THE ALTERNATIVE RELATION AND ITS MARKING STRATEGIES IN ROMANIAN

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Abstract

This study compares the two meanings of the concept of *"alternative relation"* as it appears in foreign linguistics, particularly in Mauri (2008), and in Romanian linguistics. While Mauri defines the alternative relation as a semantic relation between equivalent, non-co-occurring and mutually replaceable possibilities, Romanian studies emphasize temporal alternation and the succession of states of affairs. The research shows that Romanian linguistics does not offer a unified view regarding the status of the alternative relation: it is considered a subtype of disjunctive coordination, a subtype of copulative coordination, or a distinct type of coordination. The paper argues that the alternative relation from Romanian should be treated as a distinct type of coordination.

Keywords: alternative relation, disjunctive coordination, alternation, coordination semantics.

1. Introduction

This paper provides a brief overview of the alternative relation, discussing how it is described in international linguistics and in Romanian linguistic research, as well as the markers used to express this relation in Romanian.

As a semantic type of coordination, the alternative relation has attracted considerable scholarly interest. In international linguistics, it has been examined by Dik (1968), Harder (1996), Haspelmath (2004), and Mauri (2008a, 2008b), the latter offering a comprehensive typological analysis and a detailed description of the phenomenon. As will be shown, Romanian linguistics does not present a unified view regarding the classification and description of the alternative relation: Mitran (1962), Trandafir (1986a, 1986b), GALR (2005), and GBLR (2010) treat it as a subtype of disjunctive coordination; Bîtea (1987) and Merlan (2001) consider it a subtype of copulative coordination, whereas Iordan and Robu (1978), Avram (2001), and Irimia (2008) regard it as an independent coordination type.

The present study investigates the degree to which Mauri's concept of the *"alternative relation"* corresponds to the "alternative relation" described in Romanian grammars and linguistic studies.

2. The Alternative Relation in Foreign Linguistics
2.1. Defining the Alternative Relation

Disjunctive connectors in natural languages have long been analyzed as logical connectors and have traditionally been explained through semantic-logical models of truth values, where logical disjunction is interpreted inclusively (a statement is true if at least one of its constituent propositions is true, or if both are true).

Recent in-depth studies (Zimmermann 2000; Simons 2001, 2005; Haspelmath 2004; Geurts 2005; Mauri 2008a, b) have demonstrated that the disjunctive relation in natural languages differs from its logical counterpart, offering various semantic and semantic-pragmatic perspectives for analysis. Among these, this study focuses on Caterina Mauri's (2008a) interpretation of the disjunctive relation as a semantic type of alternative relation.

Caterina Mauri (2008a: 22-55) proposes a detailed typological description of coordination relations, identifying three semantic types: combination, alternative relation, and contrast, which correspond to the traditional coordination types: copulative, disjunctive, and adversative. In Mauri's semantic framework, the alternative relation corresponds to the disjunctive coordination in traditional classifications, with the latter understood as constructions with morphosyntactically specialized elements encoding alternatives between two states of affairs[1]. Thus, the two types of relations – disjunctive and alternative – are placed on distinct levels: the disjunctive relation belongs to the layer of expression, concerning how the relation is formally encoded, whereas the alternative relation belongs to the level of meaning, concerning the content conveyed.

Following the semantic approaches of Dik (1968) and Harder (1996), who critique truth-conditional accounts of disjunction solely on the basis of

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[1] Mauri (2008b: 32) uses the term "state of affairs" as a hypernym for "events," "states," and "situations." This term is preferred because it avoids the dynamic/static opposition implied by "event" and "situation." It specifically refers to verbal groups, as only these can be assigned a truth value – real or unreal – unlike other syntactic groups.

truth conditions and propose semantic analyses focused on alternativity and choice, Mauri (2008a, b) argues that disjunctive sentences present a set of mutually exclusive options. According to Mauri, the alternative relation is the semantic relation established between two or more states of affairs that constitute non-simultaneous alternatives:

> "*An alternative relation is the semantic relation which obtains between two or more linked clauses expressing SoAs that constitute non co-occurring alternatives.*" (Mauri 2008a: 25).

2.2. Conditions for Establishing an Alternative Relation

Mauri (2008a: 25) notices that the states of affairs involved in an alternative relation must satisfy three fundamental conditions: they must have equal relevance, represent equivalent possibilities, and express contrastive relations, allowing for potential substitution.

The **relevance condition** requires that the disjunctively connected states of affairs be equally pertinent to the context in which they occur. This ensures that both states of affairs carry the same communicative importance, i.e., they are functionally equivalent.

