THE FUNCTIONS OF RHETORIC

Silviu Nicolae Pîrîială
PhD Student, "Ştefan cel Mare" University of Suceava

Abstract: The history of rhetoric is closely connected to the evolution and development of humanity as its multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinary character has influenced human sciences from philosophy to hermeneutics, from scientific communication to the theory of stylistic devices. The diversity of definitions given to the art of persuasion reflects not only its complexity, specificity, but also its adaptability to specific requirements of different communities throughout the centuries. The aim of this paper is to examine the functions of rhetoric, their complexity and importance for society.

Keywords: rhetoric, functions, discourse, importance, development

Since its appearance, rhetoric has been in a continuous dialogue with other constituents of the social and spiritual life. It has manifested itself as a cultural phenomenon involved in the practice of organizing and leading communities, in the development of logical thinking or ethical behavior. The diversity of definitions given to rhetoric across history and throughout different cultures reflects not only its evolution, but also its complexity and specificity. The art of rhetoric in the Western world is based on Greek and Roman ideas. Plato regarded rhetoric as the art of enchanting the soul;[1] Aristotle defined rhetoric as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion;[2] Quintilian regarded rhetoric as the power of judging and discoursing on civil matters that are put before it with certain persuasiveness, action of the body, and delivery […] the art of speaking well;[3] Cicero considered that the subjects of other arts are derived as a rule from hidden and remote sources, while the whole art of oratory lies open to the view and is concerned in some measure with the common practice, custom, and speech of mankind, so that, whereas in all other arts that is most excellent which is farthest removed from the understanding and mental capacity of the untrained, in oratory the very cardinal sin is to depart from the language of everyday life, and the usage approved by the sense of the community....But the truth is that this oratory is a greater thing, and has its sources in more arts and branches of study, than people suppose.[4] Rhetoric might be defined as the study and practice of communication that persuades, informs, inspires target audiences in order to form, change or reinforce beliefs, ideas, values, habits or actions. Rhetoric is defined by its functions, not by a topic or social location.

The main function of rhetoric is persuasion; the use and choice of words is essential for changing, forming and developing an opinion or attitude towards a certain topic. Persuasion is closely connected to a series of logical, mental or linguistic factors. The fundamental requirements of the rhetorical discourse are to inform, to prove and to be acknowledged as the image of the truth. Any discourse is meant to influence in a cognitive, emotional or affective way, while the result of the rhetorical practices may be agreement or

[1] Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present, Bedford, Boston, 1990, p. 160
[2] Ibidem
[3] Ibidem
[4] Idem, p.202

BDD-V4874 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:50:51 UTC)

disagreement. Rhetoric becomes an art of using language in order to argue and convince others to adopt a position or to act in a certain way. But the simple usage of language is not enough in order to persuade. In an authentic rhetorical discourse, the message itself motivates and creates authority. To be effective, a rhetorical discourse must engage both the minds and the emotions of its audience. Words are used and organized in order to develop sound reasoning, to arouse emotions and to appeal to shared values. Any individual who seeks for different accomplishments at the level of human relationships, who wants to explore and to impose ideas, feelings, attitudes must resort to the infinite capacities of the language, and especially to its cognitive and affective sides, which are indispensable to any discourse. Either written or spoken, if these conditions are met, the discourse can reach its goals: influencing a person or a group, imposing or changing mentalities, options, emotions, ideologies or behavior. The word becomes the greatest tool of all as they are living beings.

Rhetoric investigates the ways in which certain ideas can be imposed to a certain audience; the rhetorical reasoning is based on consensus, a means through which somebody is led to assume the probable truth of the speaker. Persuasion thus means a guided acceptance of an opinion or of an idea. In order to reach this goal, a rhetorical discourse must be liked by the audience, must inform, educate, determine attitudes and changes. Therefore, different categories of rhetorical discourses: communicative- forms new ideas, reinforces old ones, eliminates others; seductive- arises, forms or removes impressions; incentive- leads to different states of mind and feelings. In practice, they all intermingle at some level in a discourse.

