

CRITICIZING WITH A QUESTION

Cassandre Creswell

People in intimate, informal relationships frequently use questions as an indirect method to criticize an undesirable situation, particularly one that is already in existence and contrary to what the speaker wishes, but in accordance with what the speaker believes the addressee wants, as in example (1):

- (1) Are we going this way? (*implicating* 'This is not a desirable way to go.')

The purpose of this paper is to explain how and why questions of this kind can be used to implicate criticisms.

1. Introduction

The first section discusses how these questions are distinguished from sincere questions with no implicature of criticism. I claim the crucial criteria on which correct interpretation depends are the beliefs of the addressee, and show how these beliefs result in a pattern of inferences that lead to correct or incorrect interpretation of the question as a criticism. The second section identifies why a speaker's use of these questions is a strategy of politeness. Briefly, these questions allow the speaker to refrain from directly performing a face-threatening act in order to satisfy the negative face of the addressee (Brown and Levinson 1987), and they allow the speaker to offer options by giving the addressee more than one possibility of how to react (Lakoff 1973). Both of these reasons are subsumed by the more fundamental desire of the speaker to preserve an informal, intimate relationship with the addressee. The final section compares rephrasings of the question in alternate forms with a different quality of politeness but with the same ability to criticize some state of affairs. This comparison explains why a speaker chooses to use a question, rather than some other form, to express criticism.

Form of the Question

Although an explanation of how criticism-implicating questions function should be universally applicable to all questions that implicate criticism, in this paper I restrict the class of questions considered to positively phrased, yes-no questions that use forms of *be* or *do*. This restriction of class allows a more focused and effective explanation of the logic of my argument.

The criterion of positive phrasing eliminates questions with the *n't* contraction as in (2), but allows questions like (3) where the *not* occurs in a position other than the position immediately following the initial element:

- (2) Aren't you going to get a haircut?
(3) Are you not going to get a haircut?

Question (2) can make either an implicature that the speaker believes that the addressee intends to get a haircut or that the addressee intends to refrain from getting a haircut and in either case, the addressee's intention is inconsistent with another assumption of the speaker. Question (3), however, can only implicate that the speaker believes the addressee intends to refrain from getting a haircut. This double implicature of (2) with its conflicting possible interpretations for exactly what state of affairs is being criticized interferes with a clear characterization of the necessary inferences the addressee makes. Therefore, including negatively-phrased questions in this analysis would unnecessarily complicate the characterization.

No restriction on tense of verb or person of the subject is motivated. Earlier examples—(3), using second person, and (1), using first person plural—and further examples (4-6) using third person and a variety of tenses can all be used to implicate criticism:

- (4) Does that shirt have to be washed?
- (5) Did that shirt have to be washed?
- (6) Will that shirt have to be washed?

Variations in person and tense do not affect the usefulness of a question for implicating criticism. Neither do they complicate the description of the inferences an addressee makes, and so they are not restricted in this characterization.

2. Distinguishing Criteria: Beliefs and Inferences of the Addressee

Although criticizing with a question is an act of a speaker, the characterization of criticism-implicating questions is explained from an addressee's, rather than a speaker's, perspective. Questions can only be successfully used to criticize if they are interpreted as implicating criticism. Correct interpretation depends on the beliefs of the addressee about the speaker's intentions, not the speaker's intentions themselves. The addressee must be able to distinguish a critical question from a sincere request for information. The difference can only be perceived if the addressee holds certain beliefs. The absence of these beliefs will prevent the addressee from making the inferences necessary for a correct interpretation of the question. Therefore, characterizing the beliefs and inferences of the addressee accounts for both successful and unsuccessful interpretation of questions that imply criticism.

