

Avoid vagueness? The case of sentence-initial linking *however*

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A. When two items are very similar in meaning, but one (the Special alternative) is in some way more specific than the other (the General alternative), the general Gricean maxim Avoid Vagueness (AV) comes into play:

(1) **AV**: Be specific; avoid vagueness.

B. The straightforward way to obey AV in the case of Special/General pairings would be to adhere to Just as Specific as Necessary (JASAN):

(2) **JASAN**: Use Special when it is appropriate; otherwise, use General.

C. If you follow JASAN, Special maintains its meaning, and General picks up some content by implicature.

An example: for the choice between the intensifier *very* and a more specific alternative like *extremely*, following JASAN keeps *extremely* towards the high end of the scale, while *very* continues to denote something up the scale, but now conveys that it's not at the high end.

Following JASAN will tend to result, *ceteris paribus*, in a statistical preference for General, the default option.

D. Prescriptions about usage rarely suggest JASAN; instead, they routinely advise that AV be satisfied by avoiding General:

(3) **ALS**: Avoid the Less Specific.

E. In particular, advice manuals (going back at least to Strunk 1918) routinely suggest avoiding *very*; *very* gets a very bad press.

The consequence of following ALS is to move Special into the space General used to occupy, eventually bleaching it (and General as well). Following ALS means that both *extremely* and *very* lose some of their punch; eventually, *extremely* will need to be replaced by something that sounds more extreme, and *very* will decline in frequency. (*Very*, in fact, started out as a high-end intensifier, got demoted to General, and now seems to be losing the competition with newer intensifiers, at least in the speech of younger people.)

F. In at least one case, some manuals actually advise AGAINST Special: from Strunk (1918) to recent works by Garner, we're told not to use sentence-initial linking *however*, as in:

(4) The roads were impassible. However, we at last succeeded in reaching camp.

Garner offers several alternatives, but especially recommends using *but* instead of *however*:

(5) The roads were impassible. But we at last succeeded in reaching camp.

Call this Garner's Rule, **GR**. Here are two formulations:

(6) It seems that everyone has heard that sentences should not begin with [*However*]—not, that is, when a contrast is intended. But doing so isn't a grammatical error; it's merely a stylistic lapse, the word *But* ordinarily being much preferable... The reason is that *However*... is a ponderous way of introducing a contrast, and it leads to unemphatic sentences. (Garner 2003:414)

(7) Don't use *However* to start a sentence: use *But* instead, move *However* inside the sentence, or collapse the preceding sentence into an *Although*-clause. (Garner 2004:245, in advice to legal writers)

G. [SIDEBAR] To buttress his pro-*but* prescription, Garner cites a number of sources, all of whom seem to share a personal "gut" feeling against *however* as a sentence-initial linker. Among them:

(8) The word serves better when not in first position. (Strunk & White 2000:48) [S&W carry over Strunk's 1918 view, which recommended keeping *however* but moving it into the sentence.]

(9) A student writer will almost invariably give *however* first position in a sentence...But [this word] works best if it is inside the sentence. Just exactly why this position is best is one of those stylistic mysteries that can't really be explained. It simply sounds better that way. And the importance of sound can't be dismissed, even in silent reading. (Payne 1965:85-6)

[NOTE] In what follows, references to *however* and *but* are to these two items as sentence-initial linking elements, unless otherwise noted. (In particular, we exclude concessive *however* – "However we looked at it, it was peculiar" and "However small it was, it was still threatening" – and conditional-exceptional *but for* – "But for Kim, we would have failed" 'If it hadn't been for Kim, we would have failed'.)

H. [SIDEBAR] GR, of course, contradicts a widely touted but quite spurious "rule" No Initial Coordinators (NIC), barring sentence-initial coordinating conjunctions; see Zwicky 2006b,c. In fact, it's quite likely that NIC is a major contributor to student inclinations to use sentence-initial *however*.

NIC in action: http://www.amazon.com/Power-Grammar-Unconventional-Approaches-Conventions/dp/0325006881/ref=pd_ybh_a_4/105-1937454-2752461 (review of Ehrenworth & Vinton 2005 by D. Johnson, Jr.):

I acquired this book because of the title: "The Power of Grammar." The list from which I was choosing left off the subtitle, "Unconventional Approaches to Conventions of Language."

That would have been a clue that basically the authors, who claim a love for grammar, actually see conventions of "received" or "standard" English as restrictive to voice.

Some conventions they decry are **the standard "do nots"** [our bold-facing – AZ/DK] like do not begin a sentence with a conjunction, do not split an infinitive, and do not end a sentence with a preposition. They model their contempt for such convention. On two pages, four sentences and one paragraph began with conjunctions... The book addresses fanatics such as myself and notes that we are "erroneous" in our views.

Consider also an e-mail report from a college professor that he has colleagues who maintain they would never assign a textbook that had sentences beginning with a conjunction in it.