The heuristic function of rhetoric identifies and engages it in a logical argumentation in search for the truth. It implies discovery of facts, ideas, insights or even self-awareness. It is essential for the ability to discover the means of expressing thoughts and sentiments effectively to others.[5] The strategy or the set of strategies for exploring topics, constructing arguments and discovering solutions to problems are no guarantee that using them will result in a single definitive explanation. The reconsideration of Aristotle's notion of heuristic reveals both another dimension of classical invention and an important feature of Aristotle's Rhetoric. Heuristic is not only an instrument for inventing techniques to articulate to others, but is also a techne enabling the rhetor and audience to cocreate meaning.[6]

The hermeneutical function compels the author of the discourse to clearly explain the main characteristics and constituents of his speech and, in the same time, to bring proofs in order to demonstrate that the opponents' theories are false or wrong. When someone wants to be convinced, the speaker needs to know how to properly interpret the speech of the interlocutor. The speaker's or the listener's discourse is necessarily interpreted in such a way in which it guides the debate. Thus, the speaker's rhetoric becomes a continuous interpretation of the opponent's rhetoric.

The pedagogical function of rhetoric imposes a close analysis of the discourse in order to rigorously study the problem or the idea presented. It regards rhetoric as the discipline whose study allows the deciphering and the creation of literary texts or discourses. It involves a two-stage activity: first, the dismantling of the discourse, then, its re-assembly from a rhetorical and argumentative perspective. The rhetorical elements of ethos, pathos, logos are eminently important in the pedagogical relationship; the speaker must know the cognitive level of the listener in order to develop the means of persuasion to help him understand or

[5] James A. Herrick, The History and Theory of Rhetoric: An Introduction, 2nd Edition, Allyn & Bacon, 2000, p.107
[6] Richard Leo Enos, Janice M. Lauer, The Meaning of Heuristic in Aristotle's Rhetoric and Its Implications for Contemporary Rhetorical Theory in Landmark Essays on Aristotelian Rhetoric, ed. by Richard Leo Enos and Lois Peters Agnew. Lawrence Erlbaum, 1998, p. 204

BDD-V4874 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:50:51 UTC)

impose an idea. In this context, the choice of his image is very important. These pedagogical practices are closely related to the representation of values of a society.

The metalinguistic function is a consequence of the fact that rhetoric is a language about a language and it implies knowing the value and the importance of words. It is a discipline that searches for a better communication within a language as rhetoric is above all a reflection upon the spoken or written word.

James A. Herrick identifies six social functions of rhetoric: testing new ideas; assisting advocacy; distributing power; discovering facts; shaping knowledge; building communities.[7] Rhetoric allows ideas to be tested on their merits and throughout society as a whole with individuals having different ideas and perspectives. Therefore, the critical response of the idea presented will help shape, strengthen and refine it.[8] By assisting advocacy, rhetoric gives life to inner thoughts, ideas, opinions and it draws attention to them. Rhetoric is connected to power at three levels: personal, psychological and political. Rhetoric as personal power allows for one to be successful throughout the duration of their life and therefore advance their life in many different ways. Rhetoric as psychological power develops the ability to help shape and alter the opinions, thoughts, views, and mindsets of individuals on many different issues. Rhetoric as a source of political power implies that who gets to speak within a society, along with what they get to speak about plays a major role in the community.[9] Rhetoric also helps to discover facts, ideas, truths that are essential to decision making. By locating evidence, creating a message and through the clash of different points of view there appear facts that are of utter importance when making a decision. Moreover, rhetoric plays a vital role in shaping knowledge as it points out to what is true, right, false, wrong and probable in a society.[10] Furthermore, rhetoric preserves the sense of community and reveals what individuals truly value.[11]

The study of rhetoric leads to a better understanding of the roles that various types of discourse have. Through their interdisciplinary valences and by focusing on the mechanisms of social discourse, the functions of rhetoric reflect the complexity of its role in the process of communication, in the social relationships and human interaction.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIZZELL, Patricia, HERZBERG, Bruce, 1990, *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, Bedford, Boston

BURKE, Kenneth, 1969, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles

ENOS, Richard Leo, LAUER, Janice M., 1998, *The Meaning of Heuristic in Aristotle's Rhetoric and Its Implications for Contemporary Rhetorical Theory* in *Landmark Essays on Aristotelian Rhetoric*, ed. by Richard Leo Enos and Lois Peters Agnew. Lawrence Erlbaum,

HERRICK, James A., 2000, *The History and Theory of Rhetoric: An Introduction, 2nd Edition*, Allyn & Bacon

TOYE, Richard, 2013, *Rhetoric: A Very Short Introduction, 1st Edition*, Richard Toye, Oxford University Press

[7] James A. Herrick, p. 16
[8] Idem, p. 18
[9] Idem, p. 20
[10] Idem, p.21-22
[11] Idem, p. 23

BDD-V4874 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:50:51 UTC)