

A Study of the Pragmatic Prototypical Categories of Rhetorical Questions

Hongbo Chen (ivy_lucky@163.com)
Department of English, 169#, Shiyong Street
Jinzhou, Liaoning, 121001 CHN

Abstract

Rhetorical questions (RQs), which are widely used and studied, are a special use of questions. A review of the literature shows that most of the previous studies are description of the pragmatic functions of RQs and are limited to the study of written data, while the cognitive factor has been relatively neglected. This study proposes a cognitive research of RQs under the Prototype Theory of Categorization, aiming to provide a systematic analysis of RQs. In the first part, I suggest that a cognitive analysis of RQs under the Prototype Theory of Categorization can perfect the analyzing system of RQs. In the second part, the proposed theoretical frame and some colloquial data collected from the situation comedy *Everybody Loves Raymond* are employed to analyze the pragmatic prototypical categories of RQs. The last part is the conclusion. Major findings and limitations are showed.

Keywords: rhetorical questions; the Prototype Theory of Categorization; the pragmatic prototypical category

Introduction

RQs, first emerging as one of the figures of speech, have caught great interests of pragmaticians. Extensive examination and profound contributions have been made over the years.

Ilie (1994) analyses the “distinctive features” and “discursive functions” of RQs from the pragmatic perspective and defines a RQ as “a question used as a challenging statement to convey the addresser’s commitment to its implicit answer, in order to induce the addressee’s mental recognition of its obviousness and the acceptance, verbalized or non-verbalized, of its validity”. He stresses that RQs, at least in arguments, can be used to “induce, reinforce, or alter assumptions, beliefs, or ideas in the addressee’s mind”.

Brown and Levinson (1978) regard RQs as off-record communicative acts such as criticizing, making excuses and commenting sarcastically, which are indirect use of language.

Slot (1993) distinguishes between a simple indirect speech act and a multiple indirect speech act. In his opinion, a simple indirect speech act is the indirect speech act which performs only a primary speech act and a secondary speech act; while a multiple speech act is the indirect speech act which is embedded in another indirect speech act. Based on the Principle of Communication developed by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992) (Rule 1: Perform no incomprehensible speech acts; Rule 2: Perform no insincere speech acts; Rule 3: Perform no unnecessary speech acts; Rule 4: Perform no pointless speech acts; Rule 5: Perform no new speech acts that are not an appropriate sequel or

relation to preceding speech acts.), Slot produces a scheme for the reconstruction of both simple and multiple indirect speech acts, which can be described as following:

(1) Speaker/ writer S has performed utterance U.

(2) Given the literal meaning of utterance U, S has performed speech act 1, which has communicative force 1 and propositional content 1.

(3) Given the context, speech act 1 violates rule (s) for communication 1 and/ or 2 and/ or 3 and/ or 4 and/ or 5.

(4) Given the context, speech act 2 rectifies the violation (s) in step 3.

(5) Speech act 1, speech act 2 and the context can be connected via rule for communication i ($=1, 2, 3, 4$ or 5), and in the case of RQs via [...], and in the case of ironic utterance via [...].

(6) Therefore, speech act 2 is a correct interpretation of speech act 1.

(7a) Given the context, speech act 2 (3, 4...n) is in accordance with all rules for communication.

(8a) Therefore, speech act 2 (3, 4...n) is a correct interpretation of U.

Or:

(7b) Given the context, speech act 2 (3, 4...n) violates rule for communication 1 and/ or 2 and/ or 3 and/ or 4 and/ or 5 (different types of violation as in step 3).

(8b) Given the context, speech act 3 (4, 5...n) rectifies the violation (s) in step 7b.

(9) Speech act 2 (3, 4...n), speech act 3 (4, 5...n) and the context can be connected via rule for communication i ($=1, 2, 3, 4$ or 5), and in the case of RQs via [...], and in the case of ironic utterance via [...].

(10) Therefore: speech act 3 (4, 5...n) is a correct interpretation of speech act 2 (3, 4...n).

(11) Back to step 7.

In fact, other researches such as Schmidt-Radefeldt (1977) and Frank (1990) have analyzed RQs. However these studies are generally based on pragmatic criteria and the cognitive perspective has been considered relatively.

This paper, aiming to analyze the pragmatic categories of RQs, is designed to conduct from the cognitive angle and takes the Prototype Theory of Categorization as the theoretical framework.

