

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

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Abstract

As a sequel to Gul and Ahmed (2024, 2024a), the current paper replicates the previously used method of qualitative analysis to explore illocutionary force of another set of rhetorical questions collected from the Holy Quran that can be interpreted as indirect speech acts. Since the entire data set comprised total thirty-three rhetorical questions that share exactly¹ same syntactic phrase in their beginning, it was divided into three subsets. While in Part-I, we analyzed only first 7 rhetorical questions, we decided to work on subsequent 13 questions in Part II, and now we analyze the last 13 instances. Our current analysis is informed by the methodological considerations and the theoretical underpinning elaborated in Part-I (Gul and Ahmed, 2024). We propose that the rhetorical questions interpreted as indirect speech acts reveal several differences and similarities in their illocutionary force. The findings show that the rhetorical questions perform a wide range of illocutionary acts, but they vary in their performativity when the content of the message, its social context and the addressee of the message change. Moreover, it was also found that there were striking similarities in their application of engaging strategies to impact readers emotionally, thus, amplify not only their persuasive power but also psychological appeal. Apart from a large number of similarities, we have also marked minor differences in their pragmatic metafunctions.

1. Introduction

Abdul-Raof (2019) and Qassem (2020) were prominent in their advocacy for benefitting from the application of linguistic theories popular in English academic world to garner fresh insights from the Holy Quran. One of these theories named Speech Act Theory (SAT) given in Searle (1969, 1979) provides Quranic readership and academic scholars with a relevant micro lens to uncover individually and socially relevant meanings. For this, we present profound communicative function of a specific syntactic structures known as rhetorical questions in literature on pragmatics. It also provides a pragmatic lens to Quranic readership and scholarship for uncovering meanings relevant to their individual and social life.

2. Problem Statement

The role of rhetorical questions in performing a variety of communicative functions is strongly connected with their interpretation as indirect speech acts proposed in Searle (1969, 1979). Since such connection is highly significant in understanding heightened persuasive power of any discourse, the present attempts to establish it through uncovering the illocutionary force of a certain set of rhetorical questions.

3. Research Questions

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- a. What kind of illocutionary acts do the different Quranic rhetorical questions that share exactly same syntactic structure in their beginning perform when readers interpret them as indirect speech acts?
- b. How are the sample rhetorical questions mutually associated in the application of strategies enhancing readers' emotional engagement with the text?

4. Literature Review

Studies (Mubarok, 2016; Flowers, 2022; J.P, 2022; Mardiyah, 2022; Saleh, 2022) have analyzed the different chapters (Suras) of the Holy Quran in the light of Speech Act Theory. Pragmatic functions of different interrogative structures have been investigated by several scholars (Badameh, 2003; Hidayat, 2009; Istinah, 2011; Bisriyah, 2014; Eddin, 2019).

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.

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.

'ARE YOU NOT aware that God has made subservient to you all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth, and has lavished upon you His blessings, both outward and inward?' (Asad, 2003) (31:20).

Locution: God has made everything in the universe subservient to human beings. He has lavishly blessed them, both inward and outward.

Illocution: God reminds human beings of His unfathomable mercy and wisdom visible everywhere. They are exhorted to remember His abundant blessings lavishly bestowed on every individual directly, and His lavishly generous offerings spread everywhere in the universe in the form of natural objects and natural phenomena and be grateful to Him.

With more similarities of this question with others in the data set, in it, the Speaker reminds the hearers of His bountiful blessings on them. Though less detailed than several others, the Speaker's lavish endowments to mankind becomes more emphatic in its effect when the hearers' imagination is aroused with more vivid sensory, temporal and spatial imagery. The propositional content of the utterance combines universal beneficence of God towards human beings with His claim of sovereign authority over the entire universe, thus, setting moral constraints on human role in it.

'Art thou not aware that it is God who makes the night grow longer by shortening the day, and makes the day grow longer by shortening the night, and that He has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each running its course for a term set [by Him] - and that God is fully aware of all that you do?' (Asad, 2003) (31: 29).

Locution: God regulates the length of day and night by making the sun and moon follow His laws. God has full knowledge of what human beings do.

Illocution: First, the Speaker asserts His unequal power and authority over natural objects like the sun and the moon and the natural phenomena of regular and systematic shortening of the day and the night. The assertion of His sovereignty in the universe is followed by the reminder that everything in the universe follows Divine laws. Thus, the hearers are advised to align with the universe through their conscious adherence to moral laws revealed to Prophet Muhammad (Peace and blessings be upon him).

