

Alternative Questions in English (Functional-Pragmatic Analysis)



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Choice as a philosophical category means freedom to act in accordance with one's own interests and purposes. People do not choose objective conditions for their activity, but they are free in choosing aims for their activity and finding means to realize them. Therefore the freedom of choice is not abstract, it is relative to some extent and is implemented by choosing a certain course of action. To make a choice thus means to select one possibility from two or more alternatives, a choice which best suits one's aims and expectations. Linguistically such alternation is expressed by means of alternative questions. It is these questions that will be discussed below in the light of speech act theory, i.e. alternative questions will be studied considering certain pragmatic and functional aspects.

Questioning is a three-step speech act: locutive, illocutive and perlocutive (Austin 1962). The **locutive** meaning of questioning is to formulate the question with the intonation and syntactic structure typical of an English interrogative sentence. Its **illocutionary** force aims at asking for new information. The aim of a real question is to get the hearer react to it, and this is the **perlocutive** effect of questioning. Questions have both direct and indirect pragmatic functions. When the function of an interrogative sentence such as *Have you been to Egypt?* is to question, it is described as a direct speech act. But interrogative structures are often used to express other functions than to question, i.e. requests, commands or statements. In this case they function as indirect speech acts.

For example, the interrogative form *Can you translate this word into French?* is normally understood as a request, though its literal/direct meaning is *Are you able to translate this word into French?* In this case nothing more than the addressee's knowledge of French and his ability of translating is being questioned.

Alternative questions imply a choice out of two or more possibilities represented by general questions. They are of two types: 1) alternation refers to a part of the sentence, 2) alternation is represented by separate clauses. The first part of the alternative question is usually pronounced with a rising intonation, the second - with falling one. If the second part is uttered with a rising intonation, then the alternative question should be perceived as a general question (Quirk and Greenbaum 1978:198-199).

For example:

General question: *Shall we go by bus or train?*
 No, let's take the car.

Alternative question: *Shall we go by bus or train?*
 By bus.

Alternative questions are not usually followed by *Yes* and *No* responses as the speaker expects the addressee to choose one out of the two proposed possibilities, and this one becomes the content of the response. Practically any general question can be transformed into an alternative question by adding the negative particle *not*.

Are you coming?
Are you coming or are you not coming?

As a rule, the second part of the alternative question undergoes different degrees of ellipsis. The above sentence can be ellipsed in the following way:

Are you coming or are you not?
Are you coming or not?

Both parts of the alternative question may undergo maximum ellipsis, in which case the structure preserves only those parts which make up the objects of alternation, in other words, only the rhematic part of the utterance. This kind of ellipsis can be accounted for by the speech situation - suggestion or advice-making.

Coffee or whiskey?
Coffee, please. (Sheldon 150)

When an alternative question is represented by separate clauses (with different subjects and predicates), ellipsis normally does not occur.

Will you go up or shall we have tea?
I'm not particular. (Houghton 32)

The first part of the alternative question may be expressed by a special or a *wh*-question.

- a) *Who do you work for, me or Kagle? (Heller 391)*
- b) *It's not how you play the game, it's whether you win or not? (Sheldon 153)*
- c) *What do you say? Go or stay?(Shaw 249)*

As evident from example (c), the second part may be separated from the main part of the sentence. This is especially usual with alternative questions made up of separate clauses as can be seen below.

But really , I think I am quite fit to be in the streets - now that I've put my dress to rights. Or do you think I am not? (Ibsen, 130)
And there was nothing he could do about it. Or was there? (Segal 235)

In the above two examples the first part of the alternative question is represented by a declarative sentence. There are cases when both parts of the alternative questions are expressed by a declarative question, i.e. declarative sentences are uttered as a question.

So I can call you at the office to talk about my career plan?
Or we could have a drink?
Absolutely. Er ... good idea. (Kinsella 388)

When the alternative clause is part of a complex sentence (as an object subordinate clause), it cannot represent alternation as the general meaning of the whole sentence. In this case alternation finds its reflection in the response.

Why can't I remember if I enjoyed it or not?
Because, baby, you were higher than a rocket ship. (Segal 219)

The response itself shows that the main meaning of the whole question is not alternation; the question is directed at finding out the reason for the action not being performed. Hence we have the question *Why...* and the answer *Because...*

Of special interest are alternative questions in which the second constituent is expressed by *something, anything, what* and the like. This kind of questions are used when the speaker is uncertain about the second alternative, or cannot exactly define it.

