



A Contrastive Study of Rhetorical Questions in English and Arabic

Lecturer: Lamees M. Tawfeeq

Department of English/College of Basic Education-University of Mosul

Lecturer: Hala F. Mohammed

Department of English/College of Basic Education- University of Mosul

Abstract:

This study concerns with rhetorical questions in English and Arabic. It sheds light on the functions and uses of rhetorical questions in the two languages, and comparing them in order to find out aspects of similarity and difference in this topic. The researchers in this study start it with an introduction on the topic, provide its aims and hypotheses, discuss the topic thoroughly in English and Arabic respectively, and then conduct a comparison between them to reach out the aims for which this study has been made.

Key words: rhetorical questions, interrogation, English, Arabic.

دراسة مقارنة للأسئلة البلاغية في اللغتين الانكليزية والعربية

م. لميس محيي الدين توفيق

قسم اللغة الانكليزية/كلية التربية الاساسية

جامعة الموصل

م. هالة فاروق محمد

قسم اللغة الانكليزية/كلية التربية الاساسية -جامعة الموصل

ملخص البحث:

تهتم هذه الدراسة بموضوع الاسئلة البلاغية (الاستفهام المجازي) في اللغتين الانكليزية والعربية، اذ تسلط الضوء على وظائف واستخدامات الاسئلة البلاغية في هاتين اللغتين ومقارنتهما لاكتشاف اوجه التشابه والاختلاف بينهما. تبدأ الباحثتان هذه الدراسة بمقدمة حول الموضوع وتعرضان اهدافها وفرضياتها وتنتقلان الى اعطاء شرح مستفيض للموضوع ثم تجريان مقارنة بين اللغتين ضمن هذا الموضوع من اجل الوصول الى الاهداف التي من اجلها اجريت هذه الدراسة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أسئلة بلاغية ، استجواب ، إنجليزي ، عربي



1. Introduction:

In everyday life, people usually use numerous types of sentence in their communication with each other, such as declarative sentences, interrogative sentences, imperative sentences, and exclamatory sentences; and each of these sentences has a function different from that of the others. Thus, people use declaratives to convey their thoughts and ideas, interrogatives to inquire about something, someone, etc., imperatives to give orders or to make requests, and they use exclamatory sentences, less frequently, to express their strong emotions or attitudes. As this study concerns with rhetorical question which is a specific form of questions, a little focus will be given here to the interrogative sentence. Interrogative sentences are typically questions used for the purpose of finding out information, people normally ask questions when they need to know or explore something, and thus, they expect answers or responds from whoever they are asking. However, people in certain occasions produce questions to achieve specific purposes other than seeking information (i.e. they need no answers or responds), and such purposes are mainly rhetorical. When an utterance is intended to be rhetorical it means that it is made for some effective or stylistic purposes.

Rhetorical question are undoubtedly common in all human languages including English and Arabic. This study, however, is an attempt to explore the rhetorical purposes of questions in both English and Arabic, and to know to what extent the two languages are similar and different in this concern.

2. Aims of the Study:

This study aims at the following:

- 1- Looking deeply into the topic of rhetorical questions in English and Arabic respectively, shedding light on their purposes and uses in both languages.
- 2- Conducting a comparison between English and Arabic in order to find out aspects of similarity and difference concerning the uses of rhetorical questions.

3. Hypotheses:

The present study is a contrastive one, it compares between English and Arabic in dealing with rhetorical questions. Hence, it hypothesizes that there must be some similarities and differences between the two languages as far as this topic is concerned.

4. Rhetorical Questions in English:

4.1 What is a Rhetorical Question?



It seems to be important to provide some definitions of the rhetorical question before starting with how it works. However, there is an agreement among grammarians about the nature of the rhetorical question. Quirk et al, (1985:825) state that “the rhetorical question is interrogative in structure, but has the force of a strong assertion. It does not expect an answer”. A more detailed definition is provided by Biber et al (1999:206) claiming that a rhetorical question is “expressing an opinion rather than asking a question.” They add that “by choosing an interrogative form, the speaker appears to let the addressee be the judge, but no overt response is expected”. In the same way, Biber et al (2002:252) deal with the rhetorical questions by saying that “when questions are used in news or academic prose, they have rhetorical purposes, since there can be no expectation that readers will actually respond” they continued “these questions do help to involve the reader in the discussion.”

To sum up these definitions, it could be claimed that a rhetorical question is a figure of speech that is made up in a form of a question with an effect of a strong statement to give a certain opinion rather to get an answer.

4.2 Types of Rhetorical Question:

Quirk et al (1973:200) suggest three types of rhetorical questions: positive, negative, and wh- questions.

