

ON THE PRAGMALINGUISTIC ANALYSES OF RHETORICAL QUESTIONS

Linguistic communication, characteristic of only human beings, is easily accomplished but not so easily explained. Its serious investigation can be an exciting, enjoyable and, at the same time, a rewarding experience leading to a better understanding of ourselves as well as the world as a whole. The study of pragmatics¹, somehow, straddles the boundaries between language and the world on the one hand and different levels of linguistics (syntax, semantics, stylistics, rhetoric) on the other hand. It has long and generally been established that the meaning of a particular linguistic expression is governed by rules of syntax, semantics, phonology and style, but the choice of that particular type is strongly affected by the pragmatic purpose of the utterance². This accounts for the fact that pragmalinguistic analysis is considered to be a very effective method when applied to the study of problems relevant to tropes and figures of speech.

In this article an attempt will be made to focus on a pragmatic approach to rhetorical questions. The subject of rhetorical questions and its relation to other classical tropes and figures of speech has, of course, been the focus of much thought. Here, we will consider to what extent the theory of pragmatics (namely the theory of speech acts³ and the theory of conversational implicature⁴) contributes to the study of rhetorical questions, and, generally, sketch the directions in which such a pragmatic account might be applied to the study of figurative use of language.

In fact, the notion of pragmatics, in general, is broad. We will focus on pragmatics as the study of linguistic communication in relation to language structure and context of utterance. What is linguistic communication⁵ and how does it work? When we focus on what people use language to do, we focus on what a person is doing with words in particular speech situations. Namely we focus on the intentions, purposes, beliefs, desires, etc. that a speaker has in speaking. In other words, merely producing, hearing and understanding meaningful expressions is not sufficient for communication to work. What is missing here is the speaker's communicative intention which is the inseparable part of the message communicated. For instance, the utterance "A career! Doesn't every man have to carve out a career?" (D.H.Lawrence, p.95) might be a real question seeking for information or a rhetorical question depending on the speaker's intentions in the appropriate circumstances. Here is another example:

Paddy: Wouldn't it be more comfortable to mix with friends of your age?

(J.Mortimer, p. 186)

It is quite clear what this utterance means, but yet not clear at all whether in uttering it Paddy (the speaker) is asking a real question, giving a piece of advice or even expressing a reproach. Thus, the sentence may have only one relevant meaning or (using J.Searle's term) one propositional content⁶ which presupposes the part of the sentence involving predication and reference. But one and the same proposition can be used for different communicative purposes (or with various illocutionary forces⁷) in different speech situations. Therefore, the general formula of the utterance is F (p) where "p" is the proposition and "F" the illocutionary force. In H.P. Grice's theory they are termed "sentence-meaning" and "speaker-meaning" respectively (1971; 53-59).

The illocutionary force traditionally associated with interrogative sentences is that of asking a question and the semantic rule for questions may be represented by means of the following formula: "I ask you so that I should know", where "I" is the speaker and "you" the hearer. The speaker asks the hearer to share the information he holds in order to fill in the information gap existing between them. Interrogative sentences used with this force introduce question proper viewed as direct speech acts. When we communicate directly or literally we say what we mean and mean what we say and, therefore, the inferential mechanisms involved in recognizing the speaker's intention and interpreting the utterance as a whole are not complicated. Implicatures, here, can be calculated from sentences on the basis of the following factors proposed by Grice:

- a) the usual linguistic meaning of what is said.
- b) contextual information
- c) shared background knowledge
- d) the assumption that the speaker is obeying the rules governing successful interaction.

To illustrate let us consider the following example:

"Who is dead ?"

"My baby son. They've killed him, those vile, filthy foreigners

(R.Aldington, p 29).

