

Typology of Rhetorical Questions as a Stylistic Device in Writing

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the use of rhetorical questions (RQs), a stylistic device often not recognized as such. The problem of reading and writing in a second language in Nigeria and also using different styles apart from the conventional style are examined. The paper also focuses on the impact any stylistic choice has on the reader. Specifically, it examines style and the concept of the RQ as well as identifying typology of RQs (about 8 different types), their characteristics and instances of overlap, their purposes and functions in newspapers and other forms of discourse. The idea is to highlight reasons why teachers and writers should spice up and embellish the variety of styles available for use and also point out to readers and writers which types of RQs have been used as well as the purposes, objectives and the writer's intention in using that particular style. The paper also looks at the sociocultural and extra linguistic contexts of the use of the RQ on the Nigerian literary scene. The typology is presented in tabular form and each type is discussed with examples. The implications of the use of this stylistic device are pointed out for teachers, students, readers and writers.

Key Words: *Style, Stylistic device, Typology, Media messages*

Research Problem

The problem of some Nigerian writers probably stem from the fact that they think first in their first language (L1) and then interpret these thoughts in English before writing them down. In the process of codification, some words, thoughts, feelings and ideas might become either over-emphasized, or under-played, or not even used at all as posited by Adeyanju (1978) and Uyo (1996). Since English is a second language in Nigeria and the level of proficiency in it is generally low due to limited grammatical resources, Nigerian users of English invariably misunderstand some words and expressions. It is probably in the same vein that Crystal and Davy (1969, p.174), label newspaper language as "journalese", and they note that "*many newspapers now try to tailor the content and style of their reports to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse and inquisitive audience*".

These variables – writer's intention, variations in newspaper language, jargon/"journalese", L1 interference, and the word as an instrument of social dynamics, constitute interpretation problems to the Nigerian newspaper reader. Thus, for the media worker/commentator or journalist who is entrusted with the task of forming public opinion through its journals, good command of the language is primary to understanding and interpreting media messages. This is where the Rhetorical Question (RQ) as a stylistic option comes in. The Nigerian newspaper reader may not be adequately equipped in terms of skills of understanding and correctly interpreting media messages where the RQ is used as a form of literary comment, as a result of the shortcomings identified here. It then becomes imperative that readers are taught and guided, right from school, on how to effectively utilize this stylistic device that has been largely under-utilized.

Style

Due to experiential differences, the way one individual uses language differs, sometimes significantly, from that of another even when they are talking about the same thing. The way a writer presents his message to his readers is often referred to as the 'style' of that writer. This is what has become Comte Buffon's celebrated "*Le style est l'homme meme*. (The style is the man). Style expresses character. Jesus said "*I am the Light of the World*". "*I and the Father are one*". Julius Caesar, the hero and title of one of Shakespeare's tragedies, refers to himself in the third person:

*Who is it in the press that calls on me?
I hear a tongue shriller than all music,
Cry 'Caesar.' Speak; Caesar is turn'd
to hear. (Act I Scene I).*

Style could be the language habits of an individual (Crystal & Davy 1969); a manner of expression (Wales 1991); the totality of one's reading and writing experiences (Oguntuase 1990); alternative ways of expressing the same content (Asher & Simpson 1994); journalistic style; In-House style of a publishing outfit; among others. From the non-linguistic point of view, it could also be an ornament; or the way one does certain things, like wearing a hat/cap, one's particular hairstyle, a corporate style, a way of organizing things, etc. Thus, 'style' can be described as that personal touch that people recognize and which stands you out.

Stylistics, the scientific study of different styles developed as a discipline, from the times of Aristotle. Then, it was called rhetoric - the art of effective argumentation with the view to influencing opinion (Yankah 1994). Systematic and scientific rhetoric was championed by Aristotle and later by Quintillian and Cicero. The Greeks are renowned for their art of public speaking, especially in the area of politics and legislation as some students were made to memorize their speeches and deliver these speeches in court. They celebrated the art of public speaking and some of them were called 'persuaders' since they set out to persuade people to take sides with them. It thus laid the foundation for elegant, sophisticated and polished writing. A Yoruba proverb says "*speech is like an egg, when it drops, it shatters*". Agbese (1987, p.9) put it succinctly: "*the word, written or spoken, is a powerful instrument for social dynamics...*" Akinkugbe & Evo- Philips (2004, p.21) captures it in this expression: "*Words are the instrument with which man wields power... with words man makes things and get things done*".

These scholars all agree that there is power in the word. In politics, religion, business, social and cultural situations, the ability to manipulate the audience by playing on their emotions, usually tells who is an orator and who is not. Basically, any form of literature uses language in depicting ideas, emotions, desires, history, culture, religion, traditions, norms, etc of a people. This content is expressed through language. Thus, we see literature as "what" the writer is saying and language (or stylistic devices) as "how" the writer is saying it. Thus, stylistics identifies the relationship between meaning and the means through which this meaning is produced. Halliday (1994) buttresses this by pointing out that the goal of stylistic analysis is to show why and how a text means what it does.