The addressee must hold two beliefs for interpretation of criticism-implicating questions. First, the addressee must believe that the speaker believes she¹ knows the answer to the question, and second, the addressee must believe that the speaker intends for the addressee to believe that the speaker knows the answer. In the absence of these beliefs, misinterpretation occurs. In order to illustrate how different interpretations can be generated, different beliefs of the addressee will be matched with the use of an example question in a given situation. In the situation in (7), John is holding a really ugly shirt. Mary asks John:

- (7) Are you going to wear that shirt?

First, if John does not believe that Mary believes he does intend to wear that shirt, then he cannot correctly interpret the question as a criticism. One possibility for a non-criticism interpretation occurs if John believes that Mary believes that he does *not* intend to wear the shirt. The utterance will be almost nonsensical; John will have a difficult time thinking of any interpretation of it.² A second possibility for non-criticism interpretation occurs if John believes that Mary holds no belief about whether or not he intends to wear the shirt. In this case then, the utterance must be a sincere question because Mary wants information, i.e. she wants to know what John intends to do.

Correct interpretation as implying criticism can only occur if, as stated above, the addressee believes the speaker believes she knows the answer. This inference is made through assessing the relevance of the question. When a speaker asks a question with an answer she already knows, she is apparently violating Grice's Cooperative Principle that conversational contributions must follow the accepted purpose or direction of the exchange (Grice 1975). A question with a known answer makes no readily recognized contribution to a conversation. No obvious reason exists for the speaker to ask something she already knows. As a rational human being engaged in conversation, the addressee assumes that the speaker is following the Cooperative Principle and, therefore, a reason does exist for her utterance. He then constructs a reason for asking such a question, and infers what implicature the speaker desired to make through her use of the question.

The chain of reasoning that leads to an implicature of criticism can best be outlined in combination with the use of an example, such as (7) in the above situation. This chain begins with John's beliefs: one, that Mary knows the answer to (7), that is she already thinks 'Yes, he is going to wear the shirt,' and two, that Mary intends for him to believe that she knows this answer. Holding these two beliefs, John cannot regard the question as a sincere request for information because Mary apparently already possesses the information. Nonetheless, if Mary is asking about the wearing of the shirt, it must have some relevance.³ Questioning a state of affairs, the wearing of a certain shirt in this situation, regarded as definitely true could hardly be rational if the speaker is in full support of such a state of affairs. On the other hand if the speaker is unhappy with a state of affairs, calling attention to the situation through asking an obvious question is perfectly rational because, if the addressee is aware of the speaker's unhappiness with a situation, he may try to rectify the situation in accordance with the speaker's wishes. So, the next inference the addressee makes is that the relevance of the question lies in its ability to call attention to a state of affairs and make the speaker's unhappiness known. Making one's unhappiness about a state of affairs known is a very simple definition of criticism.

The example situation can demonstrate this final part of the chain of inference too. John must interpret the apparent irrelevance of Mary's question about his wearing of the shirt as Mary calling attention to his plan to wear the ugly shirt in order to implicate her unhappiness with this state of affairs and her wish to make this unhappiness known. If John does follow this chain of inferences, he can cor-

rectly interpret Mary's question as an implicature of criticism, specifically the implicature in (8):

(8) 'I don't think you should wear that shirt.'

The chain of inferences made by the addressee in this particular situation can be applied in any other situation in which questions are used to implicate criticisms. The following example situation will further demonstrate the process of interpretation. In this case, John has been repeatedly cracking his knuckles for the last five minutes. Mary asks John (9).

(9) Do you have to do that?

The steps of reasoning John needs to follow to interpret (9) as criticism-implicating are very similar to the ones in the situation explicated above. First, John must believe that Mary already knows the answer to her question; she thinks 'No, there is no compelling reason for John to be cracking his knuckles.' He must also believe that Mary intends for him to believe that she knows this answer. Because he thinks she knows the answer already, the question cannot be a sincere request for information, and he must construct an alternate explanation for Mary's asking it. Because the answer to her question is obvious, John must interpret her asking it as a way to call attention to the state of affairs she is questioning. While questioning a situation that Mary is in full support of would not be regarded as rational, questioning a situation that she is displeased with seems reasonable. So, John interprets Mary's questioning of the necessity of his cracking his knuckles as implying that it bothers her, more directly stated as the assertion in (10):

(10) 'You don't have to crack your knuckles, and it bothers me that you are doing so.'

