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"When did we see you ... ?" Translating Rhetorical Questions

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Abstract
A large number of questions in the New Testament are not in fact requests for information, but emphatic positive or negative statements. A literal translation of them may be misunderstood, and the article explores making the intended meaning clear.

Keywords
Rhetorical questions, *wh*- questions, yes/no questions, French, German, Huixteco, Italian, Spanish, Trique, Job, Virginia Woolf, Beekman and Callow, Roger Omanson, Jean-Claude Margot, Eugene A. Nida

The Preface to the 4th edition of the UBS Greek New Testament records that "the consultants of the UBS Translations Department in New York (*especially Roger Omanson*) proposed and developed a revision of the punctuation apparatus" (v–vi; italics added). This statement appropriately acknowledges Roger's readiness to undertake, ultimately on behalf of the Bible and its readers, tasks so demanding and also tedious that many of his colleagues would have quailed before accepting them, but not Roger. It is hoped that Roger will find the subject of this contribution, though necessarily detailed, not too demanding or tedious.

Before discussing the translation of rhetorical questions, it may be helpful to go right back to basics and say a word about the main functions of language. These may be summarized as follows:

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To make statements:

positive: I eat
negative : I do not eat

To give commands:

positive: eat!
negative: do not eat!

To ask questions:

positive: do you eat?
negative: do you not eat?

There are also certain other functions, including exclamations such as "Goodness!" or "Ugh!"

These three main functions are not, however, always easy to distinguish, and may therefore sometimes be misunderstood. They are certainly not always correlated with particular grammatical functions—as practitioners of dynamic/functional equivalence translation have always recognized. A (polite) command may be expressed as a question. "Would you like to wash the floor?," meaning, "Please wash the floor," can be misunderstood as a real question, and may produce the answer, "No."

Linguists, especially those writing in English, distinguish between two types of questions. The first type is known as "*wh*-" questions, because they are clearly marked as questions by words such as "what?," "who?," "when?," "where?," "why?," "which?," and also "how?"

The second type is known as "yes/no" questions, such as "Have you a pencil?" These tend to be treated rather differently in different languages. For example, northern European languages such as English and German normally show by the shape of the sentence that it is a question. In English, "Have you ... ?" (or "Do you have ... ?) is a question, and "You have ..." is not. French uses either intonation: "Vous venez?" or inversion: "Venez-vous?," both meaning, "Are you coming?"; intonation is more familiar, inversion more formal.

Southern European languages such as Spanish and Italian normally use intonation alone. As a standard Italian grammar puts it,

> English sentence-interrogation (i.e., questions of the type expecting an answer "yes" or "no") generally has a different structure from affirmative sentences (e.g., "You are coming" vs. "Are you coming?"). But there is usually no such distinction in Italian: what distinguishes a question from a statement is the

> presence of the question mark[1] (in writing), and an intonational pattern which tends to rise towards the end of the sentence (in speech). (Maiden and Robustelli 2000, 147)

In this respect, New Testament Greek is like other southern European languages. Identifying "yes/no" questions is also made more difficult because the oldest New Testament manuscripts did not use question marks. Nor, of course, do we have any direct knowledge of intonation patterns used by New Testament speakers. That is one important reason why, as Roger Omanson noted, editions and translations of the New Testament quite often disagree about whether a sentence is a statement or a question.

Questions may also be distinguished according to what kind of answer, if any, they expect. *Yes/no* questions may show, either by their structure or by the speaker's intonation, whether they expect a positive or a negative answer. For example, in English:

> You won't do that, will you? (Expected answer: Of course I won't.)
> You will do that, won't you? (Expected answer: Of course I will.)

Whether or not such a question receives the expected answer is another matter. Some languages, such as French and German, have special ways of showing that an answer is unexpected:

> French: Vous partez déjà? *Si*. (Are you leaving already? Yes, I am.)
> Similarly in German: Sie gehen nicht schon weg? *Doch.*

These forms avoid the normal words for "yes": in French *oui* and in German *ja*.

