

***But* as a multi-level objection marker:
addressing issues raised by *but*-questions**

by

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Abstract

Previous research on the English adversative marker *but* has focused on two aspects: the type of meaning it encodes, and the substance of that meaning. *But* has been analyzed variously as contributing a conventional implicature (Grice 1967) or a secondary at-issue entailment (Potts 2005) on the one hand, and as behaving as an utterance modifier (Bach 1999) or marker of procedural meaning (Blakemore 2000) on the other. *But*'s function can be divided into PA and SN functions (Anscombe & Ducrot 1977); the latter includes correction, while the former encompasses uses such as denial of expectation, argumentation, and formal contrast. Attempts at a unified analysis of *but* usually focus on accounting solely for PA-type *but* by reducing multiple usages to an underlying function, e.g. argumentation (e.g. Anscombe & Ducrot 1983) or semantic opposition (e.g. Umbach 2005), or proposing that *but* marks another rhetorical relation, such as objection (Zeevat 2012). One deficiency in much of the literature is the preponderance of data where *but* connects declarative sentences, to the exclusion of instances of *but* prefacing non-declaratives, and *but* used to begin a speaker's turn in a discourse (turn-initial *but*). The latter uses of *but* must be accounted for in a unified analysis of *but*.

This paper describes *but* used to preface questions ("*but*-questions") and resolves two challenges to a unified analysis of *but*. First, *but*-questions are not as affected as *but*-assertions would be if *but* is removed, giving the impression of there being a "functional" *but* as opposed to a "rhetorical" *but*. Second, there is an opposition between *but* that contributes propositional content in some *but*-assertions and *but* that does not, especially in *but*-questions. The solution lies in extending Zeevat's (2012) intuition that *but* is an objection (and, derivatively, adversative) marker with Lang's (2000) claim that *but* can mark adversativity on multiple levels, where the *but*-clause contrasts with some assumption retrievable from the context.

- (1) We will be watching the numbers all night (A), but what else should we be looking for in tonight's results (B)?

But in (1) seems to ease topic development. Here, *but* marks the contrast between the assumption that the speaker continues on the same topic, and the fact that the speaker asks a question, (B), on a different subtopic. However, without *but*, the change in topic occurs anyway following the question. Therefore, *but* is licensed as the contrasting assumption can be retrieved, but since the function of *but* is duplicated, it appears that this use of *but* is more rhetorical than functional.

This solves the first problem. The second problem is solved by attributing the production of propositional content not to *but* per se, but to inferential processes required to make the utterance make sense. This approach allows *but* to be treated as basically an utterance modifier.

By describing *but*-questions and addressing issues they raise for a unified analysis of *but*, this paper contributes towards a more complete understanding of the function of *but*, and also allows for a unified analysis of *but* in the future. (499 words)

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1 Introduction

Two aspects of the adversative marker *but* in English have been studied: the type of meaning it contributes to an utterance, and the substance of that meaning. In terms of the type of meaning *but* contributes to an utterance, it has been analyzed as contributing a conventional implicature (Grice 1975; Horn 2013 as “F-implicature”) or secondary at-issue entailment (Bach 1999 (“The myth of conventional implicature”), Potts 2005). *But* has also been analyzed as acting as a marker of procedural meaning (as opposed to indicative meaning), acting to comment on the utterance or manage the discourse at a higher level, as an utterance modifier (Bach 1999) or discourse marker (Blakemore 2000).

Those who discuss how to categorize *but*'s contribution often assume that there is a fundamental meaning of *but* that is obvious, for example, that it presents a contrast between the two conjuncts (Frege 1892, Grice 1975). However, many have distinguished among various uses of *but* and attempted a unified analysis of these uses. The most often cited uses of *but* include formal contrast, denial of expectation, argumentative, and correction. Analyses have been proposed in which most of these uses of *but* are derived from a common function of *but*, e.g. presenting semantic opposition between conjuncts (Umbach 2005, Jasinskaja and Zeevat 2008, 2009), functioning in argumentation (Anscombe and Ducrot 1977, 1983, Merin 1999, Winterstein 2012), or marking objection (Zeevat 2012).

This essay focuses on one gap in the literature on *but*: the use of *but* in information-seeking questions. I have chosen to focus on this for two reasons. First, almost all examples of the usage of *but* in the literature focus on declarative sentences, where *but* interacts with the asserted content. This is problematic as *but*, like other adversative connectors, can be used to conjoin different speech acts (Lang 2000), and the conjoined clauses may not have asserted content (e.g. it is an interrogative clause). Existing analyses of *but* usually employ terminology that works for declaratives, but not for other speech acts. The intuition underlying a full account of *but* must be extensible to cases where *but* conjoins different speech acts. Therefore, I have chosen to look at questions beginning with *but* (“*but*-questions”) in particular, as a representative case of *but* conjoining different speech acts.

Second, many accounts of *but* treat it as a conjunction only. While *but* very often conjoins two clauses (“connective” *but*), *but* can also be used to begin a sentence without

anything preceding it by the same speaker (“turn-initial” *but*). Turn-initial *but* has been addressed in a few discussions (Bach 1999, Zeevat 2012), but it would be worthwhile to examine it in more detail. *But* in questions may be connective or turn-initial, and turn-initial use of *but* in questions is fairly common.

In this essay, I aim to do the following: provide a preliminary taxonomy of *but*-questions and a description of *but*'s function in the different types of *but*-questions, and discuss the implications of my data for determining the type of meaning *but* contributes to an utterance and the function it has in discourse. I adopt the view that *but* is ultimately an utterance modifier that marks objection on multiple levels. By addressing some apparent problems that stand in the way of a unified analysis of *but*, I contribute to a more complete survey of the function of *but* and allow for a unified analysis of *but*-questions and *but*-assertions.

The rest of this paper will be structured as follows: Section 2 discusses in more detail the extant literature on *but*; Section 3 recapitulates the need to study *but*-questions and describes the process I used to search for examples of *but*-questions in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA); Section 4 provides a description of *but*-questions and the issues they raise for describing the function of *but*; Section 5 discusses these issues; and Section 6 concludes the essay. An appendix containing extended contexts for the *but*-questions I cite follows the bibliography.

2 Background: Treatments of *but*

Many have attempted to pin down the meaning of *but*. Larger theoretical questions are often encountered along the way, most notably regarding the proper division of content in an utterance and the way discourse works. Two questions in particular can be asked about the contribution of *but*: first, what kind of contribution is it within the utterance, and second, what is the semantic substance of the contribution? Section 2.1 addresses the first question by reviewing the notion of conventional implicature, while section 2.2 addresses the second question by summarizing recent research into *but*'s meaning.

2.1 *BUT* AS CONVENTIONAL IMPLICATURE – OR NOT

Perhaps the first attempt to pin down the contribution of a conjunction such as *but* to an utterance can be attributed to Frege (1892/1980), in his work “On Sense and Reference”. He

distinguishes between the “sense of the clause” and the contribution of the conjunction, saying that the conjunction “actually has no sense and does not change the sense of the clause but only illuminates it in a peculiar fashion”. His primary example here is *although*, but mentions in a footnote that *but* and *yet* work in a similar way. Here we see that the contribution of a conjunction such as *but* is distinct from the contribution of the clause which hosts it. Yet, that contribution is hard to pin down. In his earlier work, *Begriffsschrift* (1879), Frege cannot find an expression for the difference between *and* and *but* in his formal approach to logic; “a speaker uses ‘but’ when he wants to hint that what follows is different from what might at first be supposed” (as quoted by Horn (2013)).

Grice characterizes the notion of “implicature” in his William James Lectures, delivered in 1967 at Harvard University.¹ He, like Frege, distinguishes between what is said (the truth-conditional content) and what is implicated (non-truth-conditional content), while both fall under what is meant by the speaker. Grice is primarily concerned with *conversational* implicature, which arises from the interaction of the conversational maxims with the context of the utterance, and mentions very briefly the notion of *conventional* implicature, which arises from the conventional meaning of a word or expression. The now classic example he gives is the sentence “She was poor but she was honest”, which conveys the assertion “She was poor and she was honest”, and also the implicature that there is some contrast between her honesty and poverty. The implicature is non-cancellable, as you cannot deny the contrast right after saying the sentence. The implicature can be traced to the conventional meaning of the word *but* (as replacing *but* with *and* would avoid the implicature, making the implicature detachable).

The category of conventional implicature (henceforth CI) has been subject to much scrutiny. Karttunen and Peters (1979) affirm the existence of the category of conventional implicature. They assimilate most presuppositions to CIs by means of the logic they propose for the latter, which probably has led to the impression for many that CIs can be described like presuppositions. They also add that CIs can be backgrounded, that is, entailed by the shared knowledge in the common ground. They cannot be challenged in a direct way. In their paper, they do not discuss *but*, choosing instead to focus on words such as *too*, *either*, *also*, *even* and *only*.

