# WHEN RHETORICAL QUESTIONS RECEIVE ANSWERS: ON DIFFERENT TYPES OF ANSWERS TO RHETORICAL QUESTIONS IN US PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

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Abstract

The paper examines different types of answers to rhetorical questions and their communicative functions in two sets of US presidential debates: those held in 2016 and 2020 –which, due to the blunt and unconventional language of Donald Trump were much more heated and aggressive than the previous ones– and those held from 1996 to 2012. The results indicate that around one third of rhetorical questions in the examined corpora do receive answers, with addressors' answers –those that explicitly confirm the implied answer, those that answer rhetorical questions as if they were not rhetorical, and, a less frequent type, sarcastic/ironic answers– being much more common than those provided by addressees –those that reject, and those that acknowledge the implied answer–. The results indicate that the main communicative functions of answers to rhetorical questions in US presidential debates are related to blaming, criticizing, or ridiculing the opponent or their actions, as well as making assertions or expressing disagreement. Statistically significant differences between the findings from the two corpora have been noted in regard to different types of answers to rhetorical questions, as well as their communicative functions.

*Keywords*: rhetorical questions, answers to rhetorical questions, US presidential debates, political debates, addressors' answers, addressees' answers.

## CUANDO LAS PREGUNTAS RETÓRICAS RECIBEN RESPUESTAS: SOBRE LOS DIFERENTES TIPOS DE RESPUESTAS A LAS PREGUNTAS RETÓRICAS EN LOS DEBATES PRESIDENCIALES DE EE. UU.

Resumen

El artículo examina diferentes tipos de respuestas a preguntas retóricas y sus funciones comunicativas en dos series de debates presidenciales estadounidenses: los celebrados en

2016 y 2020 (que, debido al lenguaje contundente y poco convencional de Donald Trump, fueron mucho más acalorados y agresivos que los anteriores), y los celebrados entre 1996 y 2012. Los resultados obtenidos indican que alrededor de un tercio de las preguntas retóricas en los corpus examinados sí reciben respuestas, con respuestas de los remitentes (aquellas que confirman explícitamente la respuesta implícita, aquellas que responden a preguntas retóricas como si no lo fueran y, un tipo menos frecuente, respuestas sarcásticas/irónicas) siendo mucho más comunes que las proporcionadas por los destinatarios (los que rechazan y los que reconocen la respuesta implícita). Los resultados indican que las principales funciones comunicativas de las respuestas a preguntas retóricas en los debates presidenciales estadounidenses están relacionadas con culpar, criticar o ridiculizar al oponente o sus acciones, así como hacer afirmaciones o expresar desacuerdo. Se han observado diferencias estadísticamente significativas entre los hallazgos de los dos corpus con respecto a los diferentes tipos de respuestas a preguntas retóricas, así como a sus funciones comunicativas.

*Palabras clave*: preguntas retóricas, respuestas a preguntas retóricas, debates presidenciales estadounidenses, debates políticos, respuestas de los remitentes, respuestas de los destinatarios.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As a powerful stylistic device which has a broad application in different areas of language use, and which is convenient for the effective realization of different communicative purposes, the rhetorical question (henceforth, RQ) has often been a topic of linguistic research, and has attracted a lot of attention over the past several decades. Studies have been conducted on the use of RQs in specific contexts, such as on social media (Oraby *et al.*, 2017; Ranganath *et al.*, 2017), internet forums (Kleinke, 2012), newspaper editorials (Badarneh, 2009), police interrogations (Cerović, 2016), sales presentations (Neitch & Niebuhr, 2022), talk shows (Ilie, 1999). Other studies focused on specific uses of RQs –for instance, Schaffer (2005) explored how RQs are used as effective answers to standard questions–, or on attempts to account for the nature of RQs. Namely, there is a difference of opinion among researchers when it comes to what RQs really are: for some (Sadock, 1974; Han, 2002), they are indirect statements veiled as questions; for others, only semantically questions, which can receive optional answers (Caponigro & Sprouse, 2007); redundant interrogatives whose answers are self-evident (Rohde, 2006); or even questions with a set of possible

answers, but answers which all have more or less similar implications (Van Rooy, 2003).

Closely tied to this issue is the question whether RQs actually call for answers, which still remains open (Neitch & Niebuhr, 2022). However, there is a prevalent opinion that RQs are not posed with the intention to elicit verbalized answers, although such answers might be possible (Caponigro & Sprouse, 2007; Biezma & Rawlins, 2017), or even desirable in certain situations –for instance, to engage the audience (Morgan, 2005)–. Another important thing in this regard is the role of the addressee in the interpretation of questions which are intended as rhetorical, since the rhetorical nature of a question can be open to negotiations (Kleinke, 2012).

Veering between a question and a statement, the RQ still remains an elusive linguistic phenomenon, hard to encapsulate into any comprehensive and clear frame which would define its nature and characteristics. Among different aspects of RQs which leave room for further research is the exploration of answers which they occasionally receive in communication. In this study, answers to RQs, as well as their communicative functions, are examined in the context of US presidential debates, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, and based on two corpora: a) presidential debates held in 2016 and 2020, which, due to the outrageous persona of Donald Trump, were much more heated and unconventional in the use of language than the previous ones, and b) presidential debates held from 1996 to 2012. Since convincing potential voters that the addressor is the right fit for the job, and his/her opponent is not, RQs, with their persuasive potential, seem to be a particularly convenient tool for accomplishing  this goal. Likewise, answers to such questions, whether provided by addressors or addressees, can also play a significant role in affecting the opinion of the audience, and achieving persuasive effects.

