

# Distinguishing At-Issueness from Anaphoric Potential: A Case Study of Appositives

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## 1. Introduction

Content which is at-issue is frequently described as the “main point” of an utterance (Potts, 2005; Roberts, Simons, Beaver & Tonhauser, 2009, among many others). There has been much debate in the literature about what features define at-issueness, how to identify the at-issue status of some given proposition, and how to model the different discourse effects of at-issue and not-at-issue content. These issues have been made particularly difficult, I argue here, because of a tight linking between at-issueness and the anaphoric potential of a proposition. Availability for propositional anaphora has been implicated in both how at-issueness is diagnosed (Tonhauser, 2012) and how at-issue and not-at-issue content is modeled (Murray, 2010, 2014; AnderBois, Brasoveanu & Henderson, 2013). In this paper, I show that these two notions are distinct, and that one class of tests commonly used to diagnose at-issue status in fact diagnoses only anaphoric potential.

In particular, I use appositives as a case study to show how at-issueness and anaphoric potential have been conflated, and how they can be pulled apart. Appositives have been a focus of researchers interested in distinguishing at-issue and not-at-issue content (e.g., Potts, 2005; Tonhauser, 2012; Koev, 2012; AnderBois et al., 2013; Murray, 2014). The generalization is that appositives contribute not-at-issue content (e.g., Tonhauser, 2012). However, Syrett & Koev 2015 introduces experimental evidence and argues that appositive content can have a shifting at-issue status, i.e., that appositives can be at-issue or not-at-issue depending on context. The support for this comes from one class of diagnostic for at-issueness from Tonhauser 2012, which I show in this paper is anaphoric in nature, and which has been used elsewhere in the literature (Faller, 2002; von Stechow & Gillies, 2007; Matthewson, Davis & Rullmann, 2007; Murray, 2010). However, Tonhauser 2012 also presents two other classes of diagnostics for at-issueness, which, as I show in this paper, demonstrate that appositives are never at-issue. I present new data which indicates that anaphoric potential—including direct dissent—is not diagnostic of at-issue status, but rather that the two are independent.

Before we examine how at-issueness and anaphora interact, we need to understand what is meant by “at-issueness”. In particular what I will address here is the notion that certain content conveyed by an utterance has a distinguished status as the main point of the utterance, while other content does not. Potts 2005 discusses “at-issue entailments” as distinct from presuppositions and conventional implicatures, but does not describe how to identify content as at-issue. This notion is formalized in Simons, Tonhauser, Beaver & Roberts 2010 via relevance to the current Question Under Discussion (QUD, Roberts, 1996). I will discuss other notions of at-issueness (e.g., AnderBois et al., 2013; Murray, 2014; Hunter & Asher, 2016) in Section 4. For now, I’ll be using the Simons et al. 2010 definition of at-issueness because it has associated diagnostics which make testable predictions. The definition is as follows in (1), where  $?p$  denotes the question whether or not  $p$ :

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- (1) **Revised definition of at-issueness** (Simons et al., 2010:(26))
- a. A proposition  $p$  is at-issue iff the speaker intends to address the QUD via  $?p$ .
  - b. An intention to address the QUD via  $?p$  is **felicitous** only if:
    - i.  $?p$  is relevant<sup>1</sup> to the QUD, and
    - ii. the speaker can reasonably expect the addressee to recognize this intention.

Using this definition of at-issueness, Tonhauser 2012 gives three features of at-issue content, as in (2), which are then leveraged into three classes of diagnostics for identifying the at-issue status of a sentence implication.

- (2) Features of at-issue content: (Tonhauser, 2012)
- I. At-issue content can be directly assented or dissented with
  - II. At-issue content addresses the question under discussion (QUD)
  - III. At-issue content determines the relevant set of alternatives

## 2. Diagnosing at-issueness in appositives

### 2.1. Anaphora-based diagnostics

One diagnostic frequently used in the literature to diagnose at-issue status is the assent/dissent test, which trades on feature (2I) (see, e.g., Faller, 2002; von Stechow & Gillies, 2007; Matthewson et al., 2007; Murray, 2010). This diagnostic is anaphora-based, as it relies on propositional anaphors like *that* and *so*, as well as response particles like *yes* and *no*, which are also anaphoric (Krifka, 2013; Roelofsen & Farkas, 2015).

