ISSA Proceedings 2006 – Some Remarks On Interrogativity And Argumentation

1. *Introduction*

This paper presents some aspects of a theory in which argumentation – as a 'verbal, social and rational activity' (van Eemeren 2001: 11) – plays a role in the explanation of the question phenomenon. In fact in linguistic research two levels are usually taken into account – the level of propositional content and that of the illocution or pragmatic function combined with the speaker's attitudes (Gobber 1999). In this contribution we argue that questions can have a further *intrinsic* (natural, prototypical) component as a *pragma-dialectical move.* This move is intended as a (part of a) dialogue that appears at some stage of a critical discussion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 57-68). This level should be taken into account to explain the functioning of questions in verbal communication.

In fact, the classical rhetoric tradition is interested mainly in non-prototypical uses of interrogative structures such as the so-called rhetorical questions (*interrogations*, see Quintilianus, Institutio Oratoria, IX, 2, 7-16). This tradition considers nearly always monological texts whose goal is to draw the hearer's attention, to gain his consent, to dissuade or to persuade him according to the speaker's intention ('dicendo tenere hominum mentis, adlicere voluntates, impellere quo velit, unde autem velit deducere', Cicero, De oratore, I, 30).

This is not the natural, prototypical functioning of interrogatives as questions, i.e. as dialogical moves aiming at a verbal reply. As Edmondson 1981:196 puts it, 'interrogativisation is a grammatical reflection of the interactional purpose of the language system'. Their role as requests for a verbal reply is relevant for the purposes of a dialogue in which the interlocutors' task is to reach an agreement on a standpoint in a reasonable way. From this dialogical perspective interrogative structures can be observed both as "real" questions and as moves of another, i.e. non prototypical function.

2. *Interrogatives and questions*

Let us consider first the difference between interrogatives and questions. First we

take into account the main pragmatic functions of the general type "questions". Other uses of interrogatives which are relevant for critical discussion are described in a sketchy way.

Questions should be kept qualitatively distinct from interrogative structures. The latter are items and patterns of a given language, whereas the former are text sequences (Rigotti 1993), i.e. "moves" in a dialogue or in a monologue.

There is a "many-many relation" (Gatti 1992) between interrogative structures and questions. Of course, the most typical use of interrogatives is that of making questions.

As text sequences, questions have a propositional content and a pragmatic function (Stati 1990). Two sorts of propositional content are generally considered. Their structure results from the unknown element they exhibit. According to the sort of propositional content, two types of semantic structures are then distinguished. If the content calls for verification, a propositional question is given (i.e. "Yes-No Question" or "alternative Question") and the propositional content has the cognitive status of an *assumption* (Alexius Meinong called it *Annahme*: see Meinong 1910). If the content calls for interpretation of (a) variable(s), an x-question (wh-question) is given and the propositional content has the semantic status of an open proposition. It has been observed that

[…] we can assume that the listener has understood the question if he knows what kind of information must be given as an answer – though, perhaps, he has no such information at hand. In other words, the listener understands the question if he can characterize correctly the semantical scheme of the answer (Padučeva 1986: 374).

X-questions have a premise (a propositional content condition), a "datum" (the propositional content) and an "obiectum quaestionis" (the range of the variable in the content) (Ajdukiewicz 1926/27).

In a dialogue questions are posed with a specific illocution. A bundle of illocutions is also possible ('amalgame pragmatique', Stati 1990). Specific illocutions can be traced back to two generic ones: most questions require an answer, and some of them can get the answer from the same questioner (e.g. the so-called expository questions). But there are also questions which do not wait for a verbal reply, although an answer is still possible and accepted.

The most frequent questions call for information ("let me know"). Other requests

for an answer are examination questions ("show me that you know") and maieutic, i.e. "Socratic" questions, with which the questioner helps the interlocutor find the answer. Consider the following dialogue fragment:

"Sir", he said, looking Mr. Utterson in the eyes, "was that my master's voice?"

"It seems much changed," replied the lawyer; very pale, but giving look for look.

"Changed? [...] Well, yes, I think so", said the butler. "Have I been twenty years in this man's house, to be deceived about his voice? No, sir; master's made away with [...]"

