Non-at-issue content in three text genres

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Outline

Introduction

- Extend annotation guidelines by Riester et al. (2018) to non-at-issue content (NAI)
- **Central question:** Can a unified definition of NAI be found which works in the three text genres of review, interview, and narrative?
- Various definitions (e.g., Potts, 2005; Koev, 2013; Roberts et al., 2009)

Introduction

- Extend annotation guidelines by Riester et al. (2018) to non-at-issue content (NAI)
- **Central question:** Can a unified definition of NAI be found which works in the three text genres of review, interview, and narrative?
- Various definitions (e.g., Potts, 2005; Koev, 2013; Roberts et al., 2009)
- **Our starting point:** At-issue content is content which answers the Question under Discussion (QUD). Information given in the QUD is background. Any information which is neither at-issue nor background is potentially NAI.

Using negation to test at-issue/not-at-issue status

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

   b. BMW tells us the 2-series Active Tourer, the company's first stab at a people carrier, is **not** doing better than expected.

- The Active Tourer remains BMW's first stab at a people carrier in (2b), which means the interjection is NAI to the *BMW-telling-us* proposition while the main clause is at-issue (AI)

- QUD trees model given/new distinction with background being given information and focus being new information
- Focus answers the QUD
- QUD contains given material
- Material, which the negation test finds to not be in the scope of negation—and is also not background—should not be focus and thus should not answer the QUD, and should thus be NAI

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- **Main thrust of this talk:** While this approach to NAI identification seems to give correct segmentation labelling in the review genre, less so in the interview and narrative genres
- We propose alternative QUD analyses of NAI for the interview and narrative genre better adapted to genre specifics:
  - Evasion strategies in interviews
  - Associations, memories, flashbacks etc. in narratives

In **interview genre** this approach to NAI labelling fails to distinguish

- NAI content in the form of optional information
- Vacuous statements (e.g., *Well, I mean*)
- Topic shifting, but w.r.t. topic implied or pressuposed by QUD
- Evasive statements, which are NAI w.r.t. the overt interview question but may answer alternative implicit QUDs (so not NAI w.r.t. to implicit QUDs)

In **narrative genre** this approach to NAI labelling struggles with the many layers of narration:
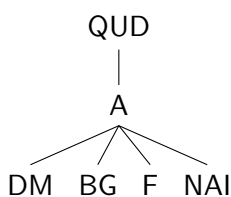
- proposions of a series of events
- characters' minds and emotions
- memories
- timelines
- flashbacks
- multiple subjective perceptions of the same events
- reinterpretation of events over the course of narration
- perspective switching
- narrator perspective

the spice of compelling story telling. To say these things are of secondary importance (NAI) seems to completely miss the spirit of literary narration

- Tempting to focus in QUD analysis on the propositional content (as you would in the review and interview genre)
- but this would make the narration of what goes on in characters' minds and their expressive, subjective exclamations NAI content
- Runs completely counter to the intuition that most of "the story" argueably happens through non-propositional content while the propositional content is often sparce, trivial, mondaine or simply uninterpretable without the non-propositional component

- We offer alternative QUD analyses of the supposed NAI content in the interview and narrative genre which aim to account for genre-specific characteristics

Methods

- Guidelines by Riester et al. (2018) as starting point
- Go beyond Riester et al. (2018) in our treatment of NAI
- Segmentation label NAI (and, as we'll see, dedicated QUD structures)
- All 3 texts (review, interview, narrative) annotated by 2 annotators
- Final XML files agreed upon annotation by both annotators
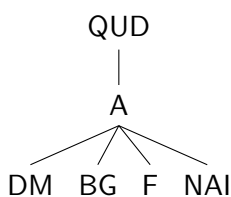
Annotation scheme for assertions (A):

	QUD	Question under Discussion
	A	Assertion
	DM	Discourse marker (e.g., and, but)
	BG	Background material
	F	Focus material
	NAI	Non-at-issue material

(2) **QUD:** *What does BMW tell us?*
[[And]$_{DM}$ [BMW]$_{BG}$ [cheerfully]$_{NAI}$ [tells us]$_{BG}$ [the 2-series Active Tourer,]$_F$ [the company's first stab at a people carrier,]$_{NAI}$ [is doing rather better than expected]$_F$]$_A$

