My talk focuses on inferences like the ones in (1) and (2).

(1) The beer was delicious but it was tangy. → SPEAKER dislikes tangy beer.
(2) The beer was delicious and it was tangy. → SPEAKER likes tangy beer.

We can talk about these inferences in terms of evaluative polarity, or what I’ll call evaluativity. Evaluativity is a rough measure of a speaker’s implied feelings or judgments toward some topic of conversation. Expressions uttered in a discourse are either evaluative or non-evaluative, and evaluative expressions have either positive or negative evaluativity.

Descriptively, these inferences involve two evaluative clauses linked by either a contrastive connective like but or a non-contrastive connective like and. Contrastive connectives require contrasting evaluativity among their conjuncts, as shown in (3) and (4). The positive evaluativity in the atmosphere was pleasant contrasts with the negative evaluativity in the waiter was rude. Non-contrastive connectives require consistent evaluativity among their conjuncts, as shown in (5) and (6). The positive evaluativity in the atmosphere was pleasant is consistent with the positive evaluativity in the waiter was friendly.

(3) The atmosphere was pleasant but the waiter was rude.
(4) #The atmosphere was pleasant but the waiter was friendly.
(5) The atmosphere was pleasant and the waiter was friendly.
(6) #The atmosphere was pleasant and the waiter was rude.

Importantly, these judgments only hold if we assume some underlying topic of evaluation. If we imagine a scenario where a speaker is merely listing random characteristics of a restaurant to jog our memory, then (6) sounds okay.

The first thing to notice about this class of inferences is that they defy a simple explanation based on the contrastive meaning of but. We might wish to say that the evaluativity contrast required in (3) and (4) is just part of a more general contrastivity requirement imposed by but. Then the consistency required in (5) and (6) could be derived by a quantity implicature: since the speaker could have signaled a contrast with but yet didn’t, they must have meant there to be consistent evaluativity.

This analysis is problematic in two ways which I detail in the talk. Ultimately, I account for these inferences by principles of discourse coherence adopted from Asher and Lascarides (2003). Using the rhetorical relations of CONTRAST, PARALLEL, and CONTINUATION, I derive these inferences from independently motivated mechanisms of coherence maximization.

This analysis hinges on an understanding of evaluative clauses as having a semantic structure distinct from their non-evaluative counterparts. This may seem problematic at
first because identical expressions can have both evaluative and non-evaluative readings, as in (7) and (8).

(7) I like John. He’s tall. (evaluative)
(8) You’ll find John at the bar. He’s tall. (non-evaluative)

I give an analysis in which both readings involve degree comparison with contextually supplied standards (von Stechow 1984). Non-evaluative readings bear the usual non-modal standard: e.g. the normal height in some salient comparison class. However, evaluative readings bear modal standards which involve quantification over deontically accessible worlds reflecting the speaker’s goals or desires. A reading of he’s tall with positive evaluativity takes on the paraphrase in (9). A reading of he’s short with negative evaluativity takes on the similar paraphrase in (10).

(9) He’s taller than what is incompatible with my desires.
(10) He’s shorter than what is compatible with my desires.

There are two promising features of this analysis. First, it correctly predicts when modal too-expressions take on evaluative readings: they do so only when the modal base reflects the speaker’s desires, as shown in (11) and (12).

(11) This dal is too salty (given my desires). (evaluative)
(12) That chair is too well-built (given what I know about chairs that typically come from John’s workshop) (non-evaluative)

Second, we can see that the distribution of and and but in evaluative discourse is part of a broader pattern affecting many expressions of modal (in)compatibility, such as those in (13-16).

(13) The box is taller than it should be and/??but it’s wider than it should be.
(14) The box is as tall as it should be but/??and it’s wider than it should be.
(15) He can and/#but he should.
(16) He can but/#and he shouldn’t.

References:
