

Interpreting Quranic Rhetorical Questions As Indirect Speech Acts: Part-I

Dr. Muhammad Asif Gul¹, Mr. Riaz Ahmed²

Abstract

This study presents a qualitative analysis of a set of rhetorical questions in the Holy Quran. The data set consists of 33 rhetorical questions that start with exactly same syntactic phrase. Considering rhetorical questions as indirect speech acts, the illocutionary force of each question in the data set has been explored and it has been shown that they perform a variety of illocutionary acts depending on their context, addressee and content. About their interconnection in engendering readers' emotional involvement that heightens their psychological impact and argumentative effect, it was also found that the set shared several similarities. Minor differences were also visible.

1. Introduction

Qassem (2020) and Abdul-Raof (2019) have made important contribution towards the application of modern English linguistic theories on the Holy Quran. Inspired by such studies, the present study applied the micro lens of Speech Act Theory (SAT) on the Holy Quran and aimed to capture profound communicative function of a certain set of rhetorical questions. Gleaning a variety of illocutionary forces for exactly- similarly-structured questions, the utterances are interpreted as indirect speech acts and it shows that the illocution of the utterance is determined by the context which includes not only the participants of the speech but also the content under discussion. Moreover, the study also explored how the questions are interconnected in the Speaker's strategy to enhance active involvement of the hearers or readers. The study contributes to modern linguistic studies by offering another perspective on a certain set of rhetorical questions that share exactly similar starting structure but differ in their illocutionary forces. It also provides a pragmatic lens to Quranic readership and scholarship for uncovering meanings relevant to their individual and social life.

2. Problem Statement

Considering religious text as discourse, Quranic scholarship has shown how the application of linguistic theories introduce modern readers to meanings which are more relevant to them, and it also refines their understanding of the Holy Book (Flowers, 2022; Raof, 2017; Raof, 2000). One important research topic popular among researchers is the communicative power of rhetorical questions (RQs). Since rhetorical questions as indirect speech acts serve a variety of pragmatic functions and heighten the argumentative power of the text, the present study is another endeavour to uncover the illocutionary force of a certain set of rhetorical questions. Apart from the exploration of different illocutionary forces of rhetorical questions starting with

¹Associate Professor National University of Pakistan Islamabad.

²Lecturer Riphah International University Islamabad Riphah International University Islamabad.

exactly similar syntactic phrase, the study also describes how they are interconnected in engendering readers' involvement.

3. Research Questions

- a. What is the illocutionary force of different Quranic rhetorical questions taken as indirect speech acts?
- b. How are the sample rhetorical questions interconnected in their strategies to involve readers?

4. Literature Review

Flowers (2022) has discussed major genres in the Quranic discourse in his PhD dissertation. Saleh (2022) studied the third Quranic Sura named al Imran in the perspective of SAT. Mardiyah (2022) has applied SAT to study directives in Sura al-Abas. J.P (2022) has studied directives in in the 67th sura of the Quran named al Mulk. Another study by Mubarok (2016) investigated interrogative structure in the same sura and also worked in SAT. Eddin (2019) explored how English translation of an interrogative particle (هل) are inconsistent with one another. Bisriyah (2014), Istinah (2011) and Hidayat (2009) are other studies in which the scholars have investigated into pragmatic functions of different interrogative structures. In all such works, Badameh (2003) is closest to the present study in its approach. Since the scholar's focus was on two dimensions i.e. stylistic and discursive aspect, of all kinds of rhetorical questions in the entire Quran, he did not study in depth the illocutionary forces of all instances of a certain set of rhetorical questions.

5. Methodology

Approach

This descriptive study uses the qualitative approach.

