

## Explaining and Arguing in Negotiation – The Role of Questions\*

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### **Abstract:**

The paper describes questions as a syntactic, semantic and discourse category and reviews research on the processes of question formation, question selection, and question discourse functions. The focus is on questions and their role in the discourse of negotiation, defined as a type of institutional discourse genre. The author analyses examples from an English negotiation transcript and concludes that in negotiation the information checking and argumentative roles of questions prevail and that the different modes of questioning may unravel the relationships among the participants in this type of interaction.

**Keywords:** question function, argumentative genre, discourse function cooperative style

### **Form and function of questions**

Interrogative sentences and questions are terms used to define and describe an important element of conversation and as such have brought about different opinions in the literature. As Tsui (1992) remarks, the problem with defining such structures relies in the fact that syntactic criteria are mixed with semantic or discourse criteria, namely that form and meaning are not clearly separated and that renders inconsistency to the various definitions of questions.

Thus, if we look into most grammars, such as Quirk et.al (1972), R. A. Jacobs (1995) Biber et.al (1999), we find that interrogative sentences are classified into three major categories: yes/no questions (e.g. 1, 2), wh-questions (e.g. 5, 6) and alternative questions (e.g. 3, 4). The basic structure in terms of subject, operator and main verb is given together with examples illustrating each of these three categories. The examples below illustrating these different interrogative forms are from Biber et al.'s *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (LGSWE, 1999) mainly because their examples are based on a corpus of today's English:

- 1) A: Is it Thursday today?  
B: No, Friday. (conv)

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- 2) A: Do you think he'll be any better?  
 B: Maybe. Yeah. (conv)  
 (LGSWE 1999: 206)
- 3) A: Do you want one or two?  
 B: Two. (Conv)
- 4) A: So, do you like my haircut or not?  
 B: It's alright. (conv)  
 (LGSWE 1999:207)
- 5) A: Who told you that?  
 B: My mate Sue. (conv)
- 6) A: Who sent it?  
 B: Guy sent it. (convt)
- (LGSWE, 1999: 205)

Special cases such as tag questions (7, 8) or rhetorical questions (9, 10) are also mentioned together with their structural description.

- 7) She's so generous, isn't she? (conv)  
 8) She's not a lesbian, is she? (conv)  
 (LGSWE 1999:208)
- 9) Who cares?  
 10) How dare you speak to me like that?  
 (LGSWE, 1999: 205)

However, when it comes to the functions played by these questions within discourse, the syntactic criteria prove to be unsuitable for their characterization (Tsui, 1992). Questions have discourse functions that cannot be strictly correlated with their syntactic form. What matters when it comes to these functions is determined by several factors, such as their place in the conversational sequence and in the overall structure of the exchange, the epistemic status of the speaker and addressee, or even the epistemic stance of the respective utterance (Herritage, 2012). Linguists and discourse analysts alike agree “that linguistic features may also perform textual tasks when they contribute to the formation of a coherent text” (Biber et al., 1999: 42). Textual tasks are used to mark information structure and to achieve coherence in a text. Discourse functions of questions can contribute to the achievements of interpersonal relations among participants in a conversation and as such they are part of the cohesive elements of a text or oral discourse. Besides the most commonly mentioned function, i.e. that of seeking information, questions fulfil a host of different tasks: asking for confirmation, seeking agreement, expressing feelings (e.g echo questions express surprise or disbelief), inviting, suggesting, requesting or even giving commands.

Some questions have declarative form but due to their intonation (mostly rising intonation) they are perceived as questions and answered

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by the addressee. A sentence like the one below (11) will be followed by an affirmative answer:

11) H: So, we'll have to fill out one of those forms again.  
(Tsui, 1992: 94)

Therefore, morphosyntactic form is not always the best indicator that a question will follow. Analyzing examples of interrogatives given in Quirk et.al. 1972, Tsui (1992) justly concludes that:

The three major classes of questions that they propose are in fact based on surface form. Even when they do look at the expected response, it is often the form of the expected response that is being attended to rather than the function or the communicative choice realized by the response.