1- Positive Rhetorical Questions:

The question here is formed in the affirmative case

1. *Can anyone doubt the wisdom of this action?*

Functionally, the rhetorical question acts as “forceful statement”. Thus, a positive rhetorical question has the same effect of a negative assertion (surely no one can doubt). (ibid)

2- Negative Rhetorical Questions:

The question is in the non-affirmative case

2. *Isn't the answer obvious?*

As with the effect of the positive rhetorical question, the negative one is the same as a positive assertion (surely the answer is obvious). (Quirk et al 1985:826)

3- Wh- Rhetorical Questions:

It has a form of a wh-question which implies a negative statement

3. *Who cares?*



The Q –element in this question can be replaced by a negative element, and thus it could be equivalent to the statement (nobody cares). (ibid)

Another category of rhetorical questions is suggested in <https://www.acethepresentation.com/rhetorical-questios/>. According to this category, rhetorical questions are classified into three types:

1- “Anthypophora or Hypophora” :

Anthypophora originally refers to the Greek words ‘against + allegation’. In this type the speaker gives a question himself and immediately provides an answer to it. “According to the dictionary of Poetic Terms (2003) Jack Myers and Don Charles Wukasch classify anthypophora as a ‘figure of argumentation’ whereby the speaker is arguing with himself”. (for this reason the researchers in this study see that it would be better to call this type ‘argumentative rhetorical question’). The following example illustrates this type:

4. “..... Can we say that we’re truly doing enough to give all the children of this country the chance they deserve to live out their lives in happiness and with purpose?..... the answer’s no.”

Barak Obama

2- “Erotesis” (emotional interrogation):

This type of rhetorical questions conveys a strong or passionate affirmation or denial.

5. “Was I an Irishman on that day that I boldly withstood our pride? Or on the day that I hung down my head and wept in shame and silence over the humiliation of Great Britain?”

Edmund Bruke

3- “Epiplexis or Epitimesis” (rebuking interrogation):

In this type, questions are asked as a way of rebuking or blaming rather to evoke answers. The speaker tries to stir the listener’s feeling of shame on certain point of view.

6. Is an Israeli teardrop worth more than a drop of Lebanese blood?

Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, July 2006

4.3 Benefits of Using Rhetorical Questions:



It has been mentioned in this study that rhetorical questions are used by the speaker to make certain point of view forceful or to stir the listener's feeling or draw attention towards certain idea. However, the following benefits of rhetorical questions are claimed in

https://www.grammar-monster.com/glossary/rhetorical_questions.htm

1- Rhetorical questions are engaging and make good titles:

In writing, a rhetorical question is useful for suggesting titles for paragraphs. In addition to make what follows clear, it makes the readers engage and encourages them to think about the answer before reading. For example

7. *Who murdered Samantha?*

Introducing a paragraph or a story with such a title makes it more engaging and interesting than a title like 'The Murder of Samantha'.

However, there is an argument that a question introducing an idea is not actually a rhetorical one since the answer might be provided either immediately after the question or later. This seems a bit logical, but if it is considered that such a question does not expect an answer from the readers themselves, it will be rhetorical.

2- Rhetorical questions can be diplomatic:

A rhetorical question can have the effect of soft statement; when some diplomacy is required, rhetorical questions would be a good option. For example

8. *Sara did the puzzle in a very short time, but **who did it first?***

The rhetorical question here makes the speech more diplomatic than saying 'Sara was the second one who did the puzzle'.

As a summary, it can be stated that rhetorical questions – although they are not a basic component of a speech or writing – they can be employed in various ways to achieve different purposes like: influencing and persuading the listeners or readers, stirring the addressees' feeling or thinking about certain idea, topic, etc., presenting topics in interesting ways, and engaging the addressees in what they listen to or read.

5. Rhetorical Questions in Arabic



5.1 Defining Rhetorical Question:

Interrogation in Arabic is classified into two types:

- 1- Real interrogation; which involves asking about something unknown and requires an answer.
- 2- Rhetorical interrogation; which involves asking questions not for getting knowledge about something, but for evoking the addressees' feeling and achieving certain rhetorical purposes. Thus it does not require answers.

(Al-Jarim and Ameen, w.d.:213, 227)

5.2 Types of Rhetorical Questions:

As it has been mentioned above, rhetorical questions in Arabic are used to achieve a number of purposes. According to these purposes, rhetorical questions are classified into many types:

1- Rhetorical Question of Negation:

Arab grammarians relate this type to negation because the interrogation particle must be replaced by a negative particle. They claim that if such replacement is done easily without affecting the meaning of the context, then this question is a rhetorical one. (Ibn Faris, w.d.: 295).

