On the disambiguation of *but*

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In this talk I investigate two factors that play a role in the disambiguation of the English connective *but* between a corrective (1) and an adversative reading, cf. (2) and (3). The pragmatic effect of the corrective reading is that some wrong element (Bill) is "replaced" by the correct element (Mary) in the representation of a situation. Corrective sentences in English require negation in the first conjunct of *but* and ellipsis of all linguistic material except the actual correction (Mary) in the second conjunct, as in (1). If the second conjunct does not undergo ellipsis (2), or if negation occurs in the second conjunct instead of the first (3), the corrective reading is lost: Mary does not "replace" Bill in the representation of the same praise event. Rather, the sentences simply state that one situation took place, while the other one didn't.

(1)   John didn't praise Bill, but Mary.

(2)   John didn't praise Bill, but he praised/did praise Mary.

(3)   John praised Mary, but not Bill.

I propose that *but* signals that its conjuncts address a question under dispute (i.e. a question on which the conversation participants disagree), and that the second conjunct of *but* must give a more informative answer to that question. The idea goes back to Anscombre and Ducrot (1977); however, the reformulation in terms of questions and answers, as I will show, is necessary for a uniform account of corrective and adversative uses. In corrections like (1), the question under dispute is a *wh*-question *Who did John praise?* The speaker believes the answer "Mary" to that question, while the hearer believes the answer "Bill". It is this *wh*-question that licenses the ellipsis in (1), cf. Vicente (2010). In contrast, the question under dispute in (2) and (3) is a polar question: *Did John praise both Mary and Bill?* in (3) and *Did John praise neither Mary, nor Bill?* in (2). These questions do not license the same kind of ellipsis; the ellipsis in (3), I will argue along with Vicente (2010), is of a different kind, involving two distinct foci *not* and *Bill* rather than a single focus on *not Bill*. (3) does not have a corrective reading because under exhaustive interpretation (Schulz and van Rooij, 2006) the positive proposition "John praised Mary" always gives a more informative answer to the question *Who did John praise?* by picking exactly one cell of the question partition, while the negative answer "John didn't praise Bill" only excludes cells in which Bill is the object of praising, leaving it open who was actually praised. In contrast, the negative proposition gives a more informative answer to the question *Did John praise both Mary and Bill?* than the positive one, since the falsification of one conjunct is enough to falsify a conjunction, whereas verification of one conjunct is not enough to verify it.

References: • Anscombre, J. C. & O. Ducrot. 1977. Deux mais en français? *Lingua* 43(1).23–40. • Schulz, K. & R. van Rooij. 2006. Pragmatic meaning and non-monotonic reasoning: The case of exhaustive interpretation. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 29(2). 205–250. • Vicente, L. 2010. On the syntax of adversative coordination. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 28(2). 381–415.