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## Linguistics and Classical Theories of Rhetoric: Connections and Continuity

### Abstract:

*The Connections between ancient approaches to rhetoric, as found in Plato and Aristotle, the prime ancient theorists of rhetoric, and modern linguistic approaches to register and genre theory, as in Hallidayan linguistics, show continuity of thought across the centuries. They also suggest that there may be such things as universal rhetorical principles as evidenced in various schemata. However, ethical considerations comprised an essential part of the ancient view of rhetoric. A major feature of the modern age is the opportunity to employ techniques of persuasion by means of new technological channels such as social media and blogs. As the use of these techniques have ethical consequences, so ethical considerations are becoming more prominent and perhaps should be incorporated into linguistic models of register.*

### Key Words:

Rhetoric, Genre, Persuasion, Ethics, Sentiment, Plato, Aristotle.

### Introduction

A good beginning may be made by comparing the types of questions that the ancients were concerned to answer with those that preoccupy the moderns, and by considering the extent to which ethical questions were seen to be integral to any theory of rhetoric. The ancients, indeed, were concerned with quite different sets of questions from those of today ([Lloyd 1979](#)). These may be characterised as being of a philosophical and social, and formal and technical nature. In the former category are found: “What type of argumentation is employed?”, “What is the relationship of rhetoric with truth?”, and “What is its relationship with ethics?” All through ancient history, and modern history until Einstein, it was generally believed that there were certain values that were true in the absolute. Plato’s writings reflect a contemporary debate as to whether social organisation and order were products of *nomos* - custom (man-made, so to speak), or *phusis* – nature (as in Plato’s Protagoras ([Lamb 1924](#))). And of the latter category are found: “How is an oration to be constructed?”, “What are the characteristics of good style?” and, “What are the linguistic devices available for attaining that style?” It is here evident that a strong prescriptive element balances an enquiring, philosophical one.

The questions with which the moderns are concerned are: “How do the dynamics of discourse (such as in a speech) work?”

That is, how is a speech to be analysed in order that the how and the why of its production be understood? How do different components or levels contribute towards the whole, and how is discourse coherent and cohesive? That is, what differentiates text from non-text, or poor text? Notice, therefore, that in the case of the how and the why there is a completely different emphasis within modern linguistics. The linguist is concerned with the Linguistic how and why, as opposed to the practical purpose of rhetoric - a prominent part of every ancient account. In addition, the treatment of truth values are now the province of the philosopher; the treatment of stylistic elements (as regarded by the ancients) are now the concern of the literary critic in their approach to the text as a work of art; and the treatment of content is the affair of the politician, preacher, historian, or whoever else looks to what the speech is about. But the linguist, as a scientist, wishes to discover which significant generalisations can be made about the very nature of discourse, rhetoric is particularly important to the linguist in that it represents one of the few fields (relevant to linguistic studies) where attempts

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have been made since ancient times to formulate a comprehensive theory. In spite of the fact that ancient theoreticians asked fundamentally different questions, the nature of the subject and the course of enquiry often led them along paths not unlike those of today.

### Athens and the beginning of Rhetoric

In the Athens of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the Athenian democracy gave all citizens (male and free by definition) the opportunity of making their voice heard not only in the law courts but also in the deliberative policy-making assemblies. The spoken word became the vehicle of power - witness Alcibiades, who persuaded the Athenians to embark on the disastrous Sicilian expedition in 415-413 BCE ([Smith 1989](#)).