What I suggest in this paper is that all linguistic categories should be prototypical categories, and they fall into a prototypical category of syntax, a prototypical category of semantics, and a prototypical category of pragmatics. In my opinion, a prototypical category of syntax is a category of different semantic meanings and pragmatic functions

expressed by the same syntactic constructions, a prototypical category of semantics is a category of different syntactic constructions and pragmatic functions expressing the same semantic meaning, and a prototypical category of pragmatics is a category of different syntactic constructions performing the same pragmatic function.

RQs, as grammatical structures, can be categorized in terms of prototypical category. In the following sections, I will give a detailed account of the pragmatic prototypical categories of RQs as well as the status and the special feature of RQs in the pragmatic prototypical categories.

Pragmatic Prototypical Categories of RQs

This part is devoted to the discussion of the pragmatic prototypical categories of RQs. I use the suggestion that a prototypical category of pragmatics is a category of different syntactic constructions performing the same pragmatic function as the criteria. The pragmatic function of RQs is based on the illocutionary force. If different syntactic structures represent the same illocutionary force, they are performing the same pragmatic function and thus belong to the same pragmatic prototypical category. We can find that the semantic differences have not been taken into consideration when deciding the criteria for the pragmatic prototypical category of RQs because RQs are semantically relative with negation, while the imperatives like *Open the door* which will be discussed in the following are not true or false in any domain and therefore cannot be taken into the realm of truth valuable statements. Without truth values imperatives cannot be shown to be truth preserving, or semantically valid, even if they are intuitively valid. In other words, imperatives cannot be judged in semantic aspect.

The Performance of Direct Assertives and Directives

Direct speech acts are the simplest cases of meaning in which the speaker utters a sentence and means exactly and literally what he says. Generally, there are two ways to perform direct speech acts.

Use the Typical Association Between Sentence Forms and Speech Acts

A basic approach to distinguishing types of speech acts is made on the basis of structures. A fairly simple structural distinction between three general types of speech acts is provided, in English, by the three basic sentence types (Yule, 1996). As shown in the following examples, there is an obvious relationship between the three types of sentences (declarative, interrogative, imperative) and the three general speech acts (assertives, asking and directives).

- (1) I have \$5. (Declarative / Assertive)
- (2) Is this the #2 bus? (Interrogative/ Asking)
- (3) Give me your money. (Imperative/ Directive)

Thus, a declarative used to make an assertive and an imperative used to make a directive are direct speech acts.

On the illocutionary force of assertive, Alessandro (1994) argues that in uttering a declarative sentence with the

propositional form *P*, the speaker says that *P*, i.e. s/he communicates that *P* represents a description of an actual state of affairs. Since this is exactly the way beliefs are defined, a declarative sentence communicates that the speaker believes that *P*. The decoding of a declarative sentence allows the hearer to infer that *{I}* contains the speaker's belief that *P*. For example:

- (4) My baby is beautiful.
- (5) He was a brave man.

By uttering the above declaratives, the speaker aims at the recognition by the hearer of the speaker's goal of making the hearer to believe that (4) my baby is beautiful; and (5) he was a brave man.

While the illocutionary force for directives argued by Alessandro (1994) is that in uttering an imperative sentence with the propositional form *P*, the speaker tells the hearer to *P*, i.e. s/he communicates that *P* represents a description of a state of affairs as being both potential and desirable. The decoding of the imperative mood allows the hearer to infer that *{I}* contains the representation of the speaker about the potentiality and desirability of *P*. For example:

- (6) Move out of the way. (Yule, 1996)
- (7) Don't do that again.

By uttering the above two imperatives, the speaker aims to command or request the hearer to (6) move out of the way; and (7) don't do that again.

Use Certain Kinds of Verbs to Perform Certain Kinds of Speech Acts

The performative verbs is one of the illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs) which can indicate that the utterance is made with a certain illocutionary force, or else that it constitutes the performance of a certain illocutionary act. Thus the second way to make a direct assertive is to use the performative verbs.

The basic expression with the performative verb for an assertive is *I assert (declare, claim etc.) to you that.../ I assert (declare, claim etc.) you that....* One can also perform a more complex notion of assertive speech act with the expression *I want you to believe that....* In both cases, the speaker can express his belief about what he asserts and make the hearer to believe it. For example:

- (8) I assert you that my baby is beautiful.
- (9) I want you to believe that he was a brave man.

