

# ***But*-prefacing for Refocusing in Public Questioning and Answering**

**Ann Tai Choe**

*University of Hawai'i at Mānoa*

**Elizabeth Reddington**

*Teachers College, Columbia University*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In this paper, we focus on a special use of *but* in interactions in which those doing the questioning and answering are accountable for producing talk that is relevant to a third party—an overhearing audience. Specifically, we aim to show how participants leverage the contrastive power of *but* in turn-initial position to refocus following a deviation from the main course of action.

## **BACKGROUND**

In grammatical terms, *but* is a coordinating conjunction that joins similar constituents, such as two nouns or two independent clauses. In doing so, it can mark two contrastive ideas (as in, *Mary is hard-working, but John is lazy*) (Fraser, 1996; Halliday & Hasan, 1976) or a denial of expectation (as in, *John is smart, but he is not hard-working*) (Blakemore, 1989, 2000, 2002; Lakoff, 1971).

*But* has also been discussed as a discourse marker—to use Bolden's (2006) description, a set of little words that do big work in discourse. In the context of talk-in-interaction, discourse markers can be seen as tokens that “rise above” their semantic or referential meaning to “take on complex interactional duties” (Waring, 2003, p. 416). Recent studies within a conversation analytic (CA) framework have examined these interactional duties in various contexts. Among these are Bolden's (2006, 2009) work on *so*-prefacing for resuming a momentarily interrupted course of action, Park's (2010) work on *anyway* as a sequence-closing device, and Waring's (2012) work on *now*-prefacing for doing disaffiliation. In this study, we aim to build on and extend this work by examining a special use of *but* in interactions in which those doing the questioning and answering are accountable for producing talk that is relevant to a third party—an overhearing (Goffman, 1981) audience.

We also draw on Schiffrin's (1987) classic study of discourse markers, which includes discussion of *but* as a point-making device. Based on data collected from sociolinguistic interviews, Schiffrin (1987) found that *but* was employed by speakers to return to a prior concern that had been interrupted, misunderstood, and/or challenged in the context of telling a story or building an argument (as in, *But that isn't the point, the point is...*). Building on Schiffrin's (1987) observation that *but* can mark contrastive actions, our focus is to examine *but*-prefacing as a practice in public discourse.

## **DATA AND METHOD**

Our data consist of naturally-occurring interactions that involve representatives of a philanthropic foundation in the US engaging in the work of publicizing the foundation's message. Specifically, we examined audio- or video-recordings and transcripts of 58 events, including question and answer (Q&A) sessions following 18 conference talks; Q&A sessions conducted during 25 webinars; 9 podcast interviews; and 6 TV interviews. More detailed information on the data, method, and transcription conventions can be found in the [Forum Introduction](#).

In reviewing the data, we began to notice instances in which *but* seemed to be doing more than marking a contrast in ideas or an unexpected proposition. Two brief contrastive examples may help to better highlight the phenomenon of interest.

Consider Extract 1, in which *but* is used in what might be called a straightforward manner.

Extract 1

01 IR: ((*gazing down*))->y'know it's so interesting.<  
02 e:- a lot- a lot of folks who lead foundations.=  
03 IE: =mm.  
04 IR: ha:ve executive backgrounds, fundraising  
05 → backgrounds, **but** not everyone who leads  
06 a .hh foundation has the background you have.

In this extract, the interviewer (IR) is describing the background of the interviewee (IE), who is the head of the foundation. He notes that many individuals who lead foundations have certain kinds of backgrounds, but not everyone has this interviewee's particular background. In line 05, *but* is used to mark a contrast between the background of other leaders and that of the interviewee, and going a step further, highlight an exceptional quality of the interviewee.

Just a few lines down in the same transcript, we find another instance of *but*.

Extract 2

09 IR: [{"(*raises eyebrows*))->°oh°< I'm- just sayi:ng} you have]  
10 [{"(*flips through the foundation report*))-an impressive  
11 → background.=.hh **but** what it- what it talks about here is,}

In lines 10-11, we find the interviewer responding to the interviewee, redoing his characterization of her background as impressive, and in line 11, an instance of *but* in turn construction unit (TCU)-initial position before he begins to reference the report that he is holding. There is no obvious contrast of ideas evident in these lines—so what is *but* doing here?

We proceeded to build a collection of these segments of talk and conduct detailed, turn-by-turn analysis, guided by CA's key analytic question, "why that now?" A total of 15 such instances were then identified and subjected to further analysis. As we will show in the following section, speakers leverage the semantic meaning of *but*, its contrastive power, to refocus following a deviation from the main interactional business of engaging in questioning and answering.

## ANALYSIS

In this section, we will present three examples of *but*-prefacing at the start of new TCUs, following different kinds of self- or other-initiated divergences from the main business of questioning and answering. Specifically, *but*-prefacing is employed by speakers following talk that either attends to unexpected contingencies or can be heard as parenthetical to the current topic or action. We argue that, in these environments, *but* functions as a refocusing device: It helps speakers shift from talk that departs from the objective at hand to pursue the original course of action, thereby regaining the focus of discussion for the benefit of the overhearing (Goffman, 1981) audience and displaying their accountability to that audience.