¹ For reference I looked up the compilation “Studies in the Way of Words”, published in 1989.

On the other hand, Bach (1999) regards CIs as a mix of different phenomena, and argues that many alleged CIs are actually part of what is said, and they seem to be CIs because of the illusion that the propositional content associated with the CI-trigger seems irrelevant to the truth conditions of the utterance. He argues for a multidimensional semantics, where a sentence can express more than one proposition. He thereby proposes that such alleged CIs are a secondary aspect of what is said. Other alleged CIs may be utterance modifiers, which neither contribute to what is said, nor generate CIs, but rather perform “second-order speech acts”. Interestingly, he classifies *but* under both types: a given instance of *but* may either express a secondary aspect of what is said, or otherwise perform a second-order speech act. Blakemore (2000) likewise denies the existence of CIs, albeit under a different framework, that of Relevance Theory.

Potts (2005) revisits Grice’s original discussion of CIs in order to extract a description of the properties of CIs. In doing so, he introduces a new set of data that fits this description. Notably, he excludes *but* from the list. Potts claims that CIs are part of the conventional meaning of words, are speaker-oriented commitments which give rise to entailments, and are logically and compositionally independent of at-issue entailments (what is said). *But* cannot generate CIs because the CIs generated do not have the property of speaker orientation; when a sentence containing *but* is embedded (e.g. under “say” or “bet”) and attributed to another agent, the speaker is not himself conveying the CI triggered by *but*. Other Potts-CIs such as nominal appositives are speaker-oriented, e.g. when one says, “Sheila believes that Chuck, a confirmed psychopath, is fit to watch the kids,” it is the speaker and not Sheila who believes that Chuck is a confirmed psychopath. On the other hand, if one says, “Marv believes that Shaq is huge but agile,” it is Marv, not the speaker, who must believe that hugeness and agility are not compatible in some way. Therefore, Potts proposes that *but*-sentences contain primary at-issue content (the main claim of the sentence) and ancillary at-issue content (the contrast suggested by *but*); the two are both at-issue and can be targeted by the embedding verb, but are distinct from each other in prominence, with the latter being backgrounded. However, Horn (2013) objects to this “dual-said-content” analysis, on the grounds that the sentence itself can never be judged false if the backgrounded content is false; the sentence can only be inappropriate, unlike what one would expect if the backgrounded content were actually at-issue. In light of this, there remains a legitimate distinction between “what is said” (at-issue) and “what is (conventionally) implicated”.

2.2 THE MEANING(S) OF *BUT* AS AN ADVERSATIVE MARKER

The meaning of *but* consists in more than marking contrast between two conjuncts. First, however, we must distinguish between two classes of uses of *but*.

2.2.1 The PA/SN distinction

When *but* is used in English in its corrective function, *but* introduces a phrase to “correct” an explicitly denied phrase before it, as in, “John is not in London, but in Paris.” Anscombe & Ducrot (1977) distinguished between two types of adversativity, restrictive and exclusive. Some languages possess a different lexicalized adversative conjunction for each type of adversativity. For example, Spanish *pero* and German *aber* are restrictive adversative markers (after which they label the restrictive type “PA”), while Spanish *sino* and German *sondern* are exclusive adversative markers (after which they label the exclusive type “SN”). English has only one adversative conjunction, *but*, with both PA and SN functions distinguished for it. In particular, corrective *but* is an SN adversative conjunction, functioning like *sino* and *sondern*, as opposed to uses of *but* that parallel *pero* and *aber*. Corrective *but* is distinct from PA uses as it occurs in a specific syntactic environment: the part of the sentence before *but* must be explicitly negated, and the part of the sentence after *but* provides the particular phrase that is being corrected, e.g. “John is not in London, but in Paris”. In contrast, “John is not in London, but he is in Paris” is not the corrective (SN) use of *but*, especially if *is* is verbally emphasized in the second conjunct.

This distinction between the PA and SN functions of *but* is an example of polysemy, not homonymy. It can be considered analogous to the difference between free choice *any* and polarity *any*. A homonymy analysis, in which we have two words that have different meanings but the same pronunciation, is not desirable here, especially since *but* is a function word. There is a systematic relation between the two uses of *but*; it is possible for more than one meaning to coexist for one word or phrase. From this point on in the essay I will restrict my discussion to PA *but*.

2.2.2 Uses of *but*

There are a number of commonly encountered terms that name uses of PA *but*. Lakoff (1971) first distinguished between two uses of *but*, “semantic opposition” and “denial of expectation”. (“Semantic opposition” also maps onto “formal contrast”.) The notion of *but* having an “argumentative” function (Anscombe & Ducrot 1983) was later recognized. These are the PA uses of *but*. It must be noted that the different uses of *but* often overlap with each other, depending on context. Table 2.1 provides examples of these commonly recognized uses of *but*. The “corrective” (SN) use of *but* is treated as a special case in many recent proposals attempting a unified analysis of English *but*, as justified by the PA/SN distinction.

Table 2.1: Examples of commonly recognized uses of *but*

Use	Examples
Formal contrast/ Semantic opposition	This ring is beautiful, but that one isn't. John is tall, but Bill is small.
Denial of expectation	This ring is beautiful, but we won't buy it. It is raining, but we are not going to stay at home.
Argumentative	This ring is beautiful, but expensive.
Corrective	John isn't going to Paris, but to Berlin.

In the case of formal contrast, something in the second conjunct semantically contrasts with something in the first conjunct (e.g. beautiful vs. not beautiful, tall vs. small). Denial of expectation arises when the second conjunct is at odds with an expectation implied by the first clause (e.g. we will stay not at home, even though it is raining and therefore we would normally want to stay at home). In the argumentative use, the second conjunct provides a stronger argument against an implied proposal than the first conjunct argues for it. Corrective *but* is used to preface a correction to a previously explicitly negated phrase.²

² The following exchange is difficult to fit into the listed categories:

A: Chris is tall and Lee is short.

B: No, Chris is tall but Lee is tall (too).

But does not seem to be marking semantic contrast between the propositional content of the clauses, and also does not seem to be marking that the *but*-host is denying an expectation arising from the clause preceding *but*. What is

2.2.3 Approaches to the meaning of *but*

Is there a core meaning of PA-type *but*, from which all its uses can be derived? Some consider the argumentative properties of *but* to be fundamental (Anscombe and Ducrot, 1977, Merin, 1999, Winterstein 2012). Consider a sentence, “*P but Q*”. *P* argues for something (what Winterstein calls a “pivot inference” (2012)), while *Q* reverses the direction of the argument and constitutes a stronger argument *against* the pivot. This is in contrast to “*P and Q*”, where the direction of the argument is not reversed by the additive *and*.

Others consider the core meaning of *but* to be its marking of semantic opposition between the conjuncts (Saebø 2004, Umbach 2005, Jasinskaja and Zeevat 2008, 2009). Such accounts posit that an implicit (or explicit) question is being answered by the *but*-conjunction. The first conjunct affirms something and the second conjunct denies something, giving rise to the sense of semantic opposition. For example, if a discourse topic, such as “the height of John and Bill”, were formulated as a question, “Are John and Bill tall?” an acceptable response would be “[Yes,] John is tall but [no,] Bill is small”.

The argumentative approach and formal contrast approach are combined by Jasinskaja (2012) in order to account for corrective uses of *but*. Nevertheless, she still considers formal contrast the more fundamental use of *but*. There are others who consider its use to deny expectation as basic, such as Blakemore (2002). She regards *but* as encoding procedural meaning. In particular, the *but*-clause contradicts and eliminates an assumption in the context (i.e. denies an expectation); she assimilates contrast *but* to this. For example, if one says “John is tall but Bill is short”, it could be the case the one would expect (in context) that John’s height implies that Bill should be tall too (e.g. they are brothers). (However, Blakemore (1989) treats contrast *but* differently.) There are also those who take a completely different approach, for example Izutsu

happening, then? Speaker B is correcting speaker A (not in the SN sense) by affirming that yes, Chris is tall, but no, Lee is not short, in fact, Lee is tall. One can readily apply Zeevat’s (2012) analysis where he characterizes *but* as marking “objection”, which at one point he describes as pointing out something wrong with a “proposal” while at the same time acknowledging other things may be right about it (the affirm+deny condition). (His use of “objection” and “proposal” are technically specified and may not correspond to the general usage of these terms – see section 5.1.) That *but* here precedes what can be called an objection is illustrated by taking away the clause preceding *but*:

A: Chris is tall and Lee is short.

B: But Lee is tall (too). [Implicitly agreeing that Chris is tall, but objecting to the statement that Lee is short.]

(2008), who proposes that there are different *but*s arising from different syntactic processes, with each function of *but* requiring a distinct account.

