

Or else, or so or what? A few Examples of the Staging of the Implicit in English

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ABSTRACT

Or-based coordination has certainly received less attention from linguists than its *And*-based counterpart, which appears to be (and statistically is) the first coordinator with an impressive variety of uses. Whereas *And* is basically a ‘surface’ coordinator connecting equally explicit though hierarchised elements, *Or* provides an insight into implicit otherness, *i.e.* not what *is* or *will be* but what *could be*. By providing alternative routes for the construction of meaning, the connector clearly reintroduces verticality in an otherwise mainly horizontal though memory-based form of representation.

The core value of ‘choice’ that has traditionally been associated with *Or* can have two readings, one open and one closed. The ‘open’ meaning derives from the diversity offered through the presentation of potentially equally relevant elements. However, such ‘spectrum interpretation’ is confronted to the tyranny of discourse linearity, to the speaker’s possible willingness to provide a situation-specific presentation order and fundamentally to the necessity of a unique preferred option to be selected from the original choice, hence the second, ‘closed’ reading of the word.

With that starting point in mind one can now consider how alternation can be literally *staged* in language and discourse, offering a syntax-based open surface whilst imposing a pragma-semantic restricted choice, as seems to be the case with such constructions as *or else*, *or so* and *or what* among others. First the presence of such combinations is observed in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA). Second their usage is considered in context, with a view to providing finally a unified theorisation of such constructions.

The starting point of this study is the unease provoked by a very particular form of alternation in which the addressee is presented with what can be aptly called “deceptive alternation”, *i.e.* a choice which only exists on the surface of discourse. The *Or* coordinator actually introduces an incomplete or contextually-irrelevant alternative that is designed to leave the addressee with no option other than to accept the preferred choice of the speaker.

Focus will be put on three complimentary sentence-ending combinations, *Or so*, *Or what* and *Or else*. Coordination in general will be first examined, with a view to identifying the specificities of *Or* coordination compared to *And* coordination, then the corpus will be presented before a more comprehensive examination of the various parameters that may account for the value of each combination.

1. Starting point: coordination

Prior to analysing specifically the usage and meaning of the three constructions under scrutiny, it is necessary to take a wider view of coordination as a mental and grammatical phenomenon¹.

1.1. Why coordinate?

The very first question to ask oneself is this: *why coordinate?* Surely the question is both extremely general – and therefore apparently detached from the technicalities of the linguistic construction of meaning – and necessary to understand how speakers, and eventually language, felt the need to have such a notion and designing tools to express it satisfactorily.

There are basically three answers to that question, depending on world-, speaker-, or discourse-based connection. World-based connection implies that there exists in the outside reality a number of similarities and/or differences, even before speakers actually get in touch with the world, so that they acknowledge their existence. Speaker-based connection, on the contrary, is based on the claim that the similarities and differences do not pre-exist in a

¹ For obvious practical reasons, this is only a general outline which is provided here.

fundamentally ever-different world and that they can only be created by speakers, serving as mind-developing stages as well as rhetorical patterns imposed upon the addressee. Discourse-based connection is the consequence of the constraints governing the production and reception of discourse, minimising, as part of anaphora, the volume of space, time and linguistic material needed to express something.

1.2. How to choose the right conjunction?

The second question is *how to choose the right conjunction* from the “Fanboys” list (*For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So*). Here only the three main conjunctions, *i.e. And, Or, and But*, will be quickly considered.

And is certainly the number one coordinator² and basically expresses Accumulation, with three complementary and potentially overlapping values, the first being Addition (as in *Peter, Paul and Mary*), the second, (chrono)logical Connection (*Rock 'n Roll* and narration) and the third, Opening perspectives, thanks to the horizontal fluidity than can be associated with the word.

But is about Opposition, which comes in three types: Contrast, *i.e.* a difference between what is expected and what is actually present, resulting in non-aligned linguistic territories; Exclusion, isolating one element away from the norm; and Concession, a remarkable rhetorical tool combining continuity and discontinuity in a fictional tale of the unexpected.

Last but not least, *Or* and its fundamentally vertical Selection value, the aim of which can be to stage diversity with a combination of zero-degree essence and otherness, to seemingly present the addressee with choice, though the degree of opening may not be as high as expected, or to impose a presentation order resulting from language constraints linked to its unidimensionality and from speaker's decision, hence a discourse protocol designed to influence the addressee's response.

1.3. Coordination and content management

The third and final question is *what coordination implies in terms of content management* before and after the conjunction.

Content is similar, as is the case with comparison. One can only coordinate two objects that share enough to be associated³, making such sentences as *She loves coffee and I'm dead* less likely than *She loves coffee and I eat chocolate*.

Content is also balanced, not necessarily in terms of linguistic weight or validity, but because, whatever elements are placed before and after the conjunction and whatever the nature of their relationship, they occupy the only two scales available⁴ and are thus abstractly equated before the connection is characterized. Then again this is a process which bears similarity with comparison, the latter being primarily based upon equality.

Finally, content is complete since the coordinator, as is shown with enumerations, introduces the last element of the series, suggesting the scanning of reality for discourse-relevant elements has ended successfully.

The question now is how the *Or so, Or else* and *Or what* constructions are integrated in the system, whether they are on a par, albeit seemingly marginal, with the patterns presented here

² *And* has therefore received more attention than *Or*, even when both coordinators should be analysed. A telling example is found in Peterson (2004). Though *And* and *Or* are explicitly mentioned in the introduction to the paper, all the examples in sections 2 and 3 and most of those in section 4 are strictly *And*-based, leaving only the introductory section and conclusion with a few references to *Or*...

³ For a general introduction to the problem of *likeness* in coordination, see Whitman (2004).

⁴ That is, if only binary alternation is considered. Still, in the case of multiple alternatives, the different items are similarly equated.

or whether they stand outside the rest as exceptions. The only way to check which hypothesis is more valid is to have a close look at data.

