研究ノート

Mind the Gap: Interpretations of Sentence-Initial Coordinating Conjunctions
in Linguistic Studies of L2 and L1 Writing.

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ABSTRACT

One confusing aspect of EFL(English as a foreign language) writing is interpreting the use of coordinators in the sentence-initial position. This phenomenon sits on the cusp between being a hallmark of grammatical transgression or a discourse tool of competent writing. While studies of EFL writing interpret this as misuse, research in L1 (English as a first language) writing propose that the violation of this rule is a mark of skillful discourse and that the prescriptive rules of sentence-initial coordinating conjunctions limit the versatility of student writers. This paper will compare two sets of literature: L2 (English as a second language) corpus studies of writing by EFL writers and L1 corpus studies which analyze how sentence-initial coordinators can be used as a discourse marker. Taking in to account these divergent views, a series of questions will be raised to propose future directions for pedagogy and research.

Introduction

Writing is essentially choices. The choices the writer has to make range from grammatical and lexical accuracy on one hand, and developing rhetoric and logical progression on the other. This latter part is vital for the learner to develop their writing skill.

This paper focuses on one type of grammatical construct which is the use of conjunctions in English in the sentence-initial position. The rules of its use in writing have been subject to debate, myth and ambiguity.

The question begins with the experience of teaching EFL writing in the context of the Kanagawa Institute of Language and Culture. One program of the Institute is the online writing course, where English teachers in Kanagawa participate in this course to improve their writing. This program is in an interesting transition: from a 20th century junior college course, which is based on paper, pencils and red pens; to a 21st century on-line course where the students receive and submit assignments via a Moodle site using word processing files. One handout which is offered to students on orientation day carried over from the previous junior college course; is what is called the No BABES rule.

This rule states that you do not start a sentence with *but, and, because, especially* and *so.* (BABES) While this is not a list exclusively for coordinating conjunctions: (*and, but, so*) and coordinating subordinators (*because*) but also includes an adverb (*especially*). A more

common acronym for the use of coordinating conjunctions is FANBOYS which is a mnemonic for using *for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet* and *so* in writing which prescribes that these words must follow a comma and must be used to link clauses only. This is still in use today in university writing classes.

The question is how relevant are these rules for L1 and L2 users of English? By enforcing this prescription to L2 student writers are we emphasizing accuracy over discourse? On the surface level a majority agree that it is irrelevant, but what is the alternative to BABES and FANBOYS which can include both writing accuracy and the process of discourse? This ambiguity may be due to how it is addressed in different grammars.

Grammatical description of sentence-initial coordinators

Contemporary grammars have either focused on its traditional explanation as a connector of two clauses or have attempted to describe this sentence-initial phenomenon. Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985), describe the use of coordinators in English as staying in a very fixed position, as the heads of clauses but do not address the use of coordinators in the sentence-initial position except for some coordinating subordinators (pp. 921-922). Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1998) divide coordinators into two different categories: coordinating conjunctions and adverbial subordinators. In the chapter relating to coordinating conjunctions they address the complexity of describing the meaning of these words as a "difficult" area for linguists and that there is very little agreement over its semantic and pragmatic meaning (pp. 472-473).

With "logical connectors" (p. 524) the use of sentence-initial coordinators is addressed here, but refers to when to use punctuation between two clauses based on their length. Except for examples in their text, there is little attention to sentence-initial coordinators. Swan (2005) describes subordinating conjunctions as flexible and can go to either end of the sentence depending on the emphasis (pp. 129-130). Later in this section, he defines conjunctions in "separate sentences" as a way to orally answer a question. (pp. 130-131)

"Ok , I did it. <u>But</u> I didn't mean to"

"Why did you do that?" "<u>Because</u> I felt like it."

Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan (1999) describe the phenomenon derived from an analysis of the Longman Spoken and Written English Corpus. They state that there is a "well-known prescription reaction against beginning an orthographic sentence with a

coordinator. Nevertheless, in actual texts we quite frequently find coordinators in this position" (p. 83) and continue to state that "the frequency with what coordinators occur in the sentence/turn initial position and even at paragraph boundaries, suggests that the traditional analysis of coordination may not always be the best one, i.e. where the coordinator connects equal elements and is related in the same way to each of these elements" (p. 84).

The treatment of sentence-initial coordinators in these grammars lend to its interpretation, especially with the example by Swan, as the providence of only spoken registers.

Coordinating conjunctions as discourse markers

In addition to understanding this phenomenon from a grammatical perspective, there is a set of literature that also describes coordinators as *discourse markers* to maintain cohesion in a text. Halliday and Hasan organize coordinators in a chapter of their book *Cohesion in English* and establish a series of types for "conjunctive relations" as illustrated in Table 1 (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, pp.242-267).

