

ISSA Proceedings 2006 - Manoeuvring Strategically With Rhetorical Questions



1. Introduction

In this paper I investigate what role the stylistic device rhetorical question can play in arguers' attempts to reconcile their rhetorical with their dialectical aims by manoeuvring strategically when carrying out particular discussion moves that form part of the dialectical procedure for resolving a dispute. The research I shall report on here, forms part of a larger project in which insights from classical rhetoric, pragmatics and modern stylistics are used to explore the possibilities for strategic manoeuvring with specific presentational means.**[i]**

Authors who have paid attention to the role of rhetorical questions in argumentative contexts, such as Slot (1993: 7) and Ilie (1994: 148) ascribe two main functions to rhetorical questions: they are used as a means of putting forward standpoints and as a means of putting forward arguments. Another function of rhetorical questions is mentioned by van Eemeren, Houtlosser & Snoeck Henkemans (2005): according to these authors rhetorical questions can also be analysed as proposals for a common starting point in the opening stage of a discussion. In this paper, I will concentrate on two of the three abovementioned functions of rhetorical questions: proposing a common starting point and putting forward argumentation. I shall first give an analysis of the way rhetorical questions can fulfil these functions, and then establish what dialectical and rhetorical goals might be served by executing the moves in question by means of a rhetorical question instead of by some other presentational means. Finally, I shall give an indication of how the types of strategic manoeuvring that rhetorical questions can be instrumental in may derail, and in which violations of the rules for critical discussion such derailed manoeuvrings may result.

2. Rhetorical questions in the opening stage and argumentation stage

According to the model for critical discussion, the argumentation stage of the discussion should be preceded by a dialogue in the opening stage by means of which the parties come to an agreement on which propositions they will regard as

common starting points during the discussion. The dialectical profile that van Eemeren, Houtlosser and Snoeck Henkemans (2005: 112) have sketched for the opening stage, specifies which moves of the discussants may contribute to achieving the aim of establishing in advance what will be the common starting points for the discussion. According to the profile, the dialogue about the starting points starts with a proposal by one party to the other party to accept a certain proposition as a shared starting point. The other party can accept or refuse this proposal, or accept it only on condition that some other proposition will also be accepted as a starting point for the same discussion.

Van Eemeren, Houtlosser and Snoeck Henkemans point out that it is unlikely that in practice parties will execute the opening move of the starting point dialogue by means of a fully explicit proposal to accept some proposition. Arguers can, however, implicitly make such a proposal, and one way of doing this is to ask a rhetorical question (2005: 115). A rhetorical question is a stronger sign that the arguer is making a proposal to accept a starting point than an ordinary question about the other party's beliefs. This is so because with a rhetorical question the addresser indirectly makes it clear that a preparatory condition for a proposal has been fulfilled, namely that the addresser thinks that the other party will be prepared to accept the proposition that functions as the presupposed answer to the question. Also, by asking a rhetorical question, the arguer shows that he himself believes that the proposition he proposes to the other party is indeed acceptable, which means that the sincerity condition for a proposal has also been fulfilled. Let us look at an example:

(1) I don't see why Google's rent-a-book program would not work. Isn't it true that libraries do not have many of the popular titles even if they are bestsellers?

The only sign that the arguer is making a proposal is the form of the rhetorical question, but in fact the arguer is making an assertion in which he presents the acceptance of the proposal as unproblematic. **[ii]** According to van Eemeren, Houtlosser and Snoeck Henkemans (2005: 121) this is the general pattern with rhetorical questions that are being used to make a proposal to accept something as a common starting point.

Similar analyses of the function of rhetorical questions are given by other authors. Ilie (1994), for instance, also describes rhetorical questions as attempts by arguers to arrive at the same commitments:

The *addresser's commitment to the implicit rhetorical answer* is indicated by his/her conviction that there is no other possible answer to the rhetorical

question. The addresser's expectation is to induce the same commitment in the addressee. (217).

And Rohde (2006), believes that a shared commitment by the discourse participants is a condition for felicitous rhetorical questions:

To be felicitous, rhetorical questions require that discourse participants share a prior commitment to similar, obvious, and often extreme answers. As such, rhetorical questions are biased, yet at the same time uninformative. Their effect is to synchronize discourse participants' commitments, confirming their shared beliefs about the world (135).

