

# snippets

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# ‘Not in my wildest dreams’: a part time minimizer?

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One of Sauerland’s many important contributions concerns dream reports (e.g., *In my dream I was Bill and I was marrying my granddaughter*). Percus and Sauerland (2003) show that pronoun interpretation in these seemingly idiosyncratic cases is subject to systematic syntactic constraints. We will consider another case involving *dream* – the fixed expression *in my (your, her, ...) wildest dreams* – and argue that its interpretation is also grammatically constrained.

Sentences containing *in my wildest dreams* are ambiguous; for example, (1) has an interpretation that does not concern actual dreaming qua what one does while asleep, but rather reports the speaker’s earlier beliefs about the likelihood of her meeting Uli, and communicates her surprise that she did so. Additionally, (1) has a literal reading: in the speaker’s actual dreams there are no events of expecting to meet Uli.

- (1) Not in my wildest dreams did I think I would meet Uli.

It is the first, non-literal interpretation that interests us. This use requires a doxastic attitude (2), and has a restricted distribution: it is licensed by negation (1), in the antecedent of conditionals (3a), and in questions (3b). Additionally, it is disallowed in positive contexts (3c) unless modified by *only* (3d):

- (2) a. Not in my wildest dreams did I {imagine/suppose/#wish/#demand} that I would meet Uli.  
b. #Not in my wildest dreams did I meet Uli.
- (3) a. If in my wildest dreams I had thought I would meet Uli I would have re-read his papers beforehand.  
b. In your wildest dreams, did you think you would meet Uli?  
c. #In my wildest dreams I thought I would meet Uli.  
d. Only in my wildest dreams did I think I would meet Uli.

A starting point for analyzing these data might be to assume that on its non-literal use *in my wildest dreams* is obligatorily focus-marked, and must be licensed by a focus particle. This may be overt, as in (3d) (pointed out to us by a reviewer), or covert. The latter possibility would explain the licensing of this use in downward entailing environments (1), (3a,b) – a property characteristic of negative polarity items, which are illicit in positive environments like (3c). If we assume that the covert focus particle is *even*, then this would correctly predict that without *only*, the phrase behaves like minimizer-type NPIs, such as *lift a finger* (Heim 1984). Like minimizers (Borkin 1971), the phrase imposes a negative bias in questions: in (3b), the expected answer is ‘no’.

This cannot be the whole story, however, since unlike minimizers, *in my wildest dreams* is not licensed (on the non-literal interpretation) in the restrictor of *every* (4) or the antecedent of indicative conditionals (5).

(4) #Everyone who in their wildest dreams thought they would meet Uli re-read his papers beforehand.

(5) #If in my wildest dreams I think I will meet Uli, then I will re-read his papers beforehand.

Additionally, the non-literal interpretation becomes unavailable if in (3d) *only* is replaced with other focus particles:

(6) {#Even/#Also} in my wildest dreams I thought that I would meet Uli.

Here then is the puzzle: the fixed expression *in x's wildest dreams* has a constrained distribution that is reminiscent of, but not identical to, that of well-studied polarity sensitive items, particularly minimizers. Additionally, in positive environments it can be licensed by *only* but not by other focus particles. We leave it to future work to understand better how *in x's wildest dreams* fits into the typology of polarity sensitive items.

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