The assent/dissent test involves directly assenting/dissenting responses to sentences which convey multiple contents (see definition of Diagnostics #1a–c in Tonhauser 2012). This diagnostic assumes that such responses are acceptable if they target at-issue content, and unacceptable if they target not-at-issue content. For example, consider (3) from Syrett & Koev 2015, where A utters a sentence containing an appositive. Each possible B response contains simple dissent (*No*) followed by the negation of the targeted content (either main clause or appositive).

- (3) A: My friend Sophie, who performed a piece by Mozart, is a classical violinist.  
 B1: No, she's not. (target: main clause)  
 B2: No, she didn't. (target: appositive) (Syrett & Koev, 2015:(21))

The notion here is that if a response is felicitous, then the content it targets must be at-issue, as at-issue content can be directly dissented with (per (2I)).

Syrett & Koev 2015 investigates the felicity of such responses experimentally, contrasting sentence-medial vs. sentence-final appositives and nominal vs. relative clause appositives. Previously, AnderBois et al. 2013 had observed that some sentence-final appositives can be directly dissented with. Syrett & Koev 2015 presents results which show that both sentence-medial and sentence-final relative clause appositives can be directly dissented with, and takes this to be evidence of a shifting at-issue status for appositives: “[W]e believe we have reason to think that these appositives may take on at-issue status, provided we assume that being the target of a direct rejection is one of the main diagnostics for being at issue. (See, for example, Tonhauser 2012.)” (Syrett & Koev, 2015:27–28).

### 2.2. QUD-based diagnostics

The other two classes of diagnostics for at-issueness presented in Tonhauser 2012, which are associated with features (2II) and (2III) above, look at what content establishes or addresses the QUD, and so are closely related to the QUD-based definition of at-issueness (Simons et al., 2010). They create question/answer pairs, with a target sentence conveying multiple contents as either the question

<sup>1</sup>Relevance is defined for assertions (and questions) as entailing (or having an answer which entails) a partial or complete answer to the QUD (Simons et al., 2010:(13)).

(Diagnostics #3a,b) or the answer (Diagnostic #2). The idea here is that because at-issue content addresses and establishes the QUD, content which fails to address the QUD or which fails to establish a QUD must be not-at-issue. These QUD-based diagnostics, which are not employed in Syrett & Koev 2015, do not support a shifting at-issue status of appositives.

We can use these tests with the same sorts of appositives used in Syrett & Koev 2015. (4) & (5) are applications of Diagnostic #2, with the Syrett & Koev 2015 appositive from (3) used as the answer to an explicit QUD. Because at-issue content addresses the QUD (per 2II), an infelicitous response which fails to address the QUD indicates that the targeted content is not at-issue. The question in (4) targets the main clause content, while the question in (5) targets the appositive content.

- (4) a. Who is your friend Sophie?  
 b. My friend Sophie, who performed a piece by Mozart, is a classical violinist.
- (5) a. What did your friend Sophie perform?  
 b. # My friend Sophie, who performed a piece by Mozart, is a classical violinist.

The response in (4) addresses the explicit QUD via its main clause. The felicity of this response is consistent with the main clause being at-issue. In contrast, the response in (5) is infelicitous, even though the appositive entails an answer to the question. This indicates that the appositive is not-at-issue; if it were at-issue, it would be able to address the QUD (per (2II)).

Further evidence against a shifting at-issue status of appositives comes from Tonhauser's (2012) Diagnostic #3a. This diagnostic involves making a question out of a declarative which conveys multiple contents, on the assumption that the at-issue content determines which answers are felicitous (per (2III)). (6) turns the Syrett & Koev 2015 appositive from (3) into a question, with possible responses targeting the main clause (as in (a–b)) or appositive (as in (c–d)).

