

# The Reinvention of Rhetoric and its Fundamental Role in Political Discourse Analysis

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**Abstract:** The origins of rhetoric as a discipline can be traced back to the ancient city-state of Athens, this being considered the birthplace of Classical Rhetoric. This article looks at the main landmarks in the evolution of Rhetoric, starting from the Sophists and how they differed from Plato and Aristotle to Modern Rhetoric and the Linguistic Turn, examining the different ways in which rhetoric has been defined and used. Additionally, the article will also canvass the relations between rhetoric and other disciplines, in particular Linguistics and Pragmatics, and consider its role in contemporary analysis of political discourse. The hypothesis is that rhetoric has basic contribution in humanitarian sciences, it has own scientific field but in the modern world it has intersection with other humanitarian and social sciences. The methods are historical observation, desk research and comparative analysis. The text is an attempt to present the reinvention of rhetoric however there are constraints concerning description its role and the opportunities to use in the modern research specifically in pragmatics, pragma-dialectical approach and the political discourse analysis.

**Keywords:** rhetoric, classical rhetoric, modern rhetoric, political discourse analysis.

## Introduction

The paper aims to present chronologically the development of rhetoric and its contribution, starting from Plato, Aristotle, the Sophists in antiquity and reaching the 20th and 21st centuries. The aim is not to give a complete and detailed overview, but to measure the contribution of rhetoric and the changes, reconceptualisations in the works of Chaim Perelman, Lucy Olbrechts-Tyteca, Tzvetan Todorov, Stephen Toulmin, Paul Ricœur, Samuel Mateus and others. The last part highlights the intersections between rhetoric and new methods of research, after which political discourse and political discourse analysis in the publications of Cornelia Ilie and other authors. Conclusions are drawn on the basis of critical review and comparative analysis between contemporary authors.

## The origins of rhetoric: The Sophists, Plato and Aristotle

The history of rhetoric is long and rich and has been made of different contributions. It is a history of reinvention and resilience. The origins of Rhetoric can

be traced back to Greek Sicily, in 465 BC and are closely connected to the judiciary system. In fact, Rhetoric was first understood as the ability to use language in order to contest the expropriation of numerous properties in Sicily. [1]

Due to the decrees of Hiero and Gelon, two tyrants, who decided to deport and expropriate numerous properties, the Sicilian population began a civil war to reclaim its property. [2] This was followed by several judiciary conflicts. As many of the claims were several years old, and attending to the fact that at the time there were no lawyers to defend the litigants, a group of people that was able to mobilize crowds began to emerge and, through eloquence, convince them of what would be appropriate to do. Corax, disciple of Empedocles (c. 490-430 BC), and Tisias, disciple of Corax, were the first teachers to put together the rhetorical technique, which consisted of a kind of advice on the most persuasive procedure for presenting a cause in a court of law.

Unsurprisingly, these gifted people quickly understood that they could make money by selling and teaching their practical knowledge. The teaching movement of the new art of oratory spread from Sicily to other Greek cities through rhetoric teachers – the rectorors – and oratory professionals (paid to defend certain causes) known as the Sophists. [3]

Among the early sophists were the masters Protagoras (c. 490-420 BC) and Gorgias (c. 485-380 BC). These Sophists disputed the rigidity of traditional morals and proposed the possibility of rationally defending different areas of the same issue and, thus, adapting the rhetorician's discourse according to each specific situation, in order to obtain the agreement of the audience. They were cosmopolitan, travelled masters, familiar with different cultures, who moved from city to city, teaching their students how to be good citizens, but, above all, to achieve victory in politics. Soon after, rhetoric would become a central feature in the political-citizen practice of the polis. [4]

The Sophist movement contributed to highlighting language and discourse as fundamental elements in the way we experience the world. In this sense, it prepared what would be the Linguistic Turn in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the rise of Philosophy of Language. The rhetorical use of language, characteristic of the sophists, was also important in the development of interpretation and literary expression. [5]

