The Pragmatics of the Rhetorical Question in Selected (English) Qur’an Chapters

Waheed A. Bamigbade
Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria

Lawan Dalha
Yanbu University College, Saudi Arabia

Abstract
This paper interrogates the pragmatic choice of the rhetorical question (RQ) as a linguistic resource in some disputational discourse in the verses of the English translated Qur’an. It argues that the choice of this sentence-type not only puts the speaker in a position of control in powerful assertion of facts, but also strengthens the pragmatic acts in the context to be more emphatic. Adopting Mey’s (2001) Pragmatic Acts theory and Caponigro and Sprouse’s (2007) Concept of Common Ground, the paper does a close reading of the last forty Quranic chapters for a critical analysis and finds that RQ accounts for 15% (61) of the 410 verses in the seventeen (17) chapters that have RQs out of the last forty chapters investigated. We find that the Authorial Voice in the Qur’an employs the RQ as an argumentative strategy to perform the pragmatic acts of challenging, inviting, affirming, reminding, reinforcing, assuring, appealing, and warning in series of intellectual engagements with the addressees in order to put them in a reflective mode. It is concluded that the RQ is an effective, dialogic, evidence-gathering, change-seeking pragmatic tool for securing improved attitude and ideological understanding from the addressees. Addressees are sought after to be convinced by the Speaker in a dialogue, and then left alone to decide, which presents the Speaker as One that uses rational argument in the context of disputation to persuade humans in real dialogues so as to seek change.

Keywords: rhetorical question (RQ), the (English) Qur’an, pragmatic acts, common ground, change-seeking, pragmatic acts of challenging, reinforcing and affirming
1. Introduction

Various scholars have described the rhetorical question in various related lights. While Rhodes (2006) argues that the interrogative in a rhetorical question (henceforth, RQ) is “redundant” (p. 135), others have underscored the structure of a RQ as that of a question but having the force of an assertion (Wang, 2014, p. 42), or “interpreted as assertion” (Nakashima, 2017, p. 96); as the tactic of “posing questions that expect no answer” (Frank, 1990, p. 723), or more extensively, as “a question used as a challenging statement to convey the addresser’s commitment to its implicit answer, in order to induce the addressee’s mental recognition of its obviousness and the acceptance, verbalized or non-verbalized, of its validity” (Ilie, 1994, p. 128).

The Microsoft Encarta Dictionary (2009) defines it as “asking of questions not to gain information but to assert more emphatically the obvious answer to what is asked” (“Figure of Speech”, paragraph 18). While Han (2002) agrees that it “has the illocutionary force of an assertion of the opposite polarity from what is apparently asked” (p. 201), Gergen (2001) argues that it “could be a powerful weapon with audiences” (p. 163). For Ilie, a RQ has “the illocutionary force of a question and the perlocutionary effect of a statement” (Ilie, 2015, paragraph 11), and as a result, only “pragmatic studies of rhetorical questions…could account for the complex nature and multifunctionality of rhetorical questions” (Ilie, 2015, paragraph 11). This paper therefore interrogates the pragmatic acts that the RQs are used to perform in the last forty Chapters of the English Qur’an.

2. Theoretical Framework

Jacob L. Mey, the proponent of the Pragmatic Act theory, describes these acts as “acts that work not just by their wording but also by their being embedded in a situation in which humans act, with everything that humans bring to their interactional forum, including body movements, emotions, and so on” (Mey, 2006, p. 51). Mey gives the general term Pragmeme to pragmatic acts and the term Pract for “a particular pragmeme in its realisation” (Mey, 2001, p. 221). According to Mey (2001), pragmatic acts are so called because:

they base themselves on language as constrained by the situation, not as defined by syntactic rules or by semantic selections and conceptual restrictions. Pragmatic acts are
situation-derived and situation constrained; in the final analysis, they are determined by the broader social context in which they happen, and they realise their goals in the conditions placed upon human action by that context. (p. 228)

The above emphasises the role and centrality of context of language event and situation of utterance for a useful pragmatic act interpretation. Allan (2010) tries to expand the scope and notion of the pragmatic act theory “to include other things done with language than performing illocutionary acts” (p. 2919), although Mey (2001) already insists that pragmatic acts include all such linguistic activities that human beings can potentially perform, and which cannot be listed (p. 228).

Capone (2005) further elaborates on the idea of pragmeme as “a situated speech act in which the rules of language and of society synergize in determining meaning, intended as a socially recognized object sensitive to social expectations about the situation in which the utterance to be interpreted is embedded” (p. 1357). An RQ is not a pragmatic act but the vehicle with which the acts are conveyed, and it therefore falls within such domain that is “…sensitive to social expectations about the situation in which the utterance to be interpreted is embedded” (p. 1357).

