

The Sentence-Final 'but' in American/Canadian English and Australian/New Zealand English: A Comparative Analysis Based on the TV Corpus

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ABSTRACT

Sentence-final particles (SFPs) are a common language phenomenon. Existing studies mainly focus on SFPs in single dialects or their cross-language comparisons. This article conducts a comparative analysis of the sentence-final 'but' in American/Canadian English and Australian/New Zealand English based on the TV Corpus. It focuses on its overall frequency, semantic-pragmatic roles and values. The TV Corpus, containing 325 million words from numerous TV episodes, is used as the data source, with 30 random examples analyzed in each dialect context. Results show that the sentence-final 'but' has a higher proportion per million words in Australian/New Zealand English. Both dialects mainly use it as discourse markers but differ in semantic-pragmatic values: cataphoric value is most common in US/CA English, while contrastive value prevails in AU/NZ English. The patterns may be attributed to historical influences, dialect development, and conversational style. This study provides a new perspective for the research of intra-language dialectal contrasts in SFPs.

KEYWORDS

Sentence-final particles; TV Corpus; American/Canadian English; Australian/New Zealand English

1 Introduction

Sentence-final particles (SFPs) are widely used in many languages. Morita defines them as “small lexemes that have neither denotational nor referential meaning, and are found mainly (but not always) at the utterance-final position ^[1].” In English, ‘but’ can not only serve as a conjunction but also as a sentence-final particle, which is common in spoken English. The use of ‘but’ as an SFP shows both convergence and divergence among different dialects. This article aims to delve into the comparative analysis of the sentence-final ‘but’ in American/Canadian (US/CA) English and Australian/New Zealand (AU/NZ) English, focusing on its overall frequency, semantic-pragmatic roles and values within the context of spoken language as captured in the TV Corpus.

2 Literature review

Some languages have various sentence-final particles, and they play an important role in the language. They add nuances to sentences and serve different pragmatic functions. According to Katagiri, the use of SFPs is one of the most salient features of Japanese dialogues ^[2]. He further analyzes the dialogue functions of the two most common Japanese SFPs, ‘yo’ and ‘ne,’ including information attribution and dialogue coordination. Moreover, when ‘yo’ and ‘ne’ are combined with different utterance-final intonational patterns, they lead to the speaker’s different intentions.

In English, sentence-final particles are not as prominent as they are in Japanese. English itself does not have a unique class of words that function in the same way as Japanese SFPs. However, many studies still focus on English SFPs. For example, the sentence-final ‘yeah’ with a high-falling intonation indicates that the matter discussed is obvious and indisputable ^[3]. The sentence-final ‘then’ can be used as an information-seeking device ^[4].

Mulder and Thompson specifically analyze the grammaticization of ‘but’ as a final particle in English conversation ^[5]. They state that as ‘but’ moves along the continuum from an initial position to a final position, its function shifts from ‘a turn-continuing connective’ to ‘a turn-yielding discourse particle.’

However, most existing studies either only analyze SFPs within a single dialect of a language or compare SFPs between two different languages. Limited attention is paid to the comparison of SFPs between different dialects of a language. Therefore, this article tries to fill this gap and offer a relatively complete picture of ‘but’ as a sentence-final particle in American/Canadian English and Australian/New Zealand English.

3 Data and methodology

The TV Corpus is chosen as the data source. First, it contains 325 million words from 75,000 TV episodes spanning from the 1950s to the current time. Second, the TV Corpus offers insights into spoken English, which is the context where the sentence-final ‘but’ appears. Third, it shows the variation between dialects.

In terms of data collection and analysis, the sentence-final 'but' is coded by 'but .' in the TV Corpus. This article will focus on 30 random examples in the US/CA English context and the AU/NZ English context, respectively. All these SFPs collected will be categorized by their semantic-pragmatic roles and values. The overall frequency of the sentence-final 'but' and the frequency of each category will be recorded. Any potential patterns will also be identified.

4 Results

4.1 Terminology

According to Hancil, 'but' has two main semantic-pragmatic roles as an SFP [6]. One is the discourse marker. It is a "sequentially dependent element which brackets units of talk [7]." The other one is the modal particle, which "expresses the speaker's attitude to the proposition, the relationship between the proposition and the real world, and the speaker's relationship with the hearer [8]." Hancil assigns four discursive values, including contrast, anaphor, cataphor, and filler, plus two modal values, including doubt and intensity, to the final 'but[6].'

