

**WOULD IT KILL YOU TO STOP DOING THAT?
ON SOME RHETORICAL QUESTIONS WHICH FUNCTION
AS INDIRECT REQUESTS**

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***Abstract:** While, in most instances, the difference between rhetorical and action-eliciting questions is clear-cut, there are certain borderline cases where questions that are apparently rhetorical function as indirect requests. This paper deals with the analysis of examples of such rhetorical questions taken from a number of plays by four American and British playwrights. The results confirm that, although such instances are quite rare, indirect requests can also be made in the form of questions that imply obvious answers, and that contain no elements of asking for information.*

***Keywords:** action-eliciting questions, conversational implicatures, indirect requests, rhetorical questions.*

1. Introduction

Regardless of the language we speak, our age, education, or status, we all use rhetorical questions (henceforth, RQ) on a daily basis, in an attempt to achieve different communicative goals. Additionally, this linguistic form is often used as a highly effective persuasion technique in journalism, political speeches and campaigns, marketing, judicial proceedings, as well as many other spheres of life. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that RQs have been a riveting and intriguing topic for linguists and rhetoricians for quite some time.

The reasons for the effectiveness and such wide usage of RQs include their multifunctionality (Ilie 1994) (they can be used to perform different goals in communication, sometimes more than one at a time), as well as their persuasive effects (Frank 1990; Blankenship and Craig 2006), which make them a great tool in putting forward speakers' ideas and convincing interlocutors to accept them, or, alternatively, in challenging arguments presented by interlocutors (Blankenship and Craig 2006; Cerović 2016). Although RQs may be followed by answers supplied either by the addressor or addressee (Ilie 1994), their purpose is neither to elicit nor to ask for an (informative) answer. Instead, the speaker's intention in posing such questions is to let interlocutors recognize and acknowledge the apparent answer that is already implied by an RQ as the only possible one, thereby enticing them into accepting the speaker's arguments. Such questions can be used in both aggressive and friendly communication (Špago 2020), often in combination with irony or sarcasm (Oraby et al. 2017).

While a lot of research deals with different aspects and different functions of RQs both in daily communication and in a specific context, they, by and large, avoid the questions that, although apparently rhetorical, are used to implicitly suggest that the addressee should do something. In her analysis of RQs, Ilie (1994: 77) explicitly argues that an RQ can never be used to ask for information, or to ask someone to do something, "...although it may eventually lead to an act of decision-making aimed at a certain course of action as a desirable goal". However, in some instances, RQs and action-eliciting questions seem to overlap, since certain questions that meet all the requirements for being labeled as rhetorical, simultaneously function as indirect requests.

In this paper, based on examples of RQs taken from a number of plays by four famous American and British playwrights, I analyze instances where RQs are apparently used with the intention to urge the addressee to do something, and explore different patterns in which such RQs appear.

2. Background

Questions can be classified according to different criteria. Based on the form in which they are realized and „the way the set of answers is defined“ (Huddleston 1994: 411), they can be classified as *yes-no (polar)*, *wh-*, or alternative questions (Quirk et al. 1985; Huddleston 1994). In addition to these three basic types, there are minor types of questions that can be associated with one of the above types: question tags, echo questions, declarative and nonclausal questions (for a detailed account of the last two types, see Weber 1993).

On the other hand, based on the speakers' intention and the function that they perform, Athanasiadou (1991) classifies questions into four categories:

- *Information questions*, which are intended to ask for and obtain information (*Where did you buy that jacket?*),
- *Rhetorical questions*, whose purpose is to provide information, which makes them opposite to the above category (*What have you ever done for me?*),
- *Examination questions*, where the intention of the speaker is to test the addressee's knowledge (*What is a transitive verb?*),
- *Indirect requests*, which are intended to urge the addressee to do something (*Can you close the window, please?*).

