

The Semantic Implications Of Or in English and its Equivalent in Arabic

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Abstract

This paper is intended to shed some light on one aspect of language, i.e., meaning. Among the major coordinators in both English and Arabic, *or* and أو have been selected for investigation. The coordinators offer a fertile ground for a paper of a small size which falls into four parts. The first one gives a description of the semantic implications of *or* while the second is concerned with those of أو. The third part is reserved for the similarities and differences between the implications of the two coordinators. The findings of the paper are summed up in the last part.

The Implications of Or in English

In logic, the English coordinator *or* has been the center of discussion under the rubric of Disjunction. It refers to the process or the result of relating two propositions, units of meaning forming the subject matter of a statement in the form of a simple declarative sentence, in an either-or relationship (Crystal, 2003:143)

According to Kearns (2000:29), a logical disjunction is true if either or both of the combined propositions is true, so in:

1. (Either) Mary is late *or* John is early.
the disjunction holds true because saying that Mary is late presupposes John's earliness and vice versa.

As a relationship, disjunction involves alternation or contrast between elements of a sentence. (Crystal, 2004:461) Hence in the above example, there are two contrasting items or opposites before and after *or*, that is, 'late' and 'early'.

Alternativeness is an inherent characteristic of disjunctive *or*. The alternation can be either of two alternatives or more. Langacre (1983:91) argues that the

first type is usually based on a pair of antonymous words as in:

2. Is John awake *or* asleep?

The explanation of the alternatives above is bound to the situation and presupposition. The speaker uses only two alternatives with

a third alternative unlikely (Ibid.) The two alternatives 'awake' and 'asleep' presuppose that John is alive and here comes the unlikeliness of a third alternative.

For alternation with more than two alternatives, Langacre (Ibid.) gives the following two examples:

3. (Either) John *or* Mary *or* Sue will come.

4. Let's beg, borrow, *or* steal a new watch.

These examples show reduction of the structure. In (3), the auxiliary verb 'will' and main verb 'come' are elided for the purpose of avoiding monotony. The full structure would be:

5. (Either) John will come *or* Mary will come *or* Sue will come.

As for (4), it can be rewritten as follows:

6. Let's beg a new watch *or* let's borrow a new watch *or* let's steal a new watch.

Again, the ellipsis of 'let's' and 'a new watch' in (4) is to avoid repetitiveness. A last remark concerning (3) and (4) is that because of the ellipsis of certain elements, the remaining items linked with *or* are proper nouns and lexical verbs respectively.

2. Exclusive *or*

One of the typical uses of *or* is that it can express exclusion (Quirk et. al., 1999: 932). Only one of the two alternatives is to be true or fulfilled, for example:

7. You can sleep on the sofa in the lounge *or* you can go to a hotel.

The hearer is expected to sleep in two places at the same time. The exclusive reading is certainly intended in the following example discussed by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999:477):

8. You can pay us ten thousand dollars in cash *or* you can give us a money order for that amount.

Although the two alternatives or choices can be performed, being two acceptable methods of paying, i.e., the buyer can pay half the price in cash and the other half by a money order, the only interpretation is the exclusive one.

In some cases the exclusive reading is conditioned by the real world (Ibid.) , as in the sentence:

9. Right now my father is in Egypt *or* he is in Libya.

The impossibility of being present in two countries at the same time is not excluded only because the speaker intends it but it comes from "knowledge of the real world". With this meaning, *or* can be strengthened by the use of 'else' or the adverb 'alternatively' (Quirk et. al., 1999:932) as in:

10. You can boil yourself an egg *or* (else) you can make some sandwiches.

3. Inclusive *or*

Another meaning which *or* is used to convey is that of inclusion. Here, the two conjoins may be true (Kearns, 2000: 29):

11. We'll serve carrots *or* (we'll serve) peas.

According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999:476), the conditions of the statement in (11) are fulfilled so long as one or both these actions are performed. If both carrots and peas are served, no one would object to it as being false. The speaker of (11) uses two alternatives belonging to the same type of food, i.e., vegetables. The speaker enjoys freedom of choice between serving carrots or peas and serving both.