2. Corpus data selection

There are three reasons for the selection of *Or so, or what* and *or else* as the focus for this study⁵. All three constructions display an aptitude to cut discourse short, whilst being able to express completeness, which in turn makes them rather paradoxical combinations since their syntax is deceptive. Moreover, they are part of asymmetric constructions⁶ since the order of the alternatives cannot be reversed.

2.1. Cutting it short

Only sentence-terminating combinations are examined, which means that the conjunction introduces an extremely short alternative content. Such brevity is not at all unexpected with *So*, as the *Or so* collocation is a set phrase. This is also true of the *Or what* collocation, though it might be possible to consider the combination as the result of ellipsis, *what* being the sole remaining element of an otherwise developed open question for instance, such as *Is he coming or what [is he doing]?*

Else is different, as it normally introduces an explicit development⁷. Its sentence-terminating position is therefore salient. In all three cases, it appears that the element following the conjunction represents what could / should have been expressed but is not for reasons to be determined.

2.2. Saying it all

It can be assumed that the examination of the three elements taken separately gives some insight into their potential meaning when in combination. If all three can “say it all”, there must be something in their original form and meaning that makes this possible in context. The difficulty here is that *So* and *What*, especially, and *Else*, to a lesser extent, are quite empty and ubiquitous words.

Still, *So*, as its intensive and exclamative value as well as adverbial combination with *do* suggest, represents content, essence, *i.e.* sameness repeated (which, incidentally, can account for its causal use as a conjunction), close to *the like*, though the latter, maybe because of the original “outline” meaning of the word, is less centred upon essence. Here, the quantity approaching value of *Or so* is compatible with sameness as a adjacent quantitative territory is explored.

Example 1 – 2011 / Fiction / 2011 / Parnell Hall, *The Kenken Killings*

This morning there was a notice in the box saying that Cora had a registered letter. That did not bode well. Usually registered letters meant lawsuits, unpaid bills, late tax returns, **and the like**.

Possibly the use of *And* implies the representation of an actual object (as opposed to the more implicit *Or*), which is a confirmation of the Outline vs Essence distinction.

What originally represents an inanimate object (as opposed to *who*), the identity of which is yet to be determined, as in questions, or has already been determined, when *What* is not used

⁵ For a study of *And*-based combinations, see Dines (1980).

⁶ The term is borrowed from Huddleston and Pullum (2002). One example of such impossibility of reversal of the coordinates is “I’m leaving before the end or I’ll miss the train” (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 1303).

⁷ In the *Corpus of Contemporary American English*, there are ten times fewer sentence-terminating *Or else* combinations (212) than genuine alternative-introducing combinations (2,409). The ratio is nearly 1 in 20 in the *British National Corpus* (45 out of a total of 802).

as an interrogative pronoun. In other words, only the envelope of the object is expressed, not its specific content, resulting in a combined expression of identification and absence of it.

Else is different, so to speak, though, as an adjective (as in *somebody else*), it shares with *What* the abstract representation of an object. Its focus is on mainly qualitative otherness, leading to an external entity. Such a centrifugal movement brings *Else* close to *What* once again, as opposed to the centripetal *So*, and it quite logically makes the *Or else#* alternative an expectation-arousing option.

2.3. Paradoxical combinations

All three selected combinations can be described as paradoxical combinations. Indeed, *Or* is supposed to introduce discourse expansion, as is the case for all coordinators. However, such expansion is minimal in terms of explicit content, with only one word following *Or* and a word the meaning of which can hardly be described as heavy. Conversely, one finds that the implicit content of the alternative option is quite extended, depending on context. What the syntax normally introduces (a balanced content on either side of the coordinator) is replaced by a deceptively ‘empty’ form, the content of which will be studied in the next part.

Just before that, though, here is the distribution of the three forms in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English*:

Table 1 – Distribution

Combination	Tokens
<i>Or else</i>	212
<i>Or so</i>	324
<i>Or what</i>	393
Total	929

3. Forms of integration

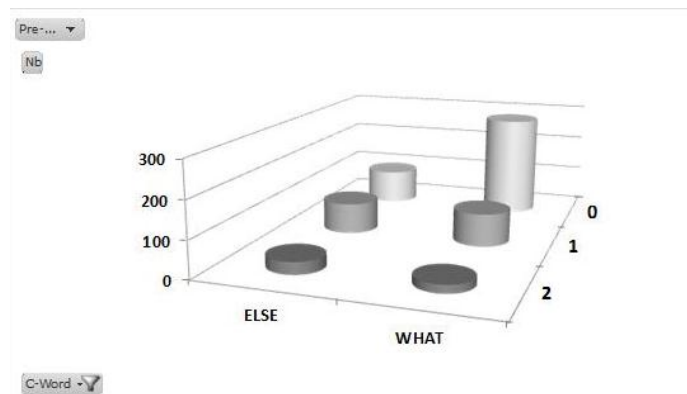
Attention is now directed to the immediate and non-immediate left and right contexts in which such constructions appear. The specific usage of the three combinations is determined by examining four aspects of their integration within discourse, starting with punctuation both before and after and then expanding the scope to include causal elements to the left and response to the right and finally taking source into consideration.

3.1. Punctuation

The nature of punctuation before the combination gives indications as to whether the combinations directly stem from what has been said before or introduce a shift in the text. Only *What* and *Else* are relevant here, since in transcriptions *Or so* can only be preceded by a blank space. In the following graph, the various signs of punctuation are merged in three types, from blank space to continuation signs to separation signs.