Focusing on the type of answers that they seek, Ilie (1994) proposes the following classification of questions:

- *Answer-eliciting questions*, which seek an answer and can be further divided into questions that seek an informative answer (information-eliciting), those that seek an answer, but not information (examination and courtesy questions), and those that ask for permission or confirmation (permission- and confirmation-eliciting questions),
- *Action-eliciting questions*, which ask for action, and
- *Mental-response-eliciting questions*, which require a *mental response* - she places rhetorical questions into this category, and explains that this response "... is basically cognitive, i.e. it represents the addressee's recognition of the implicit answer to the rhetorical question" (Ilie 1994: 82).

Regarding the nature of RQs, different accounts are offered by researchers who have explored such questions. According to one view (Han 2002; Sadock

1974), RQs are indirect statements which have the form of questions. They function as indirect statements that have the opposite polarity to that of the question (*What do you know about anything?* is equivalent to *You don't know anything*, whereas the RQ *Who doesn't know that?* implies the statement *Everybody knows that*). These implied statements are often more expressive and persuasive than explicit statements, since they "... enable speakers to make stronger statements, with greater implications, than would be possible if they had made straightforward assertions" (Frank 1990: 726).

Other views are that RQs are questions which are actually information-seeking, but with a constrained set of possible answers (van Roy 2003); redundant interrogatives, as their answers are already known (Rohde 2006); or that RQs are questions which are semantically the same as information questions, but they are different from them at the level of pragmatics, as they are used to stress an already known fact (Caponigro and Sprouse 2007).

Although they are not asked with the intention of eliciting a verbalized answer, RQs are sometimes, for different reasons, followed by answers provided by either the addressor or addressee (Ilie 1994). On the other hand, RQs can be used as successful and convincing answers to information-eliciting questions (*A: How reliable is he? B: How shallow is the ocean?*) (for a detailed account of such RQs, see Schaffer 2005).

There is a difference of opinion when it comes to what questions can be classified as rhetorical. While there is a general consensus that questions which imply an obvious answer are rhetorical, Schmidt-Radefeldt (1977) and Haverkate (1997) also include questions that are used to draw the interlocutor's attention (*Do you know...?*) as rhetorical. Additionally, other types of questions are sometimes classified as rhetorical, such as those that are used in soliloquies (*Am I that stupid?*) (Kiefer 1980) or questions that express the addressor's surprise or annoyance (*Are you crazy?*) (Haverkate 1997).

Interestingly, instances that represent borderline cases between RQs and action-eliciting questions (those that simultaneously imply an obvious answer and indirectly urge the addressee to do something) have been paid little, if any attention so far.

3. Methodology, data and research questions

Both qualitative and quantitative methods have been utilized in this study. The former was used to identify, analyze and group RQs which function as indirect requests, and the latter (descriptive statistics) was used to measure the frequency of occurrence for different patterns in which such RQs appear in the corpus. I first identified all instances of RQs in my corpus, and then selected and analyzed those that, in the given context, apparently suggest that addressees should follow a certain course of action.

The corpus from which examples of RQs have been taken consists of 13 plays by Arthur Miller (*A View from the Bridge*; *The American Clock*, *Broken Glass*), Tennessee Williams (*Sweet Bird of Youth*; *The Mutilated*; *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale*), Tom Stoppard (*Dirty Linen*; *Squaring the Circle*; *Arcadia*) and Harold Pinter (*The Heat of the Day*; *The Birthday Party*; *The Hothouse*; *The Homecoming*). The selection of the corpus was motivated by the fact that plays represent the closest substitute for real-life conversations, and, as such, can serve as a reliable source of RQs that are used in everyday

communication. Both American and British playwrights were included in order to ensure that the two major variants of English are represented, but without any intention to explore potential similarities or differences between them in regard to RQs.

The research questions that this study is intended to answer are the following:

- Can RQs function as indirect requests?
- If yes, what are the most common patterns in which such RQs are realized, and how common are they?