By uttering the two sentences, the speaker asserts that (8) my baby is beautiful; and (9) he was a brave man. Thus utterances (8) and (9) have the same illocutionary force with utterances (6) and (7).

On the other hand, the basic expression for an imperative is *I order (request, command, etc.) you that....* Apart from this, one can also perform a directive act by the expression *I order (request, command, etc.) you whether....* For example:

- (10) I request you to move out of the way.
- (11) I order you not to do that again.

By uttering the two sentences, the speaker intends to request/order the hearer to (10) move out of the way; and (11) don't do that again. Thus they have the same illocutionary force with utterances (6) and (7).

The Performance of Indirect Assertives and Directives

When there is no direct relationship between a structure and a form but rather an indirect one, the speech act is considered indirect. Therefore the indirect assertive means the act of assertion is performed indirectly by uttering a non-declarative sentence and the indirect directive means the act of directive is performed indirectly by uttering a non-imperative sentence. In this subsection, I argue that the utterance of RQs can perform a wide range of indirect assertives including asserting, blaming, protesting and complaining, etc. and indirect directives such as advising, requesting, commanding, and warning.

To Assert

(12) See? Look at her. Isn't she sweet? Don't kids cheer you right up? (Everybody Loves Raymond)

(13) Doesn't it feel good to be honest with them? (ibid)

To blame

(14) How could you do that to her? (Everybody Loves Raymond)

(15) Don't you care about how much your mother suffers or if I starve? (ibid)

To Protest

(16) A: Wasn't that a good idea? (Everybody Loves Raymond)

B: Yeah. I have an idea. How about if I bite your nose really hard? (ibid)

To Complain

(17) How could my father do this? He knew what that ball meant to me. (Everybody Loves Raymond)

(18) Do you know how many things I can find wrong with your parents? (ibid)

To Advise

(19) Would you look at this big stain here? (Everybody Loves Raymond)

(20) Shouldn't you indent? (ibid)

To Request

(21) Why can't you boys play well? (Everybody Loves Raymond)

(22) Why don't you pass it onto the editor? (ibid)

To Command

(23) Why don't you read it out loud, Ray? (Everybody Loves Raymond)

(24) Don't you go to your house? (ibid)

As shown above, RQs heard as questions but used to perform indirect acts of assertion and directives.

Following Slot's scheme for reconstruction of indirect speech acts, the rhetorical question, for example, "Isn't she sweet" in (12) can be reconstructed as following:

This is the context: the mother and the father are looking at their little daughter, who is very sweet and lovely. They feel proud and encouraged that they have such a lovely girl. According to Slot, the direct speech act 1 "I ask if she isn't sweet" violates the rules 2 and 3 because the speaker knows what the answer is (step 3). Speech act 2 "I assert that she is sweet" rectifies the violations (step 4). And speech act 1, speech act 2 and the context can be connected through rule 3

because by asking for agreement the speaker is sure about having the evidence for the truth of the proposition of speech act 2. Thus speech act 2 is a correct interpretation of speech act 1. The speaker is making an assertive by uttering "Isn't she sweet".

We now see another example "Don't you go to your house" in (24), which is used to perform an indirect directive.

Speech act 1: to ask, "Don't you go to your house?" violates the rule of sincerity and necessity because the speaker knows well the answer.

Speech act 2: to state, "You go to your house" rectifies the violation in speech act 1, but violates the rule of being an appropriate sequel of the previous speech act. That is, speech act 2 seems to be unrelated to the hearer's wish to not go to the house.

Speech act 3: to command, "You should go to your house", rectifies the violation in speech act 2 and is in accordance with all the communication rules.

Thus speech act 3 is the correct interpretation of the rhetorical question "Don't you go to your house". The uttering of the rhetorical question is performing the act of directive.

Pragmatic Prototypical Categories of RQs

As analyzed above, indirect assertives and directives performed by RQs have the same illocutionary forces with the corresponding direct speech acts. In my opinion, indirect assertives and directives have the weakest illocutionary forces because they often depend on contexts and need inferential efforts for the hearer to understand the speaker's intention. While direct assertives and directives have the strongest illocutionary forces as they need little efforts for the hearers to understand the speaker's intention. From the strongest to the weakest illocutionary forces, and from the greatest efforts to the least efforts for the hearer to understand the intention of the speaker, there are a range of family resemblances, which form pragmatic categories of ASSERTIVE and DIRECTIVE. That is, RQs are in the pragmatic prototypical categories of ASSERTIVE and DIRECTIVE.