Instead of reducing the functions of *but* to a certain use of *but*, Zeevat (2012) attempts a unified account by suggesting that *but*-clauses function to mark the rhetorical relation of objection; that is, they show that the speaker is objecting to a proposal given in the context³. He proposes that *but* is an objection marker that has partially grammaticalized into a correction marker and a formal contrast marker, thereby covering all known uses, while not insisting that SN *but* and PA *but* are exactly the same. He attempts to show that other approaches to *but*, such as the formal contrast and argumentative approach, are reducible to his objection approach; as such, his proposal has one of the stronger claims to being the most comprehensive treatment of the function of *but*, and I will discuss his proposal in section 5.1, extending it with the multi-level approach of Lang (2000).

3 An overlooked set of data: *but*-questions

3.1 THE PLACE OF *BUT*-QUESTIONS IN THE LITERATURE

Although the role of *but* connecting declarative clauses is widely studied, the role of *but* in questions is underdescribed in recent literature. Some authors intentionally work with a restricted data set; for example, Umbach (2005) explicitly confines her discussion to what she calls “yes... *but* no... sequences”, where the *but*-sentence responds to a question affirmatively in the first clause and negatively in the second. However, many authors do not intentionally restrict their data set, but nevertheless somehow default to working with *but* connecting declaratives.

Questions starting with *but* do exist, nevertheless, and the function of *but* in questions needs to be further studied. Some have noticed the problems posed by *but*-questions. Blakemore (2000, 2002), in refuting Rieber’s (1997) assumption that *but* conjoins propositions where conjuncts contrast, points out that *but* can be used to “conjoin” different types of speech act, for example, “I know that this bus goes to town, but does it go to Piccadilly Gardens?” She further

³ Zeevat’s (2012) objection analysis of *but* appears to echo Bach’s (1999) intuition that “sentence-initial ‘but’ is generally the ‘but’ of rebuttal, used to introduce a reason or evidence against something previously asserted”. However, while Bach distinguishes between a use of *but* that contributes to propositional content at the sentential level (the *but* of contrast) and another use of *but* that acts as an utterance modifier (the *but* of rebuttal), Zeevat derives all uses of *but* from the objection use, and does not distinguish between levels of usage of *but*.

points out that *but* can be used discourse-initially. Lang (2000) points out a similar case, and discusses the notion that adversative connectors can function on different levels of discourse, i.e. when the two conjuncts are different speech acts, the adversative connector is interpreted on a speech act level. However, they do not discuss *but*-questions in particular detail.

3.2 WHY WE NEED TO STUDY *BUT*-QUESTIONS

But why should we study *but*-questions at all? The challenge lies in the fact that much of the discussion of *but* assumes that *but* connects declaratives, and this makes it difficult to assimilate existing analyses of *but* to *but*-questions. For example, if *but* is used to signal objection to a previous proposal under discussion (Zeevat 2012), the *but*-host is read as arguing against the implied reason for the proposal. However, an information-seeking question does not constitute an argument in and of itself, so *but*-questions need to be analyzed at a different level, beyond the propositional content of the *but*-clause. A similar difficulty is posed by the view that two clauses conjoined by *but* are supposed to be distinct answers to one (implicit) question under discussion (Umbach 2005, Jasinskaja and Zeevat 2008); it would be impossible to have an information-seeking question as one of the clauses, since it would not be an answer to the question. Therefore, we need to at least demonstrate that the intuition, if not the implementation, of such analyses can be extended to account for *but*-questions.

3.3 LOOKING FOR *BUT*-QUESTIONS IN THE CORPUS OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ENGLISH

To obtain a sample of *but*-questions, I searched the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), which contains 450 million words from 1990-2012 across a variety of media. Since this corpus is contemporary and restricted to American English, it was more likely that the search results would represent fairly consistent and common uses of *but*. In addition, I would be able to consult American English-speaking peers if in doubt about the nuances of the context. I chose to focus on the spoken sub-corpus to obtain dialogue in which questions would occur naturally, as sentences beginning with *but* are more common colloquially than in formal written language. When using COCA, searching for strings returns results that can be clicked through to reveal the date, title and source of the result, as well as the expanded context. For the spoken sub-corpus, punctuation is given, and speakers are identified or at least distinguished where possible.

I concerned myself with looking for two types of questions: yes-no questions and wh-questions. The syntactic features of these types of questions in English could be used to filter out irrelevant results: yes-no questions feature do-support (“Do you need an umbrella?”) or subject-auxiliary inversion (“Should I go?”), while wh-questions begin with a wh-word and a verb (usually auxiliary). The general pattern of the beginning of a *but*-question would therefore be “but (*wh*-word) *verb*”.⁴

In light of this, I searched for the strings listed in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Search strings for *but*-questions in COCA

Search string	Searches for	Sample sentence
but wh* [v*]	but <i>wh-word verb</i>	She may end up testifying about that. But what are your thoughts?
but how [v*]	but how <i>verb</i>	A: But then we discovered the brain is where the problem starts. B: But how does that help you treat it, then?
but [v*]	but <i>verb</i>	I know you’re studying for your test, but could you read me a story?

The search results were arranged by context, grouping results together by the verb (and wh-word), and arranging them in decreasing order of frequency. This allowed me to visually scan through the grouped results to identify strings that appeared to be the beginning of *but*-questions. While using the search strings above still returned a few non-question results, there were fewer non-question results than when in an earlier stage of data collection I looked solely for “but wh*”.

The *but*-questions collected from the corpus search are used as examples in this paper. A full listing of all the examples with their provenance can be found in the appendix. At times these

⁴ I did not include declarative questions in my search (e.g. “You need an umbrella?”), mostly because they are difficult to distinguish from declarative sentences in a corpus search. I also focused on *but*-questions that seemed to be sincerely information-seeking, as rhetorical questions can be used to effectively assert something.

examples will be simplified or modified for clarity. Examples taken from a source other than COCA will be noted accordingly.

4 A description of *but*-questions

4.1 CATEGORIES AND EXAMPLES

In this section, I will present my preliminary categorization of *but*-questions, give examples of each type (§4.1.1-§4.1.4), discuss the distinctions I make between categories (§4.2-§4.4), and then summarize the issues raised by *but*-questions (§4.5). The categories are given in Table 4.1 below. In the examples given, the relevant *but*-question is underlined.

Table 4.1: Categories of *but*-questions

Variable	Type			
	I	II	III	IV
Discourse context	Turn-initial (But <i>Qn</i>)		Connective (<i>P</i> , but <i>Qn</i>)	
Function	Challenge	Ease topic development		RCBP ⁵
Optionality	Optional: does not affect pragmatic felicity			Obligatory

4.1.1 Type I: “Challenging” *but*-questions

The following examples illustrate *but*-questions that seem to convey that the speaker is challenging or objecting to something that his interlocutor said.

(4.1) A: Are you worried you're going to relapse?

B: No.

A: Why?

B: Because I'm not going to, period, the end.

A: But how do you know?

B: I blinked and – I blinked and I cured my brain.

⁵ RCBP: Response-controlling *but*-preface (after Baker 1975). I return to this in section 4.1.4.

In (4.1), A seems doubtful of B's statement that B is simply not going to relapse. It appears that A is not satisfied by B's last explanation ("Because I'm not going to") and challenges it by asking for more information.

- (4.2) A: When are we going to see a detailed plan of this thing?
 B: I guess I have to explain that this doesn't happen overnight.
 A: Right.
 B: What happens is, you build support for the idea –
 A: (Interrupting) But when are we going to see the plan?
 B: (Crosstalk, ignoring A) The president has articulated the features. He's specified the dollar amount, when it would kick in...

In (4.2), A asks a question, which B attempts to answer in a roundabout way. Apparently unsatisfied with B's attempt, A repeats the same question, this time with *but* added to it, thereby challenging B's answer.

- (4.3) Mrs. Higgins: Quite so. I know all about that: it's an excellent arrangement. But where does this girl live?
 Higgins: With us, of course. Where would she live?
 Mrs. Higgins: But on what terms? Is she a servant? If not, what is she?

(*Pygmalion* Act III, George Bernard Shaw)

In (4.3), there are two *but*-questions: one connective and one turn-initial. We are concerned with the second, turn-initial *but*-question. (The connective one is an example of type III.) Mrs. Higgins appears to be uncomfortable with Higgins's proposal that Eliza stay with him and Pickering (see the script of the play for context). The *but*-question conveys her objection: she does not completely accept Higgins's proposal, but does not completely reject it, either.⁶

⁶ This is in line with Zeevat's (2012) characterization of an objection: indicating that something is wrong with a proposal, while accepting that other things may be right about it at the same time. This contributes to the sense of provisional acceptance of the proposal under objection. This will be discussed in greater detail in section 5.1.

