QUESTIONS AND RHETORICAL QUESTIONS. A THEORETICAL SYNTHESIS

LILIANA IONESCU-RUXĂNDOIU[1]

Abstract. This article represents a concise critical discussion of some basic theoretical approaches to questions and rhetorical questions, arguing for an interactional and discursive pragmatic approach.

Keywords: question, rhetorical question, speech act, felicity conditions, presuppositions, adjacency pair, communicative strategy.

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

In the following, I intend to give a bird's-eye view of some basic theoretical approaches to questions and, in particular, rhetorical questions. I bring forward the idea that pragmatics offers essential clues for solving the basic problems connected with questions, irrespective of the scholarly background and targets of the specialists tackling them.

What can be surprising is the complete lack of language samples, which – in my opinion – can be largely amended resorting to some monographic researches (for example, Şerbănescu 2002 – for Romanian, or Ilie 1994 – for English), to descriptive grammars (for example, GA II 2005: 31–44), as well as to some analyses of particular aspects (for example, Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu 2013) or even to readers' personal experience as native speakers of a certain language.

2. APPROACHES TO QUESTIONS

Questions are mainly identified as a particular class of utterances on the basis of their grammatical form. A closer examination of this class, using the theoretical and methodological apparatus of various scholarly disciplines, reveals the fact that its formal unity hides a strong heterogeneity at some deeper levels.

Grammarians noticed that interrogative syntactic structures do not fulfil a unique communicative goal. At the same time, one can perform questions using non-interrogative

[1] Liliana Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu is Professor Emeritus at the University of Bucharest, Dept. of Linguistics. She has published extensively on topics related to pragmatics, discourse analysis, argumentation. She has edited several volumes and coordinated projects related to creating a corpus of verbal interaction in present-day Romanian as well as a survey of the Romanian parliamentary discourse. E-mail: lilianarux@gmail.com.

RRL, **LXIII**, *1–2*, p. 49–53, Bucureşti, 2018

BDD-A27735 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-26 16:59:53 UTC)

syntactic structures. Accordingly, the distinction between interrogative utterances and questions, proposed by the functionalists, became largely adopted in the last decades (see, for example, the last version of the Romanian academic grammar, GA II: 32). J. Wilson (1981: 95) claims that "interrogatives are abstract grammatical structures, questions are discourse acts; interrogatives do not expect answers, questions do". In other words, the form is not enough to account for questions; semantic and pragmatic aspects should also be taken into consideration.

Important difficulties arise when trying to describe the meaning of different kinds of questions. In a synthetic survey of the logical literature, F. Kiefer (2016) critically examines the three basic approaches to the semantics of questions: propositional, categorial and epistemic-imperative, concluding that "the contribution of semantics is restricted to some fundamental properties" (Kiefer 2016: 147). One can hardly predict from the semantics of the question what the questioner wants to know (*ibid.*: 144). The interpretation of a simple question depends on a set of parameters, as the questioner's assumptions about the addressee's knowledge state, the relationships between the two, and the extra-linguistic context in which the question is being asked (*ibid.*: 144). All these aspects belong to pragmatics, as Kiefer convincingly demonstrates.

One can notice that both linguists and logicians arrive at the same conclusion: the basic problems connected with questions are pragmatic in nature.

Still, actional pragmatics provides only partial solutions to these problems. Viewed as speech acts, their felicity conditions were defined by J. Searle (1969) as follows:

- preparatory conditions: S (speaker) does not know the answer and it is not obvious that H (hearer) would provide the answer without being asked;
- sincerity condition: S really wants to get that information;
- essential condition: counts as an attempt of S to get H to provide a certain information;
- propositional content: future act (of providing a certain information) of H.

On closer examination, it is quite clear that only the so-called information questions fully meet the above-mentioned conditions. They are meant "to eliminate a knowledge deficit" (Kiefer 2016: 144). Other types of questions (for the typology of questions, see Ilie 1994: 35; Kiefer 2016: 144–145) plainly violate one or more of these conditions. Consider, for example, the so-called examination and didactic / expository questions (the questioner knows the answer, but wants to check the knowledge state of the addressee, or in the second case to state the topic which will be approached), conducive / leading questions (meant to get the confirmation of some information or hypothesis of the questioner), problem formulating questions (neither the questioner nor the addressee know the answer), and finally rhetorical questions (the questioner does not want to elicit information from the addressee, but to express a personal opinion or position and to persuade him / her to adopt it).

