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Indo-Iranian and Indo-European Studies
in Honor of

Stephanie W. Jamison

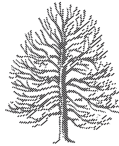
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Rhetorical Questions and Negation in Ancient Indo-European Languages

OLAV HACKSTEIN

1 Nonrhetorical and rhetorical questions

Rhetorical questions are traditionally regarded as phenomena belonging to literary rhetoric and falling outside the scope of grammar, rather than as linguistic phenomena. Most grammars lack a formal category “rhetorical question”. This is because many languages use the same question format for rhetorical and nonrhetorical questions. In these cases rhetorical and nonrhetorical questions are only differentiated by their propositional content. In English, interrogative structures such as (1) *How could you X?* or (2) *Have you lost X?* can indiscriminately introduce nonrhetorical or rhetorical questions, e.g.

- (1a) nonrhetorical
How could you fight the crisis?
- (1b) rhetorical
How could you?!
- (2a) nonrhetorical
Have you lost your wallet?
- (2b) rhetorical
Have you lost your mind/marbles?!

Nevertheless there are languages that formally distinguish rhetorical from nonrhetorical questions. Thus for questions involving sentential negation, i.e. a negated proposition ($\neg p$), older (and modern) Indo-European languages frequently exhibit a contrast between two functionally discrete question types. In question type 1 (nonrhetorical), non-movement of the negation correlates with true, information-soliciting questions; in question type 2 (rhetorical), leftward sentence negation movement correlates with strong counterexpectationality of a negated proposition ($\neg p$). Questions of type 2 thus preempt an affirmative bias towards the core proposition (p), thereby canceling the solicitation of new information. In the following I will first

document both correlations for modern and ancient Indo-European languages (§2–6), then lay out the mechanism behind the form–function correlation (§7).

2 English and German

In English and German, the placement of the negation can distinguish between non-rhetorical and rhetorical questions. Thus in (3) and its (New High) German translation equivalent in (4) low negation (a) in a non-rhetorical information-soliciting question contrasts with raised negation (b) in a rhetorical question:

- (3a) English, non-rhetorical, correlating with low negation
*Why should you **not** stand under a tree during a thunderstorm?*
- (3b) English, rhetorical, correlating with raised negation
*Why should**n't** we take the shortcut, if there is one?*
- (4a) German, non-rhetorical, correlating with low negation
*Wieso sollte man sich bei Gewitter **nicht** unter einen Baum stellen?*
- (4b) German, rhetorical, correlating with raised negation
*Wieso sollte man **nicht** die Abkürzung nehmen, wenn es sie gibt?*

3 Latin

Latin formally differentiates inner negated polar questions and outer negated polar questions; on this subdivision cf. Ladd 1981 and Büring and Gunlogson 2000. Inner negated polar questions exhibit low negation, which encodes a nonrhetorical, information-soliciting question (5a). By contrast, outer negated polar questions tend to move the negation *nōn* to the left periphery to express counterexpectationality of the negated proposition (\neg p), thus yielding rhetorical questions like those in (5b). Cf. Kühner and Stegmann 1976:503 with further exemplification.

- (5a) Latin, inner negated polar question, nonrhetorical
iis=ne rebus manus adferre non dubitasti
this:ABL.PL.F=Q thing:ABL.PL.F hand:ACC.PL lay.ON:PRS.INF NEG doubt:PRF.2SG
a quibus etiam oculos cohibere te religionum
from which.thing:ABL.PL even eye:ACC.PL divert.INF you:ACC.SG rite:GEN.PL
iura cogebant?
law:NOM.PL force:IMPF.3PL
“Did you not refrain from laying your hands on these things from which the religious rites forced you to divert even your eyes?” (Cic. *Verr.* 2.4.101)
- (5b) Latin, outer negated polar question, rhetorical
non=ne eum graviter tulisse arbitramini . . . ? Quod enim . . .
NEG-Q he:ACC seriously take:PRF.INF think:PRS.2PL.MP . . . ? For indeed . . .
“You surely don’t think he regretted . . . , do you? For . . .” (Cic. *Verr.* 2.5.170)

non est iudicatus hostis Antonius?
 NEG AUX:PRS.3SG judge:PRF.PTCP.MP enemy:NOM Antonius:NOM
 “Hasn’t Antonius been declared an enemy?” (Cic. *Phil.* 7.13)
non manum abstines, mastigia?
 NEG hand:ACC take.off:PRS.2SG whip:VOC
 “Won’t you take your hand off, you scoundrel?” = “Hands off!” (Ter. *Ad.* 781)

