



UNIVERSITY OF
GOTHENBURG

Don't you think that a rhetorical
question can convey an argument?

Denis Iousséf, Ellen Breitholtz and Christine Howes
University of Gothenburg

About the paper

- > based on my BA thesis at the University of Gothenburg
- > about rhetorical questions and argumentation in dialogue
- > focus on the interactional aspects, hitherto overlooked
- > rhetorical questions as a device for delivering arguments
- > corpus collected by Mary Lavelle (Lavelle et al, 2013)
- > 40 triadic dialogues where subjects discuss the balloon task
 - 4 passengers in a hot air balloon, one must jump to prevent the balloon from crashing - who should be sacrificed?
- > Part of the DRiPS-project (Breitholtz et al 2021) looking at reasoning in dialogue and how it relates to other aspects of interaction.

Reasoning in Dialogue

> tends to be *enthymematic*

> i.e. defeasible and relies on what is "in the mind" of the interlocutor

> These things could be facts (or beliefs) and principles of reasoning warranting the acceptability of the argument

> Such warrants are often referred to as *topoi* (sg *topos*)

Anon 3: "The Monarchy are non political <pause> and therefore, when they choose to speak it is usually out of a genuine concern for that problem"

(BNC, FLE 233)

> the topos of this enthymematic argument is something like

x is non political ~> x doesn't have to pander to voters

This preliminary study explores the following:

1. Can rhetorical questions express enthymematic arguments, or parts of them?
2. Can their use make the warranting *topoi* more likely to be accommodated by participants, or make the *topos* that would warrant the enthymematic argument more acceptable?
3. Is the expression of enthymemes through RQs (as well as the **structural correspondence** between enthymemes and RQs, and their argumentative power) linked to an RQ having the illocutionary force of the statement it implies?

What are rhetorical questions?

- > indirect speech acts
- > contextual environment also important to interpretation and classification
- > in dialogue we rely on common sense inferences rather than strictly logical deductions
- > RQs are enthymematic too -- rely on such notions in the mind of the hearers
- > a cognition oriented view is that RQs are used to set off in the mind of the addressee the same sort of process of arriving at a conclusion, that mirrors that of the addresser
- > correspondence with syllogisms has been noted before
- > in our analysis, RQs function as different aspects of enthymematic inferences - as replies or as something to be replied to, iow express the premise or conclusion of an argument
- > their rhetorical power rests on a presumption that the topos should be as acceptable to the addressee
- >

What are rhetorical questions?

> We argue that the employment of an RQ to form an argument strengthens the argumentative force through a presumption that the topos warranting it should already be acceptable to the addressee.

> This is due to the role of RQs in cognition itself, beyond simply being attenuators of FTAs -- they express the **speaker's commitment** to the implied answer and **expectation of the same of the addressee** because the the notion behind them is presumed to already be acceptable.

> Whether the hearer ends up agreeing with the reasoning or not, casting it as a question expecting negative answers sets off a process in **the mind of the hearer mirroring that of the speaker**

> We propose that this process can be described as the successful elicitation of a topos that would warrant the enthymeme expressed by an RQ, and the RQ form itself accentuates, or makes salient in discourse **the expectation that a topos is already available, and should be acceptable to the other conversation participants.**

> the answer to “why p?” is an enthymeme “q~>p”. Where the antecedent of a why-question is a conditional statement, why? elicits a reason for the stated enthymeme, to explicate the topos that underpins it. In theory, this questioning may go on indefinitely, as there may always be “a topos in the context that the interlocutors do not explicate, but implicitly accommodate” (Schlöder et al., 2016). So, enthymemes can be nested: a reason provided for one inference is itself an unstated premise in a superordinate enthymeme, and so on. RQs have a similar property, in that they link utterances in an enthymematic way

> the **interrogative/statement duality** enables self-answers to RQs, RQs as self-answers, providing backing and rhetorical structure to one's own reasoning

Yes/No rhetorical questions

- > has the illocutionary force of a statement with a negative polarity
- > expects negative answers, like an ellipsis of the statement implied: “She is not”
- > rhetorical reading motivated by premise to the statement, by “really” and “anyway”
- > “She isn’t really gonna make a difference [if thrown out], [because] she’s nine years old, she’s so light anyway”
- > The chain of reasoning above as an enthymeme:

