

### ***Or what?: Challenging the speaker***

One way of challenging an imperative is shown in (1): B asks what the consequences would be if the command is not fulfilled (we refer to this response as an OWQ). We address two main questions: (i) what explains the conditional question paraphrase? and (ii) what properties must a theory of imperatives have to account for OWQ responses?

- (1) A: Eat your vegetables!  
B: Or what?

**Paraphrase:** ‘What (will happen) if I don’t eat my vegetables?’

OWQs are a species of disjunctive question and, intuitively, they ask the hearer to provide alternatives to the antecedent imperative. In isolation, OWQs might just be an interesting curiosity, but an OWQ response seems to instantiate the more general ‘conditional disjunction’ construction, as in (2) from [1]. Conditional disjunctions have generated substantial interest, themselves raising versions of questions (i) and (ii).

- (2) Open the window or I’ll kill you.

Among the puzzles of conditional disjunction is that not all disjunctive continuations to imperatives are good: while (2) is good, that imperative followed by *or I’ll kiss you* is infelicitous ([1]). A rough generalization is that disjunctive imperatives can be used as threats but not promises. In this paper we add new data: OWQ responses are similarly not always licit.

- (3) a. Imperatives as invitations:                      b. Imperatives as disinterested wishes:  
A: Have a candy.    Mother: Have fun! (mother’s farewell to son).  
B: # Or what?    Son: # Or what?

In parallel, the imperatives in (3) could not be used to construct a conditional disjunction without changing the intent or rendering them infelicitous. For example, *Have a candy or you will miss a great delicatessen* is only felicitous as advice, not as an invitation. The challenge, therefore, is to get an account of OWQs that explains the felicity parallelism with conditional disjunction, while capturing the fact that OWQs act as questions (unlike regular disjunctive conditionals).

**Conditional disjunction** [5] proposes to encode the meaning of conditional disjunction as part of the compositional semantics of the imperative operator: the propositional content of the imperative clause is disjoined (using classical  $\vee$ ) with the second disjunct (see [6] and preceding for a competing analysis). On [5]’s proposal, a disjunction is always present in the semantics, but may be syntactically absent. That is, an imperative always expresses a priority for some proposition in the face of explicit or implicit alternatives. [5]’s proposal satisfies two key desiderata: (a) since OWQ is a disjunctive question, and what is disjoined in disjunctive questions is typically taken to be propositional ([3]), we need an account of imperatives that provides some propositional content around which to build a question, and (b) one might not want to say anything construction-specific about disjunction. However, we have already seen one puzzle for this account, in that not all imperative clauses do accept a disjunctive continuation. OWQs present a second immediate puzzle, suggesting that the expression of the alternatives can be distributed across utterances, and needn’t be compositional: an OWQ seems to fill the same role as a disjunctive continuation, and therefore cannot be used to respond to a conditional disjunction.

- (4) A: Eat your vegetables or you won’t get any dessert!                      B: #Or what?

How can the idea behind the proposal be reconciled with the OWQ data? Intuitively, some kinds of imperative uses are not compatible with presenting or inquiring about alternatives in context, and some are.

**‘Or What’-questions** We assume (following [2]) that ‘or what’ questions in general (‘Are you going to the party or what?’) are alternative questions where ‘what’ is anteceded by a salient Q(uestion) U(nder) D(iscussion). Disjunction serves the same role as introduced in Hamblin semantics: to build sets of propositional alternatives from the union of the disjuncts. On this proposal, an OWQ-question is a tool for re-raising a QUD in combination with some explicit specification of an alternative via the first disjunct. As responses to imperatives, there is no first disjunct and the content of the antecedent imperative is taken for granted (though not accepted as common ground), so OWQ responses serve purely to re-raise a QUD, requesting a complete answer (developed below).

**Analysis: Imperatives as preferences** We adopt [4]’s theory of imperatives in which the utterance of an imperative with content  $\phi$ , where the content is the proposition that is true if the imperative is fulfilled, conventionally commits the speaker simply to a preference for  $\phi$  to be actualized (constraining the speaker’s future action choices). In this account, the core *semantics* of the imperative  $[[!\phi]]$  is simply  $[[\phi]]$ . To derive all other features of imperative interpretation, and in particular different ‘flavors’ of imperative meanings, this account relies on pragmatics and context. [4] make use of *effective preference structures*, sets of ranked propositions according to an agent’s (consistent) preferences at a particular time (cf. Portner’s To-Do list). At each time a maximal element of the preference structure can be identified and the utterance of an imperative

conveys a public commitment of the speaker to having the content proposition of the imperative as his/her maximal preference. This theory both allows us to keep [5]’s treatment of disjunction in single-utterance conditional disjunctions, as it assumes propositional content, and allows us to refer to future alternatives.

