A Uniform Analysis for Concessive *at least* and Optative *at least*

**The Puzzle:** Optatives, (1), are clauses that express a wish without containing a lexical item that means *wish* (Rifkin 2000). Cross-linguistically, optatives often have the morphosyntax of embedded clauses and the distribution of unembedded clauses (cf. Evans 2007); (1a) illustrates an *if*-optative, (1b) illustrates a *that*-optative.

1. **If** he’d **only** give us a chance. 
   ≈ {It would be good if / I wish that} he’d give us a chance.
   **(21st century English)**
   1b. **Oh that** Apollo would **but** drive his horses slowly!
   ≈ I wish that Apollo would drive his horses slowly.
   **(from a 1682 source)**

One prototypical property of optatives is the presence of (typically scalar) particles, which are drawn from a set that includes *only*, as in (1a), *though/but*, as in (1b), and also *at least*, as in (2). In English, *at least* cannot give rise to an optative meaning, but in many other languages it can.

2. a. **An toulachiston** / *mono* o John iche akusi tin Mary! **Modern Greek**
   if at.least only the Johnnom had3sg listened the Maryacc
   b. **Se ao menos**/*só** / *apenas* o João tivesse ouvido a Maria! **Portuguese**
   if at.least only the John had listened.to the Mary
   c. **Si almenys** /*solament** / *només* hagués escoltat (a) la Maria! **Catalan**
   if at.least only the John had listened to the Mary
   ‘If John had at least listened to Mary!’ (≈ ‘I wish John had at least listened to Mary!’)

The connection between optativity and *at least* cannot be coincidental; it is also reflected in the diachronic development of the Middle Greek optative particle *makárion* ‘happy’: As a loan word, it acquired ‘at least’ as an additional meaning in Serbian *makar* and Romanian *măcar* (Rudolph 1996, Buchi 2008). This paper addresses the of question how *at least* is connected to optativity.

**First Step of the Analysis:** I argue that optative *at least* is a case of concessive *at least* (Nakanishi & Rullmann 2009, N&R; example (3) is theirs). Concessive *at least*, in (3a), conveys that higher values on a relevant scale are preferable; epistemic *at least*, in (3b), does not.

3. a. Mary didn’t win a gold medal, but **at least** she won a silver medal.
   ⇒ *Although winning a silver medal is less preferable than winning a gold medal, a silver medal is satisfactory.* (= N&R’s concessive *at least*)
   b. Mary won **at least** a silver medal.
   ⇒ *The speaker is uncertain about what medal Mary won.* (= N&R’s epistemic *at least*)

German has a specialized lexical item for concessive *at least*, namely *wenigstens* ‘at least’. In most dialects of German, *wenigstens* ‘at least’ cannot be used neutrally; if the speaker uses *wenigstens* ‘at least’ in (4), it implies that she/he is happy that 10 people died.

4. Bei dem Unfall gab es **mindestens** / *wenigstens* 10 Tote.
   ‘There were at least 10 casualties in the accident.’

Crucially, optatives require the concessive variant, *wenigstens* ‘at least’ (cf. Scholz 1991), (5).

5. **Wenn ich** *wenigstens* / *mindestens* viel Zeit für meine Familie hätte!
   if I at.least *at.least* much time for my family had
   ‘If at least I had much time for my family!’

I propose that the interaction of *wenigstens* ‘at least’ and the wish is indirect, as follows.

**An Analysis of Optative Utterances:** I argue that (by convention) unembedded *if*- and *that*-clauses can generally be used to express a wish in many languages (cf. Evans 2007). This *wish*
use does not require optative particles: As shown in (6), no particle is necessary in German. It can also be argued (against Evans 2007) that (6) is an unembedded if-clause, i.e. there is no elided matrix clause. If there was such a matrix clause in (6), the because-adjunct should be well-formed, taking scope over this matrix clause. This is possible in (7), which does involve deletion. Yet, (6) disallows this. It follows that (6) is an unembedded if-clause, which can express a wish.

(6) Wenn ich deine Statur hätte (… # weil ich dann auch so erfolgreich wäre)! 
if I your build because I then also so successful was
‘If (only) I had your build (#because I’d be as successful)!’ (adapted from Evans 2007)

(7) A: Under which circumstances would you be happy? / What would be good?
B: Wenn ich deine Statur hätte, weil ich dann auch so erfolgreich wäre.
‘I would be happy / it would be good if I had your build because I’d be as successful.’

Following Grosz (2010), the optative use of if-clauses is modeled as a speech act that targets the speaker’s Ideal List, a set of propositions that reflects the speaker’s ideals (based on Han’s 2000 Plan Set, Portner’s 2004 To-Do List). The Ideal List roughly serves as an ordering source (Kratzer 1981), establishing a ranking of worlds into better and less good ones. Optatives add the expressed proposition p to a speaker’s Ideal List or reactivate p from this list. Optative particles like German wenigstens ‘at least’ add presuppositions, which further refine the expressed wish.

Analyzing Optative at least: I propose a uniform analysis for concessive wenigstens ‘at least’ and optative wenigstens ‘at least’, as given in (8), based on N&R’s analysis of the former.

(8) a. For any proposition p used in a speech act φ, ||wenigstens p|| is defined iff
   (i.) the speaker intends to add p to the set of propositions C that φ targets, (ii.) there is a salient scale that reflects a preference, (iii.) there is a proposition r that ranks higher than p, and (iv.) there is a proposition u that ranks lower than p.
   b. Descriptive Statements (e.g. Assertions) target the Common Ground (Stalnaker 1974).
   c. Evaluative Expressions (e.g. Optatives) target the Ideal List.

Example (9) illustrates the analysis. It shows that if-at-least-ψ optatives mark the modified proposition as a low preference (ψ-worlds aren’t ideal, but they are better than ¬ψ-worlds, (10)).

(9) Context: The speaker didn’t want Otto to go to the recent demonstrations against Emperor Ferdinand I. Nevertheless, Otto went, and he was detained for provoking the policemen.

   Ach, wenn er wenigstens nicht die Polizisten provoziert hätte!
oh if he at.least not the police men provoked had
‘Oh, if at least he hadn’t provoked the policemen!’

   “wish use” ⇒ Speaker adds Otto didn’t provoke the police men to Speaker’s Ideal List wenigstens ⇒ Speaker presupposes that there is a better proposition (Otto didn’t go there).

(10) Preferences (from best to worst):
Otto didn’t go there. < Otto went, but didn’t provoke the police. < Otto provoked the police.

Conclusion: The phrase at least in optatives can be analyzed uniformly with concessive at least in non-optative clauses; its contribution lies in its inherent orientation towards a preference scale.