I. *But* and *however* differ phonologically (*but* is short and light, *however* longer and heavier); and stylistically (*but* is “plain style”, *however* on the formal side); and also in syntactic category (*but* is a coordinator, which means it’s limited to initial position, while *however* is an adverb and has more freedom of occurrence). All of these factors might contribute to impressions of difference between the two linkers. In any case, the advisers in the Strunk-to-Garner tradition think of *however* and *but* as equivalent in “meaning”, and sense that *however* somehow weakens the effect of the clause that follows.

J. The advice literature on English grammar and usage is full of cases where it is claimed that two expressions are free variants, identical in semantics and discourse function; the advice is then to cease using one of them in certain syntactic contexts (always use *that* for restrictive relatives, always use *but* sentence-initially) or to distinguish them merely stylistically (*if* is informal, *whether* formal, so don’t use *if* in formal contexts).

Bolinger’s Dictum [original version]: A difference in syntactic form always spells a difference in meaning. (Bolinger 1968)

Bolinger’s Dictum [AMZ’s hedged version]: Lexical and syntactic variation is unfree; variants usually have (subtly) different meanings or discourse functions, which can be observed in certain contexts (though these differences might not be of consequence in many contexts).

K. *However* and *but* aren’t equivalent: *but* is General, and *however* Special, as observed by Fraser (1998). In Schiffrin’s (1987) terms, *but* marks a main unit in discourse organization, while *however* marks a subordinate unit (and so conveys more about information structure than *but*, which merely expresses contrast). *However* normally expresses a contrast between two PROPOSITIONS, while *but* is available for all sorts of pragmatic contrasts, up to merely conveying ‘I am about to say something unexpected’. There are then many circumstances where *but* is fine but *however* is at best odd:

(10) in protests:

A: It’s bedtime.

B: But I haven’t had a story yet. / #However, I haven’t had a story yet.

(11) in amplifications:

The original was pretty bizarre.

But I’ve enhanced the effect.

?However, I’ve enhanced the effect.

(12) with interjections:

I should take your course. Oh, but I need to sign up.

I should take your course. ?Oh, however, I need to sign up.

#However, oh, I need to sign up.

(13) with following non-declarative sentences (interrogatives, imperatives, exclamations):

I know they’re nice to you. But are they really your friends?

?However, are they really your friends?

I wasn’t surprised at the results. But look at this!

?However, look at this!

This smallish sample of literate (and perhaps self-aware) writers again favors sentence-initial *but* over *however*, generally by larger margins than the three news institutions, with the exception of Liberman, who singlehandedly reduces the overall ratio, and fancies *however* more than any other writer. In any case, the individual variation is enormous (and this among four bloggers all of whom defend sentence-initial linking *however*). We conclude that *however* is a minority option, but definitely a live one.

N. **[SIDEBAR]** It's sometimes suggested that when there is a statistical preference for one variant over another, the minority option should be avoided: the majority should rule! Restrictive relativizer *that* predominates over *which*, so why not go all the way, and just get rid of *which* in this function? *But* dwarfs *however*, so why not jettison *however*?

This is a dreadful suggestion in the case of variants that differ in meaning or discourse function as General vs. Special: the proposal would drive out Special (almost always the minority option) and so reduce the expressive possibilities of the language. Even when it's hard to discern some sort of "meaning" difference (as in the case of names of educational institutions of the form *University of PlaceName* vs. *PlaceName University*, where the former variant is strongly preferred), you might sometimes go for the minority variant on the basis of factors other than "meaning". (For university names, see the discussion in Zwicky (2006a).) As Zwicky said there, "I don't think variation is in need of a fix within the standard language. There's nothing wrong with minority variants." In other words: resist the tyranny of the majority!

O. It might well be that GR reflects an appreciation of the discourse subordination of the material that *however* introduces. Nevertheless, we're dubious about GR on two grounds: other sentence-initial discourse connectives (*consequently, therefore, nonetheless, nevertheless*) that no one seems to complain about, although they are also discourse subordinators; and the sentence-internal uses of *however* ("We at last succeeded, however, in reaching camp."), which are also discourse subordinators, but are often suggested as substitutes for initial *however*. The other initial adverbials and the internal uses of *however* also share with initial *however* its prosodic weight and formality of style, so there seems to be no external justification for the bias against initial *however*, which remains a matter of individual taste – perhaps a reaction to the over-use of initial *however* by student writers who have had NIC drilled into them.

P. In any case, GR runs against both the Gricean JASAN and the prescriptivists' usual advice, ALS; there is no good reason not to use sentence-initial linking *however* on occasion.

[NOTE FROM AMZ] Even I ended up using one, finally, in my Language Log posting on the tyranny of the majority. I didn't notice it until I was about to type the comma; reflected on what I was writing; and decided I liked it as it was:

Mark turns out to be exceptionally fond of sentence-initial linking *however*, Ben to be somewhat averse to it, and Geoff and I to be strongly averse to it. However (there! I've broken the run), all of us defend this use of *however*, as something available to anyone, in formal writing and elsewhere.

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<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/002291.html>, 7/4/05.
- 2006a. The tyranny of the majority, and other reasons for choosing a variant:
<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/003576.html>, 9/13/06.
- 2006b. If they do it too much, they should be told not to do it at all.
<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/003721.html>, 10/31/06.
- 2006c. However,... <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/003723.html>, 11/1/06.