

Freie Universität Berlin
Institut für Englische Philologie

Hausarbeit im Seminar:
Semantics and Pragmatics, LV#17377
Prof. Ferdinand von Mengden
Sommersemester 2014

The contrastive feature of *but* in its different functions

Johannes Holthausen

4678204

jo.holthausen@web.de

Englische Philologie, Geschichte

4. Fachsemester

Outline:

1. Introduction.....	1
2. <i>But</i> and implicatures.....	2
3. Categorising the functions of <i>but</i>	4
3.1. Semantic level.....	4
3.2. Pragmatic level.....	7
3.3. Discursive level.....	9
4. Discussion.....	10
5. Bibliography and further readings.....	12

The contrastive feature of *but* in its different functions

1. Introduction

In the last decades, *connective* came into use instead of *conjunction* because the latter term is closely related to clauses and the former more generally describes a link between two constituents (Loos, SIL: “conjunction” and “connective”). However, many connectives that can be used for connecting clauses also operate on the illocutionary level or as discourse markers. One of these connectives is *but*. When looking at actual usage of *but*, one sees a general contrastiveness, a basic contrastive feature, that is conveyed. The online Oxford Dictionary has a similar understanding of *but* in terms of contrastiveness; in its definition, it is said that it “[u]sed to introduce a phrase or clause contrasting with what has already been mentioned” (online Oxford Dictionary: “but”). For example in (1), a contrast between the two predicates that are ascribed to Alex and Chris are opposed: tall and short.

(1) “Alex is tall, but Chris is short.”

The example in (2), on the other hand, does not reveal a contrast, or at least not very clear.

(2) “But what I wanted to say ...”

To get to know more about the possible types of contrast I would like to have a closer look at *but*. The basic question that drives my research is whether the contrastive feature of *but* can be found in its different usage. In order to answer this question, I will look at different levels to describe the usage of *but* in several contexts, so that I can analyse and categorise it. With these functions and categories, I can, then, check on the contrastiveness in each one of it.

Lakoff (1971), Dascal and Katriel (1977), Anscombe and Ducrot (1977), Redeker (1990), Lagerwerf (1998), Thomas (2005), and others already suggested some functions and especially Lagerwerf and Thomas saw a connection between *but* and implicatures. Thus, I first have to clarify: What are implicatures? And how do they interact with *but*? To do so, I will mainly rely on the entry in Bußmann's *Lexikon der Sprachwissenschaft* (2008) and roughly outline important aspects of Grice's *Logic and Conversation* (1975) that are relevant for this subject. One needs a general understanding of what implicatures are, or might be, so that one can understand the functions suggested by the authors mentioned above in order to develop new functions. There is already a tendency towards categorising the different functions, as some functions work on the same level and some work on another level. The specific levels are, however, not described in much detail and

explicitly mentioned. The suggested functions also differ from what I think *but* could be used for. Therefore, I shall present –partially old, partially new– functions of *but* and clearly show the different levels on which these functions operate. Then, I will be able to tell whether the basic contrastive feature of *but* can be found on each level, in each function.

Since I would like the functions to be practical for further research, I will stick to actual language usage by working with the CHILDES corpora. The project is motivated mainly by research in the field of Child Language Acquisition, but it still provides useful corpora for my question as the categorisation of the children's *but*-utterances also works just as good for adults. Some functions that I will present are currently discussed in the “ABER-Erwerb”-project at the Zentrum für Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft in Berlin, in which I participate as a research assistant. The functions are partially taken from previous research, partially suggested by our own thoughts, and always double-checked with corpus data – which has led to some adaptations of previous categorisations.

2. *But* and implicatures

Lagerwerf (1998) gives a comprehensive overview of the state of research in the 90s about *but* and its different functions. He focused on semantic opposition, denial of expectation, and concession as the main functions of *but*. One does not necessarily have to know what implicatures are in order to analyse and categorise semantic oppositions; yet, this does not apply for denial of expectation and concession. Sentences like *She is Viennese, but she doesn't like music* have a lot to do with implicatures, which is why I will now have a look at their definitions. Only when understanding implicatures, one can fully understand the functions.

