

But argumentative prominence, though!

Mira Ariel and John DuBois
Tel Aviv University and UC Santa Barbara
mariel@tauex.tau.ac.il and dubois@ucsb.edu

1 Introduction

According to von Heusinger and Schumacher (2019), relative prominence is a basic organizing principle of discourse, which comes into play when equally-ranked units compete with each other. Ariel (2019) has argued that relative discourse prominence applies to inferred representations as well. An argument that supports an inferred conclusion (pro), when presented side by side with an argument against that conclusion (con), naturally creates a competition between the pro and con arguments, and implicitly between their inferred conclusions. According to Anscombe and Ducrot (1983), a *but*-type counter-argument tends to win out, presumably because *but* marks it as the more prominent argument. Here we compare adversative *but* and concessive *though*, arguing that the former assigns a higher degree of prominence to the counter-argument. Our analysis is based mostly on data from the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBC) (DuBois et al. 2000-2005).

2 Prominence of arguments and counter-arguments

Like *but*, *though* is a marker that links two arguments, each (potentially) supporting an opposite conclusion. Both markers index the counter-argument (con), i.e., the assumption that serves as a basis for the con conclusion, which argues in the opposite direction from the pro conclusion. The argument in (1) is that ‘Joanne would like to go (to Nicaragua)’ and the *but* counter-argument is ‘it’s an interesting thing’, which serves as a basis for an inferred conclusion against going. The argument and the *though* counter-argument in (2) are quite similar:

- (1) JOANNE: I wanna go.
... (H) **But**- -- ((1 Intonation Unit omitted))
It's an interesting thing. (SBC: 015)
- (2) KEN: I'd like to go,
JOANNE: It's an interesting thing **though**, (SBC: 015)

The prominence of the counter-argument, however, is different for *but* and *though*, we claim. English *but* often introduces a prominent, winning counter-argument, which defeats the conclusion derived from the argument. *Though* presents a concession, a less prominent, weaker opposition to the conclusion based on the argument (Barth-Weingarten & Couper-Kuhlen 2002, Couper-Kuhlen & Thompson 2000, Quirk et al. 1985). In this case, the speaker presents the counter-argument almost as a reluctant counter-claim, a putative side-line, leaving the main line of the argument mostly intact.¹

The position of the marker is also correlated with how prominent the speaker wishes to construe the divergent argumentation. Placing it at the beginning of the relevant intonation unit (IU), as in (1), the speaker foregrounds her countering stance (DuBois 2007), because her argument is pre-framed as divergent, regardless of its content or strength. Placing the counter-

¹ We here focus on *though*. *Even though* manifests a different discourse profile with respect to the prominence of the counter-argument.

argument marker, a sentence adverbial in this case, in non-IU-initial position, as in (2), on the other hand, downgrades the divergent position, for the counter-argument is often interpreted as a nonprominent afterthought. Given the difference in prominence between *but* and *though*, it is not surprising that only a quarter of *but* tokens (426/1839=23.2%) occurred in IU-final position, while the vast majority of *though*'s occur finally (110/125=88%).

Prototypical *but* and *though* are associated with two different discourse profiles, we claim. *But* introduces a prominent counter-argument in IU-initial position, whereas IU-final *though* downplays the prominence of the counter-argument, and hence the potential divergence between argument and counter-argument. We then make two predictions on preferences for prototypical *buts* versus *though*'s. It is socially dispreferred to express a stance that diverges from one's interlocutor (Pomerantz 1984). If we are correct, *but* should favor counter-arguments the speaker directs at herself, where no politeness issue arises, rather than at another interlocutor, which may cause an interactional risk due to a face-threatening action. Since *though* introduces a mitigated counter-argument (less face-threatening), it should preferably be used for countering another interlocutor.

At the same time, face considerations are not necessarily equal for powerful and powerless conversation participants. Powerful speakers may use the more prominently divergent *but* when addressing a powerless addressee, but the opposite should be true for a powerless speaker addressing a powerful addressee. We expect more cross-speaker *but*'s from powerful speakers to powerless ones, and vice versa. An impressionistic examination of the data confirms our predictions, but we here make do with some minimal pair examples.

