Rhetorical Questions as Redundant Interrogatives
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Standard analyses associate rhetorical questions with negative singleton answers, but I introduce new data (including Switchboard corpus data) with rhetorical questions that have a wider range of answers: (1) Negative answer Who lifted a finger to help? (2) Positive answer Has the educational system been so watered down that anybody who’s above average is now gifted? (3) Non-null answer Who always shows up late to class? (4) Multiple answers What’s going to happen to these kids when they grow up? I propose a new condition for felicitous use of rhetorical questions: the Speaker and Addressee must share prior commitments to similar and obvious answers. I frame the analysis of shared answers within Gunlogson’s (2001) model of Common Ground, and I define sufficiently similar answers as those that either have an identical value or share an extreme position on a contextually relevant scale. Obviousness is measured using van Rooy’s (2003) implementation of entropy for calculating the predictability of an answer set. Because they invoke an answer set, rhetorical questions resemble interrogatives, but the obviousness of a particular answer implies the bias of an assertion. As such, they are assertive, yet uninformative: instead of informing any discourse participant, rhetorical questions are redundant and serve to synchronize Speaker and Addressee beliefs.