Problems appear too when it comes to the classification of questions as speech acts. The solutions proposed by pragmaticians are quite different. Austin (1962) assigns them to the class of expositives, Searle (1969) as well as Bach and Harnish (1979), to the class of directives, Allan (1986) to the class of invitationals; Vendler (1972) puts them into a special class, called interrogatives (see Allan 1998: 925). These differences are determined not only by the classification criteria used by the above-mentioned authors (starting with Austin's criterion of performative verbs and continuing with the 12-criteria system

BDD-A27735 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-26 16:59:53 UTC)

proposed by Searle), but also by the high diversity of meanings expressed in an interrogative form in different communicative situations (see the previous discussion concerning the felicity conditions of questions). The acts performed in an interrogative form seem to have in common that they are hearer-oriented, which seems to bring them closer to directives. Still, this orientation means different things. The hearer is expected to give different kinds of answers, in a verbal or non-verbal form (manifestations of interest and curiosity for speaker's performance, signs of approval for his / her opinions, signs of concern for solving some critical problems, etc.).

As previously noted, actional pragmatics leaves open some problems. Interactional pragmatics, its necessary complement, may bring us closer to a better solution.

Questions are the first member of the most usual adjacency pair, which involves answers as a second part. As Levinson (1983: 274) puts it, the interrogative sentence-type functions "as an open proposition, closed by a set of appropriate answers" or it may denote "the set of its true answers", which, as previously stated, can take different forms. Questions have an inherently dialogic nature, even when they occur in monologic discursive forms or are actualized through sentences which do not have an interrogative form (Ilie 1994: 48).

The nature and use of questions depend mainly on some parameters defining a particular communicative situation and accordingly on the discursive form. Examination questions are specific to didactic discourse, expository questions – to didactic and scholarly discourse, conducive questions – to judicial discourse, rhetorical questions – to political discourse, etc. They are sort of routines, correlated with these discursive types, triggering the "right" sort of situational answers.

3. RHETORICAL QUESTIONS

In the following, a particular case will be discussed: the case of rhetorical questions. The general remarks under 2 on approaching speech acts, as well as some considerations from a previous analysis of this type of acts (Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu 2013: 476-484) will be taken into account.

Rhetorical questions represent a non-canonical group of speech acts, which are characterized by a specific inconsistency between their form and function. J.M. Sadock (1974) suggestively termed them *queclaratives* (*apud* Levinson 1983: 373), as they combine the interrogative form (question) with an assertive function (typical of declaratives). From the viewpoint of actional pragmatics, they do not comply with the felicity conditions of questions, as the questioner knows the answer and does not expect to get it from a knowledgeable receiver, but provides him/herself a certain piece of information.

Still, when considered from an interactional perspective, these acts preserve an important feature of questions: they are not complete without a certain type of reaction – at least mental – from the receivers: their agreement with speaker's opinion. They are quite similar to tag questions, which initially exhibit an affirmative sequence followed by the question *isn't it?* This *isn't it?* is implicit in the deep structure of rhetorical questions, necessarily involving hearer's agreement as a preferred second. Some authors noticed that, in a modal perspective, rhetorical questions restrict the dialogic space available for expressing an alternative position (see Simon-Vandenbergen, White and Aijmer 2007: 34–36):

BDD-A27735 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-26 16:59:53 UTC)

assertions which are indirectly expressed by rhetorical questions can always be prefaced by modals of certainty, anticipating the agreement of the hearer(s).

Leaving apart literary genres, where rhetorical questions play a special role as figures of speech, and considering only the oral discursive forms, one can agree that rhetorical questions have a higher frequency in some types of institutional discourse than in daily current communication. Political discourse is one of them.

Rhetorical questions have an inherent strategic potential, given that any interrogative utterance form is directed towards a hearer and, at the same time, is a trigger of structural presuppositions, which are always true. These characteristics are currently exploited in political discourse, in connection with its typical persuasive goals. Speaker's opinions are transferred to the audience via the exploitation of the similarities between the rhetorical questions and the conductive questions, whose aim is to get confirmation of certain information or hypothesis from the hearer. Moreover, structural presuppositions are quite frequently manipulated. Speakers either assign their opinions a larger validity, sometimes presenting them as axioms, or distort others' opinions adding or skipping some aspects or details.

The persuasive function of the rhetorical questions is also connected with one of their inherent features: a particular splitting of the speaker's voice into an asserting and an interpreting voice. These two resulting voices are discursively staged in a specific way: only the first voice is heard, the other (attributable to any person in the audience) tacitly doubles it, as the mutual alignment of stances on the issue at stake between the speaker and the audience is implicitly claimed (for a more detailed discussion, see Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu 2012). Speaker's role is only to make the others fully aware of their position and opinions.

