What is at-issueness? An experimental comparison of diagnostics

Abstract At-issueness is a key concept in theoretical semantics/pragmatics, but there is no consensus about how it is defined or diagnosed (e.g., Tonhauser 2012; Tonhauser et al. 2018; Koev 2018). We present experimental data investigating whether four widely used diagnostics for at-issueness yield consistent results. Our findings reveal significant differences across diagnostics, indicating they are not interchangeable. Since the diagnostics target distinct theoretical conceptions of at-issueness, these differences offer insight into their comparability.

1 Introduction

At-issueness is a key concept in theoretical semantics and pragmatics, distinguishing between at-issue propositions conveyed by an utterance, those contributing to its main point, and those that do not (e.g., Karttunen & Peters 1979; Horton & Hirst 1988; Abbott 2000; Faller 2003; Potts 2005; Tonhauser 2012). Despite its importance, the concept lacks a unified definition. Instead, various theoretical notions (Koev 2018; Tonhauser et al. 2018) and empirical diagnostics (e.g., Tonhauser 2012) have been proposed. This paper addresses the question whether four widely used diagnostics for at-issueness yield consistent results when testing the same stimuli. Our findings reveal significant differences across diagnostics, indicating they are not interchangeable. Since the diagnostics target distinct theoretical conceptions of at-issueness, these differences offer insight into the comparability of these conceptions.

The four diagnostics we tested are illustrated in (**??–??**) for sentence-medial non-restrictive relative clauses (NRRCs), which are usually taken to contribute non-at-issue content. As appositive content is generally taken to be not-at-issue, participants are expected to: Give low naturalness ratings under the QUD diagnostic **??** and the direct dissent diagnostic **??**, not interpret the speaker to be asking about the content under the 'asking-whether' diagnostic in **??**, will choose one of the *yes*-responses under the 'yes, but' diagnostic in **??**.

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