Tackling minimal sufficiency
ObTrEx, Tübingen

Grosz 2012 observes German nur ‘only’ to be ambiguous between two readings in conditional antecedents, an exclusive and a minimal sufficiency reading. The former is slightly more salient than the latter.

(1) Es ist gut, wenn nur zwei Leute kommen
it is good if only two people come

EXCLUSIVE reading (EXCL, more salient): The UPPER limit are 2 people
~~> it’s no longer good if 3 come

MINIMAL SUFFICIENCY reading (MS): The LOWER limit are 2 people
~~> it’s at least as good if 3 come

He further notes schon ‘already’ to disambiguate in favor of the MS-reading:

(2) Es ist schon gut, wenn nur zwei Leute kommen
it is already good if only two people come
~~> it’s at least as good if 3 come
~/>~> it’s no longer good if 3 come

We are going to present two different theories one may entertain on this ambiguity, and put to discussion the design for a planned acceptability rating study to tease them apart.

Theory 1 (T1) is advocated by Grosz 2012 and has Heim’s 1991 principle Maximize Presupposition as its background: SCHON enforces the MS-reading by means of a presupposition it triggers. If SCHON is not used, this signals that this presupposition is not satisfied, i.e., that the MS-reading is wrong.

Theory 2 (T2) follows Bade’s 2014, 2016 Obligatory Implicatures (OI) account, according to which certain additive particles are inserted to cancel an exhaustivity-implicature that would arise in their absence: In (2), SCHON triggers an additive presupposition that blocks matrix exahustification of the conditional as a whole. The saliency of the EXCL-reading is explained by the fact that exhaustification arises as a default, as long as it doesn’t weaken truth conditions, see e.g. Fox & Spector 2018.

The design draws on the experimental logic underlying Bade’s & Tiemann’s 2016 study on obligatory presupposition triggers under negation: Propositions are not exhaustified in the scope of negation. OI thus predicts the EXCL reading to vanish under negation. It also predicts SCHON to be needed to convey the MS-reading only as long as it is not embedded under negation.

Selected References
Bade, Nadine 2016: Obligatory presupposition triggers in discourse
Bade, Nadine & Sonja Tiemann 2016: Obligatory triggers under negation
Grosz, Patrick 2012: The grammar of optative constructions