Rhetoric may be defined as persuasive communication, written or oral, formal or informal; a verbal art or a type of poetics; or an academic discipline concerned with persuasive communication. In his seminal work, *Rhetoric*, Aristotle provided the original, neutral definition of the concept as simply “the available means of persuasion.” The content and style of one’s rhetoric can help to convey to others information about one’s politics, geographic region, nationality, race, socioeconomic status, age, religion, level of education, and other critical aspects of self. Depending on its content, for example, one may be correctly or incorrectly labeled “rightwing,” “leftwing,” “feminist,” “chauvinist,” “fundamentalist,” and so on. This entry explores various aspects and issues of rhetoric, including appeals and canons, history, verbal art or poetics, performance, varieties, and tropes and schemes.

**Appeals and Canons of Rhetoric**

In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle outlines three modes or appeals of rhetoric: *logos* (reason), *pathos* (emotion), and *ethos* (ethics). To have maximum persuasiveness, a message or speech must appeal to audience members in each of these three ways; that is, it must be logical and well constructed, it must touch the hearer emotionally, and it must be presented by someone who is ethical (or who at least is believed to be a person of integrity).

The five canons of rhetoric are *inventio* (prewriting), *dispositio* (arrangement), *elocutio* (style), *memoria* (memorization), and *pronuntiatio* (delivery). Inventio involves planning and research to give one’s communication substance. Arrangement, selection, and use of words, figures of speech, varied sentence types, and paragraphs for greatest effect are all the purview of dispositio. Style (elocutio) can be formal or informal, depending on the type of audience for which one writes or performs. With respect to memoria, orators often make use of various mnemonic devices to help them memorize material they will perform or execute verbally. Lastly, pronuntiatio (delivery) is key to persuasiveness. A powerfully written message with limp or lukewarm delivery loses much of its effectiveness for an audience.

**History**

*Classical Greek Rhetoric and Its Relationship to African Oratory*

Many textbooks begin discussion of rhetoric’s history at the 4th and 5th centuries BC with the work of Aristotle, Socrates, and others who highlighted techniques for persuasive argumentation in the courtroom and other settings, and there is debate about the influence of African oratory on Greek rhetoric. The question arises, for instance, as to whether the Greeks *invented* or merely *catalogued*
tropes and schemes they learned from African orators. Deborah Sweeney's study of law and rhetoric in ancient Egypt uncovers the use of repetition, parallelism, antithesis, hyperbole, metaphor, and other tropes and schemes. The current intellectual milieu is one of increasing suspicion of revisionist history in textbooks, history that highlights European civilizations and their achievements and overlooks non-Western civilizations and their contributions to rhetoric and other fields.

Certain anthropological and rhetorical sources, by African, African American, and White scholars, suggest that whereas ancient Greeks acknowledged the influence of Egyptians on their culture, later Eurocentric scholars, with their own agenda of establishing and maintaining views of White superiority, sought to diminish, if not outright deny, this African influence. James Berlin and other scholars committed to recovery of a history that fully describes the extensive cultural exchanges that went on between persons of ancient Greece and Egypt suggest, for instance, that Socrates and others studied in Egypt and brought back what they learned to help shape the teaching of rhetoric and other aspects of Greek civilization.

Martin Bernal, Carol Lipson, Roberta Binkley, Jacob Carruthers, Cheikh Anta Diop, Lucy Xing Lu, and others have written extensively on issues related to the Eurocentric slant on the history of rhetoric and the distortion of world history in general. In *Black Athena Writes Back*, Bernal describes the difference between an Aryan model of history, which asserts that Greece was conquered from persons to its north and that there was no philosophy before the Greeks, and an ancient model, which highlights the interchanges between Greece and Egypt. Bernal notes that the ancient model was not doubted until the end of the 18th century, and it was not seriously challenged until the 1820s. He proposes a “revised ancient model,” one that acknowledges dual influence on Greece of cultural practices from peoples both to the north and south of that country.

**Split of Rhetorical Studies and Composition**

Rhetoric also is an academic discipline. Two crucial splits occurred in the early 1900s between the teaching of oral and written rhetoric (the history, theory, and practice of persuasive communication) and the teaching of composition (basic writing). With regard to the teaching of oral rhetoric (specifically, elocution and debate), such instruction saw a decline for the period 1860 to 1910, then experienced a renaissance beginning in 1914 when the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking (now the National Communication Association) broke away from the National Council of Teachers of English.

A watershed moment occurred in the early 1900s with respect to written rhetoric instruction when the previous approach to rhetorical studies of continental Europe shifted from a focus on the rhetorical thought and methods of ancient philosophers to focus on technical mechanics of the writing process. Specifically, with the advent in 1907 of Edwin C. Woolley's *Handbook of Composition: A Compendium of Rules*, written rhetorical instruction languished as the handbook era began. Woolley's was the first college-level text of its kind, unapologetically covering every aspect of mechanical correction (spelling, grammar, punctuation, etc.) at a very basic level. Edward P. J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors suggest that it was Cornell University that revived interest in classical rhetoric in the 1920s by establishing a seminar in which students read and discussed the works of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. As graduates from that program went on to be hired at schools in other parts of the country, renewed interest in rhetoric occurred.