4.1.2 Type II: *But*-questions that ease topic development (turn-initial)

Unlike Type I *but*-questions, Type II *but*-questions do not convey any doubt on the part of the speaker regarding what the interlocutor said. Questions that seek more information on something related to the discourse topic can also be prefaced by *but*; the use of *but* does not always reflect doubt on the speaker's part.

(4.4) A: Nik Wallenda successfully crossed Niagara Falls. Pretty fantastic. First person to do that.

B: But why? Why did he cross Niagara Falls?

A: To get to the other side.

In (4.4), the fact that Nik Wallenda successfully crossed Niagara Falls is a statement that B also accepts. By asking a question, he is seeking more information.

(4.5) A: But, you know, I think real cougars⁷ is just one part of a two-part story, because the real cougars – because they're such a force in changing the way people look at everything – that it's really going to affect the boomer men. And I think that's going to be an exciting story.

B: But where do the cougars get their confidence? (...)

C: It's self-love.

Likewise, in (4.4), B is not clearly objecting or challenging something that A said. Rather, B wishes to hear more about cougars.

4.1.3 Type III: *But*-questions that ease topic development (connective)

The function of Type II *but*-questions is apparently available in connective form as well. A person may say something about the discourse topic, and then ask for more information about the topic from an interlocutor by using a *but*-question.

⁷ This refers not to the large cat, but to women who seek romantic relationships with men significantly younger than themselves.

- (4.6) Christina, what else? Obviously, we are looking at the numbers. We will be watching for the numbers all night, but what else should we be looking at in tonight's results?
- (4.7) I mean, Johnny Otis, who had a now-famous rhythm and blues touring revue, got you into the show. He discovered you. But how did you audition for him? How did you find him, or he find you?

4.1.4 Type IV: Response-controlling *but*-questions

These questions are infelicitous in their respective contexts if *but* is absent, unless a postponed “though” is added at the end. This appears to be because the act of questioning (with the *but*-question) is incompatible with a likely inference from the first conjunct. The speaker signals with *but* that she knows that there is an apparent conflict between the implications of the first conjunct and the question; by doing so, she preempts the addressee’s criticism. Such questions are a subset of what Baker (1975) calls “response-controlling *but*-prefaces” (RCBPs).

- (4.8) I believe you and everything, but how do I know you're in Nigeria right now? How do I know that?
- (4.9) Why are you yelling at her? Why are you calling her an idiot? And I'm sorry. I know it's not my business, but what are you doing? She is a little girl. How old are you?

RCBPs usually signal that the speaker is violating a cultural or conversational norm. For example, if a person says, “Forgive me, but...”, this usually indicates that the speaker is aware that he is about to say something that could go over badly. Likewise, in RCBP questions, the speaker indicates that she is aware that the question is somehow inappropriate; by referring to the possible objection (“You shouldn’t ask me this if you believe me”; “It’s none of your business”), the speaker preempts criticism. The use of *but* in RCBP questions is appropriate as the first clause, acting as the disclaimer, inadvertently highlights the a cultural or conversational

norm that is about to be violated, and so the second clause can be marked by *but* to reflect that the *but*-question denies the expectation arising from this norm. In a broad sense, then, RCBP questions deny some sort of expectation.

In the following sections, I elaborate on the distinctions made between the different types of *but*-questions listed in Table 4.1.

4.2 CONTEXTUAL DISTINCTION: TURN-INITIAL VS. CONNECTIVE *BUT*

In my description of *but*-questions, I distinguish between turn-initial and connective *but*. Connective *but* refers to when *but* occurs in the context “*P* but *Q*”, where *P* and *Q* stand for any clause, and where the same speaker says *P* and *Q*. One may also call this “monological *but*”, as the same person says both the *but*-clause and the clause immediately preceding *but*. Turn-initial *but* refers to when *but* occurs in the context “But *P*”, where the speaker uses *but* to begin his turn in the discourse. If there is something preceding the *but*-clause, it is spoken by a different speaker. One may also call this “dialogal *but*”.

This distinction between turn-initial and connective *but* is important as there are functions of *but* not shared by both turn-initial and connective *but*. For example, as observed by Zeevat (2012) and Bach (1999), turn-initial *but* has the function of objection or rebuttal, when used in response to someone else’s statement.⁸ Moreover, RCBPs are possible with connective *but*, but not with turn-initial *but*. For example, one may say, “Forgive me, but that is an unacceptable insult,” but one can hardly use turn-initial *but* to convey the same thing; just

⁸ One may argue that turn-initial *but* can be rephrased as connective *but* in the following way:

A: Nik Wallenda successfully crossed Niagara Falls.

B: But why?

= B: Yes, but why? (Implicit agreement with A’s statement)

= B: Nik Wallenda successfully crossed Niagara Falls, but why?

In the case where *but* is not used in objecting to a statement, the connective/turn-initial versions are equivalent.

However, if *but* is used in a way intended to challenge the interlocutor without acknowledging anything right about what the interlocutor said, the speaker is not indicating commitment to the interlocutor’s statement, and the equivalence does not hold.

A: I’m not going to relapse.

B: But how do you know?

≠ B: You’re not going to relapse, but how do you know?

although ≈ B: Sure/perhaps/maybe so, but how do you know?

The speaker can be said to be objecting to the interlocutor’s statement, and is not committing fully to the statement. Since turn-initial *but* cannot be rephrased as connective *but* here, I would argue that turn-initial and connective *but* cannot be equivalent in every respect.

saying, “But that is an unacceptable insult,” is merely an objection unmitigated by any disclaimer for politeness’s sake. Adding the disclaimer *after* a turn-initial *but*-clause is even more removed from the point of an RCBP (e.g. “But that is an unacceptable insult. Forgive me.”), and certainly the interlocutor cannot say the disclaimer on behalf of the person using the *but*-clause. A response-controlling *but*-preface occurs in a sentence of the form “*P*, but *Q*”, where *P* is a comment on the utterance of *Q*, *P* being a possible objection to the speaker uttering *Q*. By prefacing the *Q* with *P*, the speaker acknowledges the possible objection and makes it inappropriate for the hearer to respond with that same objection. Clearly, such a function of *but* can only work if *P* and *Q* are both said by the same speaker, using connective *but* to connect them.⁹

4.3 FUNCTIONAL DISTINCTIONS: CHALLENGING, DENIAL OF EXPECTATION, AND EASING TOPIC DEVELOPMENT

A *but*-question may challenge (by raising an “objection” in the form of a question), deny expectations (in being an RCBP), or ease topic development. The first two categories may be assimilated into many extant analyses of *but*, with objection under Zeevat’s (2012) rubric and Bach’s (1999) characterization of turn-initial *but*, and denial of expectation under any analysis acknowledging this function of *but*. The third category, easing topic development, is not one often discussed in the literature. Before commenting on this latter category, I would like to address one possible objection to the distinction between *but*-questions that challenge and *but*-questions that deny expectations.

Based on the examples of RCBPs given above, one might think that the *but*-question in fact objects to something that the interlocutor said or did which is salient in the context, instead of *but* marking incompatibility between the question and the implications of the clause, uttered by the speaker of *but*, immediately preceding the question. However, I maintain that while the content of the question may well serve as an objection, *but* in RCBPs do mark a relation between

⁹ Under dialogal/turn-initial contexts I would include discourse-initial *but*, as such uses of *but* are definitely turn-initial in that the speaker starts his turn with *but*. It may even be said to be dialogal in that the speaker is responding to an implicit but contextually salient “point” that he wishes to address. For example, someone may encounter frigid weather at a normally warm time of year and exclaim, “But it’s March!” *But* here seems to mark denial of expectation. (Example from discussion with Larry Horn.)

the *but*-question and the implications of the clause immediately preceding it, not something else. This is demonstrated in (4.9') below, compared to (4.9).

- (4.9) Why are you yelling at her? Why are you calling her an idiot? And I'm sorry, I know it's not my business, but what are you doing?
- (4.9') Why are you yelling at her? Why are you calling her an idiot? And I'm sorry, I know it's not my business. #What are you doing?

The question, while following a line of questions that challenge the interlocutor's behavior, cannot be asked after the statement "I know it's not my business" without the use of *but*, showing that the use of *but* is "elicited" by the presence of that statement, and not by the act of objecting.

Now, to return to the third category: if there is a scale of how "meaningful" *but* is in its various functions, the third category of *but* may be the least "meaningful" *but* there is. *But*, when implicating a contrast or tension between conjuncts (where *but* can be seen as "and-plus"), adds some meaning that can be stated as a proposition. This is the case in saying, "She is poor but she is honest": She is poor and she is honest, and there is (I imply) a contrast between her poverty and honesty. This tension or contrast cannot be so easily found when *but* acts to ease topic development. I say that *but* "eases topic development" because moving immediately to the question without *but* can sound a little abrupt, compared to when *but* (or *though*) is present.

