

Spanish emphatic rhetorical questions with *cómo*

Hella Olbertz

Universidade de Santiago de Compostela

1 Introduction

Questions can be subclassified into three categories corresponding to different Speaker intentions: (i) information-seeking questions, (ii) rhetorical questions, (iii) indirect requests. Only the first are “true” questions, in which “the formal properties of an utterance are directly related to the accomplishment of the speech act it embodies” (Hengeveld et al. 2007: 76). Rhetorical questions differ from true questions in that they do not require an answer from the addressee, rather, instead of requesting information, they provide information (Špago 2016: 102). The information provided by rhetorical questions usually belongs to the common ground, i.e. the knowledge, beliefs and attitudes shared by the speaker and the addressee (cf. e.g. Rohde 2006: 135). Indirect requests, on the other hand, call for an action on the part of the addressee, very much in the same way as imperatives. Hengeveld & Mackenzie (2008: 48) do not treat indirect requests as a special type of question because “the grammar represents communicative intentions only to the extent that they are linguistically coded”. Are rhetorical questions just another kind of indirect speech act (Prado Orgaz 2024), or are there some that are linguistically coded as such? It is my aim in this squib (i) to show that there is at least one such type of rhetorical question in Spanish, and (ii) to propose a preliminary account in FDG.

The rhetorical question (henceforward: RQ) type I will discuss here is illustrated in the second turn of the following (somewhat simplified) dialogue:¹

(1) — *¿Quieres que me vaya?*
want.PRS.2SG COMP REFL.1SG go.PRS.SUBJ.1SG
— *¡Cómo voy a querer que te vayas!*
how go.PRS.1SG to want.IMP COMP REFL.2SG go.PRS.SUBJ.2SG
‘— Do you want me to leave?
— Why on earth should I want you to leave?’
“— How am I going to want you to leave?” (Sampedro, *Sonrisa*, BDS)

¹ In the interest of readability, I have glossed in detail only the verbal complex, in which only the subjunctive mood is marked, and the indicative mood is the default.

The RQ is introduced by the question word *cómo* ‘how’, and contains the periphrastic infinitive construction *ir a* ‘go to’, which in other contexts functions as an expression of Prospective Aspect, akin to English *be going to*. It is typically used in the present indicative, most frequently in the first person singular, as in example (1). It functions as a reaction to the interlocutor’s Move, more specifically as a refutation of its Communicated Content.² In this case, this Communicated Content is contained in a question. In addition, as can be inferred from the use of exclamation marks, rather than question marks, in (1), this type of RQ has an emphatic intonation, where the main stress invariably is on the question word. For the time being, I will refer to this kind of RQ as “emphatic *cómo*-RQ”.³

This squib, based on data from European Spanish fiction, is structured as follows. I will first, in Section 2, describe the construction in more detail. In Section 3, I will compare the construction with formally similar content questions and show which grammatical features make that this type of rhetorical question is formally marked as such, and propose a –very preliminary– FDG account of emphatic *cómo*-RQs. Section 4 concludes. As this type of RQs necessarily involves two Moves, instead of using Speaker and Addressee, I will just use P for “participant in the interaction”, i.e. P₁ to refer to the speaker whose Move motivates the RQ uttered by P₂.

2 Emphatic *cómo*-RQs

The following example is similar to (1), in the sense that P₁’s Move, to which the RQ reacts, is a question.

(2) Ernesto: *¿Es realmente un empleado tuyo?*
 COP.PRS.3SG really a employee yours
 Javier: *¿Cómo voy a saber=lo? Tengo más de*
 how go.PRS.1SG to know.INF=it have.PRS.1SG more than
dos mil. Es posible.
 two thousand. COP.PRS.3SG possible.

‘Ernesto: Does he really work with you?

Javier: How am I supposed to know? I’ve got more than two thousand.
 May be.’ (Reina, *Pasajero*, BDS)

Although the RQ of (2) does not contain any prosodic marking of emphasis, it is equally emphatic as the one in (1). What is different is the context of use: while

² Schaffer (2005) discusses a wide range of RQ types in English that function as retorts.