One name always comes up when talking about implicatures: Herbert Paul Grice. In 1975, he published an article titled *Logic and conversation* and introduced the term 'implicature'. As Bußmann (2008: “implicature”) puts it:

“With the utterance of a sentence *S*, a speaker induces the implicature (implicates) that *p* is the case if his utterance allows the conclusion *p* without him literally saying that *p*.”¹

1 Translated by myself. Original in German: “Ein Sprecher induziert mit der Äußerung eines Satzes *S* die Implikatur (impliziert), dass *p* der Fall ist, wenn seine Äußerung den Schluss auf *p* erlaubt, ohne dass er mit *S* wörtlich gesagt hätte, dass *p*.”

Grice distinguished between two implicatures: the conventional implicature and the conversational implicature. The first one has to do with the conventional meaning of words and how these are grammatically modified and structured in an utterance. The second one has to do with the so-called “Cooperative Principle”, which contains four maxims:

1. Quantity
 1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
 2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
2. Quality - “Try to make your contribution one that is true.”
 1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
 2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
3. Relation - “Be relevant.”
4. Manner - “Be perspicuous.”
 1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
 2. Avoid ambiguity.
 3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
 4. Be orderly.

(taken from Grice 1975:45f)

An utterance induces a conversational implicature if one (or more) maxims are complied with or exploited, i.e. flouted (Grice 1975:49). Thus, a conversational implicature requires at least the observation – either consciously or subconsciously – of the Cooperative Principle. Grice saw the possibility that a conversational implicature can be cancelled by exploiting the maxims and adding an additional clause “that states or implies that the speaker has opted out” (Ibid. 57) or via context. For this paper, precisely that part about the additional clause is highly relevant. Let's have an example:

(3) “Mary loves you very much, although you already know that.”

(taken from Sanders in Lagerwerf 1998:28)

Connect 1, *Mary loves you very much*, implicates that the hearer did not know that *Mary loves you very much*. As the first maxim of quantity suggests, one should say exactly what is asked for; nothing more, nothing less. However, connect 2 opposes that implicature by admitting that the hearer already knows that *Mary loves you very much*. This contrast between the implicature of connect 1 and connect 2 is made by *although*, which could easily be replaced by *but*. Thus, connect 2 cancels the implicature of connect 1 – that is exactly what Grice refers to with the additional clause.

3. Categorising the functions of *but*

Now that I showed why implicatures and their understanding are important for my subject, I can dive into the different functions of *but*. Since they operate on different levels, I would like to arrange them in three categories: the semantic, the pragmatic, and the discursive level. The levels serve as an orientation for understanding and organising the different functions. However, the functions can overlap (see section 4) and do not mean that each *but* operates only on one level. They can easily work on several levels – and often do so. The functions describe a specific element of the usage of *but*, and as a consequence *but* can have more than one function.

Ted Sanders picked up the idea to distinguish coherence relations. He included different types of connectives in his research, but what is crucial for this paper is that he distinguished between semantic and pragmatic coherence relations (cf. Sanders 1997). This can be applied to *but*, too, as can be seen later in this section.

A general problem with linguistic research is when looking at languages that it is often guided – but also misled – by personal understanding of the respective language and feelings about it. Thus, one major challenge is always to find formal criteria when it comes to categories and the like. In the following, I shall try to find such formal criteria for each function to make them accessible for others who are interested in this subject. As for the semantic level, this is fairly easy, whereas it hard to find formal criteria for pragmatic and especially discursive usages of *but*.

3.1. Semantic level

According to Sanders, those relations are semantic in which the connects refer to the real world, so that their propositional content connects the connects on a semantic level (Ibid. 122). *But* can produce such a semantic relation between two connects. This semantic usage includes the two functions *semantic opposition* and *denial of expectation*. Let's first have a look at semantic opposition.

