

## The OR cycle

Based on converging evidence from a cross-linguistic diachronic survey (200 language-sample) and a corpus-based analysis of spoken English, Hebrew and Italian, we argue that ‘or’ constructions frequently result from recurrent diachronic cycles, reminiscent of Jespersen’s negation cycle. Two key contrasts are essential for motivating an OR cycle: symmetric versus asymmetric *readings* and neutral versus dedicated *strategies* for expressing them. Specific ‘or’ *readings* convey either symmetric or asymmetric alternativity, i.e., either equivalence or nonequivalence between the explicit alternatives). Consider:

1. Demokratya    **o**        mered. (Hebrew, 2023)  
Democracy    or        revolt.

(1) can be read symmetrically: ‘There are only two viable alternatives: one is democracy, the other is revolt’. But it can be also read asymmetrically: ‘If there is no democracy there will be revolt’.

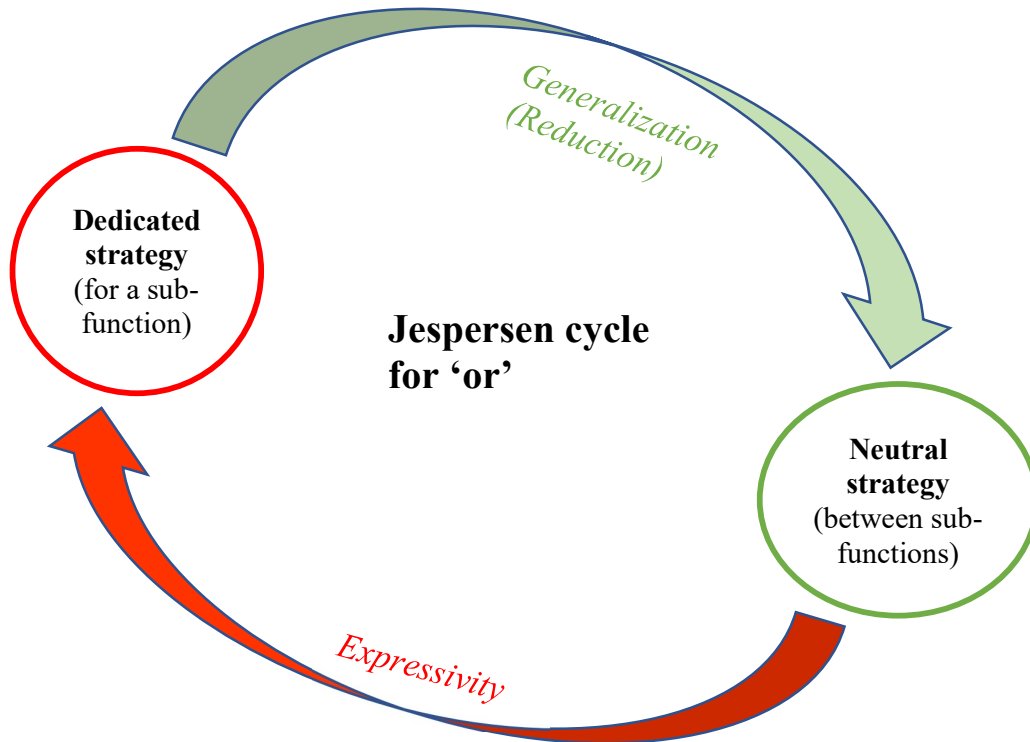
The *constructions* hosting various ‘or’ readings may be either *neutral* (accommodating both symmetric and asymmetric readings, as in 1) or *dedicated*: (2a) is a dedicated symmetric construction, and (2b,c) are dedicated asymmetric constructions:

2. a.~    **O**        demokratya    **o**        mered.  
          Either democracy    or        revolt.  
      b.~    Demokratya.    **Va.lo**    mered.  
          Democracy.    If.not    revolt.  
      c.~    Demokratya.    **O**        **im lo**    mered.  
          Democracy.    Or        if not    revolt.

We propose that neutral ‘or’ constructions, as in (1), ultimately evolve from dedicated strategies already associated with either symmetric or asymmetric ‘alternativity’. As shown by our typological survey (cf. also Giacalone and Mauri 2011), recurrent diachronic sources for disjunctive connectives are doubly marked dubitative or interrogative markers (e.g., *perhaps X, perhaps Y, Is it X? Is it Y?*), conveying a *symmetric* alternativity relation (by inference). Other strategies are associated with *asymmetric* alternativity, where the first element is asserted, and is only retroactively construed as an alternative: (e.g., “*X. If it is not like that, then Y*”, cf. Italian *sennò* < *se no*, lit. ‘if not’). Both symmetry and asymmetry-dedicated strategies may then turn into neutral (general) constructions.

The analysis of written and spoken English (SBC, LSAC corpora), Italian (KIParla corpus) and Hebrew (HeTenTen corpus), shows that the evolved neutral constructions no longer render either symmetry or asymmetry prominent. The demands of expressive clarity may then trigger new usage patterns, where the neutral construction is further specified towards symmetry or asymmetry, potentially leading to the evolution of new dedicated constructions (cf. (2a) and (2c)). In due course, however, these dedicated constructions too may bleach into neutral constructions (cf. Italian *oppure* < *o pure*, a.it. ‘or simply/only/at least’). This is a typical Jespersen cycle change, as shown in the figure below.

Starting with the dedicated strategies, an asymmetric strategy such as [X. If not, Y] can evolve into a neutral strategy (a compact construction, in fact) via *generalization* (and reduction, often), whereby the ‘asymmetry’ aspect is lost (e.g., Italian *oppure*). But, in order to *express* an asymmetric reading, it can be further specified (typically compositionally, e.g., *oppure anche* ‘or also’), so a new dedicated strategy may develop. This completes the ‘alternativity’ Jespersen cycle:



In closing, we offer some speculations generalizing our model to the Jespersen cycles of negation and possession.