Graph 1 – Punctuation before *Or else* and *Or what*

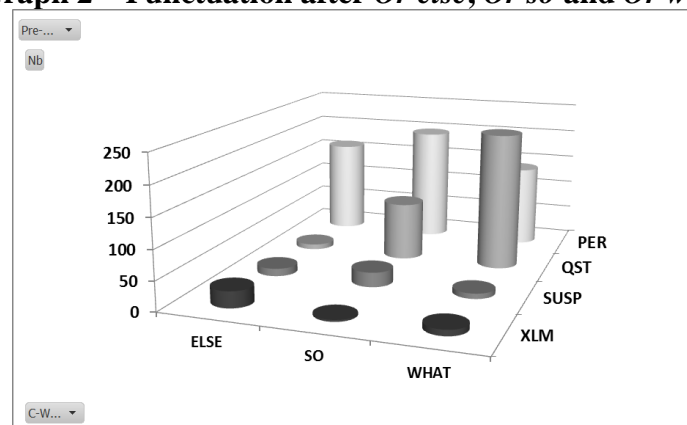
0-Blank space / 1-Comma/Dash/Bracket / 2-Period/Question/Exclamation/Suspension



Or what shows a clear tendency towards continuation, with the 0 value making up three quarters of all occurrences (281 tokens out of 393) while the 2 value is just over 5% (22 occurrences). *Or else* is comparatively more balanced with 45% of 0 punctuation, 40% of intermediate punctuation and over 15% of clear punctuation. The difference suggests that while *Else* opens a new perspective that should be considered by the addressee, *What* only pretends to open one and puts the emphasis on what comes before.

All three combinations are now taken into consideration for ‘After’ punctuation, with only type 2 signs: period (PER), question mark (QST), suspension points (SUSP) and exclamation mark (XLM).

Graph 2 – Punctuation after *Or else*, *Or so* and *Or what*



The nature of the element placed after the conjunction has a direct influence on the preferred punctuation mark, hence the large amount of question marks associated with *What*. However this is not enough to predict what sign will emerge. In the case of *Or else* for example, a large proportion of suspension points would be expected since the alternative announced is left unsaid. This is clearly not the case, with just 6% of suspension points, less than with *Or so*. Surely the presence of the exclamation mark, at 13%, is comparatively large and it shows that the implicit is staged but the main sign is the neutral period, just as with *Or so*. Even *What* displays, with different proportions, the whole set of punctuation marks. This shows that, beyond the potentially problematic transcription choices made for originally spoken material or the idiosyncratic use of punctuation by authors of written text, there exists a form of variability which bears witness to the rhetorical gap between prototypical and contextual usage and accounts for unexpected combinations.

3.2. Looking left: the quest for cause

Since the three combinations mark the completion of the sentence, its last element must both share characteristics with content on the left and, because there is marked alternation, depart from that content. It is thus necessary to examine the left context as part of a quest for possible causes that lead to the combinations. Each element will be considered in turn, starting with *Or so*, which is the least complex in terms of use.

3.2.1. So: trying to set quantity

Or so is exclusively used to try and set quantity and/or quality. Two parameters will be considered here, one is the nature of the quantified element, the other is the quantity taken into consideration. The aim is to see whether and if so in what way the value of those parameters can explain the presence of the *Or so* phrase.

The semantic nature of the quantified element was sorted out by assigning general categories to the word used. *Time* is by far the most frequent category, with 78% of all tokens (*But it has become a lot more complicated over the past five years or so*). Next is *Space*, with 5% of the total. The rest is divided into several domains, among which *Date*, *People*, *Money*, etc. Time and Space are both represented by many words that basically cover the whole spectrum of units, from *Second* to *Millennium* with Time and from *Inch* to *Mile* with Space. Those words are not equally frequent, and the reason is not necessarily their overall frequency in the *Coca* corpus, as shown by table 2:

Table 2 – Time – Comparison between *Or so* and overall *Coca* frequency

	Or so		General		
	Rank	Number	Rank	Rank	Number
<i>Year</i>	1	70	1	54	769,354
<i>Hour</i>	2	41	5	273	138,255
<i>Week</i>	3	31	2	188	199,268
<i>Month</i>	3	31	4	237	162,685
<i>Minute</i>	5	26	6	309	126,660
<i>Day</i>	6	24	3	215	183,724
<i>Decade</i>	7	13	7	731	53,727

At both extremes, positions are justified by the overall frequency, with *Year* and *Decade* clearly separated from the other terms. In between there is no correlation between overall frequency and frequency in the *Or so* phrase. For instance, *Hour* is a third more frequent with *Or so* than *Week* is though the latter is a third more frequent than the former overall.

What is more interesting is the general presence of Time both as a parameter to be quantified and as one that is quantified with difficulty. Maybe Time is present for two reasons, one being that life and therefore social interaction are organised around temporal cycles, especially since we are mortals and therefore very much aware of what time means, the second being that time, as a fluid element, is not the easiest to grasp, either because long units have a thickness making it possible to have partial quantity or because short units cannot be precisely quantified externally.

The second parameter to appear, far behind Time, is Space. The proportion is too small to come up with a definite explanation about the presence of space in such context, though the importance of measuring one's imprint in the world can be considered as relevant. Since this is not the overall proportion of space or time quantification that is taken into account here but only the *Or so*-quantification, maybe the small part played by Space as opposed to Time is

due to the fact that it is easier to have a clear view with space, which can in turn account for the systematic use of the space metaphor to represent the ever-fleeing time. Another interesting difference is that while one can say “I’m here”, it is not possible to say “I’m Monday”. Time is shared whereas space is not⁸. Space is naturally, fundamentally bordered.

The quantity taken in consideration, *i.e.* the number associated with the quantified object, is the second parameter that needs to be looked at carefully. A first assumption is that lack of preciseness is connected to rather large quantity as counting becomes more difficult to perform both from a strictly mental point of view and within the context of conversation. The findings, as shown in table 3, are quite surprising, with variable quantity expressed and interesting differences between time and space.

