



# Just and scale structure

Schuyler Laparle · [schuyler\\_laparle@berkeley.edu](mailto:schuyler_laparle@berkeley.edu)  
Rob Truswell · [rob.truswell@ed.ac.uk](mailto:rob.truswell@ed.ac.uk)  
WCCFL 36 - UCLA - 2018



## Overview

The particle *just* is highly polyfunctional, leading previous analyses (Cohen 1969; Grant 2011; König 1991; Kishner & Gibbs 1996; Lee 1987, 1991; Lindemann & Mauranen 2001) to treat it as polysemous. We argue that this polyfunctionality is instead a result of vagueness: *just* has a stable function of scalar restriction, restricting an individual's location on a scale to a position close to some anchor.

## Polyfunctionality

Using Lee's (1987, 1991) terminology, we can identify at least six possible surface readings for *just*.

- |   |                 |
|---|-----------------|
| (1) a. This poster is <i>just</i> good. | (Depreciatory)  |
| b. It's <i>just</i> a scratch.          | (Depreciatory)  |
| c. He's <i>just</i> a child.            | (Exclusivity)   |
| d. It's <i>just</i> behind the lamp.    | (Specificatory) |
| e. I <i>just</i> left.                  | (Recency)       |
- 
- |   |               |
|---|---------------|
| (2) a. This poster is <i>just</i> perfect!    | (Emphatic)    |
| b. I <i>just</i> wanted to talk for a moment. | (Saving face) |

But we claim that these aren't nearly as different as they might seem. Most (the examples in (1)) are variations on the depreciatory use. We focus on these, but offer an extension of our analysis to include the sentences in (2).

## Good, perfect, and scale structure

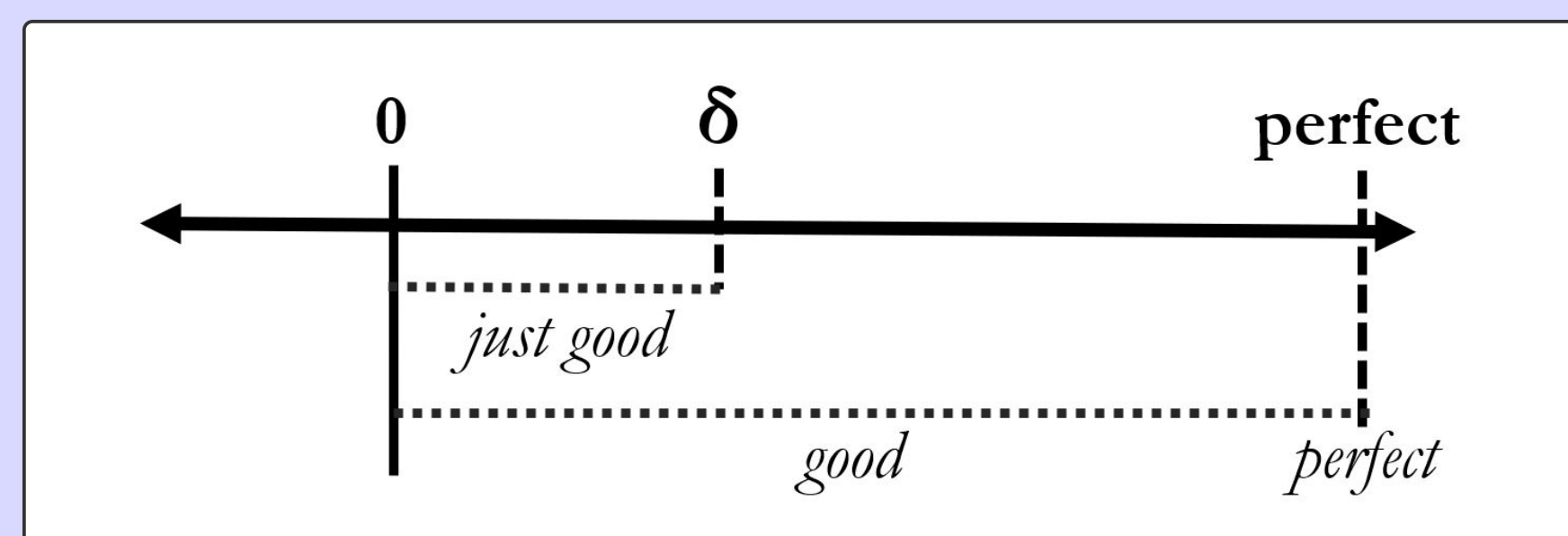
*Good* and *perfect* are both of type  $\langle d, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$ , denoting sets of degrees on a scale of quality. Something that is *perfect* is also *good* (3a), but it is not *just good* (3b).

