

# Rhetorical Questions and Scales

Just what do you think constructions are for?

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International Conference on Construction Grammar 4, 2006  
Tokyo University, Japan

# Outline

- 1 Easy Rhetorical Questions
  - Definition
  - Types of rhetorical questions
  - Generalizations
- 2 A New Type of Rhetorical Question
  - Wrong-opinion
  - With gradable adjectives
  - With “what” and “who”
- 3 Tentative tidbits
  - Apokoinou and/or continuations
  - Insults and criticism
- 4 Conclusions

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# Intuitive definitions

For now, a basic definition will suffice. A rhetorical question is:

- An utterance that takes the form of an interrogative, but
- does not primarily act as an information-seeking question

What does this mean?

Many sorts of indirect speech will be called rhetorical questions. Here is a short tour.

# Assert-the-opposite

Assert-the-opposite rhetorical questions, described by Sadock (1974) as **queclaratives**, and analyzed in detail by Han (2002) contain implicit negation.

## Example

- Did I tell you writing a dissertation was easy?
  - no
- What has Sam ever done for John?
  - nothing
- So and when other time have I ever done that?
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# Question-for-response

Rhetorical questions used as responses to other questions use a question-for-response metonymy. The rhetorical question has an obvious “answer”, which is then taken as being the response to the original question.

## Example

Q: Would you like some cookies? original question

R: Is the Pope Catholic? **obviously, yes**, thus **obviously, I would like some cookies.**

# Specific-answer

The final type of rhetorical question considered in the literature (Ilie 1994) has a specific answer, and this answer is somehow relevant to the surrounding context.

## Example

Q: What company's computer will you buy?

R: Well, what company do I **work** for? I will obviously buy that company's computer.

## Example

Who's in charge here, anyway? You are ((therefore I will do as you say, etc.))

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Rohde (2006) makes three main generalizations regarding these three types of questions:

- 1 They are redundant, i.e., they do not inherently provide new information (though an addressee faced with one can reason from them to arrive at a novel conclusion).
- 2 They are used to reconfirm / synchronize discourse participants beliefs and commitments.
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- 2 They are used to reconfirm / synchronize discourse participants beliefs and commitments.
  - this seems to mean they are often non-confrontational
- 3 They have obvious answers that are (believed by the speaker to be) shared among the discourse participants.

Is there any sort of rhetorical question that does not fit within these generalizations?

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# Wrong-opinion rhetorical questions

## Example

- WH ... SUBJ [{think, suppose, ...} CP]
- How light/heavy do you think it is?
- How smart do you imagine I am?
- What do think they store in there?
- Who does he think he is to come in and take over everything?
- Who do you think I am?

With gradable adjectives

# What does it mean?

## Example

How light do you think this suitcase is?

## The situation

Someone has claimed, **You can certainly lift that suitcase on your own, because it is very light.** The speaker wishes to refute this claim by communicating, **You have obviously misjudged the weight of this suitcase. It is too heavy for me to lift it.** That is what this rhetorical question communicates, and so it can be called the “wrong-opinion” rhetorical question.

With gradable adjectives

# What does it mean?

## Example

How light do you think this suitcase is?

In general:

- There is a claim, 'X has a value of degree  $d$  on a scale, below some **limit**, such that X is able to participate in some event.'
- The speaker wishes to say that X has value of degree  $d'$  such that  $d' > \text{limit} > d$ .
- The speaker uses the wrong-opinion rhetorical question, using the **negatively-biased** adjective: **How light do you think it is?**
- For the opposite case ( $d' < \text{limit} < d$ ), the **positively-biased** adjective **heavy** is used.

