



HAVE WE REALLY LOST OUR MINDS? ON FORMS AND COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS OF RHETORICAL QUESTIONS IN X POSTS RELATED TO THE GAZA WAR

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ABSTRACT: The paper investigates the use of rhetorical questions on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter) by Francesca Albanese (a UN official) and Eylon Levy (a former Israeli government official), in posts related to the war in Gaza. The analysis, which is primarily qualitative and conducted within the framework of the speech-act theory, explores the primary forms and communicative functions of rhetorical questions, and their potential role in promoting opposing narratives about the conflict. The results indicate that, despite their diametrically opposed views, both individuals utilize similar forms of rhetorical questions, and mostly direct them at the general public, with criticizing being the predominant illocutionary force of such questions in both corpora, followed by accusing and ridiculing. Overall, the results show that rhetorical questions represent an important pragmatic tool for shaping narratives, and for engaging and influencing the public in a conflict-related social media discourse.

KEYWORDS: rhetorical questions, illocutionary force, social media discourse, X (Twitter), Gaza war.

¿REALMENTE HEMOS PERDIDO LA RAZÓN? SOBRE LAS FORMAS Y LAS FUNCIONES COMUNICATIVAS DE LAS PREGUNTAS RETÓRICAS EN PUBLICACIONES DE X RELACIONADAS CON LA GUERRA DE GAZA

RESUMEN: El presente artículo examina el uso de las preguntas retóricas en la plataforma de redes sociales X (anteriormente Twitter) por parte de Francesca Albanese (funcionaria de las Naciones Unidas) y Eylon Levy (exfuncionario del gobierno israelí), en publicaciones relacionadas con la guerra de Gaza. El análisis, de carácter principalmente cualitativo y realizado en el marco de la teoría de los actos de habla, explora las principales formas y funciones comunicativas de las preguntas retóricas, así como su posible papel en la promoción

de narrativas contrapuestas sobre el conflicto. Los resultados indican que, pese a sostener posturas diametralmente opuestas, ambos individuos emplean formas similares de preguntas retóricas y las dirigen mayoritariamente al público general, siendo la crítica la fuerza ilocutiva predominante en ambos corpus, seguida de la acusación y la ridiculización. En conjunto, los resultados muestran que las preguntas retóricas constituyen una herramienta pragmática relevante para la construcción de narrativas y para la implicación e influencia del público en el discurso sobre conflictos en las redes sociales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: preguntas retóricas, fuerza ilocutiva, discurso en redes sociales, X (Twitter), guerra de Gaza.

AVONS-NOUS RÉELLEMENT PERDU LA RAISON ? SUR LES FORMES ET LES FONCTIONS COMMUNICATIVES DES QUESTIONS RHÉTORIQUES DANS LES PUBLICATIONS SUR X RELATIVES À LA GUERRE DE GAZA

RÉSUMÉ : Cet article examine l'utilisation des questions rhétoriques sur le réseau social X (anciennement Twitter) par Francesca Albanese (fonctionnaire des Nations unies) et Eylon Levy (ancien fonctionnaire du gouvernement israélien), dans des publications relatives à la guerre de Gaza. L'analyse, principalement qualitative et inscrite dans le cadre de la théorie des actes de langage, explore les principales formes et fonctions communicatives des questions rhétoriques ainsi que leur rôle potentiel dans la promotion de récits opposés concernant le conflit. Les résultats indiquent que, malgré des points de vue diamétralement opposés, les deux individus utilisent des formes similaires de questions rhétoriques, les adressant majoritairement au grand public, la critique constituant la force illocutoire prédominante dans les deux corpus, suivie de l'accusation et de la moquerie. Dans l'ensemble, les résultats montrent que les questions rhétoriques constituent un outil pragmatique pertinent pour façonner des récits et pour engager et influencer le public dans un discours relatifs aux conflits sur les réseaux sociaux.

MOTS CLÉS : questions rhétoriques, force illocutoire, discours sur les réseaux sociaux, X (Twitter), guerre de Gaza.

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1. Introduction

Rhetorical questions (henceforth, RQs) offer a number of advantages to language users in different communicative situations, which makes them a particularly effective stylistic tool in realization of various communicative goals. Among other qualities, RQs can carry strong persuasive potential, make conveyed

messages more memorable and resonant, and can intensify (or, at other times, soften) the implications of propositions which they express. An important feature of RQs is that they can be used to achieve multiple communicative goals simultaneously (Frank, 1990; Schaffer, 2005). Their multifunctionality, while communicatively effective, is also what makes them a theoretically and analytically elusive phenomenon. In the present study, RQ is defined and understood as an interrogative form which does not ask for an answer, but instead serves multiple illocutionary functions in communication, by guiding the addressees to recognize the answer implied by the addressor as self-evident. This definition is in line with the conceptual framework of indirect speech acts, and it allows for a systematic analysis of illocutionary and perlocutionary effects that RQs may have in social media discourse.

Due to their extensive use, RQs have attracted a sustained scholarly attention in a number of linguistic or discourse-related fields, including marketing (Neitsch and Niebuhr, 2022), police interrogations (Cerović, 2016), persuasive messages (Blankenship and Craig, 2006), newspaper editorials (Badarneh, 2009), internet forums (Kleinke, 2012), talk shows (Ilie, 1999), religious texts (Moshavi, 2009), literature (Conti, 2025), and in other contexts.

While the prosody of such questions plays an important role in their identification and in distinguishing them from answer-eliciting ones, and has accordingly received significant attention in previous studies, RQs are also commonly used in written discourse, including communication on social media platforms, where prosodic cues are absent. Since online platforms provide venues for rapid dissemination of persuasive content to wider audiences, RQs can play an important role in such communication due to their persuasive potential. One of those platforms is X (formerly Twitter), which has been noted as particularly influential in shaping public opinion, rallying support, or discrediting opponents during political campaigns (McGregor et al., 2017), social unrests (Kumar et al., 2014), as well as in conflict situations. In spite of an increasing number of studies focusing on political and persuasive discourse on social media, the pragmatic functions of RQs in such settings remain underexplored, leaving room for further research.

