Towards a discourse-structure based response classification for interviews

René Nicolas, Arndt Riester
Department of Linguistics
Bielefeld University, Germany
{rene.nicolas,arndt.riester}@uni-bielefeld.de

Abstract

This paper deals with (non-)answers in interviews, and the research question what kind of evasive strategies interviewees may utilize. We reconstruct the implicit questions under discussion (QUDs) for each assertive move in our corpus of German political interviews, in order to reveal their underlying discourse structure, and highlight the discrepancy between the question asked and the question answered. Building on previous work, we establish a response classification.

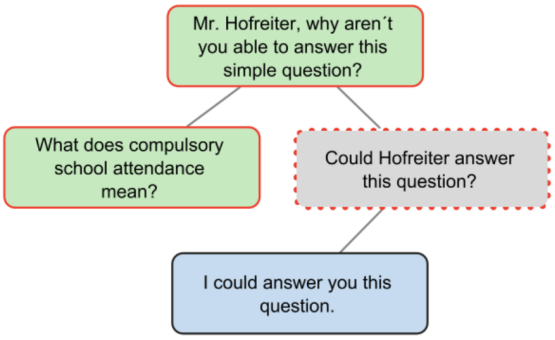

Figure 1: Part of a QUD tree.

1 Introduction

While human verbal interaction is generally characterized by cooperativity (Grice, 1975), there are many reasons for interlocutors to not fully cooperate in adversarial encounters, in which they have conflicting intentions. A paradigm example of this kind of dialogue are political interviews (cf. Clayman and Heritage, 2002), in which answer avoidance is a key face-saving tool for the interviewee. This paper builds upon existing taxonomies (Bull and Mayer, 1993; Ginzburg et al., 2022) of answer compliance and avoidance, and further develops a classification tailored to political dialogue. Our approach differs from the abovementioned ones regarding the following issues: first, we operate on dialogue that has been pre-analysed with regard to its question-under-discussion (QUD) based discourse structure (Roberts, 2012), i.e., the scope of our classification is not confined to question-response pairs, but takes into account entire response paragraphs/branches, which are common in interview data. Second, our taxonomy is strictly oriented along linguistic criteria, while ignoring political aspects of the respective utterances.

2 Data

Our corpus currently consists of 10 German political interviews taken from *Deutschlandfunk* (public radio). Audio data are available, but our analyses are based on transcripts, which have been cleaned of fillers and most grammatical errors. Interviews are selected to be balanced for the gender of interviewer and interviewee, and for the latter's political background. The average length of these interviews is about 2000 words per interview.

As a preparation for the QUD analyses, interviews are segmented into discourse units, or, in other words, information units. This pre-processing happens semi-automatically. Linguistic adjuncts and conjuncts standardly represent separate discourse units. The units are then arranged as QUD trees following the guidelines of Riester et al. (2018), compare Figure 1.

QUD trees visualize the hierarchical structure of the discourse, assigning a response paragraph to each overt question. Each discourse unit contained in that paragraph is labelled for its *response status* (see Section 3) relative to the question.

3 A taxonomy of answer avoidance

Our taxonomy consists of 16 categories (see Figure 2). First, we distinguish between **answers** and **non-answers**. A response is classified as a **direct answer** when it is congruent with the overt question it responds to. Answers may be **partial** (PA)

Proceedings of the 29th Workshop on the Semantics and Pragmatics of Dialogue, September 3–5, 2025, Bielefeld, Germany.