4. Results and discussion

4.1. RQs as action-eliciting questions

While, in most cases, RQs and action-eliciting questions represent two distinct types of questions that perform different communicative goals, the results of this study indicate that there are questions that, although apparently rhetorical, can also function as action-eliciting in a particular context. Typical action-eliciting questions bear some similarity to information-eliciting questions. Ilie (1994), following Kiefer (1980), states that the distinction between the two categories is subtle rather than clear-cut, as both of them contain elements of the other group:

Questions expressing mainly information desiderata are normally considered to be information eliciting, whereas questions expressing mainly action desiderata are normally considered to be action eliciting (...). (Ilie 1994: 76-77)

The rationale behind this claim is that, when asking information-eliciting questions, the speaker simultaneously asks the interlocutor to do something - at least to provide an answer (in the same vein, Bach and Harnish (1979: 40) define questions as "... special cases of requests, special in that what is requested is that the speaker provide the hearer with certain information"), whereas action-eliciting questions also contain elements of asking for information about the interlocutor's willingness or ability to do something (at least out of courtesy). Therefore, when asked if they are able or willing to do something, the addressees are left with an option to answer that they cannot do something for some reason, or to do it without waiting for the speaker to request it explicitly. However, the following examples reveal a significant difference between some questions that obviously function as action-eliciting in the given context:

(1) TAYLOR: Would you be able to give me something to eat?
(Miller 2003: 389)

(2) ROSE: **Are you playing cards or hatching an egg?**
DORIS: Oh, it's my turn? All right; here!
ROSE: Hallelujah. (idem: 433)

While the speaker's intention in both examples is clearly geared towards getting the addressee to do something, it is only the example (1) that contains some elements of an information-eliciting question (inquiring about the addressee's ability to help the speaker, and thereby tacitly asking him to do so). Conversely, in the example (2), we have an alternative question asked during a card game that

offers two potential answers - one that is obvious in that particular context (*you are playing cards*), and the other one which is absolutely unacceptable in any context (*it is impossible for a woman to hatch an egg*). Since it implies an obvious answer and it is equivalent to an indirect statement, this question is rhetorical by any standards. However, given that the implied statement seems redundant (why would the speaker imply something that is already clear to everybody?), the addressee, following the Grice's maxim of relevance (see Grice 1989), interprets the implied statement as a tacit request to do something, and acts accordingly.

While RQs typically function on a two-layer basis (a question represents an indirect statement), the question in the example (2) has the third component, with the implied statement functioning as an indirect request, as shown in Figure 1:



Figure 1: RQs as indirect requests

Considering the fact that statements can be used to indirectly urge the addressee to do something, it is quite logical that RQs, as questions that are equivalent to indirect statements, can also perform that same function. Namely, implicit statements in such RQs contain conversational implicatures:

(3) HARRISON: Are you off your head? **Do you think we've got all night?**
(Pinter 1989: 81)

(4) BERNIE: It's about time you quit hustling, not because you think so but because the guys you hustle for the price of a bottle or a couple of drinks have eyes to see you with, sister, and what they see is a wino, long in the tooth.

CELESTE: *Is this any way to talk to a girl at Xmas?*
(Williams 2000: 593)

The questions in the above examples obviously fall within the scope of RQs as defined by Ilie (1994: 53) (RQs are questions that have "... one and only one implied answer which excludes all other answers"), and they are equivalent to indirect statements of opposite polarity (*we haven't got all night / this is not a way to talk to a girl at Xmas*). However, it is clear that, in the given context, the speakers' intention goes beyond simply making those statements more convincing and memorable by formulating them in the form of RQs. Instead, those RQs are meant to make the addressees do something (*hurry up / stop talking like that*), once they recognize and acknowledge the obvious answers that they imply.

Altogether, I have identified 492 examples of RQs in my corpus, and, among them, 34 RQs (7%) that could be labeled as indirect requests. Among the examples of RQs identified, those that function as indirect requests have been realized in one of the following ways:

- in the form of *why-don't-you/we-do-something* questions,
- in the form of asking addressees if they want something unpleasant to happen to them,
- by asking addressees who told or allowed them to do something,
- without following any specific pattern.