The hearer understands the literal meaning of the speaker's utterance and assumes that the speaker is obeying the general conversational rules, i.e. what he (the speaker) says is expected to be truthful, relevant, clearly and sufficiently informative. Taking into account also the factor of contextual appropriateness the speaker's utterance may be interpreted as follows : "I ask you to provide the information I need, i.e. to supply a value for the unknown element of my utterance and if you can, please do". It is obvious from the example, that

the listener has succeeded in recognizing the speaker's communicative intention which is very important for any communication to be successful. As Grice stated, communicative intentions are "open" and "overt" and not hidden, and in actual, normal communication they are intended to be recognized. J. Austin terms the addressee's recognition of the speaker's intention as an "illocutionary uptake". And how does the hearer recognize the speaker's communicative intention in the case of indirect speech acts⁸, when we mean more than what we say? In other words, very often the speaker-meaning (what we mean to communicate) is not compatible with the sentence-meaning (what our expression literally means) but is dependent on it. How often we have heard people say, in an attempt to clarify: "Yes, that's what I said but that's not what I meant". Common cases of this are metaphors, rhetorical questions, ironies and other implicit uses of language. For instance, the utterance "Who could tell?" normally has the force of a real question expecting an answer from the addressee. But it may also be used with the indirect force of a rhetorical question as it is in the following context:

He was thinking of Hetty Merton. For it was an unjust mirror, this mirror of his soul that he was to look at. Vanity? Curiosity? Hypocrisy?... There had been something more. At least he thought so. But who could tell? ... No there had been nothing more.

(O. Wilde, p.263)

According to Grice's theory of conversational implicature implicit utterances are viewed as cases of maxim⁹ exploitation. Grice distinguishes between the speaker secretly breaking the maxims, e.g. by telling a lie, which he terms "violating the maxims", and deliberately breaking them for some linguistic effect which he calls "flouting a

maxim". From the linguistic point of view the cases of flouting are more interesting and they certainly give rise to various implicatures.

Ironies, metaphors, rhetorical questions are viewed as cases of flouting the maxim of Quality. The theory of implicature accounts for how it is possible to communicate more than what is literally said and how hearers succeed in working out the complete message when speakers mean more than they say. We will not turn to the analysis of metaphors and ironies as they have undergone thorough investigation in the theories of many scholars such as Grice, Searle, R.Brown and others. What Grice meant by conversational implicature we will try to illustrate on the material of rhetorical questions. Despite the fact that the use of rhetorical questions has had a long tradition, it seems that, so far, there has not been done much study which looks into the functional-communicative properties of rhetorical questions.

As it has already been mentioned above, questions are normally of information-seeking type and they are expected to be answered by the addressee. But in the process of communication interrogative sentences can be used with various indirect forces (or illocutionary forces) to yield such distinct indirect speech acts as requests, invitations, offers, advice, suggestions, rhetorical questions, greetings on introduction, questions signalling for attention, etc. As J.Lyon's points out, the distinction between information-seeking questions and rhetorical questions matches the distinction between "asking a question of someone" and simply "posing a question" (1963: 756). To ask a question normally means both to pose a question and, in doing so, to give some indication to one's addressee that he is expected to respond. By uttering a rhetorical question the speaker merely poses a question without addressing it to anyone.

e.g. From life without freedom, say
Who would not fly?

For one day of freedom, oh,
Who would not die?

(Th. Moore, p. 203)

Here, the negative constructions "Who would not fly?" and "Who would not die?" imply "everybody would fly" and "everybody would die" respectively. Why does the author (the speaker) use the negative constructions instead of their positive counterparts? If we try to use the positive construction (i.e. who would fly?) instead of the negative one (i.e. who would not fly?) in the given context we will easily notice that the nature of the question changes. It ceases to be a rhetorical question as it loses its specific quality and can be regarded as an ordinary question asking for information and, therefore, expecting an answer from the addressee. Thus, in the given context it is the negative construction that can be used with the force of a rhetorical question. In the rhetorical questions of this type we find an interplay of two structural meanings: that of the question and that of the statement. Both are materialized simultaneously. I.R. Galperin takes the view that this type of a rhetorical question is a "special syntactical device, the essence of which consists in reshaping the grammatical meaning of the interrogative sentence, i.e. it is more like a statement than a question expressed in the form of an interrogative sentence". (1977: 244)

e.g. "Don't you like it ?", cried Hallward at last.

"Of course he likes it ?" said

Lord Henry, "Who wouldn't

like it ? It is one of the

greatest things in modern

art".

(O.Wilde, p. 48) .

Here, "Who wouldn't like it ?" is semantically equivalent to the statement "Everybody would like it". Then, why does the speaker prefer the indirectness of the rhetorical question "Who wouldn't like it ?" to the simplicity and directness of the statement "everybody would like it". Rhetorical questions are intended to produce a certain perlocutionary effect on the hearer by means of getting him to recognize that effect. The rhetorical question "Who wouldn't like it?" sounds stronger and more persuasive than the statement "everybody would like it". The latter means something like "I say that everybody would like it and one may agree or disagree with me". While the utterance "Who wouldn't like it ?" can be interpreted as follows: "I ask you a question being sure of the answer. I am firmly convinced that everybody would like it and there can hardly be a person who would disagree".

Thus, rhetorical questions are more emotional and expressive than the statements they imply. The question-words used (such as "who", "what", etc.) imply that the speaker has the answer at that point, but he is throwing the question open, in J.Barzun's words, to suggest "conversation" (1975. p. 167).

What is further required is an account of how rhetorical questions, once uttered, are interpreted and perceived.

e.g. "Don't think of what's past !" said she,
"I am not going to think outside of
now. Why should we ? Who knows
what tomorrow has in store ?"

(Th.Hardy, p. 410)

Here, of course, the hearer will have no trouble understanding that the speaker's utterance "Who knows what tomorrow has in store?" means something like "Nobody knows what tomorrow has in store." But how do we arrive at this interpretation. The inference strategy involved in

understanding the speaker's message can be formulated in the form of the following steps:

- Step 1: The utterance "Who knows what tomorrow has in store ?" is in the form of an interrogative sentence, therefore, the speaker is expected to ask a question. According to the rules governing "questions", I (the hearer) am expected to supply a value for the unknown element "who" in the speaker's utterance.
- Step 2: The conversational situation is not such as to indicate the speaker's interest in my ability to provide the possible answer. In other words, the assumption that the speaker, merely, asks me to supply the answer is rather strange and contextually inappropriate.
- Step 3: The speaker's utterance can't be a proper question asking for information. It must have some hidden illocutionary point. What can it be ?
- Step 4: Having searched the utterance and its context, the following possible interpretation comes to my mind: the speaker merely poses his question without directing it to anyone.
- Step 5: In the absence of any other plausible illocutionary point the utterance has the force of a rhetorical question and what the speaker intends to convey is "Nobody knows and can say what tomorrow has in store".

All the cases of indirect speech acts may be similarly analyzed. It should be mentioned that in conversation no one would consciously go through these steps to conclude that the utterance "Who knows what tomorrow has in store" is a rhetorical question. One simply takes it as such, based on the general principles of communication together with

mutually shared background knowledge and what is most important the context of the utterance¹⁰. There exist a number of inference theories to account for the indirect force of an utterance. And all of them share the following essential feature: for an utterance to be an indirect speech act and give rise to an implicature, there must be an "inference trigger" i.e. some indication that the literal force of an utterance is blocked by the context or is inappropriate in the given situation and needs to be "repaired" by some additional inference. (Levinson 1983: 270).

What has been said above can be successfully applied to another type of a rhetorical question quite different in nature from the first one. The feature that the two types have in common is that in both cases the speaker poses a question. The difference is that unlike the first type (where the speaker is sure of the answer expressed in the form of a statement), in the second type of a rhetorical question by posing a question the speaker merely externalizes his doubt. He seems to be in search of the answer, but he cannot find a solution to the problem that he has posed himself.

e.g. Dimly, at the back of her mind, she was thinking:

why are we all only like mortal pieces of furniture ?

Why is nothing important ? (D.H.Lawrence, p. 67)

The utterance "Why are we all only like mortal pieces of furniture ?" can be interpreted as follows: "I wonder why we are all only like mortal pieces of furniture ?"

