

THE STRUCTURE AND DYNAMICS OF A RHETORICALLY EFFECTIVE PRESENTATION

GABRIELA DUMBRAVĂ *

ABSTRACT: *Since public speaking is ultimately an act of persuasion, the paper attempts to determine the way in which the ancient principles of rhetoric are still valid in contemporary professional communication, underlying the structure and dynamics of an effective discourse, meant not only to convey information, but also to elicit a certain desired response on the part of the audience. Therefore, the study approaches presentation as a specific instance of public speaking, whose clarity, conciseness and credibility largely depends on observing the classic ethos-logos-pathos canon.*

KEY – WORDS: *presentation, rhetoric, public speaking, ethos, logos, pathos*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: *Z13*

1. PUBLIC SPEAKING AS A RHETORICAL ACT. A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The earliest manifestations of public speaking date back to Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt, the systematic approach to the phenomenon began in the 3rd century BC, in the cultural space of ancient Greece and Rome. In these cultures, the public discourse had strong civic accents, being mainly devoted to economic and political and philosophical issues. Whether it was about a speech delivered in the public square, or a fervent debate in the administrative and legislative forums, the public discourse was meant to inform, convince, and motivate the audience.

In ancient Greece, the major importance granted to public speaking skills prompted the need to establish a set of rules and canons meant to guide the orators in constructing and delivering a persuasive discourse. Hence, the emergence of rhetoric at the crossroads of art and science, and the preoccupation of prominent scholars of the time to determine its inherent mechanisms and principles.

* Associate Professor, Ph.D., University of Petroșani, Romania, gbrldumbrava@yahoo.com

Thus, in his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle includes rhetoric in the category of arts and defines it as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion”. (*Rhet.* I.2, 1355b26f) At the same time, he sets forth the three means of persuasion an orator should use in order to captivate, persuade and motivate their audience, namely:

1. **Ethos** is a term of Greek origin that basically refers to “the characteristic spirit of a culture, era or community, as manifested in its attitude and aspirations”. (*Rhetoric* II. 19-26) Aristotle uses it to argue that the credibility of a discourse depends mainly on the speaker’s ability to prove they have ‘good character’ and, therefore, they can be trusted. The author also outlines a set of strategies to be used in the construction of a discourse in order to build up trust and authority, such as:

A. Style-related strategies

- Careful choice of vocabulary and attention to grammatical correctness and adequate syntax (*Rhetoric* III.3: 1-12);
- An appropriate rhythm and tone of voice, adapted to the topic in question and meant to arouse emotions (*Rhetoric* III.1: 3-4);
- The balanced use of figurative language (especially similes and metaphors) in order to enhance the effect of the discourse by visualization (*Rhetoric* III. 2: 6-13);
- The use of definitions and explanations to make the discourse more accessible;
- The avoidance of ‘frigid’ language by excluding exaggeration (hyperbole), as well as of archaic words or excessively elaborate phrases (*Rhetoric* III.3:1-4);

B. Structure-related strategies

- The use of an introduction capable of stating the issue in question as clearly and concisely as possible, as well as of leading to the desired conclusion (*Rhetoric* III.14:1-11);
- The choice of adequate argumentation and questions meant to reduce to absurdity the challenges from opponents;
- The conclusion should be granted major importance, given both its immediate effects, “disposing the hearer favorably toward the speaker and unfavorably to the opponent, [...] moving the hearer into emotional reactions”, and its long-term benefits,” giving reminder of the speech's main points”. (*Rhetoric* III.19:1-4)

2. **Logos**, “the principle of reason and judgement” (*Rhetoric* II.2:31-33) is the mechanism that ensures the logical sequence of ideas and arguments in a discourse, so that the latter should make sense to the audience. Logical argumentation is one of the strongest points of public speaking, since a discourse that appeals to the audience’s reason automatically appears more professional and credible.

3. **Pathos**, defined as “an element in experience or in artistic representation evoking pity or compassion” (*Rhetoric* II.2: 31-33), has to do with the capacity of the discourse to appeal to the audience’s emotions and create empathy. The ability to handle elements of pathos in a discourse is of crucial importance in terms of impact, as emotional connection with the interlocutors facilitates the understanding and acceptance of the speaker’s position.

