

## Pragmatic Functions of Questions in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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### ABSTRACT

Questioning is an instructional process that is not only central to verbal interaction in the classroom but also essential to negotiation of meaning in discourse. Existing studies dealing with functions of questions have only identified few functions which questions perform in discourse probably because the scholars who worked on them have not explored varied situations and contexts which necessitate asking questions whose functions are totally different from the ones already identified in the literature. Hence, the current research investigates the pragmatic functions of questions in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The major advantage of using this source of data is that, it, unlike previous studies which investigate data from premeditated sources, this source provides rich and varied naturally-occurring contexts for asking different questions which perform different functions. The study is driven by insight from the concept of pragmatic competence. On the whole, the research identified nine novel pragmatic functions of questions which have not been documented in the literature. These include questions to indicate annoyance, questions to foster interpersonal relationship, questions to persuade somebody to do something, questions for showing disapproval and so on. These findings implicate that in a bid to build on a learner's competence in a particular language, such a learner should be introduced to the importance of contexts in determining the function which a particular question is meant to perform in any communicative encounter.

### INTRODUCTION

Interactants in social contexts make use of different "discourse units or components" like words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs and other identifiable discourse units (Van Dijk, 1985:6) to communicate. Depending on the context, each of the above discourse units has the capacity to adequately convey the message of a writer or speaker to his/her audience. Of the discourse units, the sentence is the most basic in passing across ideas, either simple or complex. According to Kirk Patrick (2009:21), "the most important unit structure is the sentence". In the words of Afolayan and Ogunrotimi (2017:54) "The English sentence is a very important unit of written English language. It is the basic unit of expression...". Function-wise, the sentence has four basic types – declarative, exclamatory, imperative and interrogative. In any normal social interaction, classroom situation inclusive, all the four sentence types above manifest. However, the interrogative type of sentence, which is used to ask questions, is our focus in this study.

In any meaningful interactions, questions are bound to be asked by interactants at various points and for diverse

reasons. On this point, Ilie (2015:1) avers that "empirical evidence indicates that no real communication can take place without questions. Whether questions are explicit or implicit, direct or indirect, their prominent role in communication can hardly be overestimated". Supporting the above, Zhang, Spirling and Niculesin-Mizil (2017) citing Goffman (1976) write that "questions play a prominent role in social interaction". Because asking questions is one of those ordinary, unconscious, effortless and automatic things we do during social interaction, everybody assumes that they know much about the forms and functions of questions. However, Kearsely (1976:355) has revealed that:

Question asking is one of those mundane and everyday activities which we spend considerable time engaged in, yet have a very rudimentary technical understanding of. Ask people you know to tell you why they ask questions. A shrug... They will probably respond (if they don't think the question too absurd) by telling you that they ask questions to find out something they don't know.

The above shows that most people do not give serious thoughts to why they ask questions or the motivations behind the questions they ask and by extension, the various functions of the questions. Owing to the central role which questions play in interactions, many linguistic scholars have written on it in one form or the other. Probably, this is why Ilie (2015:1), writes that “the scholarly interest in the art and technique of questioning and answering, which started with the ancient Greek rhetorician is still very much alive. However, Mei-Mei Wu (1996) believes that scholarly inquiry into questions is a recent endeavour by writing that “Elicitation is also termed ‘questioning’, ‘question – asking, and question – answering’ in most literature. The study of this had not caught researchers’ attention until the 1960s when the logic of question and answers became a focus of interest”.

However, what exactly is a question in discourse? Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1985:804) see question as “primarily used to seek information on a specific point”. However, Tsui (1992:89) writes that “sometimes an utterance is identified as a “question” because it is interrogative in form and sometimes because it expects an answer or some verbal performance from the addressee”. He further avers that the term “question” is sometimes taken as a syntactic category and sometimes a discourse category; as a result, the term remains vague and ill-defined”. Ilie (2015:3) says that “what are normally called ‘questions’, that is, utterances that are syntactically interrogative sentences, are often perceived by language users as seeking an answer and/or information”. In our own opinion, Ilie’s view above is just a narrow conception of what question means in discourse in that it is not all questions that are necessarily information oriented. This is why Angeliki (1990:119) declares that “questions are not only about information”. In another dimension, Sakhiyya (2017:311) avers that “questioning is a potential means to establish identity in social interaction and thus it helps position oneself in relation to others”. Lastly, Karen, Yeoman, Alison, Murison and Gino (2017:4) write that “question- asking directs conversations by encouraging the other person to actively share information”. The definitions above have revealed how different scholars view the term “question” and “questioning”.

