# Presupposition and exclusivity in Indian English *only*

Auromita Mitra

## 1 Introduction: issues, aims, questions

In most varieties of English, *only* is a focus-sensitive particle that attaches to a focused constituent to its right and contributes a meaning of exclusivity: i.e., that among other contextually salient alternatives, the complement of *only* is the only alternative for which the statement holds (Rooth, 1985, 1992).

(1)   Exclusive *only* [1]

    a.   Only [John]$_F$ danced
        = John, and no one else, danced

    b.   John only [danced]$_F$
        = John didn't do anything but dance

In addition to this "exclusive" *only*, Indian English (IE) allows for another use of the particle (henceforth, IE *only*):

(2)   Indian English *only*
    .[John]$_F$ only danced
    = It was John who danced (John is known for his party-dancing proclivities)
    $\neq$ John, and no one else, danced
    $\neq$ John didn't do anything but dance

This squib is concerned with the latter—IE *only*. Two salient characteristics distinguish this use from the exclusive *only*:

  (i)   Position: Indian English *only* attaches to a focused element on its left, rather than its right.

  (ii)   Meaning contribution: out of all the contextually salient focus alternatives, the complement of *only* is the most expected one.

(i) shows that the two uses of *only* in Indian English are in complementary (positional) distribution. This positional difference is especially significant because it is possible to use both the exclusive and IE *only* within the same utterance, with the same complement:

---

1. Many of the examples in this paper are adapted from Ghoshal (2021)

(3)  IE allows exclusive and IE *only* to co-occur with the same complement
John eats only [vegetarian food]$_F$ only
= John eats exclusively vegetarian food, and this is the most expected dietary habit
for John

Here, the two uses of *only* are distinguished only by their positions. Interestingly, IE *only*
appears to scope over exclusive *only* in the sentence: the inference is that that John's eating
*exclusively vegetarian food* is the most expected. It is hard to get a reading where exclu-
sive *only* scopes over IE *only*, suggesting that IE *only* prefers to scope over exclusive *only*
through covert movement. The incorporation of exclusive *only* into the complement of IE
*only* deserves careful study in future work. I am not pursuing that, or positional differences,
any further here. The rest of the squib is concerned with the meaning contribution of IE
*only*, in sentences that lack any other focus particle.

An existing analysis of the meaning contribution of IE *only* is as follows: It takes a proposition
as its argument, and creates a presupposition that places the intension of its embedded
proposition at the top of a contextually-determined expectation scale (Ghoshal, 2021). The
primary meaning contribution of IE *only* is that of expectation. This is unlike exclusive *only*,
which contributes the meaning of exclusivity, and is therefore unacceptable in an utterance
where any of the other focus alternatives are true:

(4)  *Only John came to class. Shyama and Abdul came too.

However, there are sentences in which the use of IE *only* licenses an inference of exclusivity:

(5)  (Context: The whole class took a test in Math, Physics, and English. John is known
to be particularly good at Math.)
.[John]$_F$ only got an A in Math
= John was the most likely person to get an A in Math (compared to everyone else)
But also suggests: No one else got an A in Math

Observation: It is possible to explicitly reinforce this exclusivity without redundancy. How-
ever, in positive sentences, it is difficult to explicitly cancel this inference without giving rise
to anomaly and/or unacceptability. This asymmetry does not exist in negative sentences.

This squib explores the exclusivity reading of IE *only*, focusing on the following questions: (i)
Is this exclusivity inference an entailment or an implicature? (ii) If it is an implicature, how
is it built from the presuppositional meaning of IE *only*? (iii) What explains the asymmetry
between positive and negative sentences with regard to the exclusivity inference— how does
negation interact with the implicature?
I explore the idea that exclusivity is not an additional meaning component of IE *only*, but
rather follows from interaction of its presuppositional content with Gricean conversational
maxims, and simple principles of inference.

# 2  Data: Exclusivity inference in Indian English *only*

This section describes the behavior of IE *only* in structures that vary with regard to the position of focus in the sentence. As I will show, this affects the meaning contribution of the particle and the exclusivity inference it generates.

