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**MONOLOGIC AND DIALOGIC USES OF THE ADVERSATIVE  
CONNECTIVES *ABER* AND *BUT* IN TWO DENSE PRODUCTION  
CORPORA<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract.** In this paper we analyze the dense corpora of an English and a German child to investigate how the discourse structure (monologic versus dialogic) contributes to the complexity of the different use types of adversative connectives. Our findings suggest that firstly, discourse structure must be considered when accounting for the acquisition of connectives in terms of complexity [cf. Evers-Vermeul et al. 2009] and secondly, the semantic and the pragmatic uses of adversative connectives interact differently with the dialogic split of utterances that can be observed in the language of young children.

**Keywords.** adversative connectives, language acquisition, longitudinal production, monologic, dialogic, German, English

**1. Introduction**

Adversative connectives (ACs) like German *aber* and English *but* can have semantic and/or pragmatic functions. They can signal relations between propositions (semantic opposition) and inferences thereof (denial of expectation) as well as introduce speech acts and mark upcoming talk as relating to a new episode [cf. Lakoff 1971; Schiffrin 1987]. Several studies have shown that the different semantic and pragmatic uses of ACs do not appear at once, but findings are inconsistent with regard to the developmental sequence. Depending on the type of production data used, children were found to produce ACs representing semantic relations before pragmatic

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adversative relations or vice versa [e.g. Kyratzis et al. 1999; Spooren et al. 2008].

With regard to the syntactic complexity of utterances it has been shown that most children use their first connectives sentence-initially in single clauses before they produce them in integrated multi-clause utterances. Moreover, if two uses of a given connective differ in syntactic complexity, the less complex form will appear first [Evers-Vermeul et al. 2009]. These findings are related to the claim that generally, children's production of conjoined clauses is preceded by juxtaposed clauses that may also cut across speakers' turns [Diessel 2004]. However, the semantic contribution of an AC to a given stretch of discourse may differ depending on whether - all else being equal - the utterance displays a monologic or a dialogic structure. With *monologic* we refer to conjoined multi-clause utterances produced by one speaker and with *dialogic* we refer to (juxtaposed) utterances that are produced by different speakers. The utterance *Peter is allergic to alcohol, but he drinks a beer occasionally* differs in meaning from the exchange A: *Peter is allergic to beer.* B: *But he drinks a beer occasionally.* While the first *but* indicates an unreasonable behavior, the second *but* can additionally signal that B wants to contradict A's statement that Peter is allergic to beer. In the second example, an additional message on the speech act level is conveyed. As the use of *aber* and *but* always involves the notion of polarity in some sense, it seems difficult to find dialogic examples where an illocutionary act can be categorically ruled out. For the language-learning child the dialogic split of multi-clause utterances is therefore an advantage in terms of lower syntactic complexity, but it may also mean that the child needs to consider the additional illocutionary effect.

In the present study we examined children's spontaneous productions of *aber* and *but* for one year following the first instances of the two expressions in two dense conversational corpora. We categorized all instances with regard to the use types. Subsequently, we analyzed their distribution with respect to discourse structure

(monologic or dialogic). Based on previous findings it can be expected that dialogic realizations of ACs precede monologic realizations. It is however less clear how a monologic or a dialogic realization influences the construal of a specific meaning type of *aber* and *but*. Some pragmatic uses are prototypically dialogic. Sentence-initial *but* can for instance express protest with regard to a prior speaker's statement, e.g. *Child: I want more chocolate. Adult: But we wanted to go outside. Child: But I want more chocolate*. Clearly, the use of *but* in these examples cannot be explained by the need to reduce the syntactic complexity of a multi-clause utterance. In fact, it seems impossible to turn the sequence into a single utterance. Rather, such instances of sentence-initial *but* represent an independent use type that typically occurs in dialogue. Both speakers produce *but* to signal an illocution (protest) and a change in the topic under discussion (thema change or return). However, the use of ACs to signal an illocution or a change in the thematic structure is not restricted to dialogue, it can also occur in monologue (*This soup is really hot, but I like it* or *And then John and I went for a long walk in the woods. But let me tell you about the party first*).