Definition of Rhetorical Questions (RQs)

The study has used the definition of Research Questions provided by Ilie (1994) in his pragmatic framework which he developed to identify, describe, and interpret RQs in English as they appear in spoken and written discourse. Agreeing to Ilie, RQs are defined as questions that are used to serve some pragmatic purpose. They are not a special kind of questions; rather, they are questions normally used to seek information. One of their striking features is that they are neither unanswerable nor answerless; undoubtedly, the answer to them, being socially motivated, differ in their emotional impact for different hearers.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Speech Act Theory introduced by Austin (1962) and further refined by Searle (1969, 1975, 1979), Bertollet (2017), Harnish, (1979), Fogal, Harris, & Moss (2018) has been used as theoretical framework. The major concern of the theory with the communicative function of language gives it particular appeal. To the proponents of the theory, the pragmatic functions of utterances are driven by the communicative intentions of the speaker. To them, a single sentence may be used to realize a variety of illocutionary functions. Considering RQs as indirect speech acts, they have been analysed as they occur in Quranic discourse. Since speech act theory also considers utterances situated in discourse and decides their illocution on what precedes and what follows the target utterance, it offers a suitable framework for the examination of illocutionary force of the RQs chosen as sample for the study.

Despite that the theory offers no direct allusion to RQs, Austen (1962) uses the term 'masqueraders' for the performative utterances that neither describe or report nor judge if the

statement is true or false hints that RQs can be studied as such performative utterances. Since the illocutionary act performed by RQs is closer to that of assertions, we can categorize them indirect speech acts. Searle (1975) also claims that contrary to direct speech acts, the illocutionary force of indirect speech acts is always much greater. Therefore, the study of RQs as indirect speech acts entails that we accept a necessary relationship between what we label as different speech acts. In other words, RQs paradigmatically represent how a single utterance may perform multiple functions: they act as an utterance which is used primarily to perform the target illocutionary act, though the surface locutionary act does not overtly show it. Thus, RQs convey the speaker's meaning indirectly because there is little coincidence between the form and the meaning preferred by the speaker.

Another theoretical clarification about RQs as indirect speech acts demands that we briefly discuss speech act conditions that are necessary for labelling any utterance as question. The first condition in Searle (1969) says that the speaker's knowledge is limited, and it obvious to neither the speaker nor the hearer that the hearer will provide information sought in the question. The first part of the condition does not apply to RQs, but the second part is quite operational in them. Since in RQs, the hearers' answers might not be in conformity with what the speaker implies, they encourage the hearer to be more actively involved so that the hearer can accept the speaker's stance in the argument contained within. The second condition classified as sincerity condition requires that the speaker is asking the question to seek information. RQs do not satisfy this condition because the speakers' purpose is not to seek information. Rather, he wants to arouse some psychological state in the hearer that leads them emotionally respond in an appropriate manner. The final condition entails that the questions always attempt to elicit some information from the hearer. When we apply final condition to RQs, we notice that that their primary objective is to elicit the hearers' engagement or agreement with the speaker. In summary, we can say that RQs operate like real questions with the difference that they are oriented more to the psychological conditioning of the hearer and less to their ability to provide information sought in the question. Thus the three specific conditions for RQs include not only the speaker's belief that the hearer does not agree with the speaker on a particular claim, but also the speaker's purpose to gain the hearer's agreement through evoking the desired emotional state in the hearer so that they agree to the speaker's point of view.

For the study of readers' involvement, the study uses the definition of involvement given in Slater (2002) where it has been equated with increased attentional capacity, or increased cognitive activation. The conceptual framework used by Badameh (2003) in his study on Quranic rhetorical questions for the analysis of readers' involvement strategies has been adopted and adapted for this study.

The present study has greatly benefited from the ideas expressed in Mills (1991), Gatti (1999) Roskos-Ewoldsen (2003) and Slater (2002) on rhetorical questions, their communicative function, their specific pragmatic force and different illocutions.

Population and Sample

Quranic discourse uses three major kinds of rhetorical questions. The first category represents speech in which the reader is addressed directly. The second kind of rhetorical questions involve God and some prophet (e.g. Jesus, Moses, Abraham). The third category consists of those rhetorical questions in which human participants (e. g. Moses and Khizar, or Moses and Pharaoh) use these structures as discursive act. In other words, rhetorical questions are used in the Quranic discourse to operationalize three basic relationships between standpoints: between God and the reader of the Quran, between God and some character in the Book, and between characters themselves. The first category forms the population of of this study.

