

A Semantic and Pragmatic Approach to *But*

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This study is intended as an investigation of the relationship between the grammatical behavior of *but* and its core meaning. I propose that the core meaning of *but*, namely “contrast”, is always observed across the various interpretations of *but*. My main concern here is the duality of *but* with respect to the adoption of constituents in sentence interpretation. On one aspect *but* serves as a focusing particle and on the other aspect, it serves as an exceptive. Let us consider one aspect of *but*, as illustrated in (1):

(1) He is *but* a boy. (OALD⁵)

Here I will adopt the term “scope” to refer to the element following *but*. To describe the function of *but* in terms of scope implies that there is an entity to be included in the scope, and there is another entity to be excluded from that scope. We refer to the excluded entities as “compared entities (CEs)”. In (1), for example, the element in the scope is “a boy”. The CE in (1) relates to any categories that can be described as something different from being a boy.

It follows from this line of reasoning that the scope stands in a contrastive relation to the CE. Though the sentence in (1) may be paraphrased as “He is *only* a boy”, the proposed analysis makes it possible to detect the difference in quality between the original sentence and the paraphrase. While *only* only focuses on what is included in the scope, *but* can contrast it with what is excluded from the scope. It is now clear that the former serves nearly as an intensifier, while the latter can bring about the contrastive implication. This is the difference between the two particles.

A similar analysis can apply to the following sentences:

- (2) a. Go there *but* fast.
 b. Go there fast.

In (2a), too, we come across the sense of contrast. Since the scope in this case is the manner adverb *fast*, it follows naturally that the CE in (2a) is specified as some manner different from going fast. That is to say, the manner of fast going is contrasted to any different manner of going. This sense of contrast is absent in (2b), which does not have *but* in it. This sentence only shows the manner of going fast without comparing it with different manners of going.

We next turn to the exceptive use of *but*. We have seen so far cases in which *but* serves as a focusing particle. Notice that *but* in this use has no affect on the polarity of the sentence in which it appears. Thus the sentences in (1) and (2a) are affirmative irrespective of the presence of *but*. The *but* we see in (3), however, has to

do with polarity.

(3) There is no man but feels pity for starving children. (OALD⁵)

In this sentence, *but* functions as a relative pronoun. This sentence differs in polarity from sentences without *but* like *There is no man who feels pity for starving children*. The question is how the *but* in this sentence plays a role in changing the polarity.

We will argue that the analysis based on the core meaning of *but* carries over to this use: in (3), the element in the scope is “a man who feels pity for starving children” and the CE relates to “a man who is different from the man who feels pity for starving children”. It is evident that a contrast holds between the scope and the CE. We can interpret this sentence as containing a negative element of *no* which denies the existence of the CE, hence this sentence is semantically equivalent to *There is not a man who is different from the man who feels pity for starving children*. Notice that denying the existence of something is equal to changing the polarity originally assigned to that something. In this way, the *but* in (3) has affect on the polarity.

Similar remarks apply to the following sentence:

(4) I could come any day but Thursday. (LDOCE³)

In (4), the scope of *but* is Thursday and CE in this case is related to any day different from Thursday. Importantly, seven days in a week constitute a closed set. In such a closed set as seven days in a week, to affirm all the members of a set except one is equal to denying that one. That is to say, in this case, too, there is a contrast between Thursday (scope) and the other days (CE).

What we have seen so far strongly suggests that the core meaning of *but* underlies various uses. This core meaning is relevant to the focusing particle use when it singles out what is included in the scope of *but*. It is relevant to the exceptive use when it singles out what is excluded from the scope (CE). Therefore, we can conclude that a difference in choice between what is included in and what is excluded from the scope of *but* affects the polarity of a clause of which *but* takes a scope.

SELECTED REFERENCES

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