The aim of this paper is to explore the use of answers to RQs in US presidential debates, and to shed light on the following issues: 1) how often RQs receive answers, and who provides them; 2) what types of answers they receive, and how common each type is, 3) what communicative functions are performed by answers to RQs in US presidential debates. A pragmatic analysis of different communicative

functions of answers to RQs is conducted within the framework of the theory of speech acts, as it offers, through the analysis of illocutionary force and perlocutionary effects of those answers, an insight into what interlocutors intend to do by utilizing them.


## 2. BACKGROUND

### 2.1. *Rhetorical questions*

Ilie (1994: 128) defines the RQ as a «question used as a challenging statement», claiming that it has «one and only implied answer which excludes all other answers» (Ilie, 1994: 53). According to her, the RQ seeks what she terms as «a mental response» from the addressee, which consists of the addressee's recognition of the answer implied by the addressor.

In a similar vein, Han (2002: 203) states that RQs «have formal properties of assertions rather than of questions», noting that the polarity of what is apparently asked is opposite to that of the implied assertion (the RQ *Did I tell you that writing a dissertation was easy?* is equivalent to the assertion *I didn't tell you that writing...*, whereas the RQ *Didn't I tell you that writing a dissertation was easy?* is equivalent to *I told you that writing...*). As they are essentially assertions, RQs do not seek to elicit answers, as it is the case with ordinary questions.

Van Rooy (2003) claims that RQs are questions, which, just like the standard ones, invoke a set of possible answers, but what differentiates them from standard questions is that, in the case of RQs, there is almost no difference between the possible answers (the RQ *Did John lift a finger to help?* already implies that John's help was not adequate, so the possible answers about lifting a finger to help –*yes* or *no*, make no significant difference–).

Rohde (2006) states that RQs neither seek information (like standard questions do), nor provide it (like assertions do). Therefore, they represent «redundant interrogatives», which invoke a set of answers, but the obviousness of an answer is what differentiates them from standard questions. She demonstrates that RQs may imply four different types of answers: negative (*Who lifted a finger to help?*), positive (*Has the*

*educational system been so watered down that anybody who's above average is now gifted?*), non-null (*Who always shows up late for class?*) or multiple answers (*What's going to happen to these kids when they grow up?*) (Rohde, 2006: 135). She also notes that the addressee may provide answers to RQs in three cases: a) if the rhetorical nature of a question is misunderstood; b) if an RQ represents an exam question, or c) if the addressee wants to confirm the obvious answer (this is the most common type of answer provided by the addressee in her corpus).

According to Caponigro & Sprouse (2007), there is no real difference between rhetorical and standard questions at the semantic level. The only difference between them is at the level of pragmatics (what makes a question rhetorical in a particular context is the fact that both the addressor and addressee already know the answer to it). As they are essentially questions, RQs leave room for the same kinds of answers that may be provided to standard questions. Answers to RQs are optional, and may be offered by either the addressor or addressee.

Biezma & Rawlins (2017: 302) view RQs as interrogatives which «don't expect an answer», «have the feel of an assertion», and «can optionally be answered». They also note that, for a successful interpretation of a rhetorical nature of a question, there has to be «a conventional marking of a certain kind of speaker attitude» (Biezma & Rawlins, 2017: 307), which would differentiate it from a standard question (in other words, it is not enough that the addressor and addressee already know the answer).

## 2.2. *Speech-act theory*

Outlined by Austin (1962) and perfected by Searle (1969), the theory of speech acts represents one of the most significant theories of language use, and, as such, it attracted a lot of interest in linguistics, philosophy of language, and elsewhere, with the concept of speech acts becoming «one of the focal phenomena that any pragmatic theory must account for» (Levinson, 1980: 5). According to the theory of speech acts, utterances can be used to perform different types of actions, provided that certain conditions are met. Speech acts are performed in conformance with certain conventions (Austin, 1962), and they represent «basic or minimal

units of linguistic communication» (Searle, 1969: 16), which comprise three acts: locutionary (production of an utterance which is understandable and grammatically acceptable), illocutionary (the utterance is used with a specific illocutionary force, i.e. purpose or intention, such as to order, apologize, warn, etc.), and perlocutionary (production of certain effects on the audience, such as to persuade, encourage, frighten, etc.). The produced perlocutionary effects do not necessarily need to be the same as those intended by the addressor, since the addressee may misinterpret the addressor's intention, or simply view the illocutionary act in a different way (for instance, the intended perlocutionary effect could be to convince the addressees to accept the addressor's arguments, and the achieved one may be to anger them). Since the illocutionary force of utterances cannot be accounted for within the framework of their truth conditions, Austin (1962) introduced, and Searle (1969) systematized, a set of felicity conditions which need to be fulfilled in order for a speech act to be successfully performed: *essential* (the utterance represents the addressor's attempt to perform a speech act), *preparatory* (referring to a state of affairs which has to exist ahead of performing a speech act –for instance, if criticizing, the addressor needs to have a negative view of the target's actions–), *sincerity* (the addressor sincerely intends to perform the stated act), and *propositional content condition* (the words used by the addressor are in line with the illocutionary purpose –for instance, words with negative connotations are used when insulting, and those with positive connotations when praising someone–)[1].

Context plays a particularly important role when it comes to successful interpretation of the illocutionary force of an utterance, since different illocutionary acts may be performed by utilizing the same propositional content (i.e. the same locutionary act). Closely tied to this issue is the existence of indirect speech acts, in which, as noted by Searle (1975), one illocutionary act (for instance, asking a question) serves as performance of another one (for instance, making a request). Among other linguistic tools, rhetorical questions are particularly convenient for performing indirect speech acts (Frank, 1990), due to their function-form dichotomy.

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[1] For a detailed overview, see Searle (1969).

According to Searle's (1979) classification, speech acts can be grouped into assertives (committing the addressor to the truth of the conveyed proposition), expressives (expressing the addressor's feelings about something /someone), directives (pushing the addressee to do something), commissives (committing the addressor to some future actions), and declarations (creating a new reality simply by declaring something).

