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‘And’ and ‘But’: A Note¹

Saul A. Kripke

Abstract. Most philosophers seem to be under a misleading impression about the difference between ‘and’ and ‘but’. They hold that they are truth-functional equivalents but that ‘but’ adds a Gricean ‘conventional implicature’ to ‘and’. Frege thought that the implicature attached to ‘but’ was that the second clause is unlikely given the first; others have simply said they express a contrast between the two. Though the second formulation may seem more general, in practice writers seem to agree with Frege’s idea. The present note will argue against this conventional view. Indeed, ‘and’ and ‘but’ may *both* convey conflicting implicatures; and the traditional characterization of the implicature of ‘but’ is outright mistaken, or at least misleading.

Frege said that the difference between ‘and’ and ‘but’ is that “a speaker uses ‘but’ when he wants to hint that what follows is different from what might at first be supposed”.² Truth-functionally, there is no difference between them.

Later writers I have read say that ‘but’ introduces a *contrast* between two clauses. Such a formulation might be read as more general than Frege’s formulation, but the examples I have seen in these same writers appear to agree with Frege’s idea.³

In underappreciated remarks,⁴ Frege’s view on the meaning of ‘but’ was refuted by Michael Dummett.⁵ Consider the following example he gives. Suppose a group at Oxford is considering whether to invite a certain speaker, and someone says:

¹ A version of this paper was first given as part of one of my lectures to the *Logos Group* at the University of Barcelona, Spain, in December 2005.

² Frege (1879, in Beaney 1997: 63). See also Frege (1918-1919, in Beaney 1997: 331). The use of ‘hint’ in the quote is a bit odd. In the second cited passage, Frege emphasizes that in such cases the speaker ‘only hints’ that the implicature holds, but does not change the thought expressed.

³ See Burgess (2009: 90-91). Burge (2012: 59-60, footnote 45) appears to endorse Frege’s view. David Kaplan’s manuscript, “What is Meaning? Explorations in the theory of *Meaning as Use*” (section “And vs But”, Part I and Part II) seems to presuppose the conventional views of the distinction between ‘and’ and ‘but’. Probably much of his argument could still go over on a proper understanding of the usage, though it will become more complex.

⁴ But see fn. 9 below.

⁵ Dummett (1973: 86). Dummett also objects to the common assumption that ‘she was poor but honest’ suggests that someone poor is unlikely to be honest. He adds: “But the speaker may have had quite a different contrast in mind, e.g. that poverty is undesirable but honesty desirable”.

(1) He is always a very popular and successful speaker, but he is in America for the year.

Certainly the use of ‘but’ in (1) should not be read in Frege’s terms as ‘hinting’ that such a popular and successful speaker is unlikely to be in America for the year, or would not be expected to be. Nor there is any *intrinsic* contrast between the clauses.

The point is of course that while the first clause gives an important reason to invite the proposed speaker, the second gives a reason not to do so.

Not only is Frege’s characterization not a necessary condition for ‘but’, it does not appear to be a sufficient condition either. Consider:

(2) She entered the lottery, but she won.

This sentence is inappropriate, even though it is very improbable that someone who enters a lottery wins it. However, the corresponding ‘and’ sentence is perfectly normal:

(3) She entered the lottery, and she won!⁶

Here the second clause is a surprise, given the first. Any indication of this is given above (in writing) by an exclamation point, and in the spoken language by a tone of surprise, but these do not seem to me to be necessary.⁷

However, ‘but’ is appropriate in the following variant:

(4) She entered the lottery. The odds were heavily against her, but she won!

In fact, apparently the phrase was originally in a poem or song about a poor and simple woman who surrendered her chastity to a richer man who had no intention of marrying her.

I shall add that I do not here feel committed to Dummett’s main point that where something is merely suggested in a statement, there can be no specific general characterization of what is suggested – although his point does hold for ‘but’.

⁶ My thanks to Romina Padró for suggesting that ‘and’ could be appropriate in this case and for giving me this example.

⁷ Note use of ‘but’ in this sentence.

Why does explicit mention of the improbability of a win change the situation as to whether ‘and’ or ‘but’ is appropriate? In the previous versions, both speaker and hearer may be well aware of the overwhelming odds against winning such a lottery, and it may be ‘common knowledge’ between them, but this does not seem to help. Why should explicit mention of the improbability make the difference? As of this writing, I am not sure.