Claiming common ground between the speaker and the audience represents a basic strategy of positive politeness too, which is meant to create and continuously enhance group solidarity. At the same time, as rhetorical questions are reactive acts avoiding the direct expression of a critical attitude towards different (or even opposed) positions, they are also connected with the negative politeness strategies, based on indirection.

Beside the discursive functions involving the manipulation of audience's opinions, which sometimes includes irony and humour as a means of criticizing different or opposed views, rhetorical questions fulfil important argumentative functions. Quite frequently, they provide arguments, most of them fallacious, or the conclusion of a reasoning process; stating the topic of a following argumentation activity is quite rare (for a synthesis on the functions of rhetorical questions, see Ilie 1994: 145–152).

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Questions are a non-homogeneous class of utterances, considering their form and function. On the one hand, interrogative sentences are their prototypical but not exclusive form of linguistic actualization, on the other hand, only the so-called information questions are connected with speaker's intention to eliminate a knowledge deficit.

Given the lack of homogeneity of the class of questions, actional pragmatics can offer only partial solutions to their problems. There are types of questions (examination, expository, conducive, and rhetorical questions) which do not comply with the felicity conditions described by Searle. Accordingly, it is hard to include them in the same speech act class.

BDD-A27735 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-26 16:59:53 UTC)

Considering the inherent dialogic nature of questions, interactional pragmatics is able to provide a more efficient approach to questions.

The nature and use of questions mainly depends on the specific configuration of the communicative situation in which they are performed; in its turn, this situation is correlated with a certain discursive form.

There is a particular distribution of different types of questions, depending on the discursive form. Prototypical questions (the so-called information questions) are the only type lacking discursive distributional restrictions.

Rhetorical questions are specific to political discourse, having a persuasive function. Their strategic potential is based on the exploitation of the main features of the interrogative form: the orientation towards the hearer and the capacity to trigger presuppositions.

REFERENCES

Allan, K., 1986, *Linguistic Meaning* (Vols. 1 and 2), London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Allan, K., 1998, "Speech Act Classification and Definition", in: J.L. Mey (ed.), *Concise Encyclopedia of Pragmatics*, Amsterdam, Lausanne, etc., Elsevier, 922–927.

Austin, J. L., 1962, *How to do things with words*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Bach, K., R.M. Harnish, 1979, *Linguistic communication and speech acts*, Cambridge, MIT Press.

GA = Guțu Romalo, V. (ed.), *Gramatica limbii române* II, *Enunțul*, 2005, Bucureşti, Editura Academiei.

Ilie, C., 1994, *What Else Can I Tell You? A Pragmatic Study of English Rhetorical Questions as Discursive and Argumentative Acts*, Stockholm, Almqvistand Wiksell Int.

Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu, L., 2012, "Perspectivation in the Romanian parliamentary discourse", in: L. N. Berlin, A. Fetzer (eds), *Dialogue in Politics*, Amsterdam, Philadelphia, John Benjamins, 151–165.

Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu, L., 2013, "Întrebarea retorică: aspecte teoretice şi aplicative", in: D.O. Cepraga, C. Lupu, L. Renzi (eds), *Études romanes II. Hommages offerts à Florica Dimitrescu et Alexandru Niculescu*, Bucureşti, Editura Universității din Bucureşti, 476–484.

Kiefer, F., 2016, "On the Meaning of Questions", in: K. Allan, A. Capone, I. Kecskes (eds), *Pragmemes and Theories of Language Use. Perspectives in Pragmatics*, Philosophy and Psychology 9, Cham, Springer, 141–148.

Levinson, St. C., 1983, *Pragmatics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Sadock, J. M., 1974, *Toward a Linguistic Theory of Speech Acts*, New York, Academic Press.

Searle, J.R., 1969, *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Searle, J.R., 1979, *Expression and meaning. Studies in the theory of speech acts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Simon-Vandenbergen, A-M., P.R.R. White, K. Aijmer, 2007, "Presupposition and „taking-for-granted" in mass communicated political argument", in: A. Fetzer, G. E. Lauerbach (eds), *Political Discourse in the Media*, Amsterdam, Philadelphia, John Benjamins, 31–74.

Şerbănescu, A., 2002, *Întrebarea. Teorie şi practică*, Iaşi, Polirom.

Vendler, Z., 1972, *Res Cogitans*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press.

Wilson, J., 1981, "Come on now answer the question: an analysis of constraints on answers", in: *Belfast Working Papers in Language and Linguistics* 5, 93–121.

BDD-A27735 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-26 16:59:53 UTC)

BDD-A27735 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-26 16:59:53 UTC)