The **equivalence condition** requires that each alternative be equally possible, so that no option is inherently preferred over another (each state of affairs, taken individually, has an equal likelihood of occurring).

The **contrast condition** demands that the states of affairs connected by disjunctive coordination express contrasting relationships and can potentially substitute for one another. The alternatives must stand in a specific contrast, referring to events that oppose each other at certain points, which is necessary for substitution.

The alternative relation is illustrated in sentences like (1), where all three conditions are satisfied:

(1) a. La ora aceasta, Mihai doarme, se joacă *sau/ori* se uită la televizor.
"At this time, Mihai is sleeping, playing, *or* watching television.*"*
b. La ora aceasta, Mihai *fie* doarme, *fie* se joacă, *fie* se uită la televizor.
"At this time, Mihai is *either* sleeping, playing, *or* watching television.*"*
Elements connected as in example (1) are in a relation of non-simultaneity/non-co-occurrence and belong to the same functional set:

they can appear in the same context, but not simultaneously. This entails both structural and functional equivalence. Furthermore, the states of affairs are in a certain contrast, as the speaker does not know which of the three states of affairs will be realized.

Utterances of the type illustrated in example (2), where the first clause expresses a certain situation and the second clause appears as a reconsideration or reversal of a prior decision, cannot be considered as expressing an alternative relation. In these cases, the clauses are independent and present distinct states of affairs rather than alternatives:

(2) Rămânem acasă și ne uităm la un film. *Sau* vreți să ieșim în oraș?
 "We'll stay home and watch a movie. *Or* do you want to go out?*"*

In example (2), although the states of affairs constitute alternatives, they are not functionally equivalent, as they carry different illocutionary force, thus exhibiting functional asymmetry.

The equivalence condition is not either obeyed in utterances such as those in example (3), where one of the constituents is highly unlikely to occur or is not intended to occur. These asymmetric constructions are known as disjunctive pseudo-imperatives:

(3) Învață *sau* o să iei o notă mică!
"Study, *or* you'll get a low grade!*"*

Alternative relations are also absent when no contrast exists between states of affairs, as in example (4):

(4) *O să pic acest examen *sau* nu o să-l trec.
"*I will fail this exam *or* I will not pass it.*"*

Two states of affairs forming an alternative relation are equally possible and mutually replaceable. This description in terms of mutually replaceable, equally possible states of affairs raises the question of their

temporal positioning[2]. Conceived as hypotheses of equal value, states of affairs do not require a placement along the temporal axis, which means that the alternative relation has an atemporal value.

2.3. *Semantic Types of Alternatives*

To identify subtypes of the alternative relation, Mauri (2008b: 159-161) uses *purpose* as a parameter, referring to the speaker's communicative intention when establishing an alternative coordination between two states of affairs. Based on this criterion, two subtypes are distinguished: *"simple alternative"* and *"choice-aimed alternative"*[3], labels that are transparent and neutral.

In utterances expressing a simple alternative, the speaker's intention is to present the entire set of possible alternatives at a given moment, highlighting the equivalence and potential realization of each state of affairs. An example of this is provided in (5):

(5) Ești liber să faci ce vrei: să asculți muzică, să citești *sau* să te uiți la televizor.
"You are free to do whatever you want: listening to music, reading, *or* watching television.*"

Here, the alternative relation functions to enumerate the set of possibilities without requiring the interlocutor to select a specific option. The alternatives are mutually replaceable and share the same functional relevance within the context.

By contrast, in *choice-aimed alternatives*, the speaker establishes an alternative relation between two or more states of affairs while positioning the interlocutor to choose one of the options presented, as illustrated in (6):

(6) Mergi cu el *sau* rămâi acasă?
 "Will you go with him *or* stay at home?*"

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[2] Mauri (2008b: 54) identifies three semantic parameters involved in the description of combination, contrast, and alternative relations: temporality, conflict, and purpose.
[3] According to Haspelmath (2007: 25), what Mauri (2008b) classifies as a "*simple alternative*" is referred to as a **"standard disjunction"**, whereas the "*choice-aimed alternative*" corresponds to what Haspelmath terms an **"interrogative disjunction."**

In these cases, the alternative relation is pragmatically oriented: the speaker's intention is to elicit a decision, and the alternatives are still semantically equivalent and contrastive, but the focus is on the act of selection.

According to Mauri (2008a: 22), an alternative relation requires that the linked states of affairs be equivalent, contrastive, and mutually replaceable at a given moment. This relation manifests primarily at the semantic level, concerning meaning, while at the level of expression it is typically encoded through disjunctive constructions.