Rhetoric being the art of success, increasing sophistication of presentation led to a demand for education in this sine qua non. Thus, there arose a class of professional men, known as Sophists, who travelled from city to city in Greece professing to teach both philosophy and rhetoric. This latter they did by demonstration followed by discussion. They became notorious for their verbal trickery and argumentation techniques (in Aristophanes' play the Clouds, there is a dialogue between the Just Argument and Unjust Argument, and the Unjust wins the debate ([Henderson 1998](#)). Plato wrote a dialogue about one of these Sophists eponymously entitled Gorgias ([Lamb 1925](#)): this may be used as a source for some of the opinions of these men on the subject of rhetoric. The dialectical process begins at section 449d. At first Gorgias doesn't bear up very well under the barrage of Socrates' questions: Gorgias says that rhetoric is about words but Socrates points out that this is vague and asserts that arithmetic, calculation, and geometry are also about words though they are not rhetoric. Gorgias, on further being pressed, distinguishes rhetoric by its capacity to convince by speech any gathering whatever of citizens: "I say that it is the ability to persuade with words... and by means of this faculty you will have the doctor as your slave and the athletics trainer!" (ibid., section 425e). Thus, Plato affectively attributes to Gorgias an unwitting but heavy indictment of rhetoric. There is no check on this power, the skilled orator can simply dictate his will by the power of speech. Even allowing for Plato's possible bias (the Gorgias is dated after the trial and execution of Socrates in 399 BCE, because of its bitter tone) this surely accords with historical evidence for the power of rhetoric at that time. Later in the dialogue, however, Gorgias is allowed to present a more reasoned view of rhetoric. In essence, he says that simply because a pupil makes bad use of the art he has learnt - be it boxing, armed combat, or rhetoric - there is no reason why the teacher or the art should be blamed too. This is a very important statement. It recognises, correctly, that a distinction may be drawn, at least theoretically between an art, and the manner in which that art is taught or used. Morality enters the picture as soon as what a person says affects another person's life. How can an art be characterised by ethical terminology? Only acts can be so characterised in terms of their influence for good or bad on other people. Throughout the history of rhetorical theory, however, this distinction is never fully worked out until we come to the 20th century, where the study of discourse from a principled and scientific basis is tackled.

### Ancient Theories of Rhetoric

Ancient theories of rhetoric will be found to involve, or at least presuppose in the case of technical handbooks, a standpoint on moral issues. Gorgias, of course, is also well known as an ontological Philosopher through the remaining paraphrases of fragments of his treatise On the non-existent ([McComiskey 1997](#)). Here he claims that nothing exists; even if something did exist it couldn't be apprehended by man; and if it could be apprehended it would be impossible to communicate it. Is Gorgias serious? This may simply be an example of controversial sophistic practice. It might, however, be said that Gorgias thus implicitly banishes truth and knowledge from rhetoric - although for quite different reasons from those which would be used today. Even if the leap from Gorgias' philosophy to his rhetorical practice cannot be made, it can be fairly said of him that the elements of discourse he emphasises are the speaker, his purpose, and the means of achieving that purpose, the relevant stylistic devices. The audience is important, but only in so far as they are affected by the speaker. For Plato, on the other hand, ethics and epistemology are necessary features of a satisfactory account of

rhetoric. From the *Gorgias* a picture emerges of the Platonic orator as a man who has a knowledge of right and wrong, and who will use this knowledge for the benefit of his audience. This picture is the inevitable outcome of reasoning from two basic Platonic premises: that there are absolute values of right and wrong and that the person who has knowledge of what is right and wrong will never willingly do evil. In the *Apology* of Socrates we have an actual example of the Platonic orator at work, although this is an early composition written at a time when many of Plato's doctrines were still in embryonic form ([Emlyn-Jones & Preddy 2017](#)). This is a piece of judicial rhetoric: Socrates defends himself against a charge of corrupting the young. Socrates begins by declaring that the arguments of his accusers were so convincing that he was almost carried away by them himself, but also that hardly a word of what they said was true. Here he links rhetoric with persuasion and lies. Socrates, however, promises no high-flown language but only the truth, spoken in his usual manner. Later, after the death penalty had been decided on, he says that his condemnation was not due to lack of arguments but lack of effrontery and impudence. He has not addressed the court as they would have wanted, that's to say by weeping and wailing and saying things which he regarded as unworthy of himself. But in his accusation of Meletus, his accuser, Socrates does employ standard rhetorical techniques of the time such as the argument from probability. This had been well evinced in Antiphon's *Tetralogies* (sets of speeches for and against imaginary cases) and was recognised as a standard form of argumentation ([Maidment 1948](#)). The meat, however, of Socrates' reply lies in his dialectical, question and answer, examination of Meletus. Here Socrates wants to get at the truth.

