Presupposition and Contrast:  
German *aber* as a Topic Particle

**Summary**

Contrastive (adversative) connectives and particles are commonly ascribed a 'procedural' semantics in terms of inferences. However, there are clear signs that they are sensitive to the topic–focus structure of the sentence and that they carry presuppositions involving alternatives. Pragmatic effects can be traced to different ways to identify this presupposition and to justify it in the discourse, showing that a declarative (but dynamic!) semantics is possible.

Contrastive conjunctions and particles have been widely studied, but a consensus on their meaning has not been reached. Scholars differ, inter alia, on whether there is a unitary interpretation or there are two or even three interpretations. I will argue that the semantics of German *aber* consists in a presupposition, unitary but flexible in a number of ways, to be defined in terms of Contrast, or Semantic Opposition.

Oversteegen (1997) presents a three-way division into a Semantic Opposition, a Denial of Expectation, and a Concession interpretation (of the Dutch connective *maar*). An example of the first could be (1), an example of the second could be (2).

(1)  Viele Vögel sind schon da, aber nicht alle.
(2)  Etwas müde ist er, aber durchaus interessiert.

Concession is a label for the interpretation of Hebrew *aval* or French *mais* which Dascal and Katriel (1977) and Anscombe and Ducrot (1977) called attention to: The first sentence counts pro, the second counts contra some conclusion. Cf. (3).

(3)  Clever genug ist er, aber zu faul.

It is of course theoretically unsatisfactory to have to assume two or three different semantic patterns for what seems to be one word. And in fact, Blakemore (2000) formulates a general Denial analysis which can be considered to subsume Concession. I will show, however, that Semantic Opposition cannot be reduced to Denial, and develop an analysis from which Denial readings are derivable via general principles.

**The Scope of Contrast (Semantic Opposition)**

A number of cases contradict a general Denial theory, arguing the need for a theory of Contrast. In (4), the *aber* statement **confirms** an inference from the context:

(4)  Das alles hätte im kompletten Durcheinander enden können, tat es aber nicht.

Lakoff (1971) illustrates the Semantic Opposition use of *but* with sentences like (5):

(5)  Nach dem Motto, der kriegt was, ich aber nicht.

Spooren (1989: 31) defines a Semantic Opposition as "a relation between two conjuncts each having different subjects, to which properties are attributed that are mutually exclusive in the given context". This captures (5) but not (4) or (6):

(6)  Dass ich so klein war, war in Korea nie ein Problem, hier aber schon.

Oversteegen (1997) extends Spooren’s definition from "different subjects" to “different times or places or in different possible worlds”. This conception of Semantic Opposition incorporates sentences like (4)–(6), but still not sentences like (1) or (7).
But once we have “two different” entities or times or places or worlds, it seems only logical to include “two different” anything – like properties, generalizing Semantic Opposition (Contrast) to any logical type. The common denominator seems to be (we will see how this can be interpreted as the verification of a presupposition):

The first sentence contradicts the result of replacing something in the second sentence by something in the first sentence.

Contrastive Topics
Contrastive topics have been a topic in their own right (see e.g. Büning 1999 and references there). But as far as I am aware, the question of an interaction between contrastive topics and contrastive conjunctions and particles has not been addressed. In fact, however, a word like German aber often seems to rely on the sentence topic for the identification of that for which the context supplies a replacement.

(8) Für kleine Betriebe hält sich der Schaden noch in Grenzen; für mittlere wird er aber allmählich ruinös.

Parallel Presuppositions: aber and auch
There are close parallels between aber as a particle and the particle auch (‘also’ or ‘too’), yet only auch has been analyzed in terms of presuppositions.

(9) Für grosse Betriebe nimmt der Schaden schon katastrophale Ausmaße an, für mittlere wird er auch allmählich ruinös.

The following Update Logic formulation is based on Beaver’s (1997: 993) adaptation of Heim’s (1992: 189) rule for too (t is a function assigning a sentence its topic):

The Semantics of auch
\[ \sigma[\phi \text{ auch}] \tau \iff \sigma \models \phi[t(\phi) / \alpha] \text{ for some alternative } \alpha \text{ and } \sigma[\phi] \tau \]

(A sentence with auch changes the information state \( \sigma \) to the information state \( \tau \) only if for some alternative to \( t(\phi) \) \( \alpha \), \( \sigma \) satisfies \( \phi \) with \( \alpha \) substituted for \( t(\phi) \).) I suggest that aber generally introduces a negative additive presupposition:

The Semantics of aber
\[ \sigma[\phi \text{ aber}] \tau \iff \sigma \models \neg \phi[t(\phi) / \alpha] \text{ for some alternative } \alpha \text{ and } \sigma[\phi] \tau \]

Let us go through a simple case to see how the presupposition can be verified:

(10) Es werde viel geredet, aber wenig gesagt.

\[ \sigma \models \neg \phi[t(\phi) / \alpha] \iff \]
\[ \sigma \models \neg(\text{es werde wenig gesagt})[\text{gesagt / geredet}] \iff \]
\[ \sigma \models \neg(\text{es werde wenig geredet}) \]

Since \( \sigma \) incorporates the information in “es werde viel geredet”, this is true.

Contrast Accommodation
The above definition has direct relevance for Contrast (Semantic Opposition). But via various forms of accommodation, it can account for other interpretations too. Specifically, it may be necessary to accommodate a Common Integrator (Lang 1984) for the topic and the alternative, causing inferences about a relevant parallel between these two entities, be it that both count contra some conclusion (Concession), or that one is stereotypically accompanied by the other (Denial of Expectation).
References


Rudolph, Elisabeth (1996) Contrast: Adversative and concessive relations and their expressions in English, German, Spanish, Portuguese on sentence and text level. Berlin: de Gruyter.