Wh- questions are also of two main kinds: those that expect an answer (whether or not they receive one), and those that do not. Those that expect an answer are called *real questions*; those that do not are called *rhetorical questions*.

> *Real questions*:
> How far is it to Moscow? Which train should I take? When does it leave?

[1] In Spanish, also an inverted question mark at the beginning of a question.

Rhetorical questions:
How can you get to Moscow tonight?
(Meaning: You can't possibly get to Moscow tonight!)

When did we ever see you hungry or thirsty, naked, sick or in prison? (see Matt 25.37-39).
(Meaning: Surely we never saw you hungry or thirsty, etc.)

As we know, the speakers in the quotation from Matthew's Gospel did receive an answer (an unexpected one) to their questions. Yes, they had seen other people in need, but did not recognize Jesus in them. But their questions may be misunderstood as being not rhetorical but real: "Tell us when it was that we saw you in need." This may happen particularly in languages that do not use rhetorical questions, or use them only in special situations.

Matthew's story is well known, at least to Christians. But less well-known parts of the Bible contain questions that are easy to misunderstand until the wider context becomes clear. Some hearers of Naaman's words, "Are not Abana and Pharpar rivers of Damascus ... ?" (2 Kgs 5.12), have momentarily taken this to be a real question and have mentally reacted: "Well, you know the geography of ancient Damascus better than I do. If you say they are the rivers of Damascus, I won't argue with you." A moment later, as the reading continues, most hearers will realize that the sentence is a rhetorical question, "Are not Abana and Pharpar (rivers of Damascus) better than any of the waters of Israel?," meaning, "Our rivers at home are certainly better." (In the wider context, Naaman is proved wrong, but that is not the point.)

As far as we know, all languages employ rhetorical questions, but some much more than others, and more for certain functions than others (for example, to convey blame or disbelief). We would expect more rhetorical questions in speech than in written statements, and perhaps therefore more in so-called oral societies that use speech more than writing. The Gospels and Acts, if not the rest of the New Testament, are writings that come from a mainly oral society; it is no coincidence that all the thirty-five rhetorical questions found in John's Gospel are found on the lips of characters in the narrative, never in the narrative itself.

The book of Job, consisting largely of speech from Job, his friends, and in the end God, is particularly rich in questions, a large majority of them rhetorical. Job's moving lament, following the curses of Job 3.3–10, contains in vv. 11–12, 16, 20–23 a series of "why" questions developing the theme "Why did I not perish at birth?"[2] It is most unlikely that Job expected

[2] Biblical quotations, unless otherwise identified, are based on the 2011 anglicized edition of NIV.

an answer from his so-called friends; this makes the answer God finally gives him in chs 38–41 all the more effective, one might say devastating. Job's opening questions clearly mean, "I should have perished at birth," or, "It would have been better if I had perished at birth." But the question form, in the Hebrew text and many translations, has greater emotional impact.

It is instructive to move briefly outside the Bible to another work that, like the book of Job, consists largely of dialogue: Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves* (1931). One section of dialogue that runs for over twenty pages (54–77) includes a number of questions in which a character called Bernard asks, "What am I?"[3] Sometimes he gives some kind of an answer to his own questions: "What am I? I ask. This? No, I am that" (54), so they must be counted as real questions. Similarly, "But now let me ask myself the final question ... which of these people am I? ... When I say to myself, 'Bernard,' who comes? A man of no particular age or calling. Myself, merely" (58). But in another passage Bernard asks himself a rhetorical question: "What did I write last night if it was not poetry?" (meaning: "What I wrote last night was certainly poetry"); then he immediately follows it with a real question: "Am I too fast, too facile?," answering, "I do not know" (60). The change from one kind of question to another may increase the impact of the passage.