This interpretation seems to be very similar in meaning to the following one: I ask myself " Why are we all like mortal pieces of furniture ?" Similar in meaning they may be, there is an important difference between them. As R.M. Hare points out, the difference between "wondering whether something is so" and "asking oneself whether something is so" matches the distinction between simply "posing

a question" and "putting a question to oneself as the addressee with the intention of answering it". (1971: 85). Here, the speaker merely wonders whether "we are all like mortal pieces of furniture", and she does not seem to be able to answer it. Instead she expects the question to remain without answer. The degree of emotiveness and expressiveness is higher in the given example as the part of the rhetorical question itself is another case of maxim exploitation "we are all like mortal pieces of furniture". There seems to be no relation of similarity between the two different notions: living (we) and non-living (pieces of furniture). To interpret we have to infer some analogy of the sort: The noun phrase "pieces of furniture" might have the following set of semantic features associated with it: physical object, natural, non-living, hard. By uttering "we are like mortal pieces of furniture" the speaker intends to convey that "we seem to be cold, dull, gloomy, indifferent to everything, as if secluded ourselves from the outer world and almost non-living". The use of the word "mortal", here, somehow tends to bridge the semantic gap between the notions "living" (we) and "non-living" (pieces of furniture).

Very often we come across rhetorical questions where, while asking a question of oneself, the speaker also acts as an addressee and he is expected to provide the answer by expressing his attitude towards the question posed. In other words, to ask a question of oneself is to perform a speech act which is governed by the same rules as those which govern information-seeking questions addressed to others. I.R. Galperin terms questions of this type "questions-in-the-narrative" (1977: 244).

e.g. What was youth at best?

A green, an unripe time, a time of shallow moods and sickly thoughts.

(O.Wilde, p. 261)

Here, the question is asked by one who knows the answer and provides it. The speaker holds the information he needs and he uses a rhetorical question to produce a certain aesthetic impact on the hearer.

There is still another type of a rhetorical question termed "deliberative question" by J. Lyons (1963: 767). Here we find an interplay of the following two elements: "I say so" and "I don't know".

e.g. "Yes", he whispered at last: "the steamers - I spoke of that;
and I said his name - Oh, my God ! my God ! What shall I do ?
(E. Voynich, p. 72)

The speaker asks "What shall I do ?", expects but gets no answer. Barzun holds the view that "the reader gives a silent one nevertheless and he is grateful for the opportunity to give it to himself" (1975, p. 167).

Thus, rhetorical questions, due to their power of effecting energy in communication, play a significant role in the organization of a text. Its multifunctional character is accounted for by the fact that we, humans, like to play with language and as L. Wittgenstein points out, the rules of that game are learnt by actually playing the game.

Notes

1. When Charles Morris proposed his famous trichotomy of syntax, semantics and pragmatics, he defined pragmatics as the study of "the relations of signs to their users" (1938; 29). A year later Rudolf Carnap proposed to call pragmatics "the field of all those investigations which take into consideration ... the action, state and environment of a man who speaks or hears a linguistic sign" (1939; 4)
2. The distinction between "sentence" and "utterance" is of fundamental importance to both semantics and pragmatics. "A

sentence" is an abstract theoretical entity defined within a theory of grammar, while an utterance is the essence of a sentence in actual context (Levinson, 1983: 18 - 19). According to Bar-Hillel an utterance can be understood as the pairing of a sentence and a context, namely the context in which the sentence is uttered.

3. The most general features of the speech act theory were introduced into the philosophy of language by J.L.Austin. Later his ideas were developed by J.Searle. In his set of lectures published under the headline "How To Do Things with Words" J.Austin holds the view that saying something is itself doing something. On the basis of this he distinguishes between

- a locutionary act: an act of saying something
- an illocutionary act: an act, performed in saying something, e.g. making a request, asking a question. etc.
- a perlocutionary act: an act performed by means of saying something, i.e. producing certain effects on the hearer, for instance, getting someone to do something, moving someone to anger, etc.