Plato rose as the main detractor of the Sophist movement. He notoriously condemned Sophistry as dishonest and untrue, criticizing Sophists for being more interested in appearance than substance. Plato reprimanded the sophists for their dialectical traps, mind games that did not lead students to the truth. Additionally, he censured the fact that Sophists charged for their classes, which, in the Platonic

conception, belittled their philosophy. For all these reasons, the Sophists, according to this Socratic-Platonic tradition, did not base their rhetoric on authentic knowledge. [6]

Aristotle, first disciple of Plato, was responsible for one of the greatest landmarks on the evolution of rhetoric: he provided the first systematisation of the discipline. For him, rhetoric can be described as the other face of dialectics [7], since both are concerned with questions related to knowledge and cannot be accommodated within any specific science. This is because all people try, in some way, to question ideas, debate, argue, defend themselves, accuse. Therefore, everyone, to a greater or lesser degree, uses rhetoric.

The Aristotelian idea of rhetoric contends that persuasion involves the speaker's relationship with the audience, in particular, an awareness of the expectations and of the auditorium needs. Rhetoric has its object, not in persuasion, but in the means of persuasion. This represents a much deeper definition that confers a distinct and singular character to the discipline: rhetoric as a science of the means of persuasion suitable for each case. [8]

One of the merits of Aristotle's conception of rhetoric is that it offers a middle way between the absolute power claimed by the Sophists and Plato's moral configuration of rhetoric and its consequent condemnation. Aristotle neither overvalues nor undervalues rhetoric, offering instead a realistic and more modest role to the discipline. Rhetoric becomes central in the discussion of everyday matters about which it is not possible to construct a logical and demonstrative reasoning. As if this was not already impressive enough, Aristotle is also responsible for presenting perhaps the most famous triad in rhetoric, the three modes of persuasion. Aristotle proposed that a speaker's ability to persuade an audience was founded on how well the speaker appeals to that audience. This appeal would be made in three different areas: logos, ethos, and pathos.

Logos is the appeal to reason. Logos can also be described as the text of the argument, or how well a or a speaker argued his/her point. Ethos, or ethical appeal, means convincing by the character of the author. Ethos [9] is also depicted as the role of the author, as projecting a credible image is paramount to make your point come across the audience. It is also about how credible his/her argument is. Pathos [10] appeals to emotions and sympathetic imagination, as well as to beliefs and values. Pathos corresponds to the way of convincing an audience of an argument by creating an emotional response.

## **Old Rhetoric, Classical Rhetoric and the New Rhetoric**

Rhetoric's ability to regenerate and remain relevant becomes apparent in Tsvetan Todorov's distinction between two strands of rhetoric. For Todorov [11], there was an old Rhetoric, associated to the Greek tradition, and Classical Rhetoric, connected to the Latin tradition.

Todorov states that while in the old rhetoric the effect and validity of rhetoric and argumentation are dependant on the presence and response of the audience, in Classical Rhetoric it is the speaker who becomes central. It is not so much a matter of dialoguing with the audience but of demonstrating, through the unique gifts and abilities of the speaker, the excellence of his/her argumentation. [12]

The changes that took place in the transition from the old rhetoric to Classical Rhetoric reflect the displacement of the focus from the logos to the ethos. While Ancient Rhetoric emphasizes rhetorical proofs and rigor of argumentation, Classical Rhetoric leans toward the credibility of the speaker and his/her ability to express himself/herself correctly and elegantly.

Todorov also connects the flourishing of eloquence with the form of state [13], arguing that rhetoric is necessary in democracy but not so much in a monarchy, this being one of the reasons for the change of paradigm in the discipline.

From the Middle Ages onwards, rhetoric starts its decline precisely due to the social and political conditions that, in general, saw an emergence of empires and monarchies which did not stimulate the public debate and the free expression of ideas that represented the cornerstone of Athenian democracy.

One of the consequences of this decline was that the rhetorical method of public discourse started to converge on literary discourse and to focus on the figures of speech that made the text more colourful and attractive.