Formal criteria for semantic opposition are comparably easy to find. Three elements are very helpful to distinguish different types of semantic oppositions: topic, type of opposition, and negation. Each element selects one option out of two and four, respectively.

Topic, very briefly explained, is what the sentence is about. Often, it is in first position of the sentence or clause and thereby mostly the subject of the sentence or clause, but not always (Loos,

SIL: “Topic”). As for the specific type of a semantic opposition, topic can either mean *topic change* or *topic maintenance*.

Type of opposition can either be *binary opposition* or *multiplex opposition*, whereas only the opposition between the arguments of the predicate is relevant. Binary opposition describes an opposition between a concept and its negation; logically speaking an opposition between X and ~X. The idea behind multiplex opposition is that there are several concepts of a category, e.g. ALCOHOL, which then form an opposition: 'beer' versus 'wine'. Of course, these two are not the binary opposite of each other, but they still oppose each other in a certain way.

Negation simply refers to the existence and position of a negation in either of the two connects connected by *but*. Possible options to select are: *negation in connect 1*, or *negation in connect 2*, or *negation in connect 1 and 2*, or *no negation at all*.

The result of combining these options is a list of different types of semantic oppositions. There are however some restrictions; not all options can be combined.

- (table 1) Type 1: topic change, binary opposition
1a: X VP (arg 1), but Y VP (NEG arg 1)
1b: X VP (NEG arg 1), but Y VP (arg 1)
Type 2: topic maintenance, multiplex opposition
2a: X VP (arg 1), but X VP (NEG arg 2)
2b: X VP (NEG arg 1), but X VP (arg 2)
Type 3: topic change, multiplex opposition
3a: X VP (arg 1), but Y VP (NEG arg 2)
3b: X VP (NEG arg 1), but Y VP (arg 2)
3c: X VP (arg 1), but Y VP (arg 2)
Type 4: topic maintenance, binary opposition
4a: X VP (arg 1), but X VP (NEG arg 1)
4b: X VP (NEG arg 1), but X VP (arg 1)

(adapted from ABER-Projekt as of Sept. 2014, slightly changed)

Examples of semantic opposition can be seen in the following and are taken from CHILDES corpora:

MOT: I can't see the digger.

CHI: But I can.

Type 1b, Thomas 3;2.6

CHI: Mummy, I am trying to eat something up in the sky.

CHI: But I can't.

Type 2a, Thomas 3;3.3

Another function that also operates on a semantic level is *denial of expectation*. Already Lakoff (1971) used the term to describe a certain function of *but*, and Lagerwerf was more specific about it claiming that “[a] denial of expectation is thus interpreted as ... either semantic or pragmatic” (1998:29). However, I will split what Lagerwerf called “denial of expectation” into different functions operating on different levels. When I say *denial of expectation*, I refer to the function that I shall describe in the following, the function that operates on a semantic level. The pragmatic part of Lagerwerf’s (and others’) “denial of expectation” will be found in the pragmatic functions. By that, denial of expectation describes only a semantic function of *but* and one can easily differentiate the several types of relation that a single *but* can create.

Lakoff states that denial of expectation require a presupposition in connect 1 which is cancelled by connect 2. This presupposition originates from an expectation that comes from either the speaker or general knowledge (1971:133). There are also denials of expectations in which only connect 2 or both connects have a presupposition which oppose each other. In every case, there is always a binary opposition – implicit or explicit – between connect 1 and connect 2 and is, thus, closely related to semantic opposition Type 1 and 4. The difference lies in the presupposition. Yet, I would not call it a presupposition but an implicature, since one can trace it back to the Cooperative Principle and an exploiting of the maxims. The following example might clarify any doubts:

MOT: Do you want to get there and find Dimitra?

CHI: Yes.

CHI: But it's dark and horrible in there.