According to Spago (2016), an RQ and an ordinary question (OQ) often have a similar structure, but the context of use usually determines whether a question is rhetorical or not (p. 113). Context therefore implies some kind of common ground (CG) or shared knowledge between participants. Nakashima (2017) defines common ground as “the intersection of speaker and addressee belief: the belief mutually held by the speaker and the addressee” (p. 98). Nakashima goes ahead to present how Caponigro and Sprouse (2007) distinguish between ordinary question (OQ) and rhetorical question (RQ):

a question Q is OQ if and only if the speaker does not have beliefs about the complete true answer to Q. In contrast, a question Q is RQ if and only if the speaker and addressee mutually believe the true answer to Q. More formally, OQ and RQ are defined as follows:

a. Q is an OQ iff \([Q]w>SB\)
b. Q is an RQ iff \([Q]w>CGS-A\) (Nakashima, 2017, p. 99)

Thus the answer to a RQ cannot be one-sided: it must be known to both the speaker and the addressee, whereas the answer to an OQ is one-sided: not known to the speaker while the addressee is assumed to know, hence the OQ posed to the
addressee. The Qur’an presents a complex mix of topics relating to humans, and has been generally seen as a sacred book which describes itself as a book of guidance (Qur’an Chapter 2 verse 2) rather than a drama book with dialogues. It would be interesting to find out how the RQ comes to apply to its context: who the Speaker(s) and the Addressee(s) is/are, what the RQs are, how the answers are known to both sides, and the pragmatic acts of such RQs.

3. The Qur’an and the Context of RQ in the Qur’an

There have been works on the Qur’an from various linguistic perspectives. One of such is Alamiri’s (2018) attempt to “approach the Qur’anic Arabic from an SFL perspective…exposing the importance of the functional analysis in understanding the oldest text of Arabic” (p. 47); another is Abdul-Raof’s (2011) article which “discusses the structure of the Qur’anic verses and some linguistic features unique to the text of the Qur’an” (p. 37); still another is a comparative translation investigation to determine the extent to which two selected English Qur’anic translations sustain the tenor variable of the RQ with reference to Halliday and Hasan’s context of situation of the source text (Najjar, Kwee & Abu-Alhaji, 2019). While the first two are on Arabic language, the third is on English translations. Our present study is also on the English translation of the Qur’an.

The Qur’an was revealed to Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon Him¹, (henceforth, the Prophet) piecemeal by God, the Authorial Voice in the Qur’an, to be delivered to the world of humans and jinns². The revelation began on the night of Monday 21st Ramadan in the year 610 CE (Christian Era) when he was 40 years old (Al-Mubarakphuri, 2002, p. 86) and came to an end with his death on Monday 12th Rabiul-Awwal in the year 634 CE at the age of 63 (Al-Mubarakphuri, 2002, p. 558). The Qur’an was then compiled into a book consisting of 114 Surah (Chapters).

The context of the RQ in the Qur’an, especially most of those revealed in Makkah, is that of argumentation or disputation on one hand, and faith reinforcement on the other hand, involving the triad of God, the believers and the unbelievers. While the Prophet’s persecution in Makkah for 13 years provides the context for most of the verses revealed in Makkah, the disputation is particularly between God (henceforth, Speaker) and the Addresssee-unbelievers (henceforth, AUBs) who reject the Word of God and disobey His command, while faith reinforcement is between the Speaker and the Addresssee-believers (henceforth, ABs) which include the addresssee-Prophet
While the argumentation itself focuses on the AUBs who disbelieve in and oppose the Speaker, it serves as reinforcement of faith for the ABs who believe in and rely on the Speaker. For instance, to assure him and his followers of His support, and reinforce their faith, and to shut up the insinuations of the unbelievers that God has abandoned the Prophet, the Speaker addresses the Prophet in Qur’an Chapter 93 verse 6 (henceforth, Q93vs6): “Did He (God) not find thee an orphan and give thee shelter (and care)?” What then is the significance of the RQ in the Qur’an? What is the pragmatic force behind its use; in other words, what pragmatic acts are the RQs out to perform, and in what way have the pragmatic acts impacted the message of the Qur’an to the various addressees? These are the questions this present study intends to answer.

4. Methodology

The Qur’an consists of 114 Chapters out of which the last forty Chapters were selected for this study as this will allow for detailed analysis, and will allow the analysis to concentrate on a portion of the Qur’an related in time, namely those revealed in Makkah, and most of which can be found in the second half of the Qur’an. The Qur’an verses revealed in Makkah contain more disputational discourse and are more poetic than those revealed in Madinah. The Prophet’s period in Makkah where these chapters were revealed to him was full of persecutions from the idol worshippers before he eventually escaped in a Holy Flight to Madinah. This context of situation thus impacted greatly on the subject matter of discussion in the Qur’anic Chapters, and RQs seem to play some crucial role in the discourse. The last forty chapters begin from Chapter 75 (Surat Al-Qiyaamah: The Resurrection) and end on Chapter 114, the last chapter. The RQs were sorted out of the forty chapters and closely read with a view to identifying the pragmatic acts performed by the RQs. The pragmatic acts were then analysed for common ground. Five such pragmatic acts, out of several that can be found performed by the RQs, are analysed and discussed in detail. The selected Qur’an texts for analysis were labelled as in the original Chapter and verse numbers in the Qur’an. Moreover, both the Arabic and English translations have the same Chapter and verse numbering.

5. Findings and Discussion

We find several pragmatic acts performed in the RQ verses; however, five main
ones, namely the pragmatic acts of challenging, inviting, affirming, reminding and reinforcing, are analysed in detail.

5.1 The pragmatic act of challenging
To challenge is “to invite somebody to participate in a fight, contest, or competition; to dare somebody to do something; or to call something into question by demanding an explanation, justification or proof” (Microsoft Encarta Dictionary, 2009). An ordinary question can hardly be used to perform this pragmatic act. In verse 37 (henceforth vs37), the Speaker uses the RQ to perform the pragmatic act of challenging humans that they should dispute the fact that they are a drop of sperm:

Q75vs37: Was he not a drop of sperm emitted (in lowly form)?