Rhetorical Questions

Rhetorical Questions (RQs) are as old as language itself, and instances of the use of RQs are found in political speeches (Orwell 1946). RQs have been defined by several scholars such as Beekman & Callow (1976), Cuddon (1979), Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik (1985), Richards, Platt & Weber (1990), Wales (1991), and Yankah (1994) as that question that is structurally the same as any other question but which, usually, is not designed or is not expected to elicit an answer. The main difference, however, is that the RQ is semantically/functionally a statement or claim because the writer is ready to tell his readers the answer, the answer is already known, or nobody, not even the writer, knows the answer. This means that getting an answer to such a question is the desire of every reader/listener. It could also be used to wrap-up discourse in a conclusible statement based on previous discussions or facts presented such as: "What else can I say?" This means I have said all that has to be said.

RQs are equally found in The Holy Bible –in the books of Job, Romans, Galatians, etc. Also, Jesus used a lot of RQs in His teachings: For instance, He told His parents:

*How is it that you sought me? Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business? (Lk 2:49);
and*

Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay, but rather division (Lk 12:5).

The RQ is an assertive, sophisticated and authoritative style frequently used by Jesus to drive home His point:

Whom say the people that I am? (Matt 16:13).

Whom say ye that I am? (Matt 16:15)

In literature, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* exemplifies how RQs are used to achieve different purposes. For instance, Caesar used it to emphasize his personality as unmovable and unshakable as Mount Olympus: "*Hence! Wilt thou lift up Olympus?*" And completely devastated when he saw his most trusted Brutus among those that stabbed him: "*Et tu Brute?- Then fall Caesar.*" (Act III Scene I).

Mark Antony used RQs to charge emotions and to manipulate the audience, even while claiming he had "*come to bury Caesar, not to praise him*" and that he was not an orator:

*...I am no orator, as Brutus is, For I have neither wit nor words nor worth, Action, nor utterance,
nor the power of speech, To stir men's blood: I only speak right on; I tell you that which you
yourselves know; Show you sweet Caesar's wounds, poor poor dumb mouths, And bid them
speak for me... Did this in Caesar seem ambitious? ... You all did love him once, not without
cause. What cause withholds you then to mourn for him? ... Here was a Caesar! When comes
such another?*

(Act III Scene II)

Also, Marcus Brutus expresses his feelings of outrage to Caius Cassius who was accused of collecting bribes:

Remember March, The ides of March remember:

*Did not great Julius bleed for justice' sake? What villain toucht his body, that did stab. And not
for justice?... Shall I be frighted when a mad man stares?*

(Act IV Scene III)

Functions of RQs

RQs appear in both written and spoken language, therefore, it follows that they serve different functions, which include: (i.) Rhetorical functions: where they are used basically to charge emotions, to express strong feelings of outrage, vehement indignation, jolt readers/listeners out of a state of complacency/stupor, etc (ii.) Stylistic functions: it may be used to embellish one's writing as it provides variety in writing style and equally creates a break from the conventional writing format/style. (iii.) Persuasive functions: here the RQ indirectly helps in forming or even changing an opinion as well as in stimulating arguments by presenting issues, sometimes directly to the audience. The foremost advantage of this device in language use in communication is that an avenue for personal interaction is opened/created between the writer/speaker and the listener/reader than one would find in conventional straightforward sentences. (iv.) Grammatical function: is found in thematic focusing or referential prominence in a text. Thematic focusing refers to "the peg on which the message is hung". Other grammatical devices for thematic marking include word order, passive construction, cleft and relative constructions.

Sociocultural and extralinguistic contexts of the use of RQs in Nigeria

Language is a reflection of cultural identities and conventions and it is enclosed in an interconnected triangle, along with culture and the society. It is thus an integral part of culture. Cultural identities are defined and described by the writer's/speaker's ability to activate the cultural, social and linguistic resources available to produce meaningful texts that are mutually understood by both parties. The language and theme of the text gives it the identity it carries based on cultural institutions, norms and values.

The linguistic identity of the writer is exemplified by his social, cultural, religious, political and even his ideological choice of words, expressions, style of writing, the message he is trying to pass across, and the contextual situation at the time the text was written, among other variables. These constitute the extralinguistic contexts of the text.

It has been argued that “the meaning” produced from a text is determined in part by the contextual frame within which the text is placed (Street, 1994: 19). Readers make meaning out of what they read but there are experiential/maturation factors such as their level of competence in that language, their social positions, previous encounters with similar texts and similar or relevant situations, their cultural/historical backgrounds and their level of individual creativity. The contextual situation refers to the context of the situation in which the RQ was used in exhibiting any of the 8 characteristics/purposes.