- |  |
|--|
| (3) a. It's good, in fact it's perfect.          |
| b. #It's <i>just</i> good, in fact it's perfect. |
| c. It's not just good, it's perfect.             |

In Kennedy & McNally's (2005) terms, *good* relates to an **open scale**, while *perfect* is a **maximum-standard adjective**.

- |                                    |
|------------------------------------|
| (4) It's absolutely perfect/#good. |
|------------------------------------|

Bare *good* takes a silent degree modifier POS, indicating that *x* is good to a degree above a standard that we call **0**. We call **0** a lexically defined **anchor**. POS(*good*) entails that the object under discussion is good to a degree in the range  $(0, \infty]$ . In contrast, *just* POS(*good*) entails that it is in the range  $(0, \delta]$ , where  $\delta$  is some small increment. So *just* shrinks the range of degrees, towards the anchor.



## Nominal scales

In *just*+DP constructions, the DP itself is not scalar, but there is often a semantically associated scale available for *just* to restrict.

- |                                 |
|---------------------------------|
| (5) It's <i>just</i> a scratch. |
|---------------------------------|

*Scratch* is used in contrast to wounds of greater severity.

- |   |
|---|
| (6) scratch $\ll$ flesh-wound $\ll$ severed limbs |
|---|

This is the scale available for *just* to restrict.

- |   |
|---|
| (7) Scale: degree of severity ( <i>d</i> )                                  |
| Available anchor: <i>scratch</i> = $d_0$                                    |
| Available restriction: $x > d_0 \rightsquigarrow x \in (d_0, d_0 + \delta)$ |

## Context dependency

Other *just*+DP modifications require context to establish the relevant scale.

- |                          |
|--------------------------|
| (8) You're just a child. |
|--------------------------|

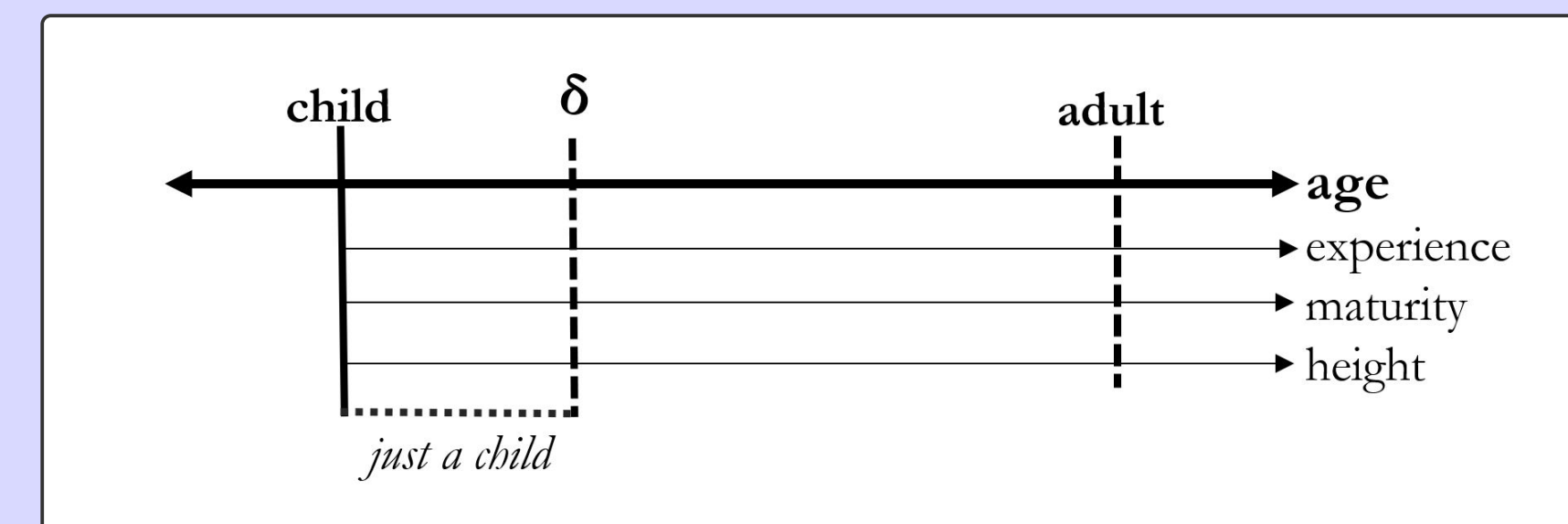
There is a scale inherent to *child* referring to the stages of life.