Another basic fact about ‘but’, not recorded in conventional characterizations, is that ‘but’ is, in a sense, not commutative. Not only does it connect two clauses that, relative to certain considerations, the speaker regards as in conflict. The speaker is also suggesting that the second consideration is the most important one (or, in some cases, at least as important as the first, or importantly qualifying it).⁸

Long ago I actually read an account of a hiring meeting in an anti-Semitic classics department. One speaker said:

(5) He is an excellent classicist, but he is a Jew.

First note that, no matter what Frege thought (semantically!), the speaker does not mean that a good classicist is unlikely to be a Jew. On the contrary, the speaker may (regretfully) think that nowadays all too many good classicists are Jewish. (Nor is there any *intrinsic* contrast between being an excellent classicist and being a Jew.) Second, he is arguing against the proposed appointment, or at the very least, intending to cast important doubt on it. Had the speaker said,

(6) He is a Jew, but he is an excellent classicist,

then the speaker is still anti-Semitic, but he is much more likely to be arguing that the appointment should nevertheless be made.

Similarly, in the case of the candidate proposed to speak at Oxford, (1) as stated is *against* the invitation, or, at the very least, cautionary. However, one who reverses the clauses is more

⁸ That this point does not *always* hold is noted in some examples below.

likely to be arguing that the group should go ahead, despite the expense and effort involved, and attempt to bring him to give the lecture.

Many people, independently of Frege's particular analysis (but according with what Frege said), think of 'but' as simply adding a conventional implicature to 'and'. Whenever 'but' can be properly used, so can 'and': the latter is merely weaker. This goes along with Grice's idea of the 'detachability' of the conventional implicature associated with 'but' (1961: 129). (Probably, at least as far as this particular issue is concerned, 'and' could be regarded as the pure truth-function.) However, such a suggestion is not really the case. Consider:

(7) He is an excellent classicist, and he is a Jew.

(7) is likely to be uttered by a speaker who regards *both* considerations as favoring the appointment. It would be inappropriate for someone whose attitude is expressed by (7) to use 'but', and by using 'and' he has indicated this. In the same way, the speaker who says (5), indicates that 'and' is inappropriate. Similarly, in (1) above, replacing 'but' by 'and' is appropriate only when his presence in America for the year is somehow another argument *in favor* of the invitation (say, that the inviters will get special credit for bringing someone all the way from America). It cannot simply be detached from the 'but'. On the other hand,

(8) He is an excellent speaker, and he will be in Oxford at just the right time.

gives two considerations in favor of the invitation.⁹

Occasionally, the two clauses (with 'but') may have equal weight, certainly in a piece of writing such as a journalistic report, and even sometimes in conversation, thus:

(9) Law Professor A attaches great weight to this argument, but Professor B dismisses it.

⁹ I am not implying here that 'and' and 'but' are *always* mutually exclusive, but only that in certain cases this is so. What is important here is that we reject the idea that 'but' simply *adds* a conventional implicature to 'and'. In certain situations, they are mutually exclusive.

The writer (speaker) may not be giving greater weight to the views of one disputant over the other. Are there cases where the clause preceding the ‘but’ may be the one to which the speaker wishes to give greater weight? Consider:

- (10) There is a near scientific consensus on the great danger of human caused global warming, but Professor C dissents.

Clearly the writer or speaker has not meant to imply that the near scientific consensus is not as important as the dissenting opinion of Professor C. The ‘but’ appears to be a warning that the ‘near consensus’ of the first clause is not unanimous.

Even more strongly:

- (11) Climate scientists agree that carbon dioxide emissions are a threat to the planet, but Senator X ignores them.

Someone who writes (11) is against Senator X, not on his side, despite ‘but’ being last. And the ‘but’ here *is* commutative.^{10,11}

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¹⁰ Larry Horn has pointed out to me that linguists are well aware of the points illustrated by Dummett’s example, namely, that neither intrinsic contrast nor unexpectedness is in itself implied by ‘but’ clauses, and that a correct analysis will often predict the asymmetry of ‘but’, where the second clause is to be stressed over the first. (See Horn 2013: 151-152. I am not sure whether these authors also agree with my point that ‘but’ need not be detachable to ‘and’, as Grice assumes.) Because of these anticipations I have wondered whether to publish this note, but I continue to hear the traditional view presupposed by philosophers, and have been persuaded by several people that it is worth publishing.

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