What is or all about?

Mira Ariel

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 of the alternatives, and possibly to all of them. 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 (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 either none, or 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-conditional. '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 possibilities on the table (1). 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 (provided X and Y constitute alternatives), as can be seen in (2), where or and maybe are interchangeable. Higher-Level Category constructions (Ariel, 2015) refer the addressee to a context-relevant higher-level category comprised of the explicitly mentioned exemplars (among others). It is that abstract category ('saving endangered animals' in 3) that the speaker refers to. 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 Yeverechyahu and Asherov's results, this conference).

Next, disjunctions under negation are interpreted conjunctively, which means that the difference between ¬(X or Y) and ¬(X and Y) is neutralized: Both X and Y are denied in the two constructions. Nonetheless, X and Y and X or Y are not invariably interchangeable in negative contexts. Subjects rejected 4(a) (grade 2.2/7), but they did accept the seemingly identical 4 (b & c) (grades 4.5/7; 4.8/7). 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 Yisraeli and Avigdor Liberman (4b) and Kahlon and Lapid (4c) are all heads of competing parties, hence clearly alternatives to each other, given that voters must choose one party. The same is true for the interchangeability of maybe X maybe Y with X or Y (Cf. 2&5).

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, negated or constructions show that
'alternativity' is a necessary ingredient for or constructions, even if it's not truth-conditional. This is why the truth-functional conceptual 'inclusivity' meaning of or must be replaced by a nontruth-functional procedural meaning of 'alternativity'.

Examples

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).

2. 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.

3. ROY: saving the whale,
   or saving uh ... the .. polar bea[r,
   PETE: [Right.
   .. Pandas],
   ROY: or making sure there's enough] grizzly bears,
   that's fine. (SBC: 003)

4. 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.
   c. √ Don't bother to turn on the radio.
   Kahlon or Lapid will not persuade me to vote for them.

5. a. PAIGE: ... (TSK) (H) Well,
   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.

References

Ariel, Mira. 2015. Higher-level category or constructions: When many is one Studies in Pragmatics 17:42-60.
Ariel, Mira and Caterina Mauri. in preparation. Or's core: An 'alternative' analysis. Tel Aviv University and Univerity of Pavia.