- |   |
|---|
| (9) infant $\ll$ child $\ll$ teenager $\ll$ adult |
|---|

But when we say *just a child*, we aren't restricting the *age* of the person under discussion, we are restricting some scale that we associate with the stages of life. Which scale that is must be given by context.

- |   |
|---|
| (10) a. You're <i>just</i> a child, you don't understand the meaning of life. (Scale: knowledge/experience) |
| b. ...you're not ready for a full-time job. (Scale: maturity)   |
| c. ...you'll grow another foot at least. (Scale: height)  |

The restriction imposed by *just* is depreciatory in all cases. The anchor is located at the standard set by our expectations for a *child* on whatever scale is most relevant.



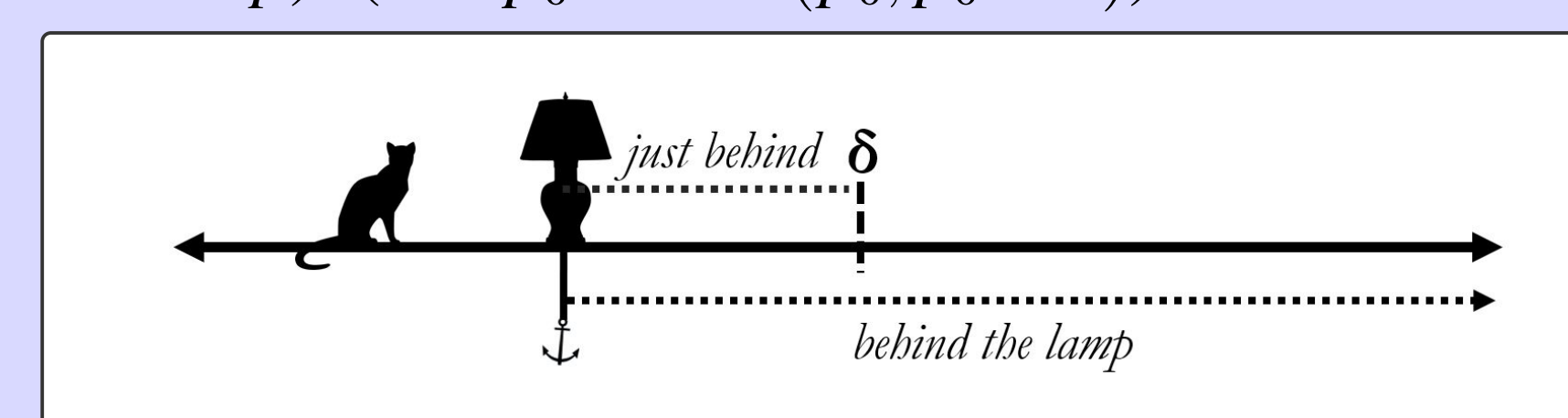
Exclusivity arises due to the granularity of 'stages of life' (see Coppock & Beaver (2013) for a discussion of so-called 'rank order' scales).