Table 3 – Time vs Space – Quantity comparison

Number Type	TIME	SPACE	Total
<i>1</i>	149	1	150
<i>2</i>	16	2	18
<i>5</i>	15	2	17
<i>10</i>	28	3	31
<i>20</i>	28	0	28
<i>50</i>	5	1	6
<i>100</i>	1	4	5
<i>1,000</i>	3	2	5
<i>1,000,000</i>	4	0	4
<i>XXX</i>	5	0	5
Total	254	15	269

The most striking feature is clearly the 149 tokens of One in Time quantification, as compared to only one occurrence with Space. There is also a surge for Time with 10 and 20, but it is not necessarily connected to a rise in imprecision as round numbers tend to appear more often, and with built-in imprecision, than “precise” numbers.

There are two explanations for the use of *Or so* with One in a Time context. One is by returning to what was said about time above. It is a fluid parameter with non-immediate boundaries that make it easier to explore the inside of large units and the outside of small ones. The second explanation is linked to the number of units available to calculate time length which is higher (ten from *second* to *millennium*) than that of space units (five from *inch* to *mile*), which means it is easier to select a unit that is adapted to quantity, *i.e.* combined with as small a number as possible⁹.

3.2.2. Else: *defining otherness*

Else is found in English both as an adjective positioned either after an interrogative pronoun or after a limited number of grammatical compound words with *some* or *any* as the first element and *where*, *thing*, *one* and *body*, and as an adverb, reinforcing *Or* as is the case in the *Or else* combination. It does not need to be present for *Or* to introduce alternation, except when it “represents” the alternative in the absence of any other element, just as suspension points or gestures might do.

⁸ The idea is expressed by Pierre Cotte (oral communication).

⁹ This is what a *unit* aims at doing: looking for *unity* in order to do away with mind-tiring large numbers.

Now the question is why the full alternative can be absent and what *else* specifically suggests. There are basically two values for the *Or else* combination, one is the staging of immediacy, the other the staging of simplicity, both of which are designed to present the first solution as preferable to its known/unknown alternative.

The immediacy *Else* introduces is associated with space/time or interpersonal relationship. *Space/time immediacy* means that the (negative) alternative is just at hand and is therefore used as a powerful argument to prompt the addressee to choose the first solution, as is shown in examples 2 and 3:

Example 2 – 1994 / Fiction / Paul Auster, *From Beirut Nightmares*

A sixth corpse shouted, “My father is a member of parliament, his car has a blue licence plate, get your corpses out of my way or I’ll have my father’s militia kill all of you over again. And you, Sabir, **let me in immediately, or else...** you know what else!”

Example 3 – 1993 / Fiction / Movie / *Sleepless in Seattle*

(turning to Jonah) Can I bring something back for you? A souvenir? (to Sam) Does he like those little snow scenes? (to Jonah) You know -- you shake them up and the snow floats down? Sam looks at Jonah, threateningly. **Be nice or else.**

In example 2, *Immediately* is used both as part of the plead and as a tool to bring the alternative close to realisation. This is reinforced by the exclamative sentence placed at the end of the speaker’s intervention, which leaves the content of the alternative implicit because it considers it as shared knowledge. In example 3, the threat that is conveyed by the intermediate descriptive sentence is a clear here-and-now representation of the alternative solution, basically formatting its content.

Interpersonal immediacy is linked to the use of the imperative before *Or*. The imperative is a prefiguration of the action the addressee should accomplish to satisfy the speaker¹⁰. Because *Or*, as a coordinator, connects two elements of similar nature, that of the missing element can be determined, thus transferring the immediacy to the alternative solution, as shown in example 4. The metalinguistic elements are not considered here.

Example 4 – 2007 / Spoken / CBS, *48 Hours*

MORIARTY: How would you describe the tone of that call? Mr-CORTEZ: Oh, he was definitely angry. He was upset. MORIARTY: Did he threaten you at any point? Mr-CORTEZ: Yeah, he was like, **Don’t see her again or else.** MORIARTY: And what was that “or else?” Mr-CORTEZ: I don’t know. I don’t know what the “or else” was.

Not only are the first possibility and its alternative viewed as immediate, they are considered as simple, which is only natural in a binary system such as alternation. The option is presented as easier to accede to, better when considering the consequences, or truer, that is to say closer to reality, as is shown in examples 5 to 7.

Example 5 – 2003 / Newspaper / *The Denver Post*

Early on, Lee also learned a few lessons about nagging. Cosmas, it seems, has a habit of leaving uncapped condiments on the counter overnight. She started by pointing out his bad

¹⁰ In a limited number of cases, accomplishment is not specifically under the addressee’s control, as in *Have a nice day*. Still, the speaker expresses what *should* happen.

habit with a Vanna-like flourish of the hand. She continued by attaching cute and progressively more threatening notes to the condiments - “**Put me back in the fridge or else!** Signed, Victor Mayo.” When that failed, Lee stopped buying condiments, leaving a note in the fridge that read, “If you can’t use condiments responsibly, then you can’t use them at all.”

Example 6 – 2007 / Spoken / NBC, *Dateline*

CORDERI: (Voiceover) During one call to his sister Judy, Zaffino says **his**, quote, “**friends better step up and pay for his appeal or else.**” (Court-in-session; - Mr-ZAFFINO: (From prison audiotape) I said call my friends, and you tell them that they will pay for it and just to get the checkbook out and not worry about it. That’s the way it’s going to be or they’re going to lose their freedom. JUDY: (From prison audiotape) Good.

Example 7 – 1994 / Fiction / Ross Randy, “The Chocolate Man”

As an octogenarian city councilman used to say back in Los Angeles, “Don’t move! Improve!” But, according to Fifi, the old neighborhood was a real downer, absolutely no hope. I didn’t budge, so she threatened me. # “**Move or else...!**” # The threat came while I was in a particularly vulnerable position [...]