4. The term implicature originated with Grice (1975: 1981). The notion of conversational implicature is one of the most important ideas of pragmatics. It provides some explicit account of how it is possible to mean more than what is actually said. According to Gazdar, "an implicature is anything that is inferred from an utterance but that is not a condition for the truth of the utterance." (1979: 49). Levinson takes an implicature as a kind of meaning and pragmatic function (1983: 127)

5. Only recently an adequate theory of communication has begun to emerge and more time and research will be required to explore it in detail. Much of this work was originally done by such philosophers of language as Wittgenstein, Austin, Searle Grice and many others.
6. Proposition can be defined as "a semantic invariant which is common for all the members of the modal and communicative paradigms of the sentence and corresponds to its nominative aspect. (Лингвистический энциклопедический словарь, 1990: 101). J.Searle uses the notion of "proposition" or "propositional content" instead of "meaning".
7. Illocutionary force is a conventional force associated with utterances. For instance, the illocutionary force traditionally associated with interrogative sentences is that of asking a question, the force associated with, for example, requests is that of issuing a request, etc.
8. The notion of "indirect speech acts" makes sense, only if we take into account also the notion of "a literal force" as the indirect force is implied only on the basis of the literal force.
9. Grice distinguishes four maxims of conversation. (1967: 64)
 1. the maxim of Quantity: be as informative as required for current conversational purposes.
 2. the maxim of Quality: say only what you believe to be true and adequately supported .
 3. the maxim of Manner: be clear and orderly and avoid obscurity and ambiguity.
 4. the maxim of Relevance: be relevant.
10. Christopher Gauker in his article "The Normative Nature of Conversational Contexts" states that "the concept of context is normative in two ways: first, the context is that which

interlocutors ought to take to be the context in choosing their words. Second, the context consists of propositions that interlocutors ought to acknowledge for purposes of achieving the goals of the conversation". Correspondingly, he distinguishes between the situational elements of a context and the propositional context. (See, Christopher Gauker "The Normative Nature of Conversational Contexts" presented at Pragma 99, Tel Aviv, Israel, June, 1999)

Bibliography

1. *Арутюнова Н.Д., Падучева Е.В.* Истоки, проблемы и категории прагматики. //Новое в зарубежной лингвистике – Вып. 16. Лингвистическая прагматика. – М.: Прогресс, 1985.
2. *Арутюнова Н.Д.* Предложение и его смысл. Москва 1976.
3. *Гаспарян С.Н.* Фигура сравнения в функциональном освещении. – Изд. Ереванского университета. Ереван – 2000.
4. *Грайс Г.П.* Логика и речевое общение. Новое в зарубежной лингвистике. – Вып.16 Лингвистическая прагматика. – М.: Прогресс, 1985.
5. *Левин С.* Прагматическое отклонение высказывания. Теория метафоры, под ред. Н.Д. Арутюновой, М.А. Журиной. М.: Прогресс 1990.
6. *Серль Дж. Р.* Метафора.–// Теория метафоры, под ред. Н.Д. Арутюновой, М.А. Журиной. М.: Прогресс 1990.
7. *Akmajian A.* Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication. Fourth Edition. – Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1995.
8. *Austin J.L.* How To Do Things With Words, Oxford, 1962.
9. *Barzun J.* Simple and direct: A rhetoric for writers. N.Y., 1975.
10. *Galperin I.R.* Stylistics, Moscow, 1977.

11. *Grice H.P.* Meaning. Philosophical Review, 1957.
12. *Grice H.P.* Utterer's Meaning, Sentence-Meaning, and Word-Meaning. Foundation of Language. 4, 1968.
13. *Levinson S.C.* Pragmatics. – Cambridge, 1983.
14. *Lyons J.* Structural Semantics. – Oxford, 1963.
15. *Lyons J.* Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics. – Cambridge University Press, 1968.
16. *Searle J.R.* Indirect Speech Acts. In: «Syntax and Semantics», Vol. 3, 1975.
17. *Searle J.R.* What is a Speech Act ?. – London, 1965.
18. *Verschueren J.* Understanding Pragmatics. – N.Y.: Oxford Univ. press, 1999.