The same form–function dichotomy (low negation ~ nonrhetorical; high negation ~ rhetorical) recurs with negated causal content questions, expressed with *why*, *how*, and *what*. These exhibit low negation when placed under information focus. When however the speaker seeks to mark the negation of the proposition as counter-expectational, the negation is raised to an immediately post-interrogative position. An example of the contextual contrast of outer and inner negated *why* questions is found in a letter of Cicero (6a–b). They contrast a dependent nonillocutional low-negation question (6a), which is purely factual, with an illocutional affirmative-bias question (6b), which is counterexpectational and thus exhibits high negation:

- (6a) Latin, low-negation, nonrhetorical, information-soliciting question
Si quis requirit cur Romae non sim: quia
 if PRON.INDEF ask:PRS.3SG why Rome:LOC NEG be:PRS.SBJ.3SG because
discessus est.
 vacation be:PRS.ISG
 “If somebody asks why I am not at Rome: (it’s) because it’s a vacation.”
- (6b) Latin, high-negation, rhetorical, affirmative-bias question
cur non sim in iis meis praediolis
 why NEG be:PRS.SBJ.ISG in these:ABL.PL my:ABL.PL estate:ABL.PL
quae sunt huius temporis:
 which:NOM.PL be:PRS.3PL this:GEN.SG time:GEN.SG
 “Why should I not stay on those estates of mine that are most appropriate for the season:
quia frequentiam illam non facile ferrem.
 because multitude:ACC that:ACC NEG easily bear:IMPF.SBJ.ISG
 (it is) because I would hardly bear that throng.” (Cic. *Att.* 12.40.3)

The juxtaposition of causal interrogative and counterexpectational high negation frequently led to a formal and functional fusion (chunking) of interrogative adverb and negation. Examples are, inter alia, (Old) Latin *quid=ni* (Lewis and Short 1879:1516 s.v. *quis* II B 3: *quidni* “in rhet. questions,” Menge 1953:330 §493), and *qui=n*, cf. (7). (For a collection of attestations, see Lindsay 1907:108–11, Fleck 2008:82–9.)

- (7) *qui-n ego hoc rogem, quod nesciam?*
 how=NEG I:NOM this:ACC ask:PRS.SBJV.ISG REL:ACC not.know.PRS.SBJV.ISG
 “Why shouldn’t I ask this, given that I don’t know it?” (Pl. *Mil.* 426)

4 Sanskrit

Vedic Sanskrit also exemplifies the negative raising in rhetorical questions. To take an example (8), RV 10.146 contrasts a nonrhetorical low-negation question, which inquires about the surprising fact that “the Lady of the Wilderness herself doesn’t inquire for a village or settlement” (Jamison and Brereton 2014:1617), with a rhetorical, and consequently high-negation, polar question “Does fear **not** find you at all?”:

- (8a) *kathá grámaṃ ná p̄chasi?*
 how village:ACC NEG ask:PRS.2SG
 “How is that you don’t ask for the village?”
- (8b) *ná tvā bhír iva vindatīṣṃ?*
 NEG you:ACC fear:NOM almost find:PRS.3SG
 “Does fear not find you at all?” (RV 10.146.1cd; Jamison and Brereton 2014:1618)

In Vedic, the correlation of high negation *why not* questions and non-information-soliciting, affirmative answer bias can be exemplified by the following example (8c). The passage describes and praises Indra’s various violent deeds (ibid.), which are assumed to be well-known to the audience:

- (8c) *ákrandayo nadyò róruvad vānā.*
 make.roar:IMPF.2SG river:ACC.PL roar:INT.PTCP.NOM.SG wood.INS
 “You made the rivers roar, yourself constantly bellowing through the woods.”

and culminates in an interrogative-exclamative clause:

- (8d) *kathá ná kṣonír bhíyāsā sám ārata?*
 how NEG war.cry:NOM.PL fear:INS together clash:AOR.3PL.MP
 “How have the war cries [/Heaven and Earth] not clashed together in fear?”
 (RV 1.54.1cd; Jamison and Brereton 2014:169)

whose content may be paraphrased as “Everybody agrees that in light of Indra’s might the war cries [/Heaven and Earth] would have clashed together in fear.”