- (4.7) He discovered you. (But) how did you audition for him?

In (4.7), there is no contrast or incompatibility, actual or asserted or implicated, between the fact that Johnny Otis discovered the interlocutor, and the question of how the interlocutor auditioned for him, at least not at the propositional content level. If one wishes to analyze this along the lines of *but* marking contrast or tension, one may propose that there is a higher-level contrast. Uryson (2006), in discussing the Russian conjunctions *a* and *no*, which can both be translated as *but*, describes uses of these conjunctions in marking what she calls a "narrative turn" (*povorot povestvovanija*), by which the discourse topic is diverted. She extends a denial-of-expectation analysis to these cases in the following way: for her, "expectation" includes not just the inferences

that can be made from the first conjunct, but also the mental state evoked by the situation described in the first conjunct, namely, the “readiness” of the listener to hear something along similar lines. When a “narrative turn” is taken with the help of *a* or *no*, the conjunction indicates that what is about to be said is not what the speaker thinks the listener was expecting. One could also say that there is a tension between what (the speaker assumes) the listener expects and what the speaker says. This is another way of looking at what is happening with *but* when it eases topic development. It is a multilevel approach in the sense that it goes beyond relating adjacent conjuncts to each other; it relates the *but*-clause to any relevant expectation or assumption in the context.

4.4 OPTIONALITY DISTINCTION: OPTIONAL VS. OBLIGATORY USE OF *BUT*

Another distinction that can be made between different uses of *but* in questions is whether the presence of *but* is optional for felicity. In Types I, II and III, the utterance is still felicitous if *but* is replaced by *and* (although the nuance conveyed may be different); in Type IV, the utterance is not felicitous if *but* is replaced by *and*, as there is an inherent contradiction between the question and the implications of the clause preceding the question. When *but* is optional for pragmatic felicity, we need to ask what allows *but* to be used; when *but* is necessary for felicity, we need to ask what *but* does that allows two otherwise contradictory clauses to be uttered by the same person.

The latter question is probably easier to answer. In an RCBP question “*P*, but *Qn*”, (*Qn* = interrogative clause) *but* marks *Qn* as denying a general cultural/conversational expectation. This cultural/conversational expectation is made salient by *P*, and in the normal course of conversation, the interlocutor would expect that the norm not be violated. However, *but* indicates that the norm is, in fact, being violated, contrary to expectation. (It is somewhat analogous to cancelling a conversational implicature.) Without *but*, there is no indication of any denial of expectation, and so the expectation made salient by *P* is not “cancelled”, and utterance of *Qn* appears to be contradictory.

As for the cases when *but* is optional for felicity, we need to first consider uses of *but* in connecting declaratives.

(4.10M) She wanted me to buy a ring. The ring was beautiful, but expensive. So I didn't get it.

(4.10'M) She wanted me to buy a ring. The ring was beautiful and expensive. So I saved up for it.

Both the underlined sentences are perfectly felicitous by themselves. However, they serve different functions in context. (4.10M) is an example of the argumentative use of *but*, where the first conjunct argues for something (e.g. buying the ring) and the second conjunct argues against it. That *but* contributes this effect is seen by comparison with (4.10'M), which has *and* connecting the conjuncts instead. In this latter case, if the ring being beautiful is an argument for buying the ring, then the cost of the ring does not negatively affect (and may even contribute to) the argument. In (4.10'M), both conjuncts must argue for the same proposal, if the sentence has an argumentative function. It is clear here that the presence of *but* matters for what the speaker wants to do by uttering the sentence, regardless of whether *but* contributes propositional meaning. The presence of *but* alters the way the individual conjuncts are interpreted in light of conversational goals.

Unlike the example given above, *but*-questions with optional *but* do not always differ obviously from their *but*-less counterparts. Consider the Type I *but*-questions, (4.1M) and (4.3M), modified for simplicity:

(4.1M) A: I'm not going to relapse.

B: (But) how do you know?

(4.3M) Higgins: She lives with us, of course. Where else would she live?

Mrs. Higgins: (But) on what terms?

With or without *but*, the questions can be interpreted as challenges or hesitation to accept the statement of the interlocutor. Likewise, Type II and Type III *but*-questions are not very affected by the removal of *but*:

(4.5M) A: Nik Wallenda successfully crossed Niagara Falls.

B: (But) why?

Where *but* is optional in this way, as opposed to the way illustrated in (4.10'), *but* appears to be somehow allowed but not necessary.

The difference between (4.10) on the one hand and (4.1M), (4.3M) and (4.5M) on the other can be illustrated by the availability of other adversative markers for communicating the same thing. “The ring is beautiful, but expensive,” can be rephrased as, “The ring is beautiful; however/nevertheless/on the other hand, it is expensive (and so we should not buy it)”. However, the use of *however*, *nevertheless* or *on the other hand* for Types I, II and III change the nuance of the sentence too much. If one had to substitute something for *but* in these cases, *though* would work: “How do you know, though?” *Though* conveys just as little as *but* in these cases, giving just the merest suggestion of some contrast or tension at some level, without affecting the function of the utterance.

4.5 SUMMARY OF ISSUES RAISED

In this section, we surveyed a sample of *but*-questions. We found that they can be described from several angles: whether they are turn-initial or connective, what function the *but*-question serves, and whether the presence of *but* is optional for felicity.

The turn-initial/connective distinction confirms the value of distinguishing between these two contexts in analyzing *but*, as some functions of *but* are possible in one context and not the other. The functions of *but*-questions include challenging/objection, denial of expectation/RCBP, and easing topic development. Of these functions, the last has no satisfactory treatment in current literature on English *but*, and needs to be explained or at least assimilated to a current theory of *but*. It is possible to treat it according to Uryson’s (2006) expanded concept of denial of expectation, where *but* is functioning at a level higher than the propositional content level. The bigger issue reflected in the existence of “topic development” *but* is the question of whether one should distinguish between *but* that contributes salient propositional content (found in some declarative clauses and not at all in questions), and *but* that does not.

The optionality of *but*-questions is a problem for Types I, II and III. *But* is obligatory for Type IV *but*-questions in order for the question to be felicitous, and this can be explained. However, *but* is not obligatory for felicity for Types I, II and III. Moreover, the absence of *but* may not even have a large impact on the function of the *but*-question, unlike instances of declarative *but*, where the absence of *but* changes the interpretation of the sentence. It seems as if there is a functional *but*, the removal of which drastically changes the point of the utterance, and also a rhetorical *but*, the removal of which does not change the point of the utterance much, if at all. This variability in the importance or contribution of *but* must also be accounted for in the analysis.

5 An analysis of the issues raised by *but*-questions

In Section 4, I provided a preliminary categorization of *but*-questions and tried to motivate the distinctions I made between different types of *but*-questions. In the process of doing so, I highlighted two issues: the spectrum of how significant or substantial *but*'s contribution is, and the problem of accounting for the use of *but*-questions to ease topic development, as part of a larger question of whether the use of *but* contributes propositional content. In this section, I attempt an analysis of these problems, keeping in mind that both *but*-assertions and *but*-questions should have a unified analysis.

Two ideas underlie my analysis. First, the burden of producing propositional content lies on the interaction of the common ground with the interlocutors' expectations, and not on *but*. *But* merely marks objection¹⁰ or adversativity, and the production of a salient proposition (as a CI, for example) is a side effect. Therefore, Bach's (1999) distinction between *but* which produces propositional content and merely utterance-marking *but* is not a distinction between two essentially different types of *but*.

The second idea is that *but* is allowed whenever objection or adversative marking can be done, at any level: the propositional content level, epistemic level, speech act level, or beyond. Yet, the more divorced the objection is from the content of the assertions or inferences that can

¹⁰ *But* could just as well mark denial of expectation, contrast, or, most vaguely, some sort of tension or incompatibility – anything that goes under the umbrella of “adversativity”. From this point on, I will use Zeevat's (2012) formulation of objection marking for consistency in discussion. See Section 5.1 for a summary of his proposal.

be made from them, i.e., the more dependent on non-semantic reasoning the objection is, the less the presence or absence of *but* affects the conversational effect of the utterance, since the objection can be derived without the help of an objection marker anyway. This accounts for the optionality and, at the same time, the availability of *but* for easing topic transition.

As I explain these ideas, I will adopt Zeevat's (2012) intuition that *but* is an objection marker, as he is able to assimilate other theories to his proposal. Additionally, I will adopt Lang's (2000) proposal that *but* marks adversativity on multiple levels of discourse. By working with their proposals, I hope to show that at least some extant treatments of *but* can be adapted to address the issues raised by *but*-questions.

