Sahasram Ati Srajas
Indo-Iranian and Indo-European Studies
in Honor of
Stephanie W. Jamison

edited by
Dieter Gunkel
Joshua T. Katz
Brent Vine
Michael Weiss

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Rhetorical Questions and Negation in Ancient Indo-European Languages

Olav Hackstein

1 Nonrethorical 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 (¬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 (¬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 constrasts 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 shouldn’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 non to the left periphery to express counterexpectionality of the negated proposition (¬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: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 cun 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)
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:prs.sbj.3sg because
discessus est.

“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 is meis praedialis
why neg:prs.sbj.1sg in these:abl.pl my:abl.pl estate:abl.pl
quaesunt 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:impe.sbj.1sg
(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) \textit{qui-n ego hoc rogem, quod nesciam?}  
\texttt{how=NEG 1:NOM this:ACC ask:PRS.SBJV.1SG REL:ACC not.know.PRS.SBJV.1SG}  
“Why shouldn’t I ask this, given that I don’t know it?” (Pl. Mil. 4.26)

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) \textit{kathá gráman ná prchasi?}  
\texttt{how village:ACC NEG ask:PRS.2SG}  
“How is that you don’t ask for the village?”

(8b) \textit{ná tvā bhír iva vindatśm?}  
\texttt{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 \textit{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) \textit{ákrandayo nadyò róruvad váñā.}  
\texttt{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) \textit{kathá ná kṣonír bbiyásā sám ārata?}  
\texttt{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 handa natta wemiyanzi
PTCL-quot:-him INTER:ACC POSTP NEG find:PRS.3PL
“(He said,) ‘Why do they not find him?’” (VBoT 38 i 23; Hoffner 1986:91)

(9b) Hittite, high-negation, rhetorical question
natta-samaš Lu मेš DUGUD tuppi hazzian harzi
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-Nataka, when the Buddha’s stepmother, Mahāprajāpati Gautami, 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 Mahāprajāpati to inquire about the reason. Mahāprajāpati’s question is therefore nonrhetorical and shows low negation:

(10a) Tocharian, low-negation, nonrhetorical question
mānt nu tās pānkāt kāṣi mā entsitār= nī?
why PTCL it buddha:Nom teacher:Nom NEG seize:OPT.3SG.MP-me
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(10b) Tocharian, high-negation, rhetorical question

Tocharian A

sukyo yomnās ksulune, mānt mā kākāl
joy:INS attain:SBJ.3SG extinction:OBL why NEG rejoice.GER.NOM
esāntāp?
give:PRS.PTCP.GEN.SG

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


(pā) [1] skā: kuyal mā nās sōl raryurās ksuluneṣam
think:PRT.1SG why NEG I:NOM life:OBL give.up:ABS nirvāṇa:LOC
go.opt.1SG

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

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

Tocharian B

ka mā weiser krent [reki]?
why NEG say:PRS.2PL good:OBL word:OBL

“We 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 corroborating/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.

References