**Analysis: Questions and imperatives** Given that imperatives present some alternative(s) for the future, they can be taken to partially answer an implicit QUD like *What will happen in the future?*, or some more specific version. A disjunctive imperative (assuming final falling intonation) describes a set of possible alternatives that may resolve this QUD and (via standard mechanisms for disjunction, e.g. innocent exclusion) requires that these alternatives are exhaustive and mutually exclusive: the second disjunct has exhausted the logical space not covered by the previous disjunct. One way of characterizing the logical space not covered by the first disjunct,  $\phi$ , is to identify it as  $\neg\phi$ , without any further fine-grained distinction. From an exhaustive disjunction it can therefore be concluded that each disjunct is conditional to the negation of the other; because the preference structure favors the imperative clause’s content, the second disjunct is more intuitively conditionalized.

(5) Eat your vegetables or you won’t get dessert.

**Paraphrase:** The alternatives for the future (in the actual world) are that either you eat your vegetables (and the speaker prefers this alternative) or that you don’t have dessert.

The interpretation of an OWQ-dialogue is illustrated in (6); instead of providing alternatives, an OWQ asks about remaining (less-preferred) alternatives by re-raising the QUD.

(6) QUD: What will happen in the future with this dinner?

Response: One alternative is that you eat your vegetables, and the speaker prefers this.

Or what?: What are the alternative(s) of the future in which I don’t eat my vegetables?

**When a disjunction is not possible** If OWQ responses are re-raising some QUD, we predict them to be sensitive to the details of what the QUD is. We suggest this is what accounts for the distributional facts, in both OWQs and regular disjunction conditionals. The basic prediction is that, in order to license disjunction, an imperative must provide a non-complete answer to the future-oriented QUD in context. Key cases where disjunction is not licit include disinterested advice, disinterested wishes, and invitations. In all of these cases, the QUD behaves like a ‘mention-some’ question, because alternatives to the preferred proposition are not relevant to the goals of discourse (see e.g. [8]). For example, in the case of disinterested advice, the QUD is typically somewhat more specific, e.g. how to achieve a particular goal. This sort of teleological question is mention-some, as there may be multiple possible alternatives but any one of them is construed as resolving. An OWQ, on our proposal, replies to a (strictly) partially answered question about the future, and requests a complete: on a mention-some question, the answer is already taken to be exhaustive relative to the goals of conversation. Unlike, e.g. ‘what if’ questions ([7]), an OWQ therefore cannot be used to challenge a complete answer. A second case is shown in (7); here, the imperative involves pretense on the part of the questioner to provide a challenge, and because of cultural context, it is already apparent what the alternative to the challenge is – B escapes with all their limbs. Consequently, an OWQ response is inappropriate.

(7) A, a mobster, discovers that B is an informant in his organization. A confronts B with a challenge:

A: Go on rat, report me to the police.

B: # Or what?

To extend this account back to conditional disjunction, we assume more generally that disjunctions must be congruent with a QUD (following [9]’s *Topic Condition*). Hence, conditional disjunction generally is infelicitous when the second disjunct provides a superfluous answer to some QUD.

**Summary** We have given an account of OWQ responses that reflects back on the theory of conditional disjunction and imperatives at large. To account for the behavior of OWQs, we required a theory of imperatives with propositional content; disjunction in OWQs is on par with disjunction in alternative questions. To account for the distribution of OWQs and conditional disjunction in parallel, we treated imperatives as responding to a salient QUD, where conditional disjunctions provide exclusified alternative resolutions to the QUD in combination with a preference structure. An OWQ asks what the alternatives would be to a partial answer to a salient QUD, provided by an antecedent imperative.

**Selected bibliography:** [1] Van der Auwera. 1986 Conditionals and Speech Acts. In *On Conditionals*, CUP. [2] Biezma & Rawlins. 2012. Or what? Presentation at workshop *Questions in Discourse*, Frankfurt. [3] Biezma & Rawlins. 2012. Responding to polar and alternative questions. *L&P* 35. [4] Condoravdi and Lauer. 2012. Imperatives: meaning and illocutionary force. In *EISS* 9. [5] Eckardt. 2011. Hands-up imperatives. In *SuB* 15. [6] Kaufmann. 2012. *Interpreting imperatives*. Springer. [7] Rawlins. 2010. Conversational Backoff. *Proceedings of SALT 20*. [8] Van Rooy. 2003. Questioning to resolve decision problems. *L&P* 26. [9] Simons. 2001. Disjunction and alternativeness. *L&P* 24.