As a matter of fact the first part is so clearly stated that the alternative is not designed to be considered. Moreover, the latter can be reconstructed using *Or* as a mirror, its negative dimension sharing with the speaker’s preferred solution its simplicity and immediacy and being often accompanied by elements suggesting the threatening nature of the speaker’s reaction in case the first option was not chosen.

3.2.3. What: *questioning reality*

The context in which *Or what* appears is either directly or indirectly connected to questions or, to be more precise, to a lack of information that is in keeping with the view of *What* as a word signalling information deficit. Two thirds of the sentences are questions, three quarters of which being *Yes/No* questions and the last quarter declarative sentences with a question mark at the end. The other third is made up of assertions containing an introductory speech or cognition verb (*say, know, wonder*). Most sentences are negative (except with *wonder*), the prototypical form being *not know if/whether*, as shown in example 8:

Example 8 – 1995 / Fiction / Robert Reed, “A place with shade”

“What do you remember?” # “Of my parents? Nothing.” She shook her head. “Everything.” A nod and the head tilted, and she told me, “I do have one clear image. **I don’t know if it’s memory or if it’s a dream, or what.** But I’m a child inside a smelly freighter, huddled in a corner [...]

Since *Or what* appears at the end of the sentence, the question to be asked is that of the nature and amount of information found before, which can account for the presence of the ‘false’ alternative.

Of the nearly 400 occurrences of *Or what*, two thirds are part of an interrogative sentence, with about 60% polar/alternative questions, 30% interrogative assertions and 10% reported questions containing verbs like *Ask, Question* or *Wonder*. This is quite natural considering the information deficit associated with *What*. The speaker tries to figure out the nature of the object¹¹ and provides the addressee with a list of items, the last of which is *What*.

¹¹ See Biezma & Rawlins (draft) for an extensive survey of alternative questions and the determination processes at work. An interesting element, which is indirectly linked to the combinations under analysis, is the interrogative sequence they refer to as “Cornering the addressee” (23): A: Are you coming to the party? / B: I

The last third is made up of declarative sentences but these are not ordinary sentences. All contain a representation of knowledge, either through a verb (*know, figure, etc.*), an adjective (*sure, clear*) or a noun (*choice, idea*). What is striking is the massive presence of negation (90%), and especially the *not + know* combination, with 70% of all tokens. The speaker clearly shows he or she cannot set a specific value to the object and consequently explores the other possibilities.

This brings us to the second point, that is to say the amount of information given before the rather empty *Or what* alternative. 80% of all examples are based on a binary pattern with *What* as second alternative. The proportion rises to 100% with declarative questions, suggesting the speaker is in fact imposing his or her view upon the addressee since the second option, being left unexpressed, is not to be considered seriously. An interesting comparison can be made between the two main types of sentences, Assertions (30%) and Polar/Alternative questions (50%). The binary pattern represents two thirds of all assertions and nine out of ten questions. Then again, questions primarily serve as a way to impose only one preferred view. More complex patterns are presented in table 4

Table 4 – Distribution of patterns (sentence type / number of alternatives)

	2	3	4	5	Total
<i>Assertion</i>	85	33	10	3	131
<i>Question</i>	159	19	1	1	180

There are two sorts of complex patterns, which can be described as open or closed. Open patterns correspond to pre-*What* lists that do not cover the whole spectrum of possibilities but only those that the speaker remembers or wishes to express. *Or what* can thus be described as representing the unexpressed rest, as shown by example 9.

Example 9 – 2006 / Fiction / Nathan Leslie, “The Fire Pit”

During this stay, Floyd just ate. He didn’t look up or seemingly listen at all. In fact, he stared at the reflection of the candles in his plate and mouthed something to himself silently. **I don’t know if he was too bored by the story, too scarred, or what.** But he shifted into some other dimension, that’s for sure.

However there are also closed patterns, which contain full lists, nonetheless supplemented by *Or what*, which logically cannot refer to additional possibilities (example 10).

Example 10 – 1995 / Magazine / Rolling Stone

And then one night in the middle of a drug feast and an orgy, he has a spiritual awakening. Then it goes back into the past and shows everything that happened, how he got to where he got and the characters around him: His manager and his girlfriend, Magdalene – there’s a song about her on the album. There’s a whole new world order involved in the story, but **you don’t know whether it’s past, present, future or what.**

This throws a new light on the use of *Or what*. Instead of introducing a new element or semi-explicitly referring to complementary information, it reinforces the displayed indecision of the speaker, as if replacing all of the specified items with *What*. In a way, the abstract smoothing out of differences is the opposite of what *else* does. *What* empties complementarity (or even

don’t know. / A: Are you coming to the party or not? In a way, the *Or what* and *Or else* alternatives go even further.

the initial set of possibilities, as in closed patterns) while *Else* magnifies its role whilst still considering the first option as the preferred one.

Another form of combination deserves some attention, *i.e.* interrogative series¹² with a *What* head and a final *Or what*. The former introduces a formatted alternative question while the latter goes beyond the specificity the alternative items represent, eventually forming a linguistic information deficit loop.

Example 11 – 2005 / Fiction / Franklin W. Dixon, *Extreme danger*

“Why did Brian have to show up for lessons today?” I moaned to my brother. “Talk about a bad coincidence.” “More like Murphy’s Law,” Frank chipped in. “Hey, Hardys!” our least favorite classmate yelled from the parking lot. “I saw you jump. **What’s up with the double tandem diving? You girls get scared, or what?**” I glanced at Frank and rolled my eyes.

3.3. Looking right: So what?

Finally, a good way of determining the role played by the three combinations is to have a look at what happens next, how the speaker complements his or her originally polemical use of the deceptive alternative¹³ and how the addressee receives it, both extensions providing metalinguistic information on the former compact construction of meaning.