Table 1: Conjunctive relations in Halliday and Hasan (1976)

Additive	Adding additional items or Information to a sentence (*and, or*)
Adversative	"Contrary to expectation" the following sentence or information contradicts what came before it. (*but*)
Causal	Providing cause and effect relations between sentences. (*so, because*)
Temporal	"The relation between the theses of two successive sentences - that is, their relation in external terms, as content- may be simply one of sequence in time: the one is subsequent of the other." (p. 261)

Defining the roles of conjunctions based on their analysis set the stage for defining how coordinators function in a text beyond its sentence bound role. Conjuncts play a grander role to play in the organization of text, especially for the writer to communicate his or her intentions to the reader. In their reappraisal of metadiscourse, Hyland and Tse (2004) state that conjuncts, adverbials and other multi-word discourse markers work by "....facilitating the

creation of discourse by allowing writers to generate texts which make sense within their context. Their role is crucial to expressing propositional and interpersonal functions, not something they do independently of them" (p. 162).

Looking at both the grammatical and the pragmatic rules established with conjunctions, we will now look at how they are used with EFL learners though collecting and analyzing their written texts.

Corpus studies of L2 writing

A learner corpus is a collection of electronic texts containing a broad range of writing from EFL students of different national backgrounds. The result of the analysis of these corpora produces generalizations about the inter-language of L2 learners of English.
"Spoken writing" and "written speech" characterize the findings of these studies in that the writer is unaware of the difference between registers. Misuse, overuse, or under-use involving word choice, discourse markers, and sentence-initial coordinators are mentioned as one of many characteristics of this register confusion. (Gilquin, Granger, & Paqout, 2007; Gilquin & Paquot, 2008; Granger, 2003).

In corpus studies which focus on specific sets of learners, a similar pattern arises. Cobb (2003) in his replication and extension of Ringbom`s (1998) study found that Francophone L2 learners tend to create writing that seems "spoken" in word choice due to the lack of nuanced vocabulary and an overuse of the first 1000 words of the British National Corpus and described their production as "writing talk down" (p. 403).

Lorenz (1999) in his study of coherence in writing between native and non-native writers of English using a contrastive corpus comments that the non-native writers have difficulty creating coherence in writing (p. 55). One example he cites as an example are EFL writers use of sentence-initial *because* as an example of "register-mixing" and "interference of other less formal text types" (p. 61).

In a corpus study of Asian learners Ying (2007) compared the writing of three different groups of university students: native speakers of English, non-native Chinese students, and non-native Japanese students. Her findings showed a marked difference in how they utilized such markers such as *so, and* and *because.* With the Chinese and Japanese learners, there was a tendency to either under or overuse certain markers and frequently in the sentence-initial position (p.72).

The evidence of these studies provides a picture of the EFL writer just reproducing speech in writing, but the question is how do we teach students to adopt a writing style that is

appropriate for the register? While the misuse of sentence-initial coordinators is a reality, is proscribing it entirely an appropriate solution?   "Syntactic complexity and grammatical accuracy, however, are not the only feature of writing improvement and may not even be the best measures of good writing. Most teachers are familiar with students who can construct accurate sentences and yet are unable to produce appropriate written texts, while fewer errors in an essay may simply reveal a reluctance to take risks, rather than indicate progress" (Hyland, 2003, p. 5).

Teachers and applied linguists must second guess our assumptions about our instruction. Sentence-initial coordinators are a grey area that needs to be understood in light of L1 use, and from this we can find appropriate approaches to L2 instruction.

A reevaluation of corpus linguistics

Challenging the assumptions of the discipline, Mukherjee and Rohrbach (2006) compare the mindsets of corpus linguistic researchers with that of language teachers and note differences on how both groups view EFL learners. Corpus linguists see language learners as a generalized population. In contrast, language teachers, due to the realities of the classroom, see learners as individuals with different needs (p.207).

"In language pedagogy, on the other hand, the individual learner's language and his/her progression is of far greater importance than the general and supra-individual description of learner language. This, by the way, also holds true for the language-pedagogical need for differentiation in classroom methodology"(p.208). While corpus evidence does provide a backdrop for decisions for instruction, there should also be a consideration about how to develop the students voice in writing.

