

A typology of rhetorical questions*

1 A plan of attack

I start with an observation and an intuition. The observation is that there are many and diverse works on rhetorical questions, but no as of yet there is no consistent definition of what a rhetorical question is, so far as I can see. But basically:

- Semanticists (e.g., Han 2002 and references therein) look at the type of rhetorical questions that look like they straightforwardly denote a truth-conditional statement, while
- Discourse/Conversation Analysts (e.g., Frank 1990, Koshik 2003, Schaffer 2005) prefer to skirt the issue of why exactly rhetorical questions have the form they do, and
- Finally, neither give clear definitions of different *types* of rhetorical questions, nor any hint at their potential unification.

I will resolve a subset of these issues. And now the intuition: those utterances that lay people call “rhetorical questions” have some commonality between them.

The basic plan:

1. A wide-scope definition
2. A particular construction
3. A comparison
4. A non-conclusion

2 What’s a rhetorical question (anyway)?

Consider some of the following definitions of R(hetorical) Q(uestions):

- (1) [While some RQs] are formatted as wh-questions, they are not designed to make answers relevant, i.e. speakers do not ordinarily stop to allow for answers to be

*My thoughts on this topic have benefited from discussions with Michael Ellsworth, Paul Kay, Yasuko Konno, Robin Lakoff, Line Mikkelsen, Kyoko Ohara, Eve Sweetser, and the Ling 205 class. Despite all of this, I still don’t know what I’m talking about.

given. Nor are the utterances treated by recipients as information-seeking questions which make answers relevant (Koshik 2003:52).

- (2) A rhetorical question is a question used as a challenging statement to convey the addressers commitment to its implicit answer, in order to induce the addressees mental recognition of its obviousness and the acceptance, verbalized or non-verbalized, of its validity (Ilie 1999:128, cited by Schaffer (2005:434))
- (3) In general, a rhetorical question has the illocutionary force of an assertion of the opposite polarity from what is apparently asked (Han 2002:202).

What unites these is the observation that RQs are (“formatted as”) questions (i.e., interrogative syntax) that are more assertion-like. But does the commonality stop there? The RQs considered by the above authors look like the following:

- (4) A: Is she all right? B: Is Chernobyl? (Schaffer 2005:438)
- (5) A: Who brought you into this world, anyway? (B: You, Mama) (Schaffer 2005:443)
- (6) Shelley: So: I mean it’s not becuz hes- hes- I mean it’s not becuz he:s not going it’s becuz (0.5) his money’s not (0.5) funding me.
Debbie: okay
Shelley: So an when other time have I ever done that? (Koshik 2003:57)
- (7) Did I tell you writing a dissertation was easy? (Han 2002:201)

- (4), at least, is quite different from (5), and these are both different from (6–7).
- The latter two have the familiar meaning of “declaratives” (Sadock 1971), i.e., a *wh*-question with semantics “which x such that P(x)” rhetorically asserts $\neg\exists x(P(x))$, and similarly a polarity question that normally means “whether P” asserts instead $\neg P$.
- The RQ-as-retort (4) does not assert “Chernobyl isn’t (all right).” Instead, its (obvious) answer (i.e., “no”), is interpreted as the answer to the question to which the RQ was given as a response.
- The RQ in (5) has not received an explicit treatment as far as my (admittedly limited) research has shown. Informally, this sort of RQ is clearly perlocutionary: it gets the addressee to think of the (obvious) answer to the question and then reason to a proper conclusion based on that answer (e.g., obey mother).

I want to potentially complicate the issue by bringing up a particular sort of rhetorical question which may or may not be assimilable to one of the above types (if they are, indeed, separate types).

3 What kind of RQ do you think I am?

Consider the following rhetorical questions. Please apply the proper prosodic profile.

- (8)
- a. How light/heavy do you think it is?
 - b. How smart do you imagine I am?
 - c. What do think they store in there?
 - d. Who do you suppose you're dealing with?
 - e. Who do you think you are?
- (9)
- a. What does this whippersnapper think it's doing, bumping Apple's iPod off the must-have gadgets list?
 - b. I know what you mean about the body *reorganizing itself* – it seems my body is “shifting” its fat around. What does it think it's doing? Trying to hide it from me???
 - c. Who do you think you are with my sick breasts / on your chest?
 - d. Who does Bush think he is kidding?

