THE LINGUISTIC NATURE OF IRREAL INTERROGATIVE MEANING AND THE PRAGMATIC POTENTIAL OF RHETORICAL QUESTIONS

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Abstract: *This paper investigates the linguistic nature of irreal interrogative meaning, exploring the asymmetric relationship between the surface syntactic structure of interrogative sentences and their deep semantic-pragmatic layers. By examining the pragmatic potential of rhetorical questions within discourse, the study analyzes their role in actualizing the speaker's communicative intentions. Grounded in Speech Act Theory and cognitive linguistics, the research demonstrates how the absence of an epistemic deficit transforms canonical questions into powerful discursive tools for assertion, negation, and emotional manipulation.*

Keywords: *irreal interrogative, rhetorical questions, pragmalinguistics, illocutionary act, epistemic deficit, semantic asymmetry, discourse analysis, conversational implicature.*

Introduction

In the contemporary linguistic paradigm, the study of language phenomena has transitioned from purely formal-structural analyses to exploring their intrinsic connection with human cognition and communicative

environments. Within this context, the functional modification of syntactic units, specifically, the deviation of interrogative sentences from their ontological nature, presents a highly complex phenomenon. Traditional grammar defines interrogative sentences as syntactic structures designed to satisfy the speaker's need to acquire unknown information. However, in actual discourse, a specific stratum of interrogative constructions emerges that carries absolutely no ''epistemic information-seeking'' function. In modern linguistics, this phenomenon is referred to as *irreal interrogative meaning*, with its most prominent manifestation embodied in rhetorical questions (Ilie, 1994). The primary objective of this paper is to provide an in-depth scientific analysis of the linguistic mechanisms that generate irreal interrogative meaning and to evaluate their discursive-pragmatic characteristics.

The Absence of Epistemic Deficit and Syntactic-Semantic Asymmetry

The fundamental criterion distinguishing canonical (real) from non-canonical (irreal) interrogatives is the presence or absence of an *epistemic deficit*—the lack of information. Relying on John Searle's Speech Act Theory, a genuine question is cognitively anchored in specific pragmatic presuppositions: the speaker's ignorance regarding a proposition (S does not know P) and the belief that the addressee possesses this knowledge (S believes H knows P) (Searle, 1975).

In irreal interrogative constructions, these preparatory conditions are deliberately violated. The speaker already knows the truth value of the proposition and expects no new information from the addressee.

Although the syntactic mold remains interrogative, its deep structure conceals entirely different illocutionary goals, such as assertion, negation,

command, or astonishment. This discrepancy between the formal and functional levels is termed *syntactic-semantic asymmetry*. As Paul Grice's framework suggests, such scenarios involve a calculated flouting of conversational maxims (particularly the Maxims of Quality and Quantity), thereby generating a conversational implicature (Grice, 1975).

Cognitive Foundations of the Pragmatic Potential of Rhetorical Questions

Rhetorical questions are not mere stylistic embellishments; they are potent instruments of pragmatic influence. Their primary communicative goal shifts from information exchange to manipulating the addressee's worldview, beliefs, and emotional state, ultimately leading them to a predetermined conclusion. Rhetorical questions function primarily as argumentative acts rather than elicitation acts.

From a cognitive perspective, an irreal interrogative forces the addressee into active mental participation. If a speaker presents an idea as a strict declarative assertion or negation (e.g., *''Everyone knows this''* or *''Nobody knows this''*), the information can easily be received passively or met with immediate resistance. However, when the exact same proposition is framed interrogatively (e.g., *''Who doesn't know this?!''*), The addressee instinctively searches their cognitive base for an answer. Guided by the structure of the utterance, they independently arrive at the *''everyone knows''* conclusion. This cognitive maneuver exponentially increases the perlocutionary effect of the speech act, making persuasion seamless and implicit.

Cross-Linguistic Analysis: Evidence from English and Uzbek

To observe the manifestation of irreal interrogative meaning, we must analyze specific linguistic facts. Consider the following English construction:

(1) ‘‘Is the Pope Catholic?’’

Pragmatically, this is a lexicalized rhetorical question. Its primary illocutionary force is not directed at ascertaining religious affiliation. In a communicative context, this interrogative is deployed to illustrate the absolute obviousness of another proposition (e.g., in response to a question like ‘‘Will you help me?’’). The crucial aspect here is that the speaker questions a universal truth precisely to actualize an emphatic assertion (Frank, 1990).

To broaden the cross-linguistic scope, let us examine evidence from the Uzbek language:

(2) ‘‘Senga kim aytibdi osmonni uzoq, yerni qattiq deb?!’’ (Literal translation: ‘‘Who told you that the sky is far and the earth is hard?!’’)

The surface syntactic structure of this sentence is a special question utilizing the interrogative pronoun *kim* (who). However, analyzing its pragmatic and semantic strata reveals complex mental processes. First, the proposition *‘‘the sky is far, the earth is hard’’* is a phraseological unit in Uzbek denoting a sense of helplessness or being in a desperate situation. Second, the interrogative format *‘‘who told you’’* serves absolutely no referential function to identify a person. Beneath it lies a strong *pragmatic negation*: *‘‘Nobody said that / That is not true / There is no reason to worry.’’* Furthermore, this irreal interrogative is saturated with emotional-expressive coloring, carrying the illocutionary act of comforting or reassuring the addressee. Thus, within a single syntactic interrogative frame, the pragmatic acts of negation and reassurance are synthesized.

(3) ‘‘O’z uyim, o’lan to’shagim demagan odamdan nima kutish mumkin?’’

(Literal translation: ‘‘What can be expected from a person who does not value their own home and bed?’’)

In this logical-rhetorical question, another cognitive mechanism is triggered: quantitative implicature. The interrogative format *‘‘nima kutish mumkin?’’* (What can be expected?) semantically necessitates a zero-value answer: *‘‘nothing can be expected.’’* Here, the speaker avoids directly assigning a negative evaluative function to a specific person. Instead, by employing a superficial politeness strategy, the speaker invites the addressee to share their stance (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

These analyses confirm that within the realm of irreal interrogativity, *wh*-words (who, what, when, where) lose their deictic properties and are demoted to the level of negative or assertive particles (e.g., *who* becomes *nobody*, *what* becomes *nothing*, *when* becomes *never*).

Conclusion

Irreal interrogative meaning is a unique linguo-pragmatic indicator that reveals the multifaceted and complex nature of the language system. Rhetorical questions and their pragmatic potential demonstrate that linguistic form and content do not always run strictly parallel. Against the backdrop of a deliberate absence of epistemic deficit, the deployment of interrogative constructions serves as one of the most effective discursive strategies for exerting psychological, cognitive, and emotional influence on an addressee.

Investigating the linguistic nature of irreal interrogative meaning yields vital theoretical conclusions not only for syntax and semantics but also for pragmalinguistics and sociolinguistics. Understanding how these constructions

are articulated across different languages—such as English and Uzbek—illuminates the national-cognitive worldview and the communicative culture of its speakers, proving that questions are often the most powerful way to make a statement.

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