Why Rhetorical Questions

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The paper offers an analysis of a particular type of rhetorical question (RQ), the so-called Doubly Marked Interrogative (DMI), a type of *why*-marked RQ with a particularly puzzling form and function described by Khalaily and Doron (2016), who report examples such as (1B) in colloquial Modern Hebrew and other Semitic languages:

(1)   A: *Clean your room!*
        B: *lama   mi met*
          why   who died
          'Who died?!' (counts as a rejection of A's demand)

A DMI consists of a *why*-question which embeds an *additional* question Q: [Why Q], yet it is interpreted as a single question, Q. First, we show that the DMI is not a multiple question – the language does not allow sentence-initial stacked *wh*-phrases. Second, we show that the DMI in (1) can be distinguished from the corresponding sequence of two questions *Why? Who died?*. Phonologically, it is marked by lack of a pause between the two questions, and by the falling intonation characteristic of RQs. Semantically, it can only be answered, if at all, by answering Q, e.g. the question *Who died?* in (1), and not the question *Why?*. Pragmatically, the DMI in (1B) is a RQ which serves to reject a previous speech-act such as (1A), by implying that the previous speech act could only be justified by an outstanding occurrence such as someone's death.

Syntactically, RQs are typically indistinguishable from ordinary questions (OQs). Nevertheless they are sometimes specially marked: in English, by the introductory phrase *after all* (Sadock 1971, 1974) or by the occurrence of strong negative polarity items (SNPIs) (Borkin 1971); in formal Hebrew, by special question words *klum, ve-xi, ha-lo* (Burstein 2013); and in colloquial Modern Hebrew – by embedding under *why* as in (1).

Following Caponigro & Sprouse (2007) (and *pace* Han 2002 who analyses RQs semantically as polarity reversing assertions rather than questions), we assume that RQs have the same semantics as OQs. We adopt, for the sake of concreteness, the semantic analysis of questions of Karttunen (1977). Thus the denotation of the question *mi met* 'Who died?' in (1) is:

(2) $[[\text{Who died?}]] = \lambda p.\ \exists x[p=x \text{ died}]\ \&\ p(w_0)$

The *why*-question in the DMI is a *metalinguistic question*, which, similarly to metalinguistic negation (Horn 1985), targets speech acts rather than propositions. While the standard use of *why* inquires about reasons/justifications for [[S]], where S is a sentence, as in (3), the metalinguistic use inquires about reasons/justifications for a previous utterance of S by the addressee, as in (4):

(3) $[[\text{Why S}]] = \lambda p.\ \exists x[p=x \text{ is reason/justification for } [[S]]]\ \&\ p(w_0)$

(4) $[[\text{Why SA}_A\text{S}]] = \lambda p.\ \exists x[p=x \text{ is reason/justification for } [[\text{SA}_A\text{S}]]]\ \&\ p(w_0)$
        condition: SA_AS describes a previous speech act SA performed by addressee *A* uttering S

In the DMI, the metalinguistic *why*-question is sluiced: [[Why ~~SA~~$_A$~~S~~] Q]. It does not contribute to the semantic value of the DMI, which is equivalent to its embedded question Q, but rather contributes a condition to the felicity of the DMI, the condition that a positive

answer for the *why*-question presupposes a positive answer for Q.[1] We mark the presupposition relation as >>:

(5)   [[Why Q]] = [[[Why S̶A̶ₐS̶] Q]] = [[Q]]

condition: [[Why SAₐS]] ≠ ∅ >> [[Q]] ≠ ∅

The condition in (5) states that a positive answer for the *why*-question presupposes a positive answer for Q. Hence, answering Q negatively is less likely than answering the *why*-question negatively. In other words, Q is the least likely among the two given alternative questions to be answered negatively. Accordingly, the condition in (5) actually determines that Q is *emphatic*, i.e. undergoes *even*-exhaustification (Chierchia 2013).

RQs are distinguished from OQs in their use. Unlike an OQ, which seeks an answer from the addressee, a RQ does not expect an answer. It has been shown that this effect can be brought upon by an emphatic component inherent to some RQs (Krifka 1995). The emphatic component accounts for the *negative bias* of RQs noted by Sadock (1971, 1974) and Han (2002), i.e. its conveying a bias toward a negative answer. This bias is achieved by choosing, from among the relevant alternative questions, the question which makes the conditions for a positive answer the weakest. The speaker lowers the threshold for a positive answer, thereby showing that (s)he is certain that the answer would be negative.

The DMI marks Q as emphatic by contrasting it with the relevant alternative, the *why*-question. The emphatic marking creates a negative bias for Q, achieved by picking the question which should be easiest among the alternatives to answer in the positive. The negative bias for Q creates an even stronger negative bias for the *why*-question, thus implying a rejection of SAₐS.

To conclude, we have proposed that the DMI [[Why S̶A̶ₐS̶] Q] is interpreted as the single emphatic rhetorical question Q contrasted with the question [Why SAₐS]. The contrast marks Q as emphatic, and hence as a rhetorical question. The negative bias for Q determines an even stronger negative bias for the question [Why SAₐS]. This implies that there is not even the least justification for SAₐS.

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[1] A 'positive' answer is the positive questioned proposition in yes-no questions, and the answer that the extension of the questioned predicate is non-empty, in the constituent question cases.