There is an underlying intersection of Speaker and Addressee belief (S-AB) in the above RQ, namely that humans are created from a drop of sperm. This is the common ground (henceforth, CG) between them, and it would be useless for the Addressees to belabour this known fact or dispute it. This verse is followed by other scientific assertions (not in RQs) about human creation in vs38 and about gender in vs39 regarding which both the Speaker and the Addressees also possess CGs. The real issue that makes a question rhetorical is the CG; in other words, the fact that the answer to the question is known to both the Speaker and the Addressees, and the reason it is put in a question format: “was he not…?” is not only to assert but more crucially to confound the Addressees and make a strong statement therefrom, in this case a statement of challenge: “he was a mere emitted drop of sperm!” or more directly, “you are a mere emitted drop of sperm!” The real challenge here is not merely to state that the Speaker is the Creator, but rather to ask humans to dispute their despicable origin.

Three lexical items here are particularly crucial: “sperm”, “a drop”, and “emitted”. A “drop” is a nominal and headword of the nominal group “a drop of sperm”. It refers to “a very small amount of liquid that becomes a rounded or pear shape as it falls” (Microsoft Encarta Dictionary, 2009), depicting both a higher source and a movement to a lower platform or receptacle, since “to fall” is to go down freely and weakly into a lower position and not a mere transfer from one receptacle to another. This depicts not only the low status of humans but also their weak, dependent and powerless origin. Naturally, it is a known fact that humans are made from this single “drop” of sperm. “Sperm”, also known as “semen” is “the thick yellowish-white fluid” (Sanders,
2008, section 2, paragraph 4) that a male human ejaculates. Aside from the drop that gets fertilized in the female human body to commence the creation of another human being, the rest of the sperm is not only useless and wasted, it is also dirty, despicable, smelly and deserving to be washed off the human body. “The average discharge of semen…contains approximately 300 million sperm” (Sanders, 2008, section 2, paragraph 4), implying that several millions of sperm that could have grown to become humans are daily washed away without any protest from them each time they are “emitted”. To “emit” is to send out (e.g. bodily fluid, smoke), to issue, flow or come out through a natural or artificial means. The expression “one’s issue” refers to “one’s offspring”, showing further that humans go forth from drops of sperm, and are simply daily emitted and wasted. This knowledge is the CG that completely subdues the Addressees from making any lawful protest against the strong statement that the Speaker already made in the RQ verse in vs36:

Q75vs36: Does man think that he will be left uncontrolled (without purpose)?
Q75vs37: Was he not a drop of sperm emitted (in lowly form)?

The drop of sperm was not emitted without a purpose, and thus it is high time humans understood also the fact that their creation did not come into being without a purpose to fulfil. The reason these verses are structured as RQs therefore is to strengthen the force in the challenge and to make it more shockingly subduing. The Speaker would have been expecting an answer already known to both sides and would have been of no effect if these verses had been structured as ordinary questions which would have irreverently and needlessly prolonged the argument. The lexical item “think” in v36 seems to mock humans and cast doubts on their intelligence as they perhaps seem to have thought too highly of their own intelligence. They are presented as never certain that they would “be left uncontrolled (without purpose)” in the first instance. Thus, the RQs perform such an effective function on the Addressees that they cannot protest.

Analogous to the above pragmatic act of challenging is the RQ in vs40 where the Speaker uses the RQ strategy to challenge the Addressees to dispute the fact that He alone has the power to give life to the dead:

Q75vs40: Has not He the (same) power to give life to the dead?
There is an existing CG between the Speaker and the Addressees that the Speaker has the power to give or create life (in Q75vs37). It is only logical that he who has the power to give also has the power to take. A human is alive when life is given, and is dead when the life is taken, and it can also be returned at will as the taker pleases. Moreover, humans lack the power to reject any of these. The Addressees are aware that the Speaker has such power. The transitive lexical verb form “has” in vs40 indicates “that somebody possesses something, either materially or as a characteristic or attribute” (Microsoft Encarta Dictionary, 2009). Thus, by conversion from an interrogative form to a declarative, vs40 reads as:

vs40b: “He has the same power to give life to the dead”

with a sense of possession, while the deictic item: “same” points to the earlier powers underlining the various powerful activities mentioned in the earlier vs36 to 40:

36. Does man think that he will be left uncontrolled (without purpose)? 37. Was he not a drop of sperm emitted (in lowly form)? 38. Then did he become a leach-like clot; then did God make and fashion (him) in due proportion. 39. And of him, He made two sexes, male and female. 40. Has not He, the (same) power to give life to the dead? (Q75v36-40)

A similar challenge is thrown to humans in Q76vs1:

Q76vs1: Has there not been over man a long period of time when he was nothing (not even) mentioned?

