The Implicitness of some Interrogative Sentences in Legislative Debates

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Linguists have identified three major sentence types namely; declaratives, imperatives and interrogatives, which feature in most communication situations, whether formal or non-formal. These sentences which perform specific communicative functions, such as giving out information, giving out command/order, and requesting for information, have unique structures respectively. These functions are sometimes, manipulated to meet speakers’ situational intentions. Legislative discourse is characterized by participants who are of opposing views and yet, need to arrive at a collective decision. Arriving at a collective decision requires convincing information which will assist the participants in decision making. In the bid to provide information as well as to influence co-participants, most speakers punctuate their utterances with interrogative sentences. This paper focuses on the pragmatic functions of some non-verbal response interrogatives in legislative discourse. Using Searle’s Speech Act Theory as well as insights from literature on grammar, this paper sets out to describe the illocutionary acts performed with some interrogative sentences in legislative debates. The data used for the research are taken from the Senate Hansards of the sixth National Assembly. It was discovered that most non-verbal response interrogative sentences (rhetorical questions) are used to perform three illocutionary acts of representative, directive and expressive acts in legislative debates. The paper concludes that rhetorical sentences are important persuasive tools which influence the emotional and reasoning capacities of participants in arriving at a collective decision in legislative debates. They also have the pragmatic force of emphasis, regrets, objections and appeal.

INTRODUCTION

Legislative debate is unique because though its participants are of opposing views, yet, they are able to eventually arrive at a collective decision made possible through the ability of the participants to persuade their opponents to accept their own points of views. This is done by providing convincing evidence (information). Legislative debate, like most political discourse, is characterized by persuasion and verbal bargaining. Hence, it is characterized by ‘the use of variety of techniques to get our [the participants’] own way: persuasion, rational argument, bribes, manipulation – anything we [the participants] think will work’ (Chilton, 3).

Legislative discourse as a sub-variety of political discourse has been given different definitions. Barley (2004) views it ‘as a sub-genre of political language and [which] represents the most formal and institutionalized variety’ (1). Ilie (2009) asserts that it is ‘a norm-regulated interaction among politically elected representatives for deliberations and decision-making purposes in specific institutional setting and which displays a number of particular communication patterns’ (61). By implication legislative
discourse is highly formal and context sensitive unlike other classes of political language such as government deliberations, party programmes, and speeches of politicians are non-regulated or regimental. The norms and regulations which are conventional features of legislative deliberations place stringent demands on the language choice of the participants. And since ‘languages are used by their speakers in social [and official] interactions’; and languages are ‘first and foremost instruments for creating social bonds and accountability of relations’ (Sentf, 3), language users must be very tactful in their choice of language form and the function ascribe to it.

This paper sets out to identify and describe how a particular set of interrogatives are used by speakers as one of the means of convincing opposing participants to accept ‘a certain course of action [as] right or a certain point of view [as] true, and this is the intended perlocutionary effect that is intrinsically associated with the speech act of argumentation’ (Isabella Fairclough & Norman Fairclough, 18). To achieve the desire perlocutionary effect it is necessary that 'communicants [sic] use those language structure which seems most appropriate to convey his/her communicative intentions and correspond to specific communicative environment’ (Malyuga, 10). Thus, both the context of the discourse and appropriate language forms, as well as, the topic of the discourse, participants shared knowledge and the purpose of the discourse influence the linguistic choice made by the language users. Therefore, the choice of some interrogative sentences as a device to achieve desire perlocutionary effect is a well thought out decision.

The purpose of this study is, ultimately, not just to identify and describe the functions of some interrogative sentences but to highlight the pragmatic acts of these sentences in legislative debates, and by extension, in political domain.

**INTERROGATIVE SENTENCES: RHETORICAL QUESTIONS**

Linguists have identified three communicative function of a sentence as:

- Giving out information – declarative sentence,
- Making a request, order or command – imperative, and
- Asking for information – interrogative sentence.