3.3.1. SO: Quantity formatting

In most cases, 95% of all 324 examples to be more exact, the mention of the approximation does not elicit any complementary quantification or correction on the part of the speaker or the addressee, which shows the evaluation is considered either as correct/acceptable or as contextually secondary information. This is not really surprising considering that two thirds of the cases contain either *one* (half of all examples) or round numbers that are naturally vague even without *Or so* and therefore less liable to provoke conflicting points of view. The other unproblematic thirty per cent can be similarly explained by the vagueness introduced by *Or so*.

The remaining 5% (17 examples) contain a developed evaluation, with three configurations emerging: confirmation, personal correction, and interpersonal correction, as shown by examples 11 to 13. Only one third is with round numbers and only 1 with *One*, which shows that the speaker is taking a greater risk by choosing precise non-unit numbers. Either the risk is compensated by *Or so* or it is reduced by second thoughts or else it is made clear by the addressee’s correction.

Example 12 – Confirmation

1998 / Spoken / Fox, Cavuto, Teligent Chairman & CEO Interview

CAVUTO: So, when you’re making money what year are we talking about? MANDL: If you start turning in 18 months to 24 months, on enterprise basis you’re probably three or four years out. CAVUTO: So I can’t realistically expect to see Teligent in the black **until 2002 or so?** MANDL: *Somewhere in that framework, yes.*

Example 13 – Personal Correction

1995 / Fiction / Stephen Dixon, “Sleep”

¹² For a more complete view of interrogative series, see Richet (2005).

¹³ This is especially the case for *Or else* and *Or what*, *Or so* being more the result of the contextual application of Grice’s maxim of quantity.

Then he went back to the sitting room, and after the casket was wheeled into the chapel, spoke a few minutes to the officiator about his wife [...] and **at eleven or so... actually, the funeral was scheduled to start at 11:15** and it did, on the dot.

Example 14 – Interpersonal correction

1998 / Spoken / ABC, *Good Morning America*

LISA McREE: You were down at the flower market. CAROLYNE ROEHM: Absolutely. LMR: What did you bring back? CR: Bursting with flowers. LMR: Oh, this is my... CR: Well, as you can see, I brought back a lot. LMR: A lot of lilacs. **It's lilac season, for, what, six weeks or so?** CR: **It's about four weeks.** LMR: Four weeks. Oh!

3.3.2. ELSE: (*Un*)naming otherness

Only occurrences with sentence-ending *Or else* were considered for inclusion in the corpus as they exemplify a form of deceptive syntax falsely announcing upcoming content. The fact that the punctuation ranges from suspension points to period, to exclamation mark shows that what comes next can be only minimally suggested and that the notion of an incomplete set of alternatives is appealing enough to the speaker for him or her to stage it, as shown by the exclamation mark. Beyond the sentence's limit however there are possibilities for forms of explicitation of various kinds depending on who utters them, the speaker, the addressee or, in written texts, the narrator, and on the nature of the comment made.

Example 15 – 1990 / Spoken / ABC, *Nightline*

Though well-armed, their greatest weapon is fear, and they are suspicious of everyone, anyone whose sympathies might be pro-government. These men say they are farmers, but the rebels are not convinced. The “suspects” were captured while trying to paddle a canoe across a nearby river. Rebels think they aided government soldiers in escaping from the area. **“Confess or else!” The rebels will do anything to extract a confession. Cries of innocence are ignored. The intimidation continues. The rebels seem to enjoy their work.**

Considering that the prototypical use of *Or else* is in either an imperative (*Do this or else*) or a volitive context (*I will do this or else*) the potential for threat is high and the unnamings of the complementary alternative element leaves the door open to all sorts of speculation. Quite like in a contradiction context (see Richet 2004), what is opposed to the primary element must go beyond it and not just oppose it, because the effect of memory implies a form of magnification for the new element to clearly emerge from what was said before.

Apart from fully-implicit alternatives, three options that are non-mutually exclusive on sequential level can be considered.

The first is the explicitation of the presence of a threat, especially through the use of loaded vocabulary describing the conditions of the utterance.

Example 16 – 2007 / Fiction / Vajra Rajnar, “On the Bubble”

Then he'd get the gates shut, patch that crappy microphone into the local PA system, and warn all paying customers to keep still or else. **Maybe set off a bomb or two to underline his point.**

The second is a potentially provocative play on the reasons for and consequences of implicitness, which is then seen as an empty rather than a real threat.

Example 17 – 2008 / Academic / *Education journal*

Before teachers begin to incorporate positive changes in the learning environment, negative influences in the learning environment must be altered or removed. If undue stress, for example, is present, brain-based practices will be less successful. Teachers often resort to scolding and threats to motivate students. **“Finish your work or else!” or other similar exhortations are often ineffective.** Other similar strategies such as finger pointing, humiliation, sarcasm, the use of unrealistic deadlines, and other demeaning methods, also have dubious impact.

The third is a genuine attempt at explicitation made by the source of the threat or the potential victim of it.

Example 18 – 2010 / Fiction /Linda Howard, *Blood born*

A man came running out of the bar, alarmed by the noise of the explosion. Taken aback, Melody stared at him. She'd completely forgotten about the bartender. The older man raced toward her. “Dear God, what happened?” he yelled as he fumbled for the cell phone in his pocket. Dammit! Under most circumstances Melody wouldn't have cared that her presence had been noticed, but her orders were clear: don't draw attention to what was happening, or else. **She didn't want to find out what “or else” meant, though she had a very good idea. The last thing she wanted was to make Sorin unhappy.**

The intervention of the source shows how powerful explicit language also is¹⁴. The intervention of the would-be victim is a sign of her determination to regain mastery over the verbal and social interaction by showing her aptitude to see through what has been deliberately left unsaid by the speaker.