### Text Cohesion and Coherence

Nowadays we might study dialectic, and arguments from probability, as aspects of text cohesion and coherence (Halliday and Hasan). The text coheres because it utilises certain types of argumentation, exemplified in linguistic form, with typical modes of progression. These types of argumentation would have been taught systematically in the ancient schools of philosophy and rhetoric. What is lacking, amongst other things, in Plato's time is an account of text coherence on the inter-personal level. The notion of coherence as regards progression of thought is specifically discussed in a later dialogue, the *Phaedrus* ([Emlyn-Jones & Preddy 2017](#)). There Socrates criticises a speech of the orator Lysias, delivered on this occasion by Phaedrus, on the grounds that it does not cohere. He goes on to say "It is necessary for every speech to cohere like a living thing having its own body, so that nothing is lacking in head or foot, but to have a middle and extremities suitable to each other, sketched as part of a whole" (*ibid.*, section 264c6-9). This theory of unity, beginning middle and end, as a necessary condition of coherence, re-appears in the *Poetics* of Aristotle ([Fife & Russell 1995](#)). It has been influential throughout history as a criterion to be used by anyone composing a text. The modern-day linguist, however, investigates the natural properties of text: what makes text intelligible, regardless of whether it is artificially or naturally produced, without wishing to prescribe. But when this investigation is performed, a distinctive feature of text delimitation emerges: a discrete portion of text can be defined in terms of a beginning, middle and end. Returning to Plato, the concluding passages of the *Phaedrus* carry a consideration of the relationship between rhetoric and knowledge of the nature of the soul: for it is clear that Thrasymachus and whoever else might give a conscientious account of rhetoric... will thirdly classify the types of speeches, and the types of soul and their conditions with each of their reasons, fitting each type of speech to each condition and teaching which soul is necessarily persuaded by which speech through which cause, and which soul is not persuaded ([Emlyn-Jones & Preddy 2017](#), section 271a4-b5).

This may be interpreted as a call for a theory of psychology, a framework within which the relationship between text context and audience type might be assessed. Yet to say this could be a little anachronistic. A classification of personality type may be the domain of psychology, but the idea of psychological context as a variable within a theory of text has more of a modern flavour. Yet the germ is already present in Plato. For the first comprehensive statement of rhetorical theory we must move on to Aristotle, who was a contemporary of Demosthenes, one of the greatest ancient orators ([Vince 1990](#)). Aristotle was a comprehensive theorist and systematiser, and this is not least evident in his all-embracing theory of the four causes, a set of basic

philosophical principles (Lloyd 1968). Although these are not applied to rhetoric in the *Ars Rhetorica* ([trans. Freese, 1926](#)), with the exception of the final cause (*ibid.*, Bk I chap.3), a reasonable attempt can be made as follows.

**Table 1.** The Four Causes of a Speech

<b>Material Cause</b>	<b>The raw sounds of discourse</b>
Formal Cause	The form this discourse takes
Efficient Cause	The speaker
Final Cause	The achievement of persuasion

