

The pragmatic potential of rhetorical questions in English informal speech

Ikhsanova Lina Ilgizovna

Ufa Law Institute of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation

Abstract. *This article deals with the questions with a pragmatic meaning as their primary one. The pragmatic meaning can be identified as an additional meaning implied by the speaker and which can be extracted when taking into consideration both linguistic and extralinguistic contexts.*

Keywords: *rhetorical question, speech acts, indirect speech act.*

Nowadays there is the tendency of modern linguistics to study sentences as multifaceted syntactic units. Different sentences besides their direct meaning may express some implicit or indirect meaning. Understanding the motives behind utterances is often crucial to successful communication. Interrogative sentences are means of language which serve to extract information as they demand an answer from the interlocutor. However, there can be the questions that may not require an answer and thus, implicate another communicative goal.

In the core of the traditional theory of speech acts are the ideas represented by the English logician J. Austin. Speech act is an act of communication. To communicate means to express a certain attitude, and the type of speech act being performed corresponds to the type of attitude being expressed. As an act of communication, a speech act succeeds if the audience identifies, in accordance with the speaker's intention, the attitude being expressed [1, pp. 96-97]. Speech acts can be expressed directly or indirectly, by way of performing another speech act, literally or nonliterally, depending on how we are using our words, and explicitly or implicitly, depending on whether we fully spell out what we mean.

Interrogative sentences are sentences in which the speaker's strive for learning or verifying something is expressed with the help of special language means. Interrogative sentences may express meaning that is usually expressed by non-interrogative sentences, for instance, request, order, advice, etc.

Rhetorical questions are rather various on their functions and thus, represent special interest in the aspect of pragmatics. A rhetorical question is an illocutionary act that has the direct illocutionary force of a question, and is not generally used with the expectation of an answer but with some different, indirect force, such as a command, a tentative statement, and an evaluation [2, p. 67].

The following indirect speech acts can be found in rhetorical questions.

1) The illocutionary force of getting confirmation:

"Damn, isn't married life great?" [4, p.71];

"Funny world, huh?" [3, p. 78].

The speaker expresses his/her opinion about some fact, but does it indirectly.

2) The illocutionary force of a complaint:

"I tried so hard and look what happened. I can't even keep a stupid houseplant alive. I mean, how hard is that? All you need to do is water the damn thing. If I can't even keep a plant alive, how am I ever going to keep a baby alive?" [4, p. 104];

"How could I have been so blind to have let you go...?" [5, p. 90].

Explicitly, the complaint may be realized through another illocutionary act of reproach. The above examples illustrated self-reproach. The most common structural patterns for self-reproach implication of a rhetorical question in English are *"How could/can/am I do smth?"* and its conditional mood variant *"If I can't do smth, how am/ can I do smth"*.

The reproach can be also directed at the interlocutor or other people:

"What on earth were you thinking?" [4, p. 128].

3) The illocutionary force of a refusal:

"I think we need to spice the name up a little."

"What are you talking about?" she asked. "We both love it." [4, p. 92].

This illocutionary force is aimed at refusing to carry out some action that was offered in the previous utterance of the interlocutor.

4) The illocutionary force of a persuasion:

"Let's say we want to enter him in competitions," I said. "Have you ever seen a champion dog with just one name? They always have big long titles, like Sir Dartworth of Cheltenham." [4, p. 98].

The illocutionary force of a persuasion is aimed at proving the truth of the speaker's opinion or the falsity of the interlocutor's point of view.

According to the type of illocutionary acts expressed by rhetorical questions, they can be specified as expressives and directives. Expressives reflect a psychological state of the speaker. Directives are the speaker's attempt to get the addressee to do something.

Thus, the pragmatic potential of questions in English language consists in their possibility to express different speech acts that are originally expressed by other types of sentences.

References:

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