3. The Alternative Relation in Romanian Linguistics

In Romanian linguistics, alternative relations are identified in sentences such as examples (7) — (10), where the elements involved are both equivalent and contrastive, but are not simultaneously replaceable. Instead, they occur successively, implying a temporal alternation:

(7) *Acum/Aici* e tristă, *acum/aici* e veselă, nu știi ce se întâmplă cu ea.
"*Now/Here* she is sad, *now/here* she is happy, you don't know what is happening with her.*"*

(8) În ultima vreme, George *ba* glumește, *ba* e foarte serios.
"*Sometimes*, George has been joking, *at other times* he has been very serious.*"*

(9) *Când* spune să plecăm, *când* spune să rămânem.
"*Sometimes* he says we should leave, *at other times* he says we should stay.*"*

(10) De câte ori ne întâlneam, *sau/ori/fie* mă ocolea, *sau/ori/fie* era foarte bucuroasă.
"Whenever we met, she *either* avoided me *or* was very happy to see me.*"*

One can notice that the elements involved in an alternative relation are often preceded by a series of homogeneous correlatives – *acum…*, *acum…*, *aici…*, *aici…*, *ba…*, *ba…*, *când…*, *când…*, *sau…*, *sau…*, *ori…*, *ori…*, *fie…*, *fie…* – some of which are specific to disjunctive coordination (*sau…*, *sau…*, *ori…*, *ori…*, *fie…*, *fie…*), while others are distinct.

Thus, these examples highlight a clear difference between Mauri's (2008a, b) semantic concept of the "alternative relation" and the Romanian linguistic perspective. Furthermore, Romanian linguistics does not come

forth with a unified approach regarding the status and description of the alternative relation.

3.1. The Alternative Relation as a Subtype of Disjunctive Coordination

In Romanian linguistics, the alternative relation is often analyzed as a subtype of disjunctive coordination (Mitran 1962; Trandafir 1986a; GALR I 2005: 642; GBLR 2010: 336), due to the similarities between the two types of relations.

The first similarity appears at the semantic level: in both types of relations, the connected elements express options. However, there are differences in the nature of these options: in disjunctive coordination, the options are hypothetical and represent possibilities (11), whereas in alternative coordination, the options are real, either in the process of being realized or already realized (12):

(11) Copilul scrie *sau* citește.
"The child writes *or* reads.*"*
(12) Este foarte nervos, *ba* intră, *ba* iese.
"He is very nervous; *sometimes* he goes in, *sometimes* he goes out.*"*

In an utterance like (12), the action of *going in* excludes the action of *going out* and viceversa, indicating that the two actions are mutually exclusive at that moment, yet they occur successively over time.

Another similarity can be observed at the expressive level: the correlative connectors *sau…sau* ("or…or"), *ori…ori*, and *fie…fie*[4], characteristic of disjunctive relations (13), are also used to express the alternative relation, as shown in examples (14a–c):

(13) Nu are prea multe opțiuni - *sau/ori/fie* merge la film, *sau/ori/fie* se duce acasă.

"He does not have many options – he *either* goes to the movies *or* he goes home.*"*

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[4] Because they appear in contexts expressing temporal alternation, the three correlative connectors (*sau…sau*, *ori…ori*, and *fie…fie*) have been called "alternative coordinating conjunctions." (GALR I 2005: 642).

(14) a. În fiecare seară *sau* citea, *sau* se uita la un film.

"Every evening, he *either* read *or* he watched a movie.*"*

b. De fiecare dată când ne întâlneam, *ori* mergeam la film, *ori* ieșeam la restaurant.

"Every time we met, we *either* went to the movies *or* we went to a restaurant.*"*

c. Ori de câte ori greșeam, *fie* îmi explica, *fie* mă punea să refac tema.

"Whenever I made a mistake, he *either* explained it to me, *or* he made me do again the homework.*"*

In disjunctive coordination, the connectors *sau* and *ori* can appear either before each connected element (correlative – (15)) or only between the elements (non-correlative – (16)):

(15) Invitatul nu a ajuns, *sau/ori/fie* pentru că nu cunoaște orașul, *sau/ori/fie* pentru că nu știe ora de întâlnire.

"The guest did not arrive, *either* because he does not know the city *or* because he does not know the meeting time."

(16) Invitatul nu a ajuns, pentru că nu cunoaște orașul *sau*/*ori* pentru că nu știe ora de întâlnire.

"The guest did not arrive because he does not know the city *or* because he does not know the meeting time."