## Regaining Focus after Parenthetical Talk

*But*-prefacing is at times used to draw a line between talk that can be heard as parenthetical to the topic at hand or the action underway and talk that forwards the main business of questioning and answering. Extract 3 comes from a Q&A session following an invited presentation by a foundation representative (FR). After being selected by the moderator, the audience member (AU) launches his turn with a greeting to the speaker, gives an appreciation of the talk, and introduces himself. Rather than launch his question as might be expected next in lines 04-05, he instead initiates a humorous digression.

### Extract 3

01 AU: hi Doctor Powell, thanks for being here. uh my name is  
 02 Jayden Miller, I'm a first #yea:r# (0.2) mph student  
 03 #i::n# the: department of sociomedical science,  
 04 #u:h,# (0.3) I've been at (school) for a w:↑ee:k, s:o  
 05 [naturally I am an-  
 06 [(light laughter from audience))  
 07 AU: I'm an expert on (.) health based social  
 08 move[m]ents now.  
 09 [(laughter from audience))  
 10 FR: [>that's g[reat.<  
 11 AU: → [but uh,  
 12 FR: [lay- lay it on me.  
 13 AU: [(leans back, smiling, laughing?))  
 14 [(laughter from audience))  
 15 FR?: [↑HHEH HHEH HEH  
 16 [(laughter from audience))  
 17 AU: ((talking over fading laughter))-u::m,  
 18 [(touches chest))-so if you need tuh talk  
 19 FR?: [↑UH HE-  
 20 AU: ((taps fingers to chest))-tuh me, °y'know.° (.h)  
 21 [ uh:, ]  
 22 FR?: [HHH]  
 23 AU: → .TCH. **bu:t**, (0.2) {((gestures to FR))-learning about}  
 24 health based social movements, (.) u:h they arise

After stating that he has been at the school for a week in line 04—a self-description that already evokes some laughter (line 06), the audience member presents an upshot: *naturally I'm an expert on health-based social movements now* (in lines 05 and 07-08). This ironic self-assessment is treated as humorous by the audience (note the laughter in line 09). It also elicits a response from the presenter: a positive assessment, *that's great*, in line 10. The presenter extends the playful talk as he continues with the colloquial *lay it on me* in line 12, suggesting a major, and perhaps challenging, question to come. It is between these two TCUs produced by the presenter that the audience member first attempts to return to the action of questioning—note the first *but* in line 11. As it occurs in overlap, the audience member abandons the turn, leaving space instead for the presenter and the rest of the audience to respond to the humor (lines 13-16). The questioner himself continues to build on it, inviting the presenter to speak with him on the issue in lines 18 and 20. When the audience member resumes the main course of action successfully in line 23, note the reappearance of *but* at the beginning of the TCU. Following a slight pause, he restates the topic that he had mentioned during his humorous digression, *health based social movements*, before giving further background that serves as a preface to the eventual question (not shown). By prefacing this TCU with *but*, the speaker thus signals the end of play and a return to the serious and to the action of questioning. In this way, the speaker displays for the question recipient, and the overhearing audience, that he is launching the action that is expected and relevant to all participants.

## Regaining Focus after Responding to the “Unexpected”

In addition to marking a contrast between the parenthetical and the “main business,” speakers also use *but*-prefacing to refocus after talk that attends to unexpected contingencies. Our second case comes from a moderated panel discussion conducted in front of a live audience. In this case, it is the moderator (MO) who produces talk that diverges from the current course of action in order to respond to technical difficulties. Prior to this extract, the audience had been applauding at the conclusion of the panel speakers’ presentation. Extract 4 begins with the moderator’s attempt to transition into the Q&A portion with a debriefing of the presentations (line 01).

### Extract 4

|    |     |  |
|----|-----|--|
| 01 | MO: | w- hh we've had some great u:m (0.2)                       |
| 02 |     | opportunities with our {(holds tablet)}-speakers           |
| 03 |     | today. and I <just lost my> um- }                          |
| 04 |     | {(grins and then shows tablet with blank screen)}-(1.2)}   |
| 05 |     | .hhh (0.2) h(hh) ((gazes down)) I just lost my             |
| 06 | →   | screen. ((begins shifting gaze to audience)) <but I wanted |
| 07 |     | to:, .hh I wanted to (.) talk a little bit about what      |
| 08 |     | we heard today. it's really interesting- we                |
| 09 |     | started out with Elva talking about (.) the fact           |

In line 01, as the moderator continues her transitional remark (the assessment, *we've had some great opportunities with our speakers*), she reaches for a tablet, suggesting that the gadget may contain information that she needs in order to further her agenda of launching the Q&A

session. Rather than proceeding, however, she begins to report a problem with her device (*I just lost my um*) (line 03). During the 1.2 second silence in line 04, the moderator grins while holding up the tablet and turns it to face the audience, providing visible evidence to account for the suspension of the current course of action and her responsibilities as moderator. In line 05, she takes a deep in-breath and finishes her description of the problem with a light laugh as she looks down at the device, *h(hh) I just lost my screen*, a noticing that can now be heard as self-talk rather than as talk directed to a recipient.