By way of definition, interrogative sentence refers to those classes of sentences which overtly or covertly, require response (information) from the addressee whether verbal or non-verbal. Interrogative sentences are also referred to as questions. According to Black (1992), ‘a question is socially mandatory. To ignore it; is to risk giving offense’ (2). Put differently, when a speaker asks a question, (s)he expects an answer or response which could be verbal or non-verbal (action); otherwise, the speaker might feel insulted. However, when a speaker asks a question which is characterized by obvious answer(s) to the speaker and the addressee, or whose answer is likely to be uninformative, the speaker neither expect a verbal answer nor does (s)he expects the questions to be interpreted on the surface level. Of course, such uninformative answers are deducible within the context of the discourse; and function as a ‘back channel’ of confirmation of shared knowledge of the participants. In linguistic domain non-verbal response questions are technically called rhetorical questions. Rhode defines it as ‘an example of utterances whose forms do not match their functions’ (134) because structurally they are questions but functionally, the speaker’s intent is not to solicit for information. Black supports Rohde’s assertion when he describes rhetorical questions as ‘a form
(interrogative) imperfectly matched to a substance (declarative)’ (3). Thus it is a case of implicitness or indirect means of speaking. Earlier on, Black asserts that ‘a rhetorical question is asked for persuasive effect of asking. It solicits assent to a proposition by a subtle shift of burden of proof ’(2). Not all non verbal response questions are rhetorical questions:

questions becomes unequivocally rhetorical when it acquires the hue of benign deceptive: a declarative statement posing as an interrogative. It is no more deceptive than the other ironies that feint in one direction and move in another, but it has abandoned the beckoning innocence of a real question – one that is seeking an answer rather than sponsoring one (Black, 2).

Rather than seek information, rhetorical questions provide information by “functioning as a forceful statement” (Quirk and Greenbaum 200). According to Egg “they [rhetorical questions] are used in indirect speech acts, which explains why they do not seek information, and in such speech acts, questions are evaluated against the common ground” (73). He notes that the motivation for using rhetorical question is the presentation of statements which are not based on the personal opinions of the speaker, but as a result of the common ground between participants in the speech events (77). However, Egg warns that a speaker can decide to be mischievous. According to him, “this mechanism can be abused: speakers can present their own opinions in the form of rhetorical questions, which the intended statement is not part of the common ground” (77). Rohde observes that rhetorical questions are characterized by obvious and similar answers which make them uninformative; they are used to “reiterate an agreed-upon state of the world from which other conclusion can be drawn” (161). Supporting Rohde’s view, Caponigro and Sprouse note that ‘unlike OQs [ordinary questions], RQs [rhetorical questions] are not asked to trigger an increase in the amount of mutual knowledge, but their goal seems to be more to highlight a proposition in the CG [common ground] , as the starting point of a discourse or its natural ‘obvious’ conclusion.’ (11) There is a general agreement amongst linguists that rhetorical questions are tools for performing indirect (implicit) speech acts.

This type of questions abounds in legislative debates. This is not surprising since legislative interactions are characterized by opposing opinions and ideas. As a result, the situation calls for the need to convince fellow legislators to accept the speaker’s point of arguments. To convince interlocutors effectively, rhetorical questions become not only handy, but also useful linguistic tool which aids the speakers to map out conflict resolution route.

**SEARLE’S SPEECH ACT THEORY**

The notion of indirect speech act – saying one thing and meaning another thing- is traceable to John Searle (1975). According to Searle:

In indirect speech acts the speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their [speaker and hearer] mutually shared background information, both linguistic and non-linguistic, together with the general power of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer (178).

For the hearer to be able to decode the speaker’s intention (meaning) which is distinct from the sentence meaning, (s)he must be aware of the fact that the sentence has two levels – surface and deep - of meanings recognizing that the speaker wants to be cooperative. On the surface meaning – the sentence meaning- it may seem that the speaker is being uncooperative but in actual sense (the deep meaning which is the speaker meaning), the
speaker simply conveys his/her message in an implicit (indirect) manner.

Searle, a student of John Austin, not only continued to toil his teacher’s ‘speaking is acting’, but also expanded the philosophy. Like his teacher, he argues that a speaker performs three distinct acts whenever an utterance is produced, however he uses different terminology for the acts. These are:

- **Utterance act**: the expression of the speaker’s intent coded in linguistic form. (Austin calls it locutionary act).
- **Illocutionary act**: the speaker’s utterance contains a proposition which makes the addressee to do something intentionally. (Austin also calls it illocutionary act).
- **Propositional act**: the speaker’s utterance is used to refer to things in the world and to make predictions about such matters.