4.2 Overall frequency

As shown in Figure 1, the sentence-final 'but' appears more in American/Canadian English, nearly ten times as in Australian/New Zealand English. However, as for the percentage in all words, the final 'but' has a higher proportion (14.40 per million) in AU/NZ English [9]. It shows that in Australia and New Zealand, people tend to use 'but' as an SFP in their conversations more frequently.

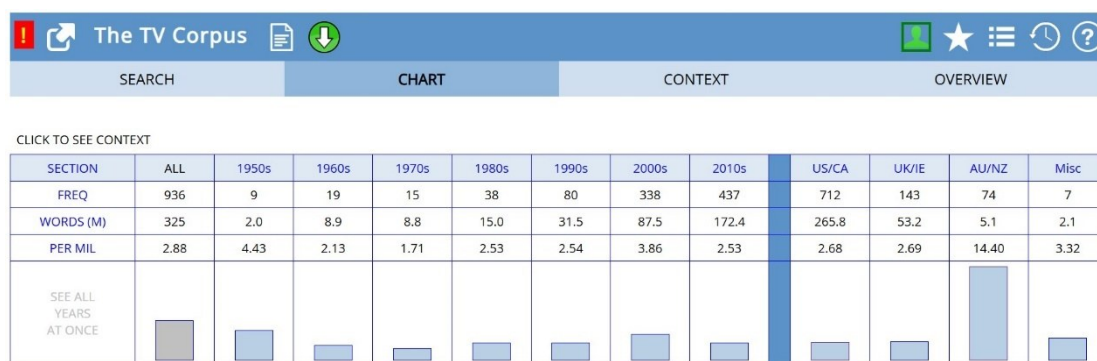


Figure 1 The overall frequency of 'but .' (sfp) in the tv corpus

4.3 Semantic-pragmatic roles

American/Canadian English and Australian/New Zealand English show convergence in terms of the semantic-pragmatic roles of the sentence-final 'but.' The majority of the final 'but' is used as discourse markers, while the use as a modal particle appears 6 times at most in both contexts.

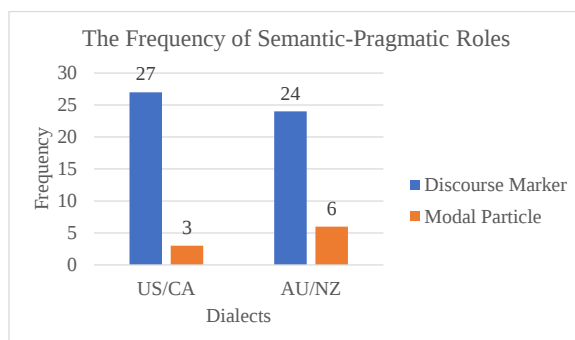


Figure 2 The frequency of semantic-pragmatic roles in 30 random examples

4.4 Semantic-pragmatic values

As shown in Figure 3, when it comes to the semantic-pragmatic values of the sentence-final 'but,' American/Canadian English and Australian/New Zealand English show divergence.

(1) She would never have let them find her like that. She did, but. (The TV Corpus)

The first value found in the TV Corpus is contrast. In (1), the speaker is discussing the fact that "Milly was found in the

classroom.” The first part of the sentence states an expectation, and the second part introduces a situation that contradicts the first part. By adding the final ‘but,’ the speaker marks a contrast between their subjective evaluation of Milly and the reality. This value is more common in AU/NZ English, with a frequency of 13, while it only appears four times in US/CA English.

(2) I just wish she was out of our lives. Yeah, so do I, but. She’s in our lives. (The TV Corpus)

The second value is cataphor. In (2), two people are talking about another woman who has big issues. They both express a dislike for her. One speaker anticipates their forthcoming utterance “She’s in our lives” with a sentence-final ‘but.’ The cataphoric ‘but’ creates a pause in the dialogue and expresses the speaker’s frustration. Meanwhile, it allows the listener to anticipate what will follow and reinforces the forthcoming sentence. The frequency of this value in US/CA English (18) is three times higher than that in AU/NZ English (6).

(3) I had lost my voice a little, You know, but. And I was out of my element, very much so. (The TV Corpus)

The third value is filler. In (3), the speaker is saying that she is in a situation that makes her feel uncomfortable. She uses the ‘but’ as an SFP without any referential meaning. It helps the speaker hold the floor, maintain the flow of the conversation, and allows the speaker to organize her thoughts for the next part of the conversation. This phatic value appears five times in both dialects, respectively.