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. *Research questions*

In line with the above-stated goals, and based on the selected corpora, this study seeks to offer answers to the following research questions:

1) How often do RQs receive answers in political debates, and what kinds of answers do they receive?

2) What kinds of answers are the most/least common, and who provides them?

3) What communicative functions do those answers perform in the context of political debates?

4) What similarities / differences in regard to answers to RQs can be noted between the two corpora?

### 3.2. *Corpora*

Two seemingly similar corpora have been selected for this research, both of them comprising US presidential debates. The first one includes the debates that preceded two most recent US presidential elections, featuring Donald Trump facing Hillary Clinton (2016, three debates) and Joe Biden (2020, two debates). An overview of the RQs found in the first corpus, as well as answers to those RQs, is shown in the Table 1.

| Debate (participants, date, location, and word count) | Total RQs | Answered RQs | Number of answers[2] |
|---|---|---|---|
| Trump vs Biden (September 29, 2020) Cleveland, Ohio (20,053 words) | 39 | 17 (43.5%) | 23 (15 vs 8)[3] |
| Trump vs Biden (October 22, 2020) Nashville, Tennessee (18,328 words) | 35 | 9 (25.7%) | 9 (8 vs 1) |
| Trump vs Clinton (September 26, 2016) Hempstead, New York (17,194 words) | 21 | 5 (23.8%) | 5 (3 vs 2) |
| Trump vs Clinton (October 9, 2016) St.Louis, Missouri (16,568 words) | 27 | 7 (25.9%) | 10 (6 vs 4) |
| Trump vs Clinton (October 19, 2016) Nevada, Las Vegas (17,040 words) | 20 | 5 (25%) | 5 (5 vs 0) |
| Total | 142 | 43 (30.2%) | 52 (37 vs 15) |

Table 1: An overview of the use of (answers to) RQs in US presidential debates 2016-2020.


The second corpus consists of US presidential debates held between 1996 and 2012[4] (Clinton vs Dole 1996, two debates; Bush vs Gore 2000, three debates; Bush vs Kerry 2004, three debates; Obama vs McCain

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[2] Some of the RQs received more than one answer (in most instances, the addressor provides an answer to his/her own RQ, which is then countered by the addressee's answer to the same RQ), thus the number of answers to RQs is higher than the number of answered RQs.

[3] Answers provided by addressors vs answers provided by addressees.

[4] Initially, I had intended to include only two sets of presidential debates (2008 and 2012) in the second corpus as well, but the use of RQs was much rarer there, so I had to expand it with additional debates to have enough examples for the analysis. While there are typically three debates preceding US presidential elections, only two were held both in 2020 and 1996.

2008, three debates; and Obama vs Romney 2012, three debates)[5]. Table 2 presents an overview of RQs from the second corpus, along with answers to those RQs.

| Debate (participants, date, location, and word count) | Total RQs | Answered RQs | Number of answers |
|---|---|---|---|
| Obama vs Romney (October 3, 2012) Denver, Colorado (16,812 words) | 7 | 4 (57.1%) | 4 (4 vs 0)[6] |
| Obama vs Romney (October 16, 2012) Hempstead, New York (18,091 words) | 11 | 7 (63.3%) | 7 (7 vs 0) |
| Obama vs Romney (October 22, 2012) Boca Raton, Florida (17,110 words) | 8 | 5 (62.5%) | 5 (5 vs 0) |
| Obama vs McCain (September 26, 2008) Oxford, Mississippi (16,293 words) | 8 | 1 (12.5%) | 1 (1 vs 0) |
| Obama vs McCain (October 7, 2008) Nashville, Tennessee (15,956 words) | 12 | 3 (25%) | 3 (3 vs 0) |
| Obama vs McCain (October 15, 2008) Hempstead, New York (15,306 words) | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| Bush vs Kerry (September 30, 2004) Coral Gables, Florida (14,933 words) | 16 | 4 (25%) | 4 (3 vs 1) |

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[5] While these two corpora do relate to different periods of time in the relatively recent past, I did not intend this to be a diachronic study (in terms of comparing the use of language in two different time periods with the intention to find out how language evolved). The participants in the debates belong to (more or less) the same age group, and it is highly unlikely that their use of language has significantly changed between 1996 and 2020, especially in regard to rhetorical questions (for instance, Trump, who participated in 2020 debates, and Bill Clinton, who participated in 1996 debates, are of the same age; Obama, who participated in 2008 debates is younger than Trump and Biden, who participated in 2020 debates). Therefore, I believe the time difference is incidental, and too small to influence the results.

[6] Answers provided by addressors vs answers provided by addressees.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Bush vs Kerry (October 8, 2004)<br>St.Louis, Missouri (16,466 words) | 15 | 9 (60%) | 9 (9 vs 0) |
| Bush vs Kerry (October 13, 2004)<br>Tempe, Arizona (15,423 words) | 6 | 1 (16.6%) | 1 (1 vs 0) |
| Bush vs Gore (October 3, 2000)<br>Boston, Massachusetts (16,475 words) | 10 | 3 (30%) | 3 (2 vs 1) |
| Bush vs Gore (October 11, 2000)<br>Winston-Salem, North Carolina (16,106 words) | 10 | 4 (40%) | 4 (4 vs 0) |
| Bush vs Gore (October 17, 2000)<br>St.Louis, Missouri (15,200 words) | 9 | 2 (22.2%) | 2 (2 vs 0) |
| Clinton vs Dole (October 6, 1996)<br>Hartford, Connecticut (16,814 words) | 8 | 4 (50%) | 5 (5 vs 0) |
| Clinton vs Dole (October 16, 1996)<br>San Diego, California (16,561 words) | 7 | 1 (14.2%) | 1 (1 vs 0) |
| Total | 132 | 48 (36.3%) | 49 (47 vs 2) |

Table 2: An overview of the use of (answers to) RQs in US presidential debates 1996-2012.

