the zero value. The scale of having children does not include zero, but that of reducing cigarettes does include zero.

[5] Note that even the semantic strength for (1) is ultimately pragmatic. With emphatic stress on *children*, marked by capitals in (i), the sentence could mean that Mary has three children rather than three alternatives-to-children, such as sisters.

(i) Mary has at least three CHILDREN.

[6] Chen (2018: 37, 76–83, 2024: 367–8) calls this the 'Top of Scale effect'. Chen also posits a 'Bottom of Scale effect', meaning that *at least* cannot combine with a lowest value – a claim that is similar to König's (1991: 45) and Risselada's (2016: 193) view that *at least* would express a medium value. Yet (14) is perfectly acceptable.

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Component (i.δ) deals with contextual conditions. Example (16a) illustrates what is meant by a 'CONTEXTUAL CONDITION'.

(16) (a) I have nine books to give away, to two pupils, and each gets at least three books.
(b) #The first pupil gets at least eight books.

With (16a) as the context for (16b), it is impossible for the second pupil to get three books, when the first pupil gets eight books. Example (17) illustrates how a contextual condition can block a $AV^{\uparrow 1}$ proposition. The context is that of (17a).

(17) (a) I have five books to give away, each of you gets something, but nobody can get four books.
(b) #Mary gets at least three books.

The positive component first specifies that the proposition with the focus value is true – (ii.α). Feature (ii.β) says that propositions with lower values are also true: when Mary has three children, she also has two children. The (ii.γ) and (ii.δ) components can be called 'modal', a point stressed also by Geurts & Nouwen (2007): the higher values are possible. It is important to be specific about the kind of possibility that is involved. There are at least four kinds; they go under different labels and the labels I use for the examples with English modal verbs in (18) are the ones advocated in van der Auwera & Plungian (1998).

(18) (a) You too can learn French, just try harder. ['participant-internal possibility']
'You have the ability to learn French.'
(b) You may leave now. ['deontic participant-external possibility']
'I give you permission to leave now.'
(c) In Stockholm it can be cold. ['non-deontic participant-external possibility'[7]]
'Stockholm regularly has cold temperatures.'
(d) In Stockholm it may be cold now. ['epistemic possibility']
'I am not sure whether it is cold in Stockholm now.'

The possibility of *at least* allows both the non-deontic participant-external and the epistemic reading – *pace* Geurts & Nouwen (2007), who describe *at least* only in terms of epistemic possibility. The first one is illustrated in (19a), the second one in (19b).

(19) (a) In this family all women have at least three children. I know exactly how many children each woman has.
(b) Mary has at least three children. I don't exclude that she has four, but I am not sure.

I thus agree with Geurts & Nouwen (2007), followed by Chen (2018, 2024), who claim that *at least* has a semantic possibility component, but I reject that this modality has to be epistemic. What we need is a wider notion of possibility (allowing both non-deontic participant-external possibility and epistemic possibility). In the *at least* literature the context-dependent reading of the epistemic possibility is called an 'ignorance' reading (e.g. Schwarz 2013; Mendia 2016;

[7] This label may be least clear. Negatively, 'non-deontic participant-external possibility' is not epistemic in that it does not refer to a moderate degree of certainty on the part of speaker. The possibility does not concern the ability of any participant – it is not 'participant-internal'. It also does not involve any rule or authority – it is not deontic. The possibility concerns a general feature of the state of the affairs: in (18c) this general feature is the climate that characterizes Stockholm.

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Göbel & Wagner 2023). The non-deontic-external possibility reading is what e.g. Alexandropoulou (2018) calls 'speaker indifference'.

Feature (ii.δ) says that propositions with higher values are possibly true. When Mary has three children, the proposition that Mary has four children gets evaluated as possibly true. But the negation of this proposition is also possibly true. The difference is that *at least* conveys some optimism: the possibility is characterized as the possibility of the proposition rather than of the negation of the proposition, which, as mentioned earlier, makes *at least* different from *even if only*. *At least* 'brings good news' (Horn 2002: 57). This upward orientation is the reason why *at least* does not occur in the scope of clausal negation — I leave echoic/metalinguistic uses out of account.

(20) *Mary doesn't have at least three children.

At least can thus be considered a 'POSITIVE POLARITY ITEM', though only a weak one (cp. Van der Wouden 1997: 123—5), for *at least* is fine in other 'negative polarity contexts'.

(21) (a) Does Mary have at least three children?
(b) If Mary has at least three children, she can ask for a special child allowance.

Then there is the restrictive component, the 'other side of the coin' of the positive component. The FV proposition is true and so are the $AV^{\downarrow}$ propositions, if any, but the $AV^{\uparrow}$ propositions are only possible. Truth is 'restricted' to FV and $AV^{\downarrow}$ propositions. Note that I choose to speak about a 'restrictive' component rather than about a 'negative' component. The meaning of *at least* is basically positive, more so than *at most* and *even if only*.

4. More parameters in the use of *at least*

So far, I have only dealt with simple numerical constructions, viz. ones in which *at least* occurs immediately to the left of the numeral. I have described their core meaning and I claimed that this core meaning does not characterize only these simple numerical constructions. I now turn to some other constructions. My goal is limited: I only want to show that the non-numerical constructions share the core meaning. The goal is not to provide a detailed analysis of the non-numerical constructions.

4.1. Substitutive scales

Numerals have the property that they instantly induce a scale. We do not need a context for this, though we do need one for the direction of the scale, as was shown with the contrast between (1) and (13). Thus *three* calls up both the higher and the lower numbers and on the upper and the lower rungs these are substitutes for the number *three*. In this sense, the scales are SUBSTITUTIVE.