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- Annotation scheme works well for NAI content not at-issue to QUD immediately super-ordinating its host assertion (e.g., evaluative adverbs such as *cheerfully* and interjections such as *the company's first stab at a people carrier*, cf. e.g., Potts, 2005)

Results

- We'll look at NAI annotation in the three genres of review, interview, and narrative
- Using the approach to NAI identification laid out in the beginning leads to a vast range of linguistic phenomena being called NAI
- Is the NAI label an appropriate umbrella term for these phenomena?

Results

- We'll look at NAI annotation in the three genres of review, interview, and narrative
- Using the approach to NAI identification laid out in the beginning leads to a vast range of linguistic phenomena being called NAI
- Is the NAI label an appropriate umbrella term for these phenomena?
- **Short answer:** No, which is why we offer alternative analyses.
- **Long answer:** The way that this approach to NAI falls short once we look beyond the proposition-style review genre highlights fundamental questions what a QUD analysis should be capturing.

Results: NAI in the review genre

- At-issue content typically statements about technical specifications
- NAI content typically **contextualising background information** (e.g., that the 2-series Active is BMW's first stab at a people carrier in example 1) or **evaluative adverbs, adjectives, statements** (e.g., *cheerfully* in example 2)
- Evaluative statements receive their own sub-QUD as in (3)

(3) Q_1:   *What is the maximum price point?*
     A_1:   The optioned-up 220d xDrive M Sport we drove veered close to £40k.
     > Q_2:   *How is the price to be evaluated?*
     > A_2:   Absurd money for an MPV.

- Subordination a way to express "secondariness" associated with NAI content

(3) **Q₁:** *What is the maximum price point?*
 A₁: The optioned-up 220d xDrive M Sport we drove veered close
 to £40k.
 > **Q₂:** *How is the price to be evaluated?*
 > **A₂:** Absurd money for an MPV.

- Negation applied above main assertion does not affect 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

- Negation test thus properly identifies NAI content in cases like (3);
 gives the correct labelling in the review genre

Results: NAI in the interview genre

- Interview genre particularly interesting for a QUD approach because of the **overt questions**
- Since the interview questions are overt QUDs, any material not answering them is, in that sense, NAI
- Unlike the review genre, AI/NAI distinction not mirrored by the distinction between fact-oriented and evaluative statements
- **Evasive statements** evade asnwering interview questions, overt QUDs, and are, in that sense, NAI (e.g., *well*, *things are actually much better than . . . the political situation . . . might lead you to believe*)
- Worth exploring these evasion strategies in more detail to see if the label NAI is approapriate

- The interviewee Boris Johnson employs a number of evasive strategies, some of which are labelled NAI, but others structurally go beyond issues of segmentation and labelling
- Four types of evasive strategies employed:
    - Vacuous statements
    - Optional, expressive or evaluative material
    - Topic shifting (but no change in QUD)
    - Answering alternative implicit QUD different from overt QUD

Vacuous statements offering no substantive information whatsoever

(4) **Q:** *How and where would there be extra checks on the island of Ireland under the proposals that you where about to take to Brussels?*

    A: [Well, I mean]$_{NAI}$ [if I made the]$_{NAI}$ [the proposals are not yet made]$_{BG}$ [I probably ought to make them to the EU]$_{NAI}$

- "Secondariness" of NAI content as NAI content being less important than AI content
- Offering no information pertinent to QUD is as unimportant as it gets
- But typical NAI cases are cases which are **contentful**. So is NAI the right label for vacuous material?

More typical example of NAI content: expressive, evaluative adverb

(5) **Q:** *Why is it (Brexit) a very difficult time?*
   A: [What we've got]$_F$ [basically]$_{NAI}$ [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]$_F$

- Notice how *basically* is not just evaluative/expressive but evasive because it **reframes** the issue of how difficult the times are

- The interview question presupposes that difficult times are "complicated." *Basically* reframes the matter, making it seem "simple." Johnson says Brexit is *basically* the outcome of the referendum (a "simple" voting procedure) while the interview question is trying to get at the turmoil the country is in because of the referendum outcome

Topic shifting, specifically topic restriction, but no change in QUD

(6) **Q_{overt}:** *How do you think [Brexit] is going?*

　　A_1: . . . it's going about as well as could be . . . Because look this was always going to be a very difficult time . . .