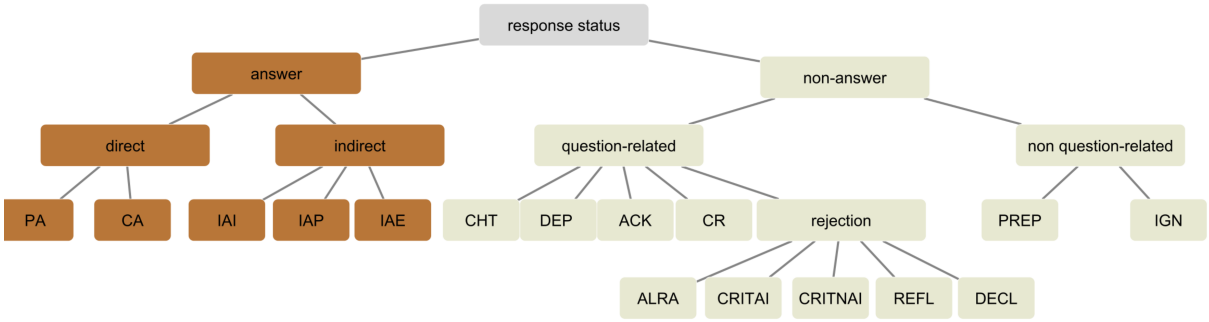

Figure 2: Our taxonomy of possible responses to a question

or **complete** (CA), cf. Groenendijk and Stokhof (1984). A PA or a CA are given when the question predicate is evaluated either with regard to at least one or with regard to all elements of the question domain. **Indirect answers** provide the answer to a question implicitly, either through a **conversational implicature** (IAI), see Example (1), **presupposition** (IAP), or an **entailment** (IAE). The QUD trees visualize direct answers (and only those) as being immediately dominated by their overt question.

(1) A (journalist): Will you go to the Supreme Court after that?
B (politician): We don't have to.
[*Implicature*: We will not.]

Non-answers can be either **question-related** or **non-question-related**. The latter case comprises the categories **ignoring the question** (IGN) and **serves to prepare an answer** (PREP), meaning that the discourse unit has no connection to the question but serves as a bridge to answer the question later (e.g., an anecdote which connects to the question later on).

The question-related non-answers form the biggest part of our classification. They represent the strategies interviewees might utilize to evade questions. There are five sub-categories: **change of topic** (CHT), see Example (2), **dependent question** (DEP), **acknowledgement of question without answering it** (ACK), **clarification request** (CR) and **rejection of the question**.

(2) A: How should schools react when students demonstrate on Fridays?
B: I think it's great that those young people want to talk about the climate crisis.

A question can be rejected in five ways: first, by claiming that it has **already been answered** (ALRA). A second way is to **criticize the at-issue content** of the question (CRITAI), e.g., by attacking the question, as in (3).

(3) A: Mr. Hofreiter, what does compulsory school attendance mean?
B: I believe that this is a classic debate to distract, to belittle those young people, to not take their concern seriously.

The **non-at-issue content** of a question can also be **criticized** (CRITNAI), e.g., by pointing out a (supposedly) false presupposition, see the blue answer in Figure 1.

The last two subcategories of rejections to questions are **reflecting the question back to the interviewer** (REFL) and **explicitly declining to answer the question** (DECL).

4 Summary and outlook

We are currently in the progress of annotating a representative corpus of 10 German interviews with QUD trees and response classifications. Also, an inter-annotator study will be conducted.

Our goal is to assess and quantify the dynamics and cooperativity of the respective interviews. Our goal is, furthermore, to gain a better understanding of common and rare strategies used by interviewees in adversarial interviews. Which strategies are particularly creative? Which ones lead to a higher "success rate" of the interviewee getting away with not answering an overt question?

Our work differs from previous approaches through its use of QUD-structures, which allow for the classification of entire response branches and not only simple question-response pairs, thereby also covering the case that an answer to an interview question may occur only after a number of non-answer responses.

Acknowledgments

Funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) – Project-ID 512393437 – CRC 1646 *Linguistic Creativity in Communication* – Project B03 *Indirectness in Discourse: Interrogatives, Implicit Meaning and Incongruence*.

References

Peter Bull and Kate Mayer. 1993. How not to answer questions in political interviews. *Political psychology*, pages 651–666.

Steven Clayman and John Heritage. 2002. *The News Interview: Journalists and Public Figures on the Air*. Cambridge University Press.

Jonathan Ginzburg, Zulipiye Yusupujiang, Chuyuan Li, Kexin Ren, Aleksandra Kucharska, and Pawel Lupkowski. 2022. Characterizing the response space of questions: data and theory. *Dialogue & Discourse*, 13(2):79–132.

H. Paul Grice. 1975. Logic and Conversation. In P. Cole and J. Morgan, editors, *Speech Acts*, volume 3 of *Syntax & Semantics*, pages 41–58. Academic Press, New York.

Jeroen Groenendijk and Martin Stokhof. 1984. *Studies on the Semantics of Questions and the Pragmatics of Answers*. Ph.D. thesis, University of Amsterdam.

Arndt Riester, Lisa Brunetti, and Kordula De Kuthy. 2018. Annotation guidelines for questions under discussion and information structure. In *Information Structure in Lesser-Described Languages: Studies in Prosody and Syntax*, pages 403–443. John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Craige Roberts. 2012. Information structure: Towards an integrated formal theory of pragmatics. *Semantics and pragmatics*, 5:1–69.