Transcripts of all the debates were taken from the website of the Commision on Presidential Debates (https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts).

Since Trump's use of language was unprecedented for a presidential candidate[7], and significantly different from what one could expect in a political context (Sclafani, 2018), often being harsh and «in defiance of

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[7] For instance, Trump invented and persistently used insulting nicknames for his political opponents: *Crazy Bernie* for Bernie Sanders, *Crooked Hillary* for Hillary Clinton, *Slow Joe* for Joe Biden, etc. (Špago *et al.*, 2019).

conventions of politics» (Kranish & Fisher, 2016: 311), one would expect that uses of RQs and answers to RQs in his debates would also be different from what was the case before. Namely, the language he uses is much closer to informal, blunt everyday language than to moderate and diplomatic language typically used in the political setting.

Furthermore, the selection of two corpora is motivated by the intention to look for patterns in regard to answers to RQs in two sources, and to draw general conclusions about such answers in political debates based on potential similarities between examples from different corpora.

### 3.3. *Procedure, method and study design*

All RQs in the selected corpora, as well as instances of answers to RQs, have been identified manually. The content of each debate was copied into a Word document, and a document search using the question mark sign was run to identify all questions[8]. Then, questions which do not seek to elicit (informative) answers, but imply obvious answers instead, were marked as rhetorical, and from among them, those which are followed by answers were singled out. Expository questions (*How are we going to do that? We are going to do that by...*), questions which are used to attract attention (*You know what? It's no difference...*), nor questions for which it was not clear if they were rhetorical or not, were not included in the analysis. Regarding answers to RQs, only those instances in which answers to questions are provided were analyzed (responses such as *You're right*, *I agree*, *That's not true*, etc. were not considered as answers to RQs, since they respond to indirect statements implied by the RQs).

Both qualitative and quantitative methods have been used in the analysis of data (the former to describe and analyze different types of

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[8] As noted by one of the reviewers, this kind of search leaves out RQs which appear in the form of indirect questions, or which do not end in a question mark. However, in addition to being more convenient and time efficient (careful reading of the entire content of the two corpora would be much more challenging and time-consuming), it was selected for two more reasons: a) it was utilized in previous studies on RQs (for instance, Ranganath et al. 2017); b) in a recent study on RQs (Špago, 2023), I looked for all RQs whether they end in a question mark or not by reading the entire content of the corpora, and found only a small number of RQs that do not end in a question mark, which had only marginal impact on the overall results.

answers to RQs, patterns in which those answers appear, as well as potential reasons behind those answers, and the latter to examine the frequency of occurrence for different categories).

The pragmatic analysis of different functions of answers to RQs in the examined presidential debates has been done within the framework of the speech-act theory, since the exploration of illocutionary force and perlocutionary effects of those answers can offer an insight into intentions of interlocutors when providing such answers (what they are trying to do with those answers), as well as the persuasive effects they might have on the audience. In order to make sure that illocutionary force of the answers to RQs from the corpora is correctly assigned, three respondents (students from Master's program in linguistics, fluent English speakers) were asked to individually assess what illocutionary acts were performed by each of the answers to RQs (the answers were presented in context, and multiple-choice options were offered).

When examining potential similarities or differences between examples and patterns from the two corpora in regard to answers to RQs and their functions, the chi square test of independence (using the online tool at https://biomath.med.uth.gr/statistics/chi_square.html) has been utilized.


## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section is divided into four subsections: the first two present and discuss different types of answers to RQs in each of the two corpora, the third one explores communicative functions of those answers, and the fourth one compares findings from the two corpora.


### 4.1. *Answers to RQs in US presidential debates held in 2016 and 2020*

A total of 142 RQs (strings of two or more RQs were counted as one example) have been identified in the five debates preceding the US presidential elections in 2016 and 2020, with 43 (30.2%) receiving answers. As several RQs from this corpus received more than one answer, a total of 52 answers to RQs have been identified.

According to the results obtained from this corpus, answers to RQs are more often provided by addressors than by addressees (37 RQs, 71.1% of answers to RQs were provided by the addressor himself/herself). Three types of addressors' answers (answers which explicitly confirm the implied answer, answers as if the question was not rhetorical, and ironic/sarcastic answers) and two types of addressees' answers (answers to RQs which reject the implied answer, and answers which explicitly confirm the implied answer) have been identified.

### 4.1.1. Addressor's answers which explicitly confirm the implied answer

The most common type of addressor's answers found in this corpus is answers that openly express the implied answers, which account for 17 examples found in these five debates (45.9 % of addressors' answers, and 32.6% of all the answers to RQs from this corpus). By explicitly stating the implied answer, the addressor strengthens the persuasive power of the preceding RQ in an attempt to leave a stronger impression on the addressee and, more importantly, on the audience:

> (1) Biden: He told us what a great job Xi was doing. He said we owe him a debt of gratitude for being transparent with us. **And what did he do then?** *He then did nothing* (Trump vs Biden, September 29, 2020).

> (2) Trump: Now, you're talking about taking out ISIS. But you were there, and you were secretary of state when it was a little infant. Now it's in over 30 countries. **And you're going to stop them?** *I don't think so* (Trump vs Clinton, September 26, 2016).

### 4.1.2. Addressors' answers as if the question was not rhetorical

Found in 15 examples (40.5% of addressors' answers, and 28.8% of all answers to RQs in this corpus), such answers are somewhat different or more specific than those implied by the preceding RQs:

> (3) Biden: What I'd make China do is play by the international rules, not like he has done. (...) They have to play by the rules, and **what's he do?** *He embraces guys like the thugs like in North Korea, and, and, and the Chinese president and Putin and others, and he pokes his finger in the eye of all our friends, all of our allies* (Trump vs Biden, October 22, 2020).

