

Rhetoric in Argentina

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Rhetoric constructions. From metaphor to metaphoric

Summary

The article is framed within the Semiotics of Culture and theorizes rhetoric as a mechanism underlying all forms of communication. Metaphor is central to this approach; thus the authors reflect on what they call the metaphorical order, a cognitive and ideological device for structuring thought processes. Examples to illustrate this approach are taken from both contemporary Latin American public discourse and Argentine literature.

Key words

Rhetoric, metaphor, cognition, ideology, Semiotics of Culture, Argentina, Latin America

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Rhetoric constructions. From metaphor to metaphoric order

1. Proposals

In this paper we will explain what we call the “turn” of the rhetorical discourse to culture that has allowed us to think, several years ago, that the scope of the study of the metaphor must fall into an expanded field. We call it the Rhetoric of Culture. And it has allowed us to think that metaphors cannot be studied in isolation because in every domain of culture, they came up in texts of different types and meanings. That is why we no longer speak of metaphors but of “metaphorical order” (Barei et al., 2006).

We have developed the concept of “metaphorical order” because studying the metaphor we have observed three important issues:

- a. metaphors move freely in the cultural field,
- b. a single fact in the world can produce different metaphors depending on the ideological perspective from which this fact is addressed, and
- c. metaphorical order can be read in two different images: the chain and the constellation.

2. New questions

A few years ago, our research group undertook the adventure of locating Rhetoric in an interdisciplinary area which involved the risk of setting up the dialogue between different disciplines and building an alluring hypothesis: *if Rhetoric is a part of the cultural complex in which a man articulates his ideas, it can also provide interesting contributions to the study of our natural environment, to the relationship between art and culture and to new virtual languages.*

We know that Rhetoric has had its moments of glory and its bad times but once again it can offer a dialogue both effective and novel between man, nature and art. It poses new questions to overcome the alienation of representing nature as something passive and man as a cultural being that does not belong to the natural or the technological world.

Beyond classical rhetoric (Aristotle *Poetics*, edition 2001; Horace *Ars poetica*, edition 2001), whose contributions remain a discipline, we believe Rhetoric is an interdisciplinary field that allows either exploring the discursive operations of persuasion and manipulation, the mechanisms of artistic texts, products of the cultural industry and the new technologies, including the amazing universe of the natural world with which we have a close and undeniable connection: biologically we are a part of this world and mostly we keep referring to it as the white noise of all our daily practices. Therefore we can state that the field of Rhetoric has changed, so have the objects we are interested in and the perspectives from which we analyze them.

3. Rhetoric, Poetics and Semiotics of Culture

Within the field of a Semiotics of Culture and its conceptualization of rhetoric as a mechanism underlying all forms of communication, we have studied with our research group (GER)¹ tropic forms of culture “not as a mere embellishment at the level of the expression” (Lotman 2000, 44), but as cultural sustenance that works in a manner akin to our brain: the constructions of tropes contain at least two languages that need to be understood and that may produce different interpretations.

Regarding the tropes, metaphor undoubtedly requires special attention, not only as a central trope for poetic creation but as a mode of cultural cognition: in their forms of transposition, displacement and conversion, metaphors tell us about individuals and collective world experiences.

In the 2006 book (Barei et al. 2006, 33), we wrote that “the order of culture corresponds to the order of its metaphors” and we analyzed metaphorical expressions that have defined the Argentine culture at different moments in its history (“the Argentine melting pot”, “Argentina as a world power”, “Argentines are human and rights”, “Argentina, First World”, etc).² The question remains, then, what is the role of Rhetoric, and particularly the metaphor, to analyze cultural texts.

1. GER. Rethoric Studies group. Universidad Nacional de Cordoba (Argentina). Founded in 2000. Director: Silvia Barei. Researchers: Maria Jose Villa, Pablo Molina Ahumada, Ana Leunda, Maria I. Arrizabalaga, Ariel Gomez Ponce. Our publications: Barei et al. 2006; Barei & Leunda 2008; Barei & Molina 2008; Barei, Loyola & Villa 2011; Barei, Molina & Ávila 2012; Pérez & Ehrmantraut 2008; Pérez & Langer 2008; Vega Rodríguez & Arrizabalaga 2011; Villa, Sánchez & Levstein 2008.

