RHETORICAL QUESTIONS OR RHETORICAL USES OF QUESTIONS

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Abstract:This paper aims to explore whether some rhetorical questions contain certain linguistic elements or forms which would differentiate them from answer-eliciting and action-eliciting questions, and thereby hint at their rhetorical nature even outside the context. Namely, despite the fact that the same questions can be rhetorical in one context, and answer-eliciting in another, some of them are more likely to be associated with rhetorical or non-rhetorical use. The analysis is based on extensive data (over 1200 examples of rhetorical questions taken from 30 plays by two British and two American writers), and the results are expected to give an insight into whether we can talk about rhetorical questions or just a rhetorical use of questions.

Key words: rhetorical question; indicators of rhetorical questions; polarity items; semantic incompati-bility.

1. Introduction According to Athanasiadou questions can be classified into four categories based on their function in communication and intentions of speakers: information-seeking questions, rhetorical questions examination questions and indirect requests. While defining examination questions as those asked in order to test the knowledge of addressees or to interrogate them, and indirect re-quests as questions intended to urge addressees to do something, she claims that the first two types of questions are in clear opposition.

Namely, whereas infor-mation-seeking questions are aimed at requesting information, RQs, on the other hand, are not asked in order to get an answer, but instead serve the purpose of providing information. Based on a type of response they initiate, Ilie classifies questions into three groups: answer-eliciting, action-eliciting, and mental-response eliciting questions, placing RQs into the third group, and claiming that RQs actual-ly require a cognitive response represented by the

addressee's acceptance of the answer implied by the speaker. She defines an RQ as: „...a question used as a challenging statement to convey the addresser's commitment to its implicit answer, in order to induce the addressee's mental recognition of its obviousness and the acceptance, verbalized or non-verbalized, of its validity times even the ones that seem to be conflicting. Namely, while Brown &Levinson point out mitigation of criticism in performing face-threatening acts as a par-ticularly important function of RQs, Frank notes that RQs can both soften criticism and strengthen assertions, and concludes that the latter is the primary function of such questions. As common functions of RQs Ilie mentions de-fending one's own opinion, manipulating and changing the opinion of others, making one's message more memorable, being ironic, etc.

According to Gergen , RQs can be a powerful weapon in political speeches.Schaffer analyzed RQs which are used as answers to information-eliciting questions, and found out that achieving a humorous effect is often a goal of such RQs: A: How reliable is he? B: How shallow is the ocean? How cold is the Sun?5 These RQs imply obvious answers that the ocean is not shallow and the Sun is not cold, so, by extension, they answer the posed question - the person referred to is not reliable at all. In the above-mentioned example, the goal of the speaker is also to produce a humorous effect, and thereby make his point more memorable and convincing. When it comes to whether RQs (may) have a distinct form, Ilie claims that pragmatic factors (and not a specific form) are what differentiates rhetorical from non-rhetorical questions, and that RQs are a special use rather than a special category of questions. Similarly, Jung & Schrott state that RQs are neither bound to a specific language nor to specific linguistic structures – whether a question is rhetorical or not depends on the context.

On the other hand, Schmidt-Radefeldt lists two types of RQs whose form is indicative of their rhetorical nature - auto-responsive RQs (questions that include an answer) and implicative RQs (questions whose answer is obvious even outside the context due to the general knowledge of interlocutors).

Furthermore, Sadock analysed certain lexical and syntactic elements that can help

us determine whether a question is rhetorical or not.

In any case, RQs differ from answer-eliciting questions, among other things, in that they are intended to convince the addressees to accept the apparently obvious answer implied by the addressor, and not to get a verbalized answer from them.1 Furthermore, as Schaffer (2005) shows in her study, RQs are often used as effective and powerful answers to standard questions.

The issue that arises is whether RQs, at least sometimes, have a specific form that differentiates them from other types of questions, or whether we can just talk about a special use of questions whose form is the same as the form of non-rhetorical questions. Our goal in this research was to look for certain forms that could be indicative of RQs, as well as to find out how often they occur.