As is the case in example (1), the proposal to accept a common starting point often serves at the same time as an argument in the argumentation stage. The arguer then takes it for granted that the opponent will accept the proposal, so that he can use it as support for his standpoint. Ilie gives the following description of the arguer's aims in using a rhetorical question:

The addresser's ultimate goal is to elicit the addressee's agreement with the message implied by the rhetorical question, i.e. the addressee's agreement with, and preferably, commitment to the implication of the rhetorical question. By pursuing the ultimate goal, the addresser of a rhetorical question intends to induce in the addressee the disposition and the willingness to act on this shared commitment (1994: 219).

Rhetorical questions can be seen as indirect speech acts because they violate two of the rules for communication when taken literally. First, the addresser already knows the answer, so the question is superfluous. Second, the question is insincere, since the addresser does not expect to get an answer from the addressee. According to Houtlosser (1995: 255-256) these violations of the Principle of Communication can be made good by assuming that by asking the question addressers implicate that they want their addressees to accept the consequences of their commitment to what is indirectly asserted. **[iii]**

As we have seen, rhetorical questions that are used to propose starting points are somewhat like "offers you can't refuse": the arguer makes it seem as if the acceptance of the proposed starting point is taken for granted, since the proposition which the addressee is asked to accept in the opening stage is at the same time being used as an argument for the arguer's standpoint in the argumentation stage. In the argumentation stage, the rhetorical question thus serves as a means to urge the addressee to act on his commitment and recognize

that the standpoint that is being defended by the argument the addressee supposedly accepts, should now also be accepted.

3. *Rhetorical questions and strategic manoeuvring*

Van Eemeren en Houtlosser have proposed to integrate a rhetorical component into the pragma-dialectical theoretical framework by starting from the assumption that arguers make use of the opportunities available in a certain dialectical situation to handle that situation in the way that is the most favourable to them (2002: 138). By manoeuvring strategically, arguers try both to uphold a reasonable discussion attitude and to further their own case (2002: 142).

Each of the stages of the model of critical discussion has a specific dialectical aim, and, because, according to van Eemeren and Houtlosser, “the parties involved want to realize this aim to their best advantage, they can be expected to make the strategic moves that serve their interest best” (2002: 138). In other words: each dialectical objective of a particular discussion stage has a rhetorical analogue.

In order to achieve both the dialectical and the rhetorical objectives that are associated with the different discussion stages, each party will aim to make the allowable moves that are specified in the dialectical profiles for every stage in such a way that these moves influence the result of the discussion as much as possible in its own favor. In van Eemeren and Houtlosser’s view, strategic manoeuvring can take place in making an expedient choice from the options constituting the ‘topical potential’ associated with a particular discussion stage, in selecting a responsive adaptation to ‘audience demand’ and in exploiting the appropriate ‘presentational devices’ (2002: 139). It is the latter aspect of strategic manoeuvring that I shall concentrate on here.

The dialectical aim of the *opening* stage as a whole is to establish an unambiguous point of departure for the discussion (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002: 138). In order to achieve this, parties should come to an agreement on which procedural and material starting points they will accept for the duration of the discussion. According to van Eemeren and Houtlosser, the rhetorical aim of each of the parties is to arrive at the point of departure that serves their own interest best: “Each party’s strategic manoeuvring will be aimed at establishing the most workable starting points and the most opportune allocation of the burden of proof” (2002: 138).

As far as the first move of the opening stage is concerned, making a proposal to the other party to accept a proposition as a starting point, the *dialectical* (sub)aim is to give the other party the opportunity to agree or not to agree with the

proposal, so that both parties can have a say in the matter and so that it becomes clear in advance which starting points have already been accepted and are therefore no longer open for discussion. The *rhetorical* aim associated with this move is that the arguer tries to ensure as much as possible that his own proposal will be accepted by the other party.

In what way can the presentational device 'rhetorical question' be instrumental to achieving the dialectical and rhetorical aims associated with this particular move? By asking a rhetorical question, because it has the form of a question, it is clearer that the arguer is making a proposal than if the arguer were to have stated that a specific proposition is a common starting point or if he would have acted as if this were the case by using this proposition as an argument. The impression is at least given that the other party can still agree or disagree. In that respect using a rhetorical question to propose a starting point as in (b) seems to be halfway between (a), first asking the other party whether he agrees with a certain proposition and when this proves to be the case using it as an argument for the standpoint, and (c) using the proposition as an argument and thereby making it clear that it is to be regarded as a common starting point:

(a) P: Do you agree that X?

