

“It is important *but* not necessary”: Investigating *but* constructions in native vs non-native corpora

Tsi-Chuen Tsai & Hsiao-Ling Hsu
National Chengchi University, Taiwan, R.O.C.
102551505@nccu.edu.tw, heidimavishsu@gmail.com

Keywords: constructionist approach, corpus-based study, contrastive connective, academic writing, L2 learning

This paper aims to compare and contrast *but* constructions in 200 native speakers' (NS) and 200 EFL learners' (FL) argumentative writing in the International Corpus Network of Asian Learners of English. Commonly known as a contrastive connective, *but* serves as a link between words, phrases, clauses or segments of text. In terms of its semantics, though, there has been no agreement on the exact number or categorization of *but*. This study attempts to examine the issue from a constructionist point of view, which conceptualizes constructions or form-function mappings as the building blocks of language. Drawing on usage-based arguments, it is contended that the meanings of *but* may be identified both on the micro-level to involve the connective and specific lexical elements, on the macro-level to include grammatical categories and on the discourse level to reflect the theme or genre features of the writing. Moreover, it is believed that the distribution and probabilities of *but* constructions may distinguish the native and non-native use of *but*.

This study utilized the concordancer software AntConc 3.5.2w to analyze the distribution and patterns of *but* construction, which was defined in terms of the types of collocates such as nouns, adjectives, verbs or clauses that were identified to the right of *but*. From the top ten most frequent collocates of *but*, we selected items that had a high Log-likelihood score. Meanwhile, the function of *but* construction was determined by the role it played in the discourse where the construction was identified. The result shows that there is linguistic and conceptual evidence of *but* constructions in both native and learner corpora. In terms of distribution, *but* ranked 52 as one of the most frequent words used by NS next to *and*, *if*, *or*, *so*, and *because* while it was listed 33 as the second most frequent connective next to the 7th ranked *and* in FL's corpus. That is, FL relied on fewer types of connectives and used *but* far more frequently than NS in their argumentative writing.

On the micro-level, we identified *but I* and *but it* to be the most prominent in NS's corpus while FL's writing featured *but also*, *but it*, *but I*, and *but not* constructions. On the macro-level, NS used *but* most frequently to connect two independent clauses in which their *but I* construction often occurred in conjunction with verbs of cognition such as *think* or *know* or of perception like *feel* or *believe* to express their personal stance or evaluation against a possible counterargument. On the other hand, FL's *but I* or *but it* construction particularly those appeared in the sentence initial position was often used to reject a point made in the prior text or highlight the necessity of certain actions. The major distinction of FL's writing was the high occurrence of the partially filled idiomatic construction *not only*but also**, which was primarily used to strengthen the writer's debate against a point under discussion. In terms of its use by 4 proficiency levels of learners, we found that as learners progress to a higher level, their use of *but* decreases. Interestingly, structures that are not common in NS's writing such as *but also* or *but not* were most prominent in higher level learners' writing. Overall, many of the learners' *but* constructions differed from those of NS's and some of their uses remain non-native even after they have progressed to a higher level. To supplement our findings, characteristics of the use of *but* constructions in the learners' native language, Mandarin Chinese, and its influence on the learners' *but* constructions are also discussed.

References

- Ellis, N. C. (2006). Cognitive perspectives on SLA: The associative-cognitive CREED. *AILA Review*, 19(1), 100–121.
- Fraser, B. (1998). Contrastive discourse markers in English. In A. H. Jucker & Y. Ziv (Eds.), *Discourse Marker: Descriptions and theory* (pp.301-326). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Goldberg, A. E. (2006). *Constructions at Work: The Nature of Generalization in Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Granger, S. & Tyson, S. (1996). Connector usage in the English essay writing of native and non-native EFL speakers of English. *World Englishes*, 15(1), 17-27.
- Huang, S. (2013). *Chinese Grammar at Work*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.