Among the first category of RQs that represent interaction between God and Quranic reader, defined on structural criterion, there are 541 Yes-No RQs out of which 31 share exactly

similar construction in their beginning. They contain a question particle 'ā' (أ) combined with negative particle 'lum' (لم), and the combination is followed by 'tra' (تر) or 'trao' (ترو). The whole phrase is translated as 'Are Thou not aware', the second person pronoun is used to show that the utterance is addressed to every individual member of the community who are the overt or the implicit addressees of the text. Another special feature of these RQs is their reference to a past event which is either well-known or should be well-known to the direct or implied addressees. One important strategy for increasing the involvement of the reader, Quranic rhetorical questions use second person grammar. The use of second person in the rhetorical question creates a dialogical assumption and evokes a situation of interpellation of the reader (Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2003). Such questions with their direct call to the reader not only influence their thoughts and emotion but also invite them to align with the Speaker's assertions. Therefore, we have taken such RQs as the sample of the study. Moreover, the study of differences in their illocutionary force can offer significant insights to how pragmatic meaning are influenced by the content and the context of the question.

Data Collection

Using the search tool in the android application named Islam 360, all the instances of the sample questions in the original Arabic text have been found. Translations of the collected verses containing the sample structures have been taken from Asad (2003).

Data Analysis

Both research questions were answered by qualitative analysis. Locution of each sample utterance is followed by a variety of illocutions. However, considering strategies used for engendering readers' active involvement, it has been shown how the sample questions show similarities and differences in the aspects defined and described in the theoretical framework.

Outcomes

The study shows that the sample questions serve a wide variety of communication functions with their implicit and indirect illocutionary force. In their illocution, they act as assertions, reproaches, warnings, commands, suggestions, recommendations, invitations, reminders, exhortations and protests. All the sample questions are closely interconnected in their power to arouse readers' attention to some eternal truths hidden in daily human activities, natural objects familiar to the hearers, universal natural phenomena, past encounters of particular characters and historical events. For emotional arousal of the readers, the sample questions employ a variety of strategies, but the strategies are chosen from a shared set of effective discursive tools that trigger readers to reach conclusions more spontaneously. The use of vivid sensual, temporal and/or spatial imagery within the content of the question invites the readers to fill in the gaps in implicit meanings and thus raises their illocutionary force.

6. Data Analysis

There are 33 sample rhetorical questions which form an appreciating number. They are found in 17 different chapters (Suras). They show close interconnection with one another in inducing readers' involvement through inviting them to reconstruct meaning because they create implicit and gap filling situation.

Seven (07) rhetorical questions have been analyzed in this paper. The rest of the 26 rhetorical questions are analyzed separately.

The analysis starts with the first instance of the sample rhetorical question and ends on the last utterance. Discussion on different salient illocutions of the utterance precedes the description of strategies for the enhancement of readers' active emotional involvement.

‘ART THOU NOT aware of those who forsook their homelands in their thousands for fear of death whereupon God said unto them, "Die," and later brought them back to life (Asad, 2003)? (2:243)’

Locution: There were a people whose fear of physical death caused their moral death.

Illocution: God is reproaching the people that showed negligence to moral laws. Instead of fighting back the hostile attack by the oppressor, they apparently saved their life by running away. However, they showed little awareness of what constitutes true faith and physical death was more terrifying experience to them than the loss of sense of the faithful community. God asserts that fighting in God’s cause requires strong faith among the faithful in moral principles. The first sign of such moral strength in them is that they have no fear of physical death. God recommends to the readers that they should develop moral courage of such a high degree that laying their life for a just cause becomes more valuable to them than to run for life on the occasion when aggression hits their community.

The Speaker refers to an important historical event in which particular characters are involved. Instead of providing more detail, brevity is preferred because the event is already well known to the addressee. Moreover, the utterance is marked with low intensity of feelings, though vivid sensory, temporal and spatial imagery has been employed. The question with its disputed propositional content challenges the readers’ point of view.

