

# Non-at-issue content in three text genres

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## 1 Introduction

We annotated the car review, interview, and narrative text by extending the guidelines by Riestler et al. (2018) to non-at-issue (NAI) content. Our main interest for the present paper is whether a unified definition of the at-issue/not-at-issue distinction can be found which works in all three text genres. There are different proposals of such a definition in the literature (e.g., Potts, 2005; Koev, 2013; Roberts et al., 2009). For our annotation we assume that at-issue content is content which answers the QUD, and we use the negation test to establish at-issueness. Take example (1) from the car review (simplified here, original in 2):

- (1) BMW tells us the 2-series Active Tourer, the company’s first stab at a people carrier, is doing better than expected.

The Active Tourer remains BMW’s first stab at a people carrier even when we negate the main clause (*is not doing better than expected*). The interjection is thus not at-issue to the *BMW-telling-us* proposition while the main clause is.

QUD trees model the given/new distinction with background being given information and focus being new information. Focus material answers the QUD. The QUD contains given material. So material which the negation test finds to not be in the scope of negation—and is also not background material—should be material which is also not in focus, and thus does not answer the QUD. Under this assumption and applying the negation test, any material which is not background, focus or a discourse marker should potentially be NAI content.

In this paper, we discuss that this approach to NAI labelling segmented corpus material seems appropriate in the review genre. However, it seems less appropriate in the interview and narrative genre. In the interview genre, this approach to NAI labelling fails to distinguish (i) NAI content in the form of optional information, (ii) in the form of vacuous statements (e.g., *Well, I mean*), (iii) evasive statements, which are NAI with respect to the overt interview questions but answer alternative implicit QUDs (so not NAI w.r.t. these implicit QUDs). In the narrative genre, a QUD analysis struggles with the many layers of narration: propositions of a series of events, characters’ minds and emotions, memories, timelines, flashbacks, multiple subjective perceptions of the same events, perspective switching, and narrator perspective. It is tempting

to focus a QUD analysis on the propositional content (as you would in the review and interview genre), but this would make the narration of what is going on in characters’ minds and their expressive, subjective exclamations NAI content. This runs completely counter to the intuition that “the real story” argueably/predominantly happens in the non-propositional content while the propositional content is often sparse, trivial, mondaine or simply uninterpretable without the non-propositional component.

In this paper, we offer alternative QUD analyses of the supposed NAI content in the interview and narrative genre which aims to account for the genre-specific characteristics. The main thrust of this paper is to highlight the urgent need for QUD approaches to address these challenges in order to be a proper framework for discourse analysis.

## 2 Methods

Generally, annotations follow the guidelines by Riester et al. (2018), but since these guidelines do not specifically address the treatment of NAI content, we introduced a NAI segmentation label. All three texts (review, interview, narrative) were annotated by two annotators. The final XML files submitted to the challenge is the annotation negotiated amongst annotators. In our annotation, assertions were segmented into background material (BG) and focus material (F), where focus is any material which answers a QUD and background is any information already given in the QUD. Discourse markers such as the contrast marker *but* received a dedicated label (DM), distinguishing them from background and focus material. The example in (2) features all segmentation labels used:

- (2) **QUD:** *What does BMW tell us?*  
 [BMW]<sub>BG</sub> [cheerfully]<sub>NAI</sub> [tells us]<sub>BG</sub> [the 2-series Active Tourer,]<sub>F</sub> [the company’s first stab at a people carrier,]<sub>NAI</sub> [is doing rather better than expected]<sub>F</sub>

Labelling NAI segments in this way works well for NAI content which is not at-issue to the QUD immediately dominating its host assertion (e.g., evaluative adverbs such as *cheerfully* and interjections such as *the company’s first stab at a people carrier* in example 1) (cf. e.g., Potts, 2005).

In the following section we showcase the limitations of this NAI labelling approach, particularly in the interview and narrative genre. We propose alternative QUD structures to overcome these limitations.