Problems in understanding rhetorical questions often create problems for translation. A speaker (less commonly a writer) may himself[4] not be sure whether his question is real or rhetorical, and if this is so, the hearer is less likely to be sure. If I hear someone say, "Am I going senile?," the intonation, the context, and the situation may help me to decide what kind of a question this is. If the setting suggests that the speaker is merely cross about having made some trivial mistake, it is likely to be a rhetorical question, and if he is twenty years old, that is more likely still; he means, or at least implies, "I'm obviously not going senile, but I have just behaved as if I were." If, however, the speaker is eighty, his tone of voice is grave, or he shows other signs of dementia, it is likely to be a real question—however well-meaning friends may answer it.

Even if a translator correctly understands which type of question occurs in his (written or oral) text, the receptor (reader or hearer) of the translation may misunderstand it. The receptor of a literal translation may not be used to rhetorical questions, or may not expect them in the Bible, and therefore may wonder why a question is not answered. Or the receptor language may

[3] Compare "Who am I?" (Woolf 1931, 60, 70).

[4] In the rest of this article masculine forms will where appropriate be understood to include feminine forms.

use rhetorical questions more sparingly than the original language, with the result that the receptor may find a literal translation heavy or unnatural—and blame the Bible for it. These are problems that all translators may encounter, and for which therefore they should be prepared.

Yet the problem is even wider. A standard grammar of New Testament Greek leaves rhetorical questions to its very last section (Blass and Debrunner 1961, 262–63 [§496]). An older, four-volume New Testament grammar does not mention them specifically at all (Moulton et al. 1906–1976).[5] The second edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), quoting an earlier source, defines rhetorical questions as "questions that do not *require* an answer, but are only put in the form of a question in order to produce a greater effect."[6] Elkins (1972, 21) quotes the definition in *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*: "a question not *intend*ed to elicit an answer, but inserted for rhetorical effect." Similarly *The American Heritage Dictionary* (3rd ed.): "A question to which no answer is *expect*ed, often used for rhetorical effect"; and *Chambers English Dictionary*: "a question in form, for rhetorical effect, not *call*ing for an answer." The various verbs in these definitions (which I have italicized) all tend to exclude questions formulated in such a way as to show that they do expect an answer, either positive (Greek *ou*, Latin *nonne*) or negative (Greek *mē*, Latin *num*). Of course, a question may receive an answer even though the questioner does not expect one, or an answer contrary to the one which the form of the question shows to be expected.

It is time to move on from these preliminary illustrations to say something about the very frequent rhetorical questions in the New Testament (perhaps as many as 700). Scholars have sometimes ignored them, or mentioned them only in passing, perhaps because they rarely presented a problem in their own language. It may also be that, in cultures where formal correspondence translation was considered more "faithful" to the text than dynamic/functional equivalence translation, there was strong bias in favour of rendering questions of any type literally as questions.

But the difficulties are not imaginary. In an issue of *Notes on Translation*[7] devoted entirely to the translation of questions, Robert E. Longacre (1972) reports on Trique, a language of Mexico:

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[5] There is an implied reference in vol. 4.34.

[6] Under "rhetorical." The source quoted is *Bradley's Aids to [Writing] Latin Prose*, §150, first published in 1884, traditionally assuming (in this case correctly) that English and Latin agree in this respect; but this is not the case in many other languages.

[7] A journal formerly published by SIL. The content of this issue (no. 44, 1972) is summarized, with additional analysis, essentially by J. Beekman in Beekman and Callow 1974, 229–49, the most detailed study of rhetorical questions in the Bible since Konopásek 1932.

> As I went through I and II Corinthians and Hebrews, again and again we got this sort of reaction from the informant: "Who's supposed to answer this question?" He would look at me and appear puzzled. Or he would try to supply an answer—which was sometimes the wrong answer. He either was considerably disturbed by the question or he got the wrong idea from it entirely. Yet my informant[8] (Celestino Cruz) is ... the most capable man with whom I have worked on translation. The problems are linguistic and cultural. (39)