There are two issues that arise from looking at data derived from texts produced from EFL learners. One is whether it is appropriate to make the comparison with native speakers of English. Two, how do we apply the knowledge gained from these studies into pedagogy? Gilquin & Paquot (2008, p. 45) recognized that the comparison between the performance between native speakers and EFL learners may be problematic, but they defend their positions stating that professional writers form a standard to be emulated. Ädel (2006) describes such data for comparison as "expert performances" to guide learners who lack "communicative competence" in writing.

While it is necessary to provide examples for learners to follow, considering the results of learner corpora studies but is it possible that the roles of "expert" and "novice" are

fluid concepts? In one corpus study, the writing of native and non-native students is compared in Gardezi and Nesi, (2010). Using an academic corpus of texts produced by British and Pakistani university students; they concluded that divergence in the use of discourse markers could be attributed to cultural norms and discourse community rather than linguistic ability. Academic discourse communities establish norms and may not be a reflection of skill. In their interpretation of their findings they noted that the Pakistani university students were willing to adopt sentence-initial structures in contrast with their British counterparts, implying that L1 users of English were hindered by the prescriptive rules of their instruction rather than reflect professional writing (p. 246).

With issue two, if EFL learners are to be compared to L1 data, we must consider what is being interpreted in the comparison. What sort of assumptions are researchers making about L1 writing that is not being taken into account in learner corpus studies? While it is important that learners' consciousness be raised to the difference of register, prescriptive rules will not provide an answer.

Studies of L1 writing: Criticism of prescriptive grammars in L1 writing instruction

This section of literature discusses L1 related studies, consisting of both corpus or syntactic analyses derive one interpretation of sentence-initial coordinators. These studies gather evidence from description, particularly from corpora to support the idea that writing should be driven by discourse rather than an attention to form. Studies in L1 writing will be divided into two categories. One set are articles which raise the idea that the sentence-initial prescription is a myth. The other are corpus studies of L1 writing of different registers and time periods which provide a glimpse of how sentence-initial constructions can be used in discourse.

The earliest literature found on the value of sentence-initial coordinating conjunctions is found in articles by Christensen (1963) and Struck (1965), which can be regarded as semi-corpus analysis. Christensen (1963) analyzed professional writers of his day as a way to criticize the teaching approaches of college writing by focusing on the grammatical form of "sentence openers." Christensen used a small corpus of twenty contemporary American writers "ten for narrative and ten for expository writing" (p. 7) and drew examples of how actual writers actually used adverbials, verbals, inverted-forms and coordinating-conjunctions in writing in the sentence-initial position (p. 8). Second most frequent to adverbials opening a sentence, coordinating conjunctions took 8.75% of expository writing and 4.55% of narrative writing (p. 11).

Another small-corpus study was also executed by Struck (1965), in which he takes a

list of contemporary writers from the United States and England plus a few contemporary magazines and uses these for offering examples of how professional writers do not follow prescriptive rules of coordinators:

> Such passages are not isolated instances, nor are the writers unusual. As a group, respected expository writers in the United States open about one sentence in ten with a coordinating conjunction, and British writers probably open considerably more; but is the most frequent, followed by *and* and *yet*; the rest-chiefly *for*, *nor*, *or*, *so*-also appear, though less frequently (p.43).

What is interesting about Struck's argument is that he calls the rule a myth and he offers ideas that it is maintained to encourage sentence linking, to prescribe for the sake of prescription or that it is enforced by college teachers in the technical and scientific fields (p.43). We will return to this third idea later in the paper.

In the twenty-first century, Reynolds (2011) also challenges this myth surrounding coordinators and uses syntactic analysis and corpus data to investigate the validity of each acronym of FANBOYS. In this challenge he tests the rule that *for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet* and *so* "work exclusively with a comma" and create two part sentences (pp. 104-106). Even in a cursory analysis of university textbooks, Reynolds finds a gap between the rule enforced by FANBOYS and its total absence in university textbooks (p. 108):

> Myths are fictions created to deal simply with a difficult and confusing world. They are shared by members of a certain community and to a certain extent identify that community. Myths can take on great import among the community of believers. Finally, they can serve a gatekeeping function, preserving power for those who know or "understand" the myths and denying those who do not (p. 105).

Corpus Studies of L1 writing

With the development of computer technology, more sophisticated analyses of language via general corpus studies has enabled us to have a deeper understanding of the structure of spoken and written registers of English (Biber 1991, Biber et al., 1999,).

In this section we will look at studies which challenge the notion that sentence-initial coordinators are the only providence of spoken language. Most of the research regarding sentence-initial conjunctions have focused on *and* and *but* which have a wide range of literature and research.

