

## Disjunctive exemplars: Verbalizing elusive categories

Mira Ariel  
Tel Aviv University

The transition from nonverbal concepts into verbally expressed information is not invariably smooth (Chafe, 1977). Indeed, many categories cannot be easily named. They are ad hoc, and often quite elusive, even for the speaker. Based on over 1,000 *or* examples from the Santa Barbara Corpus, I will argue that disjunctions are routinely mobilized to express such categories, because they allow the speaker to refer to alternatives (the explicit disjuncts) without necessarily committing to any one of them. These alternatives are then used as linguistic pointers to a higher-level category.

Here is a case where only one exemplar is explicitly introduced:

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

*Or something* instructs the addressee to view the first alternative (here 'shopping') as a salient member of a category which includes it as a member, but crucially, includes other members as well. Most likely, the category here intended is 'errands which are difficult for her to do on her own'.

On the classical analysis, 2(a) is an exclusive *or* case (the ruler must be either a king or a queen), and 2(b) is an inclusive case (it's quite likely that she got tired of both of the options mentioned):

2. a. NORA: Wonder who was the ruler. in nineteen ten.  
DIANE: Who was the **king or queen**? (SBC: 023)
- b. 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)

But I propose that Diane is actually referring to the category of 'a monarch' and Gilbert is after a rather elusive category of 'annoying corruption cases in the news'. In these nonspecialized disjunctions the speaker mentions two (or more) exemplars of a higher-level category, leaving it to the addressee to construct this higher-level category, based on the explicitly mentioned members. The category may be well-established (2a) or an ad hoc one (2b).

Why don't speakers simply name the category they mean? For more than one reason. *King or queen* are not only more vivid than *monarch*. These lexical items are also easier for the speaker to retrieve and for the addressee to process. In (1) and 2(b) the categories intended are not as easy to pin down. When speakers have a rather vague category in mind, especially an ad hoc one, verbalizing it may be a mouthful (e.g., 'things she needs to do outside the house which are difficult for her to do on her own'). Often enough, conceptualizing these categories may be easier than pinning them down linguistically. Disjunctions containing "good" exemplars for the category in mind can thus convey higher-level categories which the speaker finds difficult to verbalize more directly.

### References

Chafe, W.L., 1977. The recall and verbalization of past experience. In: Cole, P. (Ed.), *Current issues in linguistic theories*. Indiana University press, Bloomington, pp. 215-246.