The rest of Section 5 will be structured as follows. Section 5.1 summarizes Zeevat's (2012) proposal, which targets *but* preceding or conjoining declaratives, and Lang's (2000) approach to *but* as a multi-level adversative marker, combining the intuitions from the two in order to apply them to the current analysis. Section 5.2 addresses the derivation of the use of *but* that appears to contribute propositional content. Section 5.3 discusses the multi-level approach to *but* for explaining its optionality and availability in easing topic transition.

5.1 ZEEVAT (2012) AND LANG (2000)

Zeevat's key claims are as follows: adversative conjunctions such as *but* primarily mark the rhetorical relation of objection. Through the use of *but*, the speaker marks his objection to a proposal that is contextually given. The proposal may be explicitly stated, or otherwise derived.

His starting point is the turn-initial use of *but*. He observes that "butting", in the turn-initial case, is not correcting, refusing, or denying, but something weaker. To a proposal to do something (e.g. "Let's go out"), it gives a counterargument (e.g. "It's raining"). An assertion can be seen as a proposal to the hearer to believe something.¹¹ "Objections" only indicate that there is something wrong with the proposal, although it may be right in other ways.

¹¹ I suspect that Zeevat's terminology is a little loose here, since a speaker asserting that *p* is an attempt to get the hearer to believe that the speaker believes *p*, not to get the hearer to believe that *p*. The hearer's *but* is not an objection to the speaker's sincerity in asserting *p*. Perhaps *but* expresses the hearer's reluctance to add *p* to the common ground, while not challenging its being added to speaker-only commitments.

The turn-initial (objection) use of *but* with a declarative, in case *P* is a proposal, can be formulated in the following way. (Zeevat chooses to express this using a combination of presupposition and assertion.)

(5.1) *but A*

Presupposition: a given proposal *P* such that *P* is only a good proposal if *C* and *A* argues for *not-C*

Assertion: *A* and let's not *P*

In case *P* is an assertion,

(5.2) *but A*

Presupposition: a given assertion *P* such that *P* is only true if *C*, and *A* argues for *not-C*.

Assertion: *A* and *not-P*

In Zeevat's view, correction marking is not a type of adversative marking, due to the PA/SN distinction; rather, adversative *but* is semantically similar enough to correction *but* that in English we happen to use the same word to mark both functions. Correction marker *but* can mark the denial of the full assertion instead of denying only a part of the proposal or assertion. Here is his formulation of the correction use of *but*:

(5.3) *not P but A*

Presupposition: a given assertion *P* and a shared topic question *Q* for *P* and *A*

Assertion: *not P* and *A*

He then formulates the connective (adversative) use of *but*, in case *P* is a proposal, as follows:

(5.4) *A but B*

Presupposition: a given or reconstructable proposal *P* such that *P* is only a good proposal if *C* and *B* argues for *not-C* and if *B* were not the case, *A* would make *P* a good proposal

Assertion: *A*, *B*, and *P* is not a good proposal

In case *P* is an assertion,

(5.5) *A* but *B*

Presupposition: a given or reconstructable assertion *P* such that *P* is only true if *C* and *B* argues for *not-C* and if *B* were false, *A* would be sufficient evidence for *P*

Assertion: *A*, *B*, and *not P*

Note that we cannot reduce correction use to adversative use, as the first conjunct is completely denied in correction, but in the adversative use, the first conjunct gives the part of the proposal that the speaker agrees with.

The adversative use, which encompasses the formal contrast, denial of expectation, and argumentative uses, builds on the character of *but* as an objection marker. The objection makes reference to the part of the proposal that is undesirable, in the opinion of the person objecting. In the adversative use, the objection (*but*-clause) is combined with support for the remaining part of the proposal under objection (the first conjunct before the *but*-clause). Including this partial confirmation is polite: objection is combined with maximal agreement. The rhetorical effect of conceding one point while objecting to another also makes the objection or argument stronger.

Lang (2000) refines Sweetser's (1990) three-level approach to adversative connectors. The intuition behind Sweetser's approach is that the interpretation of a sentence with adversative connectors depends on the level on which the conjuncts are relating to each other. The adversative connector could mark contrast (or, more loosely, some sort of tension) between the propositional content of two assertions; it could mark contrast between the epistemic status of the conjuncts; it could also mark contrast between the *but*-clause and inferences drawn from the speech act performed by uttering the first clause, when it is not possible to draw a contrast at the content level. Sweetser's three levels are, accordingly, the content, epistemic and speech act levels.

Lang adds an overarching perspective that permeates all levels, something he calls "discourse perspective". He observes that interpreting an adversative conjunction requires relating the conjoined clauses to an "assumption" which has to be inferred outside of the

conjunction, if it is not available explicitly. Based on this, he posits that adversative connectors “contain pointers to previous information available from the context”, and therefore they “necessarily involve some back-tracking that may well go beyond the domain of sentence structure and operate on the level of (what may be called) the level of ‘textual progression’ or ‘discourse perspective’”.

Accordingly, he describes the semantic contribution of connective *but* in the following way: it (a) conjoins semantically compatible and non-inclusive propositions and (b) indicates that the second clause’s assertion contrasts with an assumption that is either read off or inferred from previous information.

Keeping in mind that Lang recognizes that *but* can connect different speech acts, it is a little strange that he explicitly mentions propositions and assertions in his description of *but*. Nevertheless, we can loosen his description to accommodate this fact: one can say that connective *but* (a) conjoins two clauses and (b) indicates that the *but*-clause contrasts on some level (propositional content, epistemic, speech act) with an assumption that is read off or inferred from previous information.

While his terminology assumes that *but* is connective, and not turn-initial, his proposal can accommodate turn-initial *but*. To describe turn-initial *but*, we can drop condition (a), which stipulates that *but* conjoins two clauses, and preserve condition (b), that the *but*-clause contrasts with an assumption derived from previous information. Since Lang recognizes the existence of “discourse perspective”, this “previous information” is not necessarily from the clause immediately preceding the *but*-clause. So, *but* can be used to mark contrast with any relevant assumption, although this assumption often relates to immediately preceding information.

Lang uses the terminology of “source-target relation” to describe the relationship between the *but*-clause and the assumption it contrasts with. The *but*-clause is the “source” that triggers the search for a “target” assumption that appropriately contrasts (or is in tension) with it. The assumption could be an abductive inference from the first conjunct, if the *but* is connective and being interpreted on the content level, or it could be some other relevant contextual assumption not related to the first conjunct in content.

In summary, this is what I adopt from Zeevat’s and Lang’s proposals: *But* can be turn-initial or connective. *But* marks an objection relation or, derivatively, an adversative relation

between the *but*-clause and an assumption that can be retrieved from the context. The objection or adversativity can hold at the content, epistemic or speech act level, or beyond, in terms of discourse perspective.

5.2 EXPLAINING THE SPECTRUM OF HOW MEANINGFUL *BUT* CAN BE: DERIVING “AND-PLUS” *BUT*

It seems as if declarative, connective *but* falls into two categories: “and-plus” *but*, where, in addition to the two conjuncts being asserted, a contrast is suggested between the contents of the two conjuncts, and “discourse-marking” *but*, which tells us how to interpret the relationship of the conjuncts to each other, but without adding propositional content. The classic example of the first is Grice’s example, “She is poor but she is honest”. It is usually seen as asserting that the person in question is both poor and honest, while implicating (or also asserting) that there is a contrast between her poverty and honesty. This contrast is traceable to the presence of *but*, as saying “She is poor *and* she is honest” does not suggest this. This suggests that *but* here is a kind of enhanced *and*, “and-plus”.

However, we need to fine-tune what counts as implicating or asserting a “contrast” in the relevant sense. Consider the following:

(5.6) Tim is short, but Bob is tall.

Here we have semantic opposition inherent in the two conjuncts. Are we then to say that in saying (5.6), we mean to assert that Tim is short and Bob is tall, and additionally implicate or assert that there is a contrast between Tim’s shortness and Bob’s tallness? Assuming that the hearer shares the assumption that shortness and tallness are opposites, the sentence without *but*, in (5.7), already presents a literal contrast between Tim’s shortness and Bob’s tallness by virtue of what *short* and *tall* mean.

(5.7) Tim is short and Bob is tall.

The difference between (5.6) and (5.7) lies in the fact that the “contrast” between their heights is made relevant, or highlighted, in (5.6) and not in (5.7). (The assertion is not that the contrast

exists.) Let us look at this under Zeevat's objection framework. Perhaps someone wants to exclude both Tim and Bob from a basketball team because he believes mistakenly that both are physically unsuited to playing basketball, and another person objects to the proposal by uttering (5.6), thereby arguing that while Tim is indeed short and unsuited to basketball, Bob is, in contrast, tall, and should be included on the team. In this case, there is a "contrast" between their heights in that Tim's shortness is expected, but Bob's tallness and therefore fitness for playing basketball is unexpected. If the person wishing to argue for Bob's inclusion on the team utters (5.7), it does not have the same force of argument, as the contrast in affirming and denying the expectations of the interlocutor has not been made relevant, since *and* is used instead of *but*. So, when we speak of *but* introducing a "contrast", we mean that the two conjuncts contrast in function (affirming vs. denying, arguing for vs. arguing against), not a contrast at the semantic level.

