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Rhetorical criticism as a vaccination against identification rhetoric

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Abstract: This article looks into the issue of identification rhetoric and its use in modern public speeches. The aspects explored include the specific character of the modern political discourse, such as media text features and a dispersed audience, and current trends in speech structuring, e.g. collage-like structure, absence of proper composition, illogical emotional pattern. The article then discusses the problems caused by these trends by adducing the results of public polls devoted to the perception of speeches. The purpose of this research is to demonstrate the effectiveness of rhetorical criticism in revealing the key features of the identification rhetoric. Three addresses by the heads of state (Vladimir Putin, Angela Merkel, and Queen Elizabeth II) have been used as a material for rhetorical analysis. Through exposing the deterioration of the public speech structure and argumentation, this article highlights the great importance of studying rhetorical criticism as a means of systematic analysis of public discourse.

Keywords: rhetoric, public speaking, rhetorical criticism, identification rhetoric, media text, signal words.

Since the ancient times, political discourse has been a means of consolidating people. Coming to a decision about the future, orators needed the audience to accept their position and to unite; or sometimes they initially spoke for the idea supported by the majority. Although, in the 20th century the situation has changed. Key genre-forming political speeches have been no longer delivered on forums and squares, but appeared on the radio, TV and now even computer screens. A political speech has become a media text characterized by a number of peculiar features which have transformed public discourse.

The specific character of the media text rhetorical influence is determined by the speech type and media technologies which affect the text. Linguistic information from the media text is complemented by other kinds of information from different semiotic systems, e.g. lead-in, pictures, background music, crawler, etc. Second important feature of a media text and a modern political speech is a specific addressee – a dispersed audience, i.e. the audience that is diverse and often has opposite interests, values, motives and fears. Similar to TV commercials, the head of state's address is aimed at millions of people with different background: cultural, ethnic, religious, political or ideological.

Classical rhetoric teaches us that before taking decisions about the future and appealing to something, it is essential to work out common places, i.e. agree upon common values. In case of diverse dispersed audience, it proves to be extremely complicated. Although, in my view, it is not impossible. A bishop's sermon, and first of all, a Primate of the Church address, can serve as an example of such consolidating rhetoric which is also communicated through media channels.

However, secular authors prefer different types of persuasion of the dispersed audience. Normally, they have two options: first, simplifying meanings, finding something common for everybody, and in case of such diffused audience only the most primitive statements become

common; that is, there is a regression to the primal primitive thinking; and second, applying the rhetoric of identification in combination with the principle – something for everyone.

What does it mean? In the mid-20th century an American philologist Kenneth Burke wrote that “the key term for the old rhetoric was ‘persuasion’ and its stress was upon deliberate design. The key term for the ‘new’ rhetoric would be ‘identification’, which can include a partially ‘unconscious’ factor in appeal.” [1].

The basis of decision-making in the rhetoric of identification is the same attitude of the speaker and the audience towards key symbols and values. The audience is introduced to its cherished values which are positively colored in the speech. Thus, the public is ready to side with the orator’s proposition without analysing the arguments, merely because they are supposedly ‘of the same breed’.

The object of the study is the specific character of identification rhetoric which can be demonstrated by many modern public speeches. If we consider political speeches by the key speakers (presidents, prime ministers or party leaders) from different countries, we will discover that they are structured in the same manner.

First, the text is addressed to a diverse multi-million audience. It often resembles a collage of unconnected positive and negative motivations, each aimed at a particular social group. These motivations are formed with symbol words or signal words which are placed into an unmistakably interpreted positive or negative context. By signal words we mean key words or expressions that evoke memories about significant events in people’s lives. For Russians these words would be ‘Russia’, ‘economics’, ‘family’; for Europeans these words would be ‘democracy’, ‘freedom’, ‘refugees’, ‘taxes’, ‘security’, etc. Signal words have an argument supporting function. In any argumentation, no matter how coherent or consistent, first of all, a listener will catch basic words in order to understand the speaker’s claim. If these words are perceived as important, the speech will capture their attention.

To gain a positive perception of the speech, it is essential that positive signal words are always used in a positive context and negative ones only appear in the negative setting. To enhance the speech effectiveness, context should always be emotionally colored. Then the listener’s value system will not be violated and they will accept the speech, “Good about what I like and bad about what I hate. That is, my viewpoint and the speaker’s position are the same”.

Let us adduce some examples from three speeches of the state leaders that differ in terms of style: by Vladimir Putin, Angela Merkel and Queen Elizabeth II. The quotes are taken from deliberative speeches by these three orators; they evaluate the past and describe future plans (except for the Queen’s speech which only refers to the future). It is deliberative speeches that most often reveal the principles of identification rhetoric, since the objective of such speeches is to gain a consensus of opinions concerning future intentions.

