

A Cognitive Pragmatic Study of Rhetorical Questions

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Abstract

While the previous researches on rhetorical questions are quite extensive, the inherent mechanism of rhetorical questions is yet to be explored. This study established the scenario of rhetorical questions making statements (called the RQ scenario) which is composed of three components: the BEFORE—the speaker disagrees with the hearer, considering the hearer's utterance or action as unreasonable, inappropriate and the like and wants the hearer to accept his or her opinion or perform the required action; the CORE—the speaker challenges the hearer to agree with him or her or do the required action and its immediate RESULT—the hearer is challenged to agree with the speaker or do something as is required; and the AFTER—the hearer will agree with the speaker or do the action as required. It is held that in the RQ scenario, each component bears a metonymic relationship to the other components and to the whole. So, by highlighting one of the three components of the scenario, the speaker is making statements when asking rhetorical questions.

Keywords: rhetorical questions, metonymy, scenario

1. Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that questions exhibit a primarily answer-eliciting function. However, it is not the case that all the questions fulfill this function. Among others, rhetorical questions are such a case. Instead of asking for information from the hearer or addressee, the speaker is making statements. As a divergent type of questions, rhetorical questions have aroused interest of rhetoricians, grammarians, and pragmatists alike, who have approached their studies from different angles and made fruitful findings. Rhetoricians lay stress on the persuasive effect of rhetorical questions; grammarians focus on their syntactic and semantic features; and pragmatists take interest in their communicative functions in diversified contexts. Carrying out their study from the interaction of syntactics and semantics, Quirk et al. (1972, 1985) hold that a rhetorical question is interrogative in structure but displays a strong assertive force and generally does not expect an answer. They maintain that for rhetorical yes-no questions, a positive question is equivalent to a negative assertion and a negative question is equivalent to a positive assertion while for rhetorical wh-questions, the positive question equals a statement in which the wh-element is replaced by a negative element and the negative question equals a statement in which the wh-element is replaced by a positive element. Schmidt-Radefeldt (1977) carried out the study of rhetorical questions on semantic and pragmatic grounds. According to him, rhetorical questions generally include certain formal indicators: intonation pattern, special particles (adverbials), non-deontic modal verbs and mood. Echoing other scholars, he holds that rhetorical questions are “insincere questions”, for the speaker knows the answer. In addition, he classifies rhetorical questions into three types: ARQs, IRQs, and the combination of the former two types. Dissatisfied with the way of analysis in the traditional indirect speech act, Frank (1990) in integrating the approaches by Anzilotti (1982) and Brown and Levinson (1978), argues that rhetorical questions can strengthen assertions as well as soften criticisms. After discussing the difficulties in the identification of rhetorical questions in some of her collected examples, she holds that the hearer's understanding of the message communicated counts most in the identification of rhetorical questions. Howard (1990) conducted four experiments to examine the effects of asking rhetorical questions on message processing and persuasion, finding that the results of the experiments confirmed the view that rhetorical questions elicit judgments on the topic of the request when they are received and that the availability of relevant information when a judgment is first requested is a critical factor determining whether message persuasion takes place or not. On the basis of the materials in talk shows, Ilie (1999) proposes a pragmatic framework for the interpretation of the discursive and argumentative functions of non-standard questions. Her investigation involves three types of