Apart from giving definitions of what question means, the scholars above and other works have shed light on different aspects of questions. Angeliki (1990) “examines four categories of questions of interrogative structure and their functions at the semantic and/or pragmatic level” using data from “three types of oral corpus of English” (pg. 107). Mei-Mei Wu (1996) makes use of insight from Discourse Analysis to identify elicitation in interaction. Asher and Reese (2007) using Segmented Discourse Representation Theory discuss some types of biased questions with examples drawn from tag questions, negative polar questions and emphatic focus question. The work of Tomaselli and Gatt (2015) centres on a particular type of question- Italian tag questions and their conversational functions using “corporal representing language use in different settings” (page 79). Ilie (2015) covers the various ways through which questions can be classified: functions of questions and context – specific questioning

practices in broadcast interviews, legal settings, medical settings and media broadcasting programmes. Sakhiyya (2016) through the theoretical framework of critical discourse analysis investigates how questions are used to negotiate social identity in casual conversation. Zhang, Spirling, and Mizil (2017) discuss the rhetorical role of question in political discourse. Karen et al. (2017) discuss how question-asking leads to self-disclosure and liking during conversation.

It is not everybody that is really aware that questions asked during interactions perform other functions apart from seeking information from the interactants. This is because people react to questions automatically during interactions and sometimes without any conscious efforts at analysing the specific functions of such questions at that point in time. Based on the above, many scholars, as will be revealed shortly, have put forward various functions of questions in discourse. Angeliki (1990:119) writes that “questions have a number of functions”. In the same vein, Ilie (2015:1) says that “... Aristotle left a decisive legacy whereby the study of questions was relegated from rhetoric and philosophy to grammar and linguistics, which have long been committed to exploring the forms and functions of different kinds of questions, posed in various circumstances and for varying purposes”. However, perhaps, the most discussed functions of questions in the literature are: question as a means of requesting information and rhetorical function of question. Regarding the first one, Ilie (2015:3) writes that:

What we normally call “questions”, that is, utterances that are syntactically interrogative sentences, are often perceived by language users as seeking an answer and/or information. Requiring or expecting an answer is often regarded as the most basic and most common function of questions.

Angeliki (1990:108) maintains the same position by writing that “the first thing anyone thinks of when reflecting on the purpose and function of a question is that it is a means of requesting information”. The above clearly emphasises the assumption or the belief that the main purpose of question is to request information. In the literature, questions that genuinely request information are called standard questions.

The second most discussed function of question is that it performs rhetorical function. Ilie (1994:28) defines and states the functions of rhetorical question at the same time by writing that:

A rhetorical question is a question used as a challenging statement to convey the addressee’s commitment to the implicit answer in order to include the addressee’s mental recognition of its obviousness and the acceptance, verbalized or non verbalized of its validity.

In the literature, rhetorical questions perform different functions (cf Angeliki, 1990; Ilie (1994), Ilie, 1995). Other functions of questions discussed in the literature are tied to the mode or type of the question in which case we have examination questions and echo questions. Generally, examination questions are used to test the respondents’ knowledge in certain areas. In this situation, it is expected that morally and ethically, the questioner knows the answer. Ilie (2015:3) notes that “examination questions are discipline-specific

questions methodically designed by teachers/instructors to determine a candidate's preparation for a course of studies [sic]".

According to Nordquist in <https://www.thoughtco.com/echo-question-language-1690627>:

An echo question is a type of direct question that repeats part or all of something which someone else has just said. It is also called a parrot question or a "repeat, please question". An echo question is one type of echo utterance. We do this when we do not fully understand or hear what someone has said. Asking an echo question with rising or fall-rising intonation allows us to clarify what we think we heard.

Because echo questions fully or partially repeat the preceding utterance, Blakemore (1994:198) says that these echo questions can be "interpreted as communicating a questioning attitude".

This section will not be complete without accounting for the pedagogical function/advantage of questions in classroom discourse. Questioning is an instructional process that is not only central to verbal interactions in the classroom but also essential to negotiation of meaning in discourse. Questioning is one of the pedagogical skills a teacher should possess because students learn better when teachers include a variety of questions in their lessons (Good and Brophy 2000). The questions teachers ask in classrooms serve as the interface between teachers' expectations and students' responses. Effective questions require students to consciously process information and compose an answer. Good questions increase students' engagement, raise their level of thought, help them organise their thoughts, guide them more successfully through an academic task and allow the teacher to monitor understanding and provide feedback (Cruickshank et al, 2003).

Every level of interaction requires asking questions and answering them either in the spoken form or the written form. Answering questions require interactants to consciously process information. Hence, teachers must help students to acquire requisite skills needed to interpret questions; which involves students in determining the pragmatic functions of questions to be able to respond appropriately. To successfully do these, students must be adequately tutored with regard to types of questions, the concept of context and its significance in effective interpretation of questions. Teachers can successfully do this in several ways. The first method is by narrating little incidents or episodes and asking questions on them requiring students to state their pragmatic functions. Teachers can also divide the class into drama groups to produce playlets in which questioning will be a major device. Members of other groups who form the audience/viewers will be asked to identify/state the pragmatic functions of the questions. Also, teachers can ask students to read short stories, identify the questions and state their pragmatic functions. Knowledge gathered in this respect is not only required for classroom interaction but also for long life application and usage.