Dorgeloh (2004) in a study that involved the Helsinki corpus which holds a collection of early modern texts (1500-1710) in comparison with modern English corpora claims that "interpretation of the increased use of sentence-initial *and* in Modern English as a mere marker of colloquiality does not pay full justice to the phenomenon" and that sentence-initial coordinator *and* served as a functional device to aid in narration (p. 1762).

In early modern texts sentence-initial *and* was used in most writing as a cohesive device, particularly for narration, to frame ideas and to introduce a global change in the text. It did not represent spoken language at that time. The comparison is based on "open-field" vs "closed-field" orientation from Traugott (1986 pp. 138-142). Connectives with a closed-field orientation implied a *closeness* between the writer and the reader whereas an open-field implied a *distance* and more objective presentation of data to the reader. *And* in the sentence-initial position in texts aided in this closed-field type of narration.

With the rise of academic language especially in the discipline of science, the open-field which favored a more objective view of the narrative became dominant, displacing older forms of narration. "The overall assumption is that, since the evolution of academic genres towards becoming less narrative begins in this period, this results in changing patterns of use of sentence-initial *And*. This process at least foreshadowed, if not initiated, the more general banishment of *And* from (larger parts of) the written language" (p. 1770). It seems that Struck's observation that the guardians of prescriptive grammar are those in technical and scientific fields has even more validity in light of this study. Dorgelogh, in using frequency counts for sentence-initial *and* in the Helsinki corpus, reveals the gradual disappearance of this form in science and history texts. See Table 2.

Table 2: Frequency of sentence-initial *and* in Dorgeloh (2004)

Sentence-initial *and* in four Early Modern English text categories (10,000–12,000 words per category)			
	Bible	Biography/autobiography	History	Science
1500–1570	398	39	87	86
1570–1640	402	44	15	37
1640–1710	—	81	10	38

In contemporary writing, Bell (2007), using a corpus of 11 academic journals of a million words representing science, social science and the humanities identifies sentence-initial *and* and *but* as having a defined utility in academic writing. This goes beyond its use as a familiar colloquial voice to support argumentation, where other discourse markers, notably *however*, would not suffice in the context in an academic argument. He highlights three uses in

academic writing: one is to indicate the last item on a list of reasons; two, to support the development of an argument; and three to signal a shift or discontinuity with a previous unit of discourse (pp. 183-184).

His corpus, designed mostly for comparisons between types of academic journals yielded three kinds of argumentation using sentence-initial *and:* symmetrical, as in its use in listing reasons; asymmetrical, which is continuation of the argument; and the final and most frequent use, as "marking a discontinuity or shift in the discourse, most often marked by a movement away from an argumentative chain or thread to what is clearly an authorial comment on the previous discourse" (p. 190), as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Examples of the use of sentence-initial *and* in Bell (2007)

> Not much is left to respect. There remains only an old man to abuse. **And** this is exactly what awaits him, precisely as he celebrates his son's successfully concluded training. (Philosophy and Rhetoric)
>
> He still imagines that his suffering is unique and fails to identify, metaphorically, with the bull in the arena or the fish on the line. He wanders the streets. He talks to himself. He is like some medieval fool setting himself on itinerant display. (**And** Ellison indeed invokes "the Fool's Errand," as we have seen.) (Anthropoetics)

The numbers for Bell's investigation for sentence-initial *but* shows that it occurs 489 times in a million word corpus and he comments that the prescriptions against this are less compared to sentence-initial *and.* In academic writing, he finds that it functions very similar to *and* in academic discourse. "I begin by showing how SIB (sentence-initial but) operates in academic writing according to a similar tripartite function as SIA(sentence-initial and): by marking off idea units through its ability to coordinate ideas; as a device of argument development,; and third, as a way of shifting the topic domain. However, unlike SIA, I note that the most frequent use of SIB is for argument development "(p. 195). See Figure 2.

Figure 2: Examples of the use of sentence-initial *but* in Bell (2007)

> After a few days Mary regains her ability to talk. **But** her speech has lost the usual   inflection and tone, making a machine-like and dead impression. (Medicine,   Health Care and Philosophy)
>
> The nature of design is partly revealed in the qualities of products. **But** it is also   revealed in the processes of design thinking that lead to the creation of products. There is little agreement

among practicing designers or design educators about   what constitutes the precise pattern of the design process. (Philosophy and   Rhetoric)

Another study which investigated the use sentence-initial connectives *and* and *but* is in the register of newspapers. Cotter (2003) analyzed a corpus of newspapers of one specific community for the occurrence of this phenomenon. She identifies the practices of newspaper editing, which prohibited sentence-initial coordinators but gradually shifted for the sake of pragmatic goals of reader identification and "operating for discourse organization, stylistic effect and the introduction of complex ideas" (p. 49).