What sort of RQs are these? On the form side, these RQs are:

- non-subject *wh*-questions, where the *wh*-element comes from within the embedded clause, which is
- headed by *think*, or some one of some set of verbs of cognition.
- prosodically unlike information-seeking questions

But pragmatically, their function is not quite clear:

- They're not the “assert the opposite” type. (8d) does not assert “you are dealing with no one.” And don't try to get metaphorical with the interpretation of “no one.” It's factually untenable (what if you are treating me higher than my normal social position?) and formally unrepresentable.
- They're not necessarily retorts. At least, not always: (9a) is not a response to even an implied question, and (9d) is a headline.
- Maybe they're of the “perlocutionary” type (see (5)). But let's examine the exact semantics first.

3.1 *How-type*

Let's take (8a-8b) as a starting point. The *wh*-element questions the degree-part of a gradable adjective.¹ The particular scale which is denoted by the adjective is key to understanding what the RQ-user is asserting. For instance, say the open-ended scale is INTELLIGENCE. The adjectives *smart* and *stupid* both use this scale, but (at least in questions) the latter is biased towards the negative end of the scale, while the former is either neutral or biased towards the positive end. Take this situation:

- The proposition “X is stupid to degree d (such that X can/can't participate in some event Y)” has been either asserted or implicated. (*I'll bet X would fail the Ling 100 final*)
- Someone wants to refute the *to degree* d part of the proposition (thus implicating that the “such that...” part is false).

The speaker may then use *how stupid do you think X is?* Conversely, if the proposition is that “X is smart to degree d ,” then *smart* must be used. In general:

- If the proposition in question contains a degree d , and the speaker wishes to assert that the degree should be d' , $d' > d$, then the *negatively*-biased adjective is used.
- For $d' < d$, then the *positively*-biased adjective is used.
- Or, just use the positive/neutral adjective all the time.

3.2 *What-type*

This analysis can be extended to cases like (8c). Here, the speaker has been asked to enter some storage room to do some task. However, she knows that several dangerous items are stored in the room, and knows that her interlocutor does as well. She thus objects to the request made of her.

In these cases, the *wh*-element denotes a (power) set of (a set of) entities, which is not inherently ordered in a scale. However, if we consider a scale of “those things which one would be squeamish about coming in contact with,” (the SQUEAM scale) then the analysis comes naturally: “you have assumed that I would be willing to come in contact with items of d -SQUEAM, but in fact they are d' -SQUEAM, where $d' > limit > d$.”

¹As far as I can tell all types of scales (upper/lower open/closed) are compatible, though in some contexts some adjectives may be (dis)preferred. In particular negated adjectives (*impure, unknown, invisible*) seem to require some hard-to-imagine situations.

Without a gradable adjective, there is also no inherent (lexical) bias in the directionality. The reading above seems most natural, but the opposite implication may be possible, given the right sort of utterance. For instance, imagine that instead a challenge has been made: *You could never handle being in that storage room.* Then, a response similar to (8c) would be possible—“you must think the items are *d*-SQUEAM, but are actually *d'*-SQUEAM, $d' < \text{limit} < d$.”

3.3 *Who*-type

Now consider (8d), (8e), and (9c). These have *who* as the *wh*-element. If we extend the previous analysis, then we expect

- *who* to evoke a scale which is
- populated by degrees of some property that holds of individuals (cf *what*, which evoked a scale of degrees of properties of entities, not of entities *per se*).

The relevant scales would be related to social-interactional roles that determine how one acts towards others (8d) or how one comports one’s self (8e, 9c).

Unfortunately, problems remain:

- Some *who*-type RQs do not conform to this analysis. 9d does not intuitively assert that Bush is fooling people he shouldn’t be, or assumes incorrectly the type of people he is fooling.
- (9b) is similar in that it seems to say that the fat is doing something unexpected—namely anything at all. What is expected is not some scalarly lesser action, but perhaps no action whatsoever.