Consider again the opposite arguments in (1) and (2), both part of the same conversation and involving the same opposite arguments. Note that when Joanne's counter-argument is aimed at herself (1), she uses an IU-initial *but*, but when she counters Ken (2), she reverts to a IU-final *though*. Indeed, when shortly afterwards Joanne again counters Ken's same argument, she chooses *though*.²

- (3) KEN: I would love --
 .. I would love to go:.
 LENORE: ... Yeah.
 JOANNE: ... Yeah?
 ... I wanna go too.
 ... (TSK) (H) I'd --
 I'd rather go to Mexico **though**. (SBC: 015)

The next excerpt involves Kathy and Nathan, who, like Ken and Joanne, are a couple. But Kathy is tutoring Nathan in math, which makes him the (powerless) novice, and her the (more powerful) expert (see her nonmitigated contradicting response in lines 3–5):

- (4) NATHAN: .. (H) You know what, 1
 .. I'm just gonna skip this one. 2
 KATHY: ... No you're not, 3
 .. you're gonna do it. 4
 ... Now. (4 IUs omitted)) 5
 NATHAN: Well I can do -- 6
 find one side by doing that, 7
 can't I? 8

² Although Joanne's *I'd rather go to Mexico* directly counters her own *I wanna go too*, it more crucially introduces a counter-argument to Ken's *I would love to go*, which is why *though* was preferred.

KATHY:	... Yeah but ,	9
	why don't you p- .. just put the other – ((11 IUs omitted))	10
NATHAN:	I know what you meant.	11
	... (H) I don't ever remember us doing anything like that though . (SBC: 009).	12

In line with the power structure in this conversation, Kathy counters Nathan with a *but*, while Nathan counters Kathy with a *though*.³

However, and seemingly surprisingly, we do find cases where the speaker introduces her counter-argument with both *but* and *though*. The topic of the following excerpt is whether musicians can make a living performing music. Brett mentions his cello teacher as a case in point, but Melissa counters this with both *but* and *though*:

- (5) BRETT: (H) My cello teacher, ((1 IU omitted))
 makes his living off of, ((1 IU omitted))
 playing the cello.
 MELISSA: **But** he's --
 .. **But** see he's a teacher **though**.
 .. (H) ... He makes his money teaching. (SBC: 019)

We propose that Melissa's final *though* is an attempt to mitigate the more confrontational *but*, reframing the counter-argument as if it is the less face-threatening concession only.

The next example shows *though*'s mitigating effect even more clearly. B's counter-argument not only supports an opposite argumentative direction, it outright contradicts A's argument itself:⁴

- (6) A: So that would be yours.
 You started the seventh.
 B: **But** that would be yours **though** wouldn't it? (LSAC)

Such a direct contradiction is clearly a face-threatening act, which B makes an effort to mitigate (note B's tag question).

Still, we note that mitigation is not the only motivation for speakers to combine the two markers. Unlike *but*, *though*, as well as *yet* and *still*, have another function, where it is the counter-expectedness of the counter-argument that is rendered prominent. This provides another motivation for speakers not to make do with a *but*:

- (7) A: But we've done an excellent in insurance **but yet** we **still** lost it
though. (LSAC)

3 Conclusions

We have here suggested that speakers make strategic choices when introducing counter-arguments, and these choices are sensitive to the degree of prominence associated with the divergent stances involved. Since IU-initial *but* renders the divergent stance prominent, speakers use it freely in self-directed counter-argumentation. Since non-IU- initial *though* renders the diverging argument less prominent, it is preferred when countering another

³ While this *but* is not IU-initial, it still precedes Kathy's counter-argument in the next IU.

⁴ *But* contradictions are normally only indirect, restricted to the conclusions inferred from the argument and the counter-argument.

speaker's argument, reducing the face threat. Similarly, *though* retroactively mitigates an other-directed *but* counter-argument. Face preservation, however, is not necessarily observed when the conversation is between unequals. Indeed, where a powerful speaker chooses *but*, the powerless may opt for *though*.

Author note

The research here reported was supported by an Israel Science Foundation grant (1398/20) to Mira Ariel.

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