Predicting contrast in sentences with and without focus marking

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Abstract

How do we know when a contrast is coming? This study explores the prediction of parallel contrastive phrases, especially NPs, in sentences with and without overt focus marking. A written sentence-completion questionnaire with clauses followed by the conjunction ''but'' compared unmarked initial clauses to ones with the focus marker ''only'' on the subject or object. Both conditions with ''only'' elicited more contrasts overall than the condition without focus marking, and many of the contrasts were with the focus-marked NP. While the baseline (no-only) condition had full clauses for half of the completions, subject focus increased clausal completions and object focus increased negative ellipsis completions (''not'' + NP structures), both changes in syntax which make a contrast with the marked NP easy. The production of negative ellipsis sentences primarily in the object-focus condition suggests that the object bias of these sentences in comprehension could relate to their being used more frequently with this meaning. Finally, the overall pattern of results shows that overt marking of contrastive focus increases continuations with contrasts, and the conjunction ''but'' does not reliably predict explicitly-stated contrasts within a sentence without overt focus marking.

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Keywords: Contrast; Focus; Ellipsis; Conjunctions; Information structure

1. Introduction

This study explores how often explicit contrastive alternatives are produced after a clause and a contrastive conjunction (*but*), through a written completion study of sentences like (1). To see how overtly marked focus affects the production of contrasts, the conditions varied the presence and placement of the focus marker *only* on the first-clause subject or object.

(1)   On Monday (only) the smuggler followed (only) the gangster through the city, but. . .

This study follows up research on the comprehension of related ellipsis structures by exploring when contrast is expected and how overt focus changes these expectations. Specifically, Carlson (2013) studied the processing of bare argument ellipsis versions of these sentences (i.e., *On Monday (only) the smuggler followed (only) the gangster through the city, not the thief*), and found both an object bias and effects of the position of focus markers. This study also explores whether the

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use of *but* in the contrast discourse relation is preferred over other discourse uses, and whether its use is influenced by focus marking.

1.1. The particle only, but, and contrast

Focus shows how information in a sentence relates to the surrounding linguistic and real world context, and can be indicated in English by means of prosody (accents), focus particles like *only*, and syntactic structures (e.g., clefting, preposing). Any sentence, with or without a focus marker, has a focus. This governs where the sentence would generally be accented (Cinque, 1991; Selkirk, 1984). For a simple sentence like (2a), focus would likely be on the object, leading to accenting of *pork*. *Only* is a focus particle that indicates contrastive focus on a constituent, as well as indicating exhaustivity (Kadmon, 2001; Kiss, 1998; Rooth, 1992). For example, a sentence like (2b) indicates that of some contextually relevant group of eaters, the only one that ate the pork was the dog.

(2)   a.   The dog ate the pork.
        b.   Only the dog ate the pork.

As this example shows, *only* divides entities into two groups: the single stated item that fits the criteria of the rest of the sentence, and the remaining items which do not.

According to some theories, contrastive focus (as marked by *only*) is distinct from informational focus, which occurs on the new information in a sentence, because contrastive focus can appear on both given and new information (Kiss, 1998). Additionally, all sentences are required to have at least one informational focus, but contrastive focus is optional. Other theorists believe that contrastive focus is just a particular use of focus, relating to its context, but not a distinct semantic category (Rooth, 1992; Schwarzschild, 1999). Semantic interpretation of focus involves the generation of alternative propositions with the focused item replaced by alternatives: i.e., for (2b), (*x* ate the pork) for all contextually relevant values of *x* (Kadmon, 2001; Rooth, 1992). In this study, *only* is always placed on an NP and does not involve the type of positional ambiguity that appears in 'association with focus' situations (Rooth, 1992).

Turning to the conjunction *but*, we follow several theorists in positing that it has several identifiable uses. Izutsu (2008)'s discussion of opposition relations distinguishes three uses of this conjunction: contrast, concessive, and corrective (though since correctives have a syntactic structure inconsistent with those in this study, they will not be considered further). In Izutsu's contrast relation, the clauses joined by *but* must be comparable in structure, and also have distinct compared items or phrases which can contrast with each other because they are mutually exclusive but within the same cognitive/semantic domain. For example, *a drink* and *a martini* cannot contrast because martinis are a sub-type of drinks; on the other hand, *a drink* and *a carburetor* do not contrast easily because they share so few features and are unlikely to relate to any particular predicate in similar ways. Kehler (2001), in his inventory of discourse relationships, similarly labels this use of *but* as illustrating a Contrast relationship between clauses. Kehler considers Contrast to be a subtype of the general category of Parallel discourse relations, which are identified by finding specific parallel arguments or predicates in the conjoined clauses. Toosarvandani (2014) also identifies this use of *but*, calling it semantic opposition.

Izutsu's concessive use, which corresponds to the Violated Expectation discourse relationship for Kehler, involves clauses where an assumption or expectation set up by the first clause is not realized by the second clause. Winter and Rimon (1994), in their analysis of contrastive conjunctions like *but*, *yet*, and *although*, claim that these conjunctions are felicitous when there is some statement which the first clause implies and the second clause denies. They then concentrate their analysis on uses of *but* that fit in the general category of Izutsu's concessives, since they involve no explicit parallelism between elements within the clauses. As Toosarvandani (2014) notes, Winter and Rimon (1994) appear to take this use of *but* as central to its meaning, while other theorists, like Umbach (2004, 2005), concentrate primarily on the semantic opposition or contrast use.

Umbach (2004, 2005) states that *but* is used between two clauses to present two alternative propositions, one confirmed and one denied. Her analysis then concentrates most on sentences with explicit parallelism, fitting Kehler's Contrast classification, and considers their focus structure. Consider the examples in (3) from Umbach (2005:216):

(3)   a.   John cleaned up his ROOM but he didn't wash the DISHES.
        b.   John only cleaned up his ROOM.

The sentence in (3a) shows a contrast use of *but*, where there are two things presented which John could have done and he only did one of them. Interestingly, Umbach emphasizes how similar this conjunction is to *only* in its sensitivity to focus position and its relationship to alternatives. Note that in (3b), although alternative things which John could have done are not presented, *only* does effectively claim that the one mentioned is what he did and alternative actions did not take place (e.g., cleaning up something else, vacuuming the hall). This is very similar to how *but* functions in (3a), except that a single