



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## Indifference adverbial X or Y

Ariel, Mira

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## 4. Indifference adverbial X or Y

Mira Ariel, Tel Aviv University

Like it or not, here's my construction for Arie:

- (1) PHIL: .. But it would still be water.  
Yes you're right.  
(H) ... **Whether** it's a **solid**,  
**a liquid**,  
**or a gas.** (SBC: 026)
- (2) KAREN: ... and let them .. continue.  
**Whether or not** the city of Chicago  
is designated for anything. (SBC:  
027)

[Adverbial *whether X or Y*] is a specialized Indifference *or* construction, whose function is quite distinct from that of a complement *whether X or Y*. It is relatively rare: there are 10 such cases in the Santa Barbara Corpus (out of 1053 *or* constructions). In 4/10, the Y alternative is *not* ('X'), as in (2). The basic function of the construction is to assert that the difference between the alternatives does not matter for the relevant discourse point: the main clause assertions modified by the adverbials hold if X is the case and if Y is the case.

Mittwoch et al. (2002) analyze such constructions as Exhaustive Conditional Constructions, the idea being that since the alternatives exhaust all contextually relevant possibilities, it necessarily follows that the relevant assertion is true. But first, note that in close to half of the relevant cases in SBC the alternatives do not objectively exhaust all contextually relevant alternatives:

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- (3) TOM: Gotta start from somebody.  
Right? ((3 LINES OMITTED))  
.. and **whether** that somebody is,  
... Emily Dickinson, ((3 LINES  
OMITTED))  
**or** George Will, (SBC: 032)

Tom's utterance is incomplete, but context makes it clear that what he's saying is that the person discussed must start reading, no matter *who* she reads. The two writers mentioned explicitly cannot possibly exhaust all the contextually relevant authors, because Tom himself had already mentioned others. We can rescue the 'exhaustivity' assumption only if we apply a pragmatic process, whereby Dickinson and Will each stand for 'any random author', based on the radical difference between them.

But my point is that this pragmatically construed exhaustivity only takes us part of the interpretative way. Typically, the speaker's point is that the very issue addressed in the adverbial (*which* authors she should read in (3)), is beside the point. This is especially clear when Y is *not* (ensuring a radical difference between the alternatives):

- (4) JANICE: <READ **whether one likes it or not**, ((2  
LINES OMITTED))  
Howard's End is a real novel READ>. (SBC: 023)

It is the question of one's subjective attitude to the book (any attitude, indifference included) that is claimed to be irrelevant to the main assertion about Howard's End. This construction is then especially useful in rejecting a counterargument as irrelevant, as we see in (5) with an [Adverbial X or *not*], a later development of the Indifference Adverbial construction:

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- (5) Interviewer: But Brown is at the end of his career!  
Reporter: **At the end of his career or not**, he's behaving as if... (Originally Hebrew, Reshet Bet, 11.2.08).

Now, constructions emerge via motivated steps in natural discourse. I propose that this one evolved from independent clauses which explicitly removed from discussion the question addressed in their sentential subject – a *whether X or Y*:

- (6) I mean he has a point. And **whether you believe it or not** is like a different story. (LSAC=Longman Spoken American Corpus)

And constructions never stop evolving too. The adverbial [PREDICATE *or not*] construction is a sub-construction of the [Adverbial *whether X or Y*] construction:

- (7) That's a language **believe it or not**. (LSAC)

Note that in this sub-construction the specific alternatives are never relevant (unlike in (1)). It is also significantly more restricted (idiomatic) than the source. Its content is overwhelmingly intersubjective (the speaker addressing her interlocutor), Y must be *not*, and the predicates heavily restricted: 28/30 [Adverbial PREDICATE *or not*] tokens in SBC and LSAC, were *believe it or not*, only 1 *like it or not* and 1 *ready or not*.

The following example shows a pair of distinct but related sub-constructions: [Adverbial NP *or no* NP] (in bold) and

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[Adverbial NP *or* NP] (in italics) (both unattested in SBC and LSAC):

- (8) *AOL or any other organization, money or no money* –  
beware of a few trying to control your lives.  
(<https://churumuri.wordpress.com/2008/02/01>)

The example shows the implications of extending the family resemblance of sub-constructions. While lack of space prevents me from a full analysis, I'd like to point out that the [Adverbial NP *or* NP] construction is not yet quite established. The only reason we interpret it as an Indifference construction here is its resonance with the more established Indifference [Adverbial NP *or no* NP].

If I'm correct, what we see here is a typical dynamic balance between the coded and inferred meanings involved in constructionalization. Explicit meanings (irrelevance, as in (6)), closely associated with some salient discourse pattern ([Adverbial *whether X or Y*]), can eventually be left to inference. So can an explicit marker (*whether*, as in (5), (7), (8)), provided enough constructional cues remain. For more such cases of sub-constructionalization of *or* see Ariel (2014).

### **References**

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