

# MINIMIZERS IN CONDITIONAL THREATS AND PROMISES

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## Introduction: The data

Weak NPIs like *ever* can occur in the antecedents of conditionals, but strong NPIs like *in weeks* cannot.

- (1) a. If John *ever* drinks alcohol, I will be surprised. (neutral)  
 b. If John *ever* drinks alcohol, I will punch him. (threat)  
 c. If John *ever* drinks alcohol, I will kiss him. (promise)
- (2) a. ??If John drinks a. *in weeks*, I will be surprised. (neutral)  
 b. ??If John drinks alcohol *in weeks*, I will punch him. (threat)  
 c. ??If John drinks alcohol *in weeks*, I will kiss him. (promise)

But **minimizers** show an unexplained **content-dependency**

(cf. Lakoff (1969)):

- (3) a. If John drinks **a drop**, I will be surprised. (neutral)  
 b. If John drinks **a drop**, I will punch him. (threat)  
 c. ??If John drinks **a drop**, I will kiss him. (promise)

## Theories of NPI licensing

### Downward-Entailment

NPI must occur in the scope of a **downward entailing** operator (cf. Ladusaw (1979), von Stechow (1999)).

- (4) If Alex likes vegetables, we can serve this soup.  $\subseteq$   
 If Alex likes carrots, we can serve this soup.  
 ✓ If Alex likes any vegetables, we can serve this soup.

### Pragmatic Scales

NPIs trigger **alternatives**; in order to be licensed, they must be stronger than (in declaratives: entail) their alternatives (cf. Krifka (2005), Eckardt (2005)).

- (5) If Alex likes any vegetables, we can serve this soup.  $\subseteq$   
 If Alex likes orange-coloured vegetables, ...  $\subseteq$   
 If Alex likes carrots, ...

### Neither theory predicts content-sensitivity in conditionals!

## Hypotheses

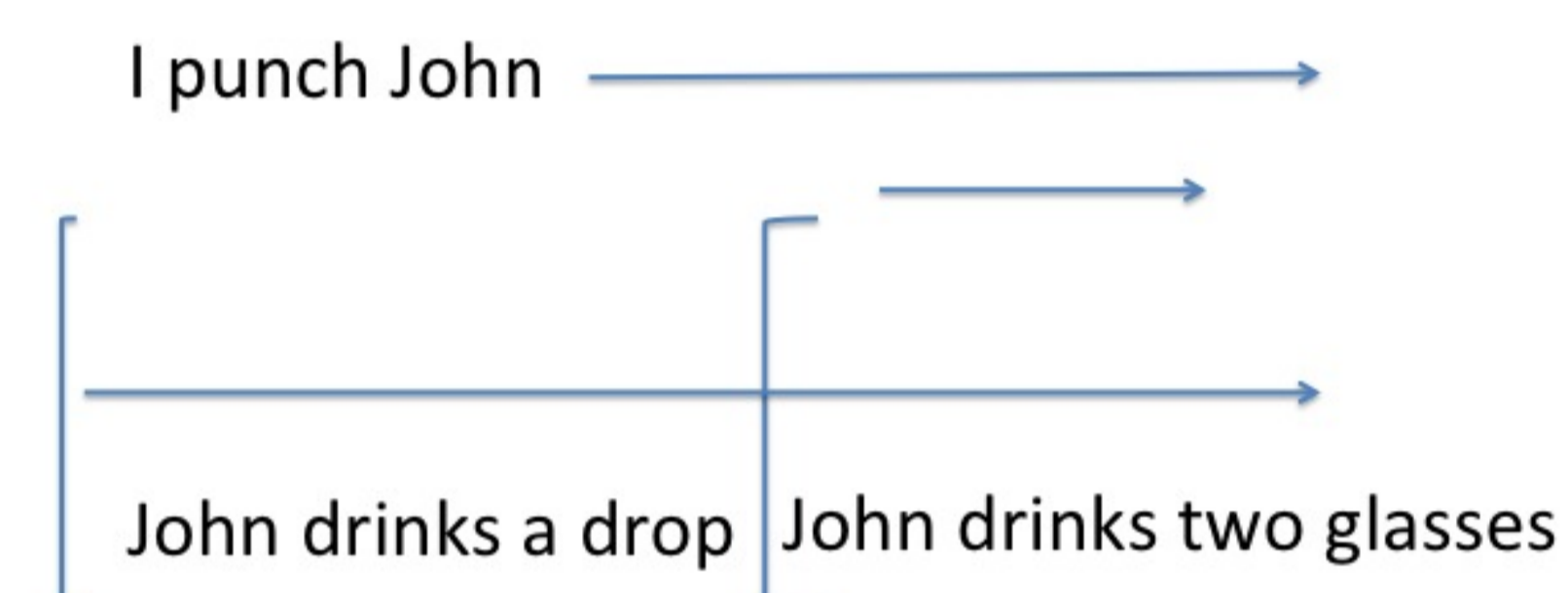
- ▶ Hypothesis 1: Not all conditionals can license minimizers (false; cf. (1c))
- ▶ Hypothesis 2: Promises aren't really conditionals (unattractive)
- ▶ Hypothesis 3: There are pragmatic reasons to exclude minimizers from promises (yes!)