**Verbal Rhetoric, Poetics, and Performance**
In his work on language and artful verbal structure (poetics), Roman Jakobson outlines six functions of language and identifies the appropriate function of poetics within these. In brief, the constitutive factors of any speech event are as follows: An **addresser** sends a **message** to an **addressee**. To be understood, the message must have a **context**, a **code** or language, and a **contact** (physical channel and psychological connection that allow addresser and addressee to enter and remain in communication). The functions can be diagrammed as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotive (Addresser)</th>
<th>Referential (Context)</th>
<th>Poetic (Message)</th>
<th>Conative (Addressee)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Phatic (Contact)</td>
<td>Metalingual (Code)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If we try to relate the diagram to a piece of political rhetoric, such as U.S. Senator Barack Obama's Nomination Acceptance Speech, given in August 2008 at the Democratic National Convention at the Pepsi Center in Denver, it might look like the the chart above.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2008 Presidential Election (Democratic National Convention)</th>
<th>National Audience (Americans who construe or interpret his message as convincing or not)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nomination Speech (Message about change he plans to bring to America)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Impassioned Orator</strong> (Senator Obama)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV, Cable, Internet/ Relationship Between Obama and &quot;The Public&quot; (Their shared concern over what is good for the country)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard American English (Polished version, charismatic in its delivery)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Rhetorical Frames and Performance**

In his work *Verbal Art as Performance*, scholar Richard Bauman suggests that modern theorists in a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, linguistics, and literature, tend to have a *textcentered* approach to the notion of *verbal art or oral literature*, focusing on “special usages or patterning of formal features within texts” (p. 7). Specifically, he notes that theorists such as Roman Jakobson and Edward Stankiewicz focus on the message for its own sake, whereas others, such as William Bascom, are greatly concerned with the way a message is expressed or presented. Still others, like Bohuslav Havranek, suggest that verbal art has to do with maximized, conspicuous use of oratorical devices.

By contrast, Bauman wants to study the nature of performance and distinguish it from other ways of speaking. His approach involves particular attention to Gregory Bateson's notion of the interpretive frame or context within which messages are to be understood. In addition to the literal, there are many other types of communicative frames that vary by culture. These include but are not limited to insinuation, joking, imitation, translation, quotation, conversational speech, ceremonial speech, and storytelling (viewed as straight speech in some cultures and as performative speech in others). Bauman recognizes performance as a distinctive frame that involves, among other things, a display of

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communicative competence, accountability to the audience for which the communication is given, and
delivery that heightens enjoyment for hearers of this act of expression. He views performance as
constitutive of verbal art or verbal rhetoric.

Performance verbal art types, features, and styles vary from speech community to speech community.
Here are two examples from Latino/a rhetoric. Sociolinguistics ethnographer Marcia Farr has done
extensive research on the Mexican speech event (or frame) relajo (“joking”) and the Mexican ranchero
speech style known as franqueza (“frankness”). Farr defines relajo as a Mexican speech event or oral
performance during which normal seriousness is suspended, and individuals can deliberately breach the
prevailing code of propriety by which they usually live. Her study of verbal art among Mexicanas in
Chicago contains details of an oral performance in which the focus is changing gender roles of Mexican
and Mexican American women. Relajo provides a social space in which tensions can be released and
those participating can collectively explore community values critically and humorously.

Franqueza, according to Farr, is direct, straightforward, candid language that goes directly to a point. It is
the speech of the rancher who owns property and takes a proud, egalitarian stance with landowner
bosses of large farm cooperatives. Farr says this contrasts with the cortesia or indirect verbal
politeness style of speech used by the stereotypical indigenous Mexican Indian, who stands with a
bowed head and hat in hand before land bosses.

Varieties of Specialized Rhetoric

Studies abound on specialized varieties of rhetoric. Dell Hymes has chronicled aspects of Native
American ethnopoetics. In addition to Farr, Victor Villanueva and Jose Gutierrez also have detailed
elements of Hispanic or Latino/a rhetoric. Ronald L. Jackson II, Elaine Richardson, John Lucaites, Michelle
Condit, Richard Riecke, and James Golden are among those who have provided groundbreaking
scholarship on African American rhetoric. Gerald Davis, Henry Mitchell, Katie Cannon, Susan Bond, and
others have written comprehensively about the Black sermon as a special form of rhetoric. Arla
Bernstein, Kristina Horn Sheeler, and others are to be credited for creative, insightful scholarship on
women's political rhetoric. Various other scholars have tackled Asian and other types of rhetoric.