she’s nine years old she’s too light
~~~~~  
throwing her out won’t make a difference

(GP12, 36-39)

- 1:** Are we all agreed that the kid’s not going?
- 2:** erm.
- 1:** She’s nine years old, she’s so light anyway  
– **is she really gonna make a difference?**
- 3:** Well I’m not throwing a kid out, I just couldn’t cope with it.

# Yes/No rhetorical questions

> similarity between tag questions and RQs

> The tag implies a statement of the opposite polarity to it (identical to the statement part of the tag question)

> the argument is about the reasons to not throw out the child, not about whether or not to.

> the topos evoked is a more specific version of the one in the previous example: from the notion of having to be heavy enough (which nine year olds are not) to having to be at least the weight of a sandbag (not to deny, but to reinforce the notion in this case):

x is not as heavy as a sandbag

---

throwing x out won't make a difference

**1:** No no if that kid was a trouble maker

**3:** \*laughter\* No \*laughter\*

**1:** I would throw them out

**3:** \*laughter\* No I i- it's just ethically I I ca-  
I can't make that choice.

**2:** Why?

**1:** I just think the child is too too light  
anyway I mean, even if the child was  
morbidly obese.

**3:** \*laughter\*

**1:** **They're not gonna be as heavy as a  
sandbag, are they? So.**



# Yes/No rhetorical questions

> implies a conditional statement: if “she’s been married to him” then “she might have a little bit of piloting”, evoking:

x is married to a pilot

x has experience of piloting

> followed up by drawing on implicit topoi: i) that pilot’s wives come along on flights sometimes; ii) that going on flights gives one piloting experience and iii) that piloting experience generally includes ability to land the aircraft.

> The persuasive power of RQs is reflected in the gloss: “Surely you think that if she’s been married to him she might have a little bit of piloting”

> similarly to the tag-RQ, the introductory “don’t you think that ...” turns a statement into an RQ (the implication is derived in a similar way), and lays bare an emblematic property of RQs to make the addressee mirror the speaker’s thinking and agree

**2:** Yeah but the big question is if you throw the pilot out is what to expect, are you expected to be able to land the thing safely.

**3:** mmm.

**2:** Because if not then it’s pointless throwing the pilot out. Because you kill everybody then.

**3:** Yes. But there is a chance

**1:** **Don’t you think that if she’s been married to him she might have a little bit of piloting?**

**3:** Yeah, exactly.

**1:** She might have been on a hot air balloon more than once.

**3:** Yeah.

**1:** So she might sort of know the general idea of how to land one.

# Wh- rhetorical questions

- > Gloss: “No one needs a pilot”
- > The implication of the RQ denotes an empty set
- > More persuasive than its polar version: “do they really need a pilot?”

**1:** But the scenario still says it's gonna crash. There's nothing, they can't do anything to land it. It's gonna crash. It's got to the point where they've actually thrown the food out, thrown the sandbags. Fully prepared that it's gonna crash, there's no way to land it.

**2:** mmm

**1:** So it's gonna crash, **who needs a pilot?**

**3:** mmm

x is a passenger of a balloon doomed to crash

---

x doesn't need a pilot

# Wh- rhetorical questions

> With two wh-RQs in succession, responding to their own statement about the pregnant woman, 1 is conveying the idea that there does not exist a special quality about her, and so there exists no reason to keep her

> glossed as two statements of non-existence making up an inference: “She has no special quality. (So) there is no reason we want to keep her at all”

> “if x has a special quality ~> x should be saved”

> 2 and 3 attempt to provide an instantiation to this topos by giving informational answers to the RQs -- since by implying the null set, they allow 1 to reject that counting as two due to pregnancy actually is a special quality

> put differently, 2 and 3 give reasons for why counting for two is a special quality and that she has it on grounds of being important to the pilot -- since being pregnant isn't found among the answers implied by 1's RQs

- 1: So then we have the pregnant woman, so it's two people in one.
- 2: yeah.
- 1: **Wh- what's her special quality? Why do we want to keep her at all?**
- 2: Well, if you threw her out, maybe the pilot might well go mad, through losing his wife and his child.
- 3: But if you threw her out, maybe the pilot might jump out as well.
- 2: Yeah.
- 3: Hence, then you'd have two spaces left in the balloon. So you wouldn't have to throw anyone.

# Wh- rhetorical questions

> 1 objects to throwing out the child, invoking a topos “x makes great music ~> x should be saved”

> 3 employs an RQ to invoke another topos as a reason for why 1's topos is unfounded

**3:** I think they should dash the child

**1:** \*laughter\*

**3:** It's just a child

**1:** The prodigy, nooo

**3:** **Who listens to classical music?**

~~x makes great music  
-----  
x should be saved~~



no one likes classical music    x makes classical music  
-----  
x does not make great music

# Wh- rhetorical questions

> A common theme is that balloons are easy to fly, since operating its propane valve seems like a binary operation – either open or close it.

> The argument is that a task that consists of only two modes of action is not in the upper range for what is complicated, and evokes a topos that delimits the range for what is to be considered a difficult task

> the topos drawn on can be treated as a generalisation of the contextually relevant property of elements in the relevant range of expected answers to the RQ.

> the more general the topoi, the more tautological they get                      x  
is a binary operation (x is simple) > x isn't difficult