The chain of reasoning used in interpreting criticism-implicating questions in terms of the beliefs of the addressee can be generalized and applied to different uses of this type of question in order to explain their implicatures. In addition, this chain supports the characterization of this type by explaining how the beliefs of the addressee distinguish criticism-implicating questions from sincere information-requesting ones.

3. Motivations for Use

If criticizing with a question is a politeness strategy, it must be consistent with the principles of a general theory of politeness. Politeness in discourse can be regarded in a very general way as a means to maintain or change interpersonal relations (Green 1989). Because the act of criticizing may disrupt a given level of interpersonal relations, in order to be polite a speaker will try to minimize this disruption. Speakers want to maintain and change relations even within their most informal and intimate relationships, the kind in which criticism-implicating questions are frequently used.

This desire to preserve the speaker's informal, intimate relationship with the addressee motivates two considerations for her. First, she must refrain from directly threatening the addressee's negative face by showing respect for the

addressee's self-image and desire for freedom of action. Second, she must offer the addressee options by allowing the addressee more than one possibility of how to react to the criticism. One means of acting in accordance with these two considerations is the criticism-implying question.

Threatening the Addressee

Sincere questions pose a threat to the addressee's face only in that they expect him to use his time to answer them and to know what the answer is. Criticism-implying questions are much more threatening because they express the speaker's doubts and displeasure about a state of affairs the addressee is presumed to be responsible for or able to rectify. Because it is non-threatening, a sincere question does not require the speaker to apologize when the addressee offers an unanticipated response, although she could offer an apology for imposing upon the addressee, as in the dialog in (11):

- (11) Sue: Sorry to bother you, but did you let the cat out?
 Matt: No, I didn't.
 Sue: Oh, okay. Just wondering.

In contrast, if the question is to implicate criticism, an unexpected answer will merit an apology, as in (12), where Sue has discovered the cat outside:

- (12) Sue: Did you let the cat out? (implying 'The cat ought not to have been let out.')
- Matt: No, I didn't.
 Sue: Oh, sorry.

The mistaken criticism results in an apology by the speaker for making an unnecessary threat. An initial apology like that in (11) seems incongruent when matched with a question the speaker is using to criticize, as in example (13):

- (13) I don't mean to bother you, but are you really going out of the house in that hideous shirt for the third day in a row?

The combination of a statement that mitigates threat, *I don't mean to bother you*, with a question that strongly implicates criticism, is self-contradictory and will probably result in a conscious attempt by the addressee to assess the speaker's reason for using such a combination. The assessment he generates may be that the speaker's use of the first is entirely insincere and used for a sarcastic effect or, along opposite lines, that she is in fact sincerely concerned and desires more information about actions she regards as unusual.

As shown above, the criticism-implying question does threaten the addressee's face to a greater degree than its information-requesting counterpart does. The speaker mitigates the threatening aspect of criticism by implicating rather than asserting it. Because more than one communicative intention can be inferred from a criticism-implicating question, it is done "off-record", a strategy of negative politeness behavior, as characterized in Brown and Levinson 1987. An off-record strategy does not commit a speaker to a face-threatening act as strongly as one done

on-record, and so the speaker can use this type of question to criticize with less risk of disrupting her relationship with the addressee.

Offering the Addressee Options

The criticism-implicating question's surface resemblance to an information-requesting question means it offers the addressee options. The speaker's implicature can be ignored if the addressee disregards his own beliefs about the speaker's beliefs and responds as if the question was a request for information. When the addressee takes this option, it results in a discourse like (14):

(14) Mary: Are you going to wear that shirt? (attempting to implicate 'That's an ugly shirt and I don't think you should wear it.')