argumentative non-standard questions: expository questions, rhetorical questions and echo questions. She concludes that among the three types, rhetorical questions are more argumentative, because they imply that the speaker is firmly committed to their implied answer. Chung-hye (2002) shows that rhetorical questions and ordinary questions do not pattern alike with respect to various well-formedness conditions, such as negative polarity items (NPIs). In the light of her proposed analysis, she argues that NPIs are licensed if rhetorical questions are interpreted as a negative assertion, but not if they are interpreted as a positive assertion. Accordingly, both strong and weak NPIs are licensed in rhetorical positive yes-no questions. Schaffer (2005) carried out the study of a special type of the RQ, called the RQ-as-retort which is used in response to a preceding genuine question and whose answer is to be recognized as precisely the same as the first question's. What is peculiar to these RQs-as-retort is that the polarity reversal effect does not hold true in them owing to the fact that the propositional contents of most of them are self-evident truth or falsehood. Hyun-Oak (2011) analyzed a lexical item *ketun* in modern Korean, showing that rhetorical questions play an intriguing catalyst role in the grammaticalization process. Ortiz and Fulda (2012) demonstrates how the problem of strengthening the antecedent which is both formally valid and yet frequently intuitively invalid, concessive conditionals and conditional rhetorical questions fit into the theory of conditional elements. It goes without saying that these productive studies done so far do benefit our understanding of rhetorical questions in various aspects; however, there still exists some room for further exploration. Though researchers have noticed that rhetorical questions are interrogative in form but have the force of an assertion, there is no further exploration of the mechanism lying behind this special use. Therefore, with the data collected from English classical novels, this paper is devoted to uncovering the mechanism of rhetorical questions by embarking on the present study from a cognitive pragmatic perspective.

2. Speech Act Metonymy in Rhetorical Questions

2.1 Rhetorical Questions Performing Indirect Speech Acts

Speech act theory was first proposed by Austin and was developed and perfected by Searle (1969, 2001a; 1985, 2001b). On the view of Searle (2001a, p. 16), "... speech acts are the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication". Therefore, we are performing speech acts: making statements, issuing commands, asking questions, making promises, and so on in speaking a language. There are two kinds of communication. The first kind, also the simplest kind, is related with the direct speech act, "an act which constitutes a matching of structure (e.g., a declarative) and a communicative function (assertion)" (Locastro, 2003, p. 119; Yule, 2000, pp. 54-55); and the second with the indirect speech act, in which "structure and speech function are not matched" (ibid). Searle (2001b, p. 31) offers a more elaborated definition of an indirect speech act as "an act which is performed by way of performing another". For example, in stating "I am thirsty", the speaker can indirectly request of the hearer "Pour me some water". In this case, the speaker performs the act of issuing a request (pour me some water) by way of performing the act of making a statement (I am thirsty). Many indirect speech acts have become so conventionalized that their indirectness is hardly recognizable. As in the often-quoted example "Can you pass me the salt?" which in most contexts is interpreted conventionally as a request rather than a question.

Rhetorical questions can be treated as an indirect use of language. For being interrogative in form, rhetorical questions denote statements which are used to challenge the previous utterance or action of the hearer. To be specific, in rhetorical questions, the performance of the act of making statements is actualized by way of performing the act of asking questions.

2.2 Speech Act Scenario in RQs

Speaking and understanding indirect speech acts involves a kind of metonymic reasoning (Gibbs, 1994; Thornburg & Panther, 1997). The phenomenon of metonymy has been noted by rhetoricians for more than two thousand years. The traditional approach to metonymy is mainly limited to how people refer to things and events in the "real" world. For example, "Dickens" in the sentence "I am reading Dickens these days" is metonymically referring to "novels written by Dickens". By contrast, cognitive linguists assume that metonymy is a much broader cognitive principle. In accordance with cognitive linguistics, metonymy is not merely a referential device, but a way of our thinking, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980, pp. 36-39) claimed, "metonymy is neither just a poetic or rhetorical device nor a matter of language but, like metaphor, is a part of the ordinary, everyday way we think and act as well as we talk". Metonymy is "a property of conceptual structure, i.e., it is a relation among concepts and not merely among words" (Panther & Thornburg, 1998, p. 757). As opposed to metaphor that involves a relation of similarity, metonymy is a cognitive process which involves a relation of contiguity. In a word, metonymy underlies our way of thinking whereby we take one well-understood or easily perceived aspect

to represent or stand for the thing as a whole. In particular, metonymy is instrumental in indirectly implementing linguistic actions such as statements, promises, requests, orders, and so on. The concept of metonymy can operate either at the propositional level or beyond the propositional level. When metonymy works beyond the propositional level, this type of metonymy is called speech act (illocutionary) metonymy in which one illocutionary act stands for another illocutionary act. In rhetorical questions, the act of asking questions has the illocutionary force with the act of making statements in a certain context, written as CONX || [asking questions is making statements] _{METO}.

