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)(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.

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.
2. The Two-Speaker Case

The examples in (4) are illustrative of the two-speaker case.

(4)(a) A: Jack is in Boston today.
    B: On the contrary, he is in New York.
    (b) A: He hasn’t arrived.
    B: On the contrary, he got here 15 minutes ago.
    (c) A: Pete disagreed with us.
    B: On the contrary, he is in complete agreement.
    (d) A: Did you say that Mary made a trivial mistake?
    B: On the contrary, I said she made a horrendous error.
    (e) A: Let him go.
    B: On the contrary, shoot him.

These two-speaker examples show that S1 can be explicitly positive, explicitly negative, or have negative incorporation (dis-agree), and that there is a range of syntactic sequences: if S1 is a declarative, S2 can be a declarative or imperative; if S1 is an interrogative, S2 can be an interrogative or declarative; and if S1 is an imperative, S2 can be an imperative or a declarative. S2 can be either a declarative or an imperative but not an interrogative.

The expressions “That’s wrong,” “You are mistaken,” or the like may be substituted for on the contrary to provide a synonymous sequence when S1 and S2 are assertions, as illustrated in (5a).

However, these expressions can’t co-occur with on the contrary, as (5b) shows.

(5)(a) A: He’s arrived.
    B: That’s not true/On the contrary, he won’t be here for an hour.
    (b) #A: He’s arrived.
    B: That’s not true. On the contrary, he won’t be here for an hour.

Another alternative, no, is illustrated in (6).

(6) A: Didn’t you say that George had done it?
    B₁: No (I didn’t say that). I said he couldn’t have done it, given his skills.
    B₂: On the contrary, I said he couldn’t have done it, given his skills.
    B₃: No (I didn’t say that). On the contrary, I said he couldn’t have done it, given his skills.

Here, the two expressions no and on the contrary can occur in a sequence, as (6B₃) shows.

In addition, the two-speaker case permits the S1 and S2 sequences to represent explicit illocutionary acts, as long as they are able to be construed within a contrastable set of objects.
(7)(a) A: Don’t touch anything on the table. [Forbidding]
    B: On the contrary, you may touch anything you like. [Granting permission]
(b) A: I suggest you take a peach. [Suggestion]
    B: On the contrary, I order you to take the whole bushel. [Order]

3. The One-Speaker Case

The one-speaker case is illustrated in (8), where S1 is set up as a foil by the speaker.

(8)(a) (You ask) Is Sam dishonest? On the contrary, he’s incredibly honest.
(b) (You think) She is gorgeous. On the contrary, I find her rather ordinary looking.
(c) (You are suggesting that I) Throw the game? On the contrary, the hell with you.
(d) Fred, a gentleman? On the contrary, he is a bastard.
(e) I am positive that George didn’t speak out against the tyrannical administration. On the contrary, he never spoke at all.
(f) Mary didn’t make a trivial mistake. On the contrary, she made a horrendous error.
(g) I don’t object to Pete’s manners. On the contrary, it’s his morals I object to.

There are two variations. The first is where the content of S1 is attributed to another speaker, as in (8a–d), in which case there is no polarity constraint on S1, and S2 must be a declarative. In these cases of “other-attribution,” a denial such as “That’s incorrect,” “You’re mistaken,” or something analogous may replace on the contrary, with no change of meaning. However, “That’s incorrect” may not co-occur in the same segment with on the contrary, as shown in (9c).

(9) You said that Mary made a trivial mistake.
   (a) That’s incorrect, she made a horrendous error.
   (b) On the contrary, she made a horrendous error.
   (c) #That’s incorrect. On the contrary, she made a horrendous error.

If the rejected aspect is less serious than the correction, an expression such as “You must be kidding” can be used instead of on the contrary. However, this use is not possible if the rejected aspect is more serious, as shown in (10).

(10)(a) You said she made a trivial mistake. You must be kidding. She made a horrendous error.
(b) #You said that she made a horrendous error. You must be kidding, she made a trivial mistake.
When it is the speaker’s view that is represented in S1, as in (8e–g), S1 must be explicitly negated, and S2 must be a declarative sentence. Similar to the two-speaker case, on the contrary occurs rarely in medial or final position.