For example, to the question: "Where is the wise, where is the scribe, where is the disputer of this world?,"[9] the informant's reaction was, "Well, you tell us where they are." To make it clear that such questions were rhetorical, it was necessary to transform them into statements. Similar reports were made at the same time by Richard E. Elkins (1972) on Western Bukidnon Manobo in the Philippines, Henrietta Andrews on Otomi in the State of Mexico, Lilla Kirkpatrick on Korku in Central India, and Marjorie Crouch on Vagla in Ghana.[10]

In 1960 Marion M. Cowan had contributed to *TBT* an article entitled "The Translation of Questions into Huixteco," reporting translators' problems with Matt 6.25, "Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?," because "they tended to feel on first thought that food and clothing were more important seeing they spend all their time in getting those two items." The translators eventually preferred to "change" this and some other questions "into emphatic statements." This article was prefaced by a rather stern, ten-line comment by the editor, Eugene Nida, warning that "the sort of solution suggested here should not be adopted without serious consideration" (Cowan 1960, 123). By 1967, however, Nida was commending the translation of the rhetorical question in Heb 1.5 by "an emphatic negative, e.g. 'for God never said to any angel' (compare N.E.B.)" (Nida 1967, 119).

Four years later, Herbert G. Grether (1973, 240) pointed out the danger of a possible misunderstanding of rhetorical questions in Isaiah 50, for example, Isa 50.1 (RSV):

> Where is your mother's bill of divorce
> with which I put her away?
> Or which of my creditors is it
> to whom I have sold you?

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[8] The use of this expression reflects a historical situation in which an expatriate rather than a mother-tongue speaker would be considered the translator.

[9] 1 Cor 1.20; similarly in 3.5; 4.7.

[10] Respectively pp. 21–24, 25–28, 28–36, 36–39 in the same issue of *Notes on Translation*.

He noted that at that time, some versions rendered v. 10a literally, as a question, and others as a statement. A generation after Grether, the disagreement continues (Isa 50.10):

> Who among you fears the LORD
> and obeys the word of his servant? (NIV)
>
> All of you that honour the LORD
> and obey the words of his servant ... (TEV)
>
> None of you respect the LORD
> or obey his servant ... (CEV)

Roger Omanson's apparatus notes fifteen places, in Matthew's Gospel alone, where editions of the Greek text and translations disagree in this respect. Most of these differences involve a choice between understanding the text as a question or a statement; in 26.50, does Jesus say to Judas, "Be quick about it, friend!" (GNB text) or "Why are you here, friend?" (GNB margin)? But in some cases, the choice may be between a real and a rhetorical question. When Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" (27.11), is it a serious question (perhaps inviting Jesus to incriminate himself), or is he implying, "Surely *you* [emphatic *su*] aren't the king of the Jews!" Or in 27.42, do the people mocking Jesus exclaim, "He's the king of Israel!" (NRSV), or do they ask, "Isn't he the king of Israel?" (GNB), implying, "Yes, he claims to be," but not expecting a real answer?

Yet detailed studies of rhetorical questions are often absent where one might expect to find them. Nida and Taber's classic *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (TAPOT), first published in 1969 and at one time affectionately known as "the Bible translator's Bible," has only a short subsection stating the principle that "Answers to rhetorical questions must often be provided, so that the hearer will not misunderstand what is involved" (30).[11] De Waard and Nida's *From One Language to Another* (1986), in some respects the successor of TAPOT, does not discuss rhetorical questions at all. There is no entry under "Rhetorical Questions" in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (Baker 1998).

There is fuller discussion in J.-C. Margot (1979, 89, 324, 332–33), referring to some New Testament texts that pose particular problems in translation. Margot was able by 1979 to refer to what remains, long after its publication five years earlier, the most comprehensive modern survey of

[11] See also Nida 1964, 209.

rhetorical questions and their translation in the New Testament.[12] It formed chapter 15 of Beekman and Callow 1974.[13] Though appearing, even for its time, rather old-fashioned in its use of the Authorized/King James Version, it pays careful attention to the Greek text, and presents detailed analysis of the principles underlying different types of rhetorical questions, and their application to problems of translation. It thus combines a deductive approach to the subject, concerned with general principles, and an inductive approach, concentrating on particular texts.

