

Constraints on QUD-addressing appositives: pragmatics or prosody?¹

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Abstract Can appositives address questions under discussion (QUDs), and what does it depend on? Koev (2012; 2013) claims that there is a contrast between clause-final appositives, which can address QUDs relatively easily, and clause-medial appositives, which are at best marginal at QUD addressing. In this squib I look at sentences like the preceding one, which contain responses to multiple QUDs, and explore constraints on their configurations. I conclude that whether an appositive can address a QUD is determined by both pragmatic and prosodic factors that go beyond its linear position with respect to clause boundaries.

1. Koev’s generalization: clause-final vs. clause-medial appositives.

In his earlier work (Koev 2012), Koev claimed that clause-final appositives can address QUDs (see, e.g., Roberts 2012 for an overview on QUDs), but clause-medial appositives can’t. In his dissertation (Koev 2013), he adopts a less categorical view: appositives in general can address QUDs, but there is a weak pragmatic requirement that answers to QUDs be open for discussion, i.e., that other conversation participants should be able to challenge them. Koev maintains that only clause-final appositives can be directly challenged in the discourse, due to what he calls *the immediacy principle*, according to which a proposal should be accepted or rejected before a new one is introduced. Thus, Koev predicts that direct responses targeting clause-medial appositive relative clauses (ARCs) are unacceptable (as in B’s response in (1b)), and, relatedly, clause-medial ARCs addressing QUDs are marginal (as in B’s response in (2b)). Clause-final ARCs, however, can be targeted by direct responses and address QUDs completely felicitously (as in B’s responses in (1a) and (2a), respectively).

- (1) a. A: [I met Paula]₁, [who brought cookies]₂.
B: [No, she didn’t]₂. She brought wine.
b. A: [Paula, [who brought cookies]₁, left after midnight]₂.
B: #[No, she didn’t]₁. She brought wine.
- (2) a. A: [Who did you meet at the party]₁ and [what did they bring]₂?
B: [I met Paula]₁, [who brought cookies]₂.
b. A: [What did Paula bring]₁ and [when did she leave the party]₂?
B: ?[Paula, [who brought cookies]₁, left after midnight]₂. (Koev 2013, (15))

A similar analysis was subsequently adopted by AnderBois et al. (2013), who proposed that appositives can in principle raise issues, but by doing so they force an immediate acceptance of the preceding issue. Consequently, clause-medial appositives don’t raise issues.

In the rest of the squib I will first challenge Koev’s generalization, showing that clause-medial appositives can sometimes address QUDs entirely felicitously in responses to multiple QUDs. I will then explore more fine-grained constraints on QUD-addressing appositives and will conclude that there seem to be both pragmatic and prosodic considerations at play.

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2. It's not about clause boundaries.

In Esipova 2018, I observe that Koev's generalization as is doesn't hold in some responses to multiple QUDs. For example, in (3) there is only one matrix clause addressing the first QUD, interrupted by a partial appositive answer to the second QUD, yet B's utterance is an entirely felicitous response to A's inquiry. Similarly, the clause-medial ARC in B's utterance can be subsequently targeted by a *no* response. That is to be expected if B's response indeed addresses the second QUD, and C's utterance challenges a part of that response.

- (3) *Context: Quentin is a priest and married a couple yesterday.*
A: [Who_i did Quentin marry]₁ and [what were they_i wearing]₂?
B: [Quentin married **Uma**, [who was wearing a white **dress**]₂, and **Zoe**]₁, [who was wearing a black **tux**]₂.
C: No, Uma was wearing a yellow **suit**.²

Note that B's response in (3) can't be treated as an instance of full clause coordination with ellipsis in the second clause, because the theme of the predicate *married* is the mereological sum of Uma and Zoe, not either of them individually. In other words, the matrix clause in (3) isn't equivalent to *Quentin married Uma and Quentin married Zoe*.

B's response in (4) is much worse than the one in (3), however, even though the only thing that changes is what's in focus (which, of course, is determined by A's questions) and the resulting prosodic structure.