While Aristotle's teleology would be disputed today (although as a final cause communication could be substituted, which would leave the matter neutral as to whether persuasion had been achieved or not) the other three categories are easily identifiable with present-day concerns. In the *Ars Rhetorica* itself, however, Aristotle focuses his attention on the types of procedures used in rhetoric in order to achieve persuasion: "Rhetoric may be defined as a faculty of discovering all the possible means of persuasion in any subject" (*ibid.*, Bk I 1355b 25-27). Following on from this, Aristotle discusses the type of argumentation employed. This is dialectic, which proceeds on the basis of assumptions which have in turn been discovered in the process of dialogue, a prime method of discovering necessary truths. This is central to Aristotle's account of rhetoric. But the means of persuasion include three principal features. The first is *ethos*, the personal character of the speaker; he should seem a good and trustworthy man. This impression should be created through the speech: reputation should not be relied upon, only *ethos* thus projected is artistic. The second is *pathos*, a mode of artistic proof when the souls of the audience are moved to emotion and where the orator must be able to understand character and the emotions. And the third is *logos*, the type of proof found in the argument. Here indeed a balanced account of the relationship between speaker and listener is presented. Yet we can criticise Aristotle on two counts: one that he refuses to admit the orator's reputation as a factor - it cannot be denied that if the listener or audience know who the speaker is this will affect the nature of the communicative act - and two that while recognising the inter-personal context (and he does give a review of emotional interaction in book two) he does not discuss situation. The first count, however, is answered by remembering that Aristotle set out to talk about the art of rhetoric, he did not intend to give a general theory of the speech act, as it might be construed today ([Searle 1969; 1975](#)). But what happens in the speech act is relevant for Aristotle. In chapter three of book he provides an identification of the three elements there contained: "For a speech is composed of three elements, the speaker, the subject of the speech and the persons addressed; and the end or object of the speech is determined by the last, viz the audience" (Freese 1926, Bk I 1358a38-62). This is not enlarged upon at this point: rather, Aristotle proceeds to identify the three types of rhetoric according to the types of audience they are addressed to. These types are judicial, found in the law courts, epideictic, involving the praise or blame of a person (an example of which would be a funeral oration), and deliberative, found in winning debate. If the element of persuasion is never absent in discourse, then it is possible to infer that the distinction is simply one of style, context, and content. Aristotle's contribution, then, is a recognition that context is important, though he doesn't go beyond the three types of context encountered by the orator.

### The Elements of Rhetoric

The final book of the *Ars Rhetorica* deals mainly with style, but it does contain a short discussion of delivery at the beginning. This may well constitute an early, if not the first discussion of the way the speaker manipulates sound in discourse. Aristotle gives a cursory review of what the art of declamation involves. This is the proper use of the voice for the expression of emotion, the proper use of the accents or tones, and the rhythms suitable for each emotion. Again, therefore, a prescriptive treatment is present where it would be absent in today's descriptive linguistics. As for style, we find analysis of the features of style as well as advice on what sort of style should be used. Finally, in chapter 13, there is a short analysis of the divisions of a speech: a speech has a

minimum of two parts, the exposition (statement of the argument) and proof (proof of the argument), but more parts may be added up to a maximum of four – exordium (introduction), exposition, proof, and peroration (conclusion) (ibid. 1926). As a concluding note to what Aristotle said a diagram can be constructed to represent his ideas of how the elements of discourse relate to each other.

Aristotle's approach can now be summarised in Table 2 below.

**Table 2.** The Elements of Rhetorical Discourse

<b>Material cause</b>	<b>The Undifferentiated Stream of Sound</b>
Formal cause	The form is that of a speech
Efficient cause	The speaker
Final cause	Communicative act with the audience The audience will/will not be persuaded
Oration - the speech itself	Exordium, exposition, proof, peroration
Logos	The types of argumentation, the ordering of this argumentation
Style	Choice of lexis and structure, gesture, rhythm, and intonation
Ethos	The effect on the audience
Pathos	The audience's effect on the speaker

Although this model can only be regarded as a roughly sketched and highly schematic representation of Aristotle's thought, it can be characterised as an early, and indeed foundational, attempt at systematising the elements of rhetorical discourse. Indeed, there are many similarities and points of contact with Hymes' components of speech ([Hymes 1972](#)) and van Dijk's schema of a trial situation in a law court ([van Dijk 1996](#); Perkins 2019c, pp.30-33), which suggests that it may be possible to detect and describe universal principles of rhetorical communication.

### **The Essence of Rhetoric, the Art of Persuasion, and the Present Day**

If this survey were of a historical nature, Cicero should now be introduced as the next protagonist. But influential as Cicero was historically, he had little if anything to contribute to our discussion of theory. What, then, did the Roman world have to say? The great schoolmaster Quintilian (c. C.E. 40-95) is useful as a point of reference here. In his second book he gives a run-down of past and contemporary authorities on rhetoric ([Russell 2001](#)). Quintilian makes two broad distinctions: the first is between those who call rhetoric an art and those who call it a science, and the second is between those who define its end as purely persuasion and those who say this inadequate in that virtue is an essential part of rhetoric. Amongst those who call it a science are listed Aristotle (he is all inclusive, pays no heed to results, and by implication would include bad men as orators) Ariston (who limits it to civil matters and the persuasion of the people) (who again limits it to politics) and Cicero (who calls it a part of political science (*scientiae civilis partem*) (ibid. 2001). The Stoics and Quintilian himself - rhetoric is some sort of art of speaking well towards the good - classify rhetoric as an art. Then Isocrates, Cicero, Gorgias, and Aristotle define its goal as persuasion, while Quintilian and the Stoics add the important rider that true rhetoric is characterised by the virtue or goodness of the speaker (ibid. 2001).