## 2.1  Non-negated sentences

Non-negated sentences with focus on both subject and non-subject elements behave alike: IE *only* creates a presupposition that the focused element in its complement is the most expected among the alternative set created by focus[2]. Moreover, it also licenses an inference of exclusivity:

(6)  Exclusivity inference with IE *only* in non-negated sentences
(Context: The whole class took a test in Math, Physics, and English. John is known to be particularly good at Math.)

    a.  subject focus
        .$[\text{John}]_F$ only got an A in Math
        = John is the most likely to get an A in Math (compared to everyone else)
        But also suggests: No one else got an A in Math

    b.  non-subject focus
        John got an A in $[\text{Math}]_F$ only
        = John's getting an A in Math is most expected (compared to his getting an A in other subjects)
        But also suggests: John didn't get an A in Physics or English

## 2.2  Negative sentences: high-scope negation

IE *only* can combine with a negated sentence of the form ¬p in two ways:

  (i)  ¬(only(p)): presupposes that p was the most expected alternative, and asserts that p is false; high-scope negation

  (ii)  only(¬(p)): presupposes that ¬p was the most expected alternative, and asserts that ¬p is true, i.e. p is false; low-scope negation

In sentences with high-scope negation, parallel to non-negated sentences, IE *only* adds the presupposition that the focused alternative is at the top of the expectation scale. Also parallel to non-negated sentences, it licenses an inference of exclusivity:

---

2. I am assuming an analysis of focus as proposed in Rooth (1985), i.e. that focus invokes contextually-salient alternative propositions. This is spelt out in section 4.

(7) Exclusivity inference with IE *only* in sentences with high-scope negation
(Context: The whole class took a test in Math, Physics, and English. John is known to be particularly good at Math.)

  a. subject focus
  .[John]$_F$ only didn't get an A in Math
  = John was the most likely to get an A in Math (compared to everyone else)
  But also suggests: No one else got an A in Math

  b. non-subject focus
  John didn't get an A in [Math]$_F$ only
  = John's getting an A in Math was most expected (compared to his getting an A in other subjects)
  But also suggests: John didn't get an A in Physics or English

Note that the presence of negation does not change the implicature— it is parallel to the positive sentences in section 2.1.

## 2.3 Negated sentences: low-scope negation

In sentences where negation is part of the focused constituent, IE *only* scopes over negation. IE *only* contributes a presupposition that the negated proposition is the most expected, compared to its positive counterpart. There is no exclusivity inference here.

(8) (Context: Ali had a party on the weekend. It is well known that Ali and John don't get along)
John [didn't go]$_F$ only
= John didn't go, and his not going was expected (compared to his going)

# 3 Nature of exclusivity inference, questions, and hypotheses

Information that is implied, rather than entailed, by the semantic content of a word/phrase can be refuted without causing anomaly, and reinforced without causing redundancy (Grice, 1975). Reinforcement and cancelability can thus be used as tests to ascertain whether a given inference is an entailment (cannot be reinforced and canceled) or an implicature (can be reinforced and canceled).
Tests for implicature in negated sentences suggest that IE *only* implies, rather than entails, exclusivity:

(9)  a.   .[The bride]$_F$ only didn't show up to the wedding

    b.   Reinforcable: no redundancy
.[The bride]$_F$ only didn't show up to the wedding. Of course no one else came.

    c.   Cancelable
.[The bride]$_F$ only didn't show up to the wedding. Everyone else was there.

However, tests for implicature in positive sentences are conflicting

(10)  a.   .[John]$_F$ only got an A in Math

    b.   Reinforcable: no redundancy
.[John]$_F$ only got an A in Math. No one else got an A.

    c.   Canceling the implicature is anomalous
## [John]$_F$ only got an A in Math. Five other people also got As.

The sequence in (c) is odd, bordering on unacceptability. It appears as though the exclusivity inference of IE *only* in positive sentences cannot be canceled. This in itself is unlikely to be sufficient evidence that the exclusivity is an entailment, since it can be reinforced, and can also be canceled in negative sentences. I will assume that the exclusivity is indeed an implicature. The question I am interested in, then, is why it is difficult to cancel this implicature in positive (non-negated) sentences. Related to this is the question of why this implicature arises in the first place. I will argue that this is not an additional meaning component of IE *only*. How is it then built from the presuppositional meaning of IE *only*? The analysis in the following section attempts to answer these interrelated questions, summarized below:

(i)   How is the exclusivity implicature built up from the meaning content of IE *only*?

(ii)  Why is it difficult to cancel the implicature in positive sentences?

(iii) How does the implicature interact with negation–specifically, what explains the asymmetry in cancelability between positive and negative sentences?