## 3 Results

### NAI in the review genre

In the car review genre, at-issue content is typically statements about technical specifications about the vehicle. NAI content typically comes in the form of

contextualising background information (e.g., that the 2-series Active is BMW’s first stab at a people carrier in example 1) or evaluative adjective, adverbs, and statements. Evaluative statements receive their own sub-QUD as in (4).

- (4) **Q<sub>1</sub>**: *What is the maximum price point?*  
**A<sub>1</sub>**: The optioned-up 220d xDrive M Sport we drove veered close to £40k  
 > **Q<sub>2</sub>**: *How is the price to be evaluated?*  
 > **A<sub>2</sub>**: Absurd money for an MPV

QUD-subordination is thus a way to express secondariness associated with NAI content. Negation applied above the main assertion does not affect the NAI content: *The optioned-up 220d xDrive M Sport we drove did **not** veer close to £40k. Absurd money for an MPV*; £40k remains “absurd money” regardless of whether it is the actual price of the car. The negation test thus properly identifies NAI content in cases like (4).

### NAI in the interview genre

In the interview, evasive statements are labelled NAI because they do not answer the interviewer’s questions. Since the interviewer’s questions are overt QUDs, any material not answering an overt question is, in that sense, NAI. Unlike the review genre we do not see the AI/NAI distinction mirrored by the distinction between fact-oriented and evaluative statements. It is also worthwhile exploring whether categorising evasive interview behavior as NAI is the right label.

The interviewee employs a number of evasive strategies, some of which labelled NAI, but others structurally go beyond issues of segmentation and labelling. (5) is an example of evasion by offering no substantive information whatsoever.

- (5) **Q**: *How and where would there be extra checks on the island of Ireland under the proposals that you were about to take to Brussels?*  
**A**: [Well, I mean]<sub>NAI</sub> [if I made the]<sub>NAI</sub> [the proposals are not yet made]<sub>BG</sub> [I [probably ought to make them to the EU]<sub>NAI</sub>

Examples (6) shows a more common example of NAI content: an expressive, evaluative adverb, *basically*, which functions as an evasion here because it reframes the issue of how difficult the times are (the QUD).

- (6) **Q**: *Why is it (Brexit) a very difficult time?*  
**A**: [What we’ve got]<sub>F</sub> basically]<sub>NAI</sub> [is a situation in which the people voted for leaving the EU in the greatest expression of popular will in favour of any party or proposition in history]<sub>F</sub>

Example (7) shows an evasion through topic shift, specifically topic restriction, a stronger evasion than reframing the QUD as in (6). (7) features a topic restriction from “difficult in general” to “politically difficult” and puts forth the argument that the times are not difficult in other respects, e.g., economically.

- (7) **A:** Because look this was always going to be a very difficult time ...  
 > **Q:** *How difficult are these times?*  
 > **A:** And I think that things are actually much much better than they, than the political situation, might lead you to believe

The strongest form of evasion in the text is when the interviewer and interviewee interpret overt questions differently, as in (8):

- (8) **A:** There are many people in all sorts of positions, who don't think that [Brexit] was the right way to go ... And I think we always knew that, as we came up to that deadline, things would get choppy  
 > **Q<sub>overt</sub>:** *You are blaming all of your woes on people who are trying to stop Brexit?*  
 > **A:** No, I think, it's just the just the predicament, is just the it's just the situation, that we're in as a country

The conflict between Johnson's answers to Kunberg's overt question shows a mismatch between what the interviewer took the QUD to be and what the interviewee took it to be: When Boris Johnson says he thinks it's just the situation the country is in and not the people, he is answering an implicit question *What did we always know about the deadline?* whereas the interviewer Laura Kuenssberg's overt question shows when she asked about the difficult times approaching the deadline, she had the British people and how politically divided the country is in mind. So they agree on the discourse topic being the Brexit deadline approaching (and what repercussions this has), but have different QUDs in mind. By analysing Johnson's evasion of Kunberg's overt question as answering an implicit question which takes an alternative perspective on what the central QUD is in this case, a QUD analysis can deal with this type of evasion where interlocutors agree on the topic (the deadline), but disagree on the QUD. Analysing the evasion strategy this way is far more attractive than to simply label Johnson's answer to Kunberg's overt question as NAI. It is more attractive, first and foremost, because labelling it NAI would lump (8) together with cases like (5), where no substantive information is added by the NAI content, but (8) supplies substantive information in the form of the interviewee's counter-QUD. The strategy in (8) also appears far more elaborate than the reframing in (6) or the change in topic exemplified by (7). So lumping them all together under the label NAI would gloss over the discourse-structural differences in evasion strategies.