> 3 RQs drawing on the same topos, providing additional grounds to throw out the pilot

> it's just two things > it isn't difficult to teach how to fly a balloon

**1: How difficult is it to fly the balloon?**

**3:** He could train the Mozart.

**1:** It's just going up and down.

**2: How hard is it to, um, navigate a balloon?**

**3:** \*laughter\* I don't know \*laughter\*

**2:** \*laughter\* Yeah \*laughter\*

**1:** \*laughter\* Exactly, that's what I was thinking, yeah \*laughter\*

**2:** You let hot air in and when when you wanna go you let hot air out.

**1:** Yeah, it is common sense I suppose.

# Wh- rhetorical questions

> 3 RQs drawing on the same topos, providing additional grounds to throw out the pilot

> First RQ: it's just two things > it isn't difficult to teach how to fly a balloon (antecedent from topos in previous example)

> Second RQ expects an empty set (absence of difficulty):  
"There is nothing [difficult] a [balloon] pilot does"

> Third RQ: Y/N RQ, implied statement derived by removing the tag

> Additional topos "flying a Boeing 727 is difficult"

> The first expects answers on the low end of the scale of difficulty. The next two imply cut-off thresholds for the scale, that the difficulty of flying a balloon can not exceed: the second one implies that the difficulty of piloting a balloon is non-existent or too negligible, and the third one characterizes the high end of the scale of piloting aircraft, by placing a passenger plane there.

**1: The thing is, how easy, or difficult it is to actually teach how to fly a balloon?**

I mean it's just two things really. **What does a pilot do? It's not like flying a Boeing 727 is it?**

**2:** Well, yeah it is just two things like.

**3:** But if the balloon was sinking anyway, you wouldn't wanna train anyone, you'd just wanna jump out.

# Irregular cases

> rhetorical reading stems from a reading of the disjunction as exclusive (either/or fallacy)

> polarity reversal not a heuristic to derive the implication of the RQ (would lead to a neither ... nor construction, obviously not the case)

> one or two topoi evoked? (“if x is generous then x won’t sell the cure” and “if x sells the cure then x is not generous”)

> only sell\_cure(d) is presupposed -- the implied statement of the RQ is an enthymeme that is an instantiation of one or the other available topoi

> provided sufficient context is given as to whether a rhetorical reading is obvious in it, then it is also obvious which instantiation is presupposed and which is negated in the consequent -- as well as the derivation of the implied statement of the RQ

> ‘and’ connecting the RQ to the previous utterance: the enthymeme implied is given as yet another argument against saving the doc.

**1:** There’s always another doctor out there who is I’m I’m almost curing cancer but he hasn’t really.

**3:** **And is he gonna be kind of generous about it or is he gonna sell the cure?**

**2:** Sell the drug to make tons of money

**3:** Yeah exactly it’s

**2:** But but yeah those things apart I I I still think he’s probably the most important person in in the balloon as he has the power the power to save lives all round the world from then on.

**3:** Or the power to make money.

# Irregular cases

> the topos at hand:  $\text{not\_generous}(x) \sim \neg \text{should\_be\_saved}(x)$ , which reflects the persuasive power of the RQ - the converse interpretation lack rhetorical power in this context

> after disagreement from 2, 3 reiterates their argument drawing upon that same topos (with the power to make money as proxy for not being generous)

> while not an RQ, the last utterance providing us another example of an either/or dilemma, where the emphasized alternative stands in exclusive disjunction with the power to save lives

- 1: There's always another doctor out there who is I'm I'm almost curing cancer but he hasn't really.
- 3: **And is he gonna be kind of generous about it or is he gonna sell the cure?**
- 2: Sell the drug to make tons of money
- 3: Yeah exactly it's
- 2: But but yeah those things apart I I I still think he's probably the most important person in in the balloon as he has the power the power to save lives all round the world from then on.
- 3: Or the power to make money.



# Conclusions

- > RQs can convey entire enthymemes
- > RQs can express the antecedent or consequent of enthymematic inferences, in the latter case, linking it to the antecedent, enabled by the literal function of RQs as interrogatives
- > provide a reason to invalidate the premises of a previously evoked topos
- > make up an enthymeme by making salient the lack of concludable answers to the RQ (“How many roads must a man walk down...”), or giving them a sense of absurdity (“Have you any idea how many people have cancer?”)
- > **wh-RQs often serve as consequents** in inferences, the **wh-element introducing quantifiers** in the statements implied. By making general statements over groups of individuals having a property they convey **topoi in a more explicit way**, whereas **yes/no-RQs presuppose this implicitly**. However due to the limited amount of either kind of RQ in the data, this does not warrant any conclusion as to a fundamental difference between them in this regard
- > in the case of **how-RQs conveying scalar implicatures**, the RQ implies an inference motivating the gradation of a property of an individual under discussion somewhere along a scale
- > More work also needs to be done in relation to how RQs function in regards to incrementally updating the state of evoked and accommodated topoi in the dialogue, especially in the case of how-RQs. The only certain conclusion that can be made in this matter as of now is that **RQs are very frequently in use in interactional settings**, and when used, are met with **agreement**, succeeding in the purpose of persuasion, the more common the topos they invoke is.



You've got some questions now, haven't you?