A: Yes, I do.

P: Then you should also agree with me that Y!

(b) Y, because isn't it the case that X?

(c) Y, because X

Dialectically speaking, option (b) seems a more reasonable way of getting a starting point accepted than for instance option (c). Rhetorically speaking, the advantage of proposing a starting point by means of option (b) instead of option (a) is that by asking a rhetorical question the arguer makes it seem as if the proposition he proposes to the other party has in fact already been accepted by the other party, so that it looks as if making the proposal to accept it is in fact superfluous.

The dialectical aim of the *argumentation* stage as a whole is to test the tenability of the standpoint or standpoints that have been put forward in the confrontation stage, starting from the point of departure established in the opening stage (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002: 139). The rhetorical aim of this stage is to make the strongest case and launch the most effective attack.

When the protagonist has put forward argumentation, and the antagonist attacks

its propositional content, the protagonist can defend the argumentation by pointing out that the proposition in question forms part of the list of propositions accepted by both parties in the opening stage. The protagonist and antagonist must then check whether this is indeed the case, and if so, the antagonist is obliged to accept the propositional content of the protagonist's argumentation. This method of defense by the protagonist is called the Intersubjective Identification procedure in pragma-dialectics (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 146).

To make it clear that a proposition used in the argumentation is part of the shared starting points the protagonist can simply use this proposition in the argumentation without providing further defence for it. By doing so the protagonist implicitly makes it clear that he or she considers the proposition to be already accepted by the other party. However, by presenting the argument in the form of a rhetorical question, the protagonist refers in a more explicit way to the fact that he or she is of the opinion that the Intersubjective Identification procedure should produce a positive result: this presentation makes it clear that the proposition in question is presupposed to be already acceptable to that party. The protagonist thereby also indicates that the acceptability of the propositional content of the argument can no longer be at issue; an antagonist who wants to criticize the argument will now have to focus on the justificatory or refutatory potential of the argument. This way of proceeding could in principle further the dialectical testing procedure, since it makes it explicitly clear which procedures are supposed to have been carried out already, and therefore need not be repeated.

Rhetorically speaking, it is in protagonists' interest to see to it that their chances of obtaining a positive result of the testing procedure are optimal. The rhetorical question enables them to present their argument in such a way that it becomes clear that they expect their opponent to admit it already belonged to the agreed upon starting points. Criticizing the propositional content of the argument, therefore, seems no longer an option.

4. Derailments of strategic manoeuvring with rhetorical questions

As the analysis I have just presented has made clear, rhetorical questions can function as proposals in the opening stage of a discussion. Presenting the proposal to accept a proposition as a common starting point by means of a rhetorical question makes it possible to formulate the proposal in such a way that it becomes more difficult for the other party not to accept it. This is because the

rhetorical question makes it seem that the proposition the arguer wants to use in the argumentation is in fact already part of the opponent's commitments. If this manoeuvre is successful, the protagonist can subsequently use the proposition as an argument in defence of his or her standpoint with the advantage of having made it virtually impossible for the antagonist to attack the acceptability of the propositional content of the argument without seeming to contradict himself.

As I have explained, using the presentational device of a rhetorical question can be a useful means of realizing important dialectical and rhetorical objectives in both the opening stage and the argumentation stage of a discussion. This, however, is not to say that the types of strategic manoeuvring to which the rhetorical question may be instrumental will always be in accordance with the rules for critical discussion. The manoeuvres in question may, of course, also go wrong and result in violations of these rules. I would now like to look at some possible ways in which such derailments may occur.

Since proposing a proposition by means of a rhetorical question indirectly amounts to making an assertion in which the arguer presents the acceptance of the proposal as unproblematic, there is, of course, a real danger of this type of manoeuvre resulting in a violation of rule 6, the starting-point rule:

Discussants may not falsely present something as an accepted starting point or falsely deny that something is an accepted starting point (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 193).