However, (9a) is analyzable within the account given so far. It is complicated, however, because it seems to also be an instance of the WXDY construction (Kay & Fillmore 1999). But is it?

4 Constructional effects

Before getting into that, it might be fun to see if there are any constructional effects that we can see when the *think*-RQs interact with other parts of the grammar. Consider these:

- (10) a. He badmouthed the FBI—who did he think he was?
 b. * If he badmouthes the FBI, who will he think he is / will be?
 c. ? If he badmouthes the FBI, who would he think he is / would be?
- (11) a. He was a fool to act like that.
 b. * He will be a fool to act like that.
 c. He would be a fool to act like that.

Utterances that perform “insultative” speech acts generally cannot appear with *will*. It seems that whatever construction gives the *think*-RQ its particular semantics should also specify this condition (say, [accuse +]).

A new situation: our president is at a news conference, and prompts a reporter to ask him a question. The reporter starts, “Sir, what— a—, in regard to—” and the president cuts him off, saying “Who are you talking to?” The reporter then corrects himself, starting, “Mr. President, in regard to...”

- (12) a. # Who are you?
 b. # Who the hell are you?
 c. Who do you think you are?
 d. Who the hell do you think you are?
- (13) a. Who are you talking to? (= the original)
 b. # Who the hell are you talking to?
 c. Who do you think you’re talking to?
 d. Who the hell do you think you’re talking to?

The hell in (13b) is modifying a variable over people being talked to, which the president knows includes himself, and so the pragmatic effect is anomalous. This is alleviated in (13d). Compare this with a genuine question *Look over there—who the hell do you think he’s talking to?*, where the “disbelief” semantics accrues to the *wh*-element alone. We can revise the [accuse +] attribute to instead be a “frame” of pragmatic force that applies to the construction, specifying that the accusee is equated with the “thinker.”

Back to the iPod. Sentences (14) and (15) demonstrate possible combinations of the *think*-based RQs with WXDY and “fake answers.” All have the addressee as the matrix subject, but (14) has a non-discourse-participant as the lower subject. Further, the (a) examples have a PP as the Y part (of WXDY), while the (b) examples have a VPing. (16) show plain WXDY sentences with fake answers.

- (14) a. What do you think your kids are doing in my office? (working on their homework?)

- b. What do you think your kids are doing using my computer? (?reading my personal files?)
- (15) a. What do you think you're doing in my office? (#/?using my computer)
 b. What do you think you're doing using my computer? (#/?looking at my personal files?)
- (16) a. What are your kids doing in my office? (?working on their homework?)
 b. What are your kids doing using my computer? (*reading my personal files?)
 c. What are you doing in my office? (#/?using my computer?)
 d. What are you doing using my computer? (*reading my personal files?)
 e. What's this scratch doing on my car door? (*making me infuriated?)
 f. What do you think your name is doing in my book? (*...?)

There are several factors that seem to affect the acceptability of the “fake answers.”

- specificity of the Y predicate (location vs. full VP)
- animacy of the lower subject (*kids* vs. *name*)
- identity of the lower subject (3rd person vs. 2nd person), aka “viewpoint”
- *think*-RQ vs. straight-up WXDY

It seems as though some of these cases are straddling the line between genuine questions and rhetorical questions. The more genuine questions also show a semanticful **do** (when combined with animate subjects), where as the clearcut WXDY cases show the constructionally-specified version. This may remind us of the status of RQs like *do you guys want a pop quiz right now?* or *hey, who's the leader here?*. A sentence like (15b) is amenable to the scalar analysis (a scale of activities that increasingly become improper wrt being in a coworker's office), but also prompts the interlocuter to *think about* what they are doing, and hopefully then realize the impropriety.

Returning to (9a): personification, anyone?

5 Who needs unity, or how much unity do you think we need?

Could the analysis given by Han (2002) be applied to even a subset of these RQs? Or can a more conversational-implicature-based model do a better job of generalizing (without over-generating?)

5.1 Let's negate

Consider an RQ quite similar to (8a):

- (17) How heavy could this suitcase (possibly) be?