In selecting her data, which covers about a century of material; she randomly chose

Table 3: Frequency of sentence-initial *and* and *but* compared to temporal connectives in Cotter (2003)

Changes in connective types		
	Temporal connectives	and/but
1910–1950 (30 papers)	34	10
1962–1995 (24 papers)	14	46

the year of each decade and focused on "general news and feature stories on Page one (sic) and on one inside page, eliminating advertisements and ignoring specialty sections such as Food, Sports, and Business, which were not present in the early decades and did not appear consistently until early mid-century" (p. 54). Due to the availability of the material which was mostly on microfiche with only ten years of material on electronic format, the counting had to be done manually and by line since the newspaper format changed radically over the decades. She then divided the newspaper corpus into three eras the "proto-modern" (1910-1930); mid-century (1940 to 1950) and multi-media period (1960 to the present) counting the occurrence of sentence-initial *and* and *but* per line by era. Their use starts from zero in the first era to gradually appearing in the middle era till the multi-media era where it is a "routinized pattern" (p. 56). In comparison with temporal connectives (while, after, in the meantime etc.) there is an increase of sentence-initial *and* and *but* over time (p. 58). See Table 3.

Cotter describes the increase in pragmatic roles for sentence initial *and* and *but* in newspaper articles. From the mid-century era Cotter identified about three different kinds of pragmatic usage but this increases to as many as seven kinds by end of the multimedia era from 1988 to the present (pp. 59-66).

All of these studies challenge the idea that sentence-initial coordinators, particularly *and* and *but* have a larger role to play in discourse, and since the use or misuse coordinators are already in practice for our learners, we should reconsider whether prescription is suitable.

Pedagogical directions

A balanced approach is needed in this regard. Rather than rely exclusively on prescriptive rules which are only done to reduce complexity for the sake of convenience for the teacher we need to strike a balance with the descriptive reality of professional writers and "expert performances" (Ädel, 2006).

With this come new questions. In teaching advanced learners, the rules can be relaxed but what can guide the writing teacher to determine an inappropriate use of sentence - initial coordinators versus an appropriate one? Should beginning writers be subject to the prescriptive rules, and then be told to disregard the rules afterward without a system of support?

One way is by offering a text comparison for students where one use of the sentence-initial conjunction reads in a colloquial fashion, and then look at another where it is used to support an argument.

Another approach advocated by Crewe (1990) proposes that the use of logical connectors such as *however* for example, need to be presented in a way that is not confusing for the learner. His criticism was leveled at textbooks where all connectors were taught as a list and did not differentiate the utility of some connectors compared with others or contained mistaken associations. (pp. 317-318). Crewe suggests limiting the list, and coordinators can be part of this, to become a basic list for students to follow.

A second approach offered by Crewe would be to expand upon connectors by categorizing them as "explicit" or "implicit" He recommends these in chunks and presents one such marker with a coordinator "Because" in the initial position (p. 323). Coordinating conjunctions and subordinators in the sentence-initial position can be used here, especially for beginning students and later more advanced forms can be introduced or learned implicitly through reading academic texts.

Directions for research

The main limitation of the studies for coordinators, especially sentence-initial *and* and *but* is the size of the corpora in use. Both the Bell (2007) and the Cotter (2003) studies are too small to be generalized and in addition the results of all three studies mentioned above reported only descriptive statistics by giving token counts per genre, or in the case of Cotter's study, the

number of lines which the sentence-initial coordinator appears. But the strength of all of these studies is their attention to the actual language of the corpora itself, revealing usage of sentence-initial coordinators in writing that goes beyond the colloquial.

Future research can take the form of two approaches. One is to investigate larger more representative corpora of different registers, especially academic journals, to see if these findings are generalizable. A replication study of either two of the studies above, performed with inferential statistics may yield a more generalizability.

Another approach would be to make comparisons between inappropriate and appropriate uses of sentence-initial coordinators either by comparing corpora between native and non-native writers of English or searching for examples of appropriate use in L1 corpora. This way writing teachers can be armed with examples for pedagogy.

Conclusion

The acronyms of BABES and FANBOYS etc, are essentially "do this" or "don't do this" for EFL writers. These allow the writing teacher to gloss over the complexity of writing phenomenon. But what is needed is a new pedagogical approach which is easy to employ, aids in maintaining form, and at the same time assists with the process of establishing coherence of the message. In addition, with the accessibility of corpus data, we need to search for patterns in written language which can provide a more general view of how sentence-initial coordinators are used in writing discourse.

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