- (6) Is your friend Sophie, who performed a piece by Mozart, a classical violinist?  
 a. Yes, she is.  
 b. No, she isn't.  
 c. # Yes, she did.  
 d. # No, she didn't.

The (a) and (b) responses of (6), which target the main clause of the question, are felicitous, which is consistent with the main clause being at-issue. The (c) and (d) responses, however, which target the question's appositive content, are infelicitous. Even with a clarifying follow-up like *No, she didn't. She performed a piece by Beethoven*, the response is infelicitous, failing to address the QUD. This indicates that the appositive is not-at-issue; if it were at-issue, it would establish the QUD, and thus determine the felicitous responses to the question, which would make (c) and (d) felicitous (per (2III)).

The QUD-based diagnostics applied above demonstrate that appositives are not-at-issue, as they can neither establish nor address a QUD, as seen in (6) and (5), respectively. Syrett & Koev 2015 acknowledges the existence of the QUD-based diagnostics but argues that appositives in fact can address the QUD, discussing two examples. This is contrary to the evidence in (5), and, as I'll argue, neither example offers conclusive evidence that appositives can address the QUD.

First, Syrett & Koev 2015 discusses an example where an appositive alone does not address the QUD but nevertheless "helps to provide an answer to either of the two QUDs preceding it" (586). Those explicit questions, though, are *why* interrogatives, in contrast to the polar and *wh-* interrogatives used in Tonhauser 2012 (and here). *Why* questions are crucially different from these other questions in that they seek explanations. Because they seek explanations, such questions have no single comprehensive answer: any answer given is defeasible<sup>2</sup> or can be considered insufficiently precise, and additional

<sup>2</sup>For example, even a straightforward answer to a *why* interrogative is defeasible.

- (i) Q: Why are these flowers on the table?  
 A: Edgar put them there this morning.  
 A': Edgar put them there this morning. But then at noon, he moved them to the bookshelf. Vanessa moved them back to the table after Edgar left. So, Vanessa is why those flowers are on the table.

contextual information can always contribute to an explanation (see discussion in Bjorndahl & Snider, 2016). The appositive might contribute information which bolsters an explanation, supporting the matrix clause's answer to the QUD, but that alone does not constitute addressing the QUD. If the matrix clause does not address the QUD, then an appositive alone cannot be taken to address the QUD, even in a *why* question, as in (7).<sup>3</sup>

- (7) Why did Sophie perform a piece by Mozart?  
 a. Sophie, who received the longest ovation, adores Mozart.  
 b. # Sophie, who adores Mozart, received the longest ovation.

Syrett & Koev 2015:587 further points to an example where an appositive appears to “address one part of a coordinated QUD”, inspired by an example from Koev 2013.<sup>4</sup>

- (8) Q: Who did you see at the potluck and what dish did they bring?  
 A: I saw Renée, who brought an artichoke dip. (Syrett & Koev, 2015:(47))

But the concept of a “coordinated QUD” is novel: Roberts 1996 describes no such structure, instead describing sequences of “relevant sub-questions to some super-question” as an “enumeration, suggesting a plan for how to attack the super-question”, and says that one “can only address such sub-questions one at a time” (5). The response in (8A) thus addresses the first sub-question—as it must, because the second requires an answer to the first—and not both at once. Rather than thinking of the appositive in (8A) as addressing the second sub-question, we should consider it to merely add extra information to the answer that addresses the first, in just the same way that the appositive in (8A') does.

- (8) A': I saw Renée, who is a doctor. (She brought an artichoke dip.)

A subsequent sentence could address the second sub-question, as in (8A'), but the response in (8A) only addresses the first sub-question about who the addressee met. The appositive in (8A) *does* entail an answer to the second sub-question, but it is not relevant to the current QUD (the first sub-question), and so it is not at-issue on the Simons et al. 2010 definition.