Take a scale, WEIGHT. It is open-ended on both ends on various adverbial tests. However, assume that an RQ environment like the one in (17) closes both ends of the scale, equating the bottom with the maximum weight such that it could participate in some salient event (say, being lifted by the speaker). The *how heavy* portion may then be said to denote the set of degrees to which the suitcase could be heavy.

Then, given a theory of informativeness suggested by Han,

- The most informative answer to the question would be the minimal degree of weightiness, because
- A normal *how A* question, where A is positive-biased, presupposes a “more positive” state of affairs.
- Thus a “less positive” response (e.g., *it's not heavy at all*) is more informative (and expected; otherwise why ask the question).
- An RQ instead *asserts* this most-informative option, i.e., it is minimally heavy on the scale.
- This minimal value, of course, has been equated with the upper cutoff point for the salient event.

A similar analysis may hold for the other types. However, there is still the need to artificially close the ends of the scale, and it is dubious to assume that sentences like (8a) and (17) actually assert that the item is heavy to a *specific* degree.

5.2 Being polite and rude

A conversational implicature analysis of RQs like this may rest upon several assumptions concerning:

- Assumptions of mutual knowledge
- Expected vs. dispreferred responses/seconds

- Intonational cues
- Power/face maintenance

Consider a case like (8c). The speaker (A) must be assuming that the addressee (B) knows what is inside the storage room. A’s response to the request to enter the room is dispreferred, as the B can tell by (i) the intonation of the response, and (ii) the unexpected form of the response (i.e., a request for information that is not necessarily dependent on fulfilment of the request). B then interprets the sentence as he might (5): first he considers the (obvious) answer (whatever it might be), then he reasons that if A is refusing the request, then there must be a reason related to her utterance. He further reasons that his conception of the nature of the items being stored is being called into question, and that A wants him to revise that conception. He is then forced to concede the point or defend his position.

From the other side, A (whose face is being threatened by the oncoming request) wishes to not lose further face with a rejection, and so creates a complex formulation of a refusal (more words = more polite). This refusal furthermore is a power-taking move, because it forces the interlocutor in a position where he must either concede or defend his position. A similar, though more extreme, instance of power-taking is instantiated in (8e) as, for example, something a royal advisor says to a prince after he was seen cavorting with commoners.

To the extent that this determines the form of the *think*-RQ, it works. And, there is evidence of exactly this sort of sentence in Japanese (though the range of possible *wh*-elements is more limited), indicating that these RQs are licensed at least in part by conversational implicature, and maybe only partially by language-specific constructions.

6 Conclusions

What have we hopefully seen?

- The class of rhetorical questions is not monolithic. They cannot all be analyzed as “assert the opposite” constructions.
- Some rhetorical questions look very much like genuine questions. Even in context they may remain vague.
- The ultimate generalization will likely be somewhere between discourse strategies and idiosyncratic constructions.

And to finish up, a tribute to the diversity of rhetorical questions.

- (18) a. How delicious is that?!

- b. Did I do things I wish I hadn't? Yes. Did I lie? Yes. Was it inappropriate for someone in my position? Certainly. But did it ultimately affect my ability to act as director of our organization? Absolutely not.
- c. Do you like syntax? Do I like syntax?!
- d. Who died and elected you king?

References

- FRANK, JANE. 1990. You call that a rhetorical question? *Journal of Pragmatics* 14.723–738.
- HAN, CHUNGHYE. 2002. Interpreting interrogatives as rhetorical questions. *Lingua* 112.112–229.
- ILIE, CORNELIA. 1999. Question-response argumentation in talk shows. *Journal of Pragmatics* 31.975–999.
- KAY, PAUL, & CHARLES J. FILLMORE. 1999. Grammatical Constructions and Linguistic Generalizations: The What's X Doing Y? Construction. *Language* 75.1–33.
- KOSHIK, IRENE. 2003. Wh-questions used as challenges. *Discourse Studies* 5.51–77.
- SADOCK, JERRY. 1971. Queclaratives. In *Papers from the Seventh Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society*.
- SCHAFFER, DEBORAH. 2005. Can rhetorical questions function as retorts? Is the Pope Catholic? *Journal of Pragmatics* 37.433–460.