Aristotle's scholarly approach to public speaking has had a paramount influence not only on the development of the art of rhetoric, but also on its study, the basic elements of his doctrine being valid to this day.

Thus, Roman philosopher and orator Cicero writes *De Inventione*, a treatise that starts from the principles set forth in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and focuses on the more technical aspects of public speaking, establishing the five canons of oratory. These canons cover every stage of creating a public discourse, from gathering and structuring the material to aspects related to the choice of style and delivery. Thus, in order to be credible and elicit the desired response from the audience, an orator has to comply with the following five canons:

- Invention is the preparatory stage in which the speaker decides on the topic to be presented and, gathers relevant information and builds up solid argumentation by anticipating negative reactions from the audience.
- Arrangement refers to structuring the material in sections and establishing an adequate sequence of ideas in order to obtain a coherent and persuasive speech.
- Style covers the choice of words, figures of speech, sentence structure and tone of voice in accordance with the presented material, the audience and the desired outcome of the discourse.
- Memory has an important role in enhancing the efficiency of the discourse, since detachment from reading gives the orator more credibility and more freedom to use body language and maintain eye contact with the audience.
- Delivery, or the actual presentation of the material, is a process that depends on a series of variables (occasion, venue, audience, and, last but not least, the material as such). Consequently, the impact of a public discourse largely relies on the capacity of the speaker to adapt to the context in which the speech is delivered and to capitalize on suitable clothing, verbal and body language and movement. (Bk I: VII-XXIX)

Another notorious Roman scholar who dedicated extensive research to rhetoric is Quintilian. In his twelve-volume treatise entitled *Institutio Oratoria* (95 AD), the author continues the work of his predecessors adding new perspectives on rhetoric as an art that should be taught in an institutionalized context in order to train professional orators (1.1.15-19). Under the circumstances, he insists on the crucial role of the early formative years in the development of an orator, since childhood is the time when both the parents and the teachers are involved in laying the foundations of correct speech and writing.

Moreover, the idea that an orator is essentially a person of high morality, education should also be directed towards shaping their character from early childhood. Later on, such subjects as philosophy and civic law (12.2) will contribute to the orator's capacity to deal with a variety of issues from a larger perspective, as well as to bring solid arguments to support the discourse thesis.

Finally, Quintilian emphasizes two aspects that he considers indispensable for the career of a successful public speaker, namely the capacity to learn from the experience of her predecessors (12.4) and the moral strength to use her rhetorical skills to the benefit of the cause in question rather than to serve personal ambitions of glory (12.9. 1).

The importance of rhetorical education was reinforced in the Middle Ages when the rising monarchies in Europe used the art of persuasion mainly for religious and courtly purposes. Rhetoric was taught in universities alongside with logic and grammar, with special emphasis on the written discourse, as the power of public speaking had dwindled after the fall of the Roman Empire, the medieval culture fostering the settlement of political and diplomatic issues through letter exchanges.

During the 16th and the 17th centuries, Renaissance culture promoted science as the fundamental means of knowing and dealing with reality, which led to a decline of rhetoric as the art of persuasion by using elaborate discourses and ornamented language. The works of such scholars as Francis Bacon and John Locke separated the concept of ‘scientific rhetoric’, specific to the field of sciences, from that of classical rhetoric, which was confined to philosophy and automatically lost ground as a subject in academic curricula.

In the 18th and 19th centuries rhetoric regained its status as a powerful social and political tool supporting the ascension of democracy in Europe and the US. This is also the period in which rhetoric lost its elitist touch and gained ground as a subject in the curricula of mass education as a ‘source of social success’. (Blair 1966, p. 21)

The 20th century brought about the assertion of rhetoric as a complex field, no longer confined to political and civic manifestations. Departments of speech and rhetoric started to be established in academic institutions, alongside with the professionalization of public speaking and the emergence of schools of linguistics that approached it from a variety of angles. In this context, leading scholars such as Kenneth Burke and Marshall McLuhan revisited the classical canons from the perspective of contemporary reality and dedicated extensive studies to the deeper mechanisms of persuasion.