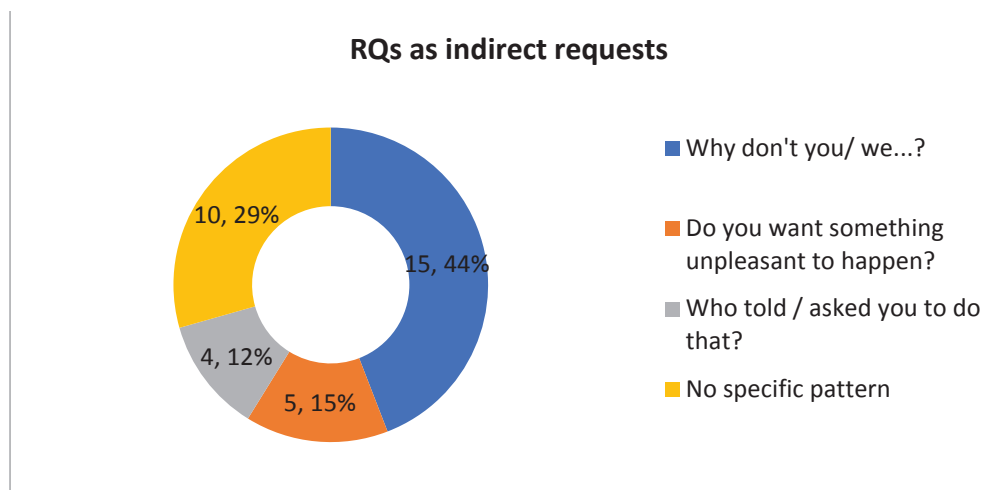


Figure 2: The form of RQs functioning as indirect requests

4.2. RQs in the form of *why-don't-you/we* questions

A common way of formulating RQs as action-eliciting questions is to ostensibly inquire about the reasons for not doing something:

(5) MAX: (...) Anyway, what's the difference, you did it, you made a wonderful choice, you've got a wonderful family, a marvellous career . . . **so why don't we let bygones be bygones?** (Pinter 1966: 48-49)

(6) JOHN: **Why don't we take a drive.**
ALMA: What a divine suggestion! (Williams 2000: 440)

(7) EDDIE: (...) **Whyn't you run down buy a tablecloth.** Go ahead, here.
CATHERINE: *There's no stores open now.* (Miller 2003: 319)

Questions realized in this form are equivalent to indirect statements that something should be done (the answer that they imply is *there is no reason not to do that*). Therefore, they are different from typical action-eliciting question (for instance, *shall we take a drive / can you buy a tablecloth*) that contain elements of information-eliciting questions.

The rhetorical interpretation of such questions is often facilitated by punctuation marks (or, in spoken utterances, by stress and intonation), as is the case in the examples (6) and (7), since questions with the same form can also be used as information-eliciting. Furthermore, as shown in example (7), they can be accompanied by imperatives.

The addressee's response in example (6) shows that the question is understood as rhetorical. However, as we can note in example (7), the addressee may choose to challenge the implied statement by responding to an RQ as if it were an information question, which is in line with Kleinke's (2012) claim that the rhetorical force of RQs may be open to negotiation.

4.3. RQs in the form of *do-you-want* questions

Another way of posing action-eliciting questions in the form of RQs is to ostensibly ask addressees if they want to experience something disagreeable or unpleasant. Since the obvious and the only meaningful answer to such questions is *no*, addressees can easily infer that the questions are meant to urge them to do something that will prevent the mentioned unpleasanties from happening. Therefore, such RQs function as warnings:

(8) REV. WINEMILLER: **Do you want them to overhear you?**

ALMA: Oh, they're not there any more, she's dragged him out of danger!
(Williams 2000: 435)

(9) WALESA: These demands against the security police – they can't be made in the name of the union. We are a non-political organization. It was a pledge. **Do you want to ruin everything?**
(Stoppard 1998: 228-229)