Just as with the provocative demand for explanation, the point is to respond to the position of power presumably achieved by the (non) speaker by occupying the verbal stage and thus directly or metonymically make up for the silent content. The use of *Or else what* for instance is, beyond the actual question, a way to belittle the other's argument by reducing it to an almost empty label. Since it has not been made explicit, it does not really exist.

Example 19 – 2005 / Fiction / Linney Romulus, “Going after Cacciato”

CORSON lies down. OSCAR: Not yet, Sergeant. We got to decide something. Now. CORSON: I'm sick! OSCAR: I don't care if you're paralyzed. And I don't care if you're a sergeant. We got to vote. DOC: Vote? OSCAR: Look yonder. That's Laos. The border. We turn back now, or else. CORSON sits up. CORSON: **Or else what?** OSCAR: We cross that border and we ain't chasing no Cacciato no more.

3.3.3. WHAT: Redefining reality

Of the almost 400 examples containing *Or what*, 250 are based upon a question, almost exclusively a *Yes/No* question either in its interrogative or assertive form and 150 are based on an assertion. This nearly 2 to 1 ratio in favour of questions is quite easily explained by the information deficit coded by *What*, which is directly compatible with an interrogative form.

Not surprisingly the questions display another 2 to 1 ratio in favour of an intervention-ending position of the *Or what* alternative, leaving the addressee with a possibility to respond to the rather provocative form just used by the speaker, which may even have the value of an insult, depending on the nature of the terms in the alternative.

¹⁴ Actually uttered words carry meaning and somewhat magical force, just as a joke present in a hand-out at a conference fully produces its comic effect only when the speaker pronounces it in public, even when the audience has access to it before.

Example 20 – 2010 / Fiction / Elisabeth Naughton, *Marked*

“Jesus,” one of the college kids behind her exclaimed. “**Are you brain-dead or what?**” Oh, damn. Those stupid college kids.

Although the choice presented by the speaker is quite biased the addressee does not necessarily follow the speaker’s cue and his or her range of reactions covers the whole spectrum from confirming the speaker’s choice to going clearly against it, or to deciding not to choose (examples 21 to 23).

Example 21 – Confirming

2006 / Spoken / The Winfrey Oprah Show

WINFREY: So when you are in the midst of writing, you were saying it takes a very long time, do you ju -- are you, like, methodical? Like you have a time set and you’re going to write four hours a day, or what? Ms-THOMPSON: **Yeah, that’s exactly what I do, I do four hours a day, 10 till 2.** And I just write at an old wooden table. I write longhand, because I don’t like writing at computers.

Example 22 – Going against

2010 / Fiction / Webb Igor, “Later”

“Can I ask you something? You know that man who, like, saved you, what was his name?” “Saved me?” “The one who came and found you and –” “Jameson. Jeffrey Jameson.” “Him. Whatever happened to him? Are you in touch, did he come round afterward, or what?” “**No. Not really. What difference does it make?**”

Example 23 – Not choosing

2005 / Fiction / Barron Laird, “Proboscis”

“You do me a favor?” “Yo, bro’. Hit me.” “Go on the Net and look up ‘haplotype’. Do it right now, if you’ve got a minute.” “X-whatsis?” I spelled it and said, “Call me back, okay? If I’m out of area, leave a message with the details.” “Be happy to.” There was a pause as he scratched pen to pad. “Some kinda new meds, or what?” “Or what, I think.” “Uh-huh. Well, I’m just happy the Canucks didn’t make you an honorary citizen, eh. I’m dying to hear the scoop.”

This should not come as a surprise if one goes one step back and considers the reason for the appearance of the *Or what* alternative in the first place. Real or supposed conflict with the addressee is a typical source for the emergence of a face-threatening act on the part of the speaker and a reaction from the addressee.

When the speaker does not end his or her intervention with *Or what*, the subsequent discourse content is logically a development and/or explanation for the use of the alternative.

The 150 examples with an assertive form almost exclusively make use of negation combined with a knowledge verb, as mentioned in 3.2.3. Contrary to questions the alternative is here not so much calling for an end as opening a perspective which depends on the way the lack of information is considered. Either the speaker explains the reasons why he or she cannot make sense of the situation he or she faces or he or she decides to go beyond that situation, hence the frequent use of contrast adverbs or coordinators like *Anyway*, *Whatever* or *But*.

Example 24 – 1999 / Fiction / Alice McDermott, *Charming Billy*

“He was a great salesman,” her younger sister, also Rosemary, said. “Well,” Kate explained, “Mr. Holtzman had lost some business during the war--**I don’t know if it was rationing or**

his being of German extraction or what. Anyway, he was glad to get Billy, an ex-GI with that handsome face of his. Those blue eyes.”

Example 25 – 1993 / Spoken / ABC, News, David Brinkley

DAVID BRINKLEY, ABC News: Here it comes. On Wednesday the President will tell us about his plan for the sacrifice he’s been promising for weeks - how much sacrifice and by whom. He speaks to a joint session of Congress on Wednesday and lays it all out. We already know there will be higher tax rates for the prosperous and for corporations, but **it’s not known yet about taxes on energy in the form of gasoline, natural gas, coal, oil, or what. Whatever it is, the opposition is already rising.** The lobbyists are ready, honing their arguments.