After making the technical difficulty public, the moderator shifts her gaze toward the audience and launches a new TCU with *but*, quickly returning to the action that she had previously aborted: transitioning into the Q&A with some summary remarks (lines 06-09). The fact that the moderator shifts her gaze to the audience shortly before the *but*-prefaced utterance reveals her intent to resume the original course of action. In fact, she further marks this resumption by referring to what she *wanted* to talk about prior to the interruption caused by the technical difficulty. In an ensuing sequence not shown in this extract, the moderator asks the first question to the panelists, successfully channeling the focus of the audience on the Q&A session. The use of *but* thus signals, for the benefit of the audience, a contrast between talk that attends to other contingencies and talk that matters to them.

Our final case involves a speaker's management of an unexpected contingency of a different sort: a divergence initiated by another participant. Extract 5 comes from a televised interview with the head of the foundation (see also Extracts 1 and 2). It occurs near the beginning of the interview, as the interviewer is revealing aspects of the interviewee's background for the audience.

Extract 5

- 01 IR: not everyone who leads a .hh foundation  
 02 has the background you have.=  
 03 IE: =uh,=  
 04 IR: =you're ((*shakes head*))-a practicing physician?  
 05 IE: [((*nods*)) ]  
 06 [fo:r (.) a few yea]rs?  
 07 IE: >op-< we don't need to talk about how many,  
 08 [yeah? huh huh huh ]  
 09 IR: [{{(*raises eyebrows*))->°oh°< I'm- just sayi:ng } you have]  
 10 [{{(*flips through the foundation report*))-an impressive  
 11 → background.=.hh **but** what it- what it talks about here is,}  
 12 .hh it breaks do:wn (.) you know in- in the: foundation  
 13 report. what this (framework name) really is and it  
 14 breaks it down in a way that (.) is real for people.=  
 15 and I want you to help us with this.

In lines 04 and 06, the interviewer notes that the representative is a *practicing physician* and has been *for a few years*. The formulation *a few years* seems to be an attempt to strike a balance between highlighting the extensiveness of the interviewee's experience while downplaying what this implies about her age—a potentially delicate topic in public discussion. While the interviewee nods *yes* in line 05, confirming the initial fact (practicing physician), note how she responds to *for a few years*. In line 07, rather than offer a preferred response in a

preferred format, she states: *we don't need to talk about how many*. In this way, she thus problematizes the question, casting “number of years in the profession” as a topic that is, at the least, one that does not require specification. She also seeks agreement from the interviewer with her *yeah*, ending in rising intonation (line 08). Her laughter (line 08) is a sign of the delicacy of the topic and/or of her action of subtly resisting the interviewee’s question. The interviewee’s response thus deviates from the interviewer’s agenda of quickly showcasing the background of the interviewee for the audience.

As a result, the interviewer is put in the position of responding to the interviewee rather than proceeding with his line of questioning. He does so by offering a characterization of the intent of his prior question: a positive assessment of the interviewee’s “impressive background” (lines 09-11). This reformulation avoids the problematic reference to a number of years. Having dealt with the interviewee’s “unexpected” response, the interviewer moves on quickly. He begins a new TCU starting with *but* (line 11) and proceeds to reference the report on the foundation’s new framework in lines 11-13, which is to be the substance of the interview. He ultimately launches a request for the interviewee to break things down for the audience, partially shown in the transcript (line 15).

Similar to the prior examples, *but* marks a contrast between talk addressed to other matters and talk that furthers questioning and answering. In addition to marking a shift back to main business, *but* also serves to mark the resumption of typical interviewer/interviewee roles and responsibilities: Interviewers ask questions, and interviewees respond. For the overhearing audience, *but* thus signals a refocusing on what matters for them.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Through these examples, we hope to have illustrated the interactional work that speakers in our dataset accomplish through the use of *but*-prefacing. Building on Schiffrin’s (1987) work on *but* as a marker of speaker return to a prior point, we find that in public questioning and answering, *but*-prefacing marks a return to the prior, or expected, course of action. It is used by speakers following self-initiated divergences, as in our first two cases, where speakers delayed launching questions to engage in humor or self-talk related to technical difficulties. It may also occur following other-initiated divergences, as in our last case, where the interviewee produces an unexpected answer, prompting the interviewer to respond and then refocus. In all cases, speakers leverage the contrastive power of *but* to draw a line between talk that is in some sense parenthetical to the Q&A agenda and talk that moves it forward. We argue that marking this boundary is one way in which speakers in these public events display their accountability to the overhearing audience to attend to the main interactional business of questioning and answering.

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Ann Tai Choe is a Ph.D. student in Second Language Studies at the University of Hawai`i at Mānoa. Her research interests include conversation analysis, discourse analysis, and second language acquisition. Correspondence should be sent to Ann Tai Choe at: [ann28@hawaii.edu](mailto:ann28@hawaii.edu)

Elizabeth Reddington is an Ed.D. candidate in Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her interests include applying conversation analysis in the study of professional practice, including the work of teaching.