The CG here is the Speaker and the Addressees belief (S-AB) that there was indeed a period of time when they were nowhere to be found, not even mentioned, nor in any worldly existence. This is a co-constructed meaning and an established fact of life, and the pragmatic force is asking the Addressees to challenge or dispute it. In this verse, the verbal group “has been” is present perfect, indicating further that this is, has always been and will always be the situation. The support for this is realised in historical narrations dating back hundreds of centuries indicating that people have lived in those times and are no more alive, and pointing at the fact that those that are alive at this present period would also most likely become part of the past. The preposition “over” in “over man” is performing the deictic function of pointing to
a period of time that has been used up, gone by or spent by man, that is, a period in which he is not yet alive, a period in which he is alive and a period in which he is no longer alive. This passing period can be broken into a minimum of three and a maximum of five phases where phases 1, 2 and 5 are mandatory: (1) the phase of pre-birth, (2) the phase of childhood, (3) the phase of adulthood, (4) the phase of old age, and (5) the phase of post-death, all in a non-cyclical, straight-line movement to be experienced once per human as illustrated below:

Figure 1. An illustration of the five phases of “…a long period of time…over man…”

The expression “he was nothing, not even mentioned” further indicates not only how far in the past the time was, but more importantly, how neither he (that was not yet born) nor anybody else knows anything about him—where he is, what is happening to him, and how he has absolutely no influence, say or any means to put up any protest or argument regarding what is happening to him or around him at that time. Therefore at the time “when he was nothing”, he is absolutely dependent and submissive to an overall power. The Speaker is insisting in this verse that now that he is born and alive, that state of order still exists, and that he should not now turn himself into a rebel against Him (the Speaker).

The established challenge is for the Addressees to argue against all these and prove the Speaker wrong; whereas the Addressees have no means, right or basis to do so. In all, humans fail to live up to the challenges in these and other RQs. Therefore, having also performed the pragmatic act of forestalling any further blind argument from the Addressees, the post-challenge pragmatic act is asking for and making them to change their attitude of disobedience to obedience and to succumb to the authorities of the Speaker. While the RQs in Chapter 75 appear as last verses of the Chapter, the one in Chapter 76 appears as the first verse of the Chapter. The implication of this is that in both ways they function as sealers: making further arguments impossible before or after delivering the messages in these chapters.

5.2 The pragmatic act of inviting (to affirm)
While a number of studies describe an RQ as asserting (Microsoft Encarta Dictionary, 2009; Wang, 2013, p. 42; Nakashima, 2017, p. 96; etc.), RQs in some verses of
the Qur’an seem to perform something extra and not simply asserting, namely inviting the Addressees to, by themselves, affirm a claim. This seems to be in line with Ilie’s (1994) argument that an RQ is used “…to induce the addressee’s… acceptance… of its validity” (p. 128). In several of the verses under study in this section, the Speaker adopts the RQ to perform the pragmatic act of inviting the Addressees to an understanding so that they can by themselves attest and affirm the claims He (the Speaker) is making in those verses. This is because by asking a question, the Speaker is extending an invitation to the Addressees so that they can enjoy a right to fair hearing and respond in any way they can. In the following:

Q77vs16: Did We not destroy the men of old (for their evil)?

the RQ is not directly affirming; rather it is inviting the Addressees to affirm by attesting to the fact that “men of old” were destroyed “(for their evil)”. The CG is the co-constructed, mutual understanding that in history, some communities were miraculously destroyed. This RQ occurs when the Speaker is informing the Addressees of the signs and certainty of the Day of Judgement. To assure them further, the Speaker reminds them of a certain historical fact: Did We not destroy the men of old (for their evil)?

In this verse, the predicator element “did destroy” is in the past tense, reinforced by the nominal group “men of old” which signifies a time in the far past, and not “old men” (men who are old). The use of “man” or “men” in these verses under study, although regarded as sexist or gender-insensitive in contemporary times, is inclusive of both genders. The Microsoft Encarta Dictionary (2009) defines “man” as “the human race in general (often offensive)”, and as “a member of the group that comprises modern humans and their ancestors”. The expression “men of old” therefore refers to all human beings living at those material times in affected communities. By reminding the Addressees of these historical events, the Speaker is seeking to assure them that His promise of a Day of Judgement in earlier verses is true:

Q77vs7: Assuredly, what ye are promised must come to pass;

and to also assure them of what will happen on that Day:

Q77vs15: Ah woe, that Day, to the Rejecters of Truth!
This is a hint to why those “men of old” were destroyed, although the English translator already inserts this idea in parentheses: “(for their evil)” in the verse under study.

Consequent upon this invitation to attest to and affirm the truth of the Day of Judgement is the pragmatic act of promising and warning being handed down to the Addressees in one fell swoop: the consequence of rejecting the truth is destruction on the Day of Judgement. You know I have destroyed communities before. This is in fact mentioned in the next verses, vs17 and 18:

vs17-18: So shall we make later (generations) follow them.
Thus do we deal with men of sin.

The effectiveness of this method resides in its ability to avoid prolonged arguments, and to only base arguments on known facts.

In another verse, the Speaker employs the RQ method to invite the Addressees to affirm and attest to the fairness of His judgement on Addressee-Unbelievers (AUBs):

Q83vs36: Will not the unbelievers have been paid back for what they did?