4. Negative Condition

The coordinator *or* may give the implication of negative condition (Leech and Svartvik, 1994: 122), as in :

13. The New Hampshire state motto is the rather grim 'Live free *or* die.'

14. You'd better put your overcoat on, *or* (else) you'll catch a cold.

Leung (2005:15) regards this use of *or* as the giving of warning. The listener or reader is warned against the "unpleasant results" that come about if he does or does not do the thing mentioned:

15. Give me some money *or* I'll shoot you.

16. Turn down that loud music *or* I'll call the police.

Not complying with the orders above would result in injury, death or arrest. The imperative sentence that precedes *or* in both (15) and (16) can be paraphrased by a negative conditional sentence introduced by *if*:

17. If you don't give me some money, I'll shoot you.

18. If you don't turn down that loud music, I'll call the police.

Pragmatically speaking, the listener's face is threatened if he chooses to refuse to obey what the speaker is telling him to do.

5. Restatement / Correction

Or can be used as a tool for restating or correcting (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1993:258):

19. There are no snakes in this area *or* so the guide tells us.

It's obvious that the speaker in this sentence is trying to display himself as reporting a statement made by another person. He achieves this through the use of *or*. The effect of the coordinator here is to free the speaker from any future responsibility if the information about the non-existence of snakes turns out to be untrue.

6. Paraphrasing

Or may be sometimes reserved to the purpose of presenting a definition, that is, to introduce a word or phrase aimed at explaining the meaning of another (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999:477-8), for example:

20. This is a matsutake, *or* pine mushroom.

21. The boards have to be mitered, *or* cut at an angle.

As these examples show, the two things mentioned before and after *or* are synonymous. The speaker uses *or* to provide the hearer with another phrase that will help understand the meaning of the first.

7. Approximation

With numerals and expressions of measurement, *or* implies approximation (Quirk et. al., 1999:981):

22. We like the month *or* two we spent together in Paris.

The speaker here implicitly conveys his uncertainty as to the exact

number of months they spent. The number he gives ranges approximately between one and two which very close numbers. If he gave an approximation between, for

instance, one and nine months, the statement would not have the same effect it has in (22).

Alternatively, *or* can be used along with *so* to render the approximative sense more vague (Ibid.). So the sentence in (22) may be rewritten as follows:

23. We like the month *or so* we spent together in Paris.

Because drinking alcohols is a common habit in western societies, one can expect a westerner to loose his ability to count after a number of drinks. Thus in (24), vagueness is doubled both linguistically and non-linguistically:

24. She looks so drunk. I guess she had ten glasses of beer *or so*.

Here, the speaker himself is drunk and unable to give a precise count adding his drunkenness to that of the other person. What makes it more unclear in the situation in this example is the speaker's use of the verb 'guess' which he uses intentionally to display his doubtfulness.

8. Ascertaining

Finding out whether a piece of information is true or correct can be achieved through *or* (Van Dijk, 1977:43-2):

25. Do you want a glass of water? *Or*, are not you thirsty?

The second question is intended to ascertain the information in the first. The speaker, realizing that his first question may not be in order, resorts to another question even before an answer to the first question is provided.

An imperative sentence may be followed by another introduced by *or*:

26. Be quiet! *Or* don't you see I'm trying to concentrate?

Seemingly, the speaker makes an attempt to soften the directness of his command by making an indirect one as well as provide a justification for demanding the hearer's

quietness. The following example involves a declarative sentence:

27. Congratulations on your examination result. *Or* aren't you happy with it?

The speaker must have inferred that the hearer was not fully satisfied with his result and before he receives any response to his congratulations, he seeks to find out whether the hearer is pleased or not.