# 4   Analysis

## 4.1   At-issue meaning of *only*

Assuming the analysis of focus as proposed by Rooth (1985, 1992), focus evokes a contextually-determined set of alternatives to the focused element. An existing analysis of IE *only* (Ghoshal, 2021) proposes that it operates on focused propositions, creates an ordered "expectation scale" from the set of alternatives evoked by focus, and affects the position of its complement on this scale. Specifically, IE *only* places its complement at the top of this expectation scale. This is a presuppositional meaning contribution. Thus, IE *also* contributes the presupposition that the focused element in its complement is the most expected among contextually salient alternatives.

## 4.2   Gricean implicatures

I suggest that the position of an element on a contextually-determined expectation scale affects the kind of information it introduces into a discourse: the more expected a piece of information, the less "informative" it is (assuming an informal notion of "informativity" as introducing new information to the discourse). Some principles that govern this kind of informativity in discourse are the conversational maxims proposed by Grice (Grice, 1975). One of the principles of a cooperative conversation is that contributions in a discourse should be as informative as needed (maxim of Quantity), and relevant to the discourse (maxim of Relevance). I propose that when the meaning contribution of a word affects the expectation scale, it necessarily interacts with these conversational principles. In most cases, stating the obvious is not considered informative (violates the maxim of Quantity). However, the use of IE *only* explicitly adds the meaning that the focused element is at the top of the expectation scale, and therefore the least informative *in the absence of any other factor.* This appears violate the Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975). This apparent issue is resolved by assuming an intentional violation of the maxim of Quantity for the sake of upholding another maxim, that of Relevance. I propose that in most circumstances, stating the most expected alternative by using IE *only* is understood to still uphold the Cooperative Principle, by assuming that the most expected proposition is being uttered because the less expected (and therefore more informative) alternatives are either not true, or not relevant to the current discourse. This gives rise to the inference of exclusivity.

In the following subsections, I explore this idea for each sentence type described in section 2 to examine how well it accounts for the attested readings associated with IE *only.* I will show that this analysis predicts most of the observed patterns, while raising some questions for future research.

## 4.3   Relevance implicature in non-negated sentences

As described in section 4.1, IE *only* adds a presupposition that the focused element is the most expected among contextually determined alternatives. In positive sentences, IE *only* thus asserts the truth of the most expected proposition given the present context. This appears to violate Grice's maxim of Quantity, being less-than-optimally informative. One way to reconcile this with the Cooperative Principle, is to assume that the utterance either does not violate the maxim of Quantity, or does so in order to avoid the violation of some other maxim. I propose that in this case, it is the latter. The interpretation is that the maxim of Quantity is violated to better satisfy the maxim of Relevance, by assuming that the most expected alternative is in this case the *most relevant–* either because the lesser expected propositions are not true, or because their truth is not relevant to the current discourse. This leads to an implicature of exclusivity, by suggesting that the stated focused alternative is the *only* one that is true.

Assuming this analysis, consider what happens when the implicature is reinforced or canceled:

(11)   a.   .[John]$_F$ only got an A in Math

    b.   Reinforcing the exclusivity implicature:
       .[John]$_F$ only got an A in Math. No one else got an A.

When the implicature is reinforced by explicitly stating that the lesser expected alternatives are not true, the discourse is coherent in terms of relevance: the speaker merely confirms what the recipient has already inferred, i.e. that the less expected alternatives are not true. However, consider what happens when we attempt to cancel the implicature by asserting that a lesser expected alternative is in fact true:

(12)   a.   .[John]$_F$ only got an A in Math

    b.   Attempting to cancel the exclusivity implicature:
       ## [John]$_F$ only got an A in Math. Five other people also got As.

This sequence is anomalous, because it is incoherent in terms of relevance. While asserting (a) leads to the implicature that (a) is the most informative sentence in the context given considerations of relevance, following it up with (b) contradicts this. (b) introduces the information that a lesser expected a.k.a. more informative proposition is true, and moreover that it is relevant to the current discourse (since it was uttered in the discourse by a cooperative participant). In light of this new information, the assertion of (a) appears uncooperative– why utter the lesser informative proposition in (a), when a more informative, discourse-relevant proposition (b) is true? This violates the maxim of Quality/Quantity with no apparent purpose. The alternative is to assume that (a) did *not* violate said maxim, which would lead to the conclusion that (b) was irrelevant to the discourse, in which case uttering (b) violates the maxim of Relevance. In other words, there is no way to reconcile the utterance of the sequence (a)–(b) within the same discourse context while assuming the Cooperative Principle to hold throughout. I propose that this is why it is difficult to cancel the exclusivity implicature in positive sentences with IE *only.*