‘ART THOU NOT aware of those elders of the children of Israel, after the time of Moses, how they said unto a prophet of theirs, "Raise up a king for us, [and] we shall fight in God's cause"? Said he: "Would you, perchance, refrain from fighting if fighting is ordained for you (Asad, 2003)?" (2:246)’

Locution: There were elders of Israel who promised to fight in God’s cause, but when the situation arose, they betrayed their ideals.

Illocution: God is admonishing the Jews for their failure to fight back their enemies’ repeated aggression even when they were ordained to do so. They are also being accused of cowardice and irresoluteness that brought moral lethargy. They are being rebuked for betraying the ideals given to them by their prophets; they forgot that fighting back the aggression against their community was synonymous with fighting in God’s cause — an act of true faith. God is reminding the Muslim community that the strength of nations and communities is determined by their will to overcome the fear of physical death.

In this utterance also, the Speaker refers to an important historical event in which particular characters are involved. However, contrary to the previous question where there was less detail, this question portrays the situation in more detail so that the addressees may recollect the event. Moreover, the utterance marked with high intensity of feelings and vivid sensory, temporal and spatial imagery provides a contrast with the previous one. In the question, the Speaker chooses disputed propositional content so that the readers’ point of view is put to challenge.

‘ART THOU NOT aware of that [king] who argued with Abraham about his Sustainer, [simply] because God had granted him kingship? Lo! Abraham said: "My Sustainer is He who grants life and deals death." [The king] replied: "I [too] grant life and deal death!" Said Abraham: "Verily, God causes the sun to rise in the east; cause it, then, to rise in the west!" Thereupon he who was bent on denying the truth remained dumbfounded: for God does not guide people who [deliberately] do wrong (Asad, 2003). (2:258)’

Locution: There was a king who tried to outwit Abraham with a superficially rational argument that his powerfulness was quite parallel to God’s. He claimed that he also had the power to

grant life and death to anyone he liked. However, Abraham revealed the emptiness of his claim of being powerful like God by challenging him cause the sun to rise in the west. Confronted with this challenge, the opponent of Abraham became dumbfounded.

Like the previous utterance, the present utterance also refers to an important encounter between two historical figures: Abraham, a venerated prophet, and Namrood, a king who was the main antagonist in Abrahamic world view. Contrary to both previous questions, this question portrays the encounter with more detail by reporting not only their stance but also their arguments to support their world view. Moreover, the utterance is marked with remarkably high intensity and with vivid sensory, temporal and spatial imagery. In this question also, the Speaker has chosen disputed propositional content so that the readers voluntarily agree to His point of view.

Illocution: God challenges the authoritarian rulers who do not believe to be accountable to Supreme Authority for their actions. Such rulers deliberately befool their subjects with their so-called smart plans of common welfare, and thus, insist on doing wrong. God asserts His power to grant life and death and to control the regular natural phenomena like the rising and the setting of the sun causing the alteration of day and night. God is advising the readers to remember His sovereign power and beware of Machiavellian tactics of totalitarian community leaders or national and global rulers who stubbornly reject God's sovereignty. 'ART THOU NOT of those who have been granted their share of revelation [aforetime]? They have been called upon to let God's writ be their law - and yet some of them turn away [from it] in their obstinacy (Asad, 2003). (3:23)'

Locution: The Jews and the Christians were given revelation similar to the Quran and were ordained to implement the Laws of the Book as the law of the land, but they did not obey God.

Illocution: God reminds the Jews and the Christians to obey the commands given to them and the laws sent to them through their prophets. God reprimands the Jews and the Christians for their repeated violations of the Divine laws which were revealed to their prophets. God is suggesting to the Muslims that they should implement the Divine law in their lands.

In continuation of previous reproachment of the Jews and the Christians, this utterance also admonishes them for their failure to implement the Divine law. However, the question does not involve particular character, though it refers to the irresolute nature of two communities. Moreover, the utterance is marked with low intensity of feelings, and vivid sensory, temporal and spatial imagery is also not as salient as in the previous ones. In the question, the Speaker chooses disputed propositional content so that the readers' the readers' point of view is put to challenge.