## Spatial scales

Uses of *just* with nominals and open-scale adjectives can be united via **property-based** scalar restriction. With prepositions, *just* modifies a **spatial** scale.

- |  |
|--|
| (11) It's <i>just</i> behind the lamp. |
|--|

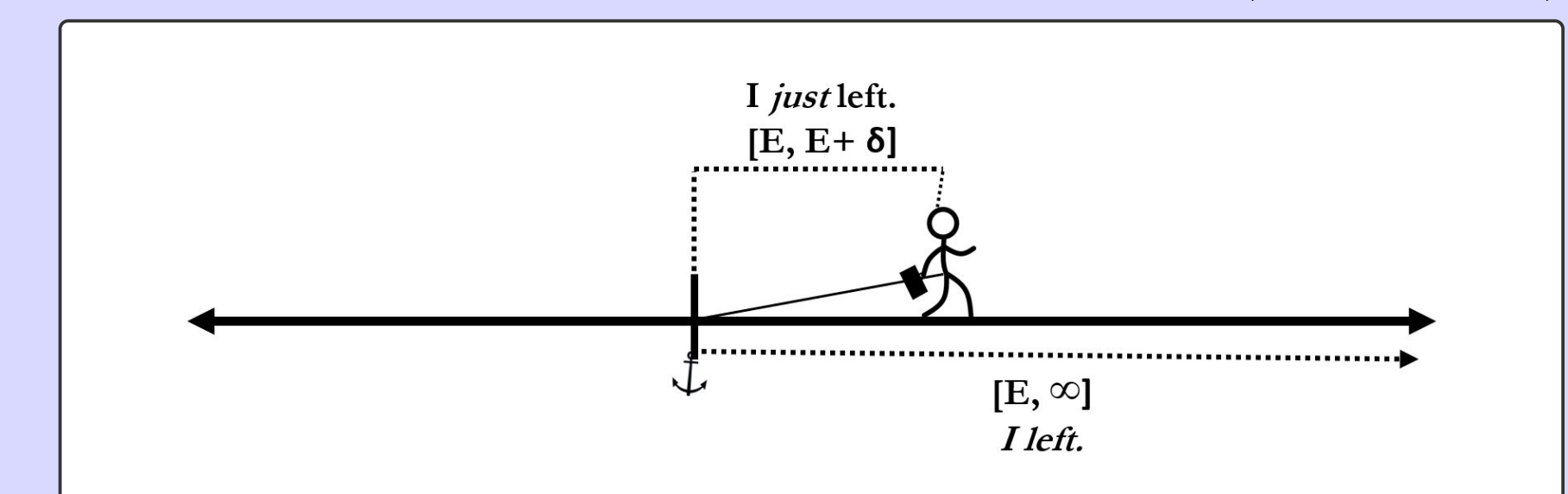
*Just* restricts the relevant spatial scale to within some incremental space of the anchor (i.e. *the lamp*):  $(x > p_0 \rightsquigarrow x \in (p_0, p_0 + \delta))$



## Modifying event times

Aspectual *just* can restrict the temporal distance between event time (**E**) and reference time (**R**) or speech time (**S**). Analogous to prepositional *just*, aspectual *just* operates on a **temporal** rather than **property-based** scale. The event time **E** serves as the anchor.