Like several other questions in the data set, in this question also, God asserts His power over the universe for which natural objects are shown as servant to Him. A more

detailed description of how the sun and the moon, two celestial bodies, following Divine laws are busy in serving mankind. The hearers' imagination is inspired by vivid sensory, temporal and spatial imagery. The propositional content of the utterance combines universal beneficence of God towards human beings with His sovereignty in the entire universe, thus, bringing heavy moral responsibility on them.

'Art thou not aware how the ships speed through the sea by God's favour, so that He might show you some of His wonders?' (Asad, 2003) (31:31).

Locution: The speeding ships in the sea are wonderful sign of God's favour to man.

Illocution: The Speaker reminds the hearers of His favours that have led them to reach the special status in the universe. One of these wonderful favours is visible in speeding ships that are the hubs of economic activity and spread joy everywhere by helping people and goods move across the globe.

In the few questions of the data set in which the content is human activity, this question conveys profound message to the hearers how human cooperation serves as a sign of His wonderful favours to mankind. Though the description of how ships as hubs of economic activity lacks detail, the vivid sensory, temporal and spatial imagery has a direct appeal to hearers' imagination. The propositional content of the utterance is characterized by universal beneficence of the Speaker towards hearers. It reminds them their moral responsibility towards God and His creations.

'ART THOU NOT aware that God sends down water from the skies, whereby We bring forth fruits of many hues - just as in the mountains there are streaks of white and red of various shades, as well as [others] raven-black?' (Asad, 2003) (35: 27).

Locution: God sends rain from the sky and the rainwater helps fruits in different hues similar to white, red and raven-black mountains.

Illocution: God reminds human beings of His unfathomable mercy and wisdom that was evident in sending rain from the sky. They are exhorted to be grateful to Him for such generous gift that plays instrumental role in the growth of fruit in countless variety and multitude of hues. They are invited to reflect on the importance of difference in colours visible in different fruits. They are invited to enjoy the blessings purposefully and remember their moral responsibilities that had come to them with their special status in the universe.

'ART THOU NOT aware that it is God who sends down water from the skies, and then causes it to travel through the earth in the shape of springs? And then He brings forth thereby herbage of various hues; and then it withers, and thou canst see it turn yellow; and in the end He causes it to crumble to dust. Verily, in [all] this there is indeed a reminder to those who are endowed with insight!' (Asad, 2003) (39: 21).

Locution: God sends rain from the sky and soon the rainwater takes the form of springs. Vegetation in different hues grow everywhere. Soon they wither and become dust.

Illocution: God reminds readers that His blessing in the form of rain brings boundless benefits to them. Vegetation in abundance grows everywhere, and that too in a variety of colours. Travelling through the earth, rainwater takes the form of springs. However, the vegetation soon withers and becomes dust again. The Speaker reminds the hearers that the societies can flourish and the cultural variety in them can be maintained only if they absorb the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (Peace and blessings be upon him) and follow the heavenly guidance sent to him as final revelation.

'ART THOU NOT aware of how far they who call God's messages in question have lost sight of the truth? (Asad, 2003) (40: 69).

Locution: Those who are doubtful of God's messages have become totally blind to His creativity visible all around.

Illocution: God reproaches those who, in their total blindness to His creative activities, reject His blessings, especially Divine guidance on moral laws important for peaceful functioning of society. In forgetfulness of His favours, and obstinacy in irresponsible behaviour, they are creating doubts on the meaningfulness and relevance of the final revelation sent to Prophet Muhammad (Peace and blessings be upon him).
'ART THOU NOT aware that God knows all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth?' (Asad, 2003) (58: 7).

Locution: God has full knowledge of everything in the universe.

Illocution: God asserts His unequal authority by declaring that He has full knowledge of everything on the land and in the heaven. The Speaker is indirectly warning those who either doubt His sovereign power or violate moral laws believing that nobody knew of their hidden agendas and utter indifference to decency. They are being warned of disastrous consequences of their sinful actions that threaten the very fabric of human society. God reproaches them for their ignorance towards His power.
'Art thou not aware of such as have been forbidden [to intrigue through] secret confabulations, and yet [always] revert to that which they have been forbidden, and conspire with one another with a view to sinful doings, and aggressive conduct, and disobedience to the Apostle?' (Asad, 2003) (58: 8).