A speaker can perform a speech act by mentioning an attribute of that speech act. Speech acts and their felicity conditions are best described as scenarios, to be more specific, as action scenarios (Panther & Thornburg, 1998). Scenarios consist of parts which can bear metonymic relations to each other and to the whole of the scenario. An action scenario encompasses at least the following parts: the BEFORE, the CORE and its RESULT, and the AFTER. Thornburg and Panther proposed the Action Scenario as follows:

- (i) The BEFORE: preconditions which *enable* a physical action, *legitimize* a social action or *motivate* an action (including speech acts);
- (ii) The CORE and its RESULT: properties which define the action as such and the immediate outcome of a successful performance of the action;
- (iii) The AFTER: intended or unintended consequences of the action which are not its immediate result. (Thornburg & Panther, 1997, p. 207)

In view of the Action Scenario, the scenario of making statements by rhetorical questions (called the RQ scenario) was established as follows : (S and H designate the speaker and the hearer respectively.)

- (i) The BEFORE: S disagrees with H, regarding H's prior utterance or action as unreasonable, inappropriate, unnecessary, or not right.

S wants H to accept his or her opinion or do the required action.

- (ii) The CORE: S challenges H to agree with him or her or do the required action.

The RESULT: H is challenged to agree with S or do something as is required.

- (iii) The AFTER: H will agree with S or do the required action, or otherwise.

3. Metonymic Realization in the RQ Scenario

In asking a rhetorical question, the speaker chooses to evoke one of the components of the scenario: the BEFORE, the CORE/RESULT or the AFTER to make a statement.

3.1 The BEFORE Component Stands for the Whole Scenario

As is afore said, the BEFORE component of the RQ scenario refers to the disagreement of the speaker with the hearer. Thus, by highlighting his or her disagreement with what the hearer has said or done, the speaker is making statements by way of asking questions. The following example may serve as evidence:

- ① "For shame! for shame!" cried the lady's-maid. "What shocking conduct, Miss Eyre, to strike a young gentleman, your benefactress's son! Your young master!"

"Master! How is he my master? Am I a servant?"

"No, you are less than a servant, for you do nothing for your keep. There, sit down and think over your wickedness."

(Jane Eyre, 1999)

Hearing that John Reed was termed as her young master, the speaker, Jane Eyre, asked the question "How is he my master? Am I a servant?" to show her disagreement with the hearer's words. The speaker's disagreement with the hearer's prior utterance is the BEFORE component of or a precondition for making statements by rhetorical questions. Therefore, the speaker was actually making the statements that "He is not my master" and "I am not a servant" by asking the rhetorical questions.

- ② "A solitary old bachelor," answered Mr. Lorry, *shaking his head*. "There is nobody to weep for me."

"How could you say that? Wouldn't she weep for you? Wouldn't her child?"

"Yes, yes, thank God. I didn't quite mean what I said."

"It is a thing to thank God for; is it not?"

“Surely, surely.”

(*A Tale of Two Cities*)

The speaker, Mr. Lorry said that he was bachelor, so nobody would weep for him. To rebut him, Carton uttered three rhetorical questions at one sitting **“How could you say that?” “Wouldn’t she weep for you?” “Wouldn’t her child?”** By highlighting the BEFORE, namely, his disagreement with the hearer’s prior utterance, Carton made the statements “You shouldn’t say that. She will weep for you. Her child will weep for you.” In this instance, the act of making a statement was realized by evoking the BEFORE of the scenario.

3.2 The CORE/RESULT Component Stands for the Whole Scenario

The CORE designates the speaker’s challenge that the hearer should agree with him or her or do the required action and the RESULT refers to the component that the hearer is challenged to agree with him or her or perform the action as is required. Therefore, the speaker may foreground his or her challenge that the hearer should approve of his or her opinion and in so doing make statements by way of asking rhetorical questions. Look at the following example:

③ “I know all, I know all,” said the last comer. “Be a brave man, my Gaspard! It is better for the poor little plaything to die so, than to live. It has died in a moment without pain. **Could it have lived an hour as happily?**”

“You are a philosopher, you there,” said the Marquis, smiling.