So far, we have examined the basic functions of questions already documented in the literature as well as its pedagogical advantage. Ilie (2015:3) has however, observed that:

Depending on the roles, power positions, goals, and relationship between the interlocutors, questions may fulfill several other context-specific functions, such as voicing a challenge, an invitation, a reproach, a complaint, a warning, a threat, an objection, a protest, an accusation – and many more.

The implication of the above is that scholars have not exhaustively accounted for the functions of questions in discourse. There are varied situations and contexts which necessitate asking questions some of which are yet to be identified in the literature. More important is that in spite of the volumes of work on question and questioning, none of the scholars has made use of an extended literary work which makes it possible to have an array of data from a single source which can provide convincing examples of novel functions of questions during interactions. This research therefore, arose out of our motivation to further account for these other 'context specific functions' of questions in discourse. The work identifies and illustrates novel context-specific functions of questions in discourse while providing examples/illustrations to further clarify some of the existing ones for better understanding. Driven by the concept of Pragmatic Competence the study examines the pragmatic functions of questions in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

## METHODOLOGY

The source of data for this research is *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) written by Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, a Nigerian. It is a 520 page literary work that won the author the 2007 Orange Broadband Prize. The prose work is considered suitable for this research because the author makes use of dialogue richly for different reasons and in diverse situations. It provides rich and varied naturally-occurring contexts for asking various questions which perform different functions. It is the questions in the dialogue that serve as the data for this research.

For each function of the question that is identified in our data, the researchers provide a minimum of two excerpts from the text to illustrate it. In order for the identified function to be justified, a brief context for the question is provided and where necessary, the excerpts are explained for clarity.

## THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

Interpreting the functions of questions in discourse depends on several factors of which the most important two, in our own opinion, are the listener's or reader's level of pragmatic competence as well as understanding the context of interaction. Based on this, this work makes use of insight from the concepts of "pragmatic competence". This makes it possible for the researchers to establish the pragmatic and/or the contextual functions of the questions in the data.

The term pragmatic competence was introduced by sociolinguist Jenny Thomas in 1983 in the article "cross-cultural Pragmatic Failure (Applied Linguistics)". In that article, she defined pragmatic competence as "the

ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand a language in context". (see <https://www.thought.com/pragmatic-competence-1691653>)

Fraser (1986:30) adds to the above by writing that pragmatic competence is "the knowledge of how an addressee determines what a speaker is saying and recognises intended illocutionary force conveyed through subtle attitudes". It is clear that the concept of pragmatic competence has two aspects. First, the ability to use linguistic resources effectively and appropriately (though not directly sometimes) in a specific linguistic context in order to achieve a particular purpose; and second, the ability of the listener or reader to decode correctly the message or intention of the speaker or writer which might have been expressed indirectly or in a subtle manner.

Newson and Cook (2007:16) quoting Chomsky (1980a: 225) briefly summarise the concept by writing that "pragmatic competence places language in the institutional setting of its use, relating intentions and purpose to the linguistic means at hand". In essence, we say that it is by postulating the concept of pragmatic competence that question askers in the text under study are able to ask questions in a certain manner which reflects what they have in mind and also why answerers are able to interpret correctly the message and intention behind the questions so that they answer appropriately. It is important to note that the term "pragmatic competence" presupposes that the interlocutors understand the context of interaction.

## DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

This section identifies and illustrates some novel context-specific functions of questions in the data. It also provides insights into some of the already documented functions for better understanding.

### Question to Indicate Annoyance

This is a situation whereby the questioner is angry over something with the interlocutor or over what a third party has done. In other words, questions in this case show the emotional state of the questioner. The excerpts below clarify the point.

- (i) His tone was gently teasing. But his hands were not gentle. They were unbuttoning her blouse, freeing her breast from a bra cup. She was not sure how much time had passed, but she was tangled in bed with Odenigbo, warm and naked, when Ugwu knocked to say they had visitors.  
'Can't they leave? She murmured  
'Come, *Nkem*' Odenigbo said. 'I can't wait for them to meet you'

In the above "his" represents Odenigbo while "she" and "her" stand for Olanna – the two major characters in the text. As they are enjoying themselves on a particular day, Ugwu, their houseboy, comes to tell them that they have visitors upon which Olanna whom Odenigbo refers to as *Nkem* asks the question above. Olanna is angry at the visitors who have come to put a sudden end to a romantic situation, hence,

contextually, the question above shows the emotional state of the questioner.