- (4) A: [Who married Uma_i and Zoe_j]₁ and [what were they_{i+j} wearing]₂?
B: ??[**Quentin** married Uma, [who was wearing a white **dress**]₂, and Zoe]₁, [who was wearing a black **tux**]₂.

Since B's response in (4) is already degraded, it doesn't make much sense to check if any of its parts can be challenged. In fact, in the rest of the squib I will not be checking if a given QUD can be targeted by a direct response, partially for the reason I just mentioned, but also because targetability by direct responses (which, I assume, are anaphoric) is likely subject to various further constraints based on how salient a given piece of content is as an antecedent for response particles (*yes* and *no*) and/or elliptical responses (e.g., *she did/didn't*).

That aside, the contrast between B's responses in (3) and (4) alone suggests that constraints on QUD-addressing appositives shouldn't be formulated in terms of their linear position with respect to clause boundaries.

3. But what is it about? Pragmatics? Prosody? Both?

3.1. Prosody matters.

Now, while Koev (2013) formulates his generalizations in terms of this clause-medial vs. clause-final distinction, he likely doesn't have to. The insight behind his story is pragmatic in nature: the speaker should give the addressee an opportunity to challenge a given proposal before introducing a new one, which in principle doesn't have to only arise at the end of the clause introducing the said proposal.

²**Bold** indicates prosodic focus marking.

Let me point out that the strings *Quentin married Uma* and *and Zoe* in B’s response in (3) could be conceptualized as two separate partial answers to A’s first question, roughly, of the form ‘Uma(/Zoe) is an atom of the theme of *married*’, even though the compositional structure of these strings doesn’t correspond to such answers.

Perhaps we could then save Koev’s story by dropping the assumption that proposals introduced by conversation participants have to compositionally map to the clauses uttered. A partial answer to A’s first question in (3) can be inferred—and thus either accepted or challenged—by anyone who has heard A’s question as soon as the speaker utters *Quentin married Uma*.

In other words, as long as we only consider the contrast between (2b) and (3), we could probably still have a purely pragmatic constraint on QUD-addressing appositives (assuming we can work out the details of non-compositionally introduced proposals without any dire consequences). In contrast to (3), in B’s response in (2b), one cannot infer an even partial answer to any QUD from the string preceding the ARC—in fact, *Paula* is given (in the sense of Schwarzschild 1999). In other words, that string starts introducing a proposal, but the content of the proposal can’t be inferred from it, hence, the degradedness.

(4), however, shows that the empirical picture is more complicated than that. In B’s response in (4), the string preceding the first ARC, *Quentin married Uma* does provide all the content necessary to completely answer A’s first question. Thus, the corresponding proposal can be inferred before it’s interrupted by any ARCs. The pragmatic approach sketched above thus doesn’t predict any contrast between B’s responses in (3) and (4). Yet, the contrast exists. What is it due to?

I strongly suspect that the reasons why B’s response in (4) is degraded are prosodic in nature. As is well known (see, e.g., Selkirk 2005 and references therein), appositives need to be packaged into their own intonational phrases (IPs) in ToBI terms (Beckman & Ayers 1997). As a result, the string *and Zoe* in B’s response in (4), surrounded by two ARCs, constitutes an independent IP, too. That means that it has to contain at least one nuclear pitch accent and an IP boundary contour (a – tone followed by a % tone), which makes *Zoe* awkwardly prominent for something that is given. I would further suggest that it is mostly the pitch accent that creates problems rather than the IP boundary contour, since the following seems OK, despite the presence of an IP boundary contour on *Zoe*, a given piece of content:

- (5) A: [Who kissed Zoe]₁, and [what was Zoe wearing]₂?
 B: [**Uma** kissed Zoe]₁, [who was wearing a white **dress**]₂.

In B’s response in (3), the prosodic structure imposed by the ARCs isn’t problematic, because both *Uma* and *Zoe* are in focus and thus already bear nuclear pitch accents.