Social media increasingly turn into online battlegrounds at the time of armed conflicts, with supporters of different sides trying to justify their attitudes or actions, discredit opponents, or rally public support for their cause. The war in Gaza has generated a highly polarized discourse on X, with various public figures, activists, or officials regularly employing rhetorical strategies to advance conflicting narratives about the conflict. It is in this context that RQs emerge as a potentially effective stylistic device for promoting evaluative claims indirectly, without formulating them as explicit statements.

This study examines how RQs are utilized on the social media platform X to promote competing narratives related to the war in Gaza, focusing on posts by two public figures with opposing views of the conflict: Francesca Albanese, a UN official critical of Israeli conduct, and Eylon Levy, a former Israeli government official. Based on an analysis of the formal properties and pragmatic functions of RQs in the selected corpora, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how RQs function as indirect speech acts in social media discourse related to conflict situations. More specifically, the study treats RQs as pragmatic devices through which, in the context of divisive social media communication, language users frame their evaluations and attitudes as self-evident, and guide the audience towards aligning with them, or even towards taking action. Thereby, the existing accounts of RQs are extended to the domain of highly polarized online discourse, where RQs are explored as indirect speech acts. The analysis is grounded in the speech-act theory, which provides a suitable framework for exploring illocutionary and perlocutionary dimensions of RQs. The study combines qualitative pragmatic analysis with a descriptive quantitative method in order to identify recurring patterns and potential differences in the use of RQs across the two corpora.

2. Background

2.1. *Previous research on RQs*

Numerous studies have been conducted in regard to different aspects or uses of RQs over the past several decades. This subsection provides a focused overview of previous research relevant to the nature and pragmatic functions of RQs, highlighting key approaches and their limitations, and focusing on the nature of RQs, their specific uses in different contexts, as well as the use of RQs on social media platforms.

Syntactic, pragmatic and semantic status of RQs have been examined from a number of theoretical perspectives. According to Han's (2002) interpretation, RQs are actually indirect statements whose interrogative form strengthens their impact and persuasive power. The polarity of such questions is usually opposite to that of the implied statement. A key strength of this account lies in its explicit treatment of RQs as instances of indirect illocutionary force, which aligns them with assertive speech acts. However, it does not offer a detailed typology of the range of pragmatic functions that such indirect assertions may perform in communication.

An alternative position is offered by van Rooy (2003), who views RQs as questions with a constrained set of potential answers, so that all potential answers lead to similar pragmatic conclusions. A major strength of his account is that it aligns the interpretation of RQs with the principles of question semantics, and explains the

obviousness of the answers which they imply. However, the rich potential that RQs demonstrate in concrete communicative situations is not fully emphasized.

Another notable account of the nature of RQs is that of Rohde (2006), who characterizes RQs as redundant interrogatives which neither provide, nor seek information, but instead point out shared beliefs by highlighting the obviousness of an implied answer. While this approach goes beyond treating RQs as simply indirect assertions, and successfully captures prototypical instances of RQs in light of interlocutors' shared knowledge, its limitation is that functional and rhetorical diversity of such questions in actual, real-life discourse remains unaccounted for.

Other studies further challenged the idea of a strict semantic or syntactic divide between rhetorical and non-rhetorical questions. Caponigro and Sprouse (2007), as well as Farkas (2025)¹, argue that the distinction between the two emerges at the pragmatic level, with rhetorical interpretations becoming evident based on contextual factors. This view is in line with speech-act approaches, in which RQs often represent instances of indirect speech acts.

Although RQs have been widely explored across pragmatic and discourse-analytic frameworks, studies that primarily focus on the illocutionary force associated with the use of RQs remain quite infrequent and somewhat fragmented. Within this perspective, some studies tied such questions to the illocutionary force of asserting (for instance, the above-mentioned account of Han, 2002), or, within Brown and Levinson's (1987) account of politeness theory, to the indirect performance of some speech acts (such as criticizing), where RQs serve as a politeness strategy aimed at mitigating face threats. Furthermore, Frank (1990) approaches RQs from the perspective of both Speech Act theory and Discourse Analysis, pointing at two main functions of such questions – strengthening criticism and mitigating face threats, with the former taking precedence in different communicative situations. However, existing studies generally do not offer a systematic and comprehensive account of a range of illocutionary acts that RQs may be utilized to perform in naturally occurring discourse, particularly in the context of nuanced exploration of their role in conflict-related online communication.

From the perspective of verbal irony, RQs have been explored as constructions which facilitate the expression of evaluative attitude by means of implicit ironic meaning. Namely, they can evoke ironic interpretation by simultaneously both invoking and undermining a given frame (Athanasiadou, 2023), thereby creating a contrast between their interrogative form and the evaluative content which they

¹ However, in contrast to the majority of other accounts, Farkas (2025) argues that RQs do not have to imply obvious answers.

express. In this way, they can perform a diplomatic function in communication, by both adopting (on a surface level) and questioning social norms.

Specific functions of RQs or their use in specific settings have also attracted quite a bit of attention in empirical studies. Schaffer (2005) focused on how RQs serve as convincing answers to standard questions, concluding that such RQs are often associated with achieving humorous effects, as well as with stressing the obviousness of the answer to the preceding question. Other studies examined the role of RQs in resistance to persuasion in messaging (Blankenship and Craig, 2006), rejecting accusations and voicing challenges in police interrogations (Cerović, 2016), and their role in sales discourse (Neitsch and Niebuhr, 2022). Kleinke (2012) further notes that the rhetorical nature of RQs is often negotiable, with responses to them playing a key role in determining their rhetorical interpretation.