(Tsui, 1992: 101)

Likewise, the literature mentions special cases of questions that cannot be answered – the so-called “unanswerables” (Clayman and Heritage, 2002 quoted in Heritage, 2012), (e.g. *How could you do that?*) or “whimperatives” (e.g. *Why don't you open the window?*) Their discourse function depends on the context. Thus, the “whimperatives” convey instructions in an indirect or more polite manner while “unanswerables” are used to express challenges and accusations. The rhetorical questions can also be included in the class of “unanswerables”, although they do not always express challenges or accusations. In most cases, however, rhetorical questions signal that the speaker expects no answer from the hearer since the answer is provided by the speaker.

Depending on the genre of discourse in which they are to be found, questions may have explanatory or even argumentative value when they introduce standpoints for various arguments. The so-called conducive or biased sentences (Tsui, 1992, Biber et.al, 1999) expressed under the form of interrogatives (e.g. *Won't you have a cup of tea?*) have persuasive value as they try to make the addressee give the preferred answer (in our example the negative interrogative sentence expects a positive answer). These discourse functions support the idea expressed in the literature (Athanasiadou, 1990, Biber, et.al., 1999, Tsui, 1992, Clayman and Heritage, 2002, Heritage, 2012, Bova et.al, 2013) that along with other grammatical and lexical structures, questions show the speaker's commitment to the truth of some proposition or to the reality of some situation.

Questions have been classified by Tsui (1992) in an attempt to find the basic discourse function underlying all of them into four categories of elicitation: *elicit-inform*, *elicit-confirm*, *elicit – repeat*, *elicit – clarify*. These labels have a great degree of generality and capture the basic functions of questions in a verbal interaction, that of expecting some sort of an answer

which depends on various extralinguistic factors, such as the speaker's commitment and attitude, the relationship between the discussants, the type of speech act and genre in which the question is embedded, and so on.

More detailed analyses have been carried out in the field of professional discourse analysis (Herritage, 2012, Fisher, 2013, Martin and Rose, 2007) or psycholinguistics (Boca, 2013) where the discourse functions of questions have been described in a more detailed manner using a generic or conversational analysis approach.

Generic and CA approaches capture and analyse the function of questions within dialogue exchanges or even within moves and stages (e.g. Rose and Martin, 2007) if they use a generic approach. Some studies (e.g. Kearsley, 1976, Bova, 2013, Fisher, 2013, Herritage, 2012) go even further and study question functions within a broader framework of social interaction.

To conclude our brief review on the literature about the form and function of questions we may say that "*a question appears to be a behavioural pattern, and as is as real – but as hard to pin down – as other behavioural pattern: aggressiveness, deference, anxiety or embarrassment* (Bolinger, 1957: 5 cited in Bova, 2013). When analyzing a question, the interaction between a speaker's turn and the environment in which this turn has been produced is important and therefore an accurate analysis can be performed within a framework of a generic approach. Using such an approach, the function of a question can be analysed at several levels- *act- move-exchange* or even *stage/phase*.

### **Defining negotiation as a genre**

The present study aims at discussing the function and form of questions in an instance of negotiation discourse, namely a teachers' meeting in which this type of discourse prevails.

Negotiation as studied in the present paper refers to a genre used in a great variety of communicative events and not to a discursive strategy in which meaning is negotiated by participants in the communicative event (Martin; Rose, 2007).

In order to examine negotiation from the perspective of genre theory, it is first necessary to place negotiation among discourse types. A fundamental classification of discourses is that proposed by Kinneavy (1971) and is based on Jacobson's functions of language. According to Kinneavy's classification, discourses fall in the following categories: reference discourse, persuasive discourse, expressive discourse and literary discourse. Negotiation falls in the category of persuasive discourse as far as its communicative aim is concerned, because during the negotiation process each party tries to persuade the other that his/her standpoint is correct. The

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discourse is focused on the hearer as in any other types of persuasive discourse and tends to achieve an identity between the speaker's and hearer's convictions or emotional attitudes. In the case of negotiation the participants strive for identical views and for the inducement of some action. The process of negotiation is a two-way process of persuasion that results in a change of the state of affairs if the negotiation is successful. The settlement that is usually attained through compromise is more important than a rational, logical resolution that would imply argumentation. Arguments are seen in this context as implicit proposals, potential concessions, rejections or expressions of preference. Arguments become expressions of personal points of view. They indicate the extent to which the negotiators are willing to relinquish their positions.