### NAI in the narrative genre

In the narrative text, in particular, this approach to annotating NAI content leads to everything happening in the protagonist's mind being NAI content, mirroring a distinction between the state of affairs (labelled at-issue) and reasoning about the state of affairs (NAI). In the narrative genre this QUD approach to NAI fails to acknowledge "where" the story is happening. What is actually happening is that our protagonist comes home after long day at work and wants to

take a bath. Being a tenant in a sublet apartment, the protagonist breaks into her landlady’s master bathroom, which is much nicer than her bathroom. But the real story happens in the NAI content. The landlady won’t let the protagonist use her bathtub because the protagonist is an immigrant and the landlady is racist. Taking a bath is not only nice but it also reminds our protagonist of her family back home. A bath is a small escape from the protagonist’s hard life.

We have divided the narration into a series of eleven events (which we call  $m_1 \dots m_{11}$  for moments to avoid confusion with other variables for topic tracking). Example (9) shows event/moment 8 in this series, where the smell of lavender triggers a memory. The sub- $Q_2$  for the trigger is embedded under the propositional  $Q_1$ . The memory and its sub- $Q_3$  is embedded under the trigger.

- (9) **Q<sub>1</sub>**: *What happens next (Moment 8)?*  
**A<sub>1</sub>**: Susie hangs her towel on the radiator curling her fingers around the warm bar. Along the shelves are glass jars of coloured salts, and powders, and liquids. She opens a jar and inhales.  
> **Q<sub>2</sub>**: *What does it smell like?*  
> **A<sub>2</sub>**: Lavender.  
> > **Q<sub>3</sub>**: *What does the smell of lavender remind her of?*  
> > **A<sub>3</sub>**: She remembers her mother’s long dark hair, the thin stripes of grey.

The negation test would render any non-propositional content NAI. This is not only an issue with respect to our linguistic means of determining AI or NAI status, but raises a much deeper problem: In literary texts, non-propositional content is argueably, oftentimes, more important than propositional content in terms of developing the narrative. So if NAI content is supposed to be information of secondary importance to AI content, then rendering non-propositional content in narratives as NAI content is at odds with literary intuitions of “where” the story is “happening.” We therefore offer an alternative analysis, where non-propositional content is embedded under sub-QUDs to the main QUDs of propositional content. This achieves two things: (i) It makes it so that propositional QUDs are parallel in the tree, similar to the rhetorical relation of Narration in RST being a series of events (the protagonist comes home, drinks some tea, breaks into the master bathroom, and takes a bath). (ii) QUD subordination then makes it clear which associations, emotions, memories are linked to or triggered by which event in the series (e.g., taking a bath reminds the protagonist of her family back home). When necessary, we use variables to link to the same topics across different propositional QUD branches.

## 4 Discussion

NAI content in the three text genres is vastly different. It is thus challenging to come to a unified account of the at-issue/not-at-issue distinction. In the review genre, NAI content is any information which is not technical facts. In

the interview genre, NAI content is any utterance which evades the interviewer's questions. In the narrative genre, NAI content is hardest to define because a lot of the dramatic unfolding of a story involves introducing seemingly unimportant side-notes and random facts, which later on in the story reveal their importance by taking on an enriched meaning. So depending on where we are in the process of unravelling the story, these random facts may be NAI in the beginning of the story and at-issue by the end of the unravelling.

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