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Or constructions: Monosemy versus polysemy, encoding versus inferencing

Monosemy and polysemy compete in language, and they are intimately associated with the competition between more encoding versus more inferencing. Single-function forms (monosemies) require minimal inferencing. Still, speakers routinely mobilize current monosemic forms to express additional meanings (via inference), so multi-function forms (polysemies) are constantly evolving, requiring heavy inferencing. Applied to constructions, the competition arises between one (super-) construction associated with multiple meanings (polysemy + heavy inferencing) and multiple sub-constructions, each with its own dedicated meaning (monosemy, or near monosemy + minimal inferencing). The idea is that discourse use increases construction polysemy (and inferencing), yet, at the same time, naturally evolved sub-constructions counter this development, increasing monosemy (and decreasing inferencing). To test these ideas, I focus on disjunctive constructions with *or*.

The disjunctive interpretation introduces multiple alternatives which must be construed as distinct instances of some higher-level relevant category (cf. 1a&b). The category may be constructed ad-hoc (1c, Ariel, 2007):

1.   a. Category = Hot drinks to be served: Would you like **tea or coffee?** (LSAC).

         b. Category= ??   ~?? Flight attendant: Chicken or cookies?

         c. Category= a large and powerful organization
                    MONTOYO: ... for example,
                                ... the president (H) .. of .. **a major labor union**,
                                .. **or a major corporation**.
                                ... the position,
                                .. (H) as president of **that entity**, (SBC: 012)

The options mentioned cannot be marked realis (Mauri, 2008). This follows from my suggestion, contra current assumptions, that the speaker is not (linguistically, necessarily) committed to the truth of even one of the alternatives (note the acceptability of *I don't remember* in 2). The speaker's (minimal) goal is to simply raise possible alternatives:

2.   '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**... you have our prospectus here' (Originally Hebrew, Lotan 1990: 12).

The most polysemous cases of disjunctive interpretations involve no specialized marking. The interpretation must then be contextually inferred:

3.   … Practices of abortion of, **perhaps, pre-partum, perhaps postpartum** (LSAC).

While [X *or* Y], the most general dedicated disjunctive construction, only encodes the minimal disjunctive interpretation above, it can be inferentially enriched in any number of ways. For example, quite often, it is actually the higher-level concept that X and Y exemplify that is relevant in the discourse, rather than the alternatives mentioned explicitly (4, and see the anaphoric reference to the powerful organization by the singular *that entity* in 1c):

4. NORA: Wonder who was the ruler.
             in nineteen ten.
   DIANE: Who was the **king or queen (=monarch)**? (SBC: 023)

Partial encoding, especially when accompanied by distinct discourse profiles (e.g., interrogative), demands only some inferencing. Such is the case of the 'exclusive' reading in 1a. In fact, [X *or* Y] can be used to convey most of the interpretations that the dedicated sub-constructions discussed below convey. Note that with minimal modifications, we can

substitute [X *or* Y] for most of the sub-constructions exemplified below. This then is a case of rather heavy polysemy.

At the same time, specialized sub-constructions can virtually guarantee the single higher-level concept reading: [X *or something*_{destressed}] (*or something* introduces a hedge rather than another viable option in 5a), and note the single concepts denoted by the lexicalized (5b):

5.   a. RICKIE: ... So is he in like jail **or** something? (SBC: 001)

        b. More or less= 'about'; sooner or later= 'at some point in time'

Finnish lacks the *or something* construction, but mobilizes a different sub-construction for the one-concept reading (using *tai*, rather than *vai* for 'or', Elsi Kaiser, P.C). Many languages have a dedicated construction for the opposite function, where the speaker indicates that each of the disjuncts denotes a distinct discourse option (6):

6.   It's an **either or situation**$_i$, you **either give me quality or you give me productivity**$_{ii}$ (LSAC).

Very often these options are also construed as exhausting all possible options, in which case an exclusive reading is triggered ('either X or Y, but neither both nor any other alternative'). This is true for virtually all the *either X or Y* sub-constructions in LSAC and SBC (~500 examples, e.g., 6$_{ii}$), and for all bare *either or*s (6$_i$). Additional disjunctive sub-constructions are exemplified in (7), where some, but not all features of the basic construction are inherited, while others are added on:

7.   a. Corrective (designated prosody, only Y):
       MARY: ... Hand me that ashtray.
                ... **Or** your light,
                I mean (SBC:007).

       b$_i$. Dispreferred Y (*or else*):
         … (H) **Or else** I'll give her a call tomorrow. (SBC: 014)

       b$_{ii}$. b$_i$ + Threat: You've got until count of three to get up **or else** (I'm smacking you) (LSAC)

       c. Dilemma (*to* verb *or not to* verb):   .. **to follow,**
                                             or not to follow.
                                     (H) **To respond or not to respond**. (SBC: 025)

       d. Impossible Y (=Only X) This has GOT to be the breakthrough album, **or I'm a monkey's uncle** (http://www.amazon.co.uk/Shepherds-Dog-Digipak-Us/dp/B000TQZ7O4).

       e. One option X *or* X: Who is the idiot—**me or me**??? (Originally Hebrew).

Our focus on the competition between minimal encoding (polysemy), which trades on heavy inferencing, and rich encoding (a set of monosemies), which only requires minimal inferencing, reveals that natural languages manifest the whole spectrum. A preliminary typological survey suggests that some languages opt for heavy polysemy accompanied by heavy inferencing, while others combine polysemy ([X *or* Y]) with a set of sub-constructions which are monosemic, or virtually so. Interestingly, no language demonstrates exclusive monosemy (eliminating inferencing). In sum, I show that a combined functional perspective linking the pragmatics of inference with the semantics of constructions sheds important light on the role of competing motivations in the grammaticization and typology of linguistic structure.

References

Ariel, Mira. 2007. *Or* constructions. Tel Aviv University.
Mauri, Caterina. 2008. The irreality of alternatives: Towards a typology of disjunction. *Studies in Language* 32:22-55.