

## Rhetoric Demystified

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### Abstract

Since its inception by the Greek scholars up until the contemporary times, the term *rhetoric* has undertaken a plethora of meanings. Those meanings have mainly been associated with what caused its flourishing in the Greek and Roman periods, decay in the middle and early modern ages, and revival in the twentieth century via various rhetorical theories. No doubt, the novice researchers in the field would get confused by the wide array of denotations this term carries. Therefore, the current article deals the definitional and historical debate vis-à-vis the extension of the term rhetoric. It, besides, provides an explanation of the two phrases: rhetorical analysis and rhetorical criticism.

**Keywords:** definition of rhetoric, rhetorical analysis, rhetorical criticism.

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### Résumé

Depuis sa création par les érudits grecs jusqu'à l'époque contemporaine, le terme *rhétorique* a donné lieu à une multitude de significations. Ces significations ont été principalement associées à ce qui a provoqué son épanouissement durant les périodes grecque et romaine, son déclin durant le moyen âge et au début de l'ère moderne et son renouvellement au XXe siècle à travers les diverses théories rhétoriques. Sans aucun doute, les chercheurs novices du domaine se trouvent déconcertés par le grand nombre de dénnotations que ce terme comporte. Pour ces raisons, le présent article porte sur le concept de la rhétorique; il présente un débat sur les plusieurs définitions du terme et l'historique de son extension. Il fournit en outre une explication de la similitude, en termes d'objectives et d'utilisations, des deux expressions: analyse rhétorique et critique rhétorique.

**Mots clés:** définition de la rhétorique, l'analyse rhétorique, la critique rhétorique.

### ملخص

منذ بدء استعمال العلماء الإغريق لمصطلح *البلاغة* وإلى غاية الفترة المعاصرة، حمل هذا المصطلح العديد من المعاني. وقد ارتبطت هذه المعاني بشكل أساسي بالأسباب التي كانت وراء ازدهار هذا العلم في الفترتين اليونانية والرومانية، وانحطاطه في العصور الوسطى وبدايات العصر الحديث، وإعادة بعثه في القرن العشرين من خلال نظريات البلاغة المختلفة. مما لا شك فيه أن الباحثين المبتدئين في هذا المجال سيشتعرون بالارتباك من المجموعة الواسعة من الرموز التي يحملها هذا المصطلح. ولهذا الأسباب، سيتناول هذا المقال مفهوم البلاغة حيث سيتم تسليط الضوء على النقاش التعريفي والتاريخي فيما يتعلق بكيفية توسع نطاق المصطلح. وسيقدم، بالإضافة إلى ذلك، شرحاً للتشابه الكائن بين عبارتي التحليل البلاغي والنقد الخطابي، لاسيما من حيث أغراضهما واستخداماتهما.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** تعريف البلاغة، التحليل البلاغي، النقد البلاغي.

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## Introduction

Because of its multiplexity, rhetoricians endorse the opinion that it is possible for one to believe in their ability to understand rhetoric in a short period, but it is a sea which one can swim in for a whole lifetime without reaching its borders. Suffice it to say that it has historically eschewed a rigorous definition. The reason is quite simple: it is a nebulous field. It has intersected with various fields: writing, communication, linguistics, culture, gender studies, race studies, philosophy of language, education, anthropology, sociology and even architecture and has given rise to a number of sub-fields such as technical communication, writing across the curriculum, online writing, contrastive rhetoric and their corresponding research methodologies. Therefore, it lacks clear limits. Existing across a number of disciplines and being rooted far back in history bestowed on this notion some complexity that need be dismantled, here.

At the outset, the English word *rhetoric* originally stems from the classical Greek phrase *rhêtorikê* which is usually translated as ‘the art of rhetoric’. One of the central most debated components of rhetoric has been its definition. This is because there has been a wide range of uses of and numerous definitions for the term rhetoric over the course of 2500 years of its existence, ranging from its connection with public speeches, persuasion, deception, stylistics, politics to being viewed as a form of communication the aim of which is to change reality, among others.