The analysis of negotiation as an instance of persuasive discourse has been carried out in the present study from a generic perspective. Communication purpose has been nominated as the privileged property of a genre (Swales, 1990). Other properties are form, structure and audience expectations, which together with the purpose identify the extent to which one instance is prototypical of a certain genre (Swales, 1990). Genre analysis allows the analyst to outline the specific and conventional features at the syntactic, semantic and content level, how they are recognized by a discourse community and used in order to achieve specific goals. Therefore the generic analysis highlights a schematic structure at the content and formal level. This approach best suits the highly interactional nature of negotiation, with a focus analysis on the dialogical process-like nature of negotiation.

The interplay between persuasion and conviction, between rhetoric and dialectic is present in most texts that are argumentative and therefore we can find them in negotiations as well. However, here the dialectical aspect seems to prevail and the dialectical structure best illustrates the cognitive pattern behind such texts.

### **Analysis of the transcript**

The corpus analyzed comprises an English transcript<sup>1</sup>, taken from the *Corpus of Spoken Professional American English* (Barlow, M., 2000) and presents a meeting held by an advisory committee with the National Test Panel concerning the contents of maths tests and the rules underlying the production and assessment of such tests (MCM 7/97).

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<sup>1</sup> The transcripts provide no additional information concerning aspects like accent, pauses, and rhythm. These kinds of texts are not originally meant for linguistic analysis, therefore no transcription conventions have been used.

As a preliminary remark upon style, we may say that most speakers in the transcript use mostly an informal style typical for institutionalized language in general; however the general style is that of friendly cooperation among colleagues having equal social status.

The opening stage is very long and elaborate consisting of greetings and a presentation of new as well as known members of the working committee assembled to discuss and decide upon the form of the new tests.

In the present article we focus on the functions played by questions in instances of negotiation, as well as on their various forms- plain interrogatives, declarative statements, and negative – interrogatives.

The interrogative structures are important in negotiation for various reasons. The most important one, stressed by many researchers (Mullholland, 1992, Drew and Heritage 1992 Ochs, Schegloff, Thomson, 1996, etc.) is that the wh -questions establish the issue to be discussed, whereas the yes / no questions usually have a probing function, to establish the degree of knowledge, information or willingness to cooperate of the other negotiating part. On the whole, we can include them in the category of explanatory questions which prepare somehow the introduction of arguments and proposals. The questions in our corpus are not so numerous, but many of them fulfil the same tasks.

What we believe is characteristic for negotiation proper is a tendency for a clear unambiguous language. The speakers frequently use when starting their turns “*So the question is*”/ “*I have a/another question* (7 instances in the meeting we analyzed)<sup>2</sup> or “*Right, in other words*” (12 instances) followed by declaratives rather than interrogatives:

273 <SP> SILVER: I have another question, partially procedural and partially substantive. That is, ... some things about the exemplars – make me very nervous. So I’m thinking about whether – how we – how to agree on the position – with respect to this.

Sometimes questions fulfill the role of comments or simply of turn taking, signalling attention or acknowledging what the previous speaker has said.

MCM 7/97:

30 <SP> BURRILL: Okay. And we also want to welcome Ed Silver, who left the Standard Writing Group. Has been busy writing I suspect, or arguing or talking.

31 <SP> SILVER: All that.

32 <SP> BURRILL: All that? To join us and both kind of keep us posted.

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<sup>2</sup> The MCM7/97 transcript has 43,204 words and 5,442 lines. The part analyzed in the present study, up to the first break, contains 8740 words and 1126 lines.

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Indirect questions like in the example below suggest a shift in the roles of the people, the speaker who is obviously chairing the meeting tries to imply that all the members of the committee have equal status. The shift between *we* and *the committee* indicates that there should be no antagonism among the members and that the speaker is both out and in the group.