As mentioned above, the selection of databases can affect the occurrence of AC uses in the production data. In conversational production data, dialogue-specific uses are therefore more likely to occur than in narrative production data. In our study we examined the role of both semantic and pragmatic uses of *but* and *aber* in the dense conversational data of two children and related them to discourse structure. We have chosen one child acquiring German and one child acquiring English because ultimately, we wanted to investigate language-specific influences on the acquisition process. Although the semantics of German *aber* and English *but* largely correspond, German differs from English in that *aber* has a modal interpretation in sentences like *Heute ist es aber warm* 'It's really warm today' that is unavailable in English. Vice versa, English *but* has to be translated by German *aüßer* but not *aber* in sentences like *Nobody but John came*.

In the data we analyzed so far, these uses had no obvious effect and almost never occurred. We will therefore treat the corpora as fairly parallel.

## 2. The study: *aber* and *but* in two dense corpora

The present analysis is based on two corpora available at CHILDES [MacWhinney 2000]. The data of the German child Leo [Behrens 2006] and the English child Thomas [Lieven et al. 2009] were analyzed for 12 months in succession after the first analyzable and non-imitated utterance with the German AC *aber* or the English AC *but* occurred. In the period analyzed Leo was recorded for at least 5 times a week for one hour. Thomas was also recorded for one hour, 5 times a week for the first 7 months and for one hour, one week in every month for the remaining 5 months. A total of 607 utterances were analyzed for Leo (2;01 - 3;00) and a total of 243 utterances were analyzed for Thomas (2;08 - 3;07). All analyzable instances were coded for the domain that the adversative connective related to: semantic opposition (*Peter is hungry, but Paul is not*), denial of expectation (*Peter is allergic to alcohol, but he drinks a beer occasionally*), illocution (*This soup is really hot, but I like it*) and thema (*John and I went for a long walk in the woods. But let me tell you about the party first*). The utterances were also coded for discourse structure; a category that relates to the monologic (M) or the dialogic structure (D) of the utterance depending on whether the first conjunct was uttered by the child or some other interlocutor. A third option, contextual (C), applied when either the speaker of the first conjunct could not be clearly identified, or the child's utterance involving the AC related more generally to the context. Fig. 1 shows that both children produced the ACs *aber* and *but* in almost equal proportions of non-monologic contexts (D and C) and that the monologic context (M) represented the lowest proportions (Leo:  $\chi^2=165,3$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Thomas:  $\chi^2=60,5$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

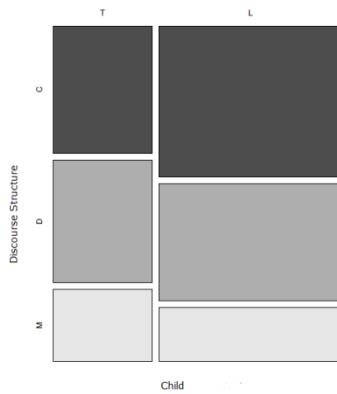


Fig. 1. Distribution of discourse structure types

In order to find out which factors influence the probability of monologic uses of *but* and *aber* we computed a binomial logistic regression with the factors age in months, semantic opposition, denial of expectation, illocution and thema for each child. For Leo, all factors except semantic opposition turned out to be significant predictors of monologic uses and improved the fit of the model as compared to the empty model ( $p < .05$ ). While age and denial of expectation increased the probability of monologic uses, the factors illocution and thema led to a decrease (see Fig. 2).

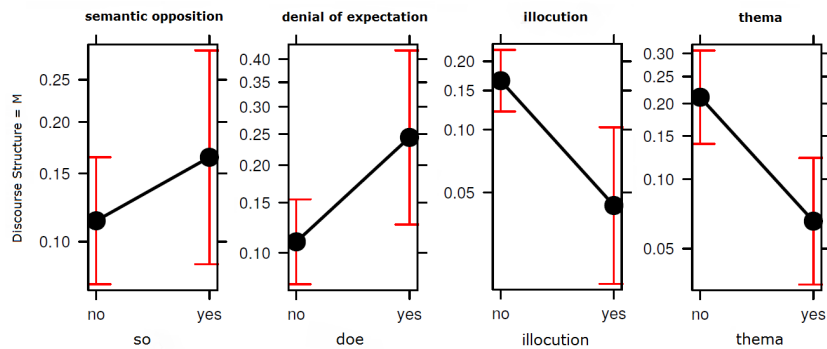


Fig. 2. Model effects for Leo

For Thomas, we fitted a model with the factors semantic opposition and denial of expectation as significant predictors of monologic *but*, all other factors did not improve the fit of the model. The expression of semantic opposition and denial of expectation reliably predicted higher probability of *but* in monologue (see Fig. 3).