　$>$　**Q_2:** *How difficult are these times?*

　$>$　**A_2:** And I think that things are actually much much better than they, than the political situation, might lead you to believe

- Topic shift stronger than reframing because the reframing in (5) did not change the topic: *basically* as *fundamentally*: "At its core, the times are so difficult because the Brexit vote was so monumental"
- (6) features a topic restriction from "difficult in general" to "politically difficult" and puts forth the argument that the times are not difficult in other domains, e.g., economically
- Answer is not NAI because it speaks to the *difficult*-part of the QUD, but it is evading the initial interview question which is questioning Johnson's leadership by deflecting away from the personal to the general public

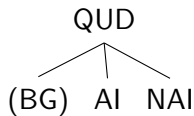**Interviewer and interviewee intrepret overt QUD differently**

(7) **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$_{overt}$:** *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

- When Johnson says "it's just the situation the country is in and not the people" he is answering an implicit QUD **different** from the overt QUD
  - Interviewee: "Choppy because of the times. Monumental decisions are always difficult and divisive"
  - Interviewer: "Choppy because of the people trying to stop Brexit"
- Agree on topic being the Brexit deadline approaching (and what repurcussions this has), but disagree on QUD
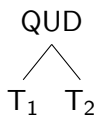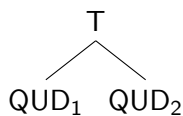
An attempt at systematising
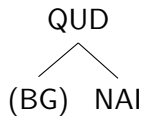
Vacuous   Expressive   Topic shifting   QUD shifting

```
    QUD              QUD              QUD                 T
    /\              / | \             /\                 /\
(BG)  NAI      (BG) AI  NAI         T_1  T_2         QUD_1  QUD_2
```

	Contentful	Non-prop.	Deg. sec.
Vacuous statements	no	yes	high
Expressive material	yes	yes	med
Topic shifting	yes	no	low
QUD shifting	yes	no	low

Potential factors/dimensions:

- Contentful
- Non-prop. = Non-propositional
- Deg. sec. = Degree of "secondariness"

Results: NAI in the narrative genre

- Approach to NAI laid out in beginning struggles most with the narrative genre: everything in characters' minds (be it associations, thoughts, feelings, memories) as well as other narrative devices (e.g., perspective change, foreshadowing, flashbacks) would be NAI content
- Mirrors a distinction between the state of affairs (labelled AI) and reasoning about the state of affairs (labelled NAI)

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- Approach to NAI laid out in beginning struggles most with the narrative genre: everything in characters' minds (be it associations, thoughts, feelings, memories) as well as other narrative devices (e.g., perspective change, foreshadowing, flashbacks) would be NAI content
- Mirrors a distinction between the state of affairs (labelled AI) and reasoning about the state of affairs (labelled NAI)
- This approach to NAI fails to acknowledge "where" the story is happening
    - **Actual events:** protagonist comes home after a long day at work and wants to take a bath. Being a tenant in a sublet apartment, the protagonist breaks into here landlady's master bathroom, which is much nicer than her bathroom.
    - **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.

- Similar to RST we take Narration to be a narration of a series of events
- Like in many narrative texts, narration is layered in this text: (i) actual events, (ii) protagnist's thoughts, feelings, associations reacting to immediate events, (iii) protagnist's memories of her family back home and how that contrasts with her life now (we use variables for reoccuring topics, e.g., the tea or smells)
- Divided the narration into a series of eleven events (which we call $m_1 \ldots m_{11}$ for moments to avoid confusion with other variables for topic tracking)

Example (8) shows event/moment 8 in this series, where the smell of lavender triggers a memory of the protagnist's mother

(8) **Q_1:** *What happens next (Moment 8)?*
   A_1: 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_2:** *What does it smell like?*
   > **A_2:** Lavender.
   > > **Q_3:** *What does the smell of lavender remind her of?*
   > > **A_3:** She remembers her mother's long dark hair, the thin stripes of grey.