82–88 <SP> MANDEL: And so the question is we could sort of guess what you might want to say on those subjects, based on the brief conversations that we had in the past, but we thought it might be good to take a little time and see if we have a clear understanding and agreement around the table about just what the committee's view is on these subjects and how you want to express that.

The conditional sentence in the example above and in many other instances in our corpus<sup>3</sup> can be interpreted as indirect questioning.

Giving the floor is frequently achieved in our transcripts by means of yes/no questions. They function better than a request as a face preserving strategy because they give the impression that the addressee has a choice, to answer or not and has more control and power over the conversation than he actually has. This face-preserving strategy is present in the example below:

102 <SP> BURRILL: Wayne?

10 <SP> MARTIN: Welcome. Thank you for coming back. Thank you for continually working so hard.

Tentative language (*I don't know, I'm not sure, I think*) modal verbs and modality adverbs, hedges, indirect questions, if clauses or declaratives with (presumably) rising intonation, are very frequent in the transcript showing a cooperative collegial type of activity, trying to preserve face for all interlocutors while at the same time introducing critical elements about the issues under discussion

214: I don't know if it is the time to discuss chapter one?

239–244: I'm not sure how I'm supposed to process what's here. Am I supposed to process what's here? Or in a different – a set of problems, the environment from which it's drawn on, in which case I need access to it.

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<sup>3</sup> The analysis we use in the present study is a qualitative one, useful insights can be obtained using specialized software for corpus analysis.

The exchange above (lines: 239–244) starts with an indirect question, in the attempt to reduce tension and is followed by a proper interrogative structure expressed as an alternative question.

Sometimes speakers address a question which is not answered because they go on presenting their standpoint. These instances are very numerous in the transcript and they illustrate the so called *argumentative questions* whose discourse function is to introduce a standpoint in support of a certain argument.

333–339: Are we going to add about the role of this document? My understanding is that an additional document that hasn't been named is that it will be a public document and that that's a very important role in this stage-- I think that's where the examples, the quality control, all of them come into play.

426–427: So what do we want to do? Do we want to get rid of the bold and go back to what it was? No, Pat? Why not?

Questions as in (426–427) signal the points to be discussed on the agenda, they have a clarifying function. However, they seem to be slightly conducive, trying to obtain a negative answer from the interlocutor, an answer desired by the speaker in order to direct the discussion towards how he wants to settle the issue.

Many of the interrogative structures to be found in the transcript part analyzed are straightforward yes/no questions (29 instances in 1126 lines). These types of questions are usually avoided in highly formal institutional genres because they sometimes are felt to be very aggressive. Fisher (2013) finds that yes/no questions are rare in press conferences. They mostly come from aggressive journalists criticizing the official authorities in charge of solving an issue. However, in our cooperative, informal style they are not felt as being aggressive and their role is mainly to check on understanding. This type of questions is common in negotiations, although in more formal encounters they contain various forms of mitigation like hedges or modals (Huțiu, 2007). In negotiations participants always have to check to what extent they have those “common starting points”, how much knowledge and understanding they share and the use of the straightforward interrogative form may be part of a the way of finding out how much the other side knows of the problem that has to be settled upon.

### **Findings and conclusions**

To sum up our present analysis, we may conclude that although questioning has been a frequent communicative activity in our transcript



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it has been carried out in various forms and fulfilled various functions, besides eliciting information.

As far as functions are concerned our transcripts display mostly types of functions: the argumentative and the explanatory function. The argumentative and explanatory functions are defined in Walton, (2004: 72) as the difference between accepting and understanding something. Argumentative questions try to make the listener accept a certain point of view, while explanatory questions simply seek understanding of a phenomenon or state of affairs or position (in the case of negotiations).

Questioning is regarded as central to research on professional discourse. Various types of questions can function as control devices within the workplace discourse during management meetings and social relations.

We believe therefore that the study of question forms and functions in discourse is important during ESP and EAP classes in order to make students aware that various question forms may carry different, more subtle meaning which may depend on the genre type or may signal aspects concerning attitudes, commitments and relationships between discussants.

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