(4) Trump: She complains that Donald Trump took advantage of the tax code. **Well, why didn't she change it? Why didn't you change it when you were a senator?** *The reason you didn't is that all your friends take the same advantage that I do.* And I do. We have provisions in the tax code that, frankly, we could change (Trump vs Clinton, October 9, 2016).

In the above examples, instead of answers implied by the RQs (*He does nothing to ensure that* / *She has no excuse for not doing it, and no right to criticize me*), the addressors provide answers which are harsher on the addressees, and have more negative implications (*He makes friends with American enemies* / *She had a secret motive for not doing it*). Therefore, such answers to RQs indicate, in line with Van Roy (2003) and Rohde (2006), that RQs actually invoke a set of possible answers. However, it is not that there is only one answer among them which excludes all the others, but, at least when it comes to wh-RQs, there is a set of related answers which have equal chances of being employed (for instance, in example 3, any answer which presents the target in a negative light is a potential answer).

### 4.1.3. Ironic/sarcastic answers provided by the addressor

The rarest type of addressors' answers to RQs in this corpus is ironic/sarcastic answers, which were used in 5 examples (13.5% of addressors' answers, and 9.6% of all the answers). Such answers may be integrated into an RQ, formulated as separate (fragmentary) RQs following the ones they provide answers to, or as simple answers (Example 6).

(5) Trump: Well, Aleppo is a disaster. It's a humanitarian nightmare. But it has fallen from the – from any standpoint. **I mean, what do you need**, *a signed document*? Take a look at Aleppo. It's so sad when you see what happened (Trump vs Clinton, October 19, 2016).

(6) Clinton: It was personal e-mails, not official.
Trump: **Oh, 33,000?** *Yeah*   (Trump vs Clinton, October 9, 2016).

Since sarcastic utterances increase the hostility towards the target (Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000), such answers intensify the aggressive attitude of the speaker, and strengthen criticism. Additionally, they facilitate the

rhetorical interpretation of the preceding question, since, without them, the rhetorical nature of the initial question might not be as clear.

### 4.1.4. Addressees' answers to RQs which reject the implied answer

The most common type of answers to RQs from this corpus provided by the addressee is the one which responds to RQs as if they were not rhetorical at all –such answers appear in 11 examples (73.3% of addressee's answers, and 21.1% of all the answers to RQs from this corpus)–. While, as noted by Rohde (2006), the addressee's motivation for providing such answers may be linked with a failure to recognize the rhetorical nature of those questions (i.e. misinterpreting the speaker's intention), the prevalent reason seems to be the addressee's rejection to acknowledge the implied answer as undisputed.

> (7) Trump: Well, all of these bad leaders from ISIS are leaving Mosul. **Why can't they do it quietly? Why can't they do the attack, make it a sneak attack, and after the attack is made, inform the American public that we've knocked out the leaders, we've had tremendous succeess?** People leave. **Why do they have to say we're going to be attacking Mosul within the next four to six weeks, which is what they're saying? How stupid is our country?**
> Moderator: *There are sometimes reasons the military does that. Psychological warfare.*
> Trump: I can't think of any. I can't think of any. And I'm pretty good at it.
> Moderator: *It might be to help get civilians out* (Trump vs Clinton, October 9, 2016).

> (8) Trump: You've been doing this for 30 years. **Why are you just thinking about these solutions right now?** For 30 years, you've been doing it, and now you're just starting to think of solutions. (...)
> Clinton: *Well, actually, I have thought about this quite a bit.*
> Trump: Yeah, for 30 years (Trump vs Clinton, September 26, 2016).

As shown in the above examples, by providing alternative answers, which are in opposition to the ones hinted by the speaker as obvious (*there is no reason not to do that / you have no excuse*), the addressee sheds new light on those RQs, indicating that their rhetorical nature may be negotiable (cf. Kleinke, 2012).

### 4.1.5. Addressees' answers which explicitly confirm the implied answer

Finally, the addressee may acknowledge the implied answer by stating it explicitly, thereby showing agreement with the addressor's implied answer. Although this kind of answer to RQs is, for obvious reasons, quite unlikely for presidential debates, it does appear in this corpus in 4 examples (26.6% of addressees' answers, and 7.6% of all answers to RQs in this corpus).

> (9) Biden: (...) and by the way, violence in response is never appropriate, never appropriate. Peaceful protest is, violence is never appropriate.
> Trump: **What is peaceful protest? When they run through the middle of the town... and burn down your stores and kill people all over the place...**
> Biden: *That is not peaceful protest* (Trump vs Biden, September 29, 2020).

Such answers can also be used to partially agree with the implied answer, while actually showing disagreement with the opponent, as shown in the following example (the implied answer is «no»):

> (10) Biden: He takes everything out of context, but the point is, look, we have to move toward a net zero emmisions. The first place to do that by the year 2035 is in energy production. By 2050, totally.
> Trump: **Is he gonna get China do it? Is he going to get China do it?**
> Moderator: No, we're finished with this. We have to move to our final question.
> Biden: *No, I'm going to rejoin the Paris Accord and make China abide by what they agreed to* (Trump vs Biden, October 22, 2020).

### 4.2. *Answers to RQs in US presidential debates held in 1996-2012*

As for this corpus, which comprised 14 presidential debates, a total of 132 RQs have been found, out of which 48 (36.3%) received answers. The obtained results show that almost all the answers to RQs from this corpus were provided by the addressor (47 answers; 95.9%), mostly in the form or answers which explicitly confirm the implied answer, or those that respond to RQs as if they were not rhetorical. Addressors' ironic or sarcastic answers, as well as addressees' answers to RQs which reject the implied answer, were employed as well, but only in two instances each.