(taken from Thomas 3;0.24)

By saying *yes*, one could assume the child to elliptically utter the proposition 'I want to get there and find Dimitra', which shall be connect 1. Connect 2 is just what the child then said: *But it's dark and horrible in there*. Connect 1 is very straight forward, the implicature lies in connect 2: The literal utterance is not relevant and, thus, exploits the maxim of relation. As a consequence, the utterance implicates *I do not want to get there and find Dimitra (because it's dark and horrible in there)*, which is the binary opposition to the proposition of connect 1. *But* makes the addition of connect 2 possible without it sounding odd – *and* would not work. This reveals that in denial of expectation, *but* does not support oppositions that already exist, but create them via implicatures. Some implicatures are very obvious and rely on conventional understanding and connections of different things, such as *Alex' car is not there* leading to the expectation that Alex has gone away. Yet, the expectation comes from a certain, sort of conventionalised interpretation of the utterance that instantly detects the exploit of maxims and, thus, induces the implicature that comes with it.

This means that an expectation is actually an implicature that is conventionally induced². A list of the specific types of denial of expectation is provided below:

- (table 2) Type 1: connect 2 induces and cancels connect 1-based implicature
Type 2: connect 2 contradicts connect 1-based implicature
Type 3: connect 2-based implicature contradicts connect 1
Type 4: connect 2-based implicature contradicts connect 1-based implicature

(adapted from ABER-Projekt as of Sept. 2014, slightly changed)

3.2. Pragmatic level

According to Sanders (1997:122), pragmatic relations between utterances are closely linked to illocutionary meaning. I do not want to dive into a discussion about Speech Act and related issues; in brief, illocutionary meaning is the action that is made by the utterance. If someone's boss tells their employees *You are promoted*, then they in fact are promoted – precisely by the action that is made by the utterance. *But* is related to illocutionary meaning and, thus, can operate on a pragmatic level. The following functions shall reveal the pragmatic usage.

Protest describes the function of *but* which can be used to express displeasure, refusal, an opposite opinion about the circumstances – in short: a protest. Two distinct types of protest shall organise the different ways of protests. The first expresses that the speaker of the *but*-utterance raises an objection to someone's demand, or in general: speech act, because they believe it to be inappropriate or misleading under the current circumstances. Most of the time the objection is raised against what the speech act infers. See for example:

MOT: Mummy has got to go and get changed.
CHI: But I don't want to.

(taken from Thomas 3;2.6)

The other type of protest is a rejection of what someone else just said; it is a rejection of the proposition. The speaker believes the content of the prior utterance to be wrong and has another opinion about what is true or not and, thus, raises an objection. By that, the content from the first utterance is cancelled. Often, this rejection comes from an inference of the *but*-utterance, as in:

2 I hereby do not refer to *conventional implicatures*, which are implicatures that are induced by the conventional meaning of words and grammatical constructions (Bußmann 2008: “implicature”). It would be worth a discussion whether such expectations are also *conventional implicatures* and the definition, thus, needs to be widened. Yet, this shall not be investigated in this paper in order to stick to the subject and not lose myself in highly theoretical discussions.

MOT: I've emptied all my rubbish already.

CHI: But you [//] piece of paper. [meaning: you have a piece of paper in your rubbish]

(taken from Thomas 3;4.0)

Mostly, this can hardly be separated from semantic opposition type 4. Nonetheless, the following list should be useful for analysing:

(table 3) Type 1: connect 2 raises objection to connect 1-based inference

Type 2: connect 2-based inference cancels connect 1

(adapted from ABER-Projekt as of Sept. 2014, slightly changed)

Apart from protest, *but* can be used either to support or to make certain actions happen. In these cases, the related function is called *action control*. There are two distinct types of action control. Type 1 describes that the speaker's intent to act opposes someone else's intent to act. *But* is used to bring forward this opposition in order to make the dialogue partner change their mind. Type 2 is more demanding, as it attempts to change or even to create a certain intent to act of the dialogue partner. While the first type could be seen as a defensive function, the second type could be seen as an aggressive function. An example would be:

MOT: Come on.

CHI: But I wanna play hide and seek.

Type 2, Thomas 3;2.3

Another function, *justification* refers to the usage of *but* with which the speaker claims his preceding action or utterance to be legitimate, as in:

(INV wants CHI to stop jumping on her stomach)

INV: Because it hurts.