To this regard, Paul Ricoeur [14] suggested that tropology was one of the people responsible for the downfall of rhetoric. In fact, contrary to certain structuralist conceptions, the decline of rhetoric was not only due to the progressive reduction of its field of action; it was also due the cutting off of two of its main features, those being argumentation and composition. [15]

By the beginning of the 20th century, rhetoric was a technique in sharp decline. During World War I, advertising became pervasive and was seen as a weapon to persuade and deceive audiences through the use of beautiful rhetorical devices. [16] This led to the perception that rhetoric was associated with psychological mechanisms of influence and change of attitude impossible to avoid, putting the discipline under a bad light in the eyes of society.

However, the 20th century also brings a political shift towards Republic as a form of state and a Democracy based on the universal suffrage, changes that

would prove to be fundamental in the rebirth of rhetoric and in its increasing importance in society. A resurgence of rhetoric is on the way, uplifted by the free exercise of political reason and self-determination, fundamental features of modern democracy. [17]

The late 50s would present two major conceptions of rhetoric, both bringing back to the spotlight the idea of argumentative persuasion. [18] Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca published their study on informal reasoning under the title “*Traité de l’argumentation: la nouvelle rhétorique*”. This New Rhetoric does not reject the teachings of the classical tradition: on the contrary, it not only integrates this knowledge but it also expands, revalues and revitalizes it. [19]

According to Perelman, New Rhetoric is the study of discursive techniques that aim to provoke or intensify the adhesion of a certain audience to the presented theses. In other words, it is the means through which the speaker, using his or her previous knowledge about the audience, argues in order to convince or persuade it. [20]

The second major work that boosted the role of rhetoric in society was the book „*The Uses of Rhetoric*“ written by Stephen Toulmin. [21] Toulmin’s objective was to create a model of argument contrasting with formal logic, the so-called practical arguments (also known as substantial arguments). This contradicts the absolutists’ theoretical arguments, as Toulmin’s practical argument is intended to center itself on the justificatory function of argumentation.

Although Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca as well as Toulmin presented a philosophical reflection, their works respond to different objectives: on the one hand, in Perelman, the concern with argumentation is of a legal nature and based on the Law, on the other hand, in Toulmin the concern is with argumentation in practical contexts and everyday life.

Nevertheless, they share a set of common features, such as the critique to Reason and Formal Logic and the attempt to base the argument on its own principles, whether it be the adhesion of spirits, or the argumentative justification. [22]

In short, the New Rhetoric is part of a broader theoretical movement that intends to increase the value of the discipline as an argumentative activity. Perelman’s and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s proposal, as well as that of Toulmin, are closer to everyday situations and have a more practical application. [23]

### **When rhetoric meets pragmatics, a love story**

The new practical applications of rhetoric soon gave origin to fruitful collaborations with other academic disciplines, such as Linguistics, Pragmatics and other sciences of communication.

In fact, all the above mentioned disciplines provide the knowledge to produce a beautiful message that can resonate with the receptor, which is one of the goals of rhetoric, so any kind of collaboration would only make sense.

Marcelo Dascal and Alan Gross went even further and announced a marriage between Rhetoric and Pragmatics, putting forward a Gricean theory of rhetoric. [24] Based on Grice's Theory of Conversation Maxims, the authors define Pragmatics as the discipline that studies the linguistic exchanges that speakers perform to express their communicative intentions and make the listeners recognize these intentions through inferences.

The bond between pragmatics and rhetoric proposed by Marcelo Dascal and Alan Gross would be as follows: in rhetorical argumentation, the speaker would try to persuade his listeners to accept either a set of premises or a group of values and a hierarchy between them. The speaker could also speak to provoke a certain ambience, disposition, or a mood in the audience. [25]

The effort would be considered successful only when and if the listeners could understand the communicative intention of the speaker, this recognition being the result of an inferential process. Marcelo Dascal and Alan Gross defended that pragmatics and rhetoric would both study the process of recognition of communicative intentions that are behind what the speakers say. However, rhetoric would deal with more specific communicative intentions, namely the persuasive ones. [26]

Other proposals that relied in the quintessential interdisciplinarity of rhetoric and its capability of creating added value by interacting with other subjects have been presented, as it is example the so-called 'pragma-dialectics'.