Example 26 – 1998 / Fiction / S.D. Howe, “Wrench and claw”

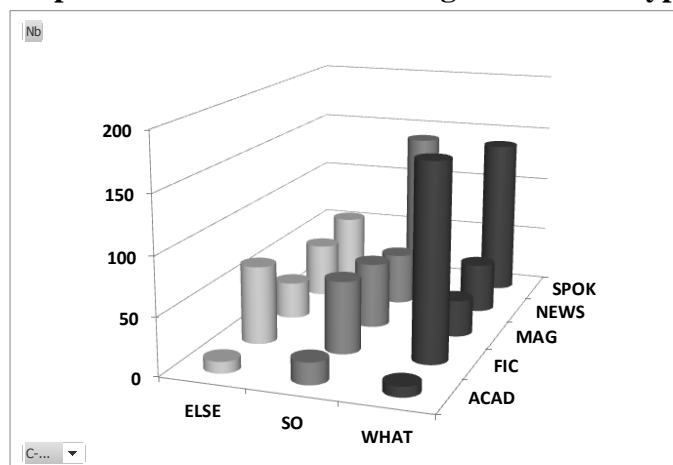
It was brilliant. An asteroid was the perfect object to be moved by sequencing small nuclear explosions. But..! “But that means they have an arsenal of nuclear weapons!” Vesquith blurted. “Exactly. **I don’t know if they got the money to buy them, or found uranium deposits, or what. But if they have enough devices to move rocks in space, they have enough to bomb the Earth.**”

Lack of knowledge is quite expectedly a reason for the smoothing out of differences between items in the list of alternatives, with the final *What* representing this in an abstract grammatical way. The smoothing out makes it also possible to move beyond those objects since they no longer have the thickness of highly-specific singular items. The pattern is therefore similar to that of concession, with a downtoned first part and an emphasised second. The presence of *Anyway* and *Whatever* after *What* confirms that the reduction of the specificity of an item is the first step leading to its amalgamation with other items and eventual disappearance. The spectrum-covering *Any* and *Ever* insert the original element in an infinite series of undetermined objects and pave the way for the emergence of a new salient object.

3.4. Source

Finally, discourse source is examined to see if there is a correlation between the constructions and specific types of discourse. Graph 3 gives the distribution of the three combinations in the five types of discourse of the *Coca* corpus, i.e. Academic (ACAD), Fiction (FIC), Magazine (MAG), Newspaper (NEWS) and Spoken (SPOK).

Graph 3 – Distribution according to discourse type



The first feature of the graph is the low representation of the three combinations in academic discourse, especially for *Or else* and *Or what*, which are too polemical for felicitous insertion into serious balanced discourse. The frequency of *Or so* is also low, as can be expected from documents that should display precise evaluation of reality, though it is slightly higher than the other two items, the reason being surely its interactively neutral form.

The second feature is the clear relative presence of *Or so* in spoken language, in which production speed is less compatible with a precise evaluation of reality. This is not to be found in the fiction section, which may imply that authors/narrators are unable to represent that type of hesitation in a prepared written form.

The third feature is the high frequency of *Or what* both in spoken discourse and fiction. This time there is no difference between the two sections because *Or what* lays the stress on interactional tension, which is typically staged in fiction.

The fourth feature is that no such salience is found with *Or else*, though it has been shown that the combination is semantically and pragmatically close to *Or what*. Fiction and Spoken are only slightly higher than the rest. The fact that *Or else* is not typically part of a question is a possible explanation, with a discourse that is less directly aimed at the addressee.

Additional research is needed to determine the exact role played by local context but from the available data one sees that each combination has its discursive logic, which is partially derived from its core value.

4. Conclusion: towards a core value

The starting point was alternation and its fundamental interactional value of choice, a choice which is in fact biased in two ways, first because the strict linearity of discourse creates a presentation hierarchy that the speaker can make use of to put in a favourable position his or her preferred alternative, second because the wording and presentation of the alternatives have an influence on how they are likely to be perceived by the addressee. Moreover the choice is necessarily closed as it is limited to the options displayed by the speaker.

In the three combinations under analysis the bias goes one step further because the last alternative, which is typically introduced by the *Or* coordinator, has a very specific grammatical and semantic form. Instead of having the same form as the element(s) preceding it, as would be expected in an enumeration, even if restricted to only two elements, the items introduced by *Or* are words that operate more like grammatical tools than like “normal” words.

However, the behaviour of the combinations in discourse shows particularities, the nature of which can be traced back to the original meaning of the words.

So can be considered as an INO, an Identical Naming Object, *i.e.* basically retaining the content of the preceding object. When applied to quantification, as is the case in the corpus under study, *So* explores the immediate environment of the number, looking for similar forms of quantity (*20 or so* basically corresponding to an 18-to-22 range)¹⁵. It is not contrastive in essence and therefore appears in non-polemical situations.

What is a UNO, so to speak, an Unidentified Naming Object expressing information deficit. The speaker is unable or unwilling to identify clearly the object under consideration, therefore acting against the expected role of a knowing speaker. Though interaction is based on information sharing and naturally includes asking and answering procedures, here there is a discrepancy between the knowledge implied by the presentation of an alternation and the unilateral surface content of the alternation. Instead of being given a choice the addressee is

¹⁵ While *And the like* can express quality in a more explicit way, which is close to other uses of *Like* and that of *Genre* in French.

typically presented with only one solution. Be it with questions or assertive lack-of-knowledge context the *Or what* alternative is the reverse of determination.

Else finally is an ENO, an External Naming Object. It opens the way to a “real” alternative and often is the introductory element before the contrastive alternative is fully expressed. However in the present corpus it is shown that the word can also be the only term of the second alternative, leaving the addressee with just implicit context-retrievable information about its nature. By focussing on otherness, *Or else* moves from the real to the potential and is therefore naturally associated with consequences. Indeed, otherness opens a new line of development.

The proximity between *Or what* and *Or else* has to do with the representation of a non-present element. However, while *Else* asserts its existence and has imperative undertones (*Come or else, You are coming or else*), *What* questions its nature and hence the possibility for the addressee to choose it (*Are you coming or what?, I don't know if he is coming or what*). Whatever combination is considered, even the more neutral *Or so* combination, the resulting discourse displays a form of deceptive alternation which is nonetheless perfectly integrated within the linguistic fabric.

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