RQs as Non-prototypical Members

In this section, the status of RQs in the pragmatic prototypical categories of ASSERTIVE and DIRECTIVE will be discussed.

As we known, prototypical members share the most attributes with other members and take the central position in a prototypical category. When a certain prototypical category is mentioned, prototypical members will first and most quickly come to mind. Since direct speech acts need the least efforts for the hearer to identify the speaker's intention, they take the least and shortest mental work, and serve as prototypical members; while indirect speech acts need more or less additional inferential efforts. Thus we can easily conclude that in the pragmatic prototypical categories of ASSERTIVE and DIRECTIVE, indirect assertives and

directives performed by uttering RQs are non-prototypical members.

It can also be analyzed from another perspective: in terms of attributes, prototypical members in a prototypical category are maximally distinct from the prototypical members of other prototypical categories. Non-prototypical members share only a small number of attributes, but have several attributes which belong to other categories as well.

As we have known that the utterance of RQs can perform indirect assertives as well as indirect directives, which indicates that there is some overlap between members of the two prototypical categories, as shown by the figure below:

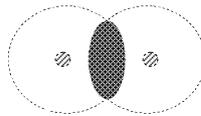


Figure 1: Pragmatic prototypical categories of ASSERTIVE and DIRECTIVE

In this figure, the two big circles represent the two pragmatic prototypical categories: ASSERTIVE and DIRECTIVE. The two small circles represent the prototypical members as they take the central position in prototypical categories. The part of overlap is the indirect speech acts performed by the utterance of RQs. The dashed lines in the figure indicate that there are no definite boundaries between categories, which is just another way of saying that category boundaries are fuzzy.

From the figure above, we can find that as members in the pragmatic prototypical category of ASSERTIVE, RQs have several attributes which belong to the pragmatic prototypical category of DIRECTIVE as well, while direct assertives are maximally distinct from direct directives in the other prototypical category. Therefore RQs are marginal or non-prototypical members in both pragmatic prototypical categories and direct assertives and directives are prototypical members in each pragmatic prototypical category.

Special Pragmatic Feature of RQs as Non-prototypical Members

As we have seen in the above, the utterance of RQs can perform indirect acts of assertive and directive. Thus the most distinctive feature of RQs is indirectness.

Thomas (1995) states that people use indirectness intentionally and rationally. As far as RQs are concerned, people often use them for the following reasons:

Firstly, face and politeness

Frank (1990) argues that RQs are used to meet the addresser's need to amplify or mitigate. Used as an amplifier, a rhetorical question works to enhance the force and impact of the standpoint or argument advanced in order to win over the addressee(s)/ audience and ensure their support, or even to challenge or attack an opponent (Jianghong Feng, 2004). For example:

(25) Well, don't you care about how much your mother suffers or if I starve? (Everybody Loves Raymond)

(26) What do you think we are? Invalids? Can't we go out and get our own fruit? (ibid)

In the above examples, RQs are used to support the claims: (25) You should care about how much your mother suffers or if I starve, and (26) We can go out and get our own fruit. In these cases, RQs are used as amplifiers which are much more powerful and persuasive than the plain claims.

RQs can also be used as mitigators. For example:

(27) Could everybody just go back to normal? (Everybody Loves Raymond)

(28) Dad, don't you wanna get started on that story about the twins? (ibid)

It is obvious that the speakers are trying to get the hearers to: (27) go back to normal, and (28) get started on that story about the twins. The speakers use RQs to convey such requirements in that the direct commands are too strong and impolite, which are not helpful to get the hearers to accept their suggestions.

According to Brown and Levinson (1978), when we interact with others in society, it is necessary to keep one's own face or to avoid threatening another's face. Yule (1996) defines a face-threatening act as something that represents a threat to another individual's expectations regarding self-image, and a face-saving act as something that can lessen the possible threat. Therefore RQs used as amplifiers are performing face-threatening acts while RQs used as mitigators are performing face-saving acts.