- 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

- Negation test would render any non-propositional content NAI
- Not only an issue with respect to 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 offer an alternative analysis, where non-propositional content is embedded under sub-QUDs to the main QUDs of propositional content (cf. 8)

Embedding non-propositional content under propositional content achieves two things:

- 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 (e.g., the protagonist comes home, drinks some tea, breaks into the master bathroom, and takes a bath)
- **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)

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- We introduce variables to be able to refer back to topics (e.g., when having to jump in and out of associations, memories at different points of the story; could also be useful for multiple timelines or narrators)

- We use variables to link to the same topics across different propositional QUD branches
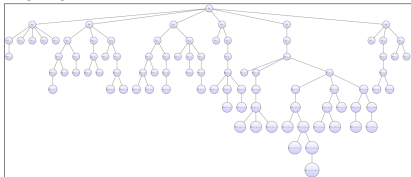
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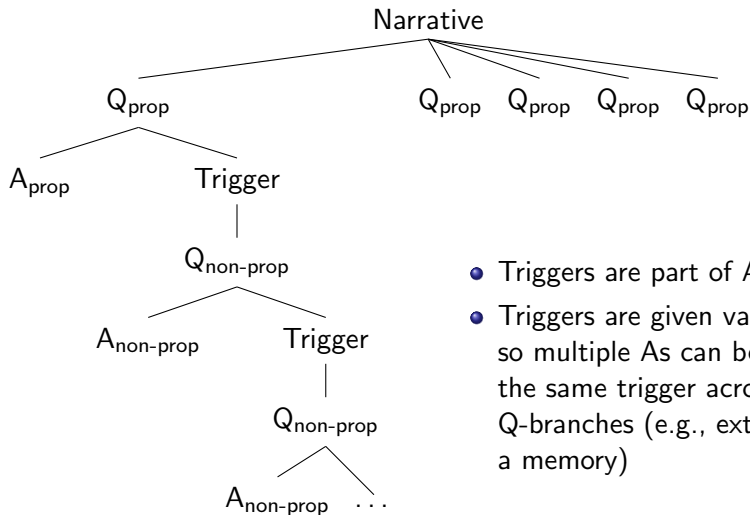
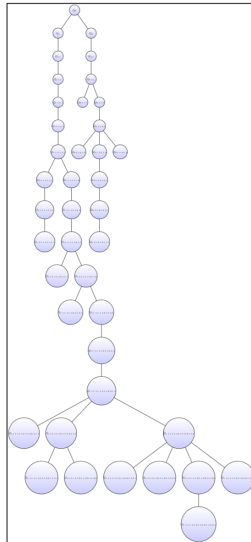
- Triggers are part of As
- Triggers are given variables so multiple As can be link to the same trigger across Q-branches (e.g., extending a memory)

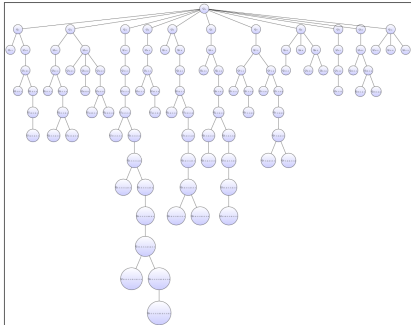# Impressionistic view of our QUD annotation of the 3 texts

Review

Narrative

Interview

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Summary

- NAI content in the 3 genres is vastly different
- Unified account of AI/NAI thus challenging
    - **In review genre:** NAI content is any information which is not technical facts (non-propositional)
    - **In interview genre:** NAI content is any utterance which evades the inteviewer's questions (overt QUDs). A QUD analysis can draw out the interactions between discourse topics and QUDs in more elaborate evasion strategies (topic shifting, QUD shifting)
    - **In 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. We offer a QUD analysis which makes the link between an association, feeling, thought, memory and its trigger clear while preserving the idea that narration is a narration of a series of events

Thank you!