So, what happens when we say, "She is poor, but she is honest"? Let us suppose that *but* does mark only a contrast in function between the two conjuncts. Why do we get the implicature or assertion that poverty and honesty are mutually exclusive traits – the other sort of "contrast"? Let us look at this in a (made-up) context where the *but*-sentence conveys denial of expectation.

(5.8) She is poor, but she is honest. That's really surprising, given the part of town she's from.

The *but*-clause is the source that activates the search for a target assumption. The assumption is something along the lines of, "She is poor and one would also expect that she is also dishonest". The speaker utters, "She is poor, *but* she is honest," because the fact that she is poor *and* honest is surprising to him and is in tension with his assumption. The assumption is partially affirmed ("she is poor") and partially denied ("but she is not dishonest – she is honest"), as in the adversative use of *but* described by Zeevat.

If it is not part of the common ground that poverty and honesty are mutually exclusive, then the hearer must deduce that the speaker has this expectation, so as to license the use of *but* to mark denial of expectation. The denial of expectation makes sense only presupposing that there is in fact an incompatibility, in this context, between the subject's poverty and honesty.

That is, in order for us to make sense of the use of *but* in this utterance, we need to attribute to the speaker the belief that there is incompatibility between poverty and honesty. It becomes salient propositional content as there is no necessary incompatibility between poverty and honesty, unlike between tallness and shortness; the incompatibility is context-dependent.

Now let us look at the same sentence in a different (made-up) context, where *but* is used in an argumentative way.

- (5.9) She is poor, but she is honest. She may not have much experience with our clientele due to her disadvantaged background, but her solid character will take her far. She'll do well here.

The “contrast” between her poverty and her honesty is purely in terms of their having different argumentative directions, her poverty being a reason against hiring her, and her honesty being a reason for hiring her. We do not feel (at least not as strongly) that the speaker is actually implicating an incompatibility between the subject’s poverty and honesty in the same way as in (5.8). In (5.8), the incompatibility was more salient and part of the point of the utterance, and so came across as part of “what is meant”, resulting in the extra propositional content.

In short, there is no “and-plus” *but*. The generation of an extra proposition beyond what is primarily asserted is not a built-in feature of *but*. *But* merely tells us how to interpret the relationship of the *but*-clause with previous information, and in order to make this relationship make sense, we sometimes have to suppose an extra proposition.¹²

5.3 *BUT* MARKS OBJECTION OR ADVERSATIVITY ON MANY LEVELS: EXPLAINING “RHETORICAL” *BUT*

So far, we have dealt with one problem on the way to a unified analysis of *but*: the apparent existence of one *but* that contributes propositional content and another *but* that does not, behaving exclusively as an utterance marker. The former is a special case of the latter.

¹² Zeevat (2012) categorizes the consequences of this relationship (i.e., the rejection of the proposal under objection) as an additional assertion (see section 5.1) in all uses of *but*, thereby suggesting that *but* always results in an additional assertion. I think that this can be reconciled with my rejection of “and-plus” *but* as a separate phenomenon. While Zeevat chooses to formulate his proposal using a combination of presuppositions and assertions, at least he does not single out “and-plus” *but* as giving more propositional content than utterance-marking *but*.

There is another problem. We have observed that removing *but* from declarative *but*-clauses often alters the function of the utterance. For example, (5.6) can be used to argue against leaving Bob out of the basketball team, but it is strange to use (5.7) to do the same thing. However, in *but*-questions, leaving out *but* does not preclude the use of the *but*-clause (lacking *but*) in the same context. RCBPs constitute an exception, as discussed in section 4.4.

This leaves us with some instances of *but*, such as the argumentative and denial of expectation uses in declarative *but*, being necessary for the utterance to function as intended in context, while other instances of *but*, such as the challenging and topic development uses in *but*-questions, are not necessary for the utterance to function as intended in context. Must we split *but* again into two types – a “functional” type and a “rhetorical” type? And if there are two types of *but*, must we then say that the former is an objection/adversativity marker and the latter must be explained some other way?

I think that *but* does mark objection/adversativity, regardless of whether *but* seems “functional” or “rhetorical”. At first sight, it seems that functionality of *but* is correlated somehow with how directly the content of the *but*-clause engages with the proposal under objection. If the propositional content of the *but*-clause directly argues against the proposal, as in Zeevat’s definitions in (5.1-5), *but* is “functional”.¹³ If the objection takes place above the propositional level, *but* is “rhetorical”. Since the semantic content of a question is not a unique proposition, *but*-questions necessarily involve objection at a higher level than propositional content.

What are these higher levels that do not engage the propositional content (if any) of the *but*-clause? As mentioned in section 4.3, *but* which is associated with easing topic development can be analyzed as denying a contextual assumption.

(5.10) He discovered you. But how did you audition for him?

The assumption being “objected” to is the contextual assumption that the speaker will, in general, continue on the same topic (Uryson 2006). The *but*-clause indicates that the clause “objects” to

¹³ I am assuming Gazdar’s (1981) view that declarative sentences express propositions and interrogative sentences express sets of propositions.

this assumption, by virtue of being a question not on the same topic. *But* relates the *but*-question to the assumption on the speech act level, while making use of “discourse perspective” to locate the target assumption beyond the immediately preceding statement. Compare (5.10) to (5.11), which lacks *but*:

(5.11) He discovered you. How did you audition for him?

The absence of *but* in (5.11) does not prevent the question from fulfilling its purpose of eliciting an answer and allowing the topic to develop. The issue is not so much what *but* does, as it is somewhat redundant between (5.10) and (5.11); the issue is why *but* is allowed in (5.10). *But* is licensed as the target assumption can be retrieved, for which the *but*-clause serves as a suitable objection. Since *but*'s function is duplicated, it is rhetorical and not functional.

(5.12) A: I won't relapse.

B: But how do you know?

B': How do you know?

Likewise, B' is sufficient for challenging A's statement in (5.12), even without *but*. The assumption is that A's answer is satisfactory to B. By asking a question, B shows that A's answer is not satisfactory. Adding *but* is acceptable, as one can construct an objection relation between the *but*-clause and an assumption.

It then appears that the functionality of *but* is not directly a consequence of the level at which objection is taking place, but whether the objection is derivable without involving *but*.

6 Conclusion

In this essay, I motivated the need to study *but* in contexts other than in declarative sentences with two clauses connected by *but*. As an example of such a context, I sampled questions beginning with *but* in both connective and turn-initial contexts, provided a preliminary taxonomy of *but*-questions, and described *but*'s function in the different types of *but*-questions. Some *but*-questions displayed a function that I described as “easing topic

development”, exemplifying a use of *but* where *but* contributes minimally to the content or interpretation of the utterance. This is in contrast to *but* which apparently introduces propositional content.

I explain this disparity in *but*'s functionality from two angles. First, *but* is merely an utterance modifier that marks objection (following the intuition of Zeevat's (2012) proposal). In cases where *but* appears to contribute propositional content, the contribution should be traced not to *but*, but to inferential processes required to make the presence of *but* make sense.

Second, the use of *but* is acceptable as long as one can retrieve an objection happening at some level. When *but* prefaces something with propositional content (i.e. a declarative sentence), the propositional content is marked as functioning as an objection to a proposal. However, when the *but*-clause lacks unique propositional content (i.e. when it is a *but*-question), the use of *but* must be licensed by interpreting the *but*-clause's function in objection on another level, namely, on the epistemic or speech act levels (Lang 2000). However, since the reasoning that allows the *but*-clause to perform its function in context can be done without the use of *but*, *but* is allowed, but is more or less redundant, making it appear more rhetorical than functional.

Essentially, I argue for a *but* that encodes only procedural meaning, that is, it tells the hearer how to interpret the *but*-clause in relation to the context; in addition, I support the view that *but* functions on many levels. By doing so, I account for the possibility of using *but* to preface questions, while not divorcing question-*but* from *but* used to connect declaratives. Further work is needed to formalize my proposal, perhaps by fine-tuning Zeevat's (2012) proposal in combination with Lang's (2000), and also to ensure that the proposal is compatible with *but* used in prefacing other speech acts, such as imperatives and exclamatives, in order to demonstrate that there is truly a unified analysis of PA-type *but*.