Some RQs (such as "Would you mind...?" and "Could you (please)...?" etc.) have been conventionalized to make a request. Such expressions can be used to create a distance between strangers and to avoid being unpleasant and impolite. Thus RQs have been regarded as one of the politeness strategies.

Secondly, power and status

Considering the use of RQs, one important factor should be taken into account: the relative power or status of the speaker over the hearer. A rhetorical question is properly used as a suggestion and demand by a speaker of higher status. On the other hand, a rhetorical question may damage the communication if the speaker doesn't have the power or status to say so. For example:

(29) Shouldn't you stay at home?

If this rhetorical question is said by a father who gives an indirect order to his daughter, it is properly used. The father doesn't tell his daughter straightly but makes her realize that her father really does not want her to go out. This is often used in daily life and can make our life and interaction go smoothly.

Contrarily, it is face-threatening for people of lower status to say such a rhetorical question because it threatens a person of higher status. One can imagine what will happen if it is said by a daughter to a father, or by an employee to an employer.

Conclusion

The major goal of this study is to discuss the pragmatic prototypical categories of RQs. I argued that the pragmatic functions of RQs are based on the illocutionary forces. If different syntactic structures represent the same illocutionary force, they perform the same pragmatic function and belong to the same pragmatic prototypical category. As a special type of structure, RQs can perform indirect acts of assertive and directive. Thus they fall into the same pragmatic prototypical categories with declaratives and imperatives. That is, RQs belong to the pragmatic prototypical categories of ASSERTIVE and DIRECTIVE. Then the status of RQs in these prototypical categories is analyzed. Two methods are employed to examine the status and both suggest that they are non-prototypical members. At last, the special pragmatic feature of RQs as non-prototypical members is introduced. The most distinctive feature is their indirectness and people often use them for the following two reasons: first, a rhetorical question can perform face-threatening acts as well as face-saving acts. Apart from this, some RQs such as "Would you mind...?" and "Could you (please)...?" etc. have been conventionalized to make requests and suggestions, which are considered as one of the polite strategies; second, the social status of the speaker and hearer should be taken into consideration when using RQs in that a proper use of rhetorical question can make our life go smoothly while an improper use of RQs can damage the communication.

Being the first attempt to analyze RQs under the Prototype Theory of Categorization, this study bears some limitations. The first limitation of the present study is the source of data. The data in this study mainly come from conversations in situation comedy, while the proportion of the oral data based on the daily conversations is relatively small. As a result, the illustration is less powerful and convincing. Secondly, not all forms of RQs are covered in this study. Some RQs do not end in question marks but in exclamation points, or sometimes they just indicated by rhetorical intonation. This study could have a broader coverage of those forms of RQs.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to acknowledge the following persons for their contributions to this paper:

- Associate Professor Yanhong Ma for her guidance and encouragement;
- Professor Qi Sun for his helpful discussion with me;
- Jiadan Qu for his enlightening sparkle.

References

- Alessandro, L. (1994). Paper presented at the Workshop on Speech Acts and Linguistic Research, Buffalo NY. *A Relevance-Based Approach to Speech Acts*, 7, 15-16.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1978). Questions and Politeness. In E. N. Goody (Eds.), *Universals in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomena*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eemeren, F. H. van, & Grootendorst, R. (1992). *Argumentation, Communication and Fallacies: A Pragma-dialectical Perspective* (pp.52-55). Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Frank, J. (1990). Journal of Pragmatics. *You Call That A Rhetorical Question? Forms and Functions of Rhetorical Questions in Conversation*, 14, 723-738.
- Ilie, C. (1994). *What Else Can I Tell you? A Pragmatic Study of English Rhetorical Questions as Discursive and Argumentative Acts* (pp.128). Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International.
- Jianghong, Feng. (2004). *A Pragmatic Study of Chinese Rhetorical Question*. Shanghai: Shanghai University of Finance and Economics.
- Schmidt-Radefeldt, J. (1977). Journal of Pragmatics. *On So-called "Rhetorical Questions"*, 1, 357-392.
- Slot, P. (1994). Studies in Pragma-dialectics. In F. H. van Eemeren and R. Grootendorst (Eds.), *Reconstructing Indirect Speech Acts*. Amsterdam: International Center for the Study of Argumentation.
- Thomas, J. (1995). *Meaning in Interaction: An Introduction to Pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.