

COMMUNICATIVE GRAMMAR : ANALYSIS OF THE WORD “HOWEVER” IN THE LOB CORPUS

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The present analysis of the word **however**, as a practical rather than theoretical activity, draws on insights from everyday talk and information from both native speakers of English and EFL students as well as from the invaluable help of mainly “A Communicative Grammar of English”¹, “A Grammar of Contemporary English”² and above all, “A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language”.³

The emphasis in this analysis is, therefore, on the meanings and uses of the word *however* (semantics and pragmatics) rather than on its syntax. Nevertheless, this aspect of the language underlying *however* is also taken into consideration.

1. However: Meanings and uses

A fortunate comment in a cafe was the starting point of my hypothesis about the meanings and uses of the word *however*:

“However many biscuits you eat, you never gain a stone”

¹ Leech, G. and Svartvik, J. (1975). *A communicative Grammar of English*. Singapore: Longman.

² Quirk, R., Greebaun, S., Leech, G. and Svartvik, J. (1972). *A Grammar of Contemporary English*. London: Longman.

³ Quirk, R., Leech, G. and Svartvik, J. (1985). *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman.

1.1 *However* in its core meaning expresses contrast⁴ between the pieces of information in which it occurs (it is difficult, at this point, to determine the different positions it may have). It can be replaced by other markers such as *but, nevertheless, yet...*. This meaning of contrast is illustrated in the following text extract:⁵

“The rehabilitation of the refugees from West Pakistan has been more or less completed, however, rehabilitation of refugees from East Pakistan still remains to be accomplished.”

In this example there is a clear contrast between the fate of those people who are living in West Pakistan and those in the East.

1.1.1 Very often, when *however* expresses contrast, it also involves a selective alternative. Let us examine this fact in light of the following example taken from the corpus:

“In this brief study, however, what interests us is not the direct

⁴ Leech and Starvick, op. Cit., p. 98. They classify the word *however* expressing contrast as a Linking Construction-Adverbial Link.

⁵ All extracts are taken from the Corpus, except for the example in point 1.1.3.

significance of these musical conventions in themselves, but their indirect influence upon the fate of Moliere”.

However in the text above, keeping its meaning of contrast, involves two alternatives as well: (i) the study of the direct significance of the musical conventions in themselves and (ii) the study of the indirect influence upon the fate of Moliere’s.

1.1.2 *However* expressing contrast, on rare occasions, might emphasise the part of the sentence in which the word appears. It may, in effect, imply that what has been written or said previously, although correct, is not the main point of the text. The example below could be an illustration of this, even though, it is not possible to be certain without further details of the passage.

“... it was not necessary to understand Marxism in order to understand socialism, though at this time he was a keen member of the B.S.P., George, however, never deviated from his belief that it was the economic basis of society which needed to be changed, for the conditions of the people were appalling, there being only slight...”

The position of *however* in medial position following George puts the contrastive emphasis on George, contrasted with “other people”. This is because George is followed by the comma juncture.

In addition, from what I can deduce, the writer wants to acknowledge the complexity of Marxist theory but stresses that what is

really relevant is merely George’s opinions regarding economics. With access to the whole text, I might, of course, have interpreted the message in a different way.

1.1.3 *However* expressing condition-contrast⁶ may be seen as a derived or extended use of the meaning of contrast considered in 1.1 above. Nevertheless, historically, it seems to be the other way round. For a better understanding of the use of *however* expressing condition-contrast, let us consider the following example taken from “A Communicative Grammar of English”:

*“However much advice we give him, he (still) does exactly what he wants”.*⁷

In this example, *however* expresses condition-contrast: the condition implying that we try to advise him as much as possible, which “contrasts” with the behaviour or response of the person advised.

However expressing condition-contrast may be replaced by the expressions “It doesn’t matter how” / “No matter how”, but, according to different informants, the use of *however* is much more formal and therefore much more used in written texts.

Going back to the comment in the cafe, although *however* also expresses condition-contrast and thus can be replaced by the expressions “It doesn’t matter how” / “no matter how”, it seems to imply something more than condition-contrast. Reading through the Corpus, as one of the best sources

⁶ Ibid ., p. 160.

⁷ Ibid ., p. 160.

of information and looking for more examples of “however many” as well as for an explanation of its implication, it was found that “*however many*” only occurs in two examples considering all the categories available.

“Finally, mention may be made of a letter which is sent out at Christmas time to every boy and girl whose address is known, however many years ago they have left our care” .

As there is not enough information in the Corpus about what “*however many*” may imply, it is not evident to me if it is to be interpreted differently from other expressions such as “*however long*”, “*however much*”, etc. This low frequency of occurrence will be taken into consideration later on.

As a result of a careful and systematic study and examination of the comment in the café “However many biscuits you eat, you never gain a stone”, the following two issues emerged:

- (i) *However* is preceding a noun phrase⁸: Adjective + noun → many biscuits
- (ii) There is not a comma after the word *however*, something that is more or less fixed when *however* means contrast (see point 3, *However*: punctuation marks).

The two issues above led me to the following questions:

- (i) Is the word *however* playing the role of a modifier of the noun phrase “many biscuits”?