9. *Or* used in the sense of *And*

In some contexts, *or* is equivalent to *and*. There are conditions for their interchangeability (Quirk et. al., 1999:934):

1. *Or* shows a tendency to replace *and* in "nonassertive" contexts, for example:

28. She didn't have blue eyes *or* wear a miniskirt.

In this sentence, *or* is replaceable by *and* when used to combine two negative statements as follows:

29. She didn't have blue eyes *and* she didn't wear a miniskirt.

2. Another context for *or-and* interchangeability is "subordinate positions":

30. If they protest *or* demand social reforms, the government won't respond.

This sentence can be rewritten as follows:

31. If they protest, the government won't respond, *and* if they demand social reforms, the government won' respond.

3. *And* can replace *or* after 'can', 'may' and other expressions of permission or possibility:

32. You may eat a cheeseburger sandwich *or/and* drink a cup of hot chocolate.

The Implications of *أو* in Arabic

In Arabic, the meanings of the coordinator *أو* are determined by the linguistic context. The implications vary according to the type of sentence that precedes the coordinator (Hassan,

2004:371). *أو* is used to convey the following :

1. التخيير (Choice)

With التخيير, the addressee is given two alternatives or more to choose from. This use, according to Al-Ghalayini (n.d.: 247), is only found with imperative sentences as in the two examples below:

2. تزوج ليلى أو أختها.

(Marry Layla or her sister.)

3. خذ قلماً أو دفترأ.

(Take a pen or a notebook.)

Both of these sentences begin with imperative verbs تزوج and خذ. Then they are followed by two alternatives. The chooser here is restricted to one and only one of the two choices offered to him. Hence deciding to have both make no sense at all for the addresser who makes the offer. In sentence (2), it is totally unimaginable that a person would marry two sisters at the same time, something which is banned by Islamic teachings. In (3), the addresser confines the addressee to either a pen or a notebook and the restriction here is clear through the context of the sentence.

If the addresser wanted the addressee to have the two objects together, he would say:

4. خذ قلماً و دفترأ.

(Take a pen and a notebook.)

While restriction in (2) is doubled by the presence of *أو* as part of the linguistic context, the religious teachings implied make up the non-linguistic context of the sentence.

A further remark has to be made here concerning the two choices given in (2) and (3) is that in the first, we have ليلى and أختها which are both female human grown-ups while in the second, the choices are قلم and دفتر which, although belonging to the stationary group, are apparently different in kind.

The conclusion is that context and background knowledge play a major role in the interpretation of أو.

2. الإباحة (Permission)

The difference between التخيير and الإباحة , as Al- Ishbili ([d. 669 H], 1998: 189) is that in الإباحة the addressee has the freedom of choosing one of the two alternatives or both at the same time:

5. جالس العلماء أو الزهاد.

(Sit with scholars or ascetics.)

Here, the addressee can choose freely to sit with one of them or both (Ibid.). The freedom given to the addressee is broader than that with التخيير.

3. الشك (Doubt)

When the addressee, for some reason, is in doubt concerning something or somebody, أو is employed to make doubtfulness clear (Al-Hashimi, n.d.:160):

6. قضيتُ في السباحة ثلاثين دقيقة أو أربعين.

(I spent thirty or fourteen minutes swimming.)

7. رأيتُ محمداً أو علياً.

(I saw Muhammad or Ali.)

The speaker in the above declarative sentences expresses his/her uncertainty as to the amount of time spent in the activity of swimming. Again, the speaker, though not sure, gives two approximate periods he assumes he has spent in swimming, i.e., thirty or forty. These two periods are measured in minutes. The same can be said about (7), the addresser is not certain which he saw exactly محمد or علي. It is obvious that these two persons are already known to him and, furthermore, they are both of the same gender. The sentence would be mere nonsense if the addressee said:

8. رأيتُ محمداً أو هنداً.

(I saw Muhammad or Hind.)