(10) HYMAN: You should already be having therapy to keep up your circulation. **You have a long life ahead of you, you don't want to live it in a wheelchair, do you?** (...)
(Miller 2003: 544)

The RQs in the above examples, equivalent to indirect statements (*you don't want them to overhear you / you don't want to ruin everything / you don't want to spend your life in a wheelchair*) that simultaneously function as indirect requests (*speak quietly / don't do that / go to see a specialist*), are communicatively more effective than the use of direct orders or demands, since they draw the addressees' attention to the potential harm of continuing with their present behaviour. As a result, it is more likely that the addressees will be persuaded to act in a particular way if requests are made by means of RQs.

4.4. RQs in the form of *who-told/asked-you* questions

The third pattern of RQs as action-eliciting questions that have been identified in my corpus is in the form of inquiring who asked or allowed addressees to do something. Since they clearly imply that addressees did not have permission to do the mentioned things (the obvious answer to such questions is *nobody*), these questions serve as indirect requests for undoing whatever had been done, while simultaneously expressing the speaker's criticism and anger towards the addressees or their actions:

(11) STANLEY: **Who gave you the right to take away my tea?**
(Pinter 1961: 12)

(12) MAX: **Who asked you to bring dirty tarts into this house?**
TEDDY: Listen, don't be silly - (Pinter 1966: 41)

(13) RODOLPHO: Eddie?
EDDIE: **Who said you could come in here?** Get outa here!
(Miller 1972: 368)

While, as shown in the example (13), such RQs can be accompanied by explicit directives (which strengthen the commanding tone of the utterance), the

speaker's intention to have the addressee do something is easily recognizable from the questions, even without any explicit orders.

4.5. RQs as action-eliciting questions without a specific pattern

Some of the RQs from my corpus that indirectly ask for action do not have any specific repeated form that would differentiate them from other RQs. Examples (2), (3), and (4) include such RQs that only in a particular context can be interpreted as indirect requests. However, it is possible that the limited number of RQs included in this study prevented me from finding more repeated patterns of RQs that can be used as action-eliciting questions. For instance, the forms of the RQs in the following examples seem conducive to such use:

(14) CHANCE: She's gone. **Why talk about it?** (Williams 2000: 160)

(15) WITHEKSHAW: (...) **are we going to judge grown responsible men in this day and age by the standards of Mrs.Grundy (...)?**

COCKLEBURY-SMYTHE: But what's the report based on if we aren't going to call any witnesses? (Stoppard 1976: 93)

While only one such example has been identified in my corpus, RQs in the form of *why+lexical verb* typically imply that it is pointless to do something, and, by extension, they represent indirect suggestions. Similarly, RQs in the form of asking if we are going to allow or do something indirectly suggest that this should not be done, thereby prompting our interlocutor to act accordingly (in the above example, to reject a witness testimony).

5. Conclusion

The results of this research confirm that although rhetorical and action-eliciting questions are two distinct types of questions, the former can be used with the intention to function as indirect requests. Namely, questions which do not ask for answers and are equivalent to indirect statements can also be used to urge addressees to do something. In those instances, RQs function on a three-layer basis: questions on the surface level are equivalent to indirect statements which serve as indirect requests. The selection of RQs intended as indirect requests, just like in the case of RQs in general, is linked to their persuasive effects, since they help the speaker convince the addressee that something needs to be done.

RQs that function as action-eliciting questions are not common. Out of 492 RQs identified in my corpus, only 34 (7%) were used to indirectly suggest that addressees should do something. Some of them had the form of *why-don't-we/you* questions (15; 44%), asking if the addressees want something unpleasant to happen (5; 15%), or asking who told or allowed addressees to do something (4; 12%). Yet, a significant number of such RQs (10; 29%) did not follow any specific pattern, or a pattern could not be established due to the limited number of RQs included into this study.

In conclusion, although rhetorical and action-eliciting questions are two distinct categories of questions, RQs can also be intended and understood as indirect requests.

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