There seems to be, therefore, at least a polarisation of attitudes: there is a definite school of thought which would exclude ethical considerations. The development of that point of view however has been powerfully challenged throughout history by a most influential factor, religion. The growth of Christianity ensured that all scientific dialogue had to include a standpoint on God and, therefore, morality. The bonds are only loosened somewhat by the time of Newton: religious declarations are made but do not interfere too much with the details of theorising. A link, indeed, between the classical and modern worlds on the subject of Rhetoric could be made in several ways. Here the New Rhetoric movement could be mentioned ([Burke 1951](#)). But this dealt with the

types of argumentation displayed in classical rhetoric as relevant to present-day methodology in the humanities. Or the problem of whether the ancients were any more or less scientific, according to current definition, than the moderns could be tackled.

There is one prominent aspect of ancient theory, however which stands out, that of persuasion, and this can be related to present-day practices. I earlier mentioned the dichotomy in the ancient approach between philosophical investigation and the strong prescriptive element of rhetorical studies which involved the practical aim of persuasion. As a direct link with the modern world on this very point it is Aristotle to whom we must turn. When Aristotle says that the object of rhetoric is not to persuade but to discover the available means of persuasion, he isolates rhetoric as a theoretical pursuit, as opposed to the applied art of declamation itself. This he has in common with descriptive linguists. Their job is not to plan, let's say, the language-teaching syllabus along functional lines. Theirs is a purely theoretical activity - the investigation of those very functions. Then a most significant statement of the nature of rhetoric and dialectic is found in chapter one of the *Ars Rhetorica*. Here it is in effect stated that dialectic and rhetoric are in extensions or developments of day-to-day conversation and argument. The perhaps reasonable inference is that there will be certain general principles underlying rhetoric that will be common to all discourse, whether in the form of written text, orally transmitted traditional text, or simple conversation. There are two observations to be made on the basis of this data. The first is that if indeed rhetoric is an extension of free conversation then it must be possible to develop a single framework for the predictive analysis of not only conversation but most probably all other manifestations of discourse too. The second concerns the central treatment of persuasion. If the power of rhetoric depends on a desire or need to persuade, and if rhetoric is an extension of ordinary conversation, is the desire to persuade central to the nature of discourse itself?

## Rhetoric and Contemporary Linguistic Approaches

The questions above can only be properly answered by examining them in the light of a modern theory of text. Such a theory might be the theory of register as developed by [Halliday \(1978; 1994\)](#) and in particular the account presented in his *Language as a Social Semiotic* ([Halliday & Hasan 1976](#)). My interpretation of this account is that language may be seen as a stream of meanings in the form of, or encoded as, sentences in succession. These meanings are the outcomes of various choices being made all the time. I understand this to be that at any given point in the flow of discourse we can say that now we have a meaning potential which is actualised: the past consists in a stream of such actualised meaning potentials which logically could have been otherwise than they were. The future consists in a series of choices to be made as to which meaning potentials to actualise. A meaning potential can be characterised in the context of situation and culture. Rather than trying to describe both in full on each occasion, it is more profitable to define situation in terms of certain general characteristics relative to the text. Halliday refines the notion of situation by making it situation-type: its semiotic structure will be represented as a complex of three dimensions - field, tenor, and mode (FTM), where field concerns the subject matter of the text, tenor the relationship between author and audience; and mode concerns the delivery of the text (spoken or written) ([Herke et al. 2011](#)). (For a full description of the further Hallidayan systemic functional linguistic framework see Perkins 2019c, pp.233ff). I assume that FTM is a model whereby we can study any text. That's to say that no text will prove impossible to analyse by these means. Let us proceed then, working within Halliday's framework. Situational features, he says, determine text. The unanswered question is how, if at all, does text influence situational features, or meanings? There must be some interaction, even if we are forced back into making a stand over the principle that anything which acts on something else must in turn be acted upon itself. The problem in general is that of feedback. Does feedback work in the following manner?