- (ii) Olanna walked into the Kitchen  
'Why are you using the kerosene stove?' She shouted. '*I na-ezuzuezuzu?* Are you stupid? Haven't I told, you to save our kerosene?' Ugwu was startled. "But mah, you said I should cook baby's food on the stove".  
'I did not say that! Go outside and light a fire'  
'Sorry, ma!'. (pg. 364)

The incident above happens in Umuahia during the Nigerian Civil War. There is scarcity of kerosene, which makes Olanna to instruct Ugwu to sparingly use the product and the failure of Ugwu to abide by her instruction leads to the above questions. The questions are not asked to request information but rather to show the questioner's anger. Ugwu correctly interprets the questions as a sign of anger and as a result, he apologises. Probably, Olanna's facial appearance and the tone of her voice during the interactions above aided Ugwu to infer correctly the pragmatic function of the two questions. It appears this function of the question has not been documented in the literature.

### Question to Register Surprise and/or that the Last Speaker Should Repeat or Clarify his/her Message

During interactions, one may show attitude of surprise over one thing or the other that happens or one hears. In this case, one may ask a question whose function is to indicate the questioner's surprise. Besides, such a question may also be a way of asking the speaker to repeat or clarify his/her message.

- (iii) 'The vandals eat well, oh!' High-Tech said. 'The last camp I infiltrated, when I was with the battalion at Nteje, they were cooking soup with big-big piece of meat. They even gave some to our men when they stopped fighting for one week to celebrate Easter'.  
*They stopped fighting to celebrate Easter?*' Ugwu asked (pg. 436).

In the above, High-Tech, a soldier who fights on the side of Biafra is narrating his experience to Ugwu, a newly conscripted soldier. So, when High-Tech reveals that the two sides stopped fighting for one week to celebrate Easter, Ugwu, a novice in war front uses echo question to show his surprise. Ilie (2015:5) reveals two things about echo questions which are relevant to the point above. They are, first: echo questions "repeat fully or partially a preceding utterance in order to elicit a reiteration or clarification of its unheard or misperceived stretches of words..." and second "echo questions can also convey an attitude of surprise, disbelief..." In the analysis above, the two observations of Ilie are validated.

- (iv) 'You should go'. Richard took a deep breath to steady himself and stared at one of the finished chairs. It was sharp-angled and ugly.  
*'How could shrapnel cut off Ikejide's head so completely?'* Kainene asked, as if she wanted him to tell her that she was mistaken about the whole thing. (pg. 387)

In the above, Kainene is talking about an incident that happened during one of the air raids in Port Harcourt in which Ikejide – Kainene’s house-help is killed. He dies with his head totally cut off by a piece of shrapnel. Kainene never believes that such a thing can happen. Hence, the function of the question above is to show the questioner’s surprise about the incident. It appears, too, as if this function of the question has received little or no attention in the literature.

### Question to Foster Interpersonal Relationship

More often than not during human interactions, some questions are asked which are mainly for the purpose of enhancing human relation rather than requesting any information or trying to show any emotion.

- (v) ‘My aunty! Kedu?’  
 ‘I am even better now that I see you’.  
 ‘Arinze is not back from her sewing class?’  
 ‘She will be back anytime now.’  
 ‘How is she doing?’  
 ‘What about Odinehezo and Ekene?’  
 ‘They are there! (pg. 55)

The situation above happens when Olanna has just arrived in Maiduguri to visit her relations. So, all the questions she asks above perform interpersonal or phatic functions. In fact, they are questions she is expected to ask in order to show her genuine love and interest in the members of the family she has gone to see. *Kedu* in the above means “how are you”.

- (vi) Anulika escorted him to the main road. He saw a familiar figure near the grove of *Uba* trees and although he had not seen her since she went to Kano to learn a trade four years ago, he knew immediately that it was Nnesinachi.  
 ‘Anulika!Ugwu! Is it you?’ Nnesinachi’s voice was as husky as he remembered but she was taller now. (pg. 152)

The “he” in the above is Ugwu, who is a younger brother to Anulika. For about four years, Nnesinachi, who has not seen the duo since she travels to the North asks the above question just for interpersonal or phatic reasons. These types of questions are meant to promote intimacy and mutual understanding in human relationships. The questions are meant to reveal that the questioner is not indifferent to the affairs and existence of his/her interlocutors. Probably, no existing work on the topic has documented this function of the question.

### Persuasive Function of Question

It is discovered in our data that question asking is one of the ways through which one character attempts to persuade the other either to do something or to refrain from doing it.