When it comes to exploring the use of RQs in social media, this area has not been extensively explored yet, although some studies have been conducted. In their study on different types of questions used on Twitter, Sharoda et al. (2011) found that RQs were among the most popular question types on this social network. Oraby et al. (2017) explored and compared the use of sarcastic and non-sarcastic RQs on Twitter and in debate forums, noting the difference between non-sarcastic RQs on Twitter (which were mostly persuasive) and those used in forums (which were often argumentative). Ranganth et al. (2017) developed a quantitative framework for identifying RQs on Twitter, based on motivations of users who post them. In a similar vein, Zhuang and Riloff (2020) explored how to differentiate between rhetorical and information-eliciting questions. While these studies represent an important step towards the understanding of RQs in online settings, they are primarily concerned with identification and classification of such questions, rather than with a detailed pragmatic analysis of their concrete functions. Moreover, the specific ways in which RQs realize their illocutionary potential in a conflict-related communication on social media sites remain underexplored.

2.2. The role of X (former Twitter) in shaping or influencing public opinion

Launched in 2006, Twitter (now X) quickly gained popularity and became a significant social network, particularly convenient for affecting public opinion and rallying support for different causes. Ott (2016) stresses simplicity, impulsivity and incivility as defining features of this online platform, which, according to him, cultivates malicious discourse. McGregor et al. (2017) note that Twitter represents a tool for political discourse, and is often used by politicians to reach voters directly, as well as to mobilize and attract supporters. Similarly, fake Twitter accounts are often

used to manipulate and confuse voters, and to affect election results (Bessi and Ferrara, 2016) or referendums (Bastos and Mercea, 2017).

The promotion of social movements is also frequently done through this social network. Wang and Caskey (2016) explored the use of Twitter in inciting and mobilizing protesters during the Occupy Wall Street movement, and Wilkins et al. (2019) focused on the role of Twitter during the initial stage of Black Lives Matter movement.

The role of Twitter (as well as other social media) has also been significant when it comes to wars and uprisings, with social media often being portrayed as online battlefields, where supporters or representatives of conflicting sides try to promote their narratives, win public support, and blame or discredit enemies. Twitter was one of the social media which played a significant role during a string of uprisings known as the Arab Spring (Kumar et al., 2014). A number of studies also explored the use of Twitter in regard to Russia-Ukrainian war (Ramos and Chang, 2023; Tao and Peng, 2023; and others).

However, previous studies on war-related discourse on Twitter have not focused on detailed pragmatic analysis of the role of specific stylistic devices utilized in this type of discourse. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining RQs as a linguistic tool used by public figures in order to shape interpretations of contested events.

2.3. *Speech-act theory*

Since the exploration of different functions of RQs in the examined corpora will be done using the framework of the speech-act theory, a brief overview of it is presented in this subsection.

Setting theoretical foundations for the study of language in use, Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) introduced a theory which provides a foundational framework for studying language as a form of action. According to it, addressees simultaneously perform a number of acts when making utterances: locutionary (the production of a meaningful expression), illocutionary (uttering something with a specific intention), and perlocutionary (achieving certain effects on recipients). Illocutionary force is particularly relevant for the analysis of RQs, which often function as indirect speech acts. For instance, they may be used to criticize, accuse, ridicule, or persuade, while preserving the interrogative form. Searle's taxonomy of speech acts (assertives, expressives, commissives, directives, and declarations) provides a suitable basis for categorization of the communicative functions of RQs in discourse.

Although originally developed for spoken communication, the principles of the speech-act theory have been widely applied to the study of written discourse, including that on social media. As RQs are frequently combined with punctuation, capitalization, or various multimodal elements when used on social media platforms, the speech-act theory can serve as a suitable framework for the analysis of RQs' uses and functions in X posts.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research questions

The present paper seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What formal and functional types of RQs are used in the examined X posts?
2. What illocutionary forces are associated with their use in the selected corpora?
3. To what extent are RQs used sarcastically in the two corpora by the two individuals?
4. What differences or similarities can be observed in the use of RQs by the two individuals?

The above questions seek to address the range of pragmatic functions of the RQs within the corpora, as well as contrastive rhetorical strategies which the two X users utilize in the given setting.

3.2. Corpora

The corpora selected for this study comprise two sets of X posts related to the Gaza war. The first corpus consists of X posts² published between 1 January and 15 September 2024 by Francesca Albanese, UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in the Palestinian territories (684 posts), and the second one comprises X posts published between 1 August and 15 September 2024 by Eylon Levy, a former Israeli government spokesman (605 posts). The timespan disparity between the two corpora is due to substantial differences in posting frequency between the two individuals. In order to avoid a significant imbalance in the number of posts and RQs for the analysis, the selected time periods were chosen to ensure comparable quantities of relevant data

² Reposts, posts published in languages other than English, or posts consisting solely of multimodal cues (images, video, emojis, etc.) were excluded.

which reflect natural posting behavior. Since the present study is primarily qualitative, the focus is on functional comparability of the data, rather than on matching time periods.

The two individuals were chosen because they are prominent public figures actively involved in influencing public opinion regarding the conflict, while promoting opposing narratives about it on X platform. The selected corpora are not meant to represent all discourse on X, but rather to enable a specific, focused analysis of the utilization of RQs by two influential X users with opposing views in a highly polarized communicative setting.

3.3. *Identification of RQs*

All posts from the two corpora which contained RQs were identified manually. A question was classified as rhetorical if its primary communicative function was not to elicit or ask for information, but to perform indirect speech acts, such as criticizing, accusing, making an assertion, etc., and if it implied an obvious answer. The classification was based on contextual interpretation, taking into consideration pragmatic criteria, rather than formal properties alone. Special attention was paid to the lack of any plausible expectation of answers, based on a number of indicators from the broader discourse context (prior posts, accompanying multimodal cues, selection of lexis, syntactic structure, etc.). These criteria were used consistently across the two corpora in order to ensure clear and coherent classification. This procedure reflects the widely accepted view that rhetorical nature of questions is context-dependent, rather than based on their formal properties. Overall, a total of 38 RQs,³ appearing in as many X posts, have been identified in the first corpus, and 40 RQs, appearing in 38 posts, have been identified in the second one.