In this verse, the CG is the S-AB that the AUBs laugh at the ABs on earth, and so it is in order to facilitate fair justice by making the ABs laugh back at them to balance the equation—they did not laugh right back at them on earth to allow peace to reign. Thus, the Speaker is using the RQ resource to perform the pragmatic act of asking the Addressees to confirm, affirm, attest, and perhaps disagree or dispute whether true justice and fairness would have been served to both the Addressees-believers (ABs) and the Addressee-unbelievers (AUBs) if on the Day of Judgement it is the turn of the ABs to laugh at the AUBs (vs34: But on this day the Believers will laugh at the unbelievers) the way the AUBs have laughed at the ABs while on earth (vs29-30: Those in sin used to laugh at those who believed; and whenever they passed by them, used to wink at each other [in mockery]). The Speaker is assuring the Addressees that true justice and fairness will of a certainty be served to both sides on Judgement Day based on their deeds while on earth.

The verbal element “will have been paid” is, according to Aremo (2010) a present modal + perfective + passive BE + lexical verb (p. 303). The present modal “will” signifies willingness, insistence, predictability and intention, and an action that is expected to be done sometimes in the future; while the perfective “have” indicates
that the judgement will certainly be inflicted. The lexical verb “paid” shows how the Speaker regards what will happen on Judgement Day: “pay-back time”, time to settle scores between the two groups of addressees: the Bs and the UBs, and time to receive the consequences of their actions. The whole verbal structure signifies certainty and assurance. Having been sufficiently assured, the Addressees are invited to compare and contrast His (Speaker’s) judgement on the AUBs and their own treatment of the ABs and say whether it is fair and commensurate or not. It is also a way to assure evildoers that He takes note of every little form of abuse and oppression, including mockery.

Furthermore, and consequent upon the above, the Speaker performs the pragmatic act of (issuing a) warning (to) the AUBs to desist from their acts of persecution. Invariably, it is a warning to the ABs themselves never to partake in hostilities and persecution, as a commensurate payback awaits them also.

5.3 The pragmatic act of affirming
In the previous Section 5.2, the Speaker is inviting people to affirm by themselves, while in this Section 5.3 the Speaker is affirming by Himself. While in the former, humans can actually see the reference materials by themselves, in the latter they cannot because these are not only about things to happen in the future, but are also about hidden things. To affirm is to declare something to be true. However, when it comes to delivering that affirmation through an RQ, it has a touch of ridicule to it, such as saying: “how come you did not know this all along?!” This is because it has always been there but one has either closed their eyes to it or they did not just discover it, sincerely. It is due to this sincere miss that it becomes reasonable to affirm and re-affirm so as to clear all doubts. We have this beautifully exemplified in the following portion of the Qur’an:

Chapter 100vs9-11
9. Does he not know, when that which is in the graves is scattered abroad
10. And that which is (locked up) in (human) breasts is made manifest
11. That their Lord had been well acquainted with them, (even to) that Day?

The Speaker here is using the RQ to perform the pragmatic act of affirming strongly that He is well acquainted with humans at every step of their lives. Some addressees usually deny or doubt this, hence the need to assure them, and at the same time challenge them to disprove this. The CG here is the S-AB that the Addressees will
die some day and will be buried or disposed of somehow. By this RQ, the Speaker questions their so-called intelligence and “high” level of “knowledge” with which they reject or cast doubts on His Words if they fail to understand the simple fact that the Speaker is aware of everything they do.

The use of this RQ also suggests that perhaps they are only being adamant about the whole thing as they can all see evidently that the Speaker is aware of everything going on. This may find some support in several scientific breakthroughs, such as the (hidden) camera, CCTV, video recording and the mobile technology, as well as in the argument behind the laws of karma, retribution, providence, and natural justice, by which they all simply refer to the consequences of human actions on earth, and the fact that someone or something is watching. If the previous action is forgotten, there is no way it would dictate what comes later in future. So the Speaker deploys the RQ strategy to taunt and affirm to the Addressees that He is aware of everything and they should not expect otherwise. Otherwise, they will be shocked to discover that some things will happen to them in their graves to indicate that the Speaker keeps a record of their deeds:

And the Book (of Deeds) will be placed (before you); and thou will see the sinful in great terror because of what is recorded therein; they will say, “Ah! Woe to us! What a book is this! It leaves out nothing small or great, but takes account thereof!” They will find all that they did placed before them, and not one shall thy Lord treat with injustice. (Q18vs49)

This verse indicates that it would not even be about what the Speaker was aware of, but about what is accurately recorded and shockingly acknowledged as so by humans themselves. The finite verbal element “is” in vs9 and 10 above, and the lexical verb “know” are in the simple present tense form, indicating habit and regularity, and suggesting “an indefinite period of time that extends through the present into the past and, predictably, the future…expressing timeless truths” (Aremo, 2010, p. 68). In other words, the actions in the grave are simply normal events all through time, but the actual “grave scattering” (vs9) and “making manifest” (vs10) may not happen until the end of time as indicated in the above Q18vs49. However, all the while, according to vs11 above, the Speaker had been well aware of everything while humans were on earth from start to finish. The Speaker is by this rhetorical affirmation encouraging humans, while they are still alive, to always have it in mind that the Speaker sees them at all times. Through this RQ, the Speaker is also assuring them of His security, sustenance and guidance at all times, and that none of their deeds, good or bad, will be lost.
Similarly in Q75vs3, this pragmatic force is again deployed as follows:

vs3:  Does man think that We cannot assemble his bones?"