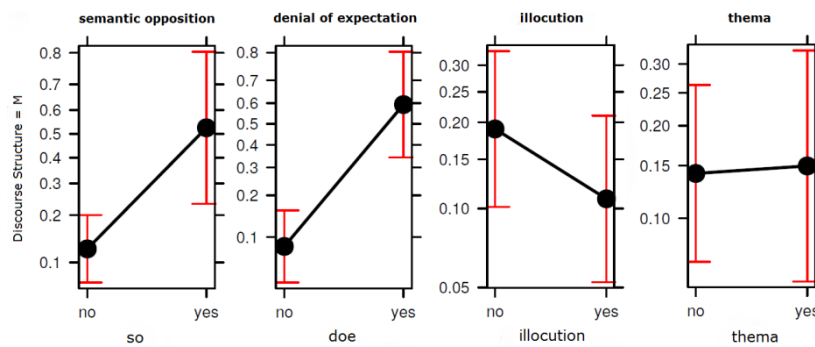


Fig. 3. Model effects for Thomas

### 3. Discussion and conclusion

Our analysis provided evidence for the differences semantic and pragmatic uses of *aber* and *but* show with respect to their affinity for monologic and non-monologic contexts. Semantic opposition and denial of expectation contexts were more likely to be used in monologic multi-clause utterances. Pragmatic uses on the other hand more readily adhered to non-monologic contexts. This raises the question how the commonalities of the two semantic and the two pragmatic uses influence the use of *aber* and *but*. The sentence-initial use of ACs can signal a speaker's concern on the illocutionary level and/or that s/he wishes to change the topic of the conversation. These uses do not link propositions that are directly expressed or inferred thereof. The high amount of non-monologic pragmatic utterances in the data of the two children can of course be regarded as an effect of the text type. Still, it is more likely that both the function and the

reduced complexity of a non-monologic utterance make them an attractive means for young children to structure their discourse. As mentioned above, a dialogic split of the semantic use types can lead to effects that are more typical for the pragmatic use types of ACs. Before the two children in our study are syntactically sufficiently advanced to build multi-clause utterances, they produce utterances with sentence-initial *but* and *aber* not only to signal illocutions or a change in thematic structure, but likewise when expressing semantic opposition and denial of expectation. The adversative connective thus enters the children's system as an expression that signals speech management in spoken dialogue and relates the (opposing) positions of the interlocutors.

We found that with age, the German child Leo produced an increasing number of monologic *aber* utterances. There was a similar age effect for Thomas that did not reach significance. We interpret this as an effect of the lower amount of utterances with *but* that appeared in Thomas' data. Taken together with the finding that the semantic use types trigger an increase in monologic structures while the pragmatic use types trigger a decrease, the results suggest that the children first expand their syntactic abilities in the semantic use types.

dialogic speech	monologic	monologic
management across	> realizations in	> realizations in
all use types	semantic use types	pragmatic use types

According to the developmental sequence established so far, children use *aber* and *but* to relate propositional elements or direct inferences thereof in their own speech before they use the adversative connective to connect their own speech when marking the (non)-satisfaction of a previous illocution or the beginning of a new episode. The above findings suggest that it is not syntactic complexity alone that leads to a late(r) appearance of monologic uses, but that syntactic complexity interacts with the functions expressed by the semantic versus the pragmatic uses of ACs. Our findings suggest that children

do not generally differentiate between semantic and pragmatic use types while they are still limited to using *aber* and *but* in a dialogic speech structure. Once they produce *aber* and *but* in monologic multi-clause utterances, however, a sequence seems to emerge in which semantic uses are attested before pragmatic uses. This generalization must of course be tested with the production data of more children.

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