Our knowledge of the world provides us with the ability to tell so easily the difference between a male and a female even in the dark and if someone says:

9. قضيتُ في السباحة ثلاثين دقيقة أو أربعين ساعة.

(I spent thirty minutes or fourteen hours swimming.)

we would be rather shocked as to the temporal span that separates the two given periods.

4. الإبهام (Ambiguity)

Related to the meaning just discussed is the use of أو to make things ambiguous so that a line of uncertainty can be felt. The distinction between الشك and الإبهام is not that easy always (As-Samara'i, 2003:217). However, أو can be utilized when the addresser wishes to deliberately obscure his message. In cases of doubt, it is not always the wish of the addresser to make the message unclear although he may do this to achieve certain ends (Al-Hashimi, n.d., 160):

10. تصدقتُ بصدقةٍ قليلةٍ أو كثيرةٍ.

(I gave a little or more in charity.)

11. كلمتُ سعيداً أو محمداً.

(I talked to Sa'eed or Muhammad.)

The interpretation of the two sentences above can be said to be dependent on the addresser's real intentions. Example (11) can be interpreted as either that of إبهام or شك since it is not linguistically explicit which one of the two is intended. The interpretation of أو in (11) hinges on the addresser's intended meaning.

5. الإضراب (Retraction)

This meaning can be explained by the following sentence

12. سأزور خالداً اليوم أو سأمكث.

(I will visit Khalid today or I will stay.)

The speaker of this sentence decides to pay his friend a visit then he changes his mind. In this sense, أو is replaceable by بل:

13. سأزور خالداً اليوم بل سأمكث.

(I will visit Khalid or [maybe] I will stay.)

Another example:

14. ما جاء سعيداً أو ما جاء خالدٌ.

(Sa'eed didn't come or [it is] Khalid [who] didn't come.)

Here, the addresser uses the negative particle ما before the past tense verb جاء to negate the coming of سعيد or خالد. After negating the coming of سعيد, the addresser realizes that he has made a mistake so he corrects himself by using أو (Al-Ghalayini, n.d.:248)

Hassan (2004:475) states that there is a disagreement among grammarians concerning this particular implication of أو. Some restrict it to the presence of two conditions: 1. أو must be preceded by an expression of negation or prohibition, 2. the structure in which it occurs must involve repetition, as in:

15. ما قرأت الكتاب أو ما قرأت المجلة.

(I didn't read the book or I didn't read the magazine.)

In this example, the same pattern is repeated before and after أو: negative particle + past tense verb with the تاء الفاعل + object. The two sentences are almost the same except for the lexical items filling the position of the objects المجلة and الكتاب.

6. (Detailing /division) التقسيم/التفصيل

Going from the general to the specific is another implication of أو (As-Samara'i, 2003:220) as in:

16. الكلمة أسمٌ أو فعلٌ أو حرفٌ.

(The word is [either] a noun or a verb or a particle.)

17. الناسُ مسلمٌ أو كافرٌ.

(People are [either] a Muslim or a disbeliever.)

18. المادةُ صلبةٌ أو سائلةٌ أو غازيةٌ.

(Material is [either] solid or liquid or gas.) The words المادة and الناس, الكلمة are obviously general terms representing general categories. Then they are followed by their subcategories.

7. الواو in the sense of أو

According to AS-Sayuti (n.d.:134), أو can indicate the meaning of الواو in some contexts as in the poetic line:

19. وقد زعمت ليلي باني فاجرٌ
لنفسى ثقاها أو
عليها فجورها

In this particular context, أو implies the possibility of having the two qualities mentioned together. الثقى and الفجور, though the two contrasts, can be found in the same person.

Another example:

20. جلسَ الضيفُ بين صاحبِ الدارِ أو ابنه.

(The guest sat between the house owner or his son.)

This means بين صاحبِ الدارِ و ابنه. In this sense, أو indicates that the both صاحبِ الدارِ and ابنه were included in the action.