(R.L. Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*)

Jekyll's butler poses a question (*Was that my master's voice?*), but he knows already the answer. He wants that the lawyer recognizes that it is not his master's voice. In fact, the lawyer seems to avoid the expected answer, but he grows "very pale". The butler intends it as a sign that he tacitly agrees with him. This allows him to advance an argument (on rhetorical questions, see later), which is followed by the conclusion "Master's made away with".

Questions as requests for verbal action can vary according to the function of the answer required. In most cases, the answer is an assertive. In some cases, the answer is a directive and the corresponding question is called deliberative, because it makes a request for an advice or an order ("Well, what should I do?"). An answer can be also a commissive, e.g. when a question makes a request for a promise ('Do you together promise you will love, cherish and respect one another throughout the years?' Together they respond: 'We do'). In other cases, the answer is a declarative ('Do you [name] take [name] to be your lawful wedded wife/husband?' Each responds: 'I do').

Some other questions make no request for an answer. Nevertheless they are "real" questions and can be used e.g. to present a problem (*posing*, not *asking*: Lyons 1977: 754), which requires an investigation ('Where do noun phrases come from?'). Used in the syntactic form of a dependent interrogative clause, it represents the starting point of a Medieval *quaestio*: '[...] necessarium est primo investigare de ipsa sacra doctrina, qualis sit, et ad quae se extendat' (Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, Prima pars, Quaestio I, Proemium).

Questions without request for an answer can be also used to express uncertainty on future events (a book published by Andrej Amal'rik in 1970 was entitled: *Will the Soviet Union survive until 1984?*). The speaker knows that nobody is able to give the desired information. He only tries to anticipate a future situation ('er versucht eine Situation vorauszuerleben', Nehring 1949: 47). This allows Adolf

Nehring to declare that a question by its nature (*Wesen*) is 'an uncertain proposition' ('eine unsichere Aussage', Nehring 1949: 47). In this respect, a propositional question has much in common with a point of view, if we accept Houtlosser's proposal that 'a point of view is typically advanced in a context where doubt as to its acceptability is presupposed' (Houtlosser 2002: 170-171).

3. *Conducive questions and rhetorical interrogatives*
Propositional questions can exhibit an expectation concerning the positive or the negative polarity of the answer. This expectation is usually made manifest by means of verbal devices. The most frequent is the positive or negative polarity of the interrogative structure used to make the question. We distinguish two great types of these questions: in the first type, the interrogative structure and the expected answer have the same polarity. In the other type, a contrast of polarity can be observed: a negative interrogative structure hints at an expected positive answer, and vice versa. The second type is best exemplified by the use of the so-called tags in English.

This contrast between the language plan and the content plan was first described by Per Restan (1972). It is quite relevant for the organization of the rhetorical interrogative structures, which we consider here as indirect assertions ('indirekte sprachliche Handlungen des Behauptens', see Meibauer 1976:185) or 'hidden assertives' ('verkappte Aussagen', Pérennec 1995: 111). In the interpretation of such utterances the illocution of a question is first hypothetically considered, then it is discarded, because it would not be reasonable, i.e. it would result as incongruous with respect to the communicative goals of the speech act in that specific speech event (see Rigotti, Rocci & Greco 2006).

In most cases, the polarity of rhetorically used yes-no interrogative sentences contrasts with that of the derived assertion:
"Have I been twenty years in this man's house, to be deceived about his voice? No, sir; master's made away with […]" (Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*)

The indirect assertion is "I have not been twenty years in this man's house, etc.". This is an argument in favour of the standpoint, which follows as a conclusion. The use of a question together with its answer in a monologue is called 'percontatio expositioque sententiae suae' by Cicero (De oratore, III. 203).

Similarly, in the majority of rhetorically interpreted wh-interrogative structures

the derived assertion contains a positive universal quantifier, if the wh-word in the interrogative structure is negated; but it has a negated existential quantifier, if the interrogative structure is positive (Gobber 1999). Concerning rhetorical uses of interrogative structures, Sándor Karoly observes that their 'characteristic feature'

[...] lies in the fact that from the point of view of their emotional effect, they appeal to the listener to respond, although they fail to produce the same effect from the viewpoint of the dialogue; here the interrogative sentence does not possess the *interrogative-communicative* role, but it has retained its *interrogative-emotional* role, the appealing character [...] arouses a greater activity in the listener; the listener is going through, as it were, the experience of giving an answer (S. Károly, *Kinds of sentences examined from the point of view of function and form*, quoted by Restan 1972: 720-721, footnote).