(4) I’m not a charity, but. You’re gon na have to bring some cash in. I can’t keep paying for everything. (The TV Corpus)

The last value found in the TV Corpus is intensity. In (4), the speaker is complaining about paying fees for the listener. The sentence-final ‘but’ reinforces the message that the speaker is no longer willing to shoulder the financial burden alone. It also indicates the speaker’s discontent and anger. The intensifying value has a relatively low frequency in American/Canadian English (3) and Australian/New Zealand English (6).

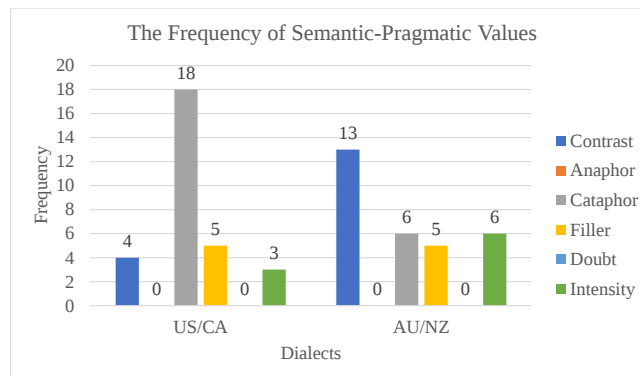


Figure 3 The frequency of semantic-pragmatic values in 30 random examples

According to Figure III, the cataphoric value is the most common in US/CA English, while the contrastive value is the most common in AU/NZ English. Both values show notable differences in terms of the frequency in different dialects. In addition, the phatic and the intensifying values of final ‘but’ are less commonly used compared with the contrastive and the cataphoric values in both dialects. In Australia and New Zealand, people tend to use the final ‘but’ as an intensifier slightly more than those in the US and Canada. Finally, anaphoric values and the expression of doubt are absent in the sampled data from either dialect.

5 Discussion

Through the analysis above, three main patterns are identified. First, Australian and New Zealand people are more likely to use the sentence-final ‘but’ in their dialogues. Second, they tend to use it as a contrastive discourse marker most frequently. Third, the final ‘but’ as a cataphor is commonly used in American and Canadian spoken English. The historical influences, dialect development, and conversational style may contribute to these patterns.

5.1 Historical influences

Unique linguistic features in Australian and New Zealand English are attributed to their geographical isolation. These lands surrounded by oceans have developed their own versions of English. Furthermore, the immigration waves also lead to linguistic diversity. Different groups of immigrants bring their own distinctive features in conversations ^[10]. The frequent use of the final ‘but’ may be one of the unique characteristics developed in such dynamics.

5.2 Dialect development

In AU/NZ English, the ‘but’ as an SFP and a contrastive discourse marker usually appears in the context of dispreferred

responses. It is used in a refusal or a counterargument, marking the transition from agreement to disagreement. A similar use is found in the vernacular 'eh,' which is also a common sentence-final particle. Starks et al. point out that 'eh' can be used in dispreferred responses^[11]. Instead of an explicit contrastive marker like 'but,' 'eh' mainly serves as a mitigator to soften the impact of a negative response. Besides the similarity in syntactic position and pragmatic function, the phonological change from 'eh' to 'but' aligns with the great vowel shift. Therefore, it is likely that the final 'but' is developed under the influence of 'eh,' and then widely adopted by New Zealand people.

5.3 Conversational style

American culture values directness and clarity in communication. The cataphoric final 'but' sets up the context or background for the main point, allowing the speaker to be more explicit and clearer in their upcoming messages. This aligns with the cultural preference for a straightforward discourse, so a high frequency of sentence-final 'but' as a cataphor is observed in American spoken English.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, by comparing the sentence-final 'but' in American/Canadian English and Australian/New Zealand English based on examples from the TV Corpus, this article identifies three notable patterns and discusses potential contributing factors. First, due to historical influences, including geographical isolation and immigration waves, the sentence-final 'but' appears more frequently in AU/NZ spoken English. Second, the high frequency of the final 'but' as a contrastive discourse marker is influenced by 'eh' in the vernacular dialect. Third, the direct and clear conversational style results in the common use of the cataphoric final 'but' in American spoken English.

However, this study still has some limitations. Only 60 sentences in total are chosen for analysis. The sample size is not large enough to draw a significant conclusion. Meanwhile, the analysis procedure may be skewed because of the potential unrepresentative data. Moreover, since the data source is the TV Corpus, only a textual analysis is conducted. The verbal aspect of the conversation, including important features like intonation, is not captured. Therefore, the future study should conduct a comparative analysis on this topic based on a larger sample size and focus more on the verbal aspect.

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