Modeling the context-sensitivity of *But*

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1 The issue

2 *But, and* and abduction

3 Context sensitivity
Assuming that there is only one *but*, is it relevant to suppose it has a prototypical use: either contrastive/semantic opposition (1-a) or argumentative/denial of expectation (1-b) (Lakoff, 1971)?

(1) a. Lemmy is tall, but Ritchie is short.
   b. Lemmy smokes a lot, but he’s in good health.

(Sæbø, 2003; Umbach, 2005): *but* is intrinsically contrastive, adversative uses can be derived by pragmatic interpretation.

(Anscombe and Ducrot, 1977; Blakemore, 2002; Winterstein, 2010): *but* is argumentative at heart, there is no such thing as a specific contrastive use.
Contrastive *but*

- **But** marks that one of its conjuncts confirms a question and the other denies it.

- Alternatively: “based on information structure, take a distinguished element of the right conjunct, place it in the first: the resulting proposition must be false”.

- (2)  
  a. Lemmy is tall, but Ritchie is short.  
  b. \( \sim \) Ritchie is not tall \( \checkmark \)
Argumentative *but*

- There must be a proposition that is debated by *but*’s conjuncts: the argumentative goal.

- In probabilistic terms (Merin, 1999), the probability of the goal $H$ must be raised by the first conjunct, and lowered by the second.

(3) a. Lemmy smokes a lot, but he’s in good health.

b. **Goal:** Lemmy is not in good health / Lemmy will die soon...
**Issues for the contrastive approach**

- If **but** just marks formal contrast, why isn’t it mandatory when compared to **and** and when such a contrast is explicit?

  (4) a. Lemmy is tall, but Ritchie is short.
  b. Lemmy is tall, and Ritchie is short.

- Why is **but** “innocuous/preferred” when the contrast is not “semantic”?

  (5) Lemmy smokes a lot, but/?and he’s in good health.

- What about denials of expectation?
Issues for the argumentative approach

- What is the denied expectation/disputed goal in contrastive cases?
  
  (6)  
  a. Lemmy is tall, but Ritchie short.  
  b. **Goal**: ??? (Ritchie is not tall?)

- How to account for information structure effects? (Umbach, 2005)
  
  (7)  
  a. ... but JOHN washed the dishes. ≠  
  b. ... but John washed THE DISHES.
Questions addressed in this talk

- The difference between **but** and **and**.
- The sensitivity of **but**:
  - to world-knowledge and context
  - (to information structure)

Intended conclusions

- Both approaches are actually quite similar in a way.
- There is something to be gained with the argumentative one.
Plan

1. The issue

2. *But, and and abduction*

3. Context sensitivity
And, but and formal contrast

What is the difference between and and but?

(8) a. Lemmy plays the bass, and Ritchie the guitar.
b. Lemmy plays the bass, but Ritchie the guitar.

The difference is at the level of the question answered by the utterance.

(8-a) Which instruments do Lemmy and Ritchie play? ✓ ?
(8-b) Do both Lemmy and Ritchie play the bass? ?? ✓
And, *but* and formal contrast (cont.)

- Which exact question is to be abduced?

  (9)  
  a. Which instruments do Lemmy and Ritchie play? Do they play the same?  
  b. Do both Ritchie and Lemmy play the bass?

- Note: Playing the bass is *not* contradictory with playing the guitar (≠ tall/short). The contrast here is not purely semantic.
Adbucing the question again

Which question for (10)?

(10)  a. This ring is nice but it’s expensive.
     b. **Question v1**: Should we buy this ring?
     c. **Question v2**: Is this ring nice and cheap?

**v1** is good, but supposes a lot of world-knowledge.

**v2** is based on (10-a)’s content only, but we lose the intuition of **v1**, and it means we should also change the previous questions to *Does Lemmy play the bass and Ritchie not play the guitar?*
On the argumentative perspective

- **And** asks for two arguments for the same conclusion, **but** asks for arguments for opposite conclusions.

- For (11), possible goal: *Lemmy and Ritchie both play the bass.*

  (11) Lemmy plays the bass but Ritchie the guitar. ✓

- How do you get that goal?

- *(Winterstein, 2010):*
  - Probabilities give us a clue: every strengthening of a proposition is a potential argumentative goal (i.e. its probability is raised by assertion).
  - Focus activates some propositions among those strengthenings.
  - **Problem:** this gives too much goals.
Taking stock

- On both accounts some element needs to be abduced.
  - A question of the proper form on the contrastive approach.
  - A goal for the argumentative approach.
- These elements are not that different, arguing for a goal can be construed as an indirect answer to a question.
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Modeling the context-sensitivity of *But*
Now, problems

(12)  a. #Lemmy is tall, but he’s taller than his brother.
    b. #Lemmy solved all problems, but Ritchie some of them.

- On the formal contrast approach, everything should be fine, the following questions should be abduced:
  - *Is Lemmy tall and is he shorter than his brother?*
  - *Did Lemmy solve all problems and Ritchie none of them?*

- The observation is also valid for the argumentative approach.

- It seems we are not allowed to reconstruct these questions. Why?
Argumentation and abduction

Some answers (I)

- Argumentation theory has a ready-made answer for (13):
  
  (13)  Lemmy is tall, but he’s taller than his brother.

- By default, being tall and being taller than someone will affect the same set of propositions in the same way, i.e. they will be argumentatively co-oriented.

- Therefore, out of the blue, the two predicates cannot be construed as opposite.
Some answers (II)

For (14), the answer is less evident:

(14) #Lemmy solved all problems, but Ritchie some of them.

By default, asserting the first conjunct of (14) activates the following goal:

- $H_{other} = \text{Lemmy is not the only one to have solved all problems.}$
- $H_{unique} = \text{Lemmy is the only one to have solved all problems.}$
- $H_{best} = \text{Lemmy is the best.}$

Because of the default scalar properties of $\langle all, some \rangle$, none of these previous goals is compatible with (14), the proper versions should be:

(15) a. Lemmy solved all problems, but he’s the only one.
b. Lemmy solved all problems, but Ritchie too.
c. Lemmy solved all problems, but Ritchie solved just about everything in the test.
Some answers (III)

Why these goals and no others by default?

- These goals are all strengthenings of the content of the utterance, so they all are, technically, argumentative goals.

- Empirically, they correspond to the major usages of \textit{but}:

  (16) a. Lemmy plays the bass, but he’s the only one.
  b. Lemmy plays the bass, but Ritchie plays it too.
  c. Lemmy drives a Porsche, but Ritchie drives a Bugatti.

- But a proper answer is still lacking.
Any approach to the semantics and pragmatics of *but* needs to take context into account.

This is not a trivial matter

- Argumentation offers a way to approach context
- There remains the question of why some goals are more accessible than others
Thanks