Within the identified set of RQs, sarcastic ones were further identified based on pragmatic incongruity demonstrated by contextual cues, such as ironic exaggeration or understatement, contradiction, or use of quotation marks and emojis. As with RQs in general, the detection of sarcasm was based on the interpretation of multiple contextual cues signaling it. In the present study, sarcasm is, in line with Filik et al. (2019), treated as a subtype of verbal irony characterized by emotional component, and a target-oriented, critical and more explicit evaluative attitude of the addressor. Due to the nature of the corpora (highly polarized, conflict-related online

³ For the purposes of the present study, a string of two or more RQs was considered a single example. Conversely, if two RQs utilized within the same post were separated by other language content, they were treated as separate examples.

communication), cases of RQs laced with sarcasm (and aimed at ridiculing the target) have been present. In such settings, sarcastic uses of RQs tend to be associated with the illocutionary force of ridicule, which is treated as a characteristic effect of sarcasm in the given dataset, rather than a general property of irony.

Conversely, irony is understood in a broader sense, as a pragmatic mechanism which is based on incongruity between the literal and intended meaning. The reliance on pragmatic incongruity as a criterion for identification of such RQs reflects its key role in recognizing the contrast between the expressed content and contextual expectations, which makes it a methodologically suitable basis for the identification of such instances, without reducing irony only to pragmatic incongruity. While other cues (such as prosodic features) are not available in written discourse (in this case, social media posts), textual and contextual indicators provide a sufficient basis for the identification of the addressor's sarcastic intention.

As the present study is primarily qualitative and theory-driven, the identification of RQs was performed by the author, with consistency being ensured through the use of explicit analytic criteria. Ambiguous or unclear cases were not taken into consideration for the analysis. This approach is in line with qualitative and discourse research practices, where the focus is on in-depth interpretation and contextual nuances, rather than on producing generalized findings.

3.4. Assigning illocutionary force to RQs

For each RQ (or a string of RQs) identified in the two corpora, a single predominant illocutionary force was assigned by the author, based on the main function it performs in the given context. While RQs may simultaneously perform multiple pragmatic functions, the present analysis focuses on the dominant illocutionary force to ensure analytical consistency and comparability. In order to validate the author's categorization and reduce potential subjectivity, an independent assessment was conducted by a linguistics professor from the same department as the author. Each RQ (or a string of RQs) was presented along with the accompanying content to ensure contextual interpretation, and with a predefined set of illocutionary categories which correspond with the analytical framework adopted in this study. The validator was asked to select the predominant illocutionary force for each example, and was not informed of the author's initial categorization. Percent agreement between the author and external validator was 87%, which indicates a high level of consistency when it comes to assigning the predominant illocutionary force. The remaining cases were resolved after subsequent discussion, or marked as unclear if agreement could not be reached.

4. Results and Discussion

For the sake of clarity, this part of the paper is divided into three subsections, with the first two presenting the analyses of the form, setting and illocutionary functions of RQs in Albanese's and Levy's posts, respectively, and the third subsection comparing the two corpora in order to highlight differences and similarities in the use of RQs, addressing previously stated research questions. In addition to describing the distribution of formal and functional types of RQs in the examined corpora, the present analysis also aims to interpret how they operate as pragmatic devices utilized to present the addressors' evaluations as self-evident, thereby seeking the audience's alignment or, in some cases, calling for action.

4.1. *The use of RQs in X posts published by Francesca Albanese*

4.1.1. *The form and setting in which RQs appear in Albanese's posts*

Over the time period analyzed (1 January – 15 September 2024), Albanese published 38 X posts which included the use of RQs. They were mostly used as single questions (33 / 86.8% of all RQs in her posts), with strings of two or three RQs appearing in 5 posts (13.2%). While Ott (2016) claims that conveying simple and concise messages is one of the defining features of Twitter (now X), Albanese's RQs are rarely used alone. They are mostly combined with other language content (in 33 posts / 86.8%), and frequently positioned at the end of posts (15 / 45.4% of posts in which RQs are not used alone).

Emoticons were rarely used, most likely reflecting the serious nature of the addressed topics. This observation can be explained by the hybrid genre of X posts, which, in the given context, combine an informal online interaction with that of political and institutional communication. Namely, the reduced use of emoticons in such settings (conflict-related online discourse) may contribute to the construction of a more serious and authoritative tone of the addressor's posts, highlighting the need to rely on textual and contextual cues when identifying RQs.

While additional, reposted content from other X users was needed to interpret her RQs in 3 posts, Albanese's RQs were almost exclusively utilized in such a way that the implications they carry, and their overall interpretation, do not depend on additional content, such as pictures, videos or reposted materials. Except for those realized in the form of indirect questions, almost all her RQs (with one exception) end with a question mark.

Most of her RQs (32 / 84.2%) were addressed to all X users (and, by extension, to the general public), with the remainder targeting Israeli officials, Western governments or people, and individual X users (2 each).

Sarcastic RQs were infrequent (5 examples, 13.2%), indicating that irony plays a relatively limited role in Albanese's rhetorical strategy, compared with previous findings on the frequency of sarcastic RQs in online settings (Oraby et al., 2017).

When it comes to the types of RQs utilized in her posts, wh-questions seem prevalent, appearing in 21 examples (55.2%), followed by yes-no, indirect, and fragmentary questions. The classification of RQs based on their form is grounded in standard typologies of interrogative structures commonly used in syntactic and / or pragmatic analysis of questions (for instance, Quirk et al., 1985). A detailed overview of the distribution of different types of RQs in Albanese's posts is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. An overview of the distribution of different types of RQs in Albanese's posts.

