



Correction-*but*: A relevance-theoretic reappraisal



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ABSTRACT

The current paper unveils the problems undermining the relevance-theoretic procedural view of correction-*but*, as it stands, in face of the fact that the specific application appears to defy inclusion in the procedural definition. On this view, the uniformity of a general account of *but* seems to be at risk. The paper aims to propose a more plausible relevance-driven account of correction that does not compromise the cause of a univocal treatment of *but* in procedural terms. To achieve this aim, it introduces a distinction in correction interpretation that has so far eluded attention in the relevant literature: descriptive and metarepresentational.

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1. Introduction

Pragmatic theory crucially evolved from a constant concern with the identification of the interface between semantic and pragmatic interpretation. Central to this issue has been the perpetual challenge of ascertaining which side of the divide a certain class of words falls on, specifically the class of discourse markers. Among them figures prominently the marker *but*, a case of contention between semanticists and pragmatists since Grice's work (1989).

In the Gricean spirit, the classification of a marker as either semantic or pragmatic served the higher cause of safeguarding the autonomy of a minimal truth-functional semantics. Against this ulterior motive, the determination of the meaning of *but* strictly by appeal to the semantics/pragmatics distinction takes precedence over a more detailed description of its meaning. In fact, however, a host of context-sensitive interpretations of *but* have been identified and discussed in subsequent research; semantic opposition,¹ denial of expectation, objection and correction interpretations are cases in point (R. Lakoff, 1971; Anscombe and Ducrot, 1977; Rouchota, 1998).

But in face of this range of meanings, the prospect of a minimal and, thus, uniform account of the connective under discussion looks more remote and the analyst's attention may be deflected from the original question in pragmatic research: which side of communication the meaning of *but* operates on. In this sense, if the plan for a uniform account is to be realistically sustained, the most suitable course of action to take is a single treatment of all varieties of *but* (Blakemore, 2002; Hall, 2007; Iten, 2000, 2005), rather than dwelling on the delineation of a single meaning.

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¹ In Blakemore's (1989) terms, the case of semantic opposition is discussed in terms of contrast in reaction to the problems besetting R. Lakoff's (1971) suggestion. However, the focus of more recent relevance-theoretic discussions (Hall, 2007: 152; Iten, 2005: 112) on the overall (procedural) behavior of *but* appears to deprioritize this point. Whatever the motivation for their decision, the current paper will continue this practice, employing, henceforth, the term of semantic opposition as a general term.

But are all varieties ultimately amenable to a single treatment? Indeed, there is an interpretation associated with *but* that has been accorded improper regard until fairly recently, that is in the more context-sensitive framework of relevance theory (Blakemore, 2002; Iten, 2000, 2005). In Iten's (2005) terms, it is the case of correction, a variety originally introduced in Anscombe and Ducrot's (1977) discussion of (the corresponding use of) French *mais*. To exemplify, the utterance in (1)

(1) That's not my sister but my mother,

[Iten, 2005: 149]

is construed as an instance of correction, in that the utterance is intended to rectify the hearer's misconception as to the identity of the speaker's relative. Iten's comment on the particular variety of *but* previews the case of its potentially differential behavior:

While it is at least conceivable that 'semantic opposition' or 'contrast' *but* may be reduced to 'denial of expectation' *but*, there is another use of *but* [correction use] which doesn't seem amenable to such a treatment (Iten, 2005:113)

Despite this acknowledgment, it is interesting that relevance-theoretic investigations have typically favored a uniform meaning description to the benefit of a parsimonious treatment. More specifically, Blakemore (2002) and Iten (2000, 2005) propose a singular procedural account of *but* as equally applicable to the use of correction. But, if Iten's earlier point on the peculiarity of correction use is justified, how does it affect the suggestion for an overall procedural application?

In other words, the issue that seems of relevance, here, is whether or not the standard procedural treatment of *but* can be preserved in handling the variety of correction. If it cannot, the course of action to take looks straightforward. Either the procedural approach to correction is abandoned altogether (the future directions of the research being uncertain) or it is maintained, though not exactly as it stands. Both of the two alternatives would necessarily involve implications for the overall procedural account of *but*, though the implications of the former would sound more far-reaching. To catch but a glimpse of the terminal point of our discussion, we will basically argue that a general, procedural scheme of analysis, as this is standardly couched in the relevance-theoretic literature on *but*, can be employed to accommodate effectively the case of correction, though on certain additional (contextual and, also, theoretical) stipulations.

More specifically, our discussion will point out a number of problems that undermine the current relevance-theoretic practice of stretching the procedural view of *but* to correction, a rather variegated, as it turns out, linguistic phenomenon. We will argue that a more accurate meaning description is required; one that involves sharper contextual observations of correction illuminating the peculiarities of this category of meaning.

This paper, then, sets out to offer a more rigorous and unifying account of correction-*but*, implementing an apparatus of meaning analysis that proved reliable and versatile in past research on connectives (Bardzokas, 2012, 2013, 2014), i.e. that of relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1995). In this line of investigation, it follows that the current work also measures the extent to which relevance theory can rise to the occasion of this new challenge. More concretely, our reappraisal of the variety of correction draws on the interface between levels of meaning that have fundamentally shaped the relevance-theoretic view of discourse markers as linguistic constraints on communication i.e. the interface between procedural encoding (Blakemore, 1987, 2002) and explicit/implicitly communicated meaning (Wilson and Sperber, 1993; Carston, 2002). Through the options opened up by these cross-cutting distinctions, we will navigate towards the view of correction as encoding a linguistic constraint on implicit import.

Section 2, our point of departure, offers an introduction to the varieties of *but*. Section 3 offers a review of the relevance-theoretic account of *but* in procedural terms, while Section 4 exposes the problems besetting the typical relevance-theoretic procedural treatment of correction. Section 5 examines the plausibility of an alternative view of correction based on the suggestion of explicit, rather than implicitly communicated content, particularly of the higher order. Whereas Section 6 keeps up our considerations of explicit content, it entertains the possibility of expounding the phenomenon analyzed in connection with the basic (propositional) order of explicitness. By a process of elimination, Section 7 arrives at the conclusion that the phenomenon of correction can be treated in the standard procedural terms, on two conditions; firstly, that the interpretation of correction is analyzed more rigorously as including two sub-categories of meaning, one of which being readily amenable to the traditional procedural analysis of *but*; secondly, that the range of contextual effects involved in accounting for *but* is marginally broadened, so that the new account takes care of data that fall into the second of these two sub-categories of meaning. Finally, Section 8 discusses the prospective implications of our position.

Let us embark on our enquiry by way of introducing the varieties of *but*.

2. Basic varieties of *but*

There appear to be two types of interpretation that figure prominently in the literature of *but*: a) denial of expectation and b) semantic opposition (R. Lakoff, 1971; Abraham, 1979; Kitis, 1982, 2000), the latter also discussed as adversative-*but* (König, 1985). By way of illustration, the time-worn, humorous example in (2) and the one in (3) typify the two varieties, respectively.

(2) John is a Republican but he is honest.

(3) John is short but Mary is tall.

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