Typology of Rhetorical Questions

Several types of RQs have been identified in the literature (See Cuddon 1979; Quirk et al 1985, Aioye Omojuwa 2004). These have been further investigated and improved upon and some will be discussed here:

- Some RQs appear as titles of books, articles, TV and radio programmes, etc. For instance:
 - *Who wants to be a millionaire?* (TV Programme).
 - *Who's Afraid of Tai Solarin?* (Title of a book).
 - *What are they celebrating?* (Title of an editorial).
 - *When will fuel scarcity end?* (Title of an editorial).

This type highlights / focuses on / gives prominence to a (new) subject / topic (especially at the beginning of discourse) which will be explained later or the answer is known to the audience. Usually, such RQs lead to further discussion on the subject or topic.

- Sometimes an RQ is self – addressed as found in these songs:
 - *Se mí náà rèé, Olúwa?* (Yoruba language for ‘could this be me, Lord?’).
 - *What shall I say unto the Lord? (I cannot thank God enough for everything). All I have to say is ‘thank You, Lord’.*

An RQ can be used as a way of making a point:

Where do you think you are going?
Ina zuwa? (Hausa language for ‘where do you think you are going?’)
Nji wa? (Hausa language for ‘says who?’)
How does that concern you? (This does not concern you, or stay out of this).

Some are declaratory and may become idiomatic expressions:

Who cares? (I don't care).
How should I know? (I don't know).

An RQ frequently provokes thought and encourages reflection within the reader/listener. It may equally serve as self – assessment/evaluation. The writer/speaker speculates aloud, and is allowed to probe the readers’ minds and also expose the writer’s level of understanding:

Can this work? (It will not work).
Can I achieve the same result? (I doubt if I will achieve the same result).

- Some RQs sometimes deny or make assertions:
 - Why are you so wicked? (You are very wicked).*
 - How could you think I did it? (You were wrong to think I did it).*
- An RQ may be a command:
 - Do I make myself clear? (I am stating this clearly).*
 - Will you shut up? (Just shut up!).*
- Some are used in response to a previous statement or question. Such RQs express strong feelings of displeasure and usually, they confirm/reinforce an already expressed view:
 - Q: She didn't greet you?*
 - A: Me? Who am I that she should greet me?*
 - Q: You mean Mary saw you and didn't stop to say hello?*
 - A: Why should she?*

- Still, some rarely produce logical answers. They are presented as antithetical because they exhibit some of life's self – contradictions. They are axiomatic because they are already accepted as the norm. These are called “empty” RQs:

- (i) *Why are they called apartments when they are already stuck together?*
- (ii) *Why do fat chance and slim chance mean the same thing?*
- (iii) *Why is it called TOOTH brush when you brush all of your teeth?*

A rhetorical question is often an effective tool for cross examination, particularly in law courts where they suggest what the answer should be, along with being a declaratory statement. This style of questioning is usually employed in court, with questions like, “You saw the accused at the scene of the crime, didn't you?” In this case, the RQ is a leading question.

Sometimes, an RQ serves as a thought provoking gesture or a way to stimulate discussion. Such RQs occur frequently during debates, especially political debates. For example, “How corrupt is the government?” is a rhetorical question. This question does not really have a concrete or measurable answer; the answer is based on individual opinion. Yet, such questions are quite capable of inspiring thought and further debate.

Table 1: Typology of Rhetorical Questions

S/N	Rhetorical Questions	Type	Characteristics/Purposes
1	a. Who are these fraudsters? b. How daring can criminals be? c. When will fuel scarcity end?	A Evaluation, Functionally, it could be a claim, a leading question.	Express/provoke anger, astonishment, disappointment, ridicule or outrage. Sometimes supports already expressed views. Work up emotion. Sometimes functions as a claim. Can influence further thought/ideas which express fear, anxiety or worry.
2	“...What is going to happen to Daniel Kanu and his YEAA.What becomes of the Abacha soap, the Abacha sandals and the Abacha TV? What will be YEAA's next line of action? What becomes of the other youth movements and associations which were set up for the sole purpose of ensuring the alleged self-succession bid of the late Gen. Abacha?... What is going to happen to Arthur Eze who allegedly declared he would emigrate from Nigeria if Abacha did not become president in the next dispensation? What is going to happen to Arthur Nzeribe who propagated the idea of the indispensability of Gen. Abacha with messianic drive?... And what about the traditional rulers nationwide whose entire lives are woven around the self-succession bid? Is it all over? Just like that?...”	B Series of RQs in quick succession	“Litany” of questions which usually require complex replies. They express strong emphasis; weighty ideas/emotions; a sense of bewilderment, and strong feelings of outrage. Such RQs usually form a paragraph or a concept. Inherent contradictions are highlighted and reduced to virtually nothing. These jolt the reader out of a state of complacency, boredom and stupor and they express stronger and more vehement indignation. This means that the strong feelings expressed here are amplified by the profusion and or repetition of the RQs. (YEAA means ‘Youths Earnestly Ask for Abacha’, Nigeria's former Head of State, now deceased, who ‘succeeded’ Chief Ernest Shonekan, Head of the Interim Government after the June 12 debacle).
3.	“Do you think I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division, for henceforth in one house there will be five divided, three against two...”	C Highlight a new subject especially at the beginning of discourse.	To give prominence to the new subject/topic so that people can realize its importance. Used in debates,developing/stimulating an argument or raise issues for discussion.
4	Can this system work? After the storm, what happens?	D Debating, Arguing or Questioning oneself as though	Allows you to speculate aloud, probes your readers' minds, exposes your level of understanding, and helps you expose potentials that are open to amendments. Used in pleas.