Background Due to their persuasive effect and communicative effectiveness, rhetorical ques-tions are widely used in different languages, different situations, and by different types of language-users. They occur frequently in day-to-day communication, as well as in various specific fields, such as marketing, politics, literature, journalism, etc.

They are generally understood as questions that are not meant to be answered, but rather to convey a message that would not be as memorable and as persuasive had it been expressed as a straightforward statement. One of the most striking characteristics of RQs is that they are used in order to achieve something else other than to elicit an answer.

 Such questions, in most cas-es, already imply an answer that seems obvious to both the addressor and the ad-dressee. They have the illocutionary force of a statement of opposite polarity from that of the question. Are we going to believe in everything they say? is equivalent to We are not going to believe...; and Isn't this the only sensible thing to do? is equivalent to This is the only sensible thing to do.2 Such implicit statements, presented in the form of questions, are often more powerful and effective, and have more influence on addressees than direct state-ments (Frank, 1990), which is one of the reasons for the frequent use of RQs in communication. Another reason for the communicative effectiveness and common usage of RQs is

that they can perform a number of different functions in communication, some-

The goal of this study was to identify and analyse syntactic and semantic elements that differentiate rhetorical from non-rhetorical questions, as well as to determine their frequency of occurrence. The corpus consisted of 30 plays by two British (H. Pinter and T. Stoppard) and two American playwrights (T. Williams and A. Miller), as plays faithfully simulate real life situations. British and American authors were included in order to pay equal attention to the two main variants of the English language, although our intention was not to look for possible differences between them in regard to RQs. All together, we identified 1205 examples of RQs,8 some of them strings of two or more questions.

Results and discussion Although context remains the ultimate and the most salient indicator of whether a question is rhetorical or not, some questions tend to be 'more inclined' towards rhetorical or non-rhetorical interpretation.

For instance, the question What time is it? will most likely be interpreted as answer-eliciting in almost any context, where-as How can a fool know what's good for him? will hardly ever be understood as an answer-eliciting question. While most questions, unlike the above examples, can-not readily be determined as rhetorical or answer-eliciting, the fact that such ques-tions do exist indicates that some RQs contain certain elements that point at their rhetorical nature. The results of this study support the view that RQs may contain such elements on syntactic and semantic level. While in reality they are all intertwined and to-gether contribute to rhetorical interpretation of questions, in this paper we analyse them separately for the sake of clarity. Altogether, we identified seven distinct forms which indicate that a question is rhetorical. As shown in Figure 1, out of the total number of RQs found in our corpus, 14% are realized in one of those forms:

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Conclusion

Based on the results obtained in this research, we can conclude that in most cases (85%) rhetorical and standard questions have the same form, and whether they will be interpreted as rhetorical or answer-eliciting depends entirely on the context in

which they are used. However, we identified seven patterns that are indicative of RQs, so questions that follow one of those patterns are rhetorical in most contexts. For the sake of clarity, we classified them under the category of syntactic or semantic indicators of RQs. Altogether, 15% of the RQs found in our corpus had one of those forms. The use of polarity items in questions, and lexical items (whether a single word or an expression) that normally precede statements in front of questions are among syntactic indicators that those questions are rhetorical. Furthermore, questions with attached ridiculous (and obviously unacceptable) answers, questions incor-porated into declarative or imperative sentences, questions realized in the form 'why + lexical verb', as well as so-called auto responsive questions (those that al-ready contain the only possible answer) are all typically rhetorical. However, the most common form indicative of RQs is what we call semantic incompatibility. This basically refers to combining conflicting concepts in a ques-tion, thereby indicating that the question is rhetorical. In closing, although in most cases there are no formal differences between rhe-torical and answer-eliciting questions, some RQs do have a specific form that dif-ferentiates them from standard questions.

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