With gradable adjectives

# In graphical terms...

## Example

How light do you think this suitcase is?

suitcase

limit



With gradable adjectives

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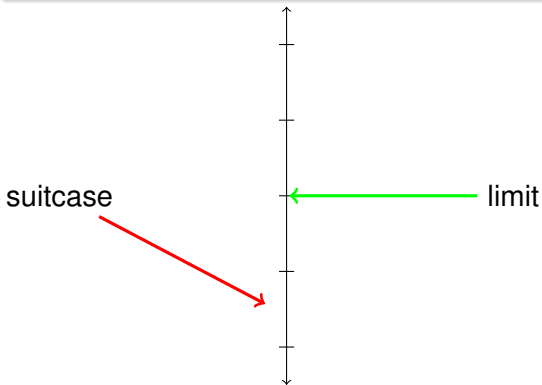
limit

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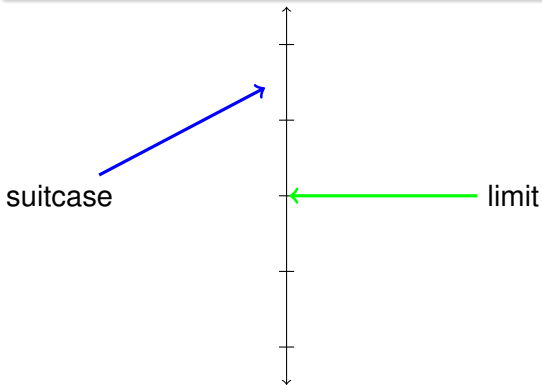


With gradable adjectives

# In graphical terms...

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With gradable adjectives

# The other intonational pattern

## Example

**How** light do you think this suitcase is?

suitcase

limit





With gradable adjectives

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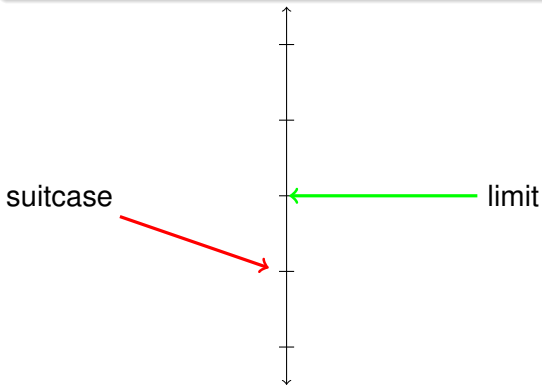
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With gradable adjectives

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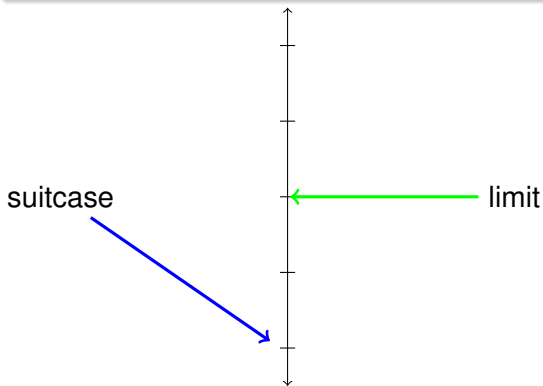


With gradable adjectives

# The other intonational pattern

## Example

**How** light do you think this suitcase is?



With gradable adjectives

# Specifying the construction

## Example

- WH ... SUBJ [{think, suppose, ...} CP]

## Form constraints

- Main-clause non-subject **wh-question**
- Main verb expresses **opinion** (see FN<sup>a</sup> `Opinion` frame).
- Other cognition-related predicators that are not used to express opinion (*suspect, reckon, assume, (be) aware, understand*) are not acceptable.
- #*How light do you assume it is?*, #*Who do you suspect I am?*

<sup>a</sup><http://framenet.icsi.berkeley.edu>

With gradable adjectives

# Specifying the construction

## Example

- WH ... SUBJ [{think, suppose, ...} CP]

## Meaning constraints

- Speaker **criticizes** or **blames** the subject of the main verb, and
- expresses **disbelief** at their wrongly-held opinion.

With gradable adjectives

# Specifying the construction

## Example

- WH ... SUBJ [{think, suppose, ...} CP]

## Intonation

- Stress on the final verb in the subordinate clause.
- (Also stress on opinion-verb.)
- A variation has strong stress on the *wh*-word, with a different meaning.

With “what” and “who”

## What does it mean with *what*?

### Example

What do you think they store in there?

