

REAL AND IRREAL INTERROGATIVE SENTENCES IN THE INTERPRETATION OF ENGLISH LINGUISTS: AN ANALYSIS OF PRAGMATIC POTENTIAL AND ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE

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Abstract

This article explores the semantic-syntactic and pragmatic features of real (genuine) and irreal (rhetorical, pragmatic) interrogative sentences in English linguistics. At the core of this research lie the linguistic nature of irreal interrogative meaning and the pragmatic potential of rhetorical questions. Utilizing Speech Act Theory and discourse-analysis methodologies, the study elucidates the asymmetry between syntactic form and communicative function. The findings demonstrate that while real interrogatives aim to fill an epistemic gap, irreal interrogatives transcend traditional questioning to serve as powerful tools for assertion, argumentation, and emotional expression in discourse.

Keywords: Real interrogative; irreal interrogative; rhetorical question; pragmatic potential; illocutionary force; speech act theory; conversational implicature.

Introduction

In traditional structural linguistics, interrogative sentences have long been classified primarily as syntactic structures designed to elicit information. However, modern pragmalinguistics and cognitive linguistics view interrogatives as multifaceted tools capable of expressing a wide array of pragmatic intentions—ranging from emphasis and surprise to condemnation and directives. Prominent English linguists, including Quirk et al. (1985) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002), categorize interrogative sentences into two broad functional groups based on their communicative goals: real (genuine) and irreal (non-genuine/rhetorical) interrogatives.

In real interrogative sentences, the speaker anticipates receiving unknown information from the listener. Conversely, the linguistic nature of irreal interrogative meaning is fundamentally different; the speaker does not expect an informative answer. Although these sentences are interrogative in form, they inherently convey assertions, negations, or emotional-expressive attitudes. The pragmatic potential of rhetorical questions, a primary subset of irreal interrogatives, manifests prominently in their perlocutionary effect—specifically in their ability to strengthen argumentation and influence the listener's cognitive state. This article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the discursive roles and illocutionary characteristics of both real and irreal interrogative sentences, contributing to the broader understanding of pragmatic meaning negotiation in English discourse.

Methodology

The research is methodologically anchored in Speech Act Theory, pioneered by Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1975), alongside Gricean pragmatics (1975) and contextual analysis.

The communicative situation is formalized using the logical model of *S* (Speaker), *H* (Hearer), and *P* (Proposition). The object of analysis comprises a corpus of real and irreal interrogative sentences extracted from contemporary English literary texts and transcripts of spontaneous spoken discourse. To uncover the implicit meanings embedded in irreal interrogatives, methods of pragmatic inference and intentional analysis were applied. Furthermore, the study employs substitution and transformational analysis to demonstrate the correlation between rhetorical questions and their underlying declarative counterparts.

Results

The analytical phase of the study reveals that the pragmatic functions of English interrogative sentences operate on a spectrum, with absolute information-seeking at one end and absolute assertion at the other.

The Semantic-Syntactic Interface of Real Interrogatives

The primary illocutionary goal of real interrogatives is to bridge an “information gap.” In this context, *S* lacks the truth value of proposition *P* and actively requests *H* to provide it.

Example: “What time does the delegation arrive from London?”

As noted by Barker (2004), this structure exhibits a pure “epistemic need.” The illocutionary force perfectly aligns with the interrogative syntactic form, maintaining a symmetrical relationship between syntax and pragmatics.

The Linguistic Nature of Irreal Interrogative Meaning

The category of irreal interrogative sentences encompasses rhetorical questions, expository questions, and conventionalized indirect speech acts. A defining linguistic feature of irreal interrogatives is their correlative polarity. A structurally positive irreal question conveys a strongly negative proposition, while a structurally negative question conveys a strongly positive assertion.

Positive form / Negative meaning:

- “Who cares about the new regulations?” (Nobody cares about the new regulations).

Negative form / Positive meaning:

- “Isn’t it a beautiful day?” (It is an absolutely beautiful day).

The Pragmatic Potential of Rhetorical Questions

Among irreal interrogatives, rhetorical questions possess the highest pragmatic potential. Biber et al. (1999) assert that in interactive discourse, such sentences serve not to seek facts, but to modify attitudes and establish common ground. They function largely for argumentative persuasion, the expression of irony, and as indirect directives (e.g. “Could you perhaps lower your voice?”).

Discussion

The interpretation of irreal and real interrogatives remains a dynamic area of debate among English linguists, particularly concerning how contextual boundaries define meaning.

The Generative vs. Pragmatic Approaches

While early generativist approaches focused heavily on the syntactic derivation of interrogatives, pragmatic-oriented linguists argue that syntactic analysis alone cannot capture the linguistic nature of irreal interrogative meaning. Huddleston and Pullum (2002) convincingly argue that rhetorical questions are “interrogative in form, but declarative in function,” possessing a closed proposition that manipulates the discourse flow.

Ilie's Continuum and Argumentative Acts

Ilie (1994) challenges the strict binary division between real and irreal interrogatives, proposing them to be evaluated on a continuum. Ilie highlights that the pragmatic potential of rhetorical questions transforms them into powerful “argumentative acts.” By framing a statement as a question whose answer is universally obvious, the speaker forces the hearer to arrive at the desired conclusion independently, making the argument highly resistant to contradiction.

Gricean Implicature and Maxim Flouting

From the perspective of Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, irreal interrogatives generate meaning through the intentional flouting of the Maxims of Quality and Quantity. When a speaker asks an obvious question, they are overtly violating the maxim of quantity, prompting the hearer to infer the conversational implicature—recognizing the utterance as an emphatic assertion rather than a genuine inquiry.

Conclusion

The dichotomy between real and irreal interrogative sentences reveals the profound complexity of the English language. While real interrogatives form the mechanical foundation of information exchange, irreal interrogative sentences inject emotional resonance, persuasive depth, and pragmatic nuance into discourse. The linguistic nature of irreal interrogative meaning is defined not by its grammatical structure alone, but by its context-dependent illocutionary flexibility. Furthermore, the pragmatic potential of rhetorical questions extends far beyond mere stylistic embellishment; they are potent psychological and argumentative instruments. This pragmatic approach strongly aligns with the modern anthropocentric paradigm in linguistics, defining language as an active tool of human social behavior and cognitive influence.

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