### 1. Multiple Connotations of the Term *Rhetoric*

To begin with, rhetoric has been utilized to mean public speech designed for persuasion. This meaning was first adopted by Aristotle and has been widespread ever since. Aristotle defines rhetoric as “the art of discovering all the available means of persuasion in any given case” (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990, p. 160). By the way, persuasive discourse does not go on only in courtrooms and parliaments but can, also, be found in various disciplines: media, advertising, business, and academia, to name but these. In this regard, rhetoric refers to persuasive skills, which are valuable because of their large use in social and work situations. LaCapra (1985 as cited in Moberg, 1990, p. 15) emphasizes that rhetoric is “not a ‘skill,’ like carpentry, but the motor for engaging in social life.” Raymond (1982, p. 781), on his part, remarks: “Rhetoric, applied to the humanities or any other field is even less certain than science, but also more useful.” Following Aristotle, several subsequent rhetoricians have associated rhetoric with persuasion and its tripartite elements: *logos* (logic), *pathos* (emotion) and *ethos* (credibility). The neo-Aristotelianism, also, emphasizes the rhetoric’s concern with effect i.e. persuasion, rather than with permanence or beauty i.e., literature.

As articulated above, rhetoric is often seen as the art of persuasion but sometimes it is understood as the abuse of language to exploit specious arguments, diffuse half-truths, insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment and deceive audience. Pieper (2000, p. 8) feared that rhetoric would be used to mislead people because of his “conviction that everything can be justified if we look hard enough for reasons.” In reality, those who were famous of such a practice were the sophists who stressed word play and style more than truth.

Besides associating it with persuasion and fraud, rhetoric has long been used in the context of public speech “especially legal and civic speech .... Spoken words attempt to convert listeners to a particular opinion, usually one that will influence direct and immediate action...” (Bogost, 2007, p. 15). So, some rhetoricians combine rhetoric with oratory. Mack (1993, p.339) contends that: “rhetoric is the art of speaking well, not about this or that, but about all subjects”. In general usage, rhetoric and oratory are virtually synonymous. However, a distinction can be made: rhetoric is taken to denote the theoretical art of speaking, and oratory is its practical application. At Athens, a rhetor was originally, a public speaker in the *ecclesia*<sup>(1)</sup>, what we would call a politician. Later, at Athens and Rome, a rhetor was a teacher of public speaking, a rhetorician; rhetoric was the art they taught.

According to this latter definition that equates rhetoric to oratory, rhetoric is an art. Hill (1877 as cited in Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990, p. 881) presents it as an art: "It is an art, not a science". Craig and Muller (2007) also support this claim and define rhetoric as an art of discourse. Day (as cited in Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990, p. 864), however, advocates two uses for the term: rhetoric as an art and as a science; he differentiates between them as follows:

Rhetoric has been correctly defined to be the Art of Discourse.... An art directly and immediately concerns itself with the faculty of discoursing as its proper subject.... A science, on the other hand, regards rather the product of this faculty; and, keeping its view directly upon that, proceeds to unfold its nature and proper characteristics.... the method of Art is synthetic, constructive; while that of Science is analytic and critical

A close reading of the above quotation makes it explicit that rhetoric is an art when regarded as a process and a practice and turns into a science when its product, the artifact, becomes an object of analysis and criticism.

The term rhetoric has, moreover, been used to mean, simply, the theory of rhetoric. Kennedy proposes the following general definition:

[Classical rhetoric] is that theory of discourse developed by the Greeks and Romans of the classical period, applied in both oratory and in literary genres, and taught in schools in antiquity, in the Greek and western Middle Ages, and throughout the Renaissance and early modern period (Kennedy, 1999, p. 3).

This view appears clear but Kennedy notes that problems do arise when we try to define the characteristics and contents of such a theory (Kennedy, 1999). Indeed, Kennedy attempts to "define classical rhetoric and its tradition by examining the various strands of thought which are woven together in different ways in different times" (Kennedy, 1999, p. 3). That is to say, a theory of rhetoric, for him, is best understood through focusing on an examination of the myriad of views and perceptions about rhetoric that have been disseminated throughout history.