As an example of the kind of rhetorical conceptual work available, the work of Maulana Karenga on
African rhetoric and its relation to African American rhetoric will be considered briefly. Maulana Karenga
outlines four characteristics of African American rhetorical communicative practice, which is rooted in
African rhetoric. Specifically, this practice features rhetoric of community, rhetoric of resistance,
rhetoric of reaffirmation, and rhetoric of possibility.

Drawing on the works of Molefi Asante, Shirley Wilson Logan, and others, Karenga describes African
American rhetoric as one of community, involving communal dialogue and action to bring positive
outcomes in the community and the world. The community context, one of historical enslavement and
ongoing systematic oppression, has helped to shape a brilliant rhetoric of resistance, struggle, and
protest. African American rhetoric also is a rhetoric of reaffirmation. It is intentional about reaffirming
the dignity and divinity of African persons and their rights to freedom, meaningful lives, and the
opportunity to share their cultural truth and their contributions to the world in their own ways. Lastly,
Karenga characterizes this communicative practice as a rhetoric of possibility, which seeks to share,
inform, question, explore, and investigate in order to solve problems and maximize human quality of life.

The work of Bauman, Farr, Jackson, Condit, Karenga, and others makes clear that all cultures have a

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variety of speech events and related interpretive frames, but that the performance frame (which is culture specific) is significant because it emphasizes the idea of competence in speaking in socially acceptable ways for an evaluating audience. Bauman's list of communicative means used for framing in various cultures includes but is not limited to special codes, figurative language, parallelism, special paralinguistic features, special formulae, and a disclaimer of performance.

*Special codes* can include archaic language ("We the people..."), poetic language, and other special linguistic usages. *Figurative language* includes the use of metaphor and other figures of speech. *Parallelism* is the systematic repetition and variation of poetic, phonic, grammatical, and semantic structures. It can help a performer with memorization of a written text or with fluency in delivering a spontaneous, improvised piece. Further, Bauman posits that parallelism is as important for the effectiveness of informal and brief passing utterances as for elaborate, public performances.

*Special paralinguistic features* are those that typically are not recorded in written texts. These include articulation, speed, accents, and other features of delivery style. In his work on Zuni narrative, Dennis Tedlock has developed conventions for indicating features such as rate, loudness, stress, and pitch contour. "Once upon a time," the opening for a fairy tale, and the common joke introduction, "Did you hear the one about ...", are among *special formulae*, which often serve as markers of specific genres.

Finally, another means of announcing performance is the *disclaimer of performance*, or denial of competence. Bauman views such disclaimers as attempts at modesty in settings and situations where selfassertiveness is considered a liability.

**Figures of Speech: Tropes and Schemes**

In the work *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, Corbett and Connors describe a figure as a type of speech that is creatively crafted in ways divergent from normal usage. *Tropes* and *schemes* are the two main types of figures. In her work on conversational involvement strategies, Deborah Tannen explains that J. D. Sapir and Paul Friedrich use the term *trope* to refer to figures of speech that operate on meaning. Sapir identifies four master tropes: *metaphor* (speaking of one thing in terms of another), *metonymy* (speaking of a thing in terms of something associated with it), *synecdoche* (a part for the whole), and *irony* (saying the opposite of what one means).

The Greeks cataloged some 250 schemes, or artful patterns or arrangements of words. A few examples follow.

**Anaphora**—repetition of a word or group of words at the beginning of successive clauses.

"Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quick sands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children." (Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have A Dream" speech, 1963).

**Antimetabole**—repetition of the same words or ideas in transposed order.

"And so, my fellow Americans: Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." (John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, 1961)

**Assonance**—the repetition of rhyming sounds in words or phrases.

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“Down with dope! Up with hope!” (Frequently uttered exhortation of civil rights leader Reverend Jesse L. Jackson Sr.)

**Parallelism**—the systematic repetition and variation of poetic, phonic, grammatical, and semantic structures.

“My faith in the Constitution is whole; it is complete; it is total. I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction of the Constitution.” (From the historic Statement on Impeachment, given by the late congresswoman from Texas, Barbara Jordan, during the Nixon impeachment hearings, July 1974)

**Polyptoton**—repetitive use of words with the same root.

“That's an im plausible solution to a plausible dilemma.”

**Polysyndeton**—use of many conjunctions for emphasis.

“The farmer planted and fertilized and watered and tended and ultimately harvested his crops.”

**Conclusion**

Crafting polished persuasive communication involves attention to the various appeals, canons, functions, factors, and frames of rhetoric, as well as concern for one's audience. Rhetoric has many varieties and is culture specific. Its persuasiveness in public as well as private arenas depends ultimately on how well each of these considerations is addressed.

**See also**

Communication Competence, Communication Theory of Identity, Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory, Language

**Further Readings**


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