### 2.3. *Medial vs. final appositives*

All of the examples given above were illustrated with sentence-medial appositives. However, Syrett & Koev 2015 argues that both medial and final relative clause appositives can be at-issue, and that sentence-final appositives are more likely to be targeted by direct dissent than sentence-medial ones. These QUD-based diagnostics show that even sentence-final appositives are not at-issue. Consider (9), which turns the sentence-final appositive from Syrett & Koev 2015 (23) into a question to be answered, an implementation of Diagnostic #3a (just like (6) above).

<sup>3</sup>The only way to get a felicitous reading for (7b) is if one understands Sophie to have chosen her piece with the intention of getting the longest ovation of the night, along with the assumption that she knew Mozart to be a crowd favorite. On this reading, of course, it is the main clause which addresses the QUD, supported by a body of contextual knowledge; the appositive still does not address the QUD.

<sup>4</sup>Koev 2013 also points to (ii) from Simons et al. 2010 as evidence that appositives can address the QUD.

- (ii) Q: Who's coming to the dinner tonight?  
 A: Well, I haven't talked to Charles, who probably won't be able to come, but I did talk to Sally, who is coming. (Simons et al., 2010:(27))

Simons et al. 2010, however, doesn't describe this as a case of the appositive addressing the QUD. They describe the example as follows: “Rather than directly answering the overt question, A instead answers the question of who she has talked to about the dinner” in a way that “includes answers to the overt question” (324). It includes answers to, but it does not itself answer the explicit question—see the discussion of (8).

- (9) Did the symphony hire your friend Sophie, who performed a piece by Mozart?
- a. Yes, they did.
  - b. No, they didn't.
  - c. # Yes, she did.
  - d. # No, she didn't.

The (a) and (b) responses of (9) target the main clause of the question and are felicitous. This is consistent with the main clause being at-issue. The (c) and (d) responses, on the other hand, target the question's sentence-final appositive and are infelicitous. This diagnostic indicates that the appositive is not-at-issue, as it doesn't establish a QUD that can be addressed, even though it is sentence-final.

Nor is a sentence-final appositive any more able to address the existing QUD (using Diagnostic #2). (5b) demonstrated that a medial appositive cannot address the QUD, and (7b) showed that the same was true even in response to *why* questions. These examples are not improved by a sentence-final appositive.

- (5) a. What did your friend Sophie perform?  
 b. # My friend Sophie, who performed a piece by Mozart, is a classical violinist.  
 c. # The symphony hired my friend Sophie, who performed a piece by Mozart.
- (7) Why did Sophie perform a piece by Mozart?  
 a. Sophie, who received the longest ovation, adores Mozart.  
 b. # Sophie, who adores Mozart, received the longest ovation.  
 c. # The longest ovation went to Sophie, who adores Mozart.

In summary, the direct assent/dissent diagnostic used in Syrett & Koev 2015 (see (3) above) supports a shifting at-issue status for appositives. The other two classes of diagnostics do not support such a shifting status, as appositives can neither address nor establish a QUD. These diagnostics suggest that appositives are never at-issue.

#### 2.4. Comparing diagnostics

The crucial difference between the classes of diagnostics illustrated above is that the first is anaphora-based, where the other two are QUD-based, as they test what can address or establish a Question Under Discussion. The direct assent/dissent diagnostic used in Syrett & Koev 2015 shows different behavior for sentence-medial and sentence-final relative clause appositives because anaphora is sensitive to recency, among other things (Ariel, 1988). The QUD-based diagnostics are not sensitive to sentence position, as relevance to the QUD (which underlies the Simons et al. 2010 definition of at-issueness) is not affected by recency.<sup>5</sup>

What Syrett & Koev 2015 shows, then, is something about the anaphoric potential of relative clause appositives. They demonstrate that relative clause appositives can be targets of direct dissent, and they take that to mean that appositives have a shifting at-issue status, based on the assumption from Tonhauser 2012 that felicitous anaphora is diagnostic of at-issueness. As shown above, the anaphora-based diagnostics and QUD-based diagnostics for at-issueness behave differently. Now, I'll show that anaphoric potential is in fact not a reliable diagnostic for at-issue status.

