

INTERROGATIVE STRUCTURES IN THE WRITTEN DIDACTIC DISCOURSE

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Abstract:

This paper starts from the premise that interrogative structures have significant impact on verbal behaviour and human behaviour, in general. Our analysis of this particular type of discourse is based on the assertions of E. Benveniste, according to whom interrogation is one of the fundamental speech acts of interhuman behaviour, alongside of assertion and imperative structures¹.

Key Words:

Emphatic stress, interrogative word, discourse, disjunction, epistemic, erotetics, alternative interrogative, partial interrogative, total interrogative, interrogation, question, modalization, erotetic pragmatics, interrogative structure.

1. Premises and goals

We have been prompted to engage in this research by the observation that *young people simply do not know how to ask questions*, even when they are required, and we have considered that most likely they cannot do it because they have not been taught to do it.

Our main goal is to analyse, from a linguistic and logico-philosophical perspective, the efficiency of using interrogative structures in the written didactic discourse, which we have considered to be a discourse model for receivers, a model that can be easily delimited and interpreted through

¹ Émile Benveniste, 1966, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, I, Paris: Gallimard, p. 130. As far as is known, in Austin and Searle only the assertions (“verdictive” in Austin and “illustrative” in Searle) and the imperatives are clearly defined (as “exercitives” – with the former and “illustrative” – with the latter). Interrogation was defined some time later as a function of anticipation, with two forms: request for information and confirmation of information, cf. the famous DAMSL scheme: Allen, J.; Core, M., *Draft of DAMSL; Dialog Act Markup in Several Layers*, <https://markcore.github.io/papers/DAMSL-manual.pdf>

linguistic analysis grids. Since our attempt approaches the issue of interrogation in terms of speech act analysis, it has presuppositions and finalities, particularly in the field of applied linguistics.

Our entire interest in the matter would thus focus on the question: *To what extent is the pragmatic aspect of interrogation capitalised on in didactic auxiliary materials?*

2. Theoretical support

The theoretical infrastructure of our analyses relies on the careful research and synthesis of the contributions of some authorities in the field, on the one hand, and on the reading of a large number of texts which are representative of the type of discourse at issue, on the other hand. In this way, we have managed to create our own analysis grid, applied to a corpus not yet addressed, to our knowledge, on a large scale until now.

Thus, in terms of the linguistic perspective, Andra Șerbănescu's monograph *Întrebarea – teorie și practică* has been of great help. The author states that the specialised studies that were available to her, even when they were in conflict, were at least capable of complementing each other². Naturally, I have used the modern descriptive grammar of Romanian, GALR, GBLR, and the 1966 edition – GAR.

The collection of studies and articles on interrogative structures in terms of logic³, compiled by the Romanian logician Constantin Grecu, has provided a solid theoretical basis.

3. Working methods

In our study, in terms of principles, methods and working tools, we have primarily employed those provided by the *descriptive and normative approaches*. However, since speech acts have always carried some logical and psychological meaning, we had to use the tools provided by the *pragmatic discourse analysis* in order to identify the manner in which the locutor uses the lexico-semantic, morphosyntactic and stylistic resources of

² Cf. Andra Șerbănescu, 2002, *Întrebarea – teorie și practică*, Iași: Polirom, p. 11.

³ Constantin Grecu, 1982, *Logica interogativă și aplicațiile ei*. Selecția textelor, traducerea, studiu introductiv, note și bibliografie de Constantin Grecu. București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică.

the language, with a view to eliciting a certain response from the allocutor. Furthermore, we proceeded to the deconstruction and reconstruction of interrogative speech acts *in terms of discourse analysis*. Thus, we used the *logico-semantic analysis* of interrogation, the didactic discourse being a communication of great complexity, a subclass of normative discourse typology⁴. The contributions of Charles Morris, who promoted the *language semantic analysis*⁵ as a research method, have been of great use.

4. Corpus

The *written didactic discourse analysis* was conducted on a corpus selected from Romanian language and literature textbooks, used in secondary schools, provided by “Art”, “ALL Educational”, “Corint” and “Niculescu ABC” publishing houses. We should point out that “Art” textbooks lay particular emphasis on the practical side, as the share of exercises is by far the largest as compared to the other analysed textbooks, whereas others include fewer interrogative structures.