(*A tale of Two Cities*)

The speaker was making the statement “It couldn’t have lived an hour so happily” by asking the rhetorical question “Could it have lived an hour as happily?” The speaker was challenging the hearer to agree with her and the hearer is challenged to do so borne out by his subsequent words “You are a philosopher”. In this example, the act of making a statement was actualized by invoking the CORE of the scenario.

3.3 The AFTER Component Stands for the Whole Scenario

The AFTER component in the RQ scenario refers to the hearer’s reaction to the speaker’s challenge. The hearer will either accept the speaker’s opinion or do the required action, or the opposite. By making salient the hearer’s future action, the speaker can thus make statements by way of rhetorical questions, such as,

④ “It is late!” he said, speaking short and with difficulty. ‘Is not your father very ill? I thought you wouldn’t come.”

“Why won’t you be candid?” cried Catherine, swallowing her greeting. “Why cannot you say at once, you don’t want me? It is strange Linton, that for the second time, you have brought me here on purpose, apparently, to distress us both, and for no reason besides!”

Linton shivered, and glanced at her, half supplicating, half ashamed; but his cousin’s patience was not sufficient to endure this enigmatical behaviour.

(*Wuthering Heights*)

The AFTER designates the future action of the hearer. By foregrounding the AFTER component, the speaker Catherine, is making a statement that “There is no reason that you won’t be candid” by means of the rhetorical question “Why won’t you be candid?” She is making, as a matter of fact, a request that “Be candid”.

Cognitive linguistics maintains that “linguistic meaning resides in conceptualization” (Langacker, 2008, p. 43). A meaning consists of both conceptual content and a particular way of construing that content (ibid). Therefore, the process of construing the meaning of a rhetorical question is identified with the process of conceptualization of the act of asking questions by dint of the metonymic relationship between the three components and the RQ scenario.

4. Conclusion

The previous studies on rhetorical questions were conducted syntactically, semantically, and pragmatically. The syntactic and semantic studies focus on the form and content of rhetorical questions while the pragmatic study puts emphasis on their pragmatic functions. It goes without saying that these researches are all important for a full understanding of rhetorical questions but they are not so sufficient and adequate due to their failure in unearthing how rhetorical questions denote statements in the form of questions. The current study was approached from a metonymic point of view based on the materials collected from some classical English novels. The major findings of this paper include: First, it is found that rhetorical questions perform indirect speech acts. Rhetorical questions are inherently indirect, because the speaker has no intention of eliciting answer or

information from the hearer in posing rhetorical questions. Instead, he or she is making statements by asking rhetorical questions; second, on the basis of the theory of speech act metonymy put forward by Thornburg and Panther (1997), Panther and Thornburg (1998, 1999), the RQ scenario was established. Speech act and its felicity conditions are best described in a scenario composed of three parts: the BEFORE, the CORE/RESULT and the AFTER, each of which bears a metonymic relation to the whole. By dint of the Action Scenario, this paper established speculatively the RQ scenario which is composed of the following three components: the BEFORE, referring to the component that the speaker disagrees with the hearer, regarding the hearer's prior utterance or action as unreasonable, inappropriate, unnecessary, or not right and wants the hearer to accept his or her opinion or perform the required action; the CORE, designating the part that the speaker challenges the hearer to agree with him or her or do the required action and its immediate RESULT that the hearer is challenged to agree with the speaker or do something as is required; and the AFTER, referring to the part that the hearer will agree with the speaker or do the action as required. In this scenario, each of component bears a metonymic relationship to the whole. By giving prominence to one of the three components of the scenario, the speaker is making statements when asking rhetorical questions.

This study deepened our understanding of the function of rhetorical questions. Rhetorical questions often occur in environments of disagreement. A rhetorical question is employed after the speaker has been attacked, blamed or accused by the hearer. In this environment, a rhetorical question is made use of to counterattack the hearer. Because the speaker considers the answer to be self-evident, he or she will not stop to wait for to answer but goes on with his/her speech. More significantly, this study facilitates our understanding of other indirect speech acts. It reveals that many other indirect speech acts apart from rhetorical questions, for example, ironic utterances can also be studied from the metonymic perspective.

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