John: Yes, I am.

With an affirmative response here, Mary must assume either that John did not understand what she was attempting to imply with her question or that John ignored her implicature deliberately. In either case, in order to attempt to remedy John's misunderstanding or to emphasize her unhappiness with the state of affairs, Mary might respond with a more direct statement of what she intended to implicate, as in (15):

(15) Well, I don't think you should. It's an ugly shirt.

The appropriateness of responding to the exchange in (14) with (15) supports the claim that although the implicature of (14) can be ignored, intentionally or unintentionally, its existence can be reaffirmed if the speaker asserts it directly. As discussed in the previous section, by offering the option of ignoring its criticism the criticism-implicating question can function as a politeness strategy, allowing the speaker to preserve a relationship and still voice a potentially threatening criticism.

4. Other Forms that Criticize

A speaker uses a criticism-implicating question as a politeness strategy to mitigate threatening criticism. A criticism that differs in form may also differ in its politeness. Criticism in question form is more polite, i.e., less threatening of others' beliefs and values, than other forms that do not offer the same kinds of options in interpretation. As explained above, a question gives the addressee the option of ignoring the implicature of criticism and interpreting the question as a sincere request for information because the criticism is only implied, not directly expressed. When a speaker wants her utterance to be less polite, she will use more directness in stating the criticism, as in examples (16-20). The example decrease in directness from (16) to (20):

(16) Inviting John to the reception is wrong and it makes me unhappy.

(17) I can't believe John is invited to the reception.

(18) John is invited to the reception?!

(19) Is John invited to the reception?

(20) I see John is invited to the reception.

Example (16), because it directly states the criticism, allows the addressee no options in interpretation. Example (17) could be interpreted literally as a statement of the speaker's disbelief, but the high degree of conventionalization of the implicature of *I can't believe* as 'I am surprised and/or dismayed that such a state of affairs exists' makes the literal interpretation unlikely. Although (18), as an exclamation, only implicates the criticism, it cannot be treated as a sincere request for information, and as a question, it will be interpreted by way of the same reasoning as any other criticism-implicating question. In contrast, when uttered with the typical rising intonation of a question, (19) cannot be treated as an exclamation, only as a question, making it less directly critical and more polite. The statement of fact, (20), can implicate the criticism in much the same way as the question (19); by calling attention to the obvious, it will lead to a very similar chain of implicature. These rephrasings of a single criticism in multiple ways, one of which is in the form of the criticism-implicating question, differ in politeness because they differ in directness. The fact that each form can express the same criticism provides proof that the questions being characterized can be used to criticize. The fact that each expresses a different degree of politeness provides a reason for a speaker to choose to use one form, such as the question, instead of one of the others.

5. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how positively-phrased, yes-no questions that begin with a form of *be* or *do* can be used to implicate criticism. First, the specific beliefs and inferences of the addressee necessary for interpreting this kind of question as implying criticism rather than requesting information were made explicit. Second, the use of this type of question as a politeness strategy was explained. Finally, rephrasings of different degrees of politeness were compared with criticism-implicating questions. Together these three sections provide a thorough characterization of how and why a speaker criticizes with a question.

NOTES

¹ Throughout the paper the speaker will be referred to as female and the addressee as male, in accordance with the sex of the participants in the examples used.

² Nonetheless, the natural inclination to interpret speech and in fact human behavior in general as rational, i.e., done with a reason, discussed in Green 1993 means that he will still attempt to construct an interpretation and a reason for her apparently nonsensical utterance.

³ This claim seems quite similar to that of Sperber and Wilson 1987, in which they assert that "a speaker who asks a question ... indicates that some relevant completion of the incomplete thought represented by her utterance is relevant." Disregarding the controversial definition of relevance outlined therein and instead thinking of relevance merely as "conforming to Grice's Maxim of

Relevance," this assertion is a good characterization of the chain of reasoning behind criticism interpretation.

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