- (ii) If so, is it giving more force to the meaning of the noun phrase?

- (iii) Or on the other hand, is *however* diminishing the meaning of the noun phrase by emphasising the second clause: “you never gain a stone”?

- (iv) Is the word *however* in the context in turn (preceding an adjective: “many”) much more emphatic than the expressions “No matter how / It doesn’t matter how”?

Looking in the Corpus for more examples of the sort of “*however many...*” and asking some informants about the possible and different meanings of the word *however* in similar contexts, I found the answers to the questions raised above. Let us consider them in light of the following example:

“As you read those slender greenish volumes of the pseudonym Library, pausing to discover the peculiar merit of Some Emotions and a Moral, you felt that however obscure the meaning, the style was superb”.

- **However + Adjective**

The word *however* in the example above seems to be diminishing the importance of the degree of obscurity (any point on the scale is valid). Thus, *however* is emphasising the importance of the style by diminishing the importance of the degree of obscurity. At this point, it may be said that *however* + adjective (however obscure) is equivalent to saying “whatever + noun; in this instance whatever the obscurity”.

⁸ Quirk, Leech and Svartvik, op. cit. , p. 39.

I will try to verify the role of *however* as a “diminisher - emphasiser ” when it precedes an adjective, by analysing another example:

“It will be argued here that procedures for setting rates, however refined, do not by themselves solve any of the problems raised by the existence of differing notions of the proper day’s work”.

However, here too, seems to be diminishing the importance of the degree of refinement. So, it is emphasising the fact that the procedures for setting rates do not solve any of the problems mentioned in the text.

And again, in the following text, *however* preceding an adjective is playing the same role which, I consider, may confirm its use as a “ diminisher-emphasiser ” .

“First we must have a Constitution which gives full protection to the various interests in the country, however diverse they may be so as to ensure that they can play a full part in the life of the country”.

However diminishes the importance of the degree of diversity of the interests and emphasises the need for having a Constitution.

With these considerations, the questions raised before may be answered.

1.1.4 *However* plays the role of a “diminisher-emphasiser” rather than a modifier when it precedes an adjective. There is not much evidence to assure that *however*

in this context is more emphatic than the expressions “No matter how /It doesn’t matter how”, but according to different informants *however* is both more emphatic and more frequent than the expressions which I previously referred to.

- **However + Adverb**

However does not only precede adjectives but also adverbs. The use of *however* + adverb appears to be a little more complicated due to the fact that sometimes it seems to play the same role of a “diminisher-emphasiser” as in the cases where *however* precedes adjectives.

... he usually observed a private fatalism, which made speculation superfluous, and in the deaths of others, however deeply he might feel a personal loss, he knew that it was useless to lament or do anything but hide his feelings in a situation where death came all the time and hardly...”

In this context, *however* can also be replaced by “No matter how / It doesn’t matter how”. The word *however* seems to be diminishing the importance of the sort of feeling by emphasising the uselessness of lamenting.

However, some other times seems to play the role of an emphasiser of the adverb it precedes. In order to study this possible use of *however*, let us consider the following text:

“ Morand decides that the ringing repetition of ME in the speech of sacrifice of the Son is a little too grotesque, however perfectly in character”

I associate this text with the comment somebody made about the repetition of a word in the script of a play. I might be wrong, but what I see is that the word ME is repeated constantly in a speech which makes it “a little too grotesque, *however* perfectly in character”. Here, the word *however* is reinforcing the meaning of “perfectly in character” referred back to the repetition of the word ME. In this context and with the role of a “reinforcer”⁹, *however* may not be replaced by the expressions “No matter how / It doesn’t matter how” because it would probably change the meaning. Maybe “although” could be used instead.

1.1.5 With the analysis of these examples I could deduce that *however* preceding adverbs may play the role of a “diminisher-emphasizer”, on the one hand, and of a “reinforcer” on the other. However, I think this impression of reinforcement may depend a lot on the final position of the *however* clause, which here comes at the end of the main clause. If I insert “*however* perfectly in

character” after “Son”, it will be noticed that the reinforcing effect will have more or less disappeared.

Summarising this first point it could be said that *however* has three different meanings and uses¹⁰:

(i). *However* expressing contrast which I will call **Hc**.

(ii). *However* preceding adjectives or adverbs and playing the role of a “diminisher-emphasiser” which I will call **Hd-e**.

(iii). *However* preceding adverbs and playing the role of a “reinforcer” which I will call **Hr**.

2. *However*: Position, occurrence and frequency

2.1 Position

Hc may occur in any position in an utterance. Nonetheless, the position of *however* in the second clause seems to be the most common. Let us consider the following examples taken from the Corpus.

	SECOND CLAUSE	EXAMPLES
	Hc, Second Clause	However, we got our wayward belle ...
	S, Hc, predicate	Interests, HOWEVER, remained...
	S+V, Hc+C	He realised, HOWEVER, as not...
FIRST CLAUSE	S+Be, Hc,C	The point is, HOWEVER, that all this ...
	S+Hc+Be+C	Sidney HOWEVER was
	S+Hc, Modal+...	the secretary of state, HOWEVER, would
	S+,Modal,Hc	We would, HOWEVER, be careful.
	S, Hc, Adverb	George, HOWEVER, deviated ...
	Adverb, Hc+Clause	Recently, Hc, she was found...