Searle further reclassifies Austin’s categories of performatives (illocutionary acts) into:

- **Representatives**: these are utterances which assert states of affairs in the world and to which the speaker must be committed to the truth of his/her utterance.
- **Directives**: these are utterances which make the addressee to perform the act expressed in the utterance. (Austin classified this under exercitives)
- **Commissives**: these are utterances which commit the speaker to carry out the act stated in the propositional content of the utterance. (It is same as Austin’s)
- **Expressives**: these are utterances which express the emotional or psychological state of the speaker.
- **Declaratives**: these are utterances which bring about change in the state of affairs in real world.

Unlike Austin’s classifications, Searle’s is not based on performative verbs but on certain conditions or rules which the illocutionary force of an utterance must fulfilled, such as content rule, sincerity condition, preparatory condition, mode of achievement condition and essential condition.

**METHODOLOGY**

The data for this study are taken from Nigeria Senate hansard of the 6th National Assembly which was inaugurated in 2007 and ended in 2011. Within the space of four (4) years, the Senate had deliberated on hundreds of legislative bills. Therefore, for effective and efficient management of the data, only six bills were sampled from 2009 -2010: each sampled year was clustered into three units and one bill chosen from each unit. The data contained two distinct sets of interrogatives namely, interrogative sentences which are seeking for information and those that are not seeking for information. However, the scope of this study lies within the interrogatives sentences which do not seek for information, technically referred to as rhetorical questions.

**DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS**

Rhetorical questions are exceptional group of questions in that although they act as if they are soliciting for information, in actuality they provide information to the hearers in an implicit manner. The information provided through rhetorical questions is not based on the speaker’s personal opinions on the issue being discussed but is a result of common knowledge of both the speaker and the listeners. They are used by speakers as a strategy to highlight and emphasize shared belief and knowledge of participants, as well as to express speakers’ psychological states and to make subtle suggestion or appeals during debates.
5.1 Representative Acts

In Nigeria Legislative Discourse, many speakers use interrogative sentences to assert states of affair in the world. Yes/No rhetorical questions are often used as representative acts. This set of rhetorical questions has the pragmatic force of evaluation and persuasion. The listeners are expected to evaluate the questions and then arrive at an emphatic or forceful statement. Below are some samples:

1. Should we now turn round to say that arbitration should be held in Nigeria? (2nd Speaker: Arbitration Bill)
2. Do we have those institutions in Nigeria? (7th Speaker: Arbitration Bill)
3. …will this Bill address the sufferings of the oil producing communities? …will the environment of oil producing communities be resuscitate? Will it give jobs…? … can it stop the acid rain…? (19th Speaker: Petroleum Bill)
4. Are there evidences or signs of such activities in the country? (2nd Speaker: Terrorism Bill)
5. … will there not be issues tomorrow? (7th Speaker: Constitution Bill)

However, some rhetorical questions, especially Wh-type, whose answers are neither obvious nor agreeable, are used by speakers “to stimulate thought and perhaps pique curiosity” (Bradley et al 160). In other words, Wh-rhetorical questions are often used to passionately persuade the listeners to agree to the point being made by the speakers; they function as thought-provoking utterances; not necessarily a forceful statement. Below are some samples:

6. … Why would we not also consider the host communities where this oil is produced to upgrade their situation … to give them a level of participation to make them… and see the installation as their own? (16th Speaker: Petroleum Bill)
7. What is the source of the electronic evidence? Where is it generated from? How do you identify the source of an e-mail? (9th Speaker: Evidence Bill)
8. How do we curb all these ones? (9th Speaker: Terrorism Bill)
9. … why are you supporting this Bill and considering it? What has that got to do with terrorism? (18th Speaker: Terrorism Bill)
10. … when will the design come? When will the advertisement come on the pages of newspapers? When will the actual award be given? (5th Speaker: Appropriation Bill)
11. … why did we adjust the time limit of elections? (14th Speaker: Constitution Bill).

Though the above examples have interrogative structure, they function as representatives because unlike interrogative, rather than seek for information, they provide the listeners with ‘forceful statement’ (Quirk and Greenbaum 200) or challenge and stimulate the hearers’ thought processes. Pragmatically, these locutions are used by the speakers to focus the attention of the listeners on problems; and the solutions arrived at by the listeners then become the implicit points being made by the speakers. Thus, serving the purpose of stimulating the listeners to ‘action’; and the action is to accept the points made by the speakers.