2. In spanish: *Argentina, crisol de culturas*; *Argentina potencia: Los argentinos somos derechos y humanos*; *y Argentina, primer mundo*

According to Rancière (2007, 120), metaphors “reveal the negative” side of culture and break “the chain of customs and beliefs.” We could say that this is a good metaphor to explain metaphors, which accurately demonstrates that the formation of our language, and therefore, the cognitive and ideological constitution of culture, has a metaphorical matrix.

We have been interested in studying the cultural function of the metaphor based on the ideas of Iuri Lotman (1978; 1994; 1996; 2000) who speaks about a “metaphorical consciousness” (1998, 128) and connects the creative forms in which the brain and culture function. He notes:

The trope is not an ornament belonging exclusively to the area of expression (...). It is a figure which rises in the junction point of two languages, and from this point of view, it is isostructural to the mechanism of creation conscience and also... a mechanism that introduces in the semiotic structure of culture, an uncertainly quote that the latter requires. The rhetorism is one of the universals of human culture (Lotman 1998, 129)

Several issues should be considered in our metaphor studies:

- a. The devices of human consciousness and of culture are heterogeneous. They work with two coded systems: discrete and continuous systems that are two ways of constructing world models and processing information. The first is a “linear chain”, the second one tends to organize networks throughout the text. “A semantic content spread throughout space” (Lotman 1998, 135).
- b. The mechanism of tropes, particularly the metaphor, constitutes a form of consciousness that is not only individual, but which allows us to account for whole portions of culture. For example, these trope mechanisms may define moments in history such as the Classical Age, or Dadaism, or any social crisis, as in the case of the “Argentine melting pot” mentioned above.
- c. The metaphor belongs to the domain of analogical thinking and therefore it is “organically linked to the creative consciousness” (in the domain of science as well as in art).
- d. The structure of the metaphor is not derived from linguistic laws but it creates its own rules. It constitutes a “reinterpretation” of primary languages, a “collision of signs” and for that reason it brings forth a creative renewal.
- e. The cultural context determines the limits of understanding metaphors in the texts (be them predictable rules or new rules).

As we noted before we have developed the concept of “metaphorical order” which can be read in two different images: the chain and the constellation.

4. Chains

Let us take a very simple yet relevant example. In our daily life we can find some expressions that are certainly metaphors, i.e. translations of meanings that refer to different ways of naming social problems. For example, in a very contemporary Latin American context, some of the social problems are quickly and easily understood by most people. We refer to the series that builds metaphorical attributes linked to drug forms: narco-police, narco-scandal, narco-plane, narco-violence, narco-lawyer, narco-killers, narco-dollar, narco-politics, and so on. They are used in everyday life, but basically they appear in the language of the media and they are incorporated into everyday discourse.

The idea of drug dealing and marketing seems to prevail in a metaphorical spectrum and people quickly pick it up because it is linked to individual, occupational and criminal practices that nowadays constitute one of the larger social problems in Latin America.

For the time being let us say that these metaphors constitute a kind of *chain* whose morpho-syntactic difference from an equivalent code supports the establishment and strengthening of the same sense that focuses on an aspect of contemporary reality.³

We can say that actually, the prefix “narco” (which refers metaphorically to “drugs”) is multiplied exponentially, in a virtually infinite sequence of cultural texts that replicate its meaning. Each new text reinforces the initial sense of belonging to the drug issue multiplying the *chain* links.

5. Constellations

Next, we will take a more complex example where the conversion process lies in the transmutation of elements connecting speech with new cultural forms that express a particular change: a process that is never complete and that opens in *constellation*.

