

Expressive devices as markers for polarisation in German rhetorical questions in YouTube comments and Reddit threads

Rhetorical questions (RhQs) are interrogatives whose answers are known and which are often regarded as assertions of the opposite polarity, so positively formulated RhQs are associated with negative assertions and negatively formulated RhQs with positive assertions (e.g., Meibauer 1986, Schöpsdau 1996, Han 2002, Caponigro & Sprouse 2007). It is assumed that their answer is known to both speaker and addressee, so the answer is assumed to be in the Common Ground (CG) (e.g., Caponigro & Sprouse 2007).

This study follows Fortuna's (2019) concept of polarisation which is based on an understanding of polarisation as a strategy involving textual structures in certain contexts to achieve a split of the audience into a positive in-group and a negative out-group (Fortuna 2019: 3). This concept combines three elements: a. a flag issue is simplified into a positive-negative dichotomy; b. differences between individuals on both sides of this divide are exaggerated to increase the divide between the groups; and c. an emotional response of the audience is provoked through morally charged imagery and language (Fortuna 2019: 92).

The proposed study addresses the research question of how different expressive devices are used in German RhQs in social media to address an assumed in-group vs. an assumed out-group in the gender discourse. More specifically, the question of whether expressive language is used differently in two types of social media, namely YouTube comment sections and Reddit threads, is addressed.

The main hypothesis motivating this study is that expressive devices are used to exaggerate group differences and to provoke an emotional response in addressees. Thus, they are used to polarise as commenters seek to enhance the in-group/out-group divide in their posts and comments.

The data is collected from the project corpus of the BMFTR-funded project 'Über Geschlecht und Gender streiten. Konflikt und Konsens als Herausforderung der Wissenschaftskommunikation (KoKoKom)', created by the IDS Mannheim. Access is provided through the analysis platform KorAP (Kupietz et al. 2023). RhQs in the comment sections of the following YouTube videos are analysed: "Uni cancellt Evolutionsvortrag von Biologin [ENG SUBS]" (donnasdottir; video settings private) and "Wie viele Geschlechter gibt es?" (MAITHINK X, previously MaiLab). From both comment sections, 300 question marks and all combinations of question marks and at least one other question mark or exclamation mark are extracted, leading to 717 YouTube hits. From the Reddit threads in the project corpus, all question marks and all combinations of question marks with additional question marks or exclamation marks are extracted, leading to 460 total hits.

The study is designed as a qualitative analysis of which expressive devices occur in RhQs in the data set. In a first step, all hits are classified as either RhQ, non-RhQ or unsure using an annotation scheme focusing on question syntax, context and linguistic markers for RhQs taken from the literature. The category 'unsure' is necessary because even when including the context, it is not always possible to clearly classify a question as either RhQ or non-RhQ. In a second step, expressive devices from the literature are annotated. The focus of the proposed study will be on their relevance for polarisation and their different usage in YouTube comments and Reddit threads.

The study shows that different expressive markers are found in the data set. For instance, (1) is a comment under the MAITHINK X video.

- (1) **Seit wann hat diese häßliche Tussi Ahnung von Biologie??? Wahrscheinlich wieder**
since when has this ugly bimbo knowledge of biology probably again

zu viel im CHEMIElabor geschlafen und sich irgend etwas Komisches eingeschmissen...¹
too much at.the chemistry.lab slept and herself something strange taken

'Since when does this ugly bimbo know anything about biology? Maybe she slept too long ant the chemistry lab again and took something strange.' [KYC/MAI/000803]

The bold wh-RhQ is marked through the tone of the comment which expresses the attitude of the speaker and lets the reader assume the answer the commenter considers appropriate. Several expressive devices are clustered in this example. The combination of three question marks following the RhQ is an instance of expressive punctuation, marking the question as an RhQ and intensifying the commenter's negative attitude towards Mai Thi Nguyen Kim (see Gutzmann & Turgay 2024). The DP 'diese häßliche Tussi' ('this ugly bimbo') also expresses this attitude. The combination of expressive punctuation and negative attitude exaggerates the commenter's feelings and provokes an emotional reaction in readers depending on their own attitudes and their own position within the in-group or the out-group. While audience members sharing the commenter's negative attitude will be reinforced in their own opinion and, thus, in their in-group identification, audience members with a positive attitude towards Nguyen Kim, representing the commenter's out-group, mentally differentiate themselves from the commenter's negative attitude, reinforcing the group divide.

Example (2) containing a wh-RhQ followed by a yes/no-RhQ is taken from a Reddit thread. The wh-RhQ contains the slur TERF ('trans-exclusional radical feminist') in fronted position, functioning as an expressive noun and emphasising its meaning through its RhQ-initial position. Moreover, the adjective geistkrank [sic] ('mentally ill') expresses the negative attitude of the speaker towards using the slur TERF in the current discourse. Depending on group membership, the combination of the slur and the adjective leads to either positive or negative emotional reactions in readers, similar to the ones in example (1).

(2) "TERF", wie geistkrank ist das denn? Ist Usain Bolt dann ein BERR,
TERF how mentally.ill is this then is Usain Bolt then a BERR

weil er nicht gegen Motarradfahrer antritt?
because he not against motorcyclists competes

'TERF, how mentally ill is this? Is Usain Bolt a BERR because he does not compete against motorcyclists?' [KRC/BDV/000012]

As these two examples already show, the data set contains various forms as expressive language such as expressive punctuation, expressions showing speaker attitudes and slurs. Moreover, these expressive devices are combined in the examples analysed, leading to exaggerating the emotional responses of the readers and, thus, intensifying the in-group/out-group divide, supporting the initial hypothesis motivating this study.

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¹ Examples are reported as found in the project corpus, grammar and spelling are kept from the original comments.

Korpora in der germanistischen Sprachwissenschaft. Mündlich, schriftlich, multimedial. Berlin: de Gruyter: 1-28 • Meibauer (1986). *Rhetorische Fragen.* Berlin: de Gruyter • Nguyen-Kim, M. T. [MAITHINK X]. (2022, November 27). *Wie viele Geschlechter gibt es?* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fraZlsmCio> • Schöpsdau, K. (1996). *Frage, rhetorische.* In G. Ueding (Ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik.* Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft. 445-454