Sequences such as those in (8f) are instances of metalinguistic negation (Horn, 1989), where it is not the entire proposition S1 that is “negated” but rather an aspect of S1, in response to a prior positive statement or an implication from the facts. Metalinguistic negation has a characteristic prosodic pattern on the rejected aspect of S1 – a high, questioning intonation with heavy stress on the suspect aspect, which is a very different pattern from a propositionally negated sentence with the same words. The sequences in (11) are illustrative.

(11)(a) The glass isn’t half full, (On the contrary), it’s half empty.
(b) He’s not my father, (On the contrary), I’m his daughter.
(c) A: Are you happy?
B: I’m not happy, (On the contrary), I’m ecstatic!

In (11a–b), the speaker is proposing a different orientation to what has been suggested, even though the corrected version is logically synonymous with the rejected segment, while in (11c) the adjective happy is rejected because it doesn’t capture the magnitude of the true feeling of the speaker. On the contrary is acceptable in all these cases.

4. ALTERNATIVE FORMS

An alternative form to on the contrary is to the contrary. However, examination of the examples used above reveals that this expression does not fit, or fits awkwardly, in their contexts. In fact, in searching the BNC, for example, only a few cases were found. The following examples reflect the use of to the contrary.

(12)(a) The fact that Mr. Bush believes he is right does not mean that events will prove him right. To the contrary, there is a growing belief that he is massively wrong.
(b) *The Washington Post* said that the knock against Clinton is that he is shifty. To the contrary, he has a pretty steady history and has survived the investigative onslaught pretty well.

These mirror on the contrary.

A second use of to the contrary is illustrated in (13).

(13)(a) Despite frequently heard voices to the contrary, economic growth requires risks.
(b) If there is evidence to the contrary, the NSC would know about it.
(c) Nothing in these papers makes me believe anything to the contrary.
In this use, *to the contrary* does not function as a DM, but rather as an adverbial, with the gloss “contradictory.”

A third variation is *quite to the contrary*, relatively infrequent, but it occurs in sequence like the following.

(14)(a) Not that she is a vicious cat: *quite the contrary*, but claws are meant for holding on, aren’t they.

(b) It had never happened to her; in fact, *quite the contrary*, she reveled in the buildup to her own entrance, loving the rush of adrenalin that came every time.

Although the expression *contrariwise*, due to its morphological content, might be expected to be an alternative to *on the contrary*, it occurs in sequences such as the following.

(15)(a) Excessive pressure on the eyeball will produce a sensation of light. *Contrariwise*, overintense stimulation of the appropriate kind will evoke pain.

(b) The idea that the right hemisphere may be involved in processing highly imaginable words is supported by considerable data. *Contrariwise*, left-sided lobectomy affects abstract words but has little effect on recall of concrete words.

Here, its meaning is clearly closely related to *on the other hand* or *conversely*, rather than to *on the contrary*.

5. The Relationship of *on the Contrary* with Other CDMs

The DM *but*, the most general of the CDMs, may often occur where the more specific CDMs are found, with no apparent alternation of meaning. Its substitutability for *on the contrary* occurs in two contexts. The first occurs when there are two speakers, and both S1 and S2 are declarative structures, as in (16), where the contrast in S2 is a direct opposite of S1.

(16)(a) A: Harry is not tall.

B: *But/On the contrary*, he IS tall.

(b) A: Sue agreed with me.

B: *But/On the contrary*, she DID NOT agree with you.

However, this is not the typical use of *but*, but rather what I have called the *protest but* (Fraser, 2008), where there is marked prosody: *but* takes an emphatic stress with relatively high pitch, and there is additional emphatic stress in the segment. This is in contrast to the typical use of *but* in a sequence of “simple contrast,” as in (17a), and “contrary to expectation,” as in (17b), where no marked prosody is required.
(17)(a) John is fairly good looking. **But/In contrast**, Henry is fairly ugly.