⁹ The term “reinforcer” is not likely to be used very commonly. It doesn’t appear in the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English” and, according to informants, it is sometimes used while in others it is not.

¹⁰ It is important to remember that Hc and Hd-e are, syntactically speaking, very different.

There are many more different structures in which **Hc** occurs in a second clause after the first clause. However, it is rather unlikely to find examples where **Hc**, in the second clause, appears before the first clause. The high variable positions of **Hc** may be shown by means of the following example where (*) indicates the possible positions of **Hc**, although some are considered more common than others.

* "For me, * aesthetics *
seemed to be * a more civilised
mode guidance * than theology
* "

2.2 Occurrence

2.2.1 Hd-e before adjectives

"Where there is a passionate and constant love of a book and rereading, then, however bad we think the book and however immature or uneducated we think the reader, it cannot..."

There are 46 cases in the Corpus in which **Hd-e** occurs before adjectives: (**Hd-e** + unpopular, horrific, impressive, arbitrary, educative, well-hidden...)

2.2.2 Hd-e before adverbs

"What we can and do object to, however carefully landscaped and however beautifully designed this power station..."

There is a total number of 11 cases in the Corpus in which **Hd-e** occurs before adverbs.

2.2.3 Hr before adverbs

"Morand decides that the ringing repetition of ME in the speech of sacrifice of the Son is a little too grotesque, however perfectly in character"

There are 10 cases in the Corpus in which **Hr** occurs before adverbs:

(**Hr** + briefly, reluctantly, much, beautifully...).

2.3 Frequency

Considering the frequency of *however* according to its possible meanings and uses, it was found that:

2.3.1 In general terms, *however* seems to be more frequent in texts related to scientific writings (28 %) and in belles-lettres, biographies and essays (18%) than in any other category of texts which may show that *however* is mostly used in formal writings. It is surprising that in science fiction, it occurs only one time (0.17 %). The second lowest frequency of *however* occurs in adventure and western fiction with a percentage of 1.2.¹¹

2.3.2 **Hc** is much more frequent than **Hd-e** or **Hr**. Among 566 texts in which *however* occurs, there are 499 cases of **Hc** which is the 88.2 % .

¹¹ Other Categories in the Corpus: Press: Reportage, Press: Editorial, Press: Review, Religion, Skills, Trades and Hobbies, Popular Lore, Miscellaneous, General Fiction, Mystery and Detective Fiction, Romance and Love Story, Humor.

2.3.3 Hd-e is much more frequent when it precedes adjectives than when it precedes adverbs. There are 46 cases of the former (8.1%) compared with 11 of the latter (1.9%). As can be clearly seen, there is some evidence to show that **Hd-e** preceding adjectives is more frequent. I can see no linguistic reason why this should be the case, but I suspect that this result may be due to the fact that there are more adjectives than adverbs being used. Alternatively, and perhaps more likely, this result may be due to the fact that adverbs tend to be placed towards the end of a sentence, whereas *however* is mostly placed towards the beginning.

2.3.4 Hr seems to be the least frequent. Of 21 texts in which *however* occurs before adverbs, there are 10 cases of **Hr** (1.8%), but none at all with the fiction categories which suggests that **Hr** is a device of formal writing.

3. However: Punctuation marks

Punctuation seems to play an important role especially when *however* expresses contrast. In general terms it could be said that:

3.1 Hc generally occurs followed by a comma

"However, it must be re-emphasised that we have included hours worked in our computation...."

3.2 Hc can also occur between commas

"The public services, however, are committed to a different view."

3.3. There are some cases in which **Hc** is not followed by or between commas

"It may however be argued that (...) places overmuch weight on the influence of average unemployment."

It could be considered that **Hc** followed by or between commas emphasises the subject more, whereas, generally speaking, **Hc** without commas emphasises the verb. This might be so because the use of commas may portray the intonation with which the piece should be read and thus makes the meaning clearer. However, the use of commas depends, to some degree, on the writers' decision; they might think that the use of commas can make the sentence overcrowded with punctuation and they leave the commas out when the meaning is clear enough.

The cases of **Hc** followed by or between commas seems to be more common and therefore more frequent. Of 499 texts of **Hc**, there are just 39 cases in which **Hc** appears without commas. This makes only the 7.8% of the cases of **Hc**.

4. Conclusions

However hard the writing of this essay was, it has been definitely influential in the development and strength of an awareness of what "Communicative Grammar" and the "teaching of grammar in a communicative way" mean.

Grammar cannot be seen as a separate, "cold" piece of a given language. Conversely, according to Leech, it is closely related to the study of language from the point of view

of the users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interactions, and the effect their use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication, which helps the learner to figure out how the language works when interacting with other people.

In the case study of *however*, it is surprising to discover the different aspects the word presents and the possible meanings the word suggests. It should be noted, however, that there must be more issues underlying the word than I could uncover.

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