- (vii) Olanna placed her book down. Her mother wanted to say something, she could tell, and the set smile, the punctilious gestures were a beginning.  
 ‘So how is Odenigbo?’ her mother asked finally.  
 ‘He’s fine’.  
 Her mother sighed in the overdone way that meant she wished Olanna would see reason. ‘Have you thought about this Nsukka move well? Very well?’ ‘I

have never been surer of anything’. ‘But will you be comfortable there?’ Her mother said comfortable with a shudder... (pg. 50)

The context for the above questions is that a particular Minister – Chief Okonji has shown interest in Olanna, however, Olanna has indicated that she is interested in Odenigbo, a university lecturer in Nsukka and that she herself has taken lecturing job in the same school. However, Olanna’s parents really wish that she would reciprocate the Minister’s advances, moreso, that they (Olanna’s parents) are expecting some contracts from Chief Okonji. So, the second and third questions above (italicised), are meant to persuade Olanna to change her mind and reconsider Chief Okonji’s marriage proposal.

- (viii) Olanna moves to Nsukka on a windy Saturday, and the next day Odenigbo left for a Mathematics Conference at the University of Ibadan. He would not have gone if the conference was not focused on the work of his mentor, the black American Mathematician David Blackwell.  
 ‘He is the greatest living Mathematician, the greatest,’ he said.  
 ‘Why don’t you come with me, Nkem? It’s only for a week’.

Olanna said no; she wanted the chance to settle down when he was not there. (pg. 65)

Pragmatically, the illocutionary force of Odenigbo’s question (italicised) above is to persuade Olanna (referred to as Nkem) to go with him to the conference. This is confirmed by the sentence after it that “it’s only for a week”. Probably, it is this function of question that Angeliki (1990:119) has in mind when she writes that “In asking a question, a speaker intends not only to get information or to communicate an experience or an event, *but also to impose his influence on his hearer...*” (italics ours). This simply means that the questioners above want to indirectly impose their wish on their listeners through the medium of questions. This function of question has probably not also been documented in the literature.

### Rhetorical Function of the Question

The nature and function of rhetorical question have been explained in section 2 of this work.

However, by rhetorical function of the question in this case, we mean a situation where the answer to the question asked by the asker is clear to both parties, that is, the person being asked the question needs not answer and the person who asked the question is not expecting any response since the context has made the answer obvious. There are many examples of rhetorical functions of questions in our data of which two are given below.

- (ix) He wanted to do more, wanted to give master every reason to keep him, and so one morning, he ironed Master’s socks. They didn’t look rumpled, the black ribbed socks, but he thought they would look even better straightened. The hot iron hissed and when he raised it, he saw that half of the sock was glued to it. He froze ... He stood there with the burnt socks knowing Master would find him that way.

'You've ironed my socks, haven't you?' Master asked. 'You stupid ignoramus'.

'Sorry, Sah! Sorry, Sah!' (pg. 26)

The 'he' above refers to Ugwu who wants to impress his master and so burns his Master's socks. His master walks into the scene and asks the question. The question, therefore, is rhetorical with the specific function of chiding Ugwu.

- (x) 'I also think that you should forgive Odenigbo,' he said, and pulled at his collar as though it was choking him. For a moment, Olanna felt contempt for him. 'Don't see it as forgiving him. See it as allowing yourself to be happy. *What will you do with the misery you have chosen? Will you eat misery?*' (pg. 281).

The person talking and asking questions in the excerpt above is Father Damian whom Olanna has gone to for the purpose of seeking advice on account of Odenigbo's impregnating a village girl (Amala). The two questions above perform rhetorical function with the specific purpose of advising Olanna to go back to Odenigbo's house. Ilie (2015:5) lends credence to our interpretation of the two rhetorical questions above when he writes that ample evidence has revealed "the fact that rhetorical questions are meant to be heard as questions and understood as statements". Rhetorical function of the question is one of the most documented functions of the question in the literature.

### Question for Showing Disapproval

It is possible to show disapproval for what somebody has said or done or failed to do by asking questions. That is, instead of voicing the disapproval openly, one may do so by asking questions whose pragmatic import will be easily decoded as showing disapproval.

- (xi) She told the nurse that she was an old friend of his. 'It's terribly urgent,' she said and kept her English accent crisp and her head held high. A nurse showed her into the office promptly. One of the women sitting in the corridor cursed! 'Tufiakwa! We have been waiting since dawn! *Is it because we don't talk through our nose like white people?*' (pg. 322).

Olanna's baby in the above excerpt is sick and she goes to see Dr. Nwala in the hospital. Because it is during the civil war, many women are around with their children too who have fallen sick. Because Olanna is not willing to wait like the others, she expresses herself in Standard English spoken with an accent which eventually makes the nurse to allow her to see the Doctor. The question above is asked by one of the women who have been waiting to see Dr Nwala since dawn. In essence, the question above is used to show disapproval and indignation for allowing Olanna to see the doctor before them.

- (xii) 'Two days ago I went out in Mufti and a ranger stopped me on the road and accused me of deserting. I warned him never to try that again or I would show him why we commandos are different from regular soldiers. I heard him laughing as I walked away. Imagine that! Before, he would never have dared to laugh at a commando. If we don't reorganize very soon, we will lose our credibility!'