Yet some rhetorical questions in the New Testament appear from the earliest times to have required rewriting as (usually negative) statements. Beekman (1972, 237) has a section on "The resolution of ambiguities by means of parallel passages" in the Gospels, while rightly emphasizing the need "to be sure that passages which are genuinely different are not forced into conformity."

For example: The Pharisees said to [Jesus], "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" (Mark 2.24), which Matthew (12.2) understands as a rhetorical question and presents as a statement: The Pharisees ... said to [Jesus], "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath." Similarly, a saying of Jesus is understood by Matthew (6.25) as a rhetorical question—"Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?"—and by Luke (12.23) as a statement—"For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes."

The questions raised by Gospel parallels recurred when manuscripts were copied. A striking example occurs in Luke's story of the master who makes his servant work hard. The whole passage in Luke 17.7–9 is relevant:

> Suppose one of you has a servant ploughing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, "Come along now and sit down to eat"? Won't he rather say, "Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink"? Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do?

Jesus answers his first question (v. 7) himself in v. 8; it expects the answer "no," which Jesus gives. He leaves his second question (v. 9) to stand as a rhetorical question expecting the same answer. But interestingly, many ancient authorities found it necessary to add the words *ou dokō*, "I do not think so," on which B. M. Metzger comments that this "retort ... has the

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[12] An older work, Konopásek 1932, also remains valuable for its study both of the original text and of a wide range of translations.

[13] This chapter is based on material in Beekman 1972. I am grateful to Ruth Weston for providing me with this and other items from the Wycliffe UK library.

appearance of being a marginal comment that found its way into the Western text" (1994, 141).[14]

A high proportion of questions in Matthew's Gospel are rhetorical. The rhetorical questions do not include requests for information, even if the context suggests that the questioner already knows the answer, as for example in Matt 11.7–9. They do, however, include questions expecting that the person(s) addressed ought to know the answer. For example, Jesus' words to the Pharisees in 12.3, 5, are typical interrogative-negatives, "Haven't you read [in the Law]?," meaning, "Surely [as experts in the Law] you will have read ... ". Here, as often, a rhetorical question adds force to a statement which when it is restructured as a statement, is marked by some such word as "surely."

Similarly: "will you not take hold of it ... ?" (12.11), meaning, "Surely you will take hold of it ... ," the form of the question in this case requiring a "yes" answer. Also consider: "how can you who are evil say anything good?" (12.34), meaning, "You who are evil certainly cannot say anything good."

John's Gospel is equally rich in rhetorical questions, which linguistically conservative versions, of which NIV in its 2011 edition is possibly the best example, tend to keep as questions, whereas a functional-equivalent version such as GNB often transforms them into statements. For example:

	NIV	GNB
4.35	Don't you have a saying, "It's still four months until harvest"?	You have a saying, "Four more months and then the harvest."
6.70	Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!	I chose the twelve of you, didn't I? Yet one of you is a devil.
7.42	Does not Scripture say that the Messiah will come from David's descendants?	The scripture says that the Messiah will be a descendant of King David.

Among other examples, compare John 6.42; 7.51; 9.40, 42; 10.34; 19.10.

Enough has been said, and much more could have been added, to show how frequent and significant are rhetorical questions in various parts of the New Testament and elsewhere. They have created problems for ancient copyists, textual critics and commentators, translators, and probably most of all for readers and hearers of translations. Among principles and procedures

[14] For similar textual problems related to rhetorical questions, see for example 1 Cor 5.12; 12.15, on which see, in addition to Metzger's *Commentary* (1994), Thiselton 2000, 415, 1002–3.

that translators may define, it is essential to consider the prominence and significance of rhetorical questions in their target/receptor language, and to apply the results, flexibly but consistently, in the course of their work.[15] Translators will in any case wish to consider, case by case, how far the use of rhetorical questions in the New Testament text corresponds to usage in the target or receptor language.

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