'ART THOU NOT aware of those who, having been granted their share of the divine writ, now barter it away for error, and want you [too] to lose your way (Asad, 2003)? (4: 44)'

Locution: Though the Jews and the Christians were also given the Divine law similar to the Muslims, they want to lead the Muslims astray as they themselves have done by not benefitting from it.

Illocution: God reminds the Muslims of their duty to be faithful to the Divine law. God protests that the Jews and the Christians were not only oblivious of their own commitment to their prophets but also jealous of the Muslims for their unwavering faith to the Divine law. God exhorts the readers to benefit from the Divine law by implementing it in its word and spirit.

This question also refers to the past behaviour of the Christian and the Jews, though there are no particular characters. Moreover, it is less detailed. Marked with high intensity of

feelings, the utterance relies more on vivid sensory, temporal and spatial imagery. The propositional content of the utterance is disputed status of Divine law.

‘ART THOU NOT aware of those who consider themselves pure? Nay, but it is God who causes whomever He wills to grow in purity; and none shall be wronged by as much as a hair's breadth (Asad, 2003). (4: 49)’

Locution: The Jews and the Christians declare themselves as the specially favoured people. They have forgotten that it is only faithfulness to the Divine law that brings people closer to God.

Illocution: God admonishes both the Jews and the Christians for relying more on their so-called affiliation with their prophets than on the observance of the Divine law in their day-to-day life. God advises the Muslims to always remember that the success defined by God totally depends on showing whole-hearted commitment to the Divine law. God asserts that the observance of the Divine law was equally beneficial for different communities, and man's susceptibility to Shirk often leads him astray. Instead of following the commands of one Supreme Authority, they start ascribing Divine powers to deities other than God, and often fall victim to moral lapses which ultimately prove disastrous to the community.

In this question also, the Speaker refers to the past behaviour of the Christian and the Jews without focusing on particular characters. Moreover, it is more detailed than the earlier one. Marked with high intensity of feelings, the utterance relies more on vivid sensory, temporal and spatial imagery. The propositional content of the utterance is disputed resurrection.

‘ART THOU NOT AWARE of those who, having been granted their share of the divine writ, [now] believe in baseless mysteries and in the powers of evil and maintain that those who are bent on denying the truth are more surely guided than those who have attained to faith (Asad, 2003)? (4:51)’

Locution: Utterly oblivious of the true teachings sent to them in the form of Divine books, the Jews and the Christians, under the spell of fanciful thinking and superstitious beliefs, are supporting those who are fighting to vanquish the Islamic faithful community of Medina.

Illocution: God admonishes both the Jews and the Christians for forgetting the true teachings of their religions, and indulging in fanciful thinking and superstitious beliefs that lead to depravity and fall. Instead of developing spiritual affiliation with the Muslims who are fighting to establish the power of moral values in the society, they are supporting anti-Muslim community who, blind in their love for material interests, have forgotten the Abrahamic religion of their forefathers. God accuses the anti-Muslims community that they have forgotten the moral values preached by Abraham and his successor prophets. They are being criticized for their blind worship of immediate benefits. Moreover, they are being reminded that their claims for human welfare were nothing more than mere fanciful thinking because their actions are motivated by superstitious beliefs that can never bring peace and prosperity in the society. God asserts that the non-observance of the Divine law is always motivated by blind love of immediate material benefits. Since such individuals and communities lack true faith in moral values, they start ascribing Divine powers to deities other than God, and often fall victim to moral lapses which ultimately prove disastrous to the community. The Speaker suggests to the hearers that they should guard themselves against the whims of fanciful thinking and susceptibility to evil caused by superstitious beliefs; otherwise, they would meet the same fate

as those who perished because they bent on destroying society by supporting injustice and depravity.