Form of RQs	Frequency	Examples
wh	21 (55.2%)	<i>What kind of monsters have we become?</i>
yes-no	9 (23.6%)	<i>Is there any red line left that Israel cannot cross?</i>
indirect	5 (13.1%)	<i>I can't imagine how the world will go on after having allowed that.</i>
fragmentary	3 (7.8%)	<i>Self-defense?</i>

4.1.2. Communicative functions of RQs in Albanese's posts

Based on the predominant type of illocutionary force associated with their use in the examined corpus, the results indicate that the most common communicative function which RQs perform in the posts published by Francesca Albanese is the act of criticizing, followed by requesting, and, to a lesser degree, accusing and expressing ridicule. These four categories emerged during the coding process as the most common illocutionary forces associated with the use of RQs in the given context, and were not pre-determined. This distribution indicates a tendency for using RQs primarily as evaluative and directive devices in this corpus. A detailed overview of the observed functions of RQs is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. An overview of communicative functions of RQs in Albanese’s posts.

Communicative functions	Frequency
Criticizing	14 (36.8%)
Requesting	7 (18.4%)
Accusing	5 (13.1%)
Ridiculing	5 (13.1%)
other (other illocutionary acts appearing only once, or unclear which illocutionary force is predominant)	7 (18.4%)

4.1.2.1. Criticizing

The results show that RQs are a particularly convenient linguistic tool when it comes to the performance of the illocutionary act of criticizing, which, as noted by Al-Dakhs (2019), represents the expression of discontent with actions taken by the addressee (or a third party), aimed at discouraging them from saying or doing similar things in the future. This is the most frequent communicative function of RQs in Albanese's posts, accounting for 14 examples (36.8%). Since RQs are formulate in a way to let the addressees recognize and acknowledge the answers presented by the addressor as self-evident, this expressive illocutionary act may seem more forceful and effective when realized in the interrogative form, as compared to an outright statement. Furthermore, the intended perlocutionary effects (convincing the audience that certain actions are unacceptable, and cannot be tolerated) are not limited only to those whose conduct is being criticized, but extend to the wider X community. In such instances, RQs are utilized to frame criticism not as the addressor's subjective evaluation, but as a shared and obvious conclusion, thereby highlighting the persuasive power of the utterance.

In most cases (9 / 64.2%), such RQs are directed to all X users (general public), with the remaining ones being addressed directly at Israeli officials, or people from some Western countries which support Israel. This is an indication of her orientation towards appealing to the general public, rather than focusing solely on criticizing the listed targets.

Interestingly, only 6 RQs (42.8%) target Israel (or its officials), which highlights her rhetorical strategy of appealing to the general public, rather than solely criticizing.

(1) I wonder how those who have kept supporting Israel's genocide will feel the day the world will enter Gaza, and see with its own eyes the ghetto turned into extermination fields and mass graves. (...) (Albanese, 23 June 2024)

(2) *#Germany. I understand. The pressure you have been under. (...) But it's time to wake up to reality. This is 2024 and while you could stay quite⁴ and silent in the corner of history, you are doing all you can to make it wrong, once again. **How can this be forgiven?*** (Albanese, 8 August 2024)

In line with previous studies (for instance, Biezma and Rawlins, 2017; Špago, 2024), some RQs are followed by explicit answers, which reinforce criticism or introduce related accusations, as shown in the following examples:

(3) *A journalist asked me how I “feel” about Gaza today. **How am I supposed to feel in the face of a Western-sponsored army relentlessly butchering people trapped in what resembles a circle of Dante's Hell?** I feel sick.* (Albanese, 10 August 2024)

(4) ***Why blocking aid to starving people?** Because this is what #Apartheid, the organic by-product of settler-colonialism, looks like. (...)* (Albanese, 24 January 2024)

The answer to the RQ in Example 4 demonstrates, in line with van Rooy (2003), that RQs actually invoke a set of possible answers, rather than a single answer. Namely, the explicit answer in the given example diverges from the one that may be interpreted as obvious (*there is no reason to do that*), thereby strengthening the evaluative force of criticising.

4.1.2.2. Requesting

Requesting is a directive illocutionary act whose goal is “to engage the hearer in some future course of action that coincides with the speaker's goal” (Safont-Jorda 2008, p.42). While RQs are not commonly used with this illocutionary force, the obtained results reveal that such questions sometimes serve as indirect requests (7 RQs / 18.4%), which is in line with previous studies (for instance, Oraby et al., 2017). In such instances, RQs are equivalent to indirect statements which implicitly urge action, often by highlighting urgency or moral responsibility. This may render such requests more powerful than if they were formulated as direct imperatives or statements:

(5) *I am horrified by yet another senseless massacre of Palestinian civilians by Israel: 71 killed and nearly 300 wounded in a zone where Israel itself had told them to seek*

⁴ Typos, quotation marks, as well as abbreviated, capitalized or misspelled words from the original posts have been kept in that form, without corrections.

*refuge. The justification is always the same: "targeting Palestinian militants". **When is the world going to stop this death machine??*** (Albanese, 13 July 2024)

*(6) In Gaza, nowhere is safe. Most of its 2.3ML ppl are trapped in despair, w/o home, food, water, medicine & left only with their lives & irreparable trauma. **How long will the int'l community take to act & administer justice?*** (...) (Albanese, 2 February 2024)

Another pattern (appearing in two posts) is in the form *how can something be allowed / ignored*, implying that something has to be done to prevent certain actions from happening:

*(7) #Rafah stands as the last line of Palestinian existence in Gaza, amidst the relentless anguish faced by the people trapped therein. **How can we possibly allow another Nakba? Have we really lost our minds??*** (Albanese, 17 February 2024)

In Example (7), the pair of RQs functions as an indirect request by invoking a shared moral framework, thereby implying that allowing such an outcome (*another Nakba*) would be unacceptable, and indirectly calling for action to prevent it. Namely, instead of explicitly urging the audience to act, the addressor utilizes this interrogative form to place responsibility on them to recognize the implied answer (*We cannot allow that*), thereby framing the requested action as a joint moral obligation, and increasing the persuasive power of the utterance.