Numerals are not the only entities that automatically conjure up substitutive scales. Quantifiers have that property too. So *a few* induces a scale with e.g. *quite a few* or *most*, on the one hand, and *very few* or *almost none*, on the other hand. Unsurprisingly, *at least* occurs with quantifiers and then the definition of table 1 fully applies to these quantifiers.

(22) Comrade Lenin, far from being dead, has simply changed his clothes ... or at least most of them. <SkEng>

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Example (23) shows that *at least* does not combine with the highest quantifier and that it does not occur in the scope of clausal negation, as fits properties (i.γ) and (ii.δ). Compare (23) with (15) and (20).

(23) (a) *Comrade Lenin, far from being dead, has simply changed his clothes ... or at least all of them.
(b) *Comrade Lenin, far from being dead, has not changed at least most of his clothes.

At least does not combine with all quantifiers though. Thus *at least* does not (easily[8]) combine with *few*, though it does with *a few.* An account of this difference is beyond the confines of this article.

(24) (a) #Comrade Lenin has simply changed at least few of his clothes.
(b) Comrade Lenin has simply changed at least a few of his clothes.

An automatic substitutive scale is also triggered by temporal expressions. This is the case with *October 2007* in (25).

(25) N was taken into custody in April 2006 and held at the Bagram Theater Internment Facility, until at least October 2007. <SkEng>

October 2007 is preceded by September 2007, and it is followed by November 2007. If N was interred until October 2007, then N was also interred before October 2007 and possibly later too.

The link between the focus of *at least* and its scale is often not automatic, but instead context-dependent. This is illustrated with (26).

(26) Arsenal have enjoyed regular success in at least the FA Cup in recent years.

If one is a British a soccer fan, one will understand (26) to invoke a scale of prestige. It is more prestigious to be successful in the European Cup than in the FA Cup, and success in the latter is more prestigious than success in the Carabao Cup. Thus the contextually defined scale going with *at least* could be the one on the right side of figure 3. 'PPP', 'PP' and 'P' stand for different prestige levels, with 'PPP' being the highest. It is the context that associates these levels with the different cups. I mark these links with a broken horizontal line. The

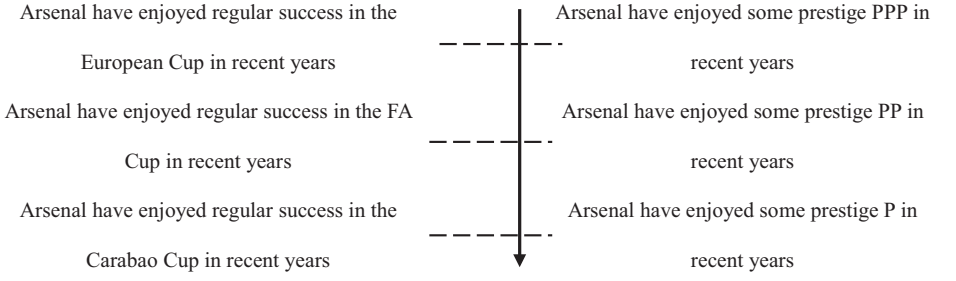


Figure 3. A scale for *Arsenal's recent FA Cup success*

[8] The *TenTen* corpus does have 1,313 *at least few* attestations, but *at least a few* has 45 times more.

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propositions on the right are the 'contextual implications' that characterize 'pragmatic strength', the notion introduced in the discussion of example (13).

On the left side I show the prejacent with the FA Cup, as well as variants with the other cups. But there is no entailment between these propositions. Entailments only hold for the ordering on the contextual scale on the right, and here the contextual scale involves more than the inverse of the ordering of the prejacent with focus and alternative values that was discussed with example (13). This scale is again substitutive: on the higher rungs the 'PPP' and 'PP' replace 'P'. But does (26) also make sense if one does not know about the various cups and their prestige? This takes us to the next section.

4.2. *Additive scales*

Anybody who says or hears (26), whether or not (s)he knows about the prestige of the various cups, is likely to know that soccer teams can compete in more than one cup and that success in one cup is thus compatible with success in another one. Thus (26) allows a second interpretation. Figure 4 sketches such an interpretation, for somebody who at least knows about the existence of the three cups mentioned in figure 3.

The scale is not 'SUBSTITUTIVE' as in figure 3, in which higher prestige levels substitute for lower ones. Instead, the scale in figure 4 is 'ADDITIVE', with lower values reappearing on higher scales, but in the company of additional content.[9]

Curiously, even though there is a substantial literature on the collocation of *at least* with noun phrases containing numerals, the additive reading has not been discussed (much). The distinction between additive and substitute scales goes back to at least Foolen (1983) and was picked up by van der Auwera (1984, 1997).[10] An additive scalar interpretation is no less possible for *Mary's three children.* The 'three and possibly four' reading of figure 1 is appropriate when the number of Mary's children is at issue. But something else could be at issue, like a description of Mary's offspring. For that situation a scale like that of figure 5 could be appropriate.

Here too the scale is additive. Note that for this reading the focus constituent is not just *three* but *three children.* So by itself, everything else being equal, *at least three children* is vague between a substitutive and an additive reading. Of course, in this article we make abstraction from intonation. Emphatic stress on *three* will trigger the substitutive reading.

The vagueness of what is the focus value can also be illustrated with an Arsenal example. Consider the variant of (26) in (27), the latter being the variant that actually occurs in the *TenTen* corpus.

(27) Arsenal have at least enjoyed regular success in the FA Cup in recent years.