### 4.2.1. Addressors' answers which explicitly confirm the implied answer

This is the most common type of answers to RQs in the second corpus, as it appears in 30 instances (61.2% of all the answers). Such answers urge the addressee (and the audience) to accept the addressor's arguments as obvious and logical.

> (11) Gore: I mean, if you were the governor of a state that was dead last in health care for families, and all of a sudden you found yourself with the biggest surplus your state had ever had in its history, **wouldn't you want to maybe use some of it to climb from 50th to, say, 45 or 40 or something or maybe better?** *I would* (Bush vs Gore, October 11, 2000).

> (12) McCain: I want to give every American a $5,000 refundable tax credit. They can take it anywhere, across state lines. **Why not? Don't we go across state lines when we purchase other things in America?** *Of course it's OK to go across state lines because in Arizona they may offer a better plan that suits you best than it does here in Tennessee* (Obama vs McCain, October 7, 2008).

### 4.2.2. Addressors' answers as if the question was not rhetorical

Another type of answers to RQs which was significantly present in the second corpus (found in 15 examples; 30.6% of all the answers to RQs) is addressors' answers which respond to preceding RQs as if they were standard questions. As noted earlier, such answers expand and strengthen the implications of the implied answer, and, thereby, carry additional persuasiveness.

> (13) Romney: There are more people in poverty, one out of six people in poverty. **How about food stamps?** *When he took office, 32 million people were on food stamps. Today, 47 million people are on food stamps* (Obama vs Romney, October 16, 2012).

> (14) Gore: Look, the world's temperature is going up, weather patterns are changing, storms are getting more violent and unpredictable. **What are we going to tell our children?** I'm a grandfather now. *I want to be able to tell my grandson when I'm in my later years that I didn't turn away from*

*the evidence that showed that we were doing some serious harm* (Bush vs Gore, October 11, 2000).

### 4.2.3. Other answers to RQs

While the above two types of answers account for a vast majority of answers to RQs in the second corpus, two other types of answers were also used in four instances: ironic / sarcastic answers offered by addressors (Example 15), and addressees' answers which reject the implied answer (Example 16) (each type was used twice in the presidential debates from this corpus).

> (15) Bush: He talks about a grand idea: Let's have a summit; we're going to solve the problem in Iraq by holding a summit. **And what is he going to say to those people that show up at the summit?** *Join me in the wrong war at the wrong time at the wrong place. Risk your troops in a war you've called a mistake* (Bush vs Kerry, October 8, 2004).

> (16) Kerry: And the test is not whether you're spending more money. The test is, **are you doing everything possible to make America safe?** We didn't need that tax cut. We needed to be safe.
> Bush: *Of course we're doing everything we can to protect America. I wake up every day thinking about how best to protect America* (Bush vs Kerry, September 30, 2004).

### 4.3. *Communicative functions of answers to RQs in US presidential debates*

In this subsection, five most common communicative functions of answers to RQs in the examined corpora (each found in ten or more examples) are explored through the lens of speech acts. As these functions are mostly present in both corpora, they are not examined separately here (a comparison of differences and similarities between the two corpora is presented in subsection 4.4.).

### 4.3.1. Blaming

Blaming is an expressive speech act whose illocutionary purpose is to express negative evaluation of the target or his/her actions. However, blaming is always geared towards the one who does something (perceived as) wrong, rather than his/her actions, as the intention of the addressor in such instances «aims at tracking some normative failure on the part of the blamed» (Simion, 2021: 7600). As such, blaming is convenient and commonly used in political debates, since «the attribution of blame to certain actors affects public opinion and voting behavior» (Hansson *et al.*, 2022: 3). In the examined data, blaming is mostly associated with the two most common types of answers provided by addressors, where the addressor's intention is to achieve the perlocutionary effect of persuading the audience that his/her opponent is incompetent and unreliable, often by launching personal attacks on the opponent[9].

> (17) Biden: And so here, here's the point. The point is that, that's what he is keep trying to rile everything up. He doesn't want to calm things down. (...) **What's he do?** *He just pours gasoline in the fire. Constantly. At every single solitary time* (Biden vs Trump, September 29, 2020).

While the same illocutionary force is used in preceding RQs (as indirect speech acts), explicit answers energize and intensify it by turning it into a direct illocution, which is particularly evident in answers to RQs as if they were standard questions. If we compare the implied (*he is not doing the right thing*) and the explicit answer in the above example, it is obvious that the explicit one has a much greater potential to achieve the desired perlocutionary effect on voters. Therefore, answers to RQs in such instances serve to perform blaming as a direct speech act, in an attempt to increase its persuasiveness, as well as chances of affecting the opinion of future voters in line with the addressor's intended perlocutionary goal.

### 4.3.2. Criticizing

Criticizing is an expressive speech act whose illocutionary point is to voice the addressor's «dissatisfaction with or dislike of H's action or to

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[9] Hansson *et al.* (2023: 22) found that attacking the opponent's character is «more critical than blaming them for causing a negative outcome».

urge the H to improve his/her future actions» (El-Dakhs, 2019: 493). Therefore, criticizing is focused on negatively viewed actions or statements, rather than on people who perform them. While the audience can easily infer who is responsible for the criticized actions, in such instances the addressor does not attribute blame.

> (18) Dole: You may think the biggest employer in America is General Motors, but I've got news for you. It's Manpower Services. Hiring people temporarily who have lost their jobs and they get to work for 30 days or 60 days. **That's a good economy?** *I don't think so* (Clinton vs Dole, October 16, 1996).