In those instances where such RQs are used, the action is requested from anybody who can do something (*the world, all people, international community, UN member states*). While the predominant illocutionary force that RQs carry in such circumstances remains that of requesting, these RQs are also laced with elements of other illocutionary forces, confirming the multifunctional character of RQs noted in previous studies (Frank, 1990; Schaffer, 2005).

4.1.2.3. Accusing

Accusing is an expressive illocutionary act in which the addressor charges the target with doing something wrong or blameworthy, thereby putting pressure on the accused parties to explain their actions or behavior (Kauffeld, 1998). RQs can be an effective tool in carrying out this illocutionary act, since they somewhat distance the speaker from making accusations, instead presenting them as something obvious to everybody. Albanese's RQs which function as accusations (5 RQs / 13.1%) mostly refer to Western governments or media, reinforcing Albanese's evaluative stance.

(8) *After months of western media misrepresenting or not reporting the unfolding genocide in Gaza and all sort of int'l law violations agnst Palestinians: I have a question. **Don't journalists have codes of conduct and professional ethics to abide by and be held accountable to?*** (Albanese, 22 January 2024)

(9) *Western governments have suspended #UNWRA funds due to serious ALLEGATIONS agst 12 staff. Same governments have not suspended ties with the state whose army has killed 26k ppl in Gaza in 3.5m, though ICJ said it may plausibly constitute GENOCIDE. **Double standards?** Yes, big time.* (Albanese, 31 January 2024)

4.1.2.4. Expressing ridicule

Ridiculing represents an expressive illocutionary act realized by voicing a negative view of someone (or their actions or attitudes), aimed at presenting them as untrustworthy (Wittek, 2022), typically by incorporating irony or sarcasm. The share of such RQs in Albanese posts (5 examples / 13.1%) is less frequent than reported in some previous studies (for instance, Oraby et al., 2017; or Robert and Kreuz, 1994)⁵. In most instances (3 posts), the target of such RQs is someone who supports or who is from the Israeli side (such as shown in Example 10, where she ridicules those who attack her because of her criticism of Israel), and, in one instance (Example 11), it is the Western governments, ridiculed for cutting aid to UNWRA. Such RQs serve to delegitimize the targets by pointing at the absurdity of the implied answer, and inviting the addressees to recognize it.

(10) (...) ***How many public figures will I have to “thank“ for being increasingly seen & threatened as a “legitimate military target“? I am not scared. I am just disgusted & utterly annoyed. One thing must be clear: no one can ever silence the call for justice*** (...) (Albanese 16 May 2024)

(11) ***I wonder wether people in #Australia, #Austria, #Canada (...) appreciate the inhumanity of their Gvts' actions v. UNWRA*** (Albanese, 1 February 2024)

The sarcastic effects of the RQs in the listed examples are achieved by combining semantically incompatible words (*thanking someone for doing something bad; appreciating someone's inhumanity*). Additionally, quotation marks can serve to signal sarcasm, as shown in Example 10.

⁵ Robert and Kreuz (1994) found that RQs are combined with irony (or sarcasm) more often than with any other form of figurative language, which indicates that ironical or sarcastic RQs are very common in language.

4.2. *The use of RQs in X posts published by Eylon Levy*

4.2.1. *The form and setting in which RQs appear in Levy's posts*

A total of 40 RQs (or strings of RQs), appearing in 38 posts⁶, have been used by Eylon Levy over the time period covered by the study. The use of single RQs was prevalent (33 / 82.5%), with strings of two RQs appearing in remaining 7 posts. With just one exception, all Levy's RQs end in questions marks, and none are accompanied by emoticons. They are often combined with other language content, which facilitates their interpretation and pragmatic implications (29 / 72.5%). Most of the RQs in his posts are posed to the entire X community (26 / 65%), with the remaining ones being addressed directly to UN officials or agencies (5 / 12.5%), individuals who are critical of Israel (5 / 12.5%), or Western governments or officials (4 / 10%).

The share of sarcastic RQs is 17.5% (7 RQs), which is still lower than expected considering that the examined posts relate to a conflict situation, and that sarcasm can add to the intensity of expressed content, as well as intensify negative evaluations of opponents (Toplak and Katz, 2000).

Wh and *yes-no* RQs account for almost all RQs in Levy's posts, with other forms (alternative, declarative, fragmentary, tag, and indirect questions) appearing only once each. Table 3 summarizes the distribution of RQ types in Levy's posts.

Table 3. An overview of the distribution of different types of RQs in Levy's posts.

Form of RQs ⁷	Frequency	Examples
Wh	24 (60%)	<i>What is the EU doing for them beyond demanding an Israeli capitulation to Hamas' demands?</i>
yes-no	15 (37.5%)	<i>Have you tried not being an antisemitic liar?</i>

4.2.2. *Communicative functions of RQs in Levy's posts*

Based on the main illocutionary force associated with their use, the results indicate that the main communicative function of Levy's RQs is to express criticism, followed by accusing, ridiculing, and expressing disagreement. Instances of requesting and insulting were also identified, but their use was rare, which indicates that Levy's

⁶ Two posts included two RQs separated by other language content, so they were counted as separate examples.

⁷ Forms which appear only once (fragmentary, indirect, declarative, alternative, and tag questions) were not listed.

RQs are primarily used as evaluative devices. A detailed overview of the distribution of the communicative functions of RQs in Levy's posts is given in Table 4.

Table 4. An overview of communicative functions of RQs in Levy's posts.