Apart from seeing rhetoric as a means of persuasion, Aristotle (1991) along with Cicero and Quintilian, regarded it as "a kind of discourse, a particular sphere of discourse activity defined... on topics that are generally subject to diversities of opinion, and on occasion such as those provided by legislative assemblies, law courts, and public ceremonies" (Beale, 1987, p. 31). What has traditionally been called rhetoric; that is, the practice and study of good public speaking and writing in parliament, in court, or literature; is often referred to in contemporary times as discourse studies. Today sometimes the new rhetoric is defined as a subdiscipline in the humanities that overlaps with discourse studies. Rhetoric, in this case, is associated with the study of discourse in general. A more precise explanation of what makes rhetoric a subdiscipline of discourse studies relies on the fact that special rhetorical structures can be used in any discourse to convey or produce specific effects, persuasion for instance. Their role is to emphasize or deemphasize meaning to influence the recipients. A study of such a discourse could involve an analysis of these rhetorical structures and a study of the "pattern[s] of discourse structure which efficiently encodes the set of communicative techniques that a speaker can use for a particular discourse purpose" (McKeown, 1985, p. 20 as cited in Grasso, 2003, p. 18). Strictly speaking, such analyses cannot be limited to those structures only, they also deal with the cognitive modelling (Turner, 1991) and cultural effects (Connor, 1996) of language use on listeners or readers as well as on the whole communicative context. This discussion leads to concluding that rhetoric is analytic in nature; it helps grasp what the discrete components of a whole are and how this whole works. Yet, this is not the only function of rhetoric. It is, also, synthetic. It provides writers with insights on how to generate effective texts. This generative nature of rhetoric is rooted in Cicero's canons of rhetoric: (1) arrangement, which is about the organization of the elements within discourse, (2) invention, which is concerned with the discovery of ideas, and (3) style, which deals with how to frame sentences.

We turn, now, to the first true shift from the original meaning of *rhetoric* occurred when this latter was aestheticized, in the early modern era; it was transformed into "a literary enterprise rather than a political one" (Garsten, 2006, pp. 11-12). Put otherwise,

*rhetoric* was dissociated from persuasion, oratory, and politics because of rising fears from the excessive use of passion at the expense of reason. This current paved the way for merging *rhetoric* with other arts as drama, poetry, literature and even history to come out with one field of study that accentuated embellished style and critical analysis. Rhetorical figures and tropes (like metaphors, metonymy, analogy, alliteration, etc.) were applied intensely to ornament their superb and impressive verbal productions. It was only then that the term rhetoric began to englobe the written forms of discourse after having been confined to the oral one (Blair, 1965) for long.

With the coming of the 'new rhetoric' in the 1960's, the connotations of the term rhetoric have started to widen as philosophers and theorists declared that rhetoric did not just refer to oratory or speeches; many other forms of communication have become part of the rhetorical realm. It was argued that all acts whose intencor functionis persuasion are regarded as rhetorical acts. Usually, speeches have a clear persuasive intent; so, they were easily conceived as rhetoric. Other actions or phenomena may have a persuasive intent, but that intent is carried out through means other than oratory, such as a stop light that influences motorists to stop or go. Still other phenomena were not created to be persuasive but end up persuading: they have a rhetorical function. They function as if their objective is to persuade in spite of the fact that this was not the initial intent of their creators just like a reader who becomes motivated by the main characters in a novel and acts as they did. According to the contemporary understanding, both the stop light and the novel are rhetorical objects.

Foss (1989, p. 4) claims that rhetoric is "the use of symbols to influence thought and action; it is simply an old term for what is now commonly called communication." The word symbols here does not refer only to a system of linguistic signs, but would also incorporate virtually any humanly created symbols from which audiences derive meaning including architecture, painting, performances, films, advertisements, conversations, debates, speeches, books, and the like (Foss, 2004). Booth (1978) also expands rhetoric to include novels, plays, editorials, songs and even nonverbal gestures. Nowadays web sites are reckoned as rhetorical artifacts. Of the more recent critics who support such claims is Cathcart (1991, p. 2) who says "rhetoric is used ... to refer to a communicator's intentional use of language and other symbols to influence or persuade selected receivers to act, believe, or feel the way the communicator desires in problematic situations". So, any symbol deployed to influence people has become a legitimate subject for rhetorical criticism.