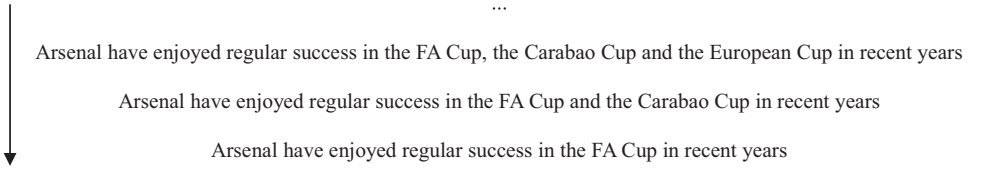


Figure 4. Another scale for *Arsenal's recent FA Cup success*

[9] Of course, substitutive and additive scales are related. Thus the value 'four' that substitutes for 'three' equals 'three and an added one' and the value 'the FA Cup and the Carabao Cup' of figure 4 substitutes for 'the FA Cup'.

[10] The additive scale resurfaced with the labels 'unordered' scale (e.g. Huang 2014: 54), 'partially ordered' scale (Rooth 1992: 8–9), 'cardinal' scale (Mendia 2016: 13) and 'plurality' scale (Chen 2018: 34, 2024: 367). Compare also Harnish (1976: 354) on *The flag was red* implicating that the flag was not both red and some other colour.

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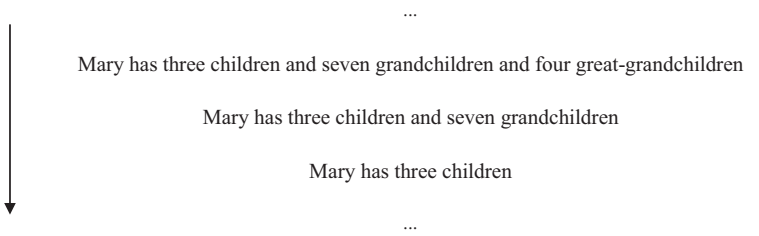


Figure 5. Another scale for *Mary has three children*

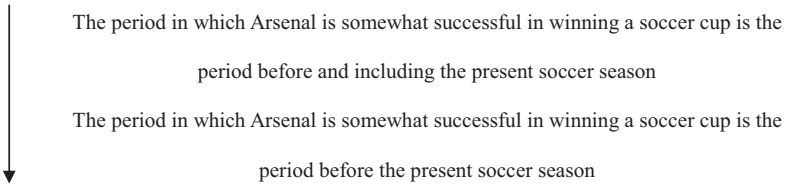


Figure 6. An additive scale for *Arsenal's recent FA Cup success*

In (27) *at least* precedes the verb phrase. So is the focus *enjoyed* or *regular* or even *success*? Can it also be the *FA Cup* or *recent*? Again, intonation can identify the focus. Thus emphatic stress on *the FA Cup* has an effect similar to putting *at least* in front of *the FA Cup*. But without intonation there is no clear focus and nothing in the sentence clearly induces a substitutive scale nor does the sentence itself give any clue about a possible additive scale. But scales are contextual and we do have a context for (27).

(28) Arsenal have at least enjoyed regular success in the FA Cup in recent years but their only chance of winning a trophy this season is in the Europa League where they will face Italy's AC Milan in their last–16 tie this month. <SkEng>

So what is at issue is whether Arsenal could have any success in winning a cup this year. Thus the scale, an additive one, is something like the one shown in figure 6.

4.3. Extra-clausal at least

In all the examples so far *at least* occurs inside a clause and it finds its focus inside the same clause. It may be vague, though, what the focus is. Even with the simple clause in (1), repeated once more, the focus could be 'three' as an alternative to 'four', but also 'three children', as an alternative to 'three children and seven grandchildren'.

(1) Mary has at least three children.

This vagueness of *at least* and its strong context dependency is very clear when *at least* occurs outside the clause, when it is 'extra-clausal' instead of 'intra-clausal'. Consider (29).

(29) Hey, y'know what, at least let me help you get your friend back. <SkEng>

In (29) *at least* is in front of the clause *let me help you get your friend back* and it is not clear what its focus is. In (30) I vary the position of *at least* to exemplify possible focuses and scales, both substitutive and additive (cp. Gast 2013: 112—13 for a similar thought experiment). It could also be done with intonation or with both intonation and word order.

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(30) (a) Hey, y'know what, let me, at least, help you get your friend back.
(α) me instead of somebody more efficient
(β) just me instead of me and somebody else
(b) Hey, y'know what, let me at least help you get your friend back.
(α) help instead of some more efficient action
(β) just help instead of help and some other action
(c) Hey, y'know what, let me help at least you get your friend back.
(α) you instead of somebody more important
(β) just you instead of you and somebody else
(d) Hey, y'know what, let me help you get at least your friend back.
(α) your friend instead of somebody more important
(β) just your friend instead of somebody who is a friend of yours and of somebody else

The right interpretation, so the context makes clear, is likely to be the one in (30d). Somebody, presumably not the *you* of *your friend*, replies to (29) with 'And mine'.

An extra-clausal *at least* can be pre-clausal as in (29), but it also be 'post-clausal' as in (31).[11]

(31) Daddy's friend Thom will be there, at least. <SkEng>

Note that 'pre-clausal' should be distinguished from 'clause-initial'. In (32) the most prominent reading *at least* is clause-initial, in front of its focus constituent '192'.

(32) At least 192 of those patients are being treated in an intensive care unit. <SkEng>

Similarly, in (33) *at least* is not post-clausal, but rather, in its most prominent reading, clause-final.