5 Hittite

Sommer (1932:54 n.4) observed for Hittite the tendency to raise the negation *natta* into sentence-initial position in rhetorical questions. Hoffner (1986:89–90) as well as Hoffner and Melchert (2008:342–3) provided an extended exemplification as well as counterexamples. These latter however do not invalidate the tendency under discussion, but merely confirm that we are dealing with a tendency. As will emerge below in §7, raising the negation in interrogatives is driven inter alia by the pragmatic tagging of the negation as counterexpectational. Note this does not preclude there being other means of marking interrogative negation as counterexpectational. See (9) below for a typical contrast between nonrhetorical interrogative with low pre-verbal negation (9a) and rhetorical interrogative with sentence-initial negation (9b):

- (9a) Hittite, low-negation, nonrhetorical question

nu= war= an kuit ḫanda natta wemiyanzi
 PTCL=QUOT=him INTER:ACC POSTP NEG find:PRS.3PL

“(He said,) ‘Why do they not find him?’” (VBoT 58 i 23; Hoffner 1986:91)

- (9b) Hittite, high-negation, rhetorical question

natta-šamas^š LÚ.MEŠ^šDUGUD tuppi ḫazzian ḫarzi
 NEG= you:2PL dignitary:DAT.PL tablet:ACC inscribe:PTCP.ACC AUX:PRS.3SG

“Has (my father) not inscribed a tablet for you dignitaries?”

(KBo 22.1 obv. 23; Hoffner 1986:90)

6 Tocharian

In Tocharian low negation correlates with nonrhetorical questions. An example of a low-negation nonrhetorical question occurs in the the third act of the Maitreyasamiti-Nāṭaka, when the Buddha’s stepmother, Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī, wants hand over to the Buddha a golden, handwoven cotton garment as a present, but he rejects it, asking his mother to donate the garment to the Buddhist community, the Saṅgha, instead. The Buddha’s rejection of the garment prompts Mahāprajāpatī to inquire about the reason. Mahāprajāpatī’s question is therefore nonrhetorical and shows low negation:

- (10a) Tocharian, low-negation, nonrhetorical question

mānt nu täṣ ptāñkāt kāsṣi mā emtsitür= ñi?
 why PTCL it buddha:NOM teacher:NOM NEG seize:OPT.3SG.MP=me

“Why would the Buddha-god the teacher not be prepared to accept it from me?” (Toch. A, AYQ 25 [III.6] b8; Ji, Winter and Pinault 1998:168–9)

(10b) Tocharian, high-negation, rhetorical question

Tocharian A

sukyo yomnāṣ ksalune, mānt mā kākäl
joy:INS attain:SBJ.3SG extinction:OBL why NEG rejoice.GER.NOM
eṣāntāp?

give:PRS.PTCP.GEN.SG

“If he happily reaches extinction, **why** shouldn’t a giver rejoice?”

(AYQ 29 [I.2] a5; Ji, Winter and Pinault 1998:28–9)

(pā)[l]skā: kuyal mā nāṣ śol raryurās ksaluneyam
think:PRT.ISG why NEG I:NOM life.OBL give.up:ABS nirvāṇa:LOC
kälkim?

go.OPT.ISG

“[I] thought: why shouldn’t I, having given up my life, go into *nirvāṇa*?”

(AYQ 36 [N.3] b1 = A 295 a5f.)

Tocharian B

ka mā weścer krent [reki]?

why NEG say:PRS.2PL good:OBL word:OBL

“Why don’t you say the good word?” (B 20 b6)

7 Conclusion

The contrast between low negation interrogatives in nonrhetorical function and high negation interrogatives in rhetorical function, documented in §§2–6, conforms to a crosslinguistic pattern. How are we to account for this form–function relationship? The mechanism behind it is that raising the negation to a higher focus position immediately after the interrogative, thereby placing it under interrogative focus, is a means of marking the negation as counterexpectational. Counterexpectationality in turn amounts to a corroboration/affirmation of the core proposition and therefore cancels the question’s information-soliciting function. The correlation of rhetorical question with raised negation conforms to an optional syntactic-pragmatic mechanism.

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