Bryant (1973), arguing against some of the overly broad extensions of the scope of rhetoric that have been advanced in his day, maintains that rhetoric should not be identified with *anything* that persuades – such as guns, gold, pictures, colors, traffic lights, elephants, donkeys, illuminated bottles of whiskey, animated packs of cigarettes, or wraps of chocolates –but rather limited to this traditional province of (spoken) discourse. Despite Bryant's resistance, the field today addresses all contexts in which symbol use occurs and includes almost any form of verbal or nonverbal communication but it still maintains its interest in persuasion.

Another turning point in the development of rhetoric has been its liberation from the classical definition that confines it to the art of persuasion and oratory. The contemporary rhetoricians have extended it to include changing reality. In this sense, Bitzer (1968, p. 4) contends that rhetoric is "a mode of altering reality by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action." More recent perspectives have gone beyond this and assumed that rhetoric constructs, through interaction, a shared understanding of the world, by which individuals can come to truth (Foss, 2004). According to this conceptualization, exchanges in the form of dialogues can be the object of rhetoric. Broadly defined in this way, rhetoric would seem to comprehend every kind of verbal expression that people engage in. In other terms, the concept of rhetoric has been expanded byclaiming that everyday conversation is a form of rhetoric – not only composition in prose or verses in poetry. All the same, rhetoricians customarily have excluded from their province such informal modes of speech as "small talk", jokes, greetings, exclamations, gossip, simple

explanations and directions albeit they express informative, directive and persuasive objectives (Corbett & Connors, 1999). So, rhetoric is, as it has always been, concerned mostly with those instances of formal, premeditated, sustained monologue in which a person seeks to exert an effect on an audience (Corbett & Connors).

As it gained renewed interest in the twentieth century, the study of rhetoric is being more and more introduced in the English Departments in American universities especially in subjects pertinent to writing. Dauterman said that “In some contexts rhetoric has been regarded as the practical study of written composition, in others, as the study of written composition” (1972, p. 4). In point of fact, rhetoric, in a broad sense, is becoming an important part of the curriculum of each of the following specializations: composition skills, English instruction, literary history, and teacher education. In reality, language learners need to know the rhetorical norms, strategies, devices and how they are used in order then to benefit from them in writing effectively, getting empowered for rigorous and constructive debates, and protecting ourselves from intellectual despotism. In other terms, rhetoric equips them with the ability to transform their thoughts and ideas in a powerful way.

Unexpectedly, some scholars like Weaver (1953) approached rhetoric from rather a religious, not to say philosophical, stance. He contends that rhetoric is “the intellectual love of the good” because “it seeks to perfect men by showing them better versions of themselves” (p. 25). Put differently, for Weaver, the more you try to talk of the good things in a good way, the more capable you become at reflecting a better image or impression of yourself.

In addition to these understandings of rhetoric, there is the one which views it a semantic stance - discarding the classical perspective which focuses, mainly, on the effect of discourse. Concerning this point, Fogarty (1959 as cited in Dauterman, 1972) maintains that rhetoric is “the science of recognizing the range of meanings and functions of words, and the art of using and interpreting them in accordance with this recognition” (p. 130). That is, rhetoric is regarded as the scientific endeavor to investigate the array of intentional and informational meanings from which discourse is framed, not just the study of their impact on the targeted audience.

To cut the long story short, definitions of rhetoric are abundant and varied; Scott (1973) rightly argues that “any fixing definition of rhetoric will be inadequate to the wide range of uses of the term.” Drawing on all what has been said so far, rhetoric can be conceived to encompass all aspects of human intercourse, because it includes all areas of communication. Yet, this is, I think, a too broad definition that renders it inadequate for one who is approaching rhetoric from a particular angle. Therefore, operational definitions are advisable for any research to be conducted depending on its purposes. Those who study rhetoric are invited to decide: (1) whether this term refers to oratory, persuasion, manipulation of language, adorned style, an oral or a written form of communication, or any linguistic or non-linguistic message, symbol or object with the intent to persuade and/or alter reality is a matter of rhetoric; and (2) whether it is referred to as an art, a science, a theory, discourse, or a discipline of study.