In this question also, the Speakers refers to the past behaviour of the Christian and the Jews, the two communities living with the Muslims at the time of revelation. However, there are no particular characters. Moreover, it is more detailed than even the previous one. Marked with high intensity of feelings, the utterance relies more on vivid sensory, temporal and spatial imagery. The propositional content of the utterance is disputed effect of superstitious beliefs.

7. Conclusion

The study found that the rhetorical questions in the Holy Quran that start with exactly similar syntactic phrase differ in their illocution, and this difference is usually driven by change in the addressee and/or the content of the utterance. The results also demonstrate that the data set shares certain strategies that are used to engender readers' emotional involvement for more profound psychological impact on them.

References

- Asad, M. (2003). *The Message of The Qur'an*. The book foundation.
- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Badameh, M. A. (2003). *The rhetorical question as a discursive and stylistic device in the Quran*. Arizona: Arizona University, USA.
- Bertolet, R. (2017). On the Arguments for Indirect Speech Acts. *Cross Mark*, 533-540.
- Bisriyah, S. (2014). Directive Speech Acts and Wisdom Values in Q.S. Al Mu'min (A A Pragmatics Study). *Journal of Islamic Literature and History*, 59-78.
- Eddin, E. A. (2019). Inconsistent Linguistic Functional Behaviours of Particle *equitirC A :naruQ yloH eht ni* هل. *Aweej*, 66-73.
- Flowers, A. (2022). *The genres of Quranic discourse*. CHICAGO: CHICAGO, ILLINOIS.
- Fogal, D., Harris, D. W., & Moss, M. (2018). *New work on speech acts*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Gatti, M. C. (1999). *Negative-rhetorical-figures-and-argumentation*. Cambridge University Library, 125-134.
- Harnish, K. B. (1979). *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*. London: MIT Press.
- Hidayat, I. M. (2009). A Pragmatic analysis of interrogative utterances of english translation. *School of Teacher Training and Education*, 1-7.
- Ilie, C. (1994). *What else can I tell you? A pragmatic study of English rhetorical questions as discursive and argumentative acts*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell.
- Istinah, A. (2011). A pragmatic analysis on interrogative utterances of english translation of KORAN. *University of Muhammadiyah Surakarta*, 1-14.
- J.P, A. M. (2022). Study of Speech Acts of Directive Verses of Command in Qur'an Surah al-Mulk. *Jurnal Studi Al-Qur'an*, 299-312.
- Mardiyah, A. (2022). A speech act analysis of directive in surah abasa. *Universitas Islam Riau*, 1-65.
- Mills, M. H. (1991). The Performance Force of the Interrogative in Colloquial Russian. *American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages*, 98-114.
- Mubarak, F. (2016). A Pragmatics Analysis Of Speech Act In Interrogative Utterances of Surah ul Mulk. *IAIN slatiga*, 1-71.
- Qassem, M. (2020). Translations of Stylistic Variations in the Noble Qur'an into English: Stylistic and Exegetical. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 304-322.
- Raof, H. A. (2000). *The Linguistic Architecture of the Qur'an*. Edinburgh University Press, 37-51.
- Raof, H. A. (2017). *New Horizons in Qur'anic Linguistics*. London: Routledge.
- Raof, H. A. (2019). *Text linguistics of Qur'anic discourse*. New York: Routledge.
- Roskos-Ewoldsen, D. R. (2003). What is the role of rhetorical questions in persuasion. In J. Bryant, D. Roskos-Ewoldsen, & J. Cantor, *Communication and emotion: Essays in honor of Dolf Zillmann* (pp. 297-321). London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Saleh, W. L. (2022). Speech Act Theory in The Noble Qur'an, Surat Al Imran as An. *مجلة در اسات تربية*, 1-17.
- Searle, J. (1969). *An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. London: Oxford University Press.

- Searle, J. R. (1979). *Expression and Meaning – Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*. New York: CAMBRIDGE university press.
- Slater, M. D. (2002). Involvement as goal-directed strategic processing. In J. P. Dillard, & M. P. (Eds), *The persuasion handbook: Developments in theory and practice* (pp. 175-194). London: Sage.