## 4.4   Scalar implicature with high-scope negation

Consider now the effect of IE *only* on negated sentences. In sentences with high-scope negation, meaning is built in the following form, for any sentence expressing the proposition p: ¬(only(p)). Negation operates over the presupposition created by IE *only—* the sentence asserts that the most expected proposition given the context, is false.
In terms of relevance, this has a different import than its non-negated counterpart: the most expected proposition is also the one that is most likely to be true. Asserting its truth is thus the least informative statement. In contrast, the most expected alternative is the *least* likely to be false. Therefore, its negation (¬p) is the least expected alternative. Given our conception of informativity, (¬p) is therefore the most informative proposition in a given context. Thus, uttering this sentence is not perceived as violating the Gricean maxim of Quantity. The utterance in itself is straightforwardly compatible with the Cooperative Principle, and additional considerations of relevance need not be implicated. It is an informative addition to the discourse, and is simply assumed to be relevant.

What, then, gives rise to the inference of exclusivity in such sentences? I propose that this arises from a simple scalar implicature. A sentence with high-scope negation over IE *only* asserts that the most likely alternative is false. On a scale of likelihood, this is the strongest possible assertion in the context. This leads to a scalar implicature.

Scalar implicatures arise when a strong assertion implicates the truth of weaker assertions and conversely, a weaker assertion implicates the *falsity* of stronger assertions. E.g.:

(13)   (The box contained 10 cookies)
       I ate some of the cookies
       Suggests: I ate at least one cookie
       Suggests: I did not eat all of the cookies

Consider the following example with IE *only*:

(14)   .[John]$_F$ only didn't get an A in Math
       = John didn't get an A + John was the most likely to get an A (compared to everyone else)
       Suggests: No one else got an A in Math

The sentence suggests that if John, being the most likely candidate, didn't get an A, it is very unlikely that anyone else did (perhaps the questions were impossibly difficult). This reading parallels the use of *even*, where the sentence "Even John didn't get an A" uttered in the same context suggests that no was else is likely to have received an A.
I propose that the expectation scale introduced by IE *only* behaves like a simple quantity scale, with the propositions on the higher end of the expectation scale being the weakest assertions, and their negations therefore being the strongest assertions.
Just like other scalar implicatures, these implicatures can be canceled and reinforced without inducing anomaly:

(15)   (The box contained 10 cookies)

       a.   I ate some of the cookies

       b.   In fact, I ate all of them (cancelable)

       c.   I didn't eat all of them, though (reinforcable)

(16)   a.   .[John]$_F$ only didn't get an A in Math

       b.   So you can imagine how the test went. Of course no one else got an A.

       c.   Somehow, *Peter* managed to get an A, and he was the only one.

Crucially, the sequence (a)—(c) above is not pragmatically odd because it does not introduce a less informative sentence followed by a more informative one from the same scale. Since (a) is already the most informative utterance in this context, the informativity of (c) is

not at issue here– Peter getting an A might range from being unsurprising to completely unbelievable, but that does not matter. The most informative sentence is uttered first, which is then followed by a second sentence, presumably because it has some relevance to the discourse.

## 4.5 No implicature with low-scope negation? A puzzle

When negation is understood to be inside the focused constituent, and therefore under the scope of IE *only*, there is no exclusivity inference. Assume that such a sentence expresses the proposition *only*(¬p), where p is a positive proposition. I propose that in such cases, there are two contextually salient focus alternatives: the proposition p and its negation ¬p. The sentence asserts the latter. IE *only* presupposes that the focused alternative (¬p) is more expected than the other alternative (p). We saw before that the exclusivity inference arises from two sources: (i) apparent violations of the maxim of Quantity; (ii) scalar implicature. Clearly, a set {p, ¬p} cannot be said to form a scale in the sense discussed in section 4.4. Although ¬p is the more likely alternative, and therefore p is arguably a "stronger" (less expected) claim, it cannot be inferred that p guarantees the truth of the less strong ¬p — in fact, p entails that ¬p is false. Turning to quantity and relevance, it is again obvious that the set of alternatives {p, ¬p} is not subject to the same relevance requirements as discussed in section 4.3: it is hard to conceive of a situation where uttering the more expected and therefore less informative ¬p implies that p is *irrelevant* to the discourse, because ¬p entails that p is false. Thus, there is no exclusivity inference in these cases, because the "exclusivity" of the focused alternative is already entailed by the meaning of negation.