³ Rhetorical questions with *ir a* may also be introduced by other question words, such as *qué* ‘what’. However, when RQs function as retorts in 1st person contexts, *cómo* is the default.

in (1) the refutation of the content of P_1 's question is both welcome and expected, i.e. it forms part of the common ground, it is probably unexpected in (2), and therefore requires explanation. Such information is provided by P_2 in the Discourse Acts that follow his RQ. The following example shows that imperatives are also a possible trigger of the emphatic *cómo*-RQ:

(3) — *¡Prometa=me que va a dejar de fumar!*
 promise.IMP.POL=me COMP go.PRS.3SG to stop.INF to smoke.INF
 — *dijo la doctora Rutheford-Klein en un repentino ataque*
 said.PFV.3SGthe doctor.F Rutheford-Klein in a sudden attack
de instinto maternal.
 of instinct maternal
 — *Pero... pero... ¿cómo le voy a prometer eso?*
 but but how you.DAT go.PRS.1SG to promise.INF that
 ‘—Promise me that you are going to stop smoking! —said doctor
 Rutheford-Klein in a sudden attack of maternal instinct.
 — But... but... how am I to promise that?’
 (J. Parrondo, *Maldito seas, Roque Waterfall*, 2002. CORPES)

In fact, any P_1 -Move that involves or affects the Addressee, i.e. P_2 , can motivate a first person emphatic *cómo*-RQ, even if it contains a declarative Discourse Act. However, Moves containing interrogative and imperative Acts are the most frequent cases. Therefore, declarative triggers will not be discussed here.

3 A preliminary FDG account of emphatic *cómo*-RQs

In this section, I will first show why I think that emphatic *cómo*-RQs are not just questions put to a rhetorical use (Section 3.1); next, in Section 3.2 I will sketch a preliminary FDG account of this construction.

3.1 *Emphatic cómo-RQs vs. formally similar questions with cómo*

Consider the following example:

(4) *No sé, no sé cómo voy a explicártelo [...] .*
 not know.PRS.1SG not know.PRS.1SG how go.PRS.1SG to
explicártelo [...] .
 explain.INF=you.DAT=it.ACC
 ‘I don’t know, I don’t know how to explain this to you [...]’
 (R. Chacel, *Barrio de Maravillas*, 1991. CREA)

Although this example contains the same constructional ingredients as the RQ, i.e. the question word *cómo*, the *ir a* periphrasis in the present indicative, and first person reference, there is no doubt that this cannot be a RQ. Emphatic *cómo*-RQs cannot appear in reported indirect speech, as emphasis is an interpersonal grammatical feature (cf. e.g. Bolkestein 1990). The following example cannot be an RQ either:

(5) — *Tu labor es importante [...] tú te*
 your work COP.PRS.3SG important you REFL.2SG]
encargas de cambiar la Máscara auténtica
 be-in-charge.PRS.2SG of change.INF the mask authentic
por la falsa.
 for the false
 — *¿Cómo voy a colar=me en el palacio?*
 how go.PRS.1SG to slip.INF=REFL.1SG in the palace
 ‘—Your work is important [...] your are in charge of changing the authentic Mask for the false one.
 —How am I going to slip into the palace?’
 (L. Montero Manglano, *La mesa del rey Salomón*, 2015. CORPES)

Like in the case of (4), the question is morphosyntactically identical to the emphatic *cómo*-RQ, and although this time it is not embedded, it cannot be a RQ as it does not fulfil the conditions of being emphatic and functioning as a retort. Therefore, it can only be interpreted as a content question, with *ir a* as an expression of prospective aspect.