(33) I'll look into the mousewheel thing, though I'm sure it works in DDF offline at least. <SkEng>

I have implied that when *at least* is extra-clausal, *at least* is still associated with a focus and a scale, in the manner described with the concept of 'core meaning'. But there is more that needs to be discussed. It so happens that the key examples for what has been called the 'evaluative' and the 'rhetorical' uses of *at least*, illustrated in (2) to (5), and repeated below, are extra-clausal.

(2) Stay in that hotel; it's noisy but at least it's comfortable.
(3) Mary will help me, at least for a short time.
(4) Mary is at home, at least John's car is in the driveway.
(5) Mary is at home, at least I think so.

In (2) *at least* is pre-clausal and in (3) to (5) *at least* is post-clausal. I will turn to the pre-clausal use of (2) in section 5 and to the post-clausal ones in (3) to (5) in section 6.

[11] Note that the extra-clausal *at least* of (30) is set off by commas. In (i) we see this for a pre-clausal *at least.*

(i) At least, I hope to visit three cities before dying. <SkEng>

This kind of marking is different from the parenthetical use of brackets, illustrated in (ii) and (iii). In both, *at least* focuses on the numeral *three.*

(ii) There are (at least) three reasons to mourn this outcome. <SkEng>

(iii) T and M also discovered a previously unknown rock art site with (at least three) petroglyph boulders further SE on the Pampa de Mosquito. <SkEng>

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5. 'Evaluative' *at least*

Sentence (2) is one of the examples that Kay (1992: 316) uses to analyse what he calls the 'EVALUATIVE' meaning. The idea is simple: the comfort of the hotel is evaluated as something good, though for a perfect hotel, one would require more than comfort. So there are two components in the evaluation, and I will discuss both in some detail. The analysis relies on Anscombre & Ducrot's (1983: 139) analysis of the French counterpart *au moins*, where the evaluative use was called 'modal'. There are three other terms and table 2 shows who uses these terms, and also what terms are used for the *three children* case and whether the distinction is semantic or pragmatic.

The term 'modal' was given by Anscombre & Ducrot (1983: 139) with a strong hedge: they consider their terminological proposal 'arbitrary'. Kay's 'evaluative' is a good term, if one accepts, as is done in each study listed in table 2, that this use involves an evaluation, a positive one. Still, Gast (2013), the linguist who is most indebted to Kay (1992) and who also accepts that this meaning involves evaluation, does not accept the term 'evaluative'. The main problem for Gast is Kay's use of the term 'scalar', for they both consider the 'evaluative' meaning to be no less scalar than Kay's 'scalar'. Gast's own proposal, with 'predicational' versus 'propositional', suggests a scope difference, with 'propositional' scoping over the whole proposition. This links up with the claim that it is the preferred interpretation of an extra-clausal, in particular, a pre-clausal placement of *at least* (Kay 1992: 313; Nakanishi & Rullmann 2009; Rullmann & Nakanishi 2009; Gast 2012: 111). The term 'concessive' is due to two unpublished conference presentations, viz. Rullmann & Nakanishi (2009) and Nakanishi & Rullmann (2009). They distinguish between 'epistemic' and 'concessive' meanings. The former is Kay's 'scalar' use and the latter his 'evaluative' one. For the former they rely on of Krifka (1999), Geurts & Nouwen (2007) and

Table 2. Views on *At least the hotel is comfortable*

		is	
The distinction between … readings		semantic	pragmatic
quantificational	modal		Anscombre & Ducrot 1983
scalar	evaluative	Kay 1992 Cohen & Krifka 2011	
predicational	propositional	Gast 2013	
epistemic	concessive	Nakanishi & Rullmann 2009 Rullmann & Nakanishi 2009 Grosz 2011a, 2011b[12] Coppock & Brochhagen 2013	Biezma 2013 Chen 2018, 2024 Butschety 2019
epistemic	evaluative	Göbel & Wagner 2023	

[12] Grosz (2011a, 2011b) focuses on 'optative' *at least* constructions, primarily in German (*wenn … wenigstens*). In English this use is possible too, a point made in Biezma (2011: 76–7, 107–8) – see (i), as a variant of (ii).

(i) If at least you loved me! <SkEng>

(ii) If only you loved me!

But it is only *if only* which has been conventionalized in this use. A *TenTen* search for *at least*, *at the least* and *at the very least*, preceded, at a maximal distance of five words, by a clause-initial *if* and followed by an exclamation mark, again at a maximal distance of five words, yields 169 hits, but only 7 optative ones. The same query for *only* yields 6,217 hits, of which the overwhelming majority are optative. Grosz (2011a, 2011b) convincingly argues that whatever analysis one offers for what he calls 'concessive' *at least*, this analysis is valid for 'optative' *at least*, too.

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Büring (2008), and for the latter they don't rely on any earlier work, so not Kay (1992), and the distinction seems to be their own. Like Kay (1992), they also posit an evaluative component. One of their examples is shown in (34a) and their paraphrase, which shows both the evaluative and the concessive component, is shown in (34b).

(34) (a) Mary didn't win a gold medal, but at least she won a silver medal.
(b) Although winning a silver medal is less preferable than winning a gold medal, a silver medal is satisfactory.

I take issue with both the terms 'epistemic' and 'concessive'. The first term is rather general. The second is ill-suited. It is true though that concessive *still* can replace *at least* in (34a), giving (34c).

(34) (c) Mary didn't win a gold medal, but she still won a silver medal.