8. حتى in the sense of أو

As-Samara'i (2003: 321), mentions that أو has the meaning of حتى or إلا أن :

21. لألزمك أو تقضيني حقي.

(I will put you under obligation or pay my due.)

22. لأضربك أو تسبقتي.

(I will beat you or you outstrip me.)

In the two sentences above, the addresser urges the addressee to take an action that would lead to a certain result. There is implied negative condition so the sentences can be rephrased: لألزمك إذا لم تقضيني حقي and لأضربك إذا لم تسبقتي. On the other hand, أو occurs in the context of warning or threatening somebody in order to make him do something we want.

Analysis of Semantic Implications

This part of the paper is intended to show the similarities and differences between or in English and أو in Arabic. From the two previous parts, the following is concluded concerning the implications of these two coordinators:

1. Both coordinators in the two languages are used to introduce alternatives or choices, mostly two.
2. The inclusive implication of or has an equivalent in Arabic. أو can be used similarly to give two alternatives both of which can be fulfilled at the same time when used to imply إباحة.
3. The same restriction imposed in the exclusive meaning of or is found with أو used to convey the meaning of التخيير. Out of the two alternatives, or more, only one has to be chosen for fulfillment. In the two languages, the exclusion can be drawn either from the linguistic or non-linguistic context.
4. Negative condition paraphrased by the conditional clause 'if you don't.....' which is employed for giving warning is equivalent to that implication of أو when it is used in the sense of حتى.
5. Or can be used to make a correction of a statement or rephrasing when a mistake is realized or more clarity is required. This is also found in the implication of إضراب. In both English and Arabic, this implication can be a useful strategy in achieving a successful communication. The two coordinators will serve as correctives.
6. The definition-giving implication of or has no equivalent in Arabic.
7. English has no equivalent implication to that of التفصيل or التقسيم. However, it displays this implication in connection with hyponymic relationships between words. The use of the correlative construction 'either.....or' may be exploited to convey this implication.
8. The interchangeability of or and and in English has an equivalent in Arabic whereas أو has the sense of الواو. In the two languages, the interchangeability is dependent on the context.

9. The implication of ascertaining in English has no equivalent in Arabic as far as أو is concerned. However, this implication may be found with other Arabic coordinators.

Conclusion

A semantic analysis of coordinators of the two languages cannot be conducted without a reference to their grammar. The two coordinators show some syntactic restriction as far as their semantic implications are concerned. This is very clear in the case أو. Some of the meanings are rigorously conditioned by the type of sentence the coordinator occurs in. Hence the linguistic context plays a major role in deciding which implication is intended by the speaker. This doesn't mean ruling out any effect of the non-linguistic context which also helps in determining the implication.

The analysis shows that the similarities between the implications of or and أو are not strictly one-to-one. In Arabic, the same occurrence of أو can be interpreted in two possible ways. This can also be true of English in some contexts. Implications that exist in Arabic but absent in English and vice versa may be expressed by other means other than the present coordinators.

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الخلاصة

يهدف هذا البحث إلى إلقاء الضوء على جانب من جوانب اللغة ألا وهو المعنى. أختير حرف العطف or في اللغة الإنجليزية و أو في اللغة العربية لغرض البحث. توفر المضامين الدلالية لهذين الحرفين أرضاً خصبة لبحث ذي حجم صغير يقع في أربعة أقسام. يُقدّم الأول منها وصفاً للمضامين الدلالية لحرف العطف or بينما يتناول الثاني المضامين الخاصة بحرف العطف أو. كرس الجزء الثالث للتشابهات و الاختلافات بين مضامين الحرفين. أما نتائج البحث فقد لُخصت في الجزء الأخير.

القادسية

في الآداب و العلوم التربوية

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ترحب بإسهام الاساتذة و الباحثين في الجامعات العراقية و مؤسسات الدولة لرفدها بأبحاثهم العلمية غير المنشورة على وفق قواعد النشر في المجلة.