But now, once we’ve helped ourselves to a prosodic explanation, we can apply it to Koev’s clause-medial ARC example in B’s response in (2b): *Paula* has to constitute an IP on its own and thus bear a nuclear pitch accent, but it’s given and thus allergic to prosodic prominence. That said, the effect might not be as strong, since *Paula* in B’s response in (2b) is a subject (unlike *Zoe* in B’s response in (4)), and subjects in English can often be packaged into their own prosodic phrases and thus bear prominence even when they are given. This subject-object contrast can be made sharper by having a more minimal paradigm:

- (6) a. A: [Who kissed whom]₁, and [what were they both wearing]₂?
 B: [Uma, [who was wearing a white **dress**]₂, kissed Zoe]₁, [who was wearing a black **tux**]₂.
- b. A: [Who did Uma kiss]₁, and [what were they both wearing]₂?
 B: ?[Uma, [who was wearing a white **dress**]₂, kissed Zoe]₁, [who was wearing a black **tux**]₂.
- c. A: [Who kissed Zoe]₁, and [what were they both wearing]₂?
 B: ??[Uma, [who was wearing a white **dress**]₂, kissed Zoe]₁, [who was wearing a black **tux**]₂.

I have to add a caveat here, though, that judgements for paradigms like in (6) become quite subtle, and a quantitative study is needed to see if the contrasts reported above are robust.

That said, if those contrasts are real, that would once again suggest that a pragmatic constraint sketched above can't be all there is (since it predicts B's response in (6c) to be as good as the one in (6a)), and prosodic factors do play a role, too. Moreover, that would likely also suggest that even if that pragmatic constraint exists at all, its effect is minor as compared to prosodic constraints, since otherwise we would expect B's response in (6b) to be at least as bad as the one in (6c), because the string *Uma* doesn't provide enough information to answer any QUD, partially or completely.

At this point, however, it's unclear if such a pragmatic constraint is needed at all, since prosodic considerations alone seem to account for the data at hand quite nicely.

3.2. *Pragmatics still matters.*

While, pending more robust data, we might be able to dispose of a pragmatic constraint on QUD-addressing appositives based on proposal interruption, we likely won't be able to explain all constraints on QUD-addressing appositives via prosody alone. There is still the very basic asymmetry between matrix clauses and appositives when it comes to their QUD-addressing potential. For example, an ARC can't address a QUD if the matrix clause doesn't, but no reverse constraint exists (ARCs don't have to address QUDs):

- (7) A: [When did Quentin leave]₁?
 B: a. [Quentin, who has a small child, left before 8pm]₁.
 b. #Quentin, [who left before 8pm]₁, has a small child.

Prosodic grouping and prominence assignment considerations are the same in both B's responses in (7), yet, (7b) is quite severely degraded while (7a) is fine.

Another potential consideration to take into account is the linear order of answers as compared to the linear order of the antecedent questions. If there is any kind of parallelism constraint in this respect (e.g., a preference to answer the first question first, at least partially), B's response in (6b) would be dispreferred, since it violates linear parallelism.

Furthermore, there might exist a hierarchical parallelism constraint. In most multiple QUD examples above, the second question is in a way subordinate to the first one. More specifically, in those cases, there is an anaphoric link between a *wh*-antecedent in the first question and a pronoun in the second one, thus, one's ability to answer the second question depends on their ability to answer the first one. In all the completely felicitous responses

to such multiple QUDs the “hierarchical” structure of the antecedent question is in a way preserved: the matrix clause answers the “matrix” QUD, and the ARCs answer the dependent one. The reverse doesn’t hold (not all structure-preserving responses are completely felicitous), so this constraint, if real, would also be complementary.

Finally, another potentially important factor is what the alternative ways of structuring one’s response to a given sequence of multiple QUDs are and how they compare to the alternative with QUD-addressing appositives in terms of economy, ambiguity (including anaphoric ambiguity), etc.

All these considerations suggest that, while prosody does seem to constrain the QUD-addressing potential of appositives, pragmatic and/or structural factors still play an important role. Once again, further careful—and preferably quantitative—empirical work is needed to clarify the picture.

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