Now consider the emphatic *cómo*-RQ in the following examples, which, due to its grammatical properties, can hardly be interpreted as true questions:

(6) *Néstor: No te preocupes...*
 not REFL.2SG preoccupy.IMP
Rosa: ¿Cómo no me voy a preocupar?
 how not REFL.1SG go.PRS.1SG to preoccupy.INF
 ‘Néstor: Don’t worry...
 Rosa: How am I not to worry?’ (Buero Vallejo, *Caimán*, BDS; adapted)

(7) *Marido: ¿Estás llorando?*
 husband COP-LOC.PRS.2SG crying
Mujer: ¿Cómo no voy a llorar?
 wife hoy not go.PRS.1SG to cry.INF
 ‘Husband: Are you crying?
 Wife: How am I not to cry?’
 (J. Sanchis Sinisterra, *Textículos*, 2010. CORPES)

The negation in the emphatic *cómo*-RQ in (6) and (7) makes its interpretation as an information-seeking question almost impossible, even outside its context.

Finally, it is worth noting that the negation of the RQ in (6) and (7) implies a positive polar value for the information implied, whereas the remaining cases have an implied informative value that is negatively polar, as predicted by Sadock (1971). However, this does not hold for every type of RQ (Špago 2016: 103 *n*).

3.2 A preliminary FDG account of emphatic *cómo*-RQs

I have shown that emphatic RQs with *cómo* always react to a Move by P_1 , which involves the Addressee, P_2 . As becomes clear in (6), the negated imperative in that example, i.e. the negation at the layer of the Illocution (Hengeveld & Mackenzie 2018: 36–37), is replicated in the RQ. This is, however, not the case in RQs that are triggered by questions, as shown in example (7). Furthermore, I have claimed that emphatic *cómo*-RQs serve to reject the Communicated Content of the Move by P_1 . That this is indeed the case can be gathered from the fact that there is some kind of anaphoric reference to that Communicated Content included in the RQ, which may be of a lexical or grammatical nature. An example of lexical reference is *querer que te vayas* in (1), where the deictic elements shift from the P_1 perspective towards P_2 perspective, as nicely explained in Hengeveld (1997). A grammatical reference is contained in (2), where the clitic *lo* ‘it’ refers to the Communicated Content of the preceding content question. Finally, the fact that it is not just the morphosyntactic structure that constitutes the RQ, as can be gathered from (4) and (5), shows that a representation in FDG will involve the Interpersonal Level.

The new approach to the Interpersonal Level in Hengeveld et al. (in prep.) allows to represent a layer higher to the individual Move, the Discourse Segment (S), which will serve us to represent the interaction between P_1 and P_2 . A first sketch of such a representation could be as follows:

(8) (S₁) (M₁): (A₁: [(F₁: {inter, imp} (F₁)) (P₁)_S (P₂)_A (C₁)] (A₁)) (M₁)
 (M₂): (emph A₂: [(F₂: inter (F₂)) (P₂: [+S, −A] (P₂))_S (P₁)_A
 (C₂: (refut C₁)] (C₂))] (A₂)) (M₂))
 (S₁))

In the representation in (8), (S₁) consists of the initial Move (M₁) and a reaction Move (M₂). In this sketchy representation for each Move only one Discourse Act (A) is given, which consists of an Interpersonal Property (F) corresponding to an abstract illocutionary predicate, the Participants in the verbal interaction (P) and a Communicated Content (C). The closing variables indicate the end of

the relevant segments. In the initial Move (M_1) the Illocution (F_1) may have an interrogative or imperative value. The Discourse Act contained in the reaction Move (M_2) has an emphasis operator (emph A_2) and the Illocution is necessarily interrogative. The Participants (P_1) and (P_2) are the same as in (M_1), but their functions of Speaker and Addressee are reversed in (M_2), and the Speaker (P_2) in the reaction Move necessarily has a first person head. The Communicated Content (C_1) of the initial Move appears twice in both Moves, but in (M_2) it is, together with the “refutation” (refut) operator, a property of the Communicated Content (C_2). This representation does not account for negation, which would require a more finetuned set of interpersonal representations.