Communicative functions	Frequency
Criticizing	10 (25%)
Accusing	7 (17.5%)
Ridiculing	7 (17.5%)
Expressing disagreement	5 (12.5%)
Requesting	2 (5%)
Insulting	2 (5%)
other (other illocutionary acts appearing only once, or unclear which illocutionary force is predominant)	7 (17.5%)

4.2.2.1. Criticizing

The single most common illocutionary force associated with the utilization of RQs in Levy's posts is that of criticizing (10 RQs / 25%), with such RQs often being preceded by statements with assertive illocutionary force, as shown in Examples 12 and 13. The perlocutionary effects are intended to be achieved not only with those being criticized, but with the general public, who need to be convinced that criticized actions do not make sense, and are blameworthy. Interestingly, the most common targets of criticism (4 RQs) are Western (including Australian) officials, whose statements or actions Levy presents as unjustified or inconsistent.

(12) *On 13 December, Australian PM (...) said in a joined statement with Canada and New Zealand that a ceasefire can only be sustainable if Hamas lays down its arms and has no role in the future governance of Gaza. **What changed?*** (Levy, 3 September 2024) (in reference to a post by Australian PM who called for a ceasefire)

(13) *The UK and French foreign secretaries (...) met Israel's FM and the Palestinian PM today. They wore the hostage pin for the Israeli meeting. They took it off for the Palestinian. **Why? Is the release of hostages not a foreign policy goal?*** (Levy, 16 August 2024)

As shown in Example 12, the use of RQs is important because the straightforward statements would present the addressor's arguments as his own, whereas RQs introduce them as self-evident or difficult to contest in the given setting (*nothing has changed in the meantime*).

In other instances, targets of criticism include UN agencies (1 RQ), unnamed international officials or individual X users (2 RQs each), or media skeptical of Israeli claims that they attack civilian infrastructure because Hamas hides there (Example 14).

(14) *Why is the international media still so utterly skeptical of the fact Hamas operates out of civilian facilities, including schools and mosques? (...)* (Levy, 10 August 2024)

4.2.2.2. Accusing

Another common function of RQs in this corpus is that of accusing (7 RQs / 17.5%), with such accusations being mostly leveled at UNWRA (a UN agency for Palestinian refugees) (utilized in 4 RQs), which he repeatedly portrays as collaborating with Hamas⁸ or intentionally putting civilians in Gaza in danger due to failure to accept Israeli proposals (as shown in Example 16). Such RQs can be accompanied by statements with different illocutionary force (Example 15), or the additional language content can also carry the same illocutionary power of accusing (Example 16). The intended perlocutionary effects are, as always, geared towards the general public, who are encouraged to recognize the implied answers as a validation of the accusations made in his posts. In this way, RQs serve to convey the addressor's evaluations and claims as seemingly uncontested facts, thereby reinforcing their persuasive impact.

(15) *UNWRA claims Israel killed its staff but is refusing to name them so Israel can cross-reference its list of terrorists. What is UNWRA hiding?* (Levy, 12 September 2024)

(16) *Just imagine if in the early days of the war, @UNWRA had said YES to the @IDF's proposal to create a tent city in a humanitarian zone and evacuate civilians en masse – once – from Hamas strongholds? Instead the UN chose to keep them as human shields. This is the result.* (Levy, 10 August 2024)

Other instances of such RQs include accusing Palestinians (as shown in Example 17; such RQs appear twice), or unnamed international diplomats (1 RQ).

⁸ Namely, while serious allegations against several members of the agency have seemed convincing, Israeli officials have constantly tried to portray the entire agency as compromised, and banned their activities.

(17) *Is Palestinian society responsible for the actions of its elected leaders?* (Levy, 3 September 2024)

4.2.2.3. Expressing ridicule

Equally frequent as the preceding category, such RQs are pretty common in Levy's posts, with targets of ridicule varying from UN agencies (ridiculed for their alleged collaboration with Hamas, as shown in Example 18) to Palestinian journalists (for the same reasons - Example 19), or individual X users. Such RQs function to deligitimize what he perceives as incompetence or bias. By inviting the online audience to recognize the implied answer as obvious and shared, such RQs amplify the ridiculing effects of the utterance, and serve to undermine the credibility of the target.

(18) *Have you tried not hiring Hamas terrorists?* (Levy, 14 September 2024 – in reference to a post by UNWRA which reads that more UNWRA staffers have been killed in Gaza)

(19) *Hang on, I thought Gaza was full of brave and independent Palestinian journalists? Brave and independent journalists who never report anything inconvenient to their government, Hamas (...)* (Levy, 9 September 2024 – in reference to a post by Jessica Simor in which she criticizes Israel for not allowing international journalists to enter Gaza)

An interesting finding is that RQs with the illocutionary force of ridiculing are usually used alone in Levy's posts (4 RQs), and, in the remaining posts where such RQs are utilized, the accompanying language content carries the same illocutionary force as the RQs, thereby reinforcing the ridiculing effects.

4.2.2.4. Expressing disagreement

In some instances (5 / 12.5%), Levy's RQs carry the illocutionary force of expressing disagreement, which is an assertive illocutionary act characterized by the addressor's claim that something said or espoused by someone else is not true (Liu, 2004). As noted by Popa-Wyatt (2017), expressing disagreement represents a reactive illocutionary act, since it always comes as a response to another illocution. In Levy's posts, RQs with this communicative function are mostly combined with other language content (4 RQs), and mostly used to express disagreement with Western politicians' posts in which they condemn attacks on UN staff in Gaza, or state that it is necessary to stop the war.

(20) *“Never“? And if turns out they are Hamas operatives, does that change? Tell UNWRA to give Israel the names, like it's asking, so it can check which staff are Hamas military operatives. (Levy, 12 September 2024 – in response to a post by German Foreign Office which reads that humanitarian workers must never be victims of rockets, and that killing of 6 UNWRA workers is unacceptable)*

(21) *Israel confirmed at least three of them were Hamas terrorists, and UNWRA is not cooperating with request for a list of names. Why is this appalling? Aid workers must not be simultaneously militants for proscribed terrorist groups. (Levy, 12 September 2024 – in response to a post by British Foreign Secretary, which reads that killing UNWRA staff members is appalling)*

While the predominant illocutionary force is that of disagreeing, such RQs also display multifunctionality, since they also serve to criticize those who made some comments or statements which are not in favor of Israeli actions, as well as to express the addressor's frustration, and, above all, to attempt to persuade the public to adopt the addressor's interpretation of the situation.