'Why should white people be paid to fight our war anyway?' Odenigbo leaned back on the chair. 'There are many of us who can truly fight because we are willing to give ourselves for Biafra' (Pg. 393).

Two characters in the text – Okeoma (the first character who speaks above) and Odenigbo are talking about the use of mercenaries by Biafra to fight during the Nigerian Civil War. The pragmatic function of the question asked by Odenigbo above is to show disapproval for the practice of hiring mercenaries to fight in the war. In the literature, Ilie (2015: 3) refers to this type of questions as "nonstandard questions", that is, questions that are not asked to elicit informative responses but "other types of responses such as answers of confirmation, permission granting, suggestion- acceptance...". It appears as if this function of the question is not yet documented in the literature.

### Question to Insinuate the Absurdity of the Previous Speaker's Idea, Comment or Act

The pragmatic meaning of this type of question is that the previous speaker should not have even said what he/she has said. It is a covert way of saying that the previous speaker's comment or remark does not make much sense.

- (xiii) 'When will my son be back?'

'They will return in the evening. They said you should rest, Mama when you come. I am cooking rice and chicken'.

'Rest?' she smiled and walked into the kitchen...

'Haven't I not come from the farm?' (pg. 121)

The interlocutors above are Ugwu and Odenigbo's mother. When she arrives Nsukka from the village, Ugwu tells her to rest but she replies with a partial echo question 'Rest?' which means that the suggestion is absurd or not logical enough.

- (xiv) 'It's *you* and not your mother. It happened because, you let it happen! *You* must take responsibility!' It startled Ugwu, how that soft voice could change to something so fierce.

'I am not a philandering man, and you know that. This would not have happened if my mother didn't have a hand!'

'Did your mother pull out your penis and insert it into Amala as well?' (Pg. 294).

The conversation above is between Olanna and Odenigbo. Odenigbo impregnates a village girl called Amala who is brought to Nsukka by Odenigbo's mother so that he can marry her. Olanna, who happens to be living with Odenigbo already before getting married to him, is not happy with the situation and she is now blaming Odenigbo while Odenigbo is casting the blame on his mother. So, the pragmatic meaning of the question asked by Olanna above is that Odenigbo's excuse that his mother is responsible for what happens is absurd and highly illogical. To the best of our knowledge, no existing work on the topic has mentioned this function of the question.

### Question to Insult and/or Abuse Somebody

This is one of the functions of question that has not been documented in the literature. Though the sentence is in the

form of a question, it is insulting in one way or the other to the person to whom it is directed.

- (xv) He thanked Pa Anozie and got up to leave. Pa Anozie said something and Emeka asked. 'Pa is asking will you not take photo of him? All the white people that have come take photo'. Richard shook his head. 'No sorry. I haven't brought a camera.' Emeka laughed. *Papa is asking what kind of white man is this? Why did he come here and what is he doing?* (Pg. 94).

Richard, a European goes to interview Pa Anozie over certain cultural artifacts he discovers many years ago. After the interview, Pa Anozie expects that Richard will take pictures with him but when it is clear that Richard does not prepare for that kind of a thing, Pa Anozie asks his interpreter to ask questions that border on abuse, "Papa is asking what kind of white man is this? Why did he come here?"

- (xvi) Ugwu sat up. 'I have tired of stories of Onyekwa [sic]. I noticed something when he came by yesterday. He should bathe more often, he smells like rotten oil beans'

*'And you, what do you smell like?'* Anulika poured the *Ukwa* in the bag and knotted it. (Pg.152).

Anulika is an elder sister to Ugwu. When Ugwu travels to the village from Nsukka, his people and Anulika are discussing Onyekwa – the husband-to-be of Anulika, in glowing language as if the young man is already a part of the family. This angers Ugwu which forces him to make the above comment knowing full well that Anulika is present. Without wasting time, Anulika fires back at Ugwu by asking him the above question which is abusive in nature.

### Question for the Purpose of Accusing Somebody

Sometimes, when a question is asked during social interactions, the main function may be to accuse somebody of a particular wrong doing either directly or indirectly.

- (xvii) Later, Ugwu watched Kainene push at Father Marcel's chest with both hands shouting into his face, shoving him so hard that Ugwu feared that the man would fall. *Amosu! You devil!*. Then she turned to Father Jude. *'How could you stay here and let him spread the legs of starving girls? How will you account for this to your God? You are both leaving now. I will take this to Ojukwu myself if I have to!'* (Pg. 480).

In the above, a Reverend Father – Father Marcel impregnates one of the girls in the refugee camps in Umuahia. After Kainene who is in charge of the camp has confronted the culprit – Father Marcel, she then turns to ask Father Jude a question whose function is not to request information but actually accusing him of negligence and inefficiency.

- (xvii) He stopped another car, a Peugeot 403. 'Come out right now!' The smallish man came out and stood by his car. The officer reached out and pulled his glasses from his face and flung them into the bush. *'Ah, now you cannot see? But you could see enough to write propaganda for Ojukwu? Is that not what all of you civil servants did?'* (Pg. 501).

The above incident took place at a military checkpoint after Biafra has surrendered and the people are going back to

Nsukka. One of the soldiers at the checkpoint pragmatically accuses "the smallish man" of being a rebel and an agent of Ojukwu (the leader of Biafra) and an enemy of one Nigeria through the question he asks. In essence, the questions perform the function of accusation. This is one of the functions of the question mentioned by Ilie (2015) but not illustrated. Using Ilie's (2015) classification, the questions above fall under nonstandard questions in that they are not meant to elicit information from the interactants.

### Question to Convey Anxiety

This function of the question indicates that one is worried or anxious about something or that one has fear about something. Just like other functions of the question, this function of the question is clear from the immediate context.

- (xix) Another flight arrival was announced and the father said *chere!* It's him? It's him'. The children stood up and the father asked them to sit down and then stood up himself. The grandmother clutched her handbag to her belly. Olanna watched the plane descend. It touched down and just as it began to taxi on the tarmac, the grandmother screamed and dropped her handbag. Olanna was startled. 'What is it?' 'Mama!' the father said 'Why does it not stop?' The grandmother asked, both hands placed on her head in despair. *'chi m'* My God! I am in trouble! Where is it taking my son now? Have you people deceived me?' 'Mama, it will stop,' Olanna said. 'This is what it does when it lands' (Pg. 42).

The three questions asked by grandmother above show the state of the mind of the woman which is that of anxiety at that point in time. However, her anxiety is borne out of her ignorance about the landing process of airplane. She is anxious because she thinks that something is wrong with the plane or that it is taking the son somewhere else since it does not stop immediately.

- (xx) Olanna ran to the telephone. 'What is happening in Lagos? Did they say what is happening in Lagos?' 'Your parents are fine, *Nkem*. Civilians are safe' Olanna was dialing. 'Operator? Operator?' she put the phone down and picked it up again (Pg. 156).

The context for the above is that Odenigbo has just informed Olanna that a coup has taken place and that the announcement is still being broadcast. On hearing this, Olanna asks the above questions because her parents are in Lagos. Taking the above context into account, it is evident that the questions above serve to convey the speakers's anxiety. It is because Odenigbo is able to pragmatically interpret the questions as conveying anxiety that he assures her that 'Your parents are fine, *Nkem*. Civilians are safe'. This appears to be one of the novel functions of questions identified in our work.

### The Function of Question as an Invitation

There are some statements that are really interrogative in form but whose function in the context of their usage is to

serve as an invitation, usually from somebody of a higher status.

(xxi) 'Why don't you all come to my house this weekend, eh?' Chief Okonji asked. 'If only to sample my cook's fish pepper soup. The chap is from Nembe; he knows what to do with fresh fish.'

Her parents cackled loudly. Olanna was not sure how that was funny, but then it was the minister's joke.

'That sounds wonderful,' Olanna's father said.

'It will be nice for all of us to go before Olanna leaves for Nsukka,' her mother said (Pg. 47).

The question above is asked by a minister – Chief Okonji who wishes to marry Olanna despite the fact that he is already married. It is in order to impress the family that he asks the above question which performs the function of an invitation.

(xxii) She lit a cigarette watching him. 'Would you like to come to dinner tonight? My parents have invited a few people'. Then he said, 'Yes, I do love to' (pg. 85).

Just like the first excerpt above, the question in the second excerpt performs the function of an invitation. In both cases, the listeners are pragmatically competent. As can be seen in their responses, they are able to interpret the illocutionary force of the questions correctly. Again, this is one of the types of questions mentioned by Ilie (2015) but not illustrated. It belongs to the category of nonstandard questions.

### Question for the Purpose of Making Requests

The excerpts below illuminate the function of questions in making requests.

(xxiii) The next afternoon, Richard sat up in bed naked, looking down at Kainene. He had just failed her again. 'I'm sorry. I think I get over excited,' he said.

'May I have a cigarette?' she asked. The silky sheet outlined the angular thinness of her naked body (pg. 90).

The question above performs the function of a request.

(xxiv) An official came out of the unfinished terminal building nearby and shook Richard's hand.

'Don't write too much, oh! Don't give away our secrets', he joked.

'Of course not', Richard said. '*Can I interview you?*' The men beamed and flexed his shoulders and said, 'well, I am in charge of customs and immigration' (pg. 376- 377).

The question asked by Richard above has the illocutionary force of a request.

### Question to Pass Across Information

The function of this type of question is to pass across information through the question that is asked. In essence, it is a way of using the medium of a question to inform one's interlocutor of what one thinks he/she might not have known before.

(xxv) 'Your older books are in the second bedroom. I need the space for *my* books'.

'*Ezi okwu?* You've really moved in, haven't you?' Odenigbo was laughing

'Go and have a bath', she said.

'*And what was that flowery scent on my good man?*'

'I gave him a scented talcum powder. *Didn't you notice his body odour?*' 'That's the smell of

villagers. I used to smell like that, until I left Abba to go to secondary school...' (pg. 67)

(xxvi) Olanna sat down on the floor and stretched out her legs. She was exhausted from fear.

'*Did you hear that we shot down their bomber around Ikot-Ekpene?*' Mrs. Muokelu asked.

'I didn't hear'.

'And this was done by a common civilian with his hunting gun' (pg. 339)

In the first excerpt above, the question, '*And what was that flowery scent on my good man?*' asked by Odenigbo from Olanna (his wife to be) passes across a piece of information that the body of his good man (Ugwu) smells of a flowery scent. The next question passes across the information that Ugwu has a body odour. The point is that though the two italicised parts above are questions, they, at the same time, pass across information. The question asked by Mrs. Muokelu in excerpt ii above is a typical information question. In other words, it is a question, but at the same time, it passes across information that is unknown to Olanna. What is of interest in this type of question is that people who use it may not even be conscious of the fact that they are performing two speech acts simultaneously- passing across information and asking a question.

### Question to Indicate Lack of Interest in the Previous Speaker's Remark, Observation or Comment.

During interactions, it is possible for the current speaker to make a particular comment or observation or introduce a topic that is not of interest to his/her interlocutor for reasons best known to him/her. When this happens, there is a way the listener will ask a question that will be clear to the previous speaker that the listener has no interest in whatever he/she might have said. In other words, a pragmatically competent person would understand the pragmatic import of the question as just an off-handed question that indicates lack of interest in the issue which the last speaker has raised. The excerpts below shed light on this function of the question.

(xxvii) 'Madu's invited us to dinner tomorrow,' Kainene said as she drove him from the train station in her long American car. 'His wife has just come back from overseas'.

'Has she?' Richard said little else, and instead looked at the hawkers on the road, shouting, gesturing, running, after cars to collect money (pg. 144).

It is clearly evident from the above that Richard has no interest in Madu's invitation or the information concerning his wife. Richard's question 'Has she?' shows lack of interest in the topic for two reasons. First, the question does not cover the first remark about their invitation to dinner. Second, the appropriate response to the information about Madu's wife's arrival in the country should have been 'Oh, that's wonderful', or 'That's good', but he only chooses to



ask an off-handed question instead. The author's comment after Richard's question also confirms our view that the question conveys lack of interest by Richard in the topic raised by Kainene.

(xxviii) They were sitting on the veranda. Kainene was peeling an orange with a knife, and the slender peel dropped into a plate on the floor.  
 'I saw Olanna', he said  
 'Did you?'  
 'At the Seminar. We said hello and she asked about you'  
 'I see'. The orange slipped from her hand, or perhaps she dropped it because she left it there on the terrazzo floor of the veranda. 'I'm sorry', Richard said. 'I thought I should mention that I saw her'.

In the above, Kainene and her boyfriend – Richard are interacting when he volunteers the information that he “saw Olanna”. The question asked by Kainene indicates lack of interest in Olanna at that point in time despite the fact that they are twin sisters. The behaviour of Kainene as described by the author and the apology of Richard confirm our view that “Did you?” as asked by Kainene above indicates lack of interest in the last speaker's comment. This function of the question has probably not been documented in the literature.

## CONCLUSION

Asking question is an integral part of any normal social interaction. This linguistic act is not a special skill that is learnt separately when children acquire their first language. In fact, Fromkin, Rodman and Hyman (2011:316) write that “*Every language* has a way of negating, *forming questions*, issuing commands, referring to past and future time and so on (emphasis ours). This means that question asking is a major natural component of every language, even though the nature and structure of question may differ from one language to the other. Questions play a prominent role/functions in social interaction (Zhang et. al. (2017) and some of them are context-specific/determined (Ilie 2015:3).

Because of the importance of questions in human interactions, scholars have identified many functions which questions perform during interactions. However, this paper has the main aim of showing that more convincing functions of questions can still be identified apart from the existing ones in the literature. To this end, the paper has identified and illustrated nine novel pragmatic functions of questions which have not been documented in the literature. It also sheds more light on other functions that have been identified earlier, by providing examples that further clarify them. These novel functions are highly significant in our rich data source as a result of the “expanded” or “extended” context of interaction of the characters in the selected text. The “extended” context of interaction makes it possible for different naturally occurring situations of language use which warrant asking different questions that perform different pragmatic functions based on the context of interaction.

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