9. "هل جزاء الاحسان الا الاحسان" (سورة الرحمن: 60) "Shall the reward of goodness be anything but good?" (Dawood, 1974: 21)

2- Declarative Rhetorical Question:

In this type, the question has a negative form and a positive forceful meaning,

10. "ألم نشرح لك صدرك" (سورة الشرح: 1) "Have We not lifted up your heart?" (Dawood, 1974: 26)

3- Rhetorical Question of Condemnation:

This type is used for condemning or blaming the addressee on doing something,

11. "أ تقولون على الله ما لا تعلمون" (سورة الاعراف: 28) "Would you tell of Allah what you do not know?" (Dawood, 1974: 248)

4- Rhetorical Question of Wishing:

The speaker expresses his wish in a form of a question,

12. "فهل لنا من شفعاء فيشفعوا لنا" (سورة الاعراف: 53)



“Will no one plead on our behalf?” (Dawood, 1974: 250)

5- Rhetorical Question of Suspense:

The speaker is attempting to draw the addressee's attention to a certain point of view by using a rhetorical question in a motivating way,

13. (سورة الصف: 10) "هل أدلكم على تجارة تنجيكم من عذاب أليم"

“Shall I point out to you a profitable course that will save you from a woeful scourge?” (Dawood, 1974: 106)

6- Rhetorical Question Expressing Mockery:

14. (سورة هود: 87) "أصلاتك تأمرك أن نترك ما يعبد آباؤنا"

“Did your prayers teach you that we should renounce the gods of our fathers” (Dawood, 1974: 140)

7- Rhetorical Question Expressing Exclamation:

15. (سورة الفرقان: 7) "ما لهذا الرسول يأكل الطعام ويمشي في الأسواق"

“How is it that this apostle eats and walks about the market-squares?” (Dawood, 1974: 209)

8- Rhetorical Question Expressing Commendation and Magnification:

16. (سورة الرحمن: 13) "فبأي آلاء ربكما تكذبان"

“Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?” (Dawood, 1974: 19)

9- Rhetorical Questions Expressing Urgency:

The speaker uses a rhetorical question to show his eagerness towards something which seems far or slow in coming up

17. (سورة البقرة: 214) "حتى يقول الرسول والذين آمنوا معه متى نصر الله"

“that each apostle, and those who shared his faith, cried out: ‘When will the help of Allah come?’” (Dawood, 1974: 354)

10- Rhetorical Question Expressing Command:

18. (سورة الانبياء: 80) "وعلمناه صنعة لبوس لكم لتحصنكم من بأسكم فهل أنتم شاكرون"

“We taught him the armorer's craft, so you might have protection in your wars. Will you then give thanks?” (Dawood, 1974: 301)

11- Motivating Rhetorical Question:



The speaker motivates the addressee towards doing something by using a rhetorical question

19. (سورة القمر: 22) "ولقد يسرنا القرآن للذكر فهل من مدكر"

"We have made the Koran easy to remember: but, will any take heed?" (Dawood, 1974: 113)

12- Rhetorical Question Expressing Exclusion:

20. (سورة الانعام: 101) "أنى يكون له ولد ولم تكن له صاحبة"

"How should He have a son when He had no consort?" (Dawood, 1974: 435)

13- Rhetorical Question Expressing Threat:

21. (سورة الفيل: 1) "ألم تر كيف فعل ربك بأصحاب الفيل"

"Have you not considered how Allah dealt with the Army of the Elephant?" (Dawood, 1974: 264)

14- Rhetorical Question Expressing Equation:

22. (سورة طه: 86) "أ فطال عليكم العهد أم أردتم أن يحل عليكم غضب من ربكم فأخلفتم موعدي"

"Did my absence seem too long to you, or was it to incur your Lord's anger that you failed me?" (Dawood, 1974: 230)

15- Rhetorical Questions Expressing Rebuke:

23. (سورة آل عمران: 101) "وكيف تكفرون وأنتم تتلى عليكم آيات الله وفيكم رسوله"

"But how can you disbelieve when Allah's revelations are recited to you and His own apostle is in your midst?" (Dawood, 1974: 416)

(Al-Jarim and Ameen, w.d.: 227-9)

<https://www.faouaid.com/2020/03/aghrad-istifham.html>

Thus, rhetorical questions in Arabic are used for fulfilling various purposes rather than getting answers, and these purposes vary according to the addresser's attitude towards certain ideas or towards certain behavior done by the addressee.

5.3 Benefits of Using Rhetorical Questions:

None of the Arab grammarians and linguists talked directly and explicitly about the benefit of using rhetorical questions in speaking and writing. However, the



researchers in this study – while investigating the topic – found out certain characteristics of rhetorical questions that could make their use beneficial.