In his *Language as Symbolic Action*, American literary theorist Kenneth Burke defines rhetoric as “the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” (which, by extension, leads to the idea that any act of communication is a matter of negotiation based on encoding/decoding culturally determined cues). In other words, whenever we address an interlocutor, the efficiency with which we manage to make ourselves understood and accepted depends not only on the clarity and logic of the message, but also on *how* we convey it in order to obtain the desired feedback.

In the same context, Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan dedicated his book entitled *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* to emphasizing the importance of the way in which ideas are transmitted in a discourse. Apart from laying the foundations of media theory, the book proposes new perspectives on the relationship between form and content and their influence on the reception and the impact of the message.

Actually, his highly controversial statement that “the medium is the message”, provided it is not taken radically, casts light on the process of communication as an interplay between the cultural context in which the communication takes place (ethos) and the actual text in generic sense (logos) that elicits specific responses (pathos).

In the contemporary world, social skills in general, and public speaking in particular have gained such importance that they have become virtually synonymous within personal and professional success. In the contemporary world, every instance of professional and business interaction, from defending a graduation paper to a job interview, and from teaching a class to promoting a product involves an act of public speaking, which once again revived the interest in cultivating oratorical skills in a systematic manner. Thus, over the past decades, rhetoric has been reintroduced in the curricula of universities and business schools in an attempt to provide the graduates with the theoretical and practical tools of persuasive discourse.

2. INSTANCES OF PERSUASIVE DISCOURSE. THE PRESENTATION

The world of business is fundamentally a space of persuasion. Therefore, the efficiency of the professionals in this field resides in their capacity to make relevant points in a meeting or to initiate and maintain a trust-based relationship with customers/clients/partners. In this context, every business professional should be aware of the complex ethos-logos-pathos mechanism as a result of which the content of a discourse is chosen, arranged and presented in such a way as to be understood and accepted by the audience.

2.1 The *Ethos* Element

Ethos is of utmost importance in any presentation as it determines the way in which the speaker is perceived by the audience and, implicitly, ensures the credibility of the message. Specialists in public speaking establish the following characteristics of ethos:

- Trustworthiness and respect - the predisposition of the audience to accept a certain message and perceive it as relevant depends on the way in which the speaker is perceived as a personality in the respective field;
- Similarity to the audience - the effect of the message is determined by the speaker’s capacity to resonate with the audience culturally and to adapt her appearance and language to a specific context (adequate clothing, careful choice of vocabulary and body language);
- Authority - the level credibility of the discourse is established beforehand in the mind of the audience in accordance with the speaker’s background and position;
- Expertise and reputation/history - in direct relation with authority and trustworthiness, this characteristic accounts for the perception of the discourse in accordance with such elements as the speaker’s knowledge, experience and expertise in the field, as well as the acknowledgement from other people of her notable contributions to a specific area. (Beqiri 2018)

Although much of the credibility of the discourse is pre-established by virtue of the speaker's authority, a number of strategies can be resorted to in order to secure and enhanced it during, and even after the presentation. Thus, a balanced approach that acknowledges different points of view, a thorough presentation of relevant facts in combination with quotes and interesting stories are efficient means of engaging the audience as the presentation develops. The attitude towards the audience after the presentation is equally important and influence the reception of other presentations, since it will become part of the speaker's reputation.

2.2 The *Logos* Element

This element has to do with the processing of the speech material into a coherent, intelligible and well documented discourse. Essentially, it refers to the way in which the discourse should be structured in order to engage the audience and lead to a desired outcome. Public speaking specialists are of the opinion that, in order to be persuasive, an oral discourse should be:

- Comprehensive - the speaker adapts the language to the audience's level of understanding and uses figures, charts, explanations and analogies to make the delivery more dynamic;
- Logical - the speaker provides solid argumentation to support the thesis of the discourse, and approaches it from a number of different perspectives to prove its validity;
- Specific - the speaker enhances the persuasive effect of the discourse either by providing facts from such reliable sources as statistics and case studies, or by citing undisputed authorities on the topic in question. Other two efficient means of logos reinforcement are resorting to visual evidence (the actual object/device the presentation refers to, or visual evidence under the form of photos or videos related to the topic in question. (Beqiri 2018)