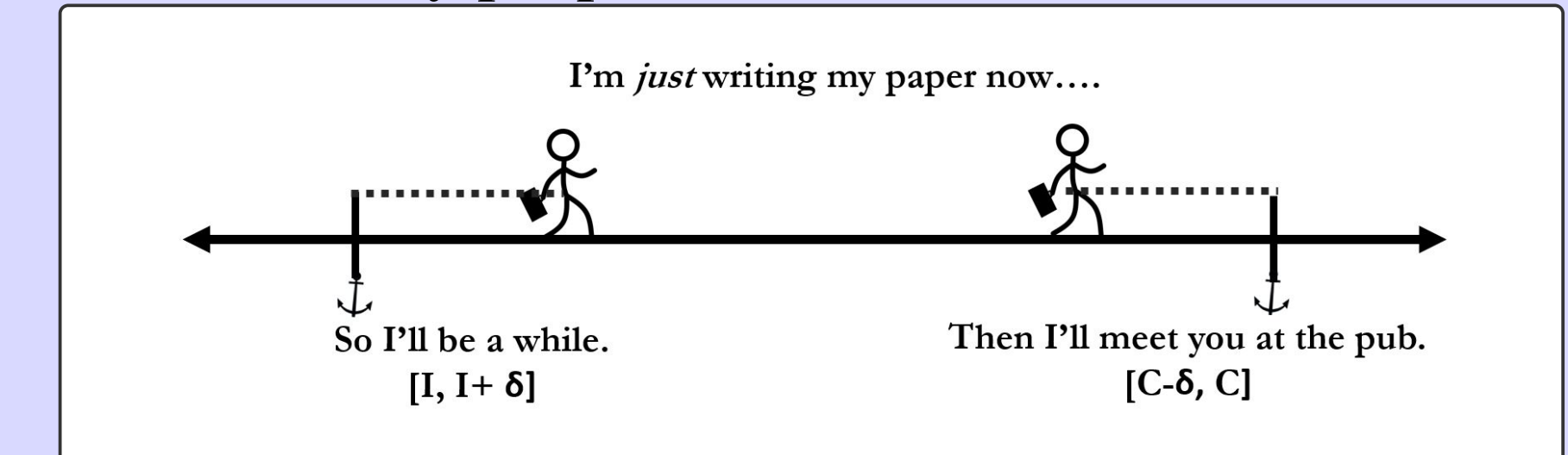
- |                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| (12) a. I've just left. | $T_R \subseteq (T_E, T_E + \delta), T_S = T_R$   |
| b. I just left.         | $T_R = T_E, T_S \subseteq (T_E, T_E + \delta)$   |
| c. I had just left.     | $T_R \subseteq (T_E, T_E + \delta), T_R < T_S$<br>* $T_E < T_R, T_S \subseteq (T_R, T_R + \delta)$ |



With the imperfective aspect, things are a bit different.

- |   |
|---|
| (13) a. I'm just leaving now. (I'll be gone in 5 minutes / I just reached the main road.)                 |
| b. I'm just making the salad / ?writing the paper / ???building the house, then I'll meet you at the pub. |

There are two available **anchors** available for *just*: the event's initiation (**I**) or culmination (**C**). For many people, **R** has to be close to both **I** and **C**.



## Loose ends

*Just* has been able to impose a uniform scalar restriction on a variety of phrases. But there are two uses (given in (2)) that still require explanation: **maximum-standard** adjectives like *perfect* and *awful* resist depreciatory readings, and 'saving face' VP uses don't seem to have anything to do with temporal scales.

- |  |
|--|
| (14) a. That hat is <i>just</i> perfect for the horse races on Sunday! |
| b. I <i>just</i> wanted to talk to you for a moment.                   |

Here, the scale undergoing restriction is one of **pragmatic slack** (e.g. Lasnik 1999): *just* signals that we are not speaking *loosely* (e.g. Sperber & Wilson 1985).

- |  |
|--|
| (15) $XP \rightsquigarrow XP + \text{just} = x > d_0 \rightsquigarrow x \in (d_0, d_0 + \delta)$ |
| $d_0$ = a lexically specified anchor where available, and 'no-slack' elsewhere                   |

## References

Cohen 1969 *CLS* 5: 25–9. Coppock & Beaver 2013 *Journal of Semantics*, 10: 1–62. Grant 2011 *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 10: 183–97. Kennedy & McNally 2005 *Language* 81: 345–81. Kishner & Gibbs 1996 *Language and Speech* 39: 19–36. König 1991 *The Meaning of Focus Particles*, Routledge. Lasnik 1999 *Language* 75: 522–551. Lee 1987 *Journal of Pragmatics* 11: 377–98. Lee 1991 *Lingua* 83: 43–66. Lindemann & Mauranen 2001 *English for Specific Purposes* 20: 459–75. Sperber & Wilson 1985 *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 86: 153–171.