(b) We started out late. **But/However**, we arrived on time.

There is no question that the use of *but* in (16) conveys a measure of surprise or annoyance not found in the same sequence when *on the contrary* is used. The uses of *but* and *on the contrary* are not synonymous in this context.

Interestingly, if the sequences in (16) have the expression “You’re mistaken” or an analogous expression inserted, as in (17),

(18)(a) A: Harry is not tall. 
   **B: But you’re mistaken/On the contrary**, he IS tall.

(b) A: Sue did not agree with me. 
   **B: But that’s wrong/On the contrary**, she DID agree with you.

the emphatic stress on *but* is not typically present. The co-occurrence of the two CDMs in a sequence such as *but, on the contrary* is unacceptable, as (19) illustrates.

(19)(a) A: Jack is in Boston today.  
   **B: But, on the contrary**, he is in New York.

(b) A: Peter disagrees with you.  
   **B: But, on the contrary**, he is in complete agreement.

The second use of *but* in an *on the contrary* context occurs when there is one speaker, both segments are declarative, and S1 reflects the speaker’s opinion, and the use is not intended as a case of metalinguistic negation. This is illustrated in (20).

(20)(a) There was no reliable evidence of guilt. **But/On the contrary**, there was considerable proof of innocence.

(b) He did not attempt to enter into ruinous competition. **But/On the contrary**, he adapted himself to the changed circumstances.

In these cases, the *but* and *on the contrary* do seem to be synonymous.

What is different in this one-speaker case is that the sequence *but* and *on the contrary* may co-occur, which was not the case for the two-speaker examples. Analogous sequences occur with the DM *and*, as in (21):

(21) It was argued for the defendant in the present appeal that his case was wrongly decided. 
   **I disagree, and on the contrary** find myself in full agreement with the award.

but no cases of *so, on the contrary* were found.

In closing, I want to illustrate briefly how the CDMs differ from each other and to stress that there is very little overlap in their use. For example, where *on the contrary* signals that the speaker
of S2 holds some state, action, or property of S1 to be incorrect, on the other hand signals that the
speaker views S1 and S2 to contrast with each other but are mutually compatible. S1 is not held
to be incorrect, and it is not rejected nor replaced.

(22) A: George spoke out against the administration.
    B: On the other hand, his message was fairly innocuous.
    #On the contrary

Instead, in contrast, signals one of two alternatives. The first is that the speaker intends S1 to
represent a state/action that did not take place, while S2 represents a state/action that did/will take
place in lieu of S1. On the contrary cannot be substituted.

(23) I didn’t take the letter. Instead, I left it lying on the table.
    #On the contrary

The second use of instead signals that S1 represents a state/action that did occur, with an alter-
native of state/action that might have been taken being suggested in S2.

(24) Mark talked at length with the police. Instead, he should have just kept quiet.
    #On the contrary

Again, on the contrary cannot replace instead.

Finally, however signals a contrast between segment S2 and an inferred representation of S1,
much the same as the “contrary to expectation” use of but. It does not involve the evaluation of the
correctness of S1 and thus it is not surprising that these two markers are not compatible.

(25) I arrived late for the dinner party. However, no one seemed to mind.
    #On the contrary

6. Conclusion

The foregoing has been a brief and incomplete presentation of one CDM: on the contrary. There are other aspects of this marker which would have to be present in a full treatment. For
example, what constraints are placed on its use by different gender, their age, if the discourse is
oral or written, if the discourse is prepared or unprepared, the country of origin, and the like? What
are the complete syntactic and semantic constraints on its use? What variations of use are possible,
and under what conditions? What is the degree of overlap with other CDMs, as was shown for but
and on the contrary? What is the possibility for sequences of on the contrary with other CDMs
(e.g., but, on the contrary), and on the contrary with other DMs (e.g., and, on the contrary)?
Finally, what role does on the contrary play in contributing to the coherence of a discourse?
These issues must be left for another time. For the moment, I have tried to give an idea of how interesting and complicated DMs are. Their examination has just begun.

REFERENCES


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