The concessivity hypothesis also aligns well with the earlier observation in Poutsma (1914: 501), with dictionary entries in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and in *Webster's*. All three sources describe two senses, the second of which they paraphrase with *at any rate*, *at all events* and *in any event. At any rate* can replace *at least* in (34a) too, and so can *nonetheless* and *nevertheless*, of which the *-less* morpheme shows a family resemblance to *least.*

(34) (d) Mary didn't win a gold medal, but at any rate she won a silver medal.
(e) Mary didn't win a gold medal, but she nonetheless/nevertheless won a silver medal.

However, as (35) shows, *at least*, on the one hand, and *still*, *at any rate* and *nonetheless/nevertheless*, on the other hand, are not always interchangeable.

(35) (a) *Mary worked really hard, but at least she didn't win a silver medal.
(b) Mary worked really hard, but she still didn't win a silver medal.
(c) Mary worked really hard, but, at any rate, she didn't win a silver medal.
(d) Mary worked really hard, but she nonetheless/nevertheless didn't win a silver medal.

The difference is that *at least* has to announce something positive and *not winning a silver medal* is negative.

Independently of one's terminological preference, all researchers agree that the *at least* of the comfortable hotel (of example (2)) and the silver medal (of example (34a)) conveys a positive evaluation.[13] Kay (1992: 315) formulates this idea as follows: '[evaluative *at least*] has the two semantic properties of indicating positive evaluation and of indicating a less than maximal degree'. The point about the less than maximal degree is well taken if it is a way of rendering what feature (i.γ) implies in table 1: *at least* cannot combine with a highest FV. It is important to stress, though, that the proposition with the highest degree may still be true – see (15d). Example (36) shows that 'evaluative' *at least* has the same property.

(36) (a) #As to the properties of that hotel, at least it is perfect.
(b) As to the properties of that hotel, at least it is comfortable, it may also be cheap, and quiet, it may be located in a good neighbourhood and so it may be perfect.

[13] A reviewer fears that a positive evaluation is not necessary.

(i) Should John be put in prison? I mean – at least he killed eight men. (So it would be justified, I think.)

Of course, as such killing eight men is bad, but what *at least* adds is that the killing of eight people is a good argument for putting someone in prison.

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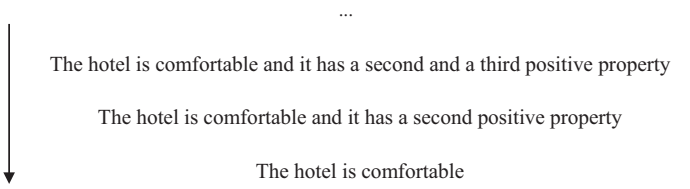


Figure 7. An additive scale for *At least the hotel is comfortable*

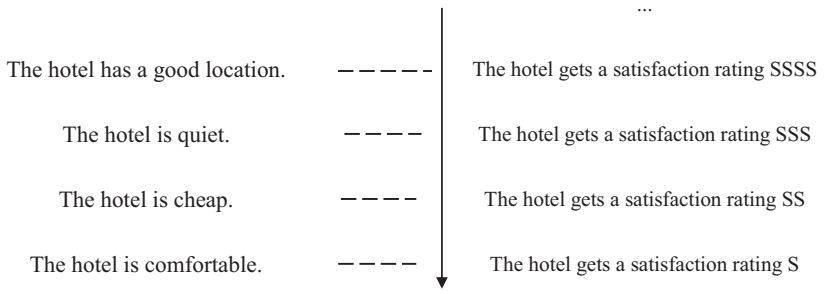


Figure 8. A substitutive scale for *At least the hotel is comfortable*

Example (36b) also shows that 'evaluative' *at least* is scalar. The scale can be additive, as in figure 7, or substitutive, when the speaker appreciates location, quietness less, and price less still and comfort least – figure 8. The context associates these properties with satisfaction levels, with 'SSSS' being the highest level and 'S' the lowest one.

It should also be pointed out that Gast (2013), inspired by Hole's (2004) analysis of the Chinese particle *jiù*, takes the non-maximality point to mean something different. For Gast non-maximality means that not all AV propositions are presupposed to be true. I have shown with (36b) that evaluative *at least* allows all AV propositions to be true, but Gast's point is different, for it concerns the presupposition that they are not all true. He draws a parallel between evaluative *at least* and *too.* For *too* he proposes the analysis in (37).

(37) (a) John attended the meeting, too.
(b) Other people attend the meeting.
(c) *John attended the meeting, too, but other people did not attend the meeting.

Example (37a) presupposes (37b) and we see this in (37c), for the presupposition cannot be denied, the latter being Gast's criterion for the status of presupposition. Is evaluative *at least* indeed like *too*? Example (38) shows that the alleged presupposition can be externally denied. Hence we are not dealing with a presupposition.

(38) (a) At least the hotel is comfortable.
(b) The hotel does not have all the positive features.
(c) At least the hotel is comfortable and it may in fact have all the positive features.

Let me now focus on the point about the positive evaluation. Let us consider (2) again. Note first that Kay's hotel example does not only show the FV proposition that we see in (38a). In example (2) the *at least* proposition is immediately preceded by a description of a negative property.

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(39) [...] it [that hotel] is noisy but at least it's comfortable.

Then comes *but* and the *at least* proposition describes a positive property. In my proposal, summarized in table 1, *at least* always has a positive component, and not only does the hotel have the one positive property of comfort, but it is possible that there are more. *But* expresses a contrast and it therefore highlights (emphasizes) this positive component. Example (40), from a brief observation in König (1991: 45), is similar and so is the silver medal example in (34a), discussed in Rullmann & Nakanishi (2009) and Nakanishi & Rullmann (2009).

(40) Paul may not be intelligent, but at least he is reliable.