CHI: But I just jump this. [meaning: I just jumped softly like this]

(taken from Thomas 3;0.15)

Furthermore, I would like to introduce another pragmatic function that we have not discussed in the ABER-Projekt, yet. It might occur seldom and we did not come across such an example so far. The sentence on which the function is based was already taken as an example to explain implicatures. Let's recall this one, and keep in mind that *although* can be replaced by *but*, in this instance:

(3) "Mary loves you very much, although you already know that."

(taken from Sanders in Lagerwerf 1998:28)

Even though the sentence is artificial, it is an English sentence and, thus, should be analysable.

In connect 1, a proposition is stated. According to the maxim of quantity, it implicates that the listener does not know about the content of connect 1, yet. By introducing connect 2 with *although* (or *but*), the speaker shows their consciousness for their violation of the maxim. *Although* (or *but*) thus introduces an apology – which puts its usage on a pragmatic level. I propose the term *apology* for this function.

The contrastive feature of *but* can be seen in the pragmatic functions, too, even if it is not as clear as in the semantic functions. Protest and action control are similar in opposing someone else's demand or intent to act. Justification opposes the implicit or explicit accusation that the speaker's action or utterance is not legitimate, and *apology* expresses the opposition between the implicature of connect 1 and what is said in connect 2. Note that justification and apology might seem very similar; their difference lies in the justification trying to legitimate the prior action or utterance and the apology not trying to legitimate anything but expressing consciousness about the implicature of connect 1.

3.3. Discursive level

For a long time, research focused on semantic conjunctions and what relations they express. Later, during the 1980s, discourse markers became more and more popular in linguistic research. Kyratzis & Ervin-Tripp were one of them, and they listed *but* among others as a discourse marker (1999:1322f). We found three discursive functions for *but* in the ABER-Projekt, which I shall present in the following. It is mainly concerned with the subject, the topic, the what-it-is-about of the discourse, so we decided to call the functions *thema* instead of *topic*, and I will use *thema* in the general (not the linguistic!) sense of 'topic' to avoid confusions.

First, there is *thema return*. It describes the return to a thema that has been talked about before. In between, another thema has to be the common ground of talk and discussion, so that the prior thema can be referred back to. The gap may vary: sometimes, only a few utterances lie between the thema that is, then, returned to; sometimes there are more than 50 utterances. Only the point of returning to the thema that has been talked about before is essential for this function.

The second discursive function, *thema change*, refers to a change of thema in the discourse, due to altering circumstances, new impressions, other interests and the like; the reasons for a thema change may vary. Thema changes can occur without *but*; yet, it is commonly used, as it is a strong support for the thema change, for instance:

MOT: I don't think they know Jo quite like we do.

CHI: But I want a sweetie here.

(taken from Thomas 3;1.4)

Thirdly, *thema digression* is very similar to *thema change* and the two are not very easy to distinguish. It describes the change of the specific subject or issue within a common *thema*. For instance, when talking about means of transport, introducing the bus as an alternative to the train, as in *But we could take the bus*, would be such a *thema digression*.

The contrastive feature of *but* is present in the discursive level, too, but not as clear as in the semantic or the pragmatic level. Nonetheless, the opposition between different *themas* and different specific issues can well be expressed by *but*.

4. Discussion

Above, I provided a list of functions to reveal the different usages and levels of *but*. It should be plausible, but there are still many open questions, which I shall propose in the following.

I already mentioned in the beginning of section 3 some functions can overlap. An example of this would be semantic opposition type 4 and protest:

MOT: Don't worry, I'm getting some more rubbish.

CHI: But there's some more.

(taken from Thomas 3;4.0)

This is partially due to the problem that especially the pragmatic and discursive functions lack detailed formal criteria. But it also reveals that most usages commonly work on more than one level – some functions are so close to each other so that they can hardly occur without the other one. It shows that one should not restrict themselves on only one function per *but*, but that one should include all functions that fit for the analysis.