Answers to RQs which carry the illocutionary force of criticizing are usually provided by addressors (either as those that explicitly confirm the implied answer, or those that answer RQs as if they were standard questions). In the above example (and other similar examples found in the corpora), addressor's illocutionary purpose is to highlight the opponent's mistakes (whether real or imagined), and achieve the perlocutionary effect on the audience, trying to convince them that the addressor would do better than that. In addition to this, other potential perlocutionary effects the addressor is trying to achieve in such instances are those of frightening or angering the audience, by drawing their attention to potential problems or difficulties they might face if the opponent gets elected. Namely, as noted by Friedrichs *et al.* (2022), fear and anger are two emotions frequently employed by politicians in their attempts to get elected, or promote their causes. While preceding RQs themselves carry the same illocutionary force (although as indirect illocutions), the role of answers to RQs in such instances is to intensify those negative emotions in the audience by performing criticizing as a direct speech act.

Since the perlocutionary act is geared towards the third party (audience, i.e. potential voters), the opponent is, in such instances, often mentioned in the third person, rather than addressed directly.), these explicit answers serve to strengthen criticism and increase persuasiveness of this speech act.

### 4.3.3. Asserting

Asserting is a speech act whose illocutionary point is to «present (or put forward) a proposition as true» (Marsili & Green, 2021: 23), and it is realized by «uttering a plain declarative sentence» (Sbisa, 2023: 268). While assertions are often implied by RQs as indirect speech acts, explicit claims made in the form of addressors' answers to those RQs further increase the addressors' efforts to intensify the pelocutionary effect of convincing the audience to accept the presented opinions as undisputed facts.

> (19) Romney: I want to invest in research. Research is great. Providing funding to universities and think tanks is great. **But investing in companies?** *Absolutely not* (Obama vs Romney, October 22, 2012).

The use of answers to RQs with the illocutionary force of asserting was, in the examined corpora, always associated with addressors' answers which confirm the implied answer, or those that answer RQs as if not rhetorical.

### 4.3.4. Expressing disagreement

This is one of so-called reactive, or secondary illocutions (Popa-Wyatt, 2017), as it occurs only as a reaction to another, preceding speech act. The illocutionary point is to assert that what was «uttered or presumed to be espoused» by the other interlocutor is untrue (Liu, 2004: 28). Addressees' answers to RQs which reject the implied answer in most cases had the illocutionary force of disagreement, since responding to RQs as if they were standard questions seems to be an effective way to express disagreement, and try to convince the audience that the opponent's claim is not sound.

> (20) Biden: He doesn't want to let me answer, because he knows I have the truth. His position has been totally thoroughly discredited...
> Trump: **By who?** The media.
> Biden: *By everybody* (Trump vs Biden, September 29, 2020).

In the above example, the addressee refuses to accept the implied (and then explicitly stated) answer as evident, providing an alternative one, which contradicts the opponent's claim. Just like in other examples from the examined corpora, the perlocutionary act of persuading is aimed for

the third party (future voters), rather than the opponent who participates in the debate.

### 4.3.5. Ridiculing

Ridiculing is an expressive speech act whose illocutionary point is to express a «negative attitude towards a target» (whether a person, idea or opinion), in order to «publicly stigmatize it as untrustworthy» (Witek, 2022: 71). Ridiculing is, like expressing disagreement, a secondary illocution (Popa-Wyatt, 2016), since it is used as a response to a primary illocution, such as asserting. A particularly convenient way of expressing ridicule is to offer sarcastic answers to one's own RQs.

> (21) Biden: I'll tell you what, he is not for any help for people needing healthcare.
> Trump: **Who is**, *Bernie*? (Biden vs Trump, September 29, 2020).

Ridiculing is the only speech act associated with addressors' answers to RQs where answers have different illocutionary force than the RQs that precede them. As such answers, due to sarcasm, carry humorous connotations, they also make the addressor's point more memorable, and the perlocutionary effects more powerful.

### 4.4. *Comparison of findings from the two corpora*

The use of RQs was much more common in the first corpus (on average 28.4 RQs per debate vs only 9.4 RQs per debate in the second corpus), which indicates that RQs are much more likely to be used in aggressive, heated debates, where more personal attacks on opponents take place.

Regarding the share of RQs which received answers, there is no statistically significant difference between the two corpora (p > .05. $X^2$(1, $N$ = 274) = 1.141, $p$ = 0.28544112). On average, answers to RQs appear in one third of the cases where RQs are used (30.2% of answered RQs from the first corpus vs 36.3% from the second one).

As for the types of answers to RQs in the two corpora, there is a statistically significant difference (p < .05. $X^2$(3, $N$ = 97) = 11.103, $p$ = 0.01118176), which is mainly due to addressees' answers to RQs, which

are almost completely absent in the second corpus, and, when it comes to answers which reject the implied answer, significantly present in the first one (accounting for 21.1% of answers to RQs). This can also be explained by aggressiveness of the debates from the first corpus, where interlocutors often felt compelled to interrupt one another, and answer RQs in order to reject implied answers. When it comes only to addressors' answers, which were commonly used in both corpora, there is no statistically significant difference between the two corpora ( p > .05. $X^2$(2, $N$ = 84) = 3.744, $p$ = 0.15381572). A comparison of different types of answers to RQs in the two corpora is presented in Table 3.

| Type of answers to RQs | First corpus (2016-2020) | Second corpus (1996-2012) |
|---|---|---|
| Addressors' answers which confirm the implied answer | 17 (32.6%) | 30 (61.2%) |
| Addressors' answers as if RQs were standard questions | 15 (28.8%) | 15 (30.6%) |
| Addressors' ironic / sarcastic answers | 5 (13.5%) | 2 (4.08%) |
| Addressees' answers which reject the implied answer | 11 (21.1%) | 2 (4.08%) |
| Addressees' answers which confirm the implied answer | 4 (7.6%) | 0 |
| Total | 52 | 49 |

Table 3: A comparison of different types of answers to RQs in the US Presidential debates.