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Appendix: Context and provenance of examples from COCA

(4.1)

Source information:

Date	2011 (110228)
Title	EXPLAINING HIS ACTIONS; "IT'S ALL PASSION"
Source	GOOD MORNING AMERICA 7:31 AM EST

Expanded context:

They can figure all this stuff out. They can try to like, normalize it, normalize it. Boring, stupid, you know, and it's fine. But, but for me, it's, it's, I've just answered to a higher calling. And it happened in the blink of an eye. And I'm totally excited by it, you know. ANDREA-CANNING-1-# (Off-camera) Are you worried you're going to relapse? CHARLIE-SHEEN-1AC# No. ANDREA-CANNING-1-# Why? CHARLIE-SHEEN-1AC# Because I'm not going to, period, the end. ANDREA-CANNING-1-# **But how do you know?** CHARLIE-SHEEN-1AC# I blinked and, I blinked and I cured my brain. That's how. Everybody has the power just because everybody - you know, can't is the cancer of happen. ANDREA-CANNING-1-# (Off-camera) Mm-hmm. CHARLIE-SHEEN-1AC# Can't is the cancer of happen. I can't do it. The Nike slogan doesn't say just try it. Okay. Just try it. No, just do it, man. ANDREA-CANNING-1-# (Off-camera) But you love to party. CHARLIE-SHEEN-1AC# I mean,

(4.2)

Source information:

Date	2005 (20050303)
Title	Is Social Security Reform Dead?
Source	CNN_Crossfire

Expanded context:

president -- give us a time. When is the president going to put out -- it's his plan. He's in charge. (CROSSTALK) CARVILLE: When are we going to see a detailed plan of this thing, so people can see what's in there? When is the president... (CROSSTALK) CARVILLE: Can't vote. There's nothing to vote on TOOMEY I guess I have to explain this doesn't happen overnight CARVILLE Right. (CROSSTALK) TOOMEY: What happens is, you build support for the idea CARVILLE **But when are we going to see the plan?** (CROSSTALK) TOOMEY: The president has articulated the features. He's specified the dollar amount, when it would kick in. There's a lot of ideas on the table. (CROSSTALK) CARVILLE: Is there anything to vote on right now? TOOMEY: There's -- there's... CARVILLE: When is the president going to put... (CROSSTALK) TOOMEY: You don't put something on the table... CARVILLE: Why? Why?

(4.4)

Source information:

Date	2012 (120618)
Title	DANA PERINO, CO-HOST: Hello, everyone. I'm Dana Perino, along with Kimberly Guilfoyle, Bob Beckel,
Source	Fox_Five

Expanded context:

. PERINO: I think before we get in trouble, we should move on. Let Kimberly go. GUILFOYLE: In other news, we have a daredevil story for you. Nik Wallenda, who is a stunt man, famous stunt man, successfully crossed Niagara Falls. This is compelling, 25 minutes. He was 200 feet above the water. He walked 1,800 feet on two-inch wire. All we have to do is get up and come to work in the morning. Look at this guy. Pretty fantastic. First person to do that. PERINO: **But why? Why did he cross Niagara Falls?** GUILFOYLE: To get to the other side. PERINO: Very nice. All right. Let's go to Eric. BOLLING: OK. Very quickly, milestone was reached over the weekend. President Obama played his 100th round of golf. (APPLAUSE) BOLLING: Good job, commander-in-chief. Thank you very much. The economy is falling apart. But it wasn't long ago that your own David Axelrod thought that wasn't such a good idea. Listen. (BEGIN-VIDEO-CLIP) DAVID-AXELROD-OBA: As you

(4.5)

Source information:

Date	2007 (20071114)
Title	Susan Agnello, Sharon Toomer and Linda Franklin discuss cougar women, women in their 40s and 50s dating younger men
Source	NBC_Today

Expanded context:

guys are more fun. GIFFORD: And those guys are going to get old one day, too, and you're going to want an even younger guy. You're creating a very bad scenario. Ms-FRANKLIN: But, you know, I think real cougars is just one part of a two-part story, because the real cougars, because they're such a force in changing the way people look at everything, that it's really going to affect the boomer men. And I think that's going to be an exciting story. KOTB: **But where do the cougars get their confidence?** That's what I notice about women -- like all three of you. I mean, you're, like, I can get anyone I want. I -- I'm gorgeous. Where does that come from? Ms-TOOMER: Well... Ms-AGNELLO: Well, you have to -- oh, I'm sorry. KOTB: Go ahead. Everybody. Ms-AGNELLO: It's self-love. I mean, you have to really feel good about yourself. I mean, me

(4.6)

Source information:

Date	2012 (120110)
Title	PBS NewsHour For January 10, 2012
Source	PBS_NewsHour

Expanded context:

have to think that he has to have a stunning number here, because, if he can't, it's the old New York, New York, story. If you can't do well here, you can't do well anywhere if you're Jon Huntsman. This would seem to be, as I mentioned -- liberal and moderates, this would seem to be the place where he would do well. JUDY-WOODRUFF: Christina, what else? Obviously, we are looking at the numbers. We will be watching for the numbers all night, **but what else should we be looking at in tonight's results?** CHRISTINA-BELLANTO: Well, I think a couple things. Ron Paul is very organized in the state. He got 8 percent in 2008. And the crowds that are coming out to see him -- it was interesting what Gwen was saying about the vigor and sort of there not being all that much energy over the last few days. But over the last year, he spent a lot of time in New Hampshire. And he's not just getting

(4.7)

Source information:

Date	2012 (120127)
Title	Etta James: The 1994 Fresh Air Interview
Source	NPR_FreshAir

Expanded context:

walk. I even sound sweeter when I talk. I said, oh. Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh. Hey, hey, yeah. Oh, it must be love. You know it must be love. Let me tell you... TERRY-GROSS: Well, wasn't, it wasn't too long after you moved in with her mother that you actually went on the road. I mean, Johnny Otis, who had a now-famous rhythm and blues touring revue, got you into the show. He discovered you. **But how did you audition for him?** How did you find him, or he find you? ETTA-JAMES: Well, he really found me, because at that time, I had ran away from home. And I went and I stayed with two girls, one named - Abby and Jean, who later became The Peaches. You know, it used to be Etta James and The Peaches. We had wrote an answer to the song " Work with Me Annie. " TERRY-GROSS: The Hank Ballard record. ETTA-JAMES:

(4.8)

Source information:

Date	2011 (110225)
Title	ONLINE NIGERIAN SCAM; WILL YOU SPEAK UP?
Source	PRIMETIME LIVE 9:44 PM EST

Expanded context:

to you. RAZ-1ACTOR2-# Give me the number. KIM-1ACTRESS2-# Okay, it's 5, 3... JOHN-QUIONES-1-# (Voiceover) After she gives up her bank account number, our scammer steps away. And even though she's onto the scam... KIM-1ACTRESS2-# Hello, Raz? Is anybody there? Can you see me by any chance or hear me at the next table? JOHN-QUIONES-1-# (Voiceover) This woman stays silent. But watch what happens when our actor returns. KIM-1ACTRESS2-# Raz, I just have one question for you. RAZ-1ACTOR2-# Yes. CUSTOMER-1FEMALE# I believe you and everything, **but how do I know you're in Nigeria right now?** How do I know that? RAZ-1ACTOR2-# Kim, we are friends. Of course I'm in Nigeria. JOHN-QUIONES-1-# (Voiceover) When she persists, our scammer asks for another favor. RAZ-1ACTOR2-# Excuse me, could you tell her we're in Nigeria? CUSTOMER-1FEMALE# Excuse me? RAZ-1ACTOR2-# That we're in Nigeria. CUSTOMER-1FEMALE# This is the United States. RAZ-1ACTOR2-# Could you just, no, this is just a favor for me. I appreciate it very much.

(4.9)

Source information:

Date	2012 (120224)
Title	NANNY ABUSE; DO YOU WANT HER TAKING CARE OF YOUR KIDS?
Source	ABC_PrimeTime

Expanded context:

her lunch break notices our out-of-control caregiver immediately. CAMILLE-1ACTRESS# I don't get paid enough to be standing here. Is this overtime? JOHN-QUI-ONES-1-# (Voiceover) But she keeps on walking. CAMILLE-1ACTRESS# You're such a spoiled brat. Stop crying. JOHN-QUI-ONES-1-# (Voiceover) But that was one insult too many. And Micheline Umpierre (PH) turns around to confront our naughty nanny. MICHELINE-1PEDEST# Why are you gon na do those things? Why are you yelling at her? Why are you calling her an idiot? And I'm sorry. I know it's not my business, **but what are you doing?** She is a little girl. How old are you? CAMILLE-1ACTRESS# I don't know what you mean. MICHELINE-1PEDEST# You're calling her an idiot. CAMILLE-1ACTRESS# Kids need a firm hand. MICHELINE-1PEDEST# No, they don't. And you're not her mother to be doing that. So... CAMILLE-1ACTRESS# Well, it's not... MICHELINE-1PEDEST# I'm gon na get the cops and you guys can stay here. CAMILLE-1ACTRESS# I'm not doing anything for you to get a police officer.