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
   \[\lambda w. \exists w’. \exists t . t = \text{now} \land \text{Acc}_{w, s, t}(w') \land \exists e [\text{catch-five-fish}(e, w') \land \tau = \text{time}(e) \land \exists e' [\text{catch-five-fish}(e', w') \land \tau = \text{time}(e') \land \tau \equiv t]]\]
   b. scope relation for (1b): ATLEAST(TENSE(catch five fish))
   alternatives at utterance time ≈ none / p
   \[\lambda w. \exists w'. \exists t . t < \text{now} \land \text{Acc}_{w', s, t}(w') \land \exists e [\text{catch-five-fish}(e, w') \land \tau = \text{time}(e) \land \exists e' [\text{catch-five-fish}(e', w') \land \tau = \text{time}(e') \land \tau \equiv t]]\]

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.