5. Structure and contents of the paper

Our work is structured in three chapters that analyse interrogative structures selected in the corpus in terms of logic, linguistics and pragmatics.

In the chapter *Logico-semantic basis of questions* we have relied on the early contribution of Eugeniu Speranția, who suggested four directions of research of interrogative sentences as a type of judgement: *analytical research, adequacy research, exhaustiveness research and implication research*⁶. Logicians have established a few conditions which help correctly formulate an interrogation: *clarity, determination, unequivocalness, consecutiveness*⁷. There are also a number of obstacles to correct questions⁸, the so-called *erotetic paralogsms*: the absence of truth-

⁴ Cf. Vasile Dospinescu, *Semiotică și discurs didactic*, București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, p. 122.

⁵ Cf. Charles Morris, 2003, *Fundamentele teoriei semnelor*. Traducere și Cuvânt înainte: Delia Marga, Cluj-Napoca: Editura Fundației pentru Studii Europene.

⁶ Eugeniu Speranția, „Observații asupra propozițiilor interrogative...”, in: Constantin Grecu, 1982, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

⁷ cf. V. F. Berkov, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-133.

⁸ Petre Botezatu, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

providing terms, syntactic confusion, the ambiguity of terms or even multiple/consecutive questions.

This chapter also deals with how *erotetic semiotics*⁹, with the three subfields – *erotetic syntax*, *erotetic semantics* and *erotetic pragmatics* – helps avoid the incorrect formulation of questions. *Syntactically incorrect questions* are those without syntactic interrogative structure but which still function as questions (richly represented in the corpus we have selected). *Erotetic semantics* helps classify interrogations as semantically correct/incorrect questions or semantically (in)determinate questions. *Erotetic pragmatics* aims to identify methods of increasing or reducing the *entropy of question*¹⁰ in order to find the optimal level of difficulty.

The chapter *Linguistic perspective in interrogation analysis* is an analysis of the three large classes of interrogations, total, partial and alternative, starting from “their behaviour within the question-answer pair”¹¹.

Total interrogations (TIs) come next in our text corpus, with 118 interrogative structures, which account for 14.76% of the 799 selected items. In defining TIs, one should note the importance of the syntactic criterion¹² and of the logico-morphological one, i.e. the possibility that the question may generate answers through the pro-sentence adverbs *Da/Nu* (‘Yes/No’), cf. GALR and GBLR. Various particular cases may come under the TIs: negative interrogative structures (very rare) or with presuppositions of truth (which may receive *Yes/No* answers). Complex utterances frequently appear in the form of “interrogative blows”: double or multiple TIs, associations TI + PI or even TI + assertive structures.

Partial interrogations (PIs) are best marked at morphological level¹³ through the occurrence of the interrogative word. PIs are the most numerous in the didactic discourse, totalling 572 occurrences, which means 70.33% of

⁹ The name and analytical attempt are based on the theoretical support provided by I.A. Petrov; A.A. Stoliar, 1977, *O pedagogiceskom aspekte semioticesckogo analiza voprosov*, in vol. *Loghika i problemi obucenija*, Moskva: Pedagoghika, pp. 63-87. We have used Constantin Grecu’s translation: I.A. Petrov; A.A. Stoliar, *Despre aspectul pedagogic al analizei semiotice a întrebărilor*, in: C. Grecu, 1982, pp. 292-322.

¹⁰ I.A. Petrov, A.A. Stoliar, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

¹¹ GALR, vol. II, p. 32.

¹² GAR, vol. II, p. 37: „Când întrebarea se referă la predicatul propoziției sau la predicat împreună cu o parte a propoziției se numește interogativă totală.”

¹³ GAR, vol. II, p. 37; GALR, vol. II, p. 34.

the analysed corpus. A significant place is occupied by those formulated using the following interrogative words: *ce?* ('what') – 212; *care?* ('who/which'); *cum?* ('how') – 141. Moreover, PIs may be expressed in various particular cases, such as those with “non-prototypical thematization”, the elliptical ones or those in association with other PIs or with different interrogative structures.

