Epistemic vs. concessive *at least*:
A matter of epistemic uncertainty

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Whether the two interpretations of *at least*-sentences sketched in (1) must be traced back to two distinct lexical entries for *at least* or not is still an open question in research on that topic.

(4) a. *John caught at least five fish*   (EPISTEMIC)
        ≈ Speaker is uncertain about exactly how many fish John caught
    b. *At least John caught five fish.*   (CONCESSIVE)
        ≈ Although catching five fish is less preferable than catching any higher amount of fish, catching five fish is satisfactory

Whereas Nakanishi & Rullmann (2009) distinguish between two separate lexical entries, based on *at least*'s syntactic surface structure position; Biezma (2013) argues that contextual factors determine the EPISTEMIC/CONCESSIVE distinction. But each account is faced with some troubles of its own.

This proposal in favor of just one lexical entry for *at least* argues for an analogy to epistemic uncertainty readings arising from an epistemic modal adverb's, e.g. *possibly,* overt syntactic position. A new perspective on the meaning of CONCESSIVE *at least* is offered, such that it resembles EPISTEMIC *at least*'s meaning, paraphrased as ‚*p* or more than *p*'. The crucial difference between the interpretations depends on scope relations, as given in (2).

(2)   a. scope relation for (1a): TENSE(ATLEAST(five fish))
       alternatives at utterance time ≈ five fish or more than five fish
       $\lambda w.\exists w'.\exists t.t=now \land Acc_{w,s,t}(w') \land \exists e[\textit{catch-five-fish}(e,w') \land \tau=time(e) \land \exists e'[e'>_{Alt}e \land e' \in w' \land \tau'=time(e') \land \tau'\cong\tau]]$
       b. scope relation for (1b): ATLEAST(TENSE(catch five fish))
       alternatives at utterance time ≈ none / *p*
       $\lambda w.\exists w'.\exists t.t<now \land Acc_{w,s,t}(w') \land \exists e[\textit{catch-five-fish}(e,w') \land \tau=time(e) \land \exists e'[e'>_{Alt}e \land e' \in w' \land \tau'=time(e') \land \tau'\cong\tau]]$

If *at least* has TENSE in its scope, evaluation time for the alternatives shifts to an earlier point preceding utterance time. Hence, under the CONCESSIVE structure, only the first meaning component, disjunct *p,* is accessible from the actual world *w.* Contrary, if *at least* is in the scope of TENSE (EPISTEMIC), both meaning-disjuncts are accessible alternatives from *w* at utterance time.

References: • Biezma, M. 2013. Only one at least. Refining the role of discourse in building alternatives. *University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics* 19(1). 10–19. • Nakanishi, K. & H. Rullmann. 2009. *Epistemic and concessive interpretations of ‚at least'.* Paper presented at CLA, Carleton University (May 24, 2009).