This theory was developed by Frans Van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst in the University of Amsterdam and was published in 1984, under the title 'Speech Acts in Argumentative Discussions'. [27] According to this theory, an argument consists of a dynamic exchange or sequence of speech acts developed by the participants in a dialogue. The novelty of this proposal is that it intends to surpass the logical approaches (the argument as the product of reasoning) and the communicational approaches (the process of argumentative exchange), approaching argumentation as a complex speech act. The name is, therefore, self-explanatory: pragmatics because it drinks from Grice's Pragmatics, subscribing to the theory of speech acts (speech act) applied with a given purpose in a given communicative situation; and dialectics, since performing a speech act involves two people engaged in a communicative situation.

As it can be seen by the brief history of rhetoric presented in the previous lines, rhetoric has always been concerned with public and political activity, for

these practices originate and are formed through discourse and communicative interaction.

To this regard, the 20<sup>th</sup> century has explored the synergy between rhetoric and pragmatics, making apparent the points of convergence and commonalities between these subjects and providing tools to a more comprehensive political discourse analysis.

The linkage between rhetoric and pragmatics has continued to be explored by many authors, especially in relation to political discourse. The authors Huckin, Andrus and Clary-Lemon [28] discuss in their article ‘Critical Discourse Analysis and rhetoric and composition’ how rhetoric and composition has integrated Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) methodology in a wide range of studies about inequality, ethics, higher education, critical pedagogy, news media, and institutional practices.

Furthermore, Cornelia Ilie proposes a methodological approach to political discourse analysis by using the interface between rhetoric and pragmatics [29]. Ilie offers a methodology that takes advantage of the complementarity of these two disciplines. If on the one hand Pragmatics lays its focus on contextualised language and on the identification of recurrent patterns, on the other hand rhetoric centres its attention on the practice of language use through the interactional transactions between the addresser and the addressee [30]. Additionally, rhetoric is also concerned with the particular commonplaces distinctive of different socio-cultural groups and professional environments, along with spontaneous or planned communicative divergences and creative irregularities [31]. Ilie contends that as rhetoric and pragmatics are both concerned with the interrelation between human action, situational context, and underlying values, using the interface between the two disciplines has the potential of integrating microlinguistically oriented pragmatic approaches with macrolinguistically oriented rhetorical approaches, in order to provide a wider perspective of the complex features of context-specific language use. [32]

Another author that saw potential in the joint-venture of rhetoric and pragmatics, is Jonathan Charteris-Black. In its work ‘Corpus Approaches to Critical Metaphor Analysis’, Black argues that the fact that metaphor is in its essence persuasive, it is commonly used in rhetorical and argumentative language such as political speeches. [33]

The author goes on to say that by taking a pragmatic perspective on metaphor, necessarily transports metaphors back to its original birthplace in the realm of rhetoric. Black affirms that metaphors have a rhetorical function, which was to persuade the audience of a particular point of view [34], highlighting the im-

portance of the speaker's communicative intention. He argues that the communication context of metaphors is paramount, which advises for an analysis of pragmatic factors which considers both the cognitive features of metaphors and their persuasive role in discourse. A definition of metaphor should always include its cognitive, pragmatic and rhetorical features. [35]

### Conclusion

As it can be understood by the amount of quality research carried out since the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, rhetoric is now undergoing a period of resurgence, which did not take place by fortune. It was due to rhetoric's resilience, flexibility and malleability, features that made possible the reinvention of rhetoric as a discipline.

Rhetoric has expanded its scope, providing numerous contributions in different fields of study, in particular in political discourse analysis. To render an analysis of a given piece of political discourse, regardless of the medium used, without making use of such a versatile tool as rhetoric would always be lacking some fundamental features. Luckily, rhetoric is alive and well, healthier than it ever was and ready for other explorations. I also believe that tendency for separating sub-schools of linguistics and drawing rigid boundaries of academic territories is gradually disappearing, opening new and exciting perspectives to rhetoric.

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