By using the lexical item “think”, the Speaker seems to call to question and ridicule the so-called human intelligence, like asking the worth of human thinking who thought it ridiculous, as it were, that the Speaker is claiming to possess the capacity to, and would actually, raise humans up from the dead and question them. The Speaker is here deploying the RQ strategy to perform the pragmatic act of strongly affirming that He will in fact not only raise them up, but will also “assemble” back neatly every single bone in their body from decay for the final judgement. The lexical item “assemble” suggests bringing bits and parts of something together and making whole and functional; while “bones” suggests that only bones would be left undecayed but perhaps scattered to be brought together alongside other parts of a human being such as the brain, flesh, nerves and blood. The royal “We” suggests the absolute authority and power to do so. The finite verbal elements are in the simple present to indicate timeless habitual perpetuity as mentioned above, as “man”, indicative of both genders, continues to “think” about whether this could be true and never being certain till they eventually die. However, according to the Qur’an, only some set of addressees fall into this “thinkers” category.

In the final analysis, the Speaker is deploying the RQ to perform the pragmatic act of totally affirming that human beings, whatever they choose to believe, will surely be resurrected from the dead, assembled, and questioned. In a way, it is also a warning that humans should be wary of how they use their time on earth to avoid shock and regret on that day of resurrection.

5.4 The pragmatic act of reminding

Reminding goes with memory and forgetting. Roediger (2008) defines Memory as the “processes by which people and other organisms encode, store, and retrieve information” (Section 1, paragraph 1). Memory and Forgetting have been major areas of scholarly studies, and are unanimous about the critical nature of memory “in humans and all other living organisms” (Section 1, Paragraph 2). According to Roediger (2008), “memory and learning are closely related, and the terms often describe roughly the same processes” (section 1, paragraph 4). This is perhaps because
only what is learnt can be recalled. Roediger (2008) reports that after a scientific study of human memory, experiments by Ebbinghaus, published in 1885, show that “the rate of forgetting was relatively consistent. Forgetting occurred relatively rapidly at first and then seemed to level off over time” (Section 6, paragraph 2). This has been confirmed by other researchers who have further argued that “with very well learned material, the (forgetting) curve eventually flattens out, showing no additional forgetting over time” (Section 4, paragraph 2). This shows that forgetting is inherent in human nature and that learning and re-learning, implying constant interaction with materials, is a major way out. It is within the ambit of these natural phenomena that the pragmatic act of reminding projects its significance for human life. Following are instances of RQs performing this act.

Q85:17-18: Has the story reached thee of the forces Of Pharaoh and the Thamud?

What follows in vs19:

vs19: And yet the Unbelievers (persist) in rejecting (the Truth)!

assures us that the question in vs17 and 18 is rhetorical as what it provides is no ordinary answer to the question. It is possible to argue that the immediate addressees might not have known anything about Pharaoh and Thamud’s stories; however this RQ is not meant for the Addressees of Prophet Muhammad’s time only, but also for people of every contemporary time who have heard of the stories.

The CG here is the historical S-AB and understanding that Pharaoh persecuted the Jews with Prophet Moses as their leader (Q2vs49-50; Q7vs103-137; Q44vs17-31; The Holy Qur’an, notes 1071-1096, 4700), while the Thamud people rejected the truth brought by Prophet Sālih (Q7vs73-79; The Holy Qur’an, notes 1043-1048) and were both miraculously destroyed. The RQs are therefore not meant to ask but to remind since forgetting is human. Stories of recalcitrant “men of old”, some of who are here identified by name, are told and re-told in various portions of the Qur’an. This kind of continuous reminder is therefore meant to constantly keep awake human consciousness regarding their responsibilities of faith and deeds, and to debar them from forgetting until their “forgetting curve” is “completely flattened”. The verbal element “has reached” meaning in this context
“heard about” or “read about” is in the perfective form, indicating that there is no doubt that the story happened and is well reported in God’s revelations to humans. The nominal headword “forces” signifies organised formations of physical power built to protect, defend and sustain a cause, ideology and the community. The pragmatic force is therefore reminding the Addressees of these historical forces and their defeat in spite of their military prowess so as not to invite similar punishment.

Similarly, we have the following in Chapter 89vs6-10:

6. Seest thou not how thy Lord dealt with the ‘Ad (people),
7. Of the (city of) Iram, with lofty pillars,
8. The likes of which were not produced in (all) the land?
9. And the Thamud (people) who cut out (huge) rocks in the valley?
10. And with Pharaoh lord of stakes?

In the above, the Speaker adopts the RQ strategy to perform the pragmatic act of reminding the Addressees of certain often repeated historical facts and their significance in case they forgot. As in the previous analysis, the CG is the mutual knowledge of the historical facts. The Speaker reminds them of the unique features of these people of old such as having buildings with “lofty pillars, the like of which were not produced in (all) the land”, the ability to “cut out huge rocks in the valley”, and “the lord of stakes” (who burnt people to death), all in spite of which they were destroyed miraculously because they “transgressed beyond bounds in the land”.

Related to this is the pragmatic act of appealing to the Addressees to be God-conscious and eschew bad deeds, as well as the pragmatic act of warning the Addressees of an appropriate punishment for tyrants and rejecters of truth.