Gee, you sure seem hungry? Got a family to support or something?
No, I'm a freshman at Harvard and need the dough for tuition. (Segal 22)
No morning sickness or anything like that?
No. (Maurier 185)
Isn't she trying to stir up trouble, or what?
Young lady's asking if you want a pound on demand. (O'Casey 362)
Are you deaf or what?
I'm a Protestant and a worshipper in this church. (O'Casey 347)

The pragmatic value of these structures as put by E. Hatch is "to weaken the criticism given in the message" (Hatch 1992:311). We think that the structures containing *or what* seem to sound somewhat less polite than those with *something* and *anything*. As for responses, they all refer to the first part of the question, which is quite logical.

Alternative questions often imply opposing statements. Here are some examples to illustrate this.

- a) *Is it love you feel or is it pity merely?*
It is love, Robert. Love and only love. (Wilde 275)
- b) *Would you rather be poor and go to heaven or rich and - go to hell?*
"Go to hell," she tells me, picking up my cue. (Heller 439)
- c) *"Are you mad or glad?" I demand with a grin.*
Oh, Daddy," she answers. "Whenever you make one of us unhappy, you always try to get out of it by behaving like a child." (Heller 108)

We see from the examples (a, b, c) that the responses reflect the addressee's concrete choice out of the proposed alternatives. It must be noted here that this is not always the case, as very often the response may show the addressee's being uncertain (d), unresolved (e) or unscrupulous (f) as to the object of choice.

- d) *"Coffee or tea?" Angela asked.*
"Whatever you're having", Calhoun said. (Cook 323)
- e) *Do you hate him too, or are you so devoted to him that you didn't want to share him?*
It's not like that at all. I used to love him once. (Christie 81)
- f) *Did you actually see this man talking to the District Attorney, or was he just in the group around him?*
I - I just don't know. (Segal 47)

The addressee may have the choice of both the alternatives proposed.

Do you want rice, Bob, or noodles?
Both. (CGOE)

In some cases the addressee suggests another alternative as different (or making it more specific) from those proposed in the question.

Is it a snow job or a hatchet job?
"I hope it'll be an honest job," the reporter replied. (Segal 501)

When an alternative question functions according to its direct communicative aim, i.e. suggests an alternation, its function is considered to be direct. As for responses, they are direct if they really show a choice of a concrete object from those proposed (a, b, g). In cases the answers are evasive or uncertain, we have indirect responses (c, d, e, f). Like other types of interrogative sentences, this type of question also has a number of indirect pragmatic uses. The second alternative may have the implications of

advice:

So do I take it then you accept my offer, George? Or do you want to think about? Maybe talk over with your faculty adviser?
All right. I'll explain things to Zbig. (Segal 158)

The above example is noteworthy in that the modal adverb *maybe* can be replaced by another *or*, since their meanings are similar in this context (*Or talk over with ...?*).

threat:

“Do you mind leaving the house?” said Max, “or do you want Crawley and me to chuck you out?”

“Steady a moment, steady a moment,” said Favel. (Maurier 338)

There is a hidden condition in the above example: *If you mind leaving the house, Crawley and I will chuck you out.* The same implication of condition is observed in the following example:

For the love of God, one of you tell me if the Reverend Clinton’s here or have I to crawl a long way further?

He’s here; I’m here, my good woman. (O’Casey 342)

The meaning of the whole utterance may be understood as *If you don’t tell me if the Reverend Clinton’s here, I’ll have to crawl a long way further.*

annoyance, anger:

Are you going to talk like a grown man or aren’t you?

Sit down, dear. Don’t be angry, what’s the matter? (Miller 404)

reproach:

Mother, are you quite sure that you wouldn’t advise me to try the Waterloo bar, or marry a laborer, or even go into the factory?

Of course not. What sort of mother do you take me for! (Shaw 218)

uncertainty:

a) *Miss Norma Restarik left Crosshedges on Sunday or was it Monday morning?*

She left there Sunday night but she has not arrived at Bordene mansions. (Christie 37)

b) *I rang up to ask you what is the girl’s address - somewhere in South Ken, isn’t it? Or was it Knightsbridge? ...I wrote down the address, but of course I’ve lost it as usual. I can’t even remember her name: Is it Thora or Norma? ... Yes, I thought it was Norma. (Christie 17)*

c) *The game’s up, you know, Mr.Restarik - or shall I call you Robert Orwell? (Christie 182)*

The use of the alternative questions in the above examples can be accounted for by the failure of the speaker’s memory (a). In other cases (b, c) it may be conditioned by the change of the circumstances entailing quite a new situation. In the last example as a result of the cross-examination it was found out that Mr. Restarik’s real name was Robert Orwell, therefore these two names are joined together by means of the conjunction *or*; which obviously does not imply alternation.