By contrast, in an alternative relation, the connectors *sau* and *ori* must appear before each connected element, as illustrated in (17) and (18):

(17) De câte ori am fost bolnavă, mama *sau/ori/fie* m-a vizitat, *sau/ori/fie* m-a sunat de mai multe ori pe zi.

"Whenever I was sick, my mother *either* visited me *or* she called me several times a day."

(18) De fiecare dată când întârziam, *sau/ori/fie* ne suna, *sau/ori/fie* ne aștepta până ne întorceam.

"Every time we were late, *either* she called us *or* she waited for us until we returned."

The connector *fie*, in contrast, always occurs as a correlative pair, irrespective of the type of relation: disjunctive (19) or alternative (20):

(19) Sâmbăta viitoare, *fie* plecăm la Sibiu, *fie* ne întâlnim cu prietenii.
"Next Saturday, we *either* go to Sibiu *or* we meet with friends."
(20) În weekenduri, *fie* mergeam la serviciu, *fie* plecam la părinți.
"On weekends, I *either* went to work *or* I went to my parents'."

Thus, in contexts expressing alternation, the disjunctive connectors *sau…, sau*, *ori…, ori*, and *fie…, fie* function as equivalents of Romanian alternative connectors such as *aici…, aici*, *acum…, acum*, *când…, când*, *ba…, ba*.

3.2. The Alternative Relation as a Subtype of Copulative Coordination or at the Interface between Copulative and Disjunctive Coordination

Authors such as Ioan N. Bîtea (1987: 38) and Aurelia Merlan (2001: 190-191) argue that the alternative relation represents a subtype of copulative coordination.

In utterances expressing an alternative relation of the type shown in (21), the two states of affairs are interreplaceable, but not simultaneously; they occur at different times along a temporal axis. This suggests that the alternative relation involves a cumulative sequence of actions. The aggregation of elements within an alternative relation brings it closer to copulative coordination: ***ba** se ceartă, **ba** se împacă* ("*sometimes* they quarrel, *at other times* they reconcile") is thus equivalent to *se ceartă **și** se împacă* ("they quarrel *and* reconcile"):

(21) În ultima vreme, *ba* se ceartă, *ba* se împacă.
"Lately, they have been *sometimes* quarreling, *at other times* reconciling."

Ioan N. Bîtea (1987: 38-39) disagrees with the view that constructions with *aici…, aici*, *acum…, acum*, *când…, când*, *ba…, ba* are disjunctive or at the interface between disjunctive and copulative coordination. He argues that, unless an independent type of coordination — "alternant coordination" — is recognized, these constructions are semantically and syntactically equivalent to forms where *aici…, aici*, *acum…, acum*, *când…, când*, *ba…, ba* are

replaced by: *în unele situaţii₁…, în unele situaţii₂…, în celelalte situaţii* or by *uneori₁…, uneori₂… uneori n*:

> (22) În ultima vreme, *uneori* se ceartă, *uneori* se împacă.
> "Lately, *sometimes* they quarrel, *sometimes* they reconcile."

According to Bîtea, such constructions are copulative, and *acum*, *aici*, *ba*, and *când* function as temporal adverbs.

Aurelia Merlan (2001: 190) considers the alternative relation a semantic type of copulative coordination, *"realized in coordinated series where juxtaposed units are accompanied by correlative adverbs: aci…aci, acum…acum, acuş…acuş, ba…ba, când…când, cât…cât, mai…mai, unde…unde*."

The alternative relation involves not only the accumulation of sequential actions, but also mutual exclusion, bringing it closer to disjunctive coordination. Therefore, some studies (GLR II 1966: 247; GR 2013: 518) describe the alternative relation as a mixed type of coordination: copulative in terms of meaning and disjunctive in terms of construction:

> "Other disjunctive conjunctions that express only simple alternation and often connect syntactic units whose coordination is at the interface between disjunctive and copulative coordination include: *aci…, aci*, *acum…, acum*, *ba…, ba, când…, când, fie…, fie, fie că…, fie că*" (GLR II 1966: 247).

> "*The term alternative points to the fact that conjuncts participate alternatively in the event(s) denoted by the verb; thus, the general meaning is cumulative, making alternative coordination an intermediate type, between disjunction and conjunction*." (GR 2013: 517).

3.3. The Alternative Relation – A Distinct Type of Coordinative Relation
In other Romanian studies (Iordan & Robu 1978: 648; Trandafir 1989: 417; Avram 2001: 395; Irimia 2008: 567), alternative coordination is

considered a distinct type of coordinative relation, alongside copulative, disjunctive, adversative, and conclusive coordination[5].