## Threats and promises

- ▶ Aim to bring about addressee behaviour (cf. Searle (1998)).
- ▶ **Promises are more costly when they succeed, and threats when they fail** (cf. Schelling (1960)).
- ▶ Only promises bring **social obligations** for the speaker (cf. experimental evidence in Verbrugge et al. (2005)).

## Minimizers in threats

- (6) If John drinks a drop, I will punch him.



- ▶ goal: **avoid** material in the antecedent  
 ~> minimizer= lowest item on relevant scale
- ▶ using minimizer makes threat as strong as possible  
 => **heightens** speaker benefits

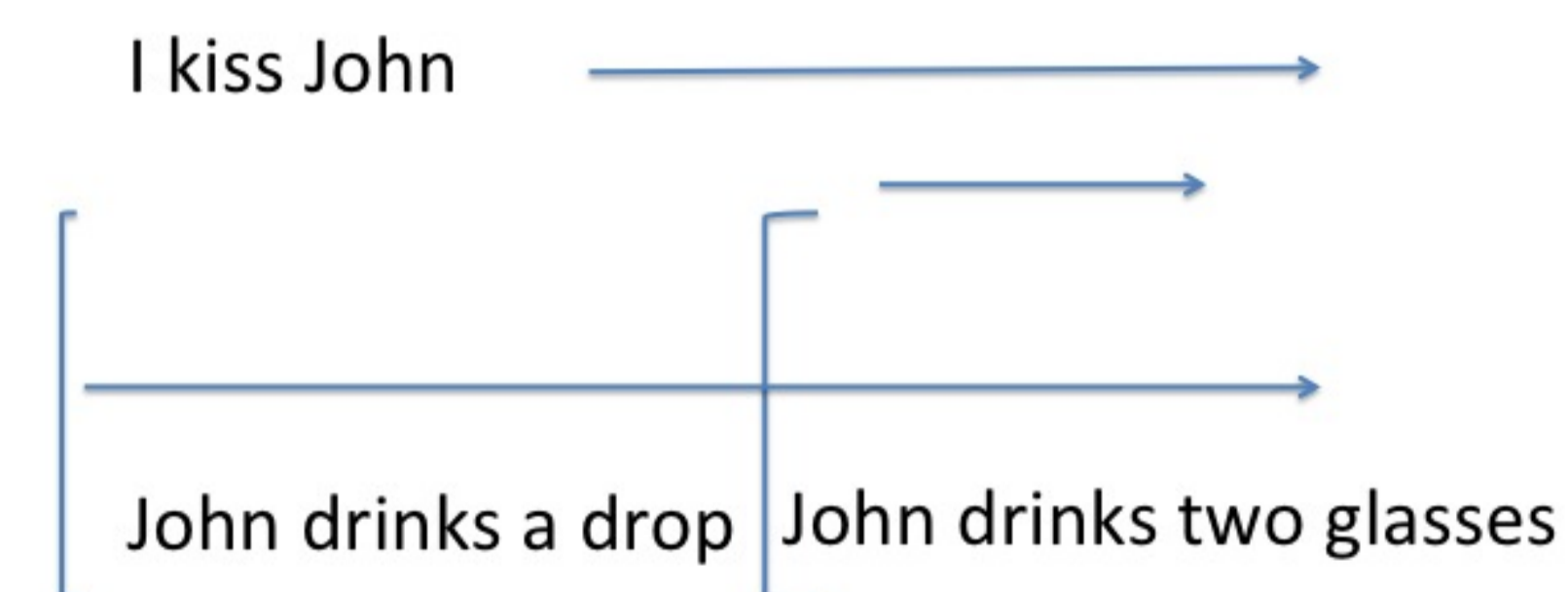
additional benefit: **yes**

additional cost: **no**

=> **rational to use**

## Minimizers in promises

- (7) ??If John drinks a drop, I will kiss him.



- ▶ goal: **achieve** material in antecedent  
 ~> minimizer= lowest item on relevant scale
- ▶ using minimizer makes promises as strong as possible  
 => **lessens** speaker benefits

additional benefit: **no**

additional cost: **yes**

=> **irrational to use**

## Desperate Promises

- (8) ✓ If you say even one word in that meeting, I'll give you a gigantic bonus.  
 (9) If you present the new product, I will give you a gigantic bonus.

- ▶ No semantic restriction against minimizers in promises!
- ▶ Promises without minimizers may be beneficial, but not efficacious  
 => speakers can use minimizers to **heighten efficacy!**  
 (speakers assign utilities as below)

|                 | present new product | say one word |
|-----------------|---------------------|--------------|
| hearer cost     | -80                 | -10          |
| hearer efficacy | 25                  | 25           |
| hearer net gain | -55                 | <b>15</b>    |

- ▶ only rational if benefit is high enough to **offset additional cost**

|                  | present new product | say one word |
|------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| speaker benefit  | 50                  | 15           |
| speaker cost     | -10                 | -10          |
| speaker net gain | 40                  | <b>5</b>     |

- ▶ typically not the case; domain widening creates rhetorical effect (cf. van Rooij (2003) for similar effects in questions).

## Conclusion

- ▶ Minimizer NPIs are licensed in conditionals; they strengthen the promise/threat they appear in
- ▶ stronger threats = speaker advantage  
 => minimizers generally good
- ▶ stronger promises = speaker disadvantage  
 => minimizers generally bad
- ▶ **The content-sensitivity of minimizers in conditional threats and promises can be explained pragmatically as rational vs. irrational discourse moves.**

## References

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