Another instance of this pragmatic act is Q88vs17-20 where God seems to be reminding the Addressees of His powers to create phenomenal creatures in the mightiest and most beautiful designs:

**Chapter 88vs17-20**

17. Do they not look at the camels how they are made?
18. And at the sky, how it is raised high?
19. And at the mountains, how they are fixed firm?
20. And at the earth how it is spread out?
People see and live with these creatures and phenomena all the time, but they might have taken their existence for granted, giving little thought to their nature and design. The CG establishing this pragmatic act of reminding is the S-AB that the creation of all these objects (such as the rain water, the sunlight, the moon, the darkness, the beautiful image of humans, the flowering plants, the rivers and the oceans, the boundless worlds of the animal, insect, fishes, rocks, etc.) is by the Speaker, and they are serving the purpose of human welfare and wellbeing. The finite aspect of the verbal elements, namely “is” and “are” in the verses are in the present tense, not past, indicating that these objects are existing, constant phenomena, and are always there to be seen and enjoyed. The reminder therefore is that if He can create these mighty objects that can be witnessed and enjoyed now, then He can do other mighty things in the future, such as raising the dead from their sleep and asking them how they spent their lives. Perhaps, a constant reminder of this kind would help humans to take constant lessons from these phenomena creatures and designs, remain focussed on the Speaker’s supremacy, and then not be forgetful of His worship.

Adjoining this are the pragmatic act of appealing to the Addressees to be God-conscious, the pragmatic act of warning them not to be disobedient to Him and the pragmatic act of assuring the Addressees of His compassion having created all the mentioned objects for them so that they can have the best of life.

5.5 The pragmatic act of (faith) reinforcing

To reinforce is:

- to make something stronger by providing additional external support or internal stiffening for it; to give additional strength, force, or conviction to something such as an idea, opinion, or feeling, e.g. by providing further evidence to support it. (Microsoft Encarta Dictionary, 2009)

While challenges are being thrown in the way of some addressees and are being invited to affirm the truth of the Speaker’s claims, the faith of some other addressees, particularly Prophet Muhammad, are being reinforced, as in the following portion of the Qur’an under study:

Chapter 93vs6
The RQ here is performing the pragmatic act of strongly but subtly assuring the primary Addressee, namely the Prophet Muhammad (Addressee-Proph, or AProph) and his followers of His support at all times. The CG is the S-AB that the Speaker has been supporting him whenever the Addressee needs help, and that none else is capable of supporting him. What “an orphan” needs is “shelter and care” in all its manifestations, and “an orphan” refers to AProph having lost his father two months before his birth, his mother at the tender age of six and his grandfather at eight (Al-Mubarakpuri, 2002, p. 75). The AProph is addressed particularly as a second person: “thee” regarding his state and the given assistance both of which happened in the past as signified by the verbal group “did find”. The verb “find” indicates that it was the Speaker who “observed and discovered” the state of the AProph as an orphan at six and offered help and not until he besieged the Speaker about three decades before he was called to Prophethood and learnt how to pray. The assurance from the Speaker is that he should not be scared of the future as He is always there for him. So aside from asking the AProph to affirm His care for him, the ultimate pragmatic act that the Speaker intends to perform here is not just to assure the AProph but to strongly reinforce his faith and that of his followers, applicably till eternity. This served to give him confidence and strength of heart.

On the side of it, the Speaker is also performing the pragmatic act of assuring the other Addressees that if they change in their disbelief and disobedience, He is ready to support them too. The CG for this is that these other addressees themselves know and can attest that the Speaker has been supporting the AProph and his followers in very manifest and critical ways.

In another portion, the Prophet was primarily and similarly addressed:

**Chapter 94 vs1-4**

1. Have we not expanded for thee thy breast?
2. And removed from thee thy burden
3. Which did gall thy back?
4. And raised high the esteem (in which) thou (art held)?

Just like in Q93 discussed above, the CG is the S-AB that the Speaker has been helping and supporting the Addressee whenever he needs help. The Speaker is thus
utilizing these RQs to perform the pragmatic act of reminding the AProph of His blessings over him, consequently reassuring him of His support at all times, and ultimately reinforcing his faith. It is actually very crucial that the addressees’ faith is constantly reinforced considering the amount of persecution they suffer in the hands of the UBs. The heart of every human being is weak and requires constant assurance and support to reinforce its strength.

Unlike in the previous verbal element “did find” which is past, dating back to his orphanage period, the verbal elements in the present RQs: “have expanded… removed…raised” are in the perfective form, indicating a completed action that the AProph knew about rather than a promise for the future, and further reinforcing the Speaker’s level of assurance and faith, especially regarding his worries and enormous task. This approach by the Speaker to the AProph is strong but subtle and gentle, suggesting the Speaker’s love and regard for the ABs since they do not dispute anything with Him. They do not have to be warned so sternly since they already know the consequences of disobedience unlike some other addressees who do not.

In summary, God is the sole Speaker or Authorial Voice who also at times acts as Reporter in the entire 114 Chapters of the Qur’an. Our analysis, however, shows that only 17 Chapters out of the last 40 Chapters contain at least one verse of RQ. The 17 Chapters consist of 410 verses out of which 61 (14.87%) are RQ verses. Out of the 17 Chapters, only Chapter 76 was revealed in Madinah; the remaining 16 Chapters, namely Chapters 75, 77, 78, 79, 83, 85, 88, 89, 90, 93, 94, 95, 96, 100, 105, and 107 were revealed in Makkah within the first 13 years of his 23-year Prophethood. This is significant because the Prophet’s period in Makkah where these chapters were revealed was full of persecutions, before he eventually escaped to Madinah. This context of situation thus impacted greatly not only on the subject matter of discussion but also on the language and particularly on the pragmatic acts that the RQs were made to perform in the Qur’anic Chapters.