4 Conclusion

In this squib I present an emphatic rhetorical question (RQ) in the morpho-syntactic form of a content question introduced by *como* ‘how’ and followed by *ir a* ‘be going to’. The function of this RQ uttered by speaker P_2 is the refutation of the Communicated Content of an initial Move by interlocutor P_1 . Accounting for this phenomenon in FDG is now possible due to the introduction of the Discourse Segment (S), an entity above the layer of the Move proposed by Hengeveld et al. (in prep.). I hope that my representation in (8) provides an appropriate basic account at the Interpersonal Level for emphatic RQs with *como*. However, a complete FDG account would need further elaboration at the Interpersonal Level (to include negated RQs) and at all lower levels of the grammatical component.

Non-standard abbreviations

COP-LOC = locative copula (*estar*)

refut = refutation (interpersonal operator)

RQ = relative clause

References

Bolkestein, A. Machtelt. 1990. Unreportable linguistic entities in Functional Grammar. In Harm Pinkster & Inge Genee (eds.), *Unity in Diversity: Papers Presented to Simon C. Dik on his 50th Birthday*. Dordrecht: Foris. 13–26.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110847420.13>

Hengeveld, Kees. 1997. Shifters. Rede uitgesproken bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van hoogleraar in de Theoretische Linguïstiek aan de Universiteit van Amstedam op vrijdag 31 oktober 1997 door Pieter Cornelis Hengeveld [Inaugural Lecture, University of Amsterdam].

Hengeveld, Kees, Eli Nazareth Bechara, Roberto Gomes Camacho, Alessandra Regina Guerra, Eduardo Penhavel, Erotilde Goreti Pezatti, Liliane Santana, Edson Rosa Francisco de Souza & Maria Luiza de Sousa Teixeira. 2007. Basic illocutions in the native languages of Brazil. *Alfa: Revista de Linguística* 51(2): 73–90.

Hengeveld, Kees & J. Lachlan Mackenzie. 2008. *Functional Discourse Grammar: A Typologically-Based Theory of Language Structure*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199278107.001.0001>

Hengeveld, Kees & J. Lachlan Mackenzie. 2018. Negation in Functional Discourse Grammar. In Evelien Keizer & Hella Olbertz (eds.), *Recent Developments in Functional Discourse Grammar*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. 17–45. <https://doi.org/10.1075/slcs.205.02hen>

Hengeveld, Kees, Evelien Keizer & Riccardo Giomi. In preparation. *Layering in Functional Discourse Grammar: The Hierarchical Structure of the Language System*.

Prados Orgaz, Miguel Ángel. 2024. Usos argumentativos de las preguntas retóricas. *Revista Iberoamericana de Argumentación* 4: 130–142. <https://doi.org/10.15366/ria2024.m4>

Rohde, Hannah. 2006. Rhetorical questions as redundant interrogatives. *San Diego Linguistic Papers* 2: 134–168. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4xd7t5ww>

Sadock, Jerrold A. 1971. Queclaratives. *Papers from the Seventh Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society*. 223–232.

Schaffer, Deborah. 2005. Can rhetorical questions function as retorts? Is the Pope Catholic? *Journal of Pragmatics* 37: 433–460. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2003.12.007>

Špago, Džemal. 2016. Rhetorical questions or rhetorical use of questions? *Explorations in English Language and Linguistics* 4(2): 102–115. <https://doi.org/10.1515/exell-2017-0009>

Corpora

BDS: *Base de Datos Sintácticos*. Based on the texts from the *Archivo de Textos Hispánicos de la Universidad de Santiago* (ARTHUS). <http://adesse.uvigo.es/data/corpus.php>

CORPES: Real Academia Española. Corpus del Español del Siglo XXI. <http://rae.es/recursos/banco-de-datos/corpes-xxi>

CREA: Real Academia Española. Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual. <http://rae.es/recursos/banco-de-datos/crea>