5.2 Expressive Acts

Sometimes, some speakers express their emotional or psychological (condemnations or regrets) states through
the use of interrogative sentence. The following rhetorical questions are samples:

12. Are we doing that? (9th Speaker: Terrorism Bill).

13. What were we supposed to do? (15th Speaker: Terrorism Bill)

The 9th Speaker performs an act of condemnation with this rhetorical question. The speaker condemns government’s inability to provide welfare for the citizens and has resulted to some citizens engaging in terrorism. As such, in enacting terrorism Bill, this aspect should be considered; rather than the house importing international law on terrorism into the country. The 15th Speaker uses rhetorical question to express regrets on the fact that when the activities of terrorists started, Nigeria government did not do much to stop the activities. The Speaker feels bad that Nigeria Law enforcement Agents lack modern gadgets and equipment to enable them checkmate the activities of terrorists.

Also in Appropriation Bill, rhetorical questions are used as effective act as shown in the following:

14. What do we have to tell Nigerians that we have done that would warrant our coming back to ask for their votes? (5th Speaker)

15. What about the ones that are not exempted? (9th Speaker)

The above locutions are used by the speakers to express their feelings of disappointment. The speakers are upset and they regret the fact that the House is still working on Appropriation Bill when the year is already half way gone. Their fear is that by the end of the year, little or nothing would have been achieved in terms of budget implementation. The 5th Speaker is particularly afraid that Nigerian electorates may not give the senators their votes in the forth coming election because there is little or nothing to show as democracy dividend.

The 10th Speaker in the same Bill also used rhetorical question to express sadness and dismay, he says:

16. Where are the groundnut pyramids? Where are the cocoa industries and agriculture which we should have laid emphasis on?

This locution is used to express disappointment; regretting the fact that Nigerian economy is monolithic; the economy depends only on oil as the source of revenue and hence the annual ritual of budget amendment. But the effect of this rhetorical question is realized in historical context of the economy of the country. The regret is more on the neglect of the country’s erstwhile profitable economic resources. Specifically that is what it is all about, not explicitly about oil.

In the Constitution Bill, rhetorical questions are also employed by some speakers as a vehicle for objection:

17. What was the main essence of the last amendment we did? (9th Speaker)

This locution is used to challenge the rationale behind this present constitution amendment. When this speaker uttered the rhetorical question, he immediately provided the response: ‘it was to ensure that all matters of litigation are concluded before swearing-in …’ Thus, the speaker used an indirect act to emphatically state his disagreement to ‘extending governorship election problem up to Supreme Court’; and also used the locution to persuade other participants that the present Amendment is unnecessary.

The 15th Speaker, on the other hand, used his rhetorical question to express doubt that there would be no series of arguments and debates on the same issue (the issue of time limit for electoral matters) in future. Therefore, it is important that the
amendment is done in such a way that it is clear to Nigerians that there is an amendment. He says:

18. Now that we are amending this constitution, does it mean that we will stick to this Amendment? (15th Speaker)

5.3 Directive Acts

Directive acts occur when speakers make suggestion, recommendation, or appeal with an utterance. Nigerian legislators do not often use interrogatives as a means of performing directive acts. Very few rhetorical sentences in the data are use as directives.

The speaker 15th speaker used a rhetorical question to make a suggestion when he said:

19. Does it mean that this is a permanent amendment?

The point made by uttering this rhetorical question is clearer from the immediate locution performed by the same speaker. He suggested that time limit for electoral matters should be removed from constitution and placed into electoral Act so as to avoid constant or series of amendment of constitution.

An appeal is made using rhetorical question in:

20. Do the cases of senators have less value than the cases of Governors who are going to the supreme courts? (14th Speaker).

This is an appeal to the listeners not to support the idea of extending the governorship litigation to move up to Supreme Court just as the senator’s electoral cases do not go up to the Supreme Court.

CONCLUSION

In the Nigeria Legislative discourse rhetorical questions are not only pervasive but are also instruments used to exert indirect influence on the addressees’ emotional and reasoning capacities and thus, creating the pragmatic force of emphasis, regrets, objections and appeal in order to arriving at a collective decision in legislative debates. They aid the speakers in persuading the listeners to accept the speaker’s argument, or reason with the speaker on his/her submission. They perform mostly representative and expressive acts; and to a lesser degree, to perform directive acts. The types of interrogative sentences employed as rhetorical device in the data are the Yes/No questions and Wh question types.

REFERENCES


