Rhetorical questions two ways in Sm'algyax¹

Colin Brown University of California, Los Angeles

I investigate Rhetorical Questions (RQs) in Sm'algyax (Tsimshianic) based on novel fieldwork data. Canonical, or Ordinary Questions (OQs) are typically conceived of as those that a Speaker may utter in case they do not know the answer to a question Q, and they assume that the Addressee does know the answer to Q. The communicative function of an OQ is that of 'asking'. RQs are characterized as non-canonical questions, licensed in cases where the Speaker knows the answer to the question Q and assumes that the Addressee does too. The communicative function of an RQ is that of 'telling' or 'reminding'.

In Sm'algyax, we find two different constructions that can be used as Rhetorical Questions. The first type (1) is morphosyntactically isomorphic to Ordinary Questions. Type 1 questions are characterized by a *wh*-expression appearing in a prepredicative position (contra baseline VSO), and extraction morphology indexing the grammatical role of the element that has been extracted. These Type 1 questions, whether being used as OQs or RQs, may optionally be marked with a question particle (d)u. The second type (2) shares this *wh*-movement and extraction morphology, but is additionally marked with the irrealis subordinator *dzi* and cannot be marked with the question particle (d)u. A Type 1 question such as (1) is felicitous in information seeking contexts, in this case where the Speaker assumes there is someone who can fly, as well as non-information seeking contexts, where the question functions as a non-interrogative speech act, suggesting that nobody can fly. A Type 2 question such as (2) is only felicitous in the latter context.

| (1) | Naa(=yu) in=t | baa-'n gip'aayk'nsk | |
|-----|---------------------------------|---------------------|-------|
| | who=Q AGT.EXTR=3 run-CAUS plane | | |
| | 'Who can fly a plane?' | | OQ/RQ |
| (2) | Naa*(=yu) dzi in=t | baa-'n gip'aayk'nsk | |

(2) Naa*(=yu) dzi in=t baa-'n ____ gip'aayk'nsk
who=Q IRR AGT.EXTR=3 run-CAUS plane
'Who can fly a plane?' = nobody can fly a plane
RQ

In (2) we thus find a construction in line with analyses of RQs as negative statements distinct from OQs (Sadock 1974; Han 2002; see also Oguro 2014; 2018 for a similar obligatorily rhetorical question construction in Japanese). This finding runs counter to the claim in Caponigro and Sprouse (2007) that RQs are semantically/syntactically OQs but differ from them pragmatically. This work thus contributes to the growing empirical landscape of non-canonical questions.

I compare Type 1 and Type 2 questions in terms of answerability, ability to function as positive RQs, and appropriateness across a range of contexts, and suggest that Type 1 RQs can be analysed as pragmatically distinct OQs (in line with Caponigro and Sprouse); Type 2 RQs I analyse based on independent analysis of interrogatives and the irrealis element dzi, which also appears in disjunction, conditionals, embedded polar questions, and subjunctive/irrealis clauses.

References

Ivano Caponigro and Jon Sprouse. Rhetorical questions as questions. In E. Puig-Waldmüller, editor, Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung 11, pages 121–133, 2007.

Chung-hye Han. Interpreting interrogatives as rhetorical questions. Lingua, 112, 2002.

Takeshi Oguro. Negation in certain rhetorical questions in Japanese. In Proceedings of the Florida Linguistics Yearly Meeting (FLYM) 1., 2014.

Takeshi Oguro. Properties of mono ka rhetorical questions. In Céleste Guillemot, Tomoyuki Yoshida, and Seunghun J. Lee, editors, MIT Working Papers in Linguistics 88: Proceedings of the 13th Workshop on Altaic Formal Linguistics (WAFL 13), pages 193–204, 2018.

Jerold Sadock. Towards a Linguistic Theory of Speech Acts. New York: Academic Press, 1974.

¹Abstract submitted to California Universities Semantics and Pragmatics (CUSP) 13, UCLA.