

What is *or* all about?

Both the core meaning and the interpretations of *or* constructions have primarily been defined by reference to the number of alternatives the speaker undertakes a commitment to. The *linguistic* meaning is said to be inclusive, whereby the speaker commits to at least one, and possibly all of the alternatives. A common interpretation of *or* constructions is said to be exclusive, where at most one of the alternatives is the case. An additional, *pragmatic* condition has been proposed, according to which the disjuncts must be construed as relevant to the same topic (starting with Grice, 1989), which captures the fact that they constitute alternatives to each other.

Based on all 1053 *or* constructions in the Santa Barbara Corpus, I will argue for a different division of labor: *Or*'s lexical meaning is procedural, rather than conceptual, only imposing an alternativity relation on the disjuncts (Ariel and Mauri, in preparation, Dik, 1972). The number of disjuncts committed to by the speaker is externally determined, by reference to linguistic and/or pragmatic factors in the context. Indeed, *or* constructions are attested which show commitment to none, one or all of the disjuncts (but interestingly, not to 'one and possibly all'). Thus, if not even one alternative is guaranteed by *or*, 'inclusivity' cannot be its core meaning (see also Alonso-Ovalle, 2006). At the same time, since alternativity is obligatory for all *ors* it must *be or*'s linguistic meaning, even if it's not truth-functional. 'Alternativity' is what *or* is all about.

There are two distinct readings where speakers do not necessarily commit to even one of the *or* alternatives, and it's not clear how the semantic commitment to at least one alternative can be cancelled. 'Raised Options' constructions only put a nonexhaustive set of *possibilities* on the table:

1. S: At a certain stage part of the shares were transferred to the children before going out on the stock exchange **or** they were returned and divided up **or** partly returned I don't remember... (Originally Hebrew, Lotan, 1990).

Note that what S doesn't remember is what happened with the shares, not which one of the alternatives he raises is the correct one. Such constructions are paraphrasable by *maybe X maybe Y* (2), which is why *or* and *maybe* are sometimes interchangeable (3):

2. **Maybe** the shares were transferred... before going out... **maybe** they were returned... **maybe** partly returned...
3. a. He's like twenty five **or** twenty six, **maybe** twenty seven (LSAC)
b. ~He's like twenty five, **maybe** twenty six, **or** twenty seven.
c. ~He's like **maybe** twenty five, **maybe** twenty six, **maybe** twenty seven.
d. ~He's like twenty five **or** twenty six, **or** twenty seven.

Other *or* constructions are not so paraphrasable: The gynecologist's assertion in 4(b) is quite weaker than the original in 4(a), where he does commit to one of the alternatives being the case:

4. a. BETH: I mean I went in at twelve weeks,
and he said,
.. this is a big baby **or** twins. (SBC: 031)
b. ... And he said **maybe** this is a big baby, **maybe** it's twins.

Higher-Level Category constructions (HLC, Ariel, 2015) refer the addressee to a context-relevant higher-level category comprised of the explicitly mentioned exemplars (among others):

5. ROY: saving the whale,
 or saving uh ... the .. polar bear,
 PETE: Right.
 .. Pandas, (SBC: 003)

It is that abstract category ('saving endangered animals') that the speaker refers to in HLC cases. Indeed, note Roy's singular, rather than plural *that*, and Pete's confirmation of Roy's utterance, which he follows by asserting an altogether different alternative, 'Pandas'. Pete doesn't take Roy to necessarily commit to any of the animals he mentions, then, but rather, to the higher-level concept (and see Ariel et al 2015). Such a response is not as coherent for 4(a), say by another gynecologist (B) present:

6. A: This is a big baby **or** twins
 B:~?? Right. A triplet.

Next, disjunctions under negation are interpreted conjunctively, which means that the difference between $\neg(X \text{ or } Y)$ and $\neg(X \text{ and } Y)$ is supposedly neutralized. Nonetheless, *X and Y* and *X or Y* are not invariably interchangeable in negative contexts. Participants rejected 7(a) (grade 2.2/7), but they did accept the seemingly comparable (b) (grades 4.5/7; 4.87/7):

7. a. ?? I'm very optimistic about the elections in three days.
 This time **Bibi or Sara** will not be back in the prime-minister's residence.
 b. √ I'm very optimistic about the elections in three days.
 This time **Eli Yishai or Avigdor Liberman** will not be in the government.

The only difference here is the fact that the members of the first disjunction, Sara and Bibi Netanyahu, go together as a unit as far as living arrangements. They do not constitute alternatives to each other. But Eli Yishai and Avigdor Liberman (b) are heads of competing parties in Israel, hence clearly alternatives to each other, given that voters must choose one party. Note that the interchangeability of *maybe X maybe Y* with *X or Y* similarly depends on an alternativity relation. Hence, unlike the acceptable substitutions in (3), the one in (8) is unacceptable:

8. a. PAIGE: I guess **maybe** if I try this.
 .. M- .. **maybe** that's the only way.(SBC: 041)
 b. ~ ?? I guess if I try this **or** that's the only way.

All in all, on the one hand, 'Raised Options' and 'Higher-Level category' *or* constructions (together, over 30% of the *or* tokens in SBC) show that we cannot assume that *or* semantically commits speakers to at least one of the alternatives, given that there is no way to eliminate this commitment. On the other hand, even negated *or* constructions show that 'alternativity' is a necessary ingredient for *or* constructions, even if it's not truth-conditional. This is why I propose that the truth-functional conceptual 'inclusivity' meaning of *or* be replaced by a nontruth-functional procedural core meaning of 'alternativity'. Of course, this bare core is compositionally (as well as noncompositionally) enriched into a variety of complete truth-verifiable propositions.

References

Alonso-Ovalle, Luis. 2006. Disjunction in Alternative Semantics. Ph.D. thesis, U.Mass.
Ariel, Mira and Caterina **Mauri**. in preparation. Or's core: An 'alternative' analysis. Tel Aviv University and University of Pavia. **Dik**, Simon. 1972. *Coordination: Its implications for the theory of general linguistics*. Amsterdam: North Holland. **Grice**, H. Paul. 1989. *Studies in the way of words*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.