

Or, or something: Constructing categories on the fly

Linguists (of all stripes) have taken the most salient feature of disjunctions to be the distinct alternatives they seem to present. Here's an example of a classical case:

1. STEPHANIE: it was either Funniest Home Videos,
or they were filming a fi- a movie, (SBC: 035).

Each disjunct presents a distinct alternative; the reading is exclusive (the alternatives are incompatible with each other); no other relevant alternatives are entertained by the speaker; and so, exactly one of the alternatives must be true. But a search of the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English reveals that such disjunctions are not so common in natural conversations.

Instead, natural discourse manifests a whole variety of interpretations associated with a number of different disjunctive constructions (and sub-constructions). One of these constructions is *X or something*, often used to create an ad hoc higher-level category, of which X is construed as a salient member:

2. ALICE: ... like if she had to go **shopping or something** maybe you could go with her, (SBC: 007).

Most likely, *shopping or something* denotes a higher-level category of activities similar to shopping. This ad hoc category is constructed using the explicit 'shopping' as pivot. The category is crucially context-dependent.

But how significant is the function *or something* relative to the more general pattern *X or Y*? The most dramatic finding of the present research is that the meaning of the basic *X or Y* construction is not all that different from the "special" *X or something* construction. I argue that very often, only one general concept is proposed by the speaker, despite the fact that two (or more) alternatives are mentioned explicitly. Consider:

3. GILBERT: She got sick and tired of,
... you know,
turning on the news,
and seeing **another ... corrupt man,**
or another,
.. you know.
.. another **scandal breaking out.** (SBC: 012).

My claim is that 'another corrupt man' and 'another scandal breaking out' are to be interpreted as two exemplars of a higher-level category, something like 'disturbing pieces

of news involving corruption', and it is that higher-level concept that the speaker is talking about.

All in all, I will criticize both the semantic and pragmatic standard analyses of disjunctions. For pragmatics, I will present discourse counts which show that standard assumptions about the use of disjunctions in discourse are not borne out by the data. The classical semantic analysis (an inclusive meaning, whereby at least one disjunct must be true) will also be criticized. I will instead support a more minimalistic linguistic analysis: By using a disjunction, speakers simply raise alternatives, but do not commit themselves to even one of them. At the same time, I will demonstrate that a whole array of enriched interpretations are associated with the various disjunction constructions, and that quite often the two (or more) disjuncts serve to create a single concept and a single discourse entity. Across a wide range of cases, what unifies the use of *or* is the construction of an ad hoc category on the fly.