Because they are indirect assertions, "rhetorical questions" – in fact, rhetorical uses of interrogative structures – can play the role of a standpoint in the domain of the confrontation stage or that of an argumentation in the domain of the argumentation stage (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004: 85). In these utterances the "interrogative-emotional" role serves as a booster of the indirect assertion: 'acrior ac uehementior fit probatio' (Quintilianus, *Institutio oratoria*, IX, 2, 6). The increased illocutionary force can then be exploited at other stages of a discussion (see Snoeck-Henkemans, in press).

4. *Conduciveness and rhetorical uses: a continuum*
There is often no clear boundary between a conducive question and an utterance with a rhetorically used interrogative. Often the respondent interprets a conducive question as a hidden assertive, or vice versa. The fuzziness of this boundary can be shown if we consider the following fragment of a dialogue. Here, a third person, named "Old J", who is also the narrator, is invited to speak in favour of a standpoint or to testify the validity of an argument:
George said, '[...] I'm the only one who works [...]
Harris laughed and said, 'George! Work! Have you ever seen George work?'
I agreed with Harris. George never worked.
'How do you know if I work, Harris? You're always sleeping, except at meal times. Have you ever seen Harris awake, except at meal times?' George asked me.
I agreed with George. Harris worked very little on the boat.
(Jerome K. Jerome, *Three men in a boat*)

'Have you ever seen George work?' is used by Harris to attack George's standpoint ('I'm the only one who works'). This question is posed to "old J". It has a preference for a negative answer, as the reply ('I agreed with Harris') makes clear. J *agrees* with him, i.e. he understands Harris' utterance as the assertion of an opinion, but also as a request for an assent. J's answer provides evidence for Harris' standpoint ('I have never *seen* him work' à 'He does not work'). George counter-attacks Harris' standpoint by questioning a condition of the assertive speech-act ('You cannot know if I work'). To do this he makes an indirect assertion by means of a rhetorically used interrogative.

In its turn, George's attack can be seen as a standpoint, which is followed by an argument ('You're always sleeping, except at meal times'). It should be observed that this standpoint is a conclusion of an enthymeme whose major premise is an implicit endoxon ('When you are sleeping you cannot know what other people are doing'); the argument is the minor premise.

George then asks J for confirmation. J agrees that Harris is always sleeping etc., but from this he derives the conclusion that 'Harris works very little on the boat'. This conclusion is reasonable because J has activated another enthymeme, which is based on the *endoxon* 'When you are sleeping you do not work'.

Let us consider another example:
Estragon: […] Funny, the more you eat the worse it gets.
Vladimir: With me it's just the opposite.
Estragon: In other words?
Vladimir: I get used to the muck as I go along.
Estragon: (*after prolonged reflection*). Is that the opposite?
Vladimir: Question of temperament.
Estragon: Of character.
Vladimir: Nothing you can do about it
(S. Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, I)

The first question asks for a usage declarative (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004: 66), and preludes to a critical discussion. The second ('Is that the opposite?') implicates (in the Gricean sense) a negative judgement about Vladimir's assertion that getting used should represent the opposite of 'the more you eat the worse it gets'. Estragon's question can be interpreted as a request for a justification of Vladimir's assertion ('Why do you think that it is the opposite?'), which has now received the position of a standpoint at the confrontation stage.

Vladimir's reply contains an implicit positive answer together with an explicit argument ('Question of temperament').

5. *Concluding remark*

In some questions which occur in the fragments considered above the respondent supports his answer with a justification.

It has been observed that the addition of an argument to an assertive can be a symptom of the speaker's assumption that the interlocutor may have doubts about the acceptability of that assertive (Houtlosser 2002: 178-182).

As we have seen, the explanatory or argumentative follow-up to an assertive occurs often in the reply to a question. This could be explained by the fact that the respondent knows that the questioner does not merely request an answer, i.e. a move whose content saturates the open proposition of the question itself. He also expects that the respondent commits himself to the validity of that answer. An explanatory or argumentative follow-up is the most reasonable way to assure that the respondent commits himself to the validity of the answer.

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