### The situation

Someone has requested the speaker to enter a storage room to do some task. However, she knows that several dangerous items are stored in the room, and knows that her interlocutor ought to as well. She thus objects to the request made of her.

With “what” and “who”

## What does it mean with *what*?

### Example

What do you think they store in there?

### Decoding the message

We can use the same sort of scalar model for this type of question:

- The *wh*-element denotes a set of entities (Rohde 2006).
- They are not inherently ordered in a scale.
- The construction evokes a scale of **danger** over the entities.

Thus: “you think that the items are **d**-dangerous, such that **d** < **limit**. In fact they are clearly **d'**-dangerous, **d'** > limit



With “what” and “who”

## Nature of the scale

### Take note:

- No gradable adjective = no inherent bias in directionality.
- The preceding reading seems most natural, but the opposite implication may be possible, given the right sort of utterance: **You could never handle being in that storage room**
- The same sentence would then assert: you must think the items are ***d***-DANGEROUS, but they are actually ***d'***-DANGEROUS,  $d' < \text{limit} < d$ .

With “what” and “who”

## What does it mean with *who*?

### Example

Who do you think you're dealing with?

### Decoding the message

The process should be familiar by now:

- The *wh*-element denotes a set of people.
- They are not inherently ordered in a scale.
- The construction evokes a scale of some property over the entities.

With “what” and “who”

## What does it mean with *who*?

### Example

Who do you think you're dealing with?

### What property?

This is highly dependant on context. One possibility is again a scale of danger (in the case that the addressee is acting naively in an illegal transaction), or a scale of in the case where the meaning is ‘stop treating me badly’.

*presumed rank* < *social rank requiring polite behavior* < *actual rank*.

With “what” and “who”

## A truly new category?

How do these fit with Rohde’s (2006) descriptions of rhetorical questions.

- Redundant/no new information? Unlikely—consider “who does he think he is?”
- Used to synchronize speaker/addressee beliefs?  
No—these are primarily confrontational and assume a discord between speaker and addressee. Simple confirmation/backchannel seems unlikely.
- Obvious/shared answers? Perhaps—the questioner is assuming that what they are asserting is obvious, and the addressee **should** have been aware of it.

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# Answers to questions

Rhetorical questions can be continued with answers. But there are two types of continuations:

- Who's gonna marry him? No one, obviously!
  - The obvious answer.
- Who's gonna marry him, Lucy?
  - An “incorrect” answer. Something the speaker imagines the addressee might believe is a correct answer; or an extreme example.

# Answers to questions II

Wrong-opinion questions also allow incorrect-answer continuations.

## Example

- Who do you think I am, your father?
- Who do you think we are, Hertz?
- What does he think I am, some kind of entertainer?
- What do you think they sell on this web site? Sushi?

How about. . . (cf. Lambrecht, yesterday)

- Who do you think we're Hertz?

[who] [do you think we're] [Hertz?]

- What do you think they sell **sushi** on this website?

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# Answers to questions III

## Example

- What does he think; I'm some kinda idiot?
- What does he, think I'm some marine friggin' biologist or something?
- Now, who do you think I'm? Your undergraduate student or something?

To what extent can we call these a composition of the wrong-opinion construction plus a continuation?

# Will

The construction acts on a par with lexical constructions used to express criticism or to insult someone.

## Example

- He was a fool to act like that.
- \* He **will** be a fool to act like that.

## Example

- He insulted his boss—who did he think he was?
- \* If he insults his boss, who **will** he think he is?
- He would be a fool to act like that.
- ? If he insults his boss, who would he think he is / would be?

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# Now and beyond

Now...

- Some types of rhetorical questions, particularly confrontational ones, remain to be studied in detail.
- The ability to associate to a particular form pragmatic scales (with and without directional biases), as well as semantic and intonational constraints, is essential in describing these questions.

...beyond:

- Further investigation into the intonation and genuine question-hood of these rhetorical questions.
- Similar constructions in other languages.

Thanks to the organizers (and participants) for a great conference!

Handout and slides (will be) available at:

<http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~rleegold>

# For further reading

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