

What's a distinct *or* alternative?☆

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Received 19 March 2016; received in revised form 26 April 2016; accepted 6 July 2016



Abstract

The alternatives introduced by *or* constructions are typically distinct from each other. Hurford's (1974) constraint dictates that disjuncts must not entail each other, which defines Distinctness as mutual nonentailment. In agreement with Simons (2001), I first argue that this constraint is too strong and too semantic, but relying on the Relevance-theoretic concept of contextual adjustment (Carston, 2002), I call for a more radical pragmatic shift. I include a discussion of Equivalence *or* constructions, where the alternatives are not referentially distinct, arguing that again, it is pragmatic considerations that determine whether to impose Distinctness or not. The take-home message is that pragmatics governs the variable application of the Distinctness constraint.

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Keywords: Hurford's constraint; Contextual adjustment; Sperber & Wilson relevance; Explicature; Privileged Interactional Interpretation

1. Introduction

It seems self-evident that *or* constructions introduce multiple and distinct alternatives. Surely, the syntax of the construction requires that at least two disjuncts be included, and the semantics, as well as the discourse relevance of *or* constructions, should make it necessary for multiple alternatives to be introduced, such that each disjunct stand for a distinct option (Hurford, 1974; Simons, 2001; Singh, 2008). Indeed, consider (1):

1. MARILYN: do you want half --
... half of one of these,
or more than that. (SBC: 003)

Trivially, each disjunct here comes with its distinct linguistic form and meaning: *half of one of these* has a different linguistic representation from *more than that*. Given the different linguistic forms and meanings, the two alternatives above naturally denote two distinct referents as well. Finally, adopting a Relevance-theoretic approach, each of the alternatives carries its own distinct (but mutually relevant) contextual implications with respect to a single topic (akin to Simons, 2001).¹ In the

☆ The research here reported was funded by the Israel Science Foundation (grant 431/15). I would like to thank the *JoP* reviewers for their constructive comments.

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¹ I prefer the Relevance-theoretic concept of 'contextual implications' over Simons' 'distinct answers to a Question Under Discussion (QUD)', first, because it more straightforwardly applies to nonassertions. But more importantly, we ultimately need to define multiple types of distinctnesses, because different *or* constructions require different subsets of such distinctnesses (see Section 4 and Ariel, 2015a). Distinctness in contextual implications is the strongest of these constraints and entails the others.

case of (1), Marilyn will perform different actions, depending on the alternative chosen by her addressees (as is made clear in the discourse, she'll either cook the whole fish, or else only some of it and make ceviche from the leftovers).²

But which of the above distinctnesses is the crucial distinctness which defines felicitous *or* constructions? And even more basically, what does it mean for an *or* construction to introduce multiple alternatives? The goal of this paper is to problematize the requirements for distinct (multiple) alternatives within *or* constructions, initially based on the Santa Barbara Corpus of spoken American English (Du Bois et al., 2000–2005) (SBC, henceforth). But the analysis here presented is not restricted to SBC, because it is not large enough to include all cases pertinent to the Distinctness issue. Examples were therefore also collected from web searches, as well as from miscellaneous personal encounters. Section 2 argues for a pragmaticized approach to Hurford's constraint. I further demonstrate the crucial role of pragmatics in establishing Distinctness in Section 3. Section 4 introduces a set of *or* constructions where referential Distinctness is absent. I conclude with Section 5.

2. Pragmaticizing Hurford's constraint

Consider the following example:

3. I do not want these messages at all, but the box doesn't give me that option. So I could (1) **get the messages** or (2) **get the messages**. What kind of choice is that?
(John C. Dvorak <http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2704,2251579,00.asp>)

Examples such as (3) are very rare, and achieve their special ('inevitability') effect (see Ariel, 2015a) precisely by violating a very basic condition placed on *or* constructions, namely that they should introduce multiple, distinct alternatives. Section 2 discusses the nature of such a constraint. I start off with Hurford's (1974:410) purely semantic constraint, but extending Simons' (2001) analysis, I propose that the 'Distinctness' constraint is thoroughly pragmatic.

Hurford's (1974:410) constraint, originally part of an argument for the ambiguity of natural language *or*, is a prime candidate for articulating a rather strong condition of 'Distinctness' of alternatives for *or* constructions: "The joining of two sentences by *or* is unacceptable if one sentence entails the other".³ Indeed, if they do, the *or* construction would seem to be pointless, given that disjunctions are supposed to be about options profiled as genuine alternatives to each other (as in 1). The typical unacceptable examples which motivated Hurford's constraint are not *X or X* identity cases as in (3), but rather, semantically different alternatives where one of the disjuncts entails the other (in 4, if John is a Californian, then he's an American; if there's dirt in the fuel line, then there's something in there)⁴:

4. a. ~?? John is **an American** or **a Californian** (= Hurford's ex. 15).
b. ~?? John is **a Californian** or **an American**.
c. ~?? Either there's **dirt** in the fuel line or there's **something** in the fuel line (=Simons' 2001:ex. 23).

Indeed, note that B in (5) cannot properly answer A. Instead, he informs her of what she must not have known, that 'Zinfandel' entails 'red wine':

5. A: Would you like **red one**?
Or **Zinfandel**?
B: Zinfandel IS red wine (Feb. 24, 2013).

The ban against an entailing relation between the disjuncts naturally accounts for the unacceptability of (4), as does Simons' (2001) 'Non-Vacuity Principle', which specifies that the *or* construction as a whole must express a different proposition from any one of its disjuncts (see also Katzir and Singh, 2013 anti-redundancy constraint).

But Hurford's constraint is too strong, argues Simons. She points to the different felicity of 6(A), where the second disjunct entails the first, as a response to Q₁ (it is infelicitous) as opposed to a response to Q₂ (it is felicitous)⁵:

² In addition, I account for the relevance between the alternatives by reference to a 'Higher Level Category Constraint', namely, by imposing a condition that all the alternatives must be construable as members of a single, possibly ad hoc, context-relevant, higher-level category. But most likely this is essentially the same as the requirement for a single QUD.

³ But we need the constraint for nonclausal disjunctions as well, of course, and I will assume it applies to such cases.

⁴ An initial ~ indicates an unattested example.

⁵ I slightly modified Simons' original example to ensure that the second disjunct entails the first one.

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