The quoted phrases were mostly taken from the speech texts one after the other (notice a frequent change of the subject): “*destruction processes of sovereignty corruption* as the Soviet Union fell apart”, “people were *frightened* with national *bankruptcy* and the *loss* of their savings and investments *all at once*”, “*needless government presence* in the economics results into a *number of negative factors*”, “it is essential to stop a *squandering* of *national resources* and establish order in *using them*” [2]; “we seek *security* in Europe”, “Europe has *decided ... to act as a single entity to defend its peaceful order and its values*”, “imposing the *supremacy of law*”, “the terrible *Ebola virus*”, “the terrorist organization *Islamic State persecuted and brutally murdered people...*” [3]; “to build a stronger *economy* and a fairer *society*”, “my Ministers will continue to *reduce the country’s deficit*, helping to ensure that *mortgage and interest rates remain low*”, “to *cut taxes* in order to increase people’s financial

security”, “*Legislation* will be introduced to help make the United Kingdom the most attractive place to *start, finance and grow a business.*” [4].

The usage of signal words relevant for different citizen classes in the analysed speeches was quite uniform. It is common for Russia to hold an opinion poll after speeches of leading political figures. Large social services ask thousands of people from different federal subjects about what they liked and disliked, agreed and disagreed with, what they remembered most, etc.

I noticed that materials of opinion polls held by the Public Opinion Fund (FOM) prove the success and the uplifting effect of the state’s leader among old and young people, workers and intellectuals, supporters of both the ruling party and other political organizations.

The second feature comes from the first: the absence of traditional public speech composition. It comes down to simple naming of what was and is good and what good is to be done. The logic of transitions is quite poor, connections between components are missing, cause-and-effect relationships are indistinct. All too often, it turns out to be a recitation of theses with numerous sub items. If you read or look through the speeches quoted here, you will have a clear proof of that.

Thirdly, the absence of composition is also reflected in the illogical emotional pattern of the speech. Addresses of political figures often resemble an emotional collage marked with indignation, patriotic exaltation and optimism that is not backed by any arguments. It is to be noted that mosaic composition does not generate necessary emotions or lead to important conclusions. As a result, listeners lose the ability to analyse and the speech loses its systematicity. Listeners start reacting with their hearts instead of their brains. Statistics offers us a proof of that.

Public polls held after a political speech that is structured according to identification rhetoric principle showed that 60,2% approved of the speech. However, all data gives evidence to the fact that the speech made an impression on all categories of citizens. Although, paradoxically, 22,6% of those who heard the address admitted that it did not contribute to their understanding of the speaker’s views, and still half of them approved of the speech.

This statistics allows to conclude that our contemporaries like speeches that they do not understand.

Therefore, unfortunately, rhetorical consolidation of the dispersed audience in the modern political discourse is performed more frequently with the help of emotional stimuli, promises and general statements which do not make a consistent argumentation.

The present situation undoubtedly indicates a problem of the moral and cultural life of Europeans. If someone asks you to make a decision without providing any consistent justification, but offering a tray filled with colorful sweets, decision-making becomes socially uncontrollable.

It reminds me of a Russian fairy tale about seven young goats and a Big Bad Wolf. The kids let him in just because he sang them a song where he called them the right names and said the right things about milk. It is clear that the fate of goatlings is tragic: the wolf gobbles them up. When we, Russians, face a problem, traditionally we ask two questions: who is guilty and what to do? I am not going to shift the blame for the rhetorical degradation of the population onto our key speakers or their speechwriters. I already named one of the reasons for that at the beginning of the article — the unique character of the media text. Clearly, it is unproductive to look for the guilty ones. It is much more important is to understand what to do next!

By all means, it is necessary to increase cultural and rhetorical levels of our society and to develop the competence of the systematic analysis of public texts. And it is a discipline 'rhetorical criticism' that allows to acquire and to master such skills.

Rhetorical criticism has appeared as a separate academic discipline in America in 1920-30s. About 60 methods and procedures for public texts analysis have been created since then. Russia has developed its own tradition of the analysis of public speeches, including homiletical texts. Recent works tend to bring it closer to semiotics. It is noted that it allows to interpret and evaluate any symbolic action of a person. Here is how Sonya Foss, the author of one the most popular university textbooks on rhetorical criticism characterized this discipline: „It is a qualitative research method that is designed for the systematic investigation and explanation of symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes“ [5]. And by rhetorical processes she means processes of non-violent influence and persuasion.

In a narrower and more common understanding of rhetorical criticism as an academic study analysing the word in its complicated interconnections and interactions between the creator, the receiver of the speech and the context, rhetorical criticism can be defined as a study of the relationship of the word to the thought.

Rhetorical criticism teaches one to analyse words in order to judge upon the thoughts conveyed in those words. A critic explores the means chosen by the author to determine their effectiveness and to learn how the pronounced ideas respond to the audience's interests and values.

I have been studying rhetorical criticism for twenty years and I have been teaching special courses and seminars devoted to this discipline for ten years. So I witness how students who immerse into this theory become more fastidious listeners; they are also more conscious about the perception of media texts. They are not satisfied with speeches which consist of a set of slogans, they look for speeches with proper argumentation.

It seems that developing rhetorical competence of our contemporaries could result into the enrichment of the conceptual and symbolic fields of the modern culture. Moreover, it may contribute to the complication of the public argumentation and conscious consolidation of the society around common values.

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