The pattern with *but at least* seems to be somewhat conventionalized, as is also confirmed by the fact that of the ten relevant attestations of *at least* in a sample of 100 attestations in the *TenTen* corpus, three display the *but at least* strategy. Example (41), from Gast (2013: 111), going back to König *et al.* (1990: 246), lacks *but*, but it still starts with a negative property.

(41) If people do not want to vote for him, at least they should stay uncommitted.

So *but* is not actually necessary and neither is a mention of a negative property. In Kay's example the description of the negative property is preceded by the speaker's recommendation to stay in that hotel and if we only had the recommendation, this would also emphasize the positive side.

(42) Take that hotel; at least it is comfortable.

My hypothesis is this: the positive evaluation is part of the core meaning, as formulated in the positive component in table 1. But it can get highlighted when it is contrasted with a negative point or announced from a positive perspective or both. Also, the restrictive component is present too: there may be other positive features, but this is not guaranteed. And the context may also highlight the restrictive component of the *at least* meaning, as in (43).

(43) The hotel is noisy, expensive, crowded, dirty, the breakfast is awful and the hotel is located in a bad neighbourhood, but at least it is comfortable.

The *at least* part, the fact that the hotel is comfortable, is still a positive feature and it is possible that there are other positive features, but (43) strongly highlights the negative features. The potential positive features will not be that the hotel is quiet, cheap, not crowded, clean, that the breakfast is good or that the hotel is in a good neighbourhood.

The point can be made with the silver medal example in (34a) too.

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

Again, the *but at least* proposition follows a negative proposition and it highlights the inherently positive aspect of the *at least* proposition. And again, there may be other positive aspects to Mary's sports performance, as in (44).

(44) Mary didn't win a gold medal, but at least she won a silver medal and she may have gotten a lot of press coverage.

Figure 9 shows an additive contextual scale that fits (44). The context can also highlight the restrictive component of the *at least* proposition.

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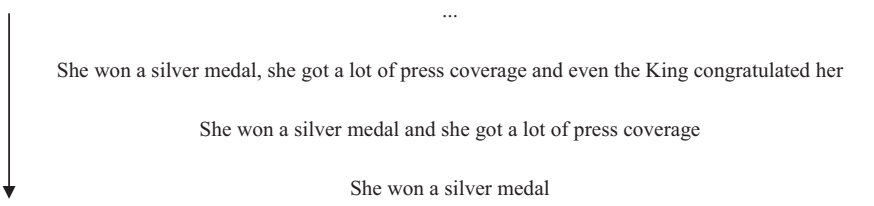


Figure 9. An additive scale for *At least she won a silver medal*

(45) Mary's results were not covered in the press, she was not supported by her national sports federation or even her family, she stayed in a bad hotel, so it was a very bad experience, but at least she won a silver medal.

Note that in one respect the *silver medal* (of (34a)) is different from the *comfortable hotel* (of (2)). *Comfortable* does not figure on any scale of hotel properties, independent of the speaker's private appreciation. *Comfortable* is thus not scale-including, with e.g. cost or location inherently ranking higher.[14] The silver medal, on the right, immediately conjures up the higher golden medal.

As a final point, let me briefly discuss whether there are other attempts to find a common core for the *three children* and the *comfortable hotel / silver medal* cases. Most of the researchers are not concerned about this: they do not discuss whether their evaluative and non-evaluative uses have a common core. Kay might have been expected to look for a common core, for he considers both to be scalar, in some sense, but he does not engage in showing this.[15] Gast (2013) does. He argues that the non-maximality feature is present in the non-evaluative uses, but in a way that is different from what he describes for the evaluative ones. For the latter, non-maximality means that it is presupposed that not all alternative propositions are true (Gast 2013: 112). For the non-evaluative use, non-maximality means that there is an implicature that there is no evidence that the higher alternatives are true. For Biezma (2013: 18) and Chen (2018: 50, 2024: 384–5), finally, the common core concerns the presence of a scale, the (main) difference residing in the question whether or not the higher values are possible – in the non-evaluative use – or false – in the evaluative use. I agree on the first point, but I disagree on the second point. To repeat, it is positive that the hotel is comfortable, but the hotel may have other positive features. It is positive to win a silver medal, but there can be good things about a competition other than winning this medal. So the higher value propositions for the evaluative uses need not be false.

6. 'Rhetorical' *at least*

I now come to the 'RHETORICAL' or 'ILLOCUTIONARY' reading or family of readings, the ones illustrated in (3) to (5), repeated in table 3. Only Kay (1992) and Gast (2013) analyse this type. They both distinguish three subtypes. Table 3 sketches their classification and terminology.[16] For the subtypes Gast (2013) supplies a label covering two subtypes, the

[14] In a different sense, 'comfortable' is scale inducing, in that it is gradable. A hotel may be more or less comfortable. What is at issue here, however, is how comfort compares to other properties.

[15] The recognition that both his 'scalar' and his 'evaluative' uses are scalar is relegated to a parenthetical remark (Kay 1992: 316) and a footnote (Kay 1992: 323).

[16] Kay's analysis pays tribute to the work of Ducrot (1980) and Anscombre & Ducrot (1983) on French *au moins* 'at least' (lit. 'at less'). In their 1983 work their 'modal' uses are illustrated with examples of both Kay's evaluative and rhetorical types. So the distinction between evaluative and rhetorical *at least* is Kay's.