MEANING ---- determines----TEXT ----affects-----AUDIENCE

Here, feedback must mean that our meanings are modified by the feedback from both the text and the audience. As far as text is concerned, one classic argument for the existence of feedback in language is that of



linguistic relativism where a claim is made that the structures available within a language dominate the way we think of the world ([Lucy 1992](#)). Controversial as this is, I would like to argue that examples can in fact be found where the nature of a language influences our thought. Take time for instance. Our vocabulary for this area of experience operates on the assumption that time is a series of discrete chunks or time-atoms. We say at “10 o’clock precisely” or “there are three seconds to go before midnight”. But time is of course continuous: divisions along the continuum are mathematical fictions. Why does our language behave so? Because our society has evolved a system wherein it is required that we organise our lives on the basis of fixed reference points in the past, present and future. Linguistic organisation and social evolution thus progress hand in hand. The other aspect of feedback portrayed in the diagram was audience reaction. In free discourse, conversation, this might consist in an effect on the way sentences are formulated. In the case of a speech where the text is fixed, reaction might take the form of an aside, or paralinguistic devices. But more importantly the author will have taken into account their predictions of audience reaction when composing the speech. At the phonetic level, there would be a reaction within the rhythm, stress, and intonation of the utterance. At another level, the interpersonal, we might find the attitude, intent, or sentiment affected by audience response, such that a sentiment event, for example, may have an impact on a real world event ([Perkins 2019a](#)).

## Conclusion

Having made an attempt to deal with feedback, I now turn to the aspect of choice and meaning potential actualised by the operation of choice. It seems to me that at this point a major space should be made for the notion of problem-solving. Biologically we know that the organism continually comes up against problems. When standing, for example, the body is continually facing problems of balance and adjusting itself accordingly to the effect that the body 'stands'. Further, how can it not be the case that at the level of choice-making any given choice that is made represents the solution to a problem. In other words, in order to make a choice there must have been a problem first which necessitated the demand. It is now that the questions concerning persuasion can be re-introduced and answered. Problem-solving involves making a choice as to a course of action which is considered best for the organism. At the level of discourse my proposal is that every choice made is expressed by an attempt by the speaker to improve his condition through persuasion. A complete and balanced theory based on these premises would take some time to be worked out in full. There is no time to do this here. But perhaps it is worth taking into account persuasion, well-known to the ancients as we have seen above, when we construct our models of discourse today. The contention in brief is that there is an essential link between problem-solving and persuasion, and that these should be manifested in our model of text. The model of text, therefore, towards which I am working is one which comprises problem-solving and feedback as major elements. The advantage of this model is that it represents text as a realisation of meanings realised in turn by the making of choices and thus the solving of problems. It also illustrates the dynamic properties of text in respect of feedback and persuasion.

If persuasion is to be taken into account in such a model of text, it would seem reasonable, if not essential, to include an ethical framework. The contemporary term fake news is widely used to indicate disinformation propagated for ethically dubious reasons. There is a long history of fake news perhaps stretching from speeches given by orators and politicians in the ancient world (Smith 1989) to the modern historical era (Reisky De Dubnic 1960; Sirvent & Haiphong 2019). There are also powerful models of linguistics, such as Critical Discourse Analysis, designed to show how language can be used to obfuscate and manipulate (Fowler et al. 1979; Fairclough 1995). New technological channels of communication have facilitated this, such as social media (Murphy 2013; Allcott et al. 2017; Kaiser 2019), and attempts are being made to detect fake news automatically (Conforti et al. 2019). In that light, ancient approaches to rhetoric are still relevant and provide insight into the ethical role of persuasion in a modern linguistic theory of rhetoric, based on register analysis.

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