		in doubt	
5	<p>Q : "He didn't greet you?" A: "Me? Little me?" Q: "Ola saw you and didn't stop to say, hello?" A: "Why should he?"</p>	<p>E Response to a previous question</p>	To express strong feelings of displeasure, sometimes supports an already expressed view. Confirms/reinforces an already expressed view.
6.	<p>a. Why is it called a "building" when it is already built? (b) Why does an alarm clock "go off" when it begins to ring? (c) Why does your nose run and your feet smell?</p>	<p>F Empty RQ's</p>	They are presented as antithetical, because they exhibit some of life's self-contradictions. They are axiomatic because they are already accepted as the norm. These hardly provide sensible answers.
7.	<p>One of the more bizarre episodes of the period was the widely publicised flogging of Minere Amakiri, a reporter... <u>His crime</u>? He ruined the governor's birthday by reporting factually...</p>	<p>G A question that is immediately answered</p>	Reasoning aloud where questions are asked and the same are immediately answered. To chide, express grief or inveigh against something or somebody
8.	<p>Will you shut that door? Do I make myself clear?</p>	<p>H Command</p>	Express the speakers' preference, anger/criticism especially in unpleasant situations. It also helps to intensify a corresponding comment or request.

Sources: 1 a & b Newspaper Editorials. 2. Ehusani, 2000; 3. KJV Bible; 4. Common examples in normal everyday conversation; 5. Enahoro, 1992; 6. Why ask why? Rudy@hiwaay.net; 7 Dare, 1985; 8. Normal conversation.

Discussion and Implications for language teaching

From Table 1, Type A is especially effective at the beginning of discourse to either evaluate or make affirmations. Type B, presents a series of RQs in quick succession which express weighty ideas and strong emphasis that are meant to jolt readers, make a self-examination and also look inwards. Type C gives prominence to a new topic especially at the beginning of discourse and is mostly used in developing arguments. Type D helps expose potentials that are open to amendments by allowing one to speculate aloud. Type E usually confirms or reinforces an already expressed view. Type F is completely different. Because they hardly provide sensible answers, they are called 'empty RQs'. Then, Type G is immediately answered because the writer is ready to tell the readers why he is expressing bitterness against something or somebody. Finally, Type H is a command which expresses anger or criticism in unpleasant situations. Clearly, there are instances of overlap.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the language teacher must expose the students to the different possibilities of stylistic usage by showing them not only what the RQ is, but also how it works, how it can be used effectively and the effects it is likely to have on readers or listeners. The reader is allowed to peep as it were, into the sociocultural environment in Nigeria through some of the sample texts in Table 1. Furthermore, knowledge of the typology of RQs provides the much-needed refreshing, succinct, polished, elegant, sophisticated and authoritative alternatives to conventional writing. Finally, it makes reading and/or writing pleasurable.

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the specialized stylistic device known as the rhetorical question from an interdisciplinary perspective. It equally focused on types and functions of RQs as well as its contribution to meaning in media messages. The samples were picked from among the writings of prolific writers. The framework for the typology itself is easily replicable. It is therefore clear that from this study, a theory of rhetoric has emerged, which not only looks at how to write, read and interpret media lan-

guage but provides the theoretical platform on which any form of meaningful text, particularly RQs, can be analyzed. Thus, this study has highlighted the complexity, diversity and dynamics of language use, as it showcases the writers' feelings about topical issues in Nigeria today.

English is a global language which must be written to meet the norm of publicness. Language is the nucleus of communication and it will continue to be used in different conceivable ways in uni – or interdisciplinary studies. Since communication efficiency has become imperative due to globalization processes, one thing is certain: the power and politics of using RQs rests with the writer/speaker who wants to speak authoritatively, emulate prolific writers, make a forceful statement, spice up and embellish write-ups and even make an impact. For if the message does not make an impact, wherein lies the purpose of that message?

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