2.3 The *pathos* element

According to the etymology of the word, pathos is that element in the process of persuasion that relies on appealing to the audience's emotions in order to establish a deeper connection with them through empathy. As specialists in the art of rhetoric point out, empathy generates in the audience a state of mind that facilitates the acceptance of the speaker's arguments. The basic ways to build up an emotionally effective relationship with the interlocutor(s) are the following:

- The use of emotionally charged language (analogies, metaphors or words in the semantic area of sensory perception, meant to trigger recollections of personal experiences in the audience;
- Sharing a personal experience with the interlocutor(s), which is likely to resonate with similar instances in their memory;

- Using humorous warmers or punch lines meant to induce a relaxed, positive state of mind, which will ensure involvement and acceptance on the part of the audience. (Beqiri 2018)

3. CONCLUSION

The rhetorical effectiveness of the presentation depends on the speaker's capacity to manage verbal and non-verbal elements in order to build up not only a coherent discourse, but also a genuine speaker-audience connection, which has a decisive role in the reception of the message.

Thus, the construction of an efficient presentation involves not only solid documentation and research for support evidence, but also thorough knowledge of the cultural context in which it is to take place, in order to be able to outline the discourse in such a way as to elicit a positive response from the audience. In this sense, the speaker's capacity to draw on shared values, experiences and beliefs is one of the most efficient means of enhancing credibility, connection and empathy, especially if it is done by means of story telling.

Apart from being emotionally effective, story telling is versatile enough to be included anywhere in the structure of the presentation. Thus, a meaningful, captivating story can be used to open the presentation, to support one or more arguments, or even as a powerful closing paragraph. However, in order to obtain a positive outcome, the speaker should be very cautious with the selection of the stories to be introduced in the presentation in order to preserve a safe level of controversy and avoid cultural faux pas.

On the other hand, since the way in which the message is conveyed is of critical importance in terms of the effect on the audience, paralanguage should never be overlooked when preparing a presentation.

In terms of paralanguage, the following elements enhance the effect of the verbal discourse and ensure the desired outcome of the presentation:

- Matching the body language (pose, gestures, facial expressions), with the verbal content of the discourse in order to trigger the desired emotions. For instance, standing straight, legs slightly apart and in line with the shoulders is considered to inspire confidence;
- Free, natural hand gestures, accompanied by matching facial expressions and sustained eye contact are most likely to build an emotional connection especially when sharing an experience through story telling;
- Modulating the pace of speech and the tone of voice according to the emotional content of the message.

Finally, experts in public speaking agree that the central characteristic of an efficient presentation is naturalness, ensured by:

- Intensive practicing of the speech, based on successive recordings meant to enable the removal of repetitions, excessive use of certain words or expressions, or any nervous habits;

- Avoidance of speech memorization and reading a script, which have a negative impact on the authenticity and credibility of the discourse.
- Keeping a high level of discourse conciseness in order to keep the audience engaged.

To summarize the above, the rhetorically effective presentation emerges at the intersection of ethos, logos and pathos, as it equally depends on the way in which the speaker is perceived by the audience, on the coherence of the discourse and on the emotional response it elicits on the part of the receivers.

REFERENCES:

- [1]. **Aritotle** (2004) *Rhetoric* (Roberts, W. R., transl.), Dover Publicatins
- [2]. **Blair, H.** (2010) *A Brief History of Rhetoric and Composition*, Bedford/St. Martin's
- [3]. **Beqiri, G.** (2018) *Ethos, Pathos, Logos: 3 Pillars of Public Speaking and Persuasion*, <https://virtualspeech.com/blog/ethos-pathos-logos-public-speaking-persuasion>
- [4]. **Cicero, M. T.** (1949) *On Invention* (Hubbel, H. M., transl.), Harvard University Press
- [5]. **McLuhan, M.** (1964) *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McGraw-Hill
- [6]. **Quintilian** (1980) *Institutio Oratoria* (Butler, H. E., transl.), Harvard University Press