This leads to another issue: turn-taking as an influence on the analysis of *but*. Kyratzis & Ervin-Tripp even used the term “turn-marking function” (1999:1322f) to refer to a turn-taking that is introduced by a discourse marker; in this case *but*. I would not go so far to propose a function for that; yet, turn-taking indeed matters when it comes to analysing *but*. If connect 1 and 2 are uttered by the same speaker, it might suggest a different function for *but* than if the connects are uttered by two speakers. Further studies definitely should investigate this.

Another important issue with *but* is the question whether it either introduces an opposition or is part of it. This would lead to the general question whether *but*, and probably other connectives, too, carry meaning or are only part of meaning and change the perspective on it. For this, see Frege (1892), Grice (1975), and more recent: Vallée (2008).

Altogether, this paper intends to prove that the contrastive feature of *but* is present in all its different functions. However, since the functions bear some problems as mentioned above, they should be reviewed. I believe that the contrastive feature still would be present, no matter what suggestions will be made for the functions, but it is important to fully grasp the function of *but* to come to a plausible answer. Nonetheless, this paper adds a new ground to the research about *but* from which to develop further studies and theories about connectives, and *but* in specific.

Bibliography

Bußmann, Hadumod (2008): *Lexikon der Sprachwissenschaft*. Vierte, durchgesehene und bibliographisch ergänzte Auflage. Stuttgart: Kröner.

Grice, H. P. (1975): "Logic and conversation." In: *Syntax and semantics*, ed. P. Cole & J. L. Morgan. New York, pp. 41-58

Gülzow, Insa, Victoria Barlitz, Johannes Holthausen & Dagmar Bittner: *The use of ABER 'but' and negation in early German production data*. Paper presented at the 13th international Congress for the Study of Child Language. 14.07.2014 – 18.07.2014, Amsterdam

Gülzow, Insa, Victoria Barlitz & Johannes Holthausen: *The use of 'ABER' & 'but' in early longitudinal production data*. Paper presented at the Arbeitstreffen des DFG-Projekts: Erwerb von ABER im Englischen, Deutschen und Bulgarischen. 29.09.2014 – 30.09.2014, ZAS Berlin

Lagerwerf, L. (1998): *Causal Connectives Have Presuppositions*. Ph.D. thesis, Catholic University of Brabant, Holland Academic Graphics, The Hague, The Netherlands

Lakoff, Robin (1971): "If's, and's, and but's – about conjunction." In: Charles J. Fillmore & D. Terence Langendoen (eds.): *Studies in Linguistic Semantics* Vol. 3, Irvington, pp. 3-114

Loos, Eugene E.: "Glossary of Linguistic Terms" SIL International sil.org/linguistics/glossaryOfLinguisticTerms/ Accessed: 2nd Oct. 2014

MacWhinney, B. (2000): *The CHILDES Project: Tools for analyzing talk. Third Edition*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Oxford Dictionary (British & World English), online: *entry of 'but'*. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/but> Accessed 3rd Oct. 2014

Sanders, Ted (1997): "Semantic and pragmatic sources of coherence: on the categorization of coherence relations in context". In: *Discourse Processes*, 1997, Vol. 24(1), pp. 119-147

Further readings

Anscombe, J. and Ducrot, O. (1977): "Deux MAIS en Français?" In: *Lingua*, Vol. 43, pp. 23-40

Dascal, M. and Katriel, T. (1977): "Between semantics and pragmatics: the two types of 'but' - hebrew 'aval' and 'ela'." In: *Theoretical Linguistics*, Vol. 4, pp.143-172

Frege, Gottlob (1892): Über Sinn und Bedeutung. In: *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik*, NF 100, pp. 25-50

Redeker, G. (1990): "Ideational and pragmatic markers of discourse structure". In: *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 14, pp.367–381

Thomas, Kavita E. (2005): *But What Do They Mean? Modelling Contrast Between Speakers in Dialogue Signalled by "But"*. University of Edinburgh