### 3. Distinguishing at-issueness from anaphoric potential

#### 3.1. Felicitous anaphora to not-at-issue content

If we use the QUD-based diagnostics to identify the at-issue status of some content, we can see that the at-issue status and anaphoric potential of a given clause are independent. First, let's look at a case where not-at-issue content is felicitously targeted by anaphora (here, by means of direct assent/dissent). For this, we'll use a speech report, as speech reports can introduce at-issue content either in the matrix clause or in the embedded clause (Simons, 2007; see also Hunter, 2016). Consider (10), where the

<sup>5</sup>Relevance to the QUD is sensitive to structural position (e.g., slifting, see Murray, 2014), but not pure linear order.

embedded clause of B's response answers the question posed by A (i.e., addresses the QUD). So the embedded clause of B's response is at-issue in this context, where the matrix clause is not-at-issue. In Hunter 2016 terms, the matrix clause is "discourse parenthetical", supplying only the source for the speaker's at-issue contribution.

(10) A: Who was at the party last night?

B: Stewart said Polly was there.

C: i. Yes, she was. (I saw her there, she was DJing.)

ii. No, she wasn't. (She was at the movies with me last night.)

iii. Yes, he did. (He was telling everyone.)

iv. No, he didn't. (He said [MOLLY]<sub>F</sub> was there; you must have misheard him.)

C's possible responses (i) and (ii) target the embedded clause of B's answer, which is at-issue in this context. Both responses are felicitous, unsurprisingly. The (iii) and (iv) responses target the matrix clause of B's answer, which is not-at-issue in this context. Both responses are felicitous, even though they target content which is not-at-issue. The matrix clause is still available for anaphoric reference by means of direct assent/dissent, despite being not-at-issue. The pattern is the same for non-assent/dissent anaphora: if B followed up their statement with *Francis told me that*, the anaphor *that* can be understood as referring to the not-at-issue proposition conveyed by the matrix clause. (10) shows us that at-issue status is not necessary for a proposition to be available for anaphora, including direct assent/dissent, and that felicitous anaphora alone is not sufficient to diagnose content as at-issue.

### 3.2. Infelicitous anaphora to at-issue content

There are also at-issue contents which systematically fail to be available for anaphoric reference. Under the Simons et al. 2010 definition, "at-issue content may include non-conventional content as well, e.g. conversational implicatures which arise as a result of the utterance in context." (Roberts et al., 2009). The discourse in (11) makes B's conversational implicature (a relevance implicature) at-issue. The pile-up is only relevant insofar as it offers a reason that Gretchen won't be able to make the meeting, thus addressing the QUD.

(11) A: Will Gretchen be able to make the meeting?

B: There's a pile-up on I-287.

C: i. Yes, there is. I heard that it's terrible.

ii. No, there isn't. The traffic is on I-87.

iii. # $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Yes} \\ \text{That's true} \end{array} \right\}$ , she won't. She's stuck in the middle of it.

iv. # $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{No} \\ \text{That's not true} \end{array} \right\}$ , she will. She took the train this morning.

C's possible responses all target content conveyed by B's answer to A's question. The (i) and (ii) responses target the not-at-issue content that there is a traffic accident, and are both felicitous. The (iii) and (iv) responses, however, which target the conversationally implicated content that Gretchen won't make the meeting, are infelicitous—despite the fact that that content is at-issue in this context. And, just like in (10), B's response in (11) has the same anaphoric potential for a non-assent/dissent anaphor: *Francis told me that* can only mean that Francis told B about the pile-up, not that Francis told B about Gretchen's non-attendance. (11), then, shows us that at-issue status alone is not sufficient to guarantee that a proposition is available for anaphoric reference. Alternatively, we can think of (11) as demonstration that the infelicity of anaphoric reference to a particular proposition is not sufficient to determine that the proposition is not-at-issue (on the Simons et al. 2010 definition). This behavior is not limited to conversation implicatures: there are also at-issue entailments and presuppositions which fail to be available for anaphoric reference (see Snider, 2017).