Alternative interrogations (AIs) are a particular subtype of interrogations. Their main feature is the disjunctive logico-semantic structure, marked by the prototypical conjunctions of disjunctive coordination: *sau, ori* ('or'). Structurally and pragmatically, AIs have the attributes of a hybrid subclass; the GBLR emphasizes the possible kinship with the other two¹⁴ - TIs and PIs. Statistically, alternative interrogations are the least frequently used in written didactic communication, with only 29 occurrences, falling under structural, intonational and behavioural conditionings in communicative context, specific to this type of interrogation, which accounts for 3.63% of the total.

The chapter *Interrogation in the didactic discourse* proposes two case studies: “*Bloom’s taxonomy and interrogative structures in the written didactic discourse*” and “*Interrogative structures and formal evaluations*”. The former is an analysis of how the authors of auxiliary materials use interrogations, with reference to the *taxonomy*¹⁵ of B. S. Bloom and his collaborators. Our analysis starts from an observation regarding a fragment in a didactic auxiliary textbook that “*questions are formulated without any criterion*”¹⁶, and our study confirms this statement after fully analysing seven alternative auxiliary materials. The second case study leads to the conclusion that the interrogative structure of the items in the baccalaureate examination is ignored, although, in our opinion, this might stimulate a better understanding of formative requirements.

¹⁴ Cf. GBLR, p. 608.

¹⁵ B. S. Bloom, M. D. Engelhart, E. J. Furst, W. H. Hill, D.R. Krathwohl, 1956, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The classification of educational goals. Handbook I: Cognitive domain*. New York: David McKay Company.

¹⁶ L. Sfarlea, 2004, „Întrebarea – o cale importantă de acces spre textul literar”, in: *Perspective. Revistă de didactica limbii și literaturii române*, Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, pp. 27-29.

6. General conclusions

• Because they are speech acts reflecting intense cognitive processes and the need to complement or confirm some information, to facilitate the construction of an argument by means of logico-syntactic sentences from formal Aristotelian thinking, *questions are often marked by elements of modalisation*. The phenomenon is explained by the emitter's desire to receive a feedback that should contain not only the lacking information but also additional data regarding the collocutor's attitude towards the truth value of the provided information. The most frequent modal operator recorded in our text corpus is the verb *a putea* ('can') in all its morphosyntactic aspects (impersonal with the reflexive clitic *se*; impersonal without reflexive; personal – in agreement with the Subject). In terms of occurrence within interrogative structures, it is followed by (semi)adverbs such as *oare, cumva* ('by any chance'), and by various periphrases with the auxiliary *a fi* ('to be') + a predicative from the series of adverbial modalizers such as *e sigur* ('it is certain') or with a noun in the same logico-semantic sphere (*certitudine* 'certainty', *îndoială* 'doubt' etc.). All this proves that the main modalisation "required" by interrogative speech acts are the *epistemic* ones. The denotative interrogation is the surface level [*"I want to know"*], and epistemic modalisation achieved through various lexical-grammatical means is the level of depth [*"I want to know what you think about..."*].

The modalisation of evidentiality is more rarely introduced in interrogative structures, when the emitter wishes to find further data regarding the sources of information they request. Deontic and appreciative modalisation are almost completely missing, for the values of permissiveness or exclamatory appreciation cannot overlap those of "knowledge" proper.

It all has to do with the nature of interpersonal verbal communication in its essence, which proves to us, once more, that structurally and pragmatically interrogations reflect the entire linguistic universe of a human community.

• The interrogative structures we have studied more frequently belong to the type of "complex utterances", i.e. they are formulated in the form of complex sentences – bi-member, in principle, but sometimes also pluri-member. Of course, there are also sentence-interrogations, which traditional grammars used to consider the only real forms of interrogations ("direct

interrogation”), the definition being valid, for example, for assertions as well. They are typical of the scientific writing, but they may also frequently occur in the usual speech (*Ajungem la timp?* ‘Shall we arrive in time?’ *Ce se întâmplă?* ‘What is happening?’). But, generally, in the type of discourse we have studied, the constructions are more complicated – and we do not refer only to the coordination of various types of utterances (Assertive + Interrogative), but also to a governor, usually reduced to the verb-Predicate, plus a subordinate clause in the category of Object clauses or other categories. The analyses have shown that this preference is explained by the didactic nature of the text. The emitter “loads” the interrogative structure, sometimes way too much, in order to provide the receiver with as many details as possible so as to elicit a certain reply, which, on the one hand, confirms the acquisition of some knowledge, and, on the other hand, may develop critical thinking that may facilitate the maieutic discovery of data requested by means of the key element of the question.