Although it is possible in principle to have sentences with low-scope negation and multiple focus alternatives parallel to the positive sentences in section 2.1, it is hard to construe readings where these alternatives feature in the expectation scale generated by IE *only*. E.g:

(17)   (Context: There was a test with problems at different levels of difficulty. The expectation is that John would be able to solve the easier problems, but not the harder problems)
John [couldn't solve the hardest problem]$_F$ only

Here, the desired focus alternatives might be of the form: {couldn't solve the hardest problem, couldn't solve the second-hardest problem, ..., couldn't solve the second-easiest problem, couldn't solve the easiest problem}. We would expect that the use of IE *only* arranges these into an expectation scale with the first alternative being at the top of the scale and the last at the bottom. But this does not happen. The use of high-scoping *only* here licenses the reading that John's not solving the hardest problem was the most expected *compared to his solving the problem*, rather than compared to his not solving the other problems. In other words, when IE *only* modifies a negated sentence and scopes over negation, the expectation scale created by *only* contains the negated sentence and its non-negated counterpart, rather than other negated propositions. This interpretive preference might suggest that the particle prefers structures where only the negation is in focus, rather than the whole VP. The

interaction of *only* with low-scope negation merits more careful investigation. I leave this for future work.

## 4.6 Consequence of relevance: Minimal sufficiency reading

The analysis of inferences generated by IE *only* in terms of Gricean principles bears on another reading licensed by the particle:

(18)   .[Thinking about her]$_F$ only drives me nuts
       = Just thinking about her is enough to drive me nuts

In this sentence, the use of IE *only* has an effect parallel to the particle *just*: it suggests that the material inside focus, to the left of *only*, is a sufficient condition to guarantee the truth of the assertion that follows *only*. The sentence also suggests that the focused element is the minimal condition for the truth of the assertion– i.e., any weaker alternative would not suffice. Moreover, it licenses a scalar implicature that any stronger alternative necessarily guarantees the truth of the assertion following *only*.

For concreteness, consider the following set of sentences which express different degrees of interaction. Let us assume that the likelihood of the speaker's being "driven nuts" increases as we go down the list:

(19)   a.   .[Thinking about her]$_F$ drives me nuts

       b.   .[Talking to her]$_F$ drives me nuts

       c.   .[Spending time with her]$_F$ drives me nuts

Uttering *only*(b) asserts that talking to her drives the speaker nuts, implies that spending time with her would definitely drive the speaker nuts, and implies that thinking about her is in itself not enough to drive the speaker nuts. In other words, (b) is the *minimal and sufficient* condition for the speaker to be driven nuts. Following Coppock & Beaver (2014), who use the term in relation to the meaning of *just*, I am referring to this behavior of IE *only* as a Minimal Sufficiency reading. While I leave a thorough analysis of this reading for future work, it is worth noting that the account presented here has promising ingredients for such an analysis. It is clear that this use of IE *only* invokes a scalar reading, and affects the position of the focused material on some contextually derived scale (leading to the "sufficiency" reading). I believe that an analysis invoking the discourse relevance of alternatives on an expectation scale would allow us to derive these inference patterns from the presuppositional meaning of IE *only* as proposed by Ghoshal (2021).

## 5   Conclusion and questions

This squib examined the sources of, and inferences associated with, the exclusivity inference in Indian English *only*. I proposed that the inferences associated with IE *only* arise from interaction between its presuppositional meaning component and Gricean principles of conversation, operationalized here as the informativity of an utterance in a given discourse

context. This accounts for the presence of an exclusivity inference, as well as a twofold asymmetry between (i) its cancelability and reinforcability and (ii) its behavior in negated vs non-negated sentences. This analysis presents some puzzles that future work should examine.

Section 1 briefly discussed positional differences between IE *only* and exclusive *only*, and showed that in sentences with both exclusive and IE *only*, the latter takes high scope. A direction for future work is to clarify the reasons and consequences of this construction, and examine the scope-taking possibilities of IE *only* in the presence of other focus particles and quantifiers. This relates to the particle's behavior with low-scope negation, and the apparent incompatibility with multiple low-scope negation focus alternatives (section 4.5). Finally, an exciting avenue for future work is to examine the Minimal Sufficiency reading licensed by IE *only* using an analysis along these lines.

# References

Coppock, E., & Beaver, D. I. (2014). Principles of the exclusive muddle. *Journal of Semantics*, *31*(3), 371–432.

Ghoshal, K. (2021). Indian English only only. *Unpublished squib, NYU*.

Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In *Speech acts* (pp. 41–58). Brill.

Rooth, M. (1985). *Association with focus* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Rooth, M. (1992). A theory of focus interpretation. *Natural language semantics*, *1*(1), 75–116.