Iordan and Robu (1978: 648) describe alternative coordination as an emphatic variant of copulative coordination, realized through the juxtaposition of elements and marked by correlative adverbs: *aci… aci*, *acu(m)… acu(m)*, *ba… ba*, *când… când*.

Trandafir (1989: 417) revises his earlier classification of alternative relations as a subtype of disjunctive coordination (1986) and considers alternative coordination a distinct type of coordinative relation in which the constituent elements are successive, alternating, opposed, and associated.

Considering the alternative relation as a distinct type of coordination, rather than as a subtype of disjunctive or copulative coordination, seems appropriate, given that the classification of coordination types is based on the semantic relationship/information conveyed and the mode of its expression. The type of relation encoded by the alternative relation is of a different nature than that conveyed by disjunctive coordination. In disjunctive coordination, the elements involved are presented as mutually exclusive in a selection process (exhaustive relation) or as admitting co-occurrence at the same moment (non-exhaustive relation), without relevance to the temporal placement of the states of affairs. By contrast, the alternative relation implies temporal alternation, with successive realization, in repeated succession, of the connected units.

In sentence (23), the states of affairs *așteaptă* ("waits") and *merge* ("goes") are presented as equivalent and interreplaceable possibilities, whereas in sentence (24), the states of affairs *suna* ("was calling") and *aștepta* ("was waiting") occur at different moments: *suna* at T1, *aștepta* at T2, with the succession repeating:

(23) După cursuri, *sau* ne așteaptă, *sau* merge în parc.
"After classes, he *either* waits for us *or* he goes to the park."

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[5] Iordan and Robu (1978: 684) and Avram (2001: 395) identify five types of coordination relations: copulative, alternative, adversative, disjunctive, and conclusive, whereas Irimia (2008: 562) distinguishes six types of coordination relations: copulative, disjunctive, alternative, adversative, oppositive, and conclusive.

(24) De fiecare dată când întârziam, *ori* ne suna, *ori* ne aştepta până ne întorceam

"Every time we were late, he was *either* calling us *or* he was waiting for us to return."

Another distinction between the two types of relations is that, in disjunctive coordination, the states of affairs represent hypotheses, possibilities, unrealized actions, whereas in the alternative relation, the states of affairs involved are real, realized, or in the process of being realized. The states of affairs involved in disjunctive coordination are future-oriented, not yet realized, as in examples (25) and (26), while those in alternative coordination are either placed in the past, as completed actions, as in (27), or in the present, as ongoing actions, as in (28):

(25) Mâine va vizita oraşul *sau* se va întâlni cu un vechi coleg.
"Tomorrow he will *either* visit the city *or* meet an old colleague."
(26) Azi mergem la părinţi *sau* facem cumpărături.
"Today we are *either* going to our parents *or* shopping."
(27) *Ba* se plimba prin casă, *ba* se aşeza pe scaun.
"*Sometimes* he would walk around the house, *at other times* he would sit   on   a   chair."
(28) *Când* priveşte pe fereastră, *când* se duce la uşă.
"*Sometimes* he looks out the window, *at other times* he goes to the door."

In Romanian, alternative coordination is marked not only by the disjunctive connectors (*sau…, sau*, *ori…, ori*, *fie…, fie*), but also by a set of homogeneous correlative adverbs that precede the coordinated units, highlighting the essence of alternative coordination: the presentation of events as occurring in succession. To clearly highlight the distinction between genuine disjunctive coordination and the alternative relation, in which desemanticized correlative adverbs occur, it would be more appropriate to use the term *"alternation relation"* instead of *"alternative relation"*. This terminology reflects the semantic and temporal characteristics of the construction more accurately and enhances terminological clarity.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of the alternative relation in Romanian linguistics highlights features that clearly distinguish it from genuine disjunctive coordination. In addition to the disjunctive connectors typically involved, alternative relations frequently include homogeneous correlatives (such as *acum…, acum* 'now…now', *ba…, ba* 'sometimes…sometimes', *când…, când* 'sometimes…at other times'), which precede the coordinated units and signal temporal succession and alternation of events. This temporal alternation indicates that the coordinated elements occur successively rather than simultaneously, thereby marking a distinct type of coordination.

The term "alternation relation" captures the semantic nature of this construction more accurately, distinguishing it from disjunctive coordination and increasing terminological clarity. Consequently, the alternation relation in Romanian linguistics may be regarded as an autonomous type of coordination, characterized by temporal alternation and successive realization of states of affairs. This perspective provides a more coherent conceptual framework for the description and classification of coordination relations in Romanian linguistics.

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