We will observe another example, in which the alternative question is used to show the differences that the change of the situation has brought about and which the speaker expects to be exactly perceived and truly appreciated by the addressee.

Did she want to be friends with me at last? Or did she realize that it had not been me at all who had told Maxim about Favel, and this was her way of thanking me for my silence? (Maurier 207)

Alternative questions may sometimes occur in monologues, in which they have the sounding of a rhetorical question. In the example given below the speaker (the mother) describes to her daughter the situation that would have happened if she had not been given the opportunities that mother had created for the latter. The mother expects her daughter to understand her, to share her troubles, to show some kind of tolerance and compassion towards her.

Do you want to find that out, like other women, at forty, when you've thrown yourself away and lost chances; or won't you take it in good time now from your own mother, that loves you and swears to you that it's truth; gospel truth? (Shaw 252)

The alternative question may also have the implication of comparison. Consider the following example:

"Which is more important?" my wife makes the mistake of asking, "Your own wife and daughter, or those other important things?"

Interestingly enough, structures with the conjunction *or* in certain contexts may lose the meaning of alternation and acquire a new shade of meaning - that of the conjunction *and* joining homogeneous parts of the sentence.

What do the people know about people like me? When did they ever meet me, or speak to me, or let anyone tell them about me? Would they ever have done for you if I hadn't paid them? (Shaw 252-253)
Mother, are you quite sure that you wouldn't advise me to try the Waterloo bar, or marry a laborer, or even go into the factory?
Of course not. What sort of mother do you take me for! (Shaw 218)

In the second and the third questions of the first example the conjunction *or* does not convey the meaning of alternation, but serves to join the homogeneous parts of the utterances, which can easily be substituted by the conjunction *and* (*What do the people that taught you know about life and people like me? When did they ever meet me and speak to me...?*) In the second example the speaker expresses her resentment towards her mother by enumerating all kinds of humiliating jobs that her mother

(according to the daughter's opinion) could wish her to get into. The same is observed in the following example:

*Did you ever think what you were doing when you abandoned us?
Did you ever even try to find out how father was? Or me? Or even Aniko?
He suddenly grew cold... he'd felt a piercing shame. (Segal 431)*

In the above example there are two **or-phrases** which, when parcellated still more strongly, emphasize the sister's resentment against her brother's callous, heartless attitude towards his own family the members of which are presented separately by. So we can say these or-phrases have no implication of alternation as they may be easily substituted by **and-phrases**. (*Did you ever even try to find how father was and me and even Aniko?*) Therefore we can call this use of the alternative question **inclusive** (including all the items) as compared with those uses discussed earlier and which may be called **exclusive** when the addressee is expected to choose only one item to the exclusion of the others.

It is worth mentioning that in English there is another type of clause with *or* which is devoid of the meaning of alternation whatsoever. In the example below the conjunction *or* implies approximation meaning with *about* (*about five/six*).

What about five or six eggs and bacon and toast? (Segal 106)

Summing up, we can say that alternative questions like other types of questions in English, function as direct and indirect speech acts, the latter manifesting a wide scope of pragmatic meanings (advice, threat, reproach, anger, uncertainty). As for the structural and semantic aspects, alternative questions present a wide variety of meaning and structure. Some structures with *or* do not imply the meaning of alternation at all.

Examining the responses to the alternative questions functioning as indirect speech acts, we come to the conclusion that they either are absent or have the meaning of indirect (evasive) responses and only in some cases do we observe a direct response.

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**Երկրնորական հարցերը անգլերենում
(գործառական-գործաբանական քննություն)**

Անգլերենի երկրնորական հարցերը, ինչպես մյուս հարցական նախադասությունները, կարող են հանդես գալ ուղիղ և անուղղակի խոսքային ակտերի գործառույթներով, վերջին դեպքում արտահայտելով զանազան գործաբանական իմաստներ (խորհուրդ, սպառնալիք, վրդովմունք և այլն): Չնի ու կառուցվածքային տասանկյունից այդ տեսակի հարցական նախադասություններն աչքի են ընկնում բազմազանությամբ: Որոշ դեպքերում *or* շաղկապով հարցական նախադասությունները չեն պարունակում երկրնորանքի իմաստ: