

Rhetoric

Sara Greco (sara.greco@usi.ch), Sabrina Mazzali-Lurati (sabrina.lurati@usi.ch)

Università della Svizzera italiana (USI)

Lugano, Switzerland

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Definition/description: Rhetoric is a creative means to design and organize discourse in order for it to be persuasive but not manipulative. Often, the word *rhetoric* is used as synonymous with stylistics; but in fact, rhetoric includes the whole process of designing a communicative intervention in response to an *exigence* that emerges in the context. As such, rhetorical discourse is characterized by a specific orientation in relation to its audience, by the importance of the character (*ethos*) of the speaker, and by sound arguments. In particular, at the heart of rhetorical discourse lies the process of *inventio*, that is, exploring possible discursive worlds and identifying appropriate arguments based on sources known as *loci*. Rhetorical discourse has several applications in contemporary communication; prime examples are found in political discourse, business communication, storytelling and advertising.

Synonyms/keyword terms: *rhetoric, argumentation, persuasion, business communication, text stakeholder, loci, topoi, audience, ethos, creativity, invention*

A hundred years ago, creativity was seen primarily as the province of artists (poets, painters, composers, and of God). Nowadays, everyone is expected to be creative” (Jones 2012: 1).

1 Introduction

A quick search of the British National Corpus, a 100 million word corpus of written and spoken English, reveals that “rhetoric” (occurring 943 times) is oftentimes collocated within negatively connoted phrases, such as “mere rhetoric”, “just rhetoric”, “if it is to mean anything more than rhetoric”; or is intended in a negative sense, for example when “rhetoric” is contrasted with “reality” as in “the tensions between rhetoric and reality are highlighted”. Looking at these collocations, one could infer that rhetoric is a bad use of creativity – a clever use of words to cheat and induce others to do something that does not really correspond to facts. In its origin, however, the word *rhetoric* did not have any such negative meaning. Rhetorical studies originated as a first form of communication studies (Rigotti 1998) and there have been “over two thousand years of reflection in the west” on rhetoric (Fahnestock 2011: 6). In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle states that rhetoric is a *means*; as such, it is not the fault of rhetoric itself if it is put to bad ends – human beings are to blame. Aristotle continues, “true and better [facts] are by nature always more productive of good syllogisms and, in a word, more persuasive” (*Rhetoric* I, 1354b-1355a, transl. by Kennedy 1991: 35). Thus, in its original sense, rhetoric constitutes a good use of the possible in discourse, i.e. the art of identifying the various means that can be directed towards reasonable persuasion - based on *ethos* (the orator’s character), *logos* (rational means of persuasion) or *pathos* (the emotive orientation towards the audience and its feelings). Rocci (2017: 89), in discussing the work of

John of Salisbury, observes that a positive understanding of rhetoric existed in medieval reflection on the liberal arts (Rocci 2017: 92ff).

Reflection on rhetoric originated in ancient Greece around the fifth century BC, in a context in which words held enormous power in the democratic system of Athens. The traditional domains for rhetoric were political, juridical and epideictic (ceremonial discourse, used to praise or blame someone); each of these domains corresponded to a type of decision that citizens were discussing together in their civic life. The reflection on rhetoric, thus, involved a reflection on audience, persuasive communication and a basic conceptualization of the communication domains in which public speaking was important (Murphy, Katula & Hoppmann 2013). Within education, especially in North America, this aspect has persisted in the tradition of debate handbooks, which teach the fundamentals of argumentative/ rhetorical persuasion, with a focus on the domains of public discourse, policy making and other forms of civic engagement (see for example Ziegelmueller & Kay 1997; Rieke, Sillars & Peterson 2005; and, earlier, the English author Whately 1828/1963).

In the last century, reflection on rhetoric formed part of the renaissance of argumentation studies, traditionally dated to 1958, thanks to Perelman's & Olbrechts-Tyteca's (1969/1958) treatise significantly entitled *La nouvelle rhétorique* (*The new rhetoric*), published in the same year as Toulmin's *The uses of argument* (1958). Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969/1958) capitalize on ancient rhetoric and apply it to the study of argument-based persuasive discourse in modern societies, with a particular focus on the legal domain. They start from the assumption that reason and rhetoric are connected, and that, in contrast to the evolution of logic since Descartes, reason is not "entirely incompetent in those areas which elude calculation" (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969/1958: 3). Rhetoric is the use of reason to form judgments on subjects that are plausible, if non-calculable. As such, rhetoric contains an opportunity: we do not need to "abandon ourselves to irrational forces, instincts, suggestion, or even violence" (ibid.); we can use reason in discourse. The same positive interpretation of rhetoric continues in contemporary studies, which theoretically and empirically examine rhetorical situations and propose rhetorical models of argumentation (cf. Tindale 1999, 2004; Zarefsky, 2014).

2 Rhetoric and possible worlds: where rhetoric is most creative

A traditional connection between rhetoric and creativity is readily found in the area of rhetorical stylistics (Lat. *elocutio*), i.e. style, or the form or 'dress' that a text takes in order to be as persuasive and captivating as possible. In recent centuries, the interpretation of rhetoric as stylistics has been almost inescapable; not least because, as Fahnestock (2011: 7) observes, of all the parts of rhetoric, "style is arguably the most implicated in the others, since linguistic choice is the point of realization for the rhetorical precepts and theories belonging to the other canons". Rhetorical stylistics famously concentrates on the persuasive function of figures of speech; but it also covers other levels of text production such as word choice, the construction of sentences, arguments, prosody and punctuation. Additionally, it includes the rhetorical construction of speaker and audience, and further aspects linked to how discourse is related to the communication context (Fahnestock 2011), including for example non-verbal behavior (Lat. *actio*, for some discussion on this term in ancient authors, see for example Balbo 2018). Rhetoricians study different contexts in which style is important, such as scientific or political discourse and politics (Fahnestock 1999; Zarefsky 2014; Herman 2017). In all these contexts, the emphasis is on how the text achieves the intended communicative goal of persuasion through rhetorical means. Unlike in literary stylistics, in which scholars "attend to texts (fiction, poetry, drama) prized ultimately for their aesthetic value" (Fahnestock 2011: 12), rhetorical stylistics looks for functional *regularities* of language and communication (ibid.). It is a different kind of creativity: creativity in rhetorical stylistics is connected to the capacity for persuasion and the adaptation of discourse to the audience, with an emphasis on the verbal strategies.

Without doing an injustice to this important area, there are other at least equally important aspects through which rhetoric and creativity are connected. We will illustrate these aspects in the following sections, arguing that rhetoric could be seen as a creative exploration of possible worlds, which could be made real if the audience is persuaded by a well-founded speech.

2.1. Rhetoric as a response to an exigence

Creation always happens in a context. Contrary to what one might assume, possibility arises in reality. Effective messages can be invented only within the perimeter of a concrete situation, with defined goals, rules and constraints (Testa 2003: 107). Far from being opposed to “reality”, rhetoric stems from the functional interaction between human beings and the environment (Bitzer 1980: 21). Invention is triggered by something that is other than it should be in the environment and it is inspired by the goal to change it. Therefore, rhetorical discourse is a creative exploration of possible worlds and reasoning about alternatives and about “desires, requirements, future possible developments, opportunities and risks, but also (...) counterfactual conditions and consequences, wishes and fictional states of affairs” (Rocci 2009: 16). Such exploration is necessary to connect “what *is*” to “what *could* be”. Not by chance, this is what Lloyd Bitzer, in his seminal article on “The rhetorical situation” (1968), identifies as the core of rhetoric. This view, which Bitzer calls *situational*, distinguishes his approach to rhetoric from other approaches, such as the stylistic or scientific approach (1980: 21-22). Rhetorical discourse “functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world” (pp. 3-4) and it originates as “a response to a situation of a certain kind” (p. 3), “which invites utterances” (p. 4), namely a *rhetorical situation*. A rhetorical situation is “a natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance” (p. 5). The exigence is pivotal: it is “an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (1968: 6) and which can be positively modified (“completely or partially removed”, p. 6) by means of discourse that engages the audience “in thought and action” (1968: 4): in order to change the current state of affairs, the speaker will try and engage his/her audience to doing something; persuasive discourse is needed to this aim. Together with the rhetor (a term that Bitzer uses interchangeably with ‘speaker’) and his/her discourse, the rhetorical situation supplies the requirements for a “fitting response” (Bitzer 1968: 10-11, Bitzer 1980: 36-38): it “dictates the purpose, theme, matter, and style of the response” and “prescribe[s] the response which fits” (p. 10). Bitzer’s concept of rhetorical situation gave rise, immediately following the publication of his original essay, to debate and criticism. From the seventies onwards, different rhetoricians have discussed the fact that the exigence and the other elements of the rhetorical situation are conceived as “located in reality” (1968: 11). The controlling/pivotal role of the exigence has been accused of being deterministic and overshadowing the creative power of the rhetor and, in a postmodern view, of the audience. However, this was not Bitzer’s position, as he explained in a later and more detailed articulation (1980, cf. Young 2001). A rhetor’s creativity lies in his/her ability to conceive and produce a discursive response capable of leading the rhetorical audience to act and positively modify the exigence, by adequately taking into account and dealing with the constraints (1980: 23-24). This is not always straightforward, especially when rhetor and audience perceive different rhetorical exigences (1980: 29-31).

2.2. Audience in rhetoric

Thus, rhetorical discourse does not only originate as a response to an exigence: it is also constructed with an orientation towards its *audience*, which the speaker wants to act in order to modify or “resolve” the exigence. Since the ancient days of rhetoric, audience has been conceived as a central factor of rhetorical discourse. When illustrating epideictic rhetoric, Aristotle observed that “[w]e must also take into account the nature of our particular audience” (Ret. I, 9), including the differences existing between the members of the assembly, particularly the differences in character (Quintilian, Inst. Or. III, 8, 38, see Winterbottom 1970). The ability to

adapt to the audience, by taking into consideration the opinions of the hearers and speaking differently to different segments of the audience is an essential trait of eloquence (Cicero 1942).

The crucial importance of the audience for rhetoric is also one of the main elements highlighted in modern and contemporary rhetoric. Consisting of the persons capable of bringing about the positive modification of the exigence controlling the situation (Bitzer 1968: 8), the audience is a constitutive element of Bitzer's rhetorical situation. Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969/1958: 17) observe that "It is not enough for a man to speak or write; he must also be listened to or read", and that often knowledge of an audience must be anticipated in order for the speaker to adapt his or her speech to that audience (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969/1958: 23ff). More often than not, rhetorical discourse addresses "a *composite* audience, embracing people differing in character, loyalties, and functions" (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969/1958: 21, our emphasis). Tindale (2015: 19) observes that any theory of argumentation should be developed around the concept of audience, and his book *The philosophy of argument and audience reception* is entirely devoted to substantiating this claim. Audience often has a complex structure and requires the speaker to maneuver strategically in accordance with a complex *audience demand* (van Eemeren 2010). Notably, while in interpersonal communication a speaker might know his/her audience well, what often happens in communication to a broader public is that the speaker will make a projection of the different segments of the composite audience.

As illustrated by Jasinski (2001), different scholars have investigated multi-audience rhetorical situations in order to understand how the rhetor can effectively deal with all the different characters and expectations of the different components within the audience (cf. Benoit & D'Agostine 1994, Myers 1999). Among these, the *text stakeholders model* (Palmieri & Mazzali-Lurati 2016) provides a general theoretical framework and categories for the analysis and production of rhetorical texts. This model enables the identification and description of the different components of the audience, typically pertaining to public communication messages; it also allows an analysis of the rhetorical and argumentative strategies deployed by the speaker/writer in order to deal with each component effectively. *Stake* is the core concept in the model: the audience of a text is composed of *text stakeholders*, i.e. individuals or groups that "hold a particular interest, which they expect the text will contribute to fulfilling" (Palmieri & Mazzali-Lurati 2016: 481). The notion of the *text stakeholder* arises from the integration of concepts elaborated in different disciplinary fields (Goffman 1981, Rigotti & Rocci 2006, Freeman 1984). Within the text, stakes take the form of *issues*, which the text is expected to resolve (Palmieri & Mazzali-Lurati 2016: 483): different text stakeholders implicitly or explicitly raise different issues in regard to the text and the rhetor has to design and produce a message responding to all of the issues raised. Different categories of text stakeholders can be distinguished: the direct *addressee* is "the one who is institutionally expected to be the main mediator of change", (p. 480) while *unaddressed ratified readers* "are not directly addressed by the writer, who however should acknowledge their presence as relevant" because, given their institutional or personal role, "they could raise an important side issue, or, if persuaded on the main issue, they could represent a conduit for persuading the addressee" (p. 480). For *meta-readers*, such as gatekeepers and regulators, the stake "focuses more directly on the text as the by-product of the writing process". Gatekeepers "decide whether or not to diffuse the text (or part of it) to a larger public"; regulators establish "whether the text can be (legally speaking) published or not, given the legally established requirements disciplining its content, form and style" (p. 480). Finally, there may be *over-readers*, i.e. individuals or groups who "are not entitled to take part in the communicative interaction" and whose "stake in the interaction field is not relevant in respect to the rhetorical exigence" (p. 479).

2.3 Topoi-loci and the art of 'inventio' as the most creative part of rhetoric

There is virtually no other area of discourse and communication in which reason and creativity, reflection and intuition meet so closely and are so tightly interconnected, as the area traditionally named *inventio* in Latin (invention), i.e. the art of seeking out reasons. Renaissance humanist Ralph Lever, in one of the first treatises on rhetoric in English (*Arte of Reason*, 1573), modelled upon Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, translated *inventio* into the English compound term *witcraft*, which we might in turn translate into "the art of finding astute reasons". This compound term makes use of "craft", which is often associated with art and creativity - or, in other words, the exploration of possible worlds; while the term "wit" has a clear connection to the use of reason in an astute way. Within the discipline of argumentation studies, the process of invention has been explored through the study of topoi-loci, i.e., literally, the "places" from which arguments are drawn. In this original metaphor introduced by Aristotle and then conceptually developed in the subsequent Latin, medieval and post-medieval studies, lists of topoi-loci are sketched out with the practical aim of giving support to an arguer who needs to find sound reasons to support his or her claims or standpoints. Topoi-loci – for example, 'locus from authority', 'locus from efficient cause' and 'locus from analogy' – indicate the sources from which arguments can be constructed.

But what do sterile, abstract structures of arguments such as loci have to do with creativity? When you want to support a standpoint, is it not better to just sit down and think – intuitively? This question presupposes that creativity should be linked to instinct, or free thinking; but this is not necessarily true (section 2.1). Loci can support creativity because they provide a map of semantic relations, and a map of reasoning connections – and this can assist the arguer to ask the right questions and, thus, find the right arguments. Renaissance humanist Rodolphus Agricola saw loci as 'capita rerum', i.e. the main semantic nodes (Lat. *capita*, or 'heads') that mirror reality (Lat. *res/rerum*); by studying these nodes and their relations, one will be helped to construct one's reasoning (Agricola 1539). True, topoi-loci are abstract nodes and connections; these abstract connections need to be fleshed out with real premises, shared starting points to become the bone structure of real arguments (Rigotti & Greco, 2019). In this way, a seemingly abstract and dry area of rhetorical or argumentative discourse, such as inference, reveals its inner creative nature.

The role of topoi-loci in rhetorical creativity has been considered in a series of studies by argumentation scholars who examine contemporary rhetoric, often considering presidential and other political speeches in the US and elsewhere. It is worth mentioning here the works by David Zarefsky (see Zarefsky 2014). The studies within this tradition demonstrate the topoi-loci on which some important speeches have been based and evaluate their validity, including reflecting on fallacies contained therein; in this sense, the study of rhetoric is not only a description of the strategies used but also an evaluation of their validity. Zarefsky's analysis (2007) of Colin Powell's speech to the United Nations on February 5, 2003 concerning Saddam Hussein's possession of nuclear arms is a case in point. Zarefsky highlights the rhetorical structure of the speech and shows how the speech was persuasive because of Powell's personal *ethos* (authority) at the time and because of judicious use of the *argument* (locus) *from ignorance*, which allowed Powell to use scant evidence to instill the suspicion that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction because no evidence to the contrary was present. Zarefsky reconstructs and criticizes the use of these topoi-loci from authority and from ignorance as rhetorical strategies that were persuasive in this case but that were ultimately not well-founded, particularly in the case of the argument from ignorance - something that Powell himself later regretted (Zarefsky 2007). This case is exemplary of studies in argumentative rhetoric, which are concerned not only with style but with profound logical strategies; and not only with persuasion but also with truth and evidence.

3 Business rhetoric: an example of creative rhetoric in contemporary communication

Because argumentative discourse is not something that is the preserve of an élite but is widely requested in today's professional world of communication and beyond, the study of topoi-loci and of rhetoric in general

has an educational value (Kienpointer 2012). Rhetoric is important in enhancing both what is called “small c creativity”, i.e. everyday creativity, especially in relation to verbal and multimodal productions, and “big C Creativity”, which “refers to the creativity of world-changing works of art or scientific discoveries that alter the way people think about a certain problem or domain” (Jones 2012: 2). Business activity is a typical sphere of “small c creativity”: it is dotted with - even constituted of - a series of texts and messages, often dealing with practical questions or problems, belonging to routine and common genres, which however challenge the manager’s/writer’s creativity to find the “fitting response”. Therefore, for decades, rhetoric, rhetorical analysis and rhetorical criticism have been integrated in the practice of and research into organizational and business communication and management. The origins of organizational and business rhetoric, and the variety of developed analyses, themes, approaches and streams of research have been thoroughly reviewed and discussed in numerous complementary works (cf. Meisenbach & McMillan 2006, Browning & Hartelius 2018, Cheney et al. 2014, Lee 2019).

Typically, communication in organizations, especially commercial companies, involves multiple audiences (Cheney et al. 2004, Huettman 1996; Schriver 1992, Hoffman & Ford 2010). When producing organizational messages, managers need to face these audiences and communicate strategically with them for the sake of the organization’s success. Managers need to produce persuasive communicative messages “that reflect the organization’s needs and goals” (Browning & Hartelius 2018: 88) and that take into account the interests and issues raised by all the different text stakeholders. As Browning & Hartelius (2018) put it, “persuasion is part of an organizational leader’s role” (p. 88) and this persuasive element of managers’ activity turns them into rhetors. A prime example of this is (digital) storytelling in organizations, which counts as an example of small c creativity. Storytelling persuades (Bendoni 2017: 142) or influences (Bendoni 2017: 143) the reader/listener. As we may say, it has a clear rhetorical and argumentative function based on the “persuasive power of words and images” (Bendoni 2017: 143), even though one might observe that studies on storytelling tend to neglect a more *critical* attitude that the audience or listener might and should adopt in argumentative rhetoric (Rocci 2017: 99). Another typical small c creativity rhetorical activity in business can be found in advertising. Studies of rhetoric and argumentation in advertising posit the need to overcome the “verbal/visual divide” (Tseronis 2018) and include more dimensions than just the verbal mode (cf. Groarke & Kišiček 2018). Multimodal tropes and figures in advertising – for instance, metaphor (Pollaroli & Rocci 2015) and metonymy (Rocci et al. 2018) – are analyzed as “patterns of thought and reasoning” (Kjeldsen 2012). From a rhetorical viewpoint, these patterns are related to different topoi-loci, which are activated in rhetorical discourse (Pollaroli & Rocci 2015); together with the verbal content, they provide the viewer with cues about the inference path proposed by the text and maximize the rhetorical effectiveness of the argument advanced. Rhetorical topoi-loci can equally be effective as means to create advertising campaigns. For example, Marsh (2007) discusses the causal topoi-loci (as derived from Aristotle’s reflection on different types of causes) and their role within “a detailed, systematic heuristic for product analysis, an indispensable part of idea generation” in advertising copywriting (Marsh 2007: 183).

Ethos, *logos* and *pathos* (Sect. 1) are considered prominent rhetorical tools in organizations, which are applied to the analysis of organizational messages. For instance, Brennan & Merkl-Davies (2014) analyze the use of the three rhetorical appeals in the press releases relating to the 2011 “Detox” campaign, a public controversy between Greenpeace and international sportswear/fashion firms about the use of hazardous chemicals in the companies’ supply chains. Hyland (2005) illustrates how meta-discourse contributes “to creat[ing] the rational, credible and affective appeals” (p. 75) in letters by CEOs in annual reports. Hyland’s purpose also has the practical side of “help[ing] students of academic and business communication to develop a more effective rhetorical and verbal repertoire to better operate in the professional domains” (p. 85). Several other studies relating to different areas of organizational and, more particularly, business activity have used ethos, pathos and logos as analytical tools to provide useful insights for text production. Green (2004), for instance, observes the role of discourse and rhetoric in the diffusion of new managerial practices and proposes a rhetorical theory

of diffusion, which describes how “[p]athos, logos, and ethos appeals may combine to shape the speed and extent of diffusion” (p. 660) and identifies the most effective combination and sequence. Tirdatov’s (2014) analysis of a sample of successful Kickstarter crowdfunding campaigns aims to clarify how appeals to ethos, pathos and logos can be used to create effective crowdfunding pitches, capable of persuading donors. Higgins & Walker (2012) examine how the three persuasive appeals are used by companies in social/environmental reporting to “isolate the role of persuasion in discursive struggle [...] about the ‘appropriate’ role of business in society” (p. 195).

In studies on organizations, ethos occupies a prominent position in relation to the broad issue of image and reputation. As Baumlin & Scisco (2018: 201) put it, ethos is revealed in discourse, but it is also constructed and “much organizational rhetoric aims at creating, maintaining, and occasionally repairing corporate image” (ibid.). The connection between rhetoric and corporate reputation has become a fertile area for studies of corporate ethics. The Aristotelian concept of ethos with its three components (virtue, practical wisdom and goodwill) is taken as a reference point and is used as a tool to describe and conceptualize corporate reputation (cf. for example, Shanahan & Seele 2015). For example, Flyvholm Jorgensen & Isaksson (2008) analyze a number of advertisements from financial institutes in order to highlight how rhetorical strategies and appeals are used to build credibility and reputation. They propose a “reconceptualized and operational model of the construct of credibility (ethos)” (p. 366) and they show that financial advertisements in international magazines largely rely on the appeal to expertise, suggesting that there is a wide range of further rhetorical strategies that remain unused. Kallendorf & Kallendorf (1985) show how the use of figures of speech in internal and external business communication texts particularly contribute to ethos, by projecting “the image of a thoughtful and analytical person whose ideas deserve to be taken seriously” (p. 43). The same authors, in a later study (Kallendorf & Kallendorf 1989), put forward an “Aristotelian theory of programmatic ethics based in and appropriate to the rhetoric of business” (p. 55). Challenging a misrepresentation of Aristotle’s rhetoric as a technique which can be vulnerable to manipulative use, they highlight that, in Aristotle’s view, language is “a carrier of values”; accordingly it generates “arguments of probable validity” and “invites rhetorical scrutiny”, based on “the three rhetorical means of persuasion” and “rel[ying] on discussion and debate” (p. 57).

Summary

In sum, rhetorical discourse arises in response to an exigence that emerges from the communication context in which the speaker finds him or herself. The speaker will explore possible worlds to persuade his/her audience and fill the gap between how a given situation is and how it could be; hence, rhetorical communication encompasses a process of exploration of possible worlds and paths to effectively change reality. We have observed that rhetoric concerns the design and realization of communicative interventions that are persuasive but also well-founded. As such, rhetoric includes the three fundamental elements introduced by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric*. First, the speaker’s character (*ethos*), which bears an influence on how the message is perceived. Second, the orientation in relation to *audience*, including a careful attention to different segments of complex audiences. Third, a well-founded *repertoire of arguments*, which is created with the help of *topoi-loci*, the supporting structures of inference. As demonstrated by the examples proposed above, these aspects are crucial in a variety of contemporary communication domains, which range from political speeches to business advertising and many others.

Cross-references

Invention, Possible in Business, Possible in Marketing, Dialectics, Analogy (also Metaphor)

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