- Partial interrogative structures are not only the most numerous, thus strengthening their status of usual speech act, but also the most clearly formally outlined, both by intonational marking, graphically expressed by the sign “?”, and by specific interrogative words – interrogative pronouns or pronominal adjectives (*cine?* ‘who’, *ce?* ‘what’, *care?* ‘which/who/what’ *cât₁?* ‘how much’) or interrogative adverbs (*unde?* ‘where’, *când?* ‘when’, *cum?* ‘how’, *cât₂?* ‘how’). In the texts studied, we have not encountered pronouns and adjectives for quantitative appreciation. The uncountable variants, with the *cât/câtă?* opposition, and the countable ones, with the same oppositions, *câți/câte?*; *al câtelea/a câta?*, are almost completely missing in the corpus selected from didactic texts. They occur only in four utterances, built with the structure *cât de*, which requires an answer in the form of appreciation with the category of the intensive.

- The proportion of alternative interrogative structures in our corpus is the lowest as compared to the other types analysed in this study and is the most poorly represented. However, the logico-semantic alternance required by the disjunctive structure requires the receiver to make a considerably higher cognitive effort than in the case of TIs and PIs, making one choose between two variants or between a variant and an element in a series of response variants.

It should be mentioned that the text corpus includes no example of an AI reformulated in the Indirect Speech, although the final exercises have many items in which the emitter uses a directive verb in an imperative structure. Instead, we have identified many situations which are a form of indirect interrogation in the didactic metalanguage: “*Arătați dacă se poate stabili o ierarhie socială sau culturală între ele (id est: personaje)*” (‘Show if a social or cultural hierarchy can be established between them’ – i.e. between characters) (L12, 228.). Paraphrasing, we get: “*Se pune întrebarea **dacă** putem stabili o ierarhie socială...*” (‘The question is **whether** we can establish a social hierarchy’).

Alternative interrogative structures clearly contain very many elements of presupposition, explicable by the fact that there is always a tendency to add as much information as possible, which augments the utterance to the dimensions of a syntactic-discursive assemblage of the “explanation/interrogation” type.

- Numerous books used in the teaching process in Romanian include very few texts with “helping questions”, “questions to stimulate critical thinking” and so on. It goes so far that the section entitled “Questions” – mandatory in the functional directives of compiling such works – contains only assertive, imperative and directive statements, in stark contrast to the heading.

We must admit that, from one series of didactic texts (textbooks) to another, the number of “close-ended questions”, typical of old texts, has greatly decreased over time. These questions required simple, precisely configured information, irrelevant in the process of thinking stimulation and in the formation of feelings and attitudes of young receivers. Questions such as “*Când s-a născut Ion Creangă?*” (‘When was Ion Creangă born?’) “*Unde a învățat carte?*” (‘Where did he study?’) are fortunately very rare in texts nowadays.

- We have noticed that there are interrogative structures which develop some kind of logic that requires the decision to choose an answer from a number of possibilities, which logicians call *decision questions* and modern linguists and grammarians refer to as *alternative interrogations*. In terms of our text corpus, it should be noted that the number of decision questions/alternative interrogations is significant, but those with more than two members are rarer. We should specify that, with decision questions, it is

necessary that there should be only one answer, out of two or more possible answers, given the logical constraints operating there.

- In the texts we have researched, semantically incorrect questions are fortunately quite infrequent. They are identified in situations in which the authors of texts attempt to make the transition from two familiar notions to a third, which seems to be the logical average of the others. Semantically correct questions, with an equivocal meaning however, i.e. which are not semantically determined – which, naturally, presupposes an unequivocal answer as well –, have a wider distribution.

- All these aspects prove the complexity of interrogative structures in verbal communication, in general, and the importance of their correct usage in the formative discourse, as in any other discourse, for that matter.

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