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 ¬(X or Y) and ¬(X 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