According to van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992: 151), in falsely promoting a proposition to the status of a common starting point, the protagonist tries to *evade the burden of proof*: He prevents the proposition from being questioned and thus avoids having to give a further defence. Whether or not this fallacy has been committed depends on whether or not the proposition in question is in fact acceptable to the opponent or not. Since in practice, the starting points of the discussion are generally not listed explicitly in advance, it will not always be possible to establish with certainty whether or not the starting point rule is really being violated. But even in cases where it is clear that a proposition has indeed been accepted by the other party, it is still possible for a violation of the starting point rule to occur, as van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2002: 151-152) have made clear. They discuss the case of a rhetorical question being used in a *conciliatio*: a figure in which an arguer uses an argument of the opponent to support his own standpoint. If a rhetorical question is used to this end, there is the following danger of derailment:

The danger of derailment stems from the fact that the opponent may be assumed to agree with the *content* of the argument but may *not* be assumed to agree with the way in which the argument is used to support precisely the opposite standpoint. (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002: 151)

In the case of a *concordatio*, it is clear that the propositional content of the argument should be acceptable to the opponent, since this opponent used the same argument earlier on in the same discussion, albeit in support of the opposite standpoint. That the argument should also be acceptable as a justification of the standpoint the arguer is defending by means of the *concordatio* is not very plausible, however. According to van Eemeren and Houtlosser, the use of *concordatio* can be seen as a derailment if it is the case that:

the proponent just presupposes that the adopted argument has an unquestioning justificatory potential for his standpoint and leaves the opponent no room to question this presupposition. If a *concordatio* is in this way derailed, the proponent relies on a starting point that is not yet accepted by the opponent and commits the fallacy of begging the question. (2002: 151-152).

So even when a rhetorical question rightly presupposes that the propositional content is already part of the opponent's commitments, there is still the danger that the arguer by making use of the rhetorical question puts so much pressure on the opponent that there is no room for the opponent to raise critical questions concerning the justificatory potential of the argument. The rhetorical question in itself, as we have seen, is already an attempt to get the opponent to act on his commitment to the proposition proposed, that is to accept the consequences of this commitment, which means recognizing that the standpoint that is being defended should also be accepted. The pressure on the opponent can be augmented by adding expressions such as "well then" to make even more clear that the opponent should now be prepared to draw the desired consequences. Example (2) seems to be a case of the arguer trying to force his opponent to accept the standpoint by making use of rhetorical questions:

(2) Do you tell the whole and complete truth to such a degree that the objective truth is told in minute detail every time you open your mouth? Well then, are you a liar?

In the example, the arguer is defending the (implicit) standpoint that the opponent does not have the right to accuse someone of lying if that person does not give a completely accurate account of something. The argumentation for this

standpoint put forward in the form of rhetorical questions is: “you yourself are not capable of always telling the complete objective truth, while you would not consider yourself a liar.” By using “well then” the arguer makes it explicitly clear that the opponent should either be prepared to call himself a liar (and it is presupposed that the opponent will not want to do that), or accept the arguer’s standpoint. That the opponent may grant that he himself cannot always tell the complete truth, is of course no reason to assume that he should therefore also be willing to accept the standpoint. **[iv]**

5. *Conclusion*

Because of their twofold function as a question and an assertion, rhetorical questions can serve at the same time as proposals to accept a common starting point and as arguments the acceptability of whose propositional content is presupposed. It is this combination of token openness and actual shielding which allows for potentially effective manoeuvring in the opening and argumentation stages of a discussion. As we have seen, this type of manoeuvring may derail if the arguer ascribes unwarranted commitments to the opponent and tries to prevent this opponent from putting forward criticisms, either with respect to the propositional content or to the justificatory potential of the argument. These derailments may result in the arguer evading the burden of proof or begging the question.

NOTES

[i] See for an earlier publication within this project Snoeck Henkemans 2005.

[ii] Rhetorical questions are often introduced by means of the expression ‘after all’. According to Sadock 1971, “after all” can even be used as a test for whether a question is rhetorical or not: it can occur with rhetorical yes-no questions but not with ordinary yes-no questions. ‘After all’ is an expression which, according to Elizabeth Closs Traugott’s analysis may be used as an “as we know” connective, by means of which “appeal is made to obvious, inter-personally recoverable, largely societal norms”. (1997: 3).

[iii] If the rhetorical question functions as a standpoint, it is the addresser’s aim to get it accepted. If it functions as an argument, the addresser attempts to get the addressee to accept the consequences of his commitment to the propositional content of the argument, that is, to accept the standpoint (Houtlosser 1995: 256).

[iv] Experimental research has provided evidence for the fact that rhetorical questions may be particularly effective in increasing persuasion and putting

pressure on the opponent to accept a standpoint. According to Blankenship & Craig's (2006) results, a message containing rhetorical questions increased participants' attitudinal resistance to an attacking message more than a control message.

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