4.3. Comparing the use of RQs in Albanese's and Levy's posts

While conveying simple and concise messages is one of the characteristics of X (Twitter) platform (Ott, 2016), both Albanese and Levy predominantly embed their RQs in broader language content, rather than utilizing them in isolation. Likewise, single RQs dominate in both corpora (86.8% in Albanese's posts vs 82.5% in Levy's), while strings of two or more RQs are less frequent. Most RQs address the general audience (84.2% vs 65%), which indicates that both officials primarily focus on engaging the broader public, rather than directly targeting those who they perceive responsible for something. Sarcasm is infrequent in both corpora (13.1% vs 17.5%), indicating a tendency towards the use of direct, serious evaluative strategies, rather than relying on sarcasm, despite the strongly polarized and emotionally charged topic.

Regarding the forms of RQs in the two corpora, *wh*-questions are the most common, followed by *yes-no* RQs. Albanese uses more indirect and fragmentary questions than Levy, which aligns with her strategy of encouraging the online audience to reflect and make moral evaluations on their own.

Some differences have been observed regarding the main communicative functions of RQs in the two corpora. Namely, the data-driven analysis of the most salient illocutionary forces associated with the utilization of RQs in the given corpora indicates that both individuals employ RQs to criticize, accuse, or ridicule. However, Albanese utilizes RQs to perform requesting more frequently, which reflects her

attempt to mobilize action, whereas Levy's RQs are more commonly used to express disagreement. Regarding the target selection, there is a difference between the two individuals, with Albanese targeting primarily Israeli or Western officials or governments, whereas Levy mainly targets UN agencies or officials, international diplomats and officials, or individual X users who disagree with his views. These differences indicate that RQs serve as a strategic tool in constructing and / or reinforcing particular evaluative frameworks, thereby guiding the audience towards specific interpretations of contested events, and putting them in line with the addressor's broader communicative goals in the given context. More specifically, the noted differences suggest that RQs in the two corpora are associated with distinct rhetorical strategies, with those from the first corpus being more oriented towards moral mobilization, and those from the second one more oriented towards contesting and delegitimizing. This indicates that RQs are not only multifunctional, but also adaptable to different persuasive strategies, depending on the primary goal of the addressor.

5. Conclusion

The study has examined the use of RQs in a conflict-related online discourse, focusing on X posts by two prominent X users with opposing views on the Gaza war. Based on the obtained results, it can be concluded that RQs serve a number of communicative functions strategically utilized to promote evaluative claims and / or interpretations of contested events, as well as to engage and influence the broader audience in regard to this highly polarized conflict. More specifically, the findings indicate that RQs enable addressors to present their evaluations as implicit and self-evident facts, thereby shifting (at least partly) the responsibility for such interpretation to the audience, while maintaining a strong persuasive position. Despite the differences in their views and orientation, both individuals utilize RQs as indirect speech acts with strong evaluative force. In both corpora, the most common communicative functions of RQs are those of criticizing, accusing, or ridiculing, with RQs being used to indirectly frame the users' views as self-evident by letting the wider audience recognize the implied answers as logical and difficult to contest.

The comparative analysis indicates that certain differences do exist in the utilization of RQs by the two individuals. Albanese more frequently uses RQs as indirect requests, which can be interpreted as her attempt to mobilize action, and appeal to moral responsibility of the general public. Conversely, Levy's RQs are more often aimed at expressing disagreement, or discrediting organizations or individuals critical of Israeli conduct in the war. These differences indicate that, rather than being just stylistic devices, RQs are a part of broader rhetorical strategies used to advance

each user's communicative goals. In this regard, RQs can be seen as pragmatic devices used for articulating the addressor's position, while shifting the responsibility for interpretation to the audience, and shaping their alignment in a highly-polarized online discourse.

In both corpora, sarcastic RQs are used less frequently than might be expected having in mind the emotionally charged nature of the discourse, as well as findings from previous studies (for instance, Oraby et al., 2017), which indicates that the utilization of RQs by both individuals is mostly associated with the use of serious evaluative strategies, rather than those laced with humor or sarcasm.

Regarding the form of RQs in the examined corpora, *wh* and, to a lesser degree, *yes-no* questions account for most RQs, with other forms (indirect, fragmentary, declarative, etc.) being rarely used, especially in the second corpus. In both corpora RQs are mainly combined with other language content, and, in most instances, addressed to the entire X community.

A key contribution of the present study lies in its systematic identification of the salient illocutionary forces associated with the use of RQs in social media posts related to a conflict situation, which gives an insight into how such questions function as indirect speech acts in online settings. The study identifies a range of common illocutionary acts that RQs are employed to perform, underscoring their pragmatic flexibility in online discourse, where they contribute to the rhetorical construction of contested events, and shape their interpretation by the general public. In this regard, RQs function not only as realizations of different indirect speech acts, but as a discursive strategy for presenting the addressors evaluations and claims as shared and self-evident, and, as such, less open to contesting.

Overall, while its primarily qualitative nature does not allow for generalizations regarding the use of RQs in the given setting, the present study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how such questions are utilized as indirect speech acts in online social media discourse related to an armed conflict, where they serve as a pragmatic tool used to shape and influence the audience interpretation of contested events. Future studies could be carried out using expanded corpora, and by examining multiple officials' use of RQs on social media in regard to conflict-related settings, which can shed additional light on how RQs contribute to shaping public opinion and promoting different interpretations of contested events.

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