These examples show that at-issueness and direct assent/dissent are independent. At-issue status alone is not enough to ensure that direct assent/dissent is felicitous (as seen in (11)). And the felicity of direct dissent is not diagnostic of at-issue status (as seen in (10)), contrary to the assumption made in much of the literature, including in Tonhauser 2012 and Syrett & Koev 2015.

#### 4. Conclusion and discussion

In this paper, I have shown that the at-issue status of a proposition, at least as defined in Simons et al. 2010, is distinct from its anaphoric potential. Tonhauser 2012 presents three classes of diagnostics for at-issue status, but as I have demonstrated, the first of these is in fact diagnostic of anaphoric potential, not of at-issueness. It is this anaphora-based diagnostic which led Syrett & Koev 2015 to conclude that appositives have a shifting at-issue status. The other two diagnostics from Tonhauser 2012, which are QUD-based and thus more closely tied to the QUD-based definition of at-issueness (Simons et al., 2010), do not show a shifting-at-issue status. Instead, these diagnostics show that appositives are never at-issue. Using a QUD-based diagnostic for at-issueness, I was then able to show cases where the at-issue status of a proposition and its anaphoric potential come apart. Felicitous anaphora to not-at-issue propositions and infelicitous anaphora to at-issue propositions demonstrate that at-issueness and anaphoric potential are distinct (see also Snider, 2017).

With this insight in hand, there are different directions we could go with our theory of at-issueness. If we want to pursue a Simons et al. 2010 notion of at-issueness, then we must decouple it from anaphoric potential. This means that we cannot rely on the assent/dissent test as a diagnostic for at-issue status, which as I have shown here behaves differently from the QUD-based diagnostics. If we want to model at-issueness using a discourse update system as in Murray 2010, 2014 or AnderBois et al. 2013, then we need to be careful to ensure that the mechanisms distinguishing at-issue and not-at-issue content are distinct from those that determine the availability of propositional anaphora.

Alternatively, this observation might lead one to move away from the Simons et al. 2010 definition entirely. Hunter & Asher 2016 proposes a discourse based account using SDRT (Asher, 1993; Asher & Lascarides, 2003) in which at-issueness and anaphoric potential are indeed closely linked—which isn't at odds with the data discussed here, because they use an entirely different notion of at-issueness. On this account, "content is at-issue at a certain point of the discourse just in case it is on the [Right Frontier (RF)] of the discourse at that time. Content that is AI becomes NAI when knocked off the RF; content that is NAI can become AI if targeted through discourse subordination" and thus returned to the Right Frontier (Hunter & Asher, 2016:1036). And, because discourse referents (propositional and otherwise) are only accessible for anaphora resolution in SDRT if they are on the Right Frontier, propositional content which is available for anaphoric reference is necessarily at-issue on this account. Thus, we can retain the tight association in the literature between at-issueness and anaphoric potential, but only by reformulating what it means to be at-issue. (On this account, both an appositive and its matrix clause can be simultaneously at-issue if the discourse relation that connects them is subordinating, as both the appositive and the matrix clause will be on the Right Frontier.)

However one chooses to define or model at-issueness, it is important to recognize the difference between the at-issue status of a proposition and its anaphoric potential. The two are at least conceptually distinct: at-issueness is about what the main point of an utterance is, while anaphoric potential is about what propositions are available for subsequent anaphoric reference. On some accounts, they coincide, but on others they come apart. Crucially, there is a disparity in the diagnostics frequently used in the literature: some diagnose the at-issue status of a proposition, while others diagnose its anaphoric potential, and these diagnostics don't always agree. How we define and model at-issueness must be sensitive to the issue of availability for propositional anaphora.

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