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Table 3. Kay (1992) and Gast (2013)

Kay 1992	Gast 2013		Examples
rhetorical	illocutionary	non-epistemic	(3) Mary will help me, at least for a short time.
		epistemic	(4) Mary is at home, at least John's car is in the driveway.
			(5) Mary is at home, at least I think so.

label is 'epistemic', and for lack of a better term I call the remaining type 'non-epistemic'. Note that Kay's examples (and all the other ones discussed in the literature) show a post-clausal *at least.* More particularly still, it is not only *at least* that is post-clausal, the focus values are post-clausal too. *For a short time*, for instance, is just as external to the clause *Mary will help me* as the *at least* that precedes *for a short time.*

There are differences between Kay (1992) and Gast (2013), but most importantly, Kay and Gast agree that the three 'rhetorical'/ 'illocutionary' types mark what Kay (1992: 324–6) calls a 'rhetorical retreat'. I find Kay's epithet 'rhetorical' appropriate, because the retreat concerns something that is not expressed literally. When the speaker asserts that Mary will help him/her and stops there, (s)he does not signal any conditions, and by not doing that, (s) he implicates conversationally that there are none or that they are not relevant. But then, after the proposition *Mary will help me*, (s)he adds a scalar restriction, viz. that the help will definitely last for a short time, possibly for longer, but possibly not. As claimed before, all uses of *at least* have a positive as well as a restrictive component. In the previous section I studied contexts for which the research literature focused on the highlighting of the positive component. Here we are dealing with a construction that highlights the restrictive component. The positive component is still present, of course – the help may last longer – but it is not highlighted. Figure 10 represents a sensible contextual scale.

The uses in (4) and (5) are similar. With *Mary is at home* the speaker conversationally implicates that (s)he is certain that Mary is home. But then this unspoken but implicated commitment is qualified and even restricted. The speaker's implicated certainty is toned down to some level of uncertainty. In (4) the uncertainty relates to the fact that evidence of somebody's car in the driveway is not very strong, and in (5) the speaker explicitly states that(s) he only thinks so. So on the essential idea, I fully agree with Kay's and Gast's analysis, but I integrate it in a simple way in the wider analysis of *at least. At least* has a core meaning with a restrictive component and the rhetorical retreat highlights the restrictive component.

I want to stress that the above account takes the *at least* in the restrictive context to have the same meaning as elsewhere, and a scalar one for that matter. Kay (1992) does not deal with the question whether the uses in (3) to (5) are scalar. Twenty-two years later (Kay 2004) he does, but unsatisfactorily. Kay (2004: 681) considers them scalar, but two pages further he writes that this family of uses 'does not appear to be scalar in any straightforward way', adding that 'perhaps that observation reflects nothing more than our ignorance regarding'

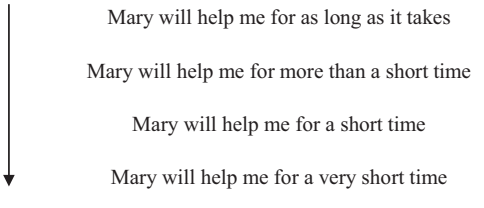


Figure 10. A scale for *Mary will help me, at least for a short time*

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these uses. Gast (2013) takes the uses in (3) to (5) to be scalar too, but he describes the peculiarity of these uses in a different way. First, he states that these uses do 'not require a scale of positive evaluation'. This comes close to my account, but it is still different: in my view, rhetorical *at least* does require positive evaluation, but it is not highlighted, and what is highlighted here is the restrictive component. There is a second difference. For Gast (2013: 114) the uses in (3) to (5) have a non-maximality presupposition that not all alternative propositions are true. This is not convincing. Example (46a) is the alleged presupposition for (3), it should be impossible to deny it – for that is how Gast finds a presupposition, and (46b) shows that this is not the case. So (46a) is not a presupposition, and non-maximality, presupposed or not, is not necessary to show rhetorically restrictive *at least* to be scalar.

(46) (a) Mary will help me, but not under all conditions.
(b) Mary will help me, at least for a short while and possibly unconditionally.

7. *At least* versus *at the least* and *at the very least*

Not much has been written about *at the least* and *at the very least.* Kay (1992: 314) writes that *at least* and *at the very least* mean the same thing as *at least* 'as far as I [Kay] can tell'. Gast (2013: 111) calls *at least*, *at the least* and *at the very least* 'near equivalents', and Geurts & Nouwen (2007: 535) take *at least* and *at the least* to be 'semantically equivalent'. The latter also report a comment by a colleague to the effect that *at the least* 'might be preferred' to *at least* in the pre-clausal position. I checked this on a sample of 100 *TenTen* attestations and I included *at the very least.* The results are shown in table 4.

We indeed see that *at the least* is more frequent in pre-clausal position, but also that *at the very least* 'prefers' the pre-clausal position even more.

Nakanishi & Rullmann (2009) as well as Chen (2018: 271–2, 2024: 389–90), however, argue for a semantic difference between *at least* and *at the very least* – they do not discuss *at the least.* They claim that *at the very least* does not allow the use that they call 'concessive', i.e. the *comfortable hotel* case. This is not correct. *But at the very least* occurs with a frequency of 0.13/million in the *TenTen* corpus and (47) is just one example showing the contrast with *but* and it expresses the same kind of contrastive positive judgment that we see in the *but* examples discussed in the literature.

(47) The page may not feature their best deals until later in the summer, but at the very least it shows consumers that they're thinking about their upcoming needs.<SkEng>

The only other claim on the difference between *at least*, *at the least* and *at the very last* that I am aware of is found in König *et al.* (1990: 247): they claim that *at the very least* is more emphatic.

I agree on the synonymy claims on *at least* and *at the least.* I also agree that *at the very least* is emphatic, but it is somewhat puzzling, for the use of *very* in front of a superlative seems redundant.

(48) [...] I happen to be the very tallest dwarf there is. <SkEng>

If the speaker of (48) is already the tallest dwarf, what could *very* add? And (48) is not the only attestation of *very tallest* – there are 115 other *TenTen* attestations.