1- Using rhetorical questions makes discourse (speaking or writing) forceful and more convincing: sometimes, conveying an idea in a form of a question seems to be better than conveying it by using a statement. For example

24. *أ تتكلم وانت تأكل؟*

(Are you talking while you are eating?)

The addresser here draws the addressee' attention to the idea that what the latter is doing is not appropriate, and indirectly gives him an order that

(لا تتكلم وانت تأكل)=(don't talk while you are eating).

2- Using rhetorical questions makes certain contexts, such as requests, more polite and effective: for example

25. *هلا فتحت الباب؟*

(Would you open the door?)

This request seems more polite and effective than saying

(افتح الباب)=(open the door).

6. Comparison of Rhetorical Questions in English and Arabic:

After the topic of rhetorical questions has been wholly discussed in English and Arabic, comparison will be conducted between the two languages in order to explore to what extent they are similar or different in dealing with this topic.

6.1 Definitions:

A rhetorical question in both English and Arabic is defined as being that question which does not demand an answer, and is asked not for getting information about something but for achieving certain stylistic purposes.

6.2 Types:

Concerning the types, it has been found out that rhetorical questions in English are mainly classified into three types: positive, negative, and wh-questions. This classification seems to be made according to the form of rhetorical questions. Another classification was found while searching on the topic in the web sites,



which puts rhetorical questions in three types with Greek titles: “anthypophora or hypophora”, “erotesis”, and “Epiplexis or Epitimesis”, and the researchers in this study suggested suitable English titles; they are respectively: argumentative, emotional, and rebuking interrogations. These types are apparently classified depending on the function of the rhetorical question or the purpose it is intended to achieve.

In Arabic, on the other hand, rhetorical questions are classified into various types depending basically on their purposes. Such purposes are: negation, declaration, condemnation, wish, suspense, mockery, exclamation, commendation and magnification, urgency, motivation, command, exclusion, threat, equation, and rebuke.

However, there is a slight similarity between English positive rhetorical question and Arabic negative one, the similarity is involved in their implied meaning:

1. Can anyone doubt the wisdom of this action?

9. (سورة الرحمن: 60) "هل جزاء الاحسان الا الاحسان" "Shall the reward of goodness be anything but good?" (Dawood, 1974: 21)

Both examples imply the effect of a negative statement: (no one can doubt the wisdom of this action) and (ما جزاء الاحسان الا الاحسان)

The same thing happens with the negative rhetorical question in English and the declarative one in Arabic:

2. Isn't the answer obvious?

10. (سورة الشرح: 1) "ألم نشرح لك صدرك" "Have We not lifted up your heart?" (Dawood, 1974: 26)

The two examples have positive forceful meanings.

Another similarity has been reached out when comparing purpose classification of rhetorical questions in English with their purposes in Arabic:

both languages employ rhetorical questions to express rebuke

6. Is an Israeli teardrop worth more than a drop of Lebanese blood?

Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, July 2006

23. (سورة آل عمران: 101) "وكيف تكفرون وأنتم تتلى عليكم آيات الله وفيكم رسوله"



“But how can you disbelieve when Allah’s revelations are recited to you and His own apostle is in your midst?” (Dawood, 1974: 416)

As for the rest of the types or purposes, none is registered as to be common in both English and Arabic, i.e. the remaining types in English are restricted to English, and those remaining in Arabic are restricted to Arabic. This could be an aspect of difference between English and Arabic concerning rhetorical questions.

7. Conclusions:

Investigating and comparing rhetorical questions in English and Arabic lead to some conclusions. First of all, a rhetorical question in both languages is identified as a figure of speech in a form of a question but it is not a real question since it does not require an answer. The importance of the question form lies in the fact that such a form makes speech forceful and effective. An idea can sometimes be conveyed better and more effectively by means of a question form than a normal statement, and by using the question form the speaker/writer draws the attention of the audience towards the idea he wants to express and may make them engage in thinking about it.

Functionally, rhetorical questions are basically used to achieve a variety of purposes which are typically stylistic and rhetorical purposes. Such purposes are more explicitly focused on in Arabic than in English, and according to these purposes types of Arabic rhetorical questions are identified. In English, however, grammarians identify types of rhetorical questions according to their structures with indirect hints to their functions. On the other hand, there has been found a minor classification of rhetorical questions in English which focuses on their purposes or functions.

Finally, the comparison of the types of rhetorical questions between English and Arabic reveals that the two languages are alike in only three types, while the rest are restricted to one language rather than the other, i.e., a type that appears in one language does not appear in the other.

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