## 2. Rhetorical Criticism and Analysis

Often, the terms ‘critic’ and ‘analyst’ are used interchangeably. This is justified as follows. To begin with, Collins English Dictionary (2003) defines the word criticism as “the analysis or evaluation of a work of art, literature, etc.” In much the same way, Stevenson and Waite (2011) state that ‘criticism’ is “the analysis and judgment of the merits and faults of a literary or artistic work successfully”. If, on the basis of these two definitions someone opposes this idea of equating ‘rhetorical analysis’ to ‘rhetorical criticism’ claiming that *criticism* entails *analysis* and/or *evaluation*, it can be admitted. However, if the purpose of the an academic work is far from evaluating i.e., just investigating, then the term criticism does not entail the meaning of judgment – in the sense of giving praise or condemnation; rather, it is confined to that of breaking down a text into pieces and studying how those parts work to create a certain effect. In

addition, Foss (2004, p. 3) determines a critic's task as "ask[ing] a question about a rhetorical process or phenomenon and how it works." This is also the task of a rhetorical analyst. In the same vein, Morgan (1982, p. 15) endorses the idea that no clear cut difference exists between both terms; he states it this way:

theory, analysis and criticism...would be joined together under the encompassing heading of criticism and those working in the field would be critics whether their concern were primarily theoretical, analytical or evaluative...the three areas are inseparable, that one cannot pursue one without . . . pursuing the others.

Above all, in the literature, the two phrases 'rhetorical criticism' and 'rhetorical analysis' are, generally, employed to mean almost the same thing. Perhaps, this is due to the fact that since the 1960's and beyond the critical purpose has been expanded in several ways so critics no longer need to evaluate the quality of rhetoric. Now, one purpose of criticism or analysis is to illuminate the rhetoric, or provide insight about it (Zarefsky, 1980). When people encounter rhetoric, they usually do so quickly and superficially, giving it some thought but not much reflection. The illuminating critic or analyst is able to examine the rhetoric to discover what is not obvious to the casual observer and what properties are used to achieve a particular effect. As (Foss, 2004, p. 7) put it, through the process of rhetorical criticism, "we can understand and explain why we like (get influenced) why we don't like (don't get influenced by) something."

A hint should also be made to the fact that the objects of study of either rhetorical analysis or criticism are symbolic acts and artifacts. An act is executed in the presence of a rhetor's intended audience – the delivery of a speech. Because "an act tends to be fleeting and ephemeral, making its analysis difficult" (Foss, 2004, p. 7), rhetorical critics study almost just "the artifact of an act – the text, trace, or tangible evidence of the act" (Foss). When a rhetorical act is transcribed, printed and preserved, it becomes a rhetorical artifact that then is accessible to an audience wider than the one that witnessed the rhetorical act.

## Conclusion

To sum up, rhetoric is as old as Homer's epic poems. Since the ancient times till now, it has certainly underwent diverse changes, challenges and developments that turned it into a complex notion, pregnant of a myriad of meanings that are difficult to classify and expound. Briefly, rhetoric is a term that involves persuasion, flattery, oratory, embellished literature, written discourse and whatever influential means of communication or objects or symbols. All in all, the article provided snapshots of a palette of meanings which have, at times, generated debates among scholars about what rhetoric points to and the way(s) the term should be employed. Suffice it to say that any use of *rhetoric* and *rhetorical analysis* and *criticism* is contingent upon the goals of the academic enterprise and the theoretical preferences of the users.

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**Note:**

(1)-The *ecclesia* was the assembly and sovereign body at Athens, comprising all the adult male citizens over the age of eighteen, all equally entitled to address the assembly and to vote.