12

THE ENGLISH CONTRASTIVE DISCOURSE MARKER

ON THE CONTRARY

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1. INTRODUCTION

Discourse markers (DMs) are illustrated by the bold expressions in (1):

(1)(a) Three is a prime number but four is not.
(b) The water wouldn’t boil, so we couldn’t make any tea.
(c) It rained at the picnic. And the beer was warm.

These terms are generally held to refer to a functional (as opposed to a grammatical) class of expressions. They do not contribute to the semantic meaning of the discourse segment (S2) which hosts them, but signal the speaker’s intended relationship between this segment and the preceding one (S1). For example, in (1a), but signals that the relationship between S1 and S2 is one of contrast, while in (1b), so signals that the relationship is one of implication or consequence. Most researchers agree that there are three classes of DMs: contrastive discourse markers (but, however, instead, …), elaborative discourse markers (and, furthermore, in addition, …), and inferential discourse markers (so, thus, as a result, …), with the DMs but, and, and so being the most general member of each class.¹

There is a subcategory of contrastive discourse markers (CDMs) in English consisting of on the contrary and the less frequent to the contrary and quite the contrary. In a sequence of discourse segments “S1. On the contrary, S2,” on the contrary signals that the speaker of S2 considers S1

¹ For a more detailed presentation of discourse markers, see Fraser (2006).
to be an incorrect representation of some action, state, or property attributed to an aspect of that segment, and offers S2 as the correct representation.

There are two distinct variations of the use of this DM: the two-person, as in (2a), and the one-person, as in (2b).

(2)(a) A: I don’t suppose you remember where they are, do you?
B: On the contrary, my dear Watson, I know exactly where they are.

(b) I’m not hungry. On the contrary, I’m starved.

In each case, by using on the contrary the speaker signals that S2 represents a correct account of S1: in (2a), correcting the first speaker’s representation, while in (2b), correcting the positive version of S1.

In general, the aspects of the discourse segments S1 and S2 being contrasted must be members of a contrastable set, that is, a collection of expressions which may be contrasted along one (or more) dimensions. For example, each member of the set consisting of the terms thin, fat, heavy, skinny, obese, slim, chunky, etc., is comparable with the other members along the dimension of “weight.” With the use of on the contrary, the expressions being contrasted need not be opposites (e.g., fat/thin), but may be two points along a cline, as in (2b). In (3a), understand cannot be contrasted with agree, there being no obvious set which combines both of them, while in (3b), beautiful is effectively synonymous with gorgeous, resulting in a non-contrast.3

(3)(a) #A: I don’t agree with you.
B: On the contrary, you understand me completely.

(b) #A: You think Susan is gorgeous.
B: On the contrary, I think she is beautiful.

On the contrary occurs rarely in medial position and even more rarely in final position.4

I shall consider the two-speaker and one-speaker types in turn, and then address the relationship of on the contrary with certain other DMs. The data for the examples in the paper are drawn from the BNC, MICASE, interviews, newspapers, and introspection. No attribution has been provided because it is not relevant for this paper.

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2 There is disagreement among speakers as to the acceptability of a contrast along a cline. I am assuming them as acceptable.
3 I am using # to signify that a segment is unacceptable in that context.
4 One finds sequences like

a) It was felt that that faction was not a threat to the government but could, on the contrary, be placated.
b) Improved economic performance is, on the contrary, a prerequisite to the solution.
c) Parents, on the contrary, are not experts on educational matters.