Locution: Some people even when they were forbidden to conspire secretly are not refraining from it. Their conspiracies are motivated by evil, aggression or disobedience to Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him).

Illocution: God disparages the people who conspire secretly to spread immorality and/or promote aggression in the society. They are being reprimanded for disobedience to Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him). The Speaker is indirectly warning them they would be punished by Him for their violation of moral laws and spreading evil. They are being reproached for their conspiracies, hidden agendas and utter indifference to decency. Since their evil actions have already been threatening the very fabric of human society, they are being given final warning.

Without focusing on particular characters, in more detailed description, with high intensity of feelings, the Speaker relies on less vivid sensory, temporal and spatial imagery. Hearers' belief that their evil actions will go unnoticed has been challenged.

'ART THOU NOT aware of those who would be friends with people whom God has condemned? They are neither of you [O believers] nor of those [who utterly reject the truth]: and so they swear to a falsehood the while they know [it to be false]' (Asad, 2003) (58: 14).

'ART THOU NOT aware of how those who would always dissemble [their real feelings] speak to their truth-denying brethren from among the followers of earlier revelation: "If you are driven away, we shall most certainly go forth with you, and shall never pay heed to anyone against you; and if war is waged against you, we shall most certainly come to your succour' (Asad, 2003) (59: 11).

Locution: There are people who are neither with the Muslim faithful community nor with those who are fighting against the Muslims. They conspired with the truth-denying community and promised to support them if they wage a war against the Muslims.

Illocution: The Speaker severely reproaches the people who, in their lack of commitment to spiritual life and moral responsibility, are always wavering in their faith. Since their

actions are mainly driven by material advantages, they do not hesitate to develop intimate relations with the enemies of the faithful community. The Speaker accuses them of moral falsehood and disparages them for condemning attitude towards the truth.

Without any particular characters, the Speaker presents human activities as a sign of His favours to mankind. More detailed description, high intensity of feelings, less vivid sensory, temporal and spatial imagery, and disputed propositional content are marked in both the utterances.

‘ART THOU NOT aware how God has created seven heavens in full harmony with one another?’ (Asad, 2003) (71: 15).

Locution: There is harmony in the creation of heavens.

Illocution: While the utterance serves the function of an assertion by the Speaker that there is complete harmony in the creation of heavens, it goes beyond offering a universal proposition that harmony and order is the hallmark of Divine creation. It invites the readers to bring similar harmony and order in their earthly life by obeying Divine revelation coming to them from the heaven.

In the few questions of the data set in which the content is natural harmony in the universe, this question conveys profound message to the hearers how God is beneficent towards human beings. Natural harmony serves as a sign of His wonderful favours to mankind. Though less detailed description of how he maintains harmony in the universe, vivid sensory, temporal and spatial imagery in the utterance has a direct appeal to hearers’ imagination. The propositional content of the utterance is characterized by universal beneficence of the Speaker towards hearers. It invites them to maintain harmony.

‘ART THOU NOT aware of how thy Sustainer has dealt with [the tribe of] ‘Ad,[the people of] Iram?’ (Asad, 2003) (89: 6-10).

‘ART THOU NOT aware of how thy Sustainer dealt with the Army of the Elephant?’ (Asad, 2003) (105: 1).

Locution: God dealt a heavy blow to the tribe of ‘Ad and the Army of the Elephant.

Illocution: The Speaker seeks to establish consensus with the hearers by appealing to recognize historically known events or phenomena. The first refers to the destruction of the entire tribe who were famous for their architectural designs. In the second, the Army of Abraha, a Christian viceroy of Yemen, who invaded Mecca in 570 AD to demolish the Kabah. The hearers are invited to quit hubris and surrender to one God Who has absolute power and authority over the entire universe and the transgressors cannot escape His punishment.

With particular character, less detailed description, high intensity of feelings, less vivid sensory, temporal and spatial imagery, and disputed propositional content of God’s complete control over the universe, the utterance invites the hearers to surrender to His power.

Conclusion

Convergent with the results of previous studies in the sequel, the current papers also shows that the Quranic rhetorical questions, even when they share exactly similar syntactic patterns in their beginnings widely differ in their illocutionary force, and the change of the message addressees and/or the message content are motivating factors for the difference proposed in the paper. The findings also corroborate the idea that God as Speaker of the rhetorical questions employs a variety of strategies for enhancing the Quranic readers’ emotional involvement and increasing the psychological impact of text on them.

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