Table 4. *At least*, *at the least* and *at the very least* in pre-clausal position

at least	*at the least*	*at the very least*
10	35	45

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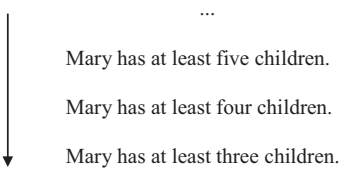


Figure 11. A scale for *Mary has at the very least three children*

I propose to consider *very tallest* as 'doubly superlative': it identifies the 'most tallest dwarf' out of group of tallest dwarfs. Thus there is a double comparison: some dwarfs are the tallest ones, in comparison with other dwarfs, and within that group, one dwarf is again the tallest one, in comparison with the other tallest dwarfs. We can draw inspiration from this to analyse *at the very least* as compared to *at least.* With *at the very least* one envisages not just one *at least* partition, but more than one, but within that set, one expresses the most restrictive partition. With *at the very least three* there is an *at least three* focus partition and the partitions with the higher numbers are alternative partitions. There has to be at least one higher alternative partition. Just like with the 'normal' scales, the higher alternatives entail the lower ones. See figure 11.

Thus when Mary has at the very least three children, the speaker evokes a contrast with the possibility that the lowest guaranteed number of children is higher than three. This is shown in (49), in which the use of a 'repair disjunction'[17] is fine when *at the very least* is contrasted with a higher partition, but not with a lower one.

(49) (a) Mary has at least four children or at the very least three.
(b) #Mary has at least two children or at the very least three.

At the very least means what *at least* means, but it involves an additional scalar comparison.

Possibly related to this semantic distinction is the fact that *or at the very least*, inviting an analysis as a repair construction, as in (49a) and (50), is rather common for *at the very least*, and much more so than for *at least* and *at the least*; see table 5 (*TenTen* 100 hits sample).

(50) No, that would certainly be impossible or at the very least it would be like a living death. <SkEng>

The three constructions differ in many other ways. Table 4 showed that *at the very least* is more frequent in the pre-clausal position, with *at the least* taking up a mid position. This may be related to the fact that *at the very least* is very infrequent with numeral foci; see table 6 (*TenTen* 100 hits sample).

All three constructions prefer to focus from the left, but *at the least* seems the most tolerant for focusing form the right, as in (51); see table 7 (*TenTen* 100 hits sample).

Table 5. The corrective *or at* (*the* (*very*)) *least* construction

at least	*at the least*	*at the very least*
10	13	29

[17] That disjunction is used for repair is recognized by Ariel & Mauri (2018: 992) as an important use of disjunction, but it is not well-studied (cp. also Blakemore 2007: 326–7).

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Table 6. Numerical with *at least*, *at the least* and *at the very least*

	at least	*at the least*	*at the very least*
numerical focus	48	5	1

Table 7. Focusing from the right

at least	*at the least*	*at the very least*
1	23	12

Table 8. *At least*, *at the least* and *at the very least*

rhetorical uses	*at least*	*at the least*	*at the very least*
non-epistemic	15	1	1
epistemic	5	2	0

(51) [...] what resemblances to Oriental modes may be found in it are an effect of convergence at the most, and of accident at the least. <SkEng>

Interestingly, though *at the very least* is more restrictive than *at least* and the rhetorical uses profile the restrictive side of *at least* and its alternatives, *at the very least* is the least preferred strategy there; see table 8 (*TenTen* 100 hits sample). For the epistemic subtypes the difference in the numbers is small, but for the non-epistemic ones the difference is substantial. Perhaps the afterthought character of the rhetorical uses is less compatible with the emphatic nature of *at the very least.*

I should be clear that the observations registered in tables 6 to 8 count as invitations for further research.

8. Conclusion

The major goal of this article was to plead for a uniform analysis of *at least.* I proposed that all uses have a common semantic core, a *Gesamtbedeutung.* This core meaning has a scalar, a positive and a restrictive component and the latter two components can be highlighted by the context. Uses called 'evaluative', 'propositional' or 'concessive' were analysed in terms of the highlighting of the positive component. Uses called 'rhetorical' or 'illocutionary' were analysed in terms of the highlighting of the restrictive component. For *at the very least* the contribution of *very* is seen as a reference to a second scale, which highlights restriction. These proposals are compared with other contemporary analyses.

A secondary goal of the article was to draw attention to alternatives for *at least.* Thus I embarked on the investigation *at the least* and *at the very least.* For both I argued that they share the core meaning proposed for *at least.* I also stressed that besides *at the least* and *at the very least* there are many more alternatives, viz. other 'superlative' elements with *least*, like *leastwise*, or without *least*, like *at minimum*, or 'comparative' ones like *if not more*, combinations of superlative and comparative elements, like *at least ... if not more*, or constructions that are neither superlative nor comparative, like *even if only.* Some work has been done on these constructions, but they deserve more work.

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An interesting issue for the research agenda is the diachrony of *at least* and related constructions (see Lewis 2000: 154–86, 2002; Gast 2013: 116 for *at least*). Another issue for future research is the cross-linguistic study of the counterparts of *at least*-like constructions. A start has been made by Nakanishi & Rullmann (2009) and Rullmann & Nakanishi (2009), Grosz (2011: 347–61), Gast (2013), Butschety (2017), Chen (2018: 29–32, 2024), Kolyseva (2022), and van der Auwera & Pappuswamy (2024), and we should not forget that the *primum movens* was work on French (Ducrot 1980; Anscombre & Ducrot 1983).

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