In regard to the most common communicative functions of answers to RQs in the two corpora, a statistically significant difference has been observed (p < .05. $X^2$(4, $N$ = 84) = 13.787, $p$ = 0.00800683). Namely, such answers were much more associated with blaming and ridiculing the opponent, as well as expressing disagreement, in the presidential debates 2016-2020, which can be explained by the aggressiveness of interlocutors

in those debates, as well as their attempts to launch personal attacks on opponents.  Table 4 shows an overview of the communicative functions of answers to RQs in the two corpora.

| Communicative functions | First corpus (2016-2020) | Second corpus (1996-2012) | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Blaming | 20 (38.4%) | 9 (18.3%) | 29 |
| Criticizing | 5 (9.6%) | 13 (26.5%) | 18 |
| Asserting | 6 (11.5%) | 10 (20.4%) | 16 |
| Expressing disagreement | 9 (17.3%) | 2 (4.1%) | 11 |
| Ridiculing | 7 (13.4%) | 3 (6.1%) | 10 |
| Other (expressing agreement, bragging, promising) | 2 (3.8%) | 6 (12.2%) | 8 |
| Other (unclear) | 3 (5.7%) | 6  (12.2%) | 9 |
| Total | 52 | 49 | 101 |

Table 4: Communicative functions performed by answers to RQs in the two corpora.

When it comes to individual types of answers, there is no statistically significant difference between the functions of addressors' answers which explicitly confirm the implied answer (p > .05. $X^2$(2, $N$ = 42) = 1.47, $p$ = 0.47950546). In both corpora, such answers are associated with blaming, criticizing or making an assertion. As for addressors' answers to RQs as if standard questions, almost all such answers in the first corpora were used with the illocutionary force of blaming, whereas in the second corpus this function was not that prevalent. Addressors' ironic/sarcastic answers in both corpora were, predictably, associated with expressing ridicule, and addressees' answers to RQs which reject the

implied answer were mostly used to express disagreement, as shown in Table 5.

| Communicative functions | Addressors' answers which confirm the implied answer[10] | Addressors' answers as if standard question | Addressors' ironic/sarcastic answers | Addressees' answers rejecting the implied answer |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Blaming | 6 vs 5 | 13 vs 4 | - | 1 vs 0 |
| Criticizing | 5 vs 11 | 0 vs 2 | - | - |
| Asserting | 6 vs 9 | 0 vs 1 | - | - |
| Expressing disagreement | - | - | - | 8 vs 2[11] |
| Ridiculing | - | 1 vs 0 | 5 vs 2 | 2 vs 0 |

Table 5: Comparison of the main communicative functions for different types of answers to RQs.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The results confirm, in line with previous studies (Caponigro & Sprouse, 2007; Biezma & Rawlins, 2017; and others), that RQs sometimes do receive answers, just like standard questions. According to the overall results obtained in this study, answers to RQs in US presidential debates occur in around one third of the cases where RQs are used. When it comes to the share of addressors' and addressees'

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[10] First (2016-2020 debates) vs second corpus (1996-2012 debates).
[11] In addition to these 10 examples where answers to RQs had the illocutionary force of expressing disagreement, one more example with the same force was found among addressees' answers which confirm the implied answer (Example 10).

answers, the results indicate that the former is much more common in political debates.

Three types of addressors' answers have been identified, with two of them being particularly common (accounting for 76.2% of all the answers to RQs found in the two corpora) –those that explicitly state the implied answer, and those that answer RQs as if they were standard questions–. As for the latter, such answers are in line with the implied ones, but they still add some extra information or implications, thereby showing, in line with Van Rooy (2003), that RQs invoke a range of answers (with similar implications), rather than a single answer. The third type of addressors' answers, utilized much less frequently than the first two types, is ironic/sarcastic answers. Regarding the addressees' answers to RQs, one type was significantly present in the first corpus (and also found in the second one) –those that reject the implied answer–. While Rohde (2006) claims that such answers occur in instances where the addressor's intention is misunderstood (i.e. the addressee believes the question is information-eliciting), the findings of this study indicate that the addressee's motivation in providing such answers is linked with his/her intention to reject the implied answer as obvious by offering alternative ones, thereby indicating, in line with Kleinke (2012), that the rhetorical nature of those questions is actually open to negotiation. While it is quite surprising for this kind of discourse, a few examples of addressees' answers which acknowledge the implied answer have also been found in the first corpus.

The pragmatic analysis of the role of answers to RQs in the examined presidential debates shows that blaming or criticizing the opponent, as well as making assertions, are the illocutionary acts most commonly associated with the use of the two most common types of addressors' answers to RQs. The other two common functions of answers to RQs are disagreement or ridicule, mostly linked with addressees' answers that respond to RQs as if standard questions (thereby rejecting the implied answer as obvious), and addressors' ironic/sarcastic answers, respectively.

The results of the study strongly suggest that the use of RQs in political debates is related to their level of aggressiveness, since only five US presidential debates held in 2016 and 2020, which were extremely

heated and forceful due to Donald Trump's language style, contained more RQs than 14 presidential debates held in 1996-2012. Certain statistically significant differences between the two corpora have been noted, indicating that the use of RQs, and answers to RQs, is affected by whether the participants in presidential debates use moderate and politically correct language, or, conversely, blunt and unconventional one. The differences include the use of addressees' answers to RQs, which were significantly present only in the first corpus, and the communicative functions of answers to RQs, which were more commonly associated with blaming and ridiculing, as well as with expressing disagreement, in the first corpus.

Although the size of the selected corpora represents a limitation of the study, the findings of this research indicate patterns and tendencies associated with the use of answers to RQs in political debates. Future studies could explore the topic on a larger corpus, as well as by comparing data from different language settings.

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