6. Implication for Teaching and Learning

The Authorial Voice in the Qur’an has shown through the RQ method that He is a teacher and a leader. The teacher knows more than the learner and should always find appropriate methods to impart knowledge and convince learners just as the Speaker is doing with the Addressees, and the RQ can come in very handy here as an interactive strategy. A learner that seems to ask a question beyond the topic of the day or farther
in thought than the teacher has stretched should not be shut down but be approached gently so that everyone can benefit from him. Using their superior knowledge over the student’s, the teacher can respond strategically to such a question and lead the student into a useful realisation by asking one or two well-conceived and strategic RQs on what the student asked, or around it, so that the student(s) can think further and rather diagonally, not just on a straight line, realise certain other factors, thereby understanding it beyond their immediate circumstance and thought. This would create a unique learning experience for all learners because they would all reflect on the RQs posed by the teacher.

Teachers can prepare a number of RQs perhaps as quizzes for learners to respond to, and to lead them to responsible knowledge. Goodwin (2018) describes this as “Inquiry-Guided Instruction” (paragraph 8), while teach.com describes it as “Inquiry-based Learning” (https://teach.com). Such RQ quizzes would be like a class discussion which can lead to cooperative learning when students work together, and in the process they would develop critical thinking skills, communication skills, problem solving skills (Goodwin, 2018, paragraph 4), reflective, introspective and retrospective thinking skills, etc. The beauty of this method is that it invites learner attention and engenders active participation and self-realisation by learners, which is the best form of education. This is a student-centred learning approach that would encourage them to make enquiries on their own, such as consulting the internet, their parents, documentaries, etc., and also helps the teacher to assume some low-profile authoritative position in the teaching-learning environment while playing the role of a facilitator, personal model and delegator (https://teach.com). Thus, dialogue remains the best response to a hyperactive, rude or unserious learner.

Another implication is that historical facts are resources of imparting knowledge, and a source of guidance for teaching and learning. Relevant national and cultural historical facts known to learners can be interesting resources for teaching and learning as learners can readily identify with them, thus aiding cognition. It would also aid lasting memory and easy recall, as there is a connection between an impactful cognition and memory recall.

Finally, cognition happens and improves with continuous intellectual interactions, while memory improves with constant reminders. Cognition and memory are not exactly the same. The former refers to knowledge acquisition, while the latter refers to the ability to retain knowledge or information and recall such when required. The Speaker in the texts examined above ceaselessly repeats the important points till they
are becoming almost monotonous, albeit in varied expressions. Repetition of points, for teachers to learners, is therefore a virtue.

7. Conclusion

From our foregoing analysis and discussions, we can conclude that God is the biggest Pragmatician, having used one of the resources of pragmatics to mean and seek understanding. Common ground or mutual shared knowledge between the speaker and the addressee(s) is a crucial condition for the interpretation of a question as rhetorical, and without which the pragmatic acts would not be in force.

We can also conclude that RQ does not just assert, but performs other strategic pragmatic acts as constrained by the context and situation of use. The RQ is neither information-seeking nor action-seeking, but rather a change-seeking interactive strategy. A responsible change in reality, thinking, attitude, understanding and belief is desired with every pragmatic act performed using an RQ. The Speaker is not deploying the RQs in the Qur’an just to assert, but to actually invite, reinforce, affirm, remind, assure, challenge or request His Addressees to disagree or dispute His claims, including historical facts, so that certain change in our world and perspectives would occur. This way, the RQ qualifies as a pedagogical resource and strategy.

We have also shown RQ as a pragmatic strategy that explores lexico-grammatical resources to perform pragmatic functions within the context of use. The choice of this sentence-type not only puts the speaker in a position of control in powerful assertion of facts, but also strengthens the pragmatic acts in the context to be more emphatic and pungent. We conclude that RQ is an effective, efficient, peaceful, mature, mutually argumentative, evidence-gathering, interactive and cognitive strategy. A speaker always relies on evidence to make their points, and doesn’t just try to force it down the addressee’s throat. This shows that the supreme pragmatic goal of a RQ is responsible change, while dialogue and superior argument are the foundation.

Notes
1  The usual prayer that Muslims say for the Prophet Muhammad each time his name is mentioned.
2  A jinn is “a spirit that can take on various human and animal forms and makes mischievous use of its supernatural powers” (Microsoft Encarta, 2009). However, not all jinns are mischievous (Bali, 2006, p.13, No.3).
References


(Copy editing: Alexander Brandt)

About the authors
Waheed A. Bamigbade (abufuruqan2@gmail.com), PhD, is of the Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria where he teaches Pragmatics, Stylistics and English Syntax. A visiting Assistant Professor at the Yanbu English Language Institute, Saudi Arabia in 2017, his research interest also includes semiotics, social media discourse, and cultural linguistics.

Lawan Dalha (lawandalha@gmail.com) teaches English and Applied Linguistics at the Yanbu English Language Institute, Saudi Arabia, and was on the editorial advisory Board of the TESOL Journal, 2016 to 2018. His research interest also includes Forensic Linguistics.