We can exemplify this process with the metaphor for money, which in Argentine everyday speech renders a variety of synonyms, many of which have a metaphorical

3. In Spanish, the prefix “narco” (for “narcotic”) refers to the semantic field of the illegal activities of production, distribution and marketing of drugs. Its metaphorical chain contributes to connect elements that can be incorporated into a larger set that can be summarized around generic “drugs.” Interestingly, we can check the recent appearance of these words in online databases of the Royal Spanish Academy. The first recorded appearance of “drugs” at the CREA database dates back to 1989 (85 cases, 2.30% of the total), and the increased presence in 1997 (1142 cases, 31.02%). As for the appearance of the word in countries, Colombia tops the list with 29.01% (1112 cases), followed by Spain (20.72%) and Mexico (16.02%). Argentina is located in the seventh place with 3.81%. Before 1975, the term does not appear in the database corpus of recorded documents. In the Google search engine for Argentina (www.google.com.ar), the search of the Spanish word “drug” throws the overwhelming figure of 17.2 million results, far from other stemmed variations such as “narco” (777000 results); drug violence (509000); narcopolitics (111000); narcopolice (61000); narco dollar (28800); narco-scandal (25400); or narcokillers (3390).

base: “guita” (in the usual slang), “mosca”, “plata”, “pasta”, “papota”, “verdes”, “fio”, “vento”, “tovén”, “tarasca”, “tela”, “teca”, “menega”, “viyuya”, “cobre”, “sope”, “mango”, and so on. It exceeds the intention of this paper to address the philosophical dimension of money (Simmel 1976), although it is valuable not to lose sight of the deeply metaphorical sense of money as a sign of the abstract system of the economy. In everyday conversation about money, we find a clear dichotomous domain: lightness and darkness, alluding to a legal or illegal movement respectively: thus, “dirty money”, “black money”, “narco dollar” or “money laundering” allude to the dual circulation using metaphorical expressions. But some rhetorical expressions are also common in culture, alluding the finite nature of money, such as the verb “spend”, “fly”, “skate”, “blend”, “squander” (or the more complex metaphor, “fleeting assets”). In particular, we are interested in analyzing the action of “burning” money to explain the second mode of the metaphorical order, the *constellation*.

Everyday speech refers metaphorically to “burning” when money is wasted or improperly used. As provided in the legislation of some countries, destroying money is a crime because money represents a public good that belongs ultimately to the State. But burning money in some contemporary contexts implies a form of protest, whether against the state institution.

Art also uses the metaphor of burning to enroll it into a dense system of meanings and polyphonic senses about money, as for example in the novel by the Argentinian writer Ricardo Piglia, *Plata quemada*⁴ (1997) which is a fictional story based on the true events of a millionaire robbery in Buenos Aires in 1965.

Through the frenetic tale of a theft and fleeing criminals, the novel explores the different characters and the complex web of police and political corruption. The decision of burning money (Chapter 7 in the novel) is narrated by a journalist Enzo Renzi in a metaphorical way: he says that burning is a “tragic ceremony that anyone who has been there will never forget that night” (Piglia 2000, 170). Additionally, it is mentioned by one of the offenders, Dorda, who says: “Burning money is ugly, it’s a sin. È peccato” (2000, 170) and the narrator describes the scene poetically equating money with ignited butterflies in flight: “From the kitchen ledge they saw burnt money flying over the corner. They appeared as lighted butterflies” (2000, 171). The novel also refers to the voice of Washington Andrade, an Uruguayan philosopher whose interpretation of incineration entails conflict with the state. Andrade interprets the burning as:

4. A similar process occurs in English where money has different metaphorical synonyms such as : “bread”, “dough”, “gravy”, “loot”, “pesos”, “riches”, “gold”, “greenback”, “bucks”, “cabbage”, “chips”, “jack”, “kale”, “lolly”, “long green”, “moola”, “lucre”, “scratch”, “shekels”, “wampum”

a kind of innocent potlatch held in a society that has forgotten the rite, an absolute and free act itself, a gesture of pure expenditure and pure waste that in other societies has been considered a sacrifice offered to the Gods because only the more valorous thing should be sacrificed and there is nothing more valuable than money between us, said Professor Andrada and he was immediately called by the judge (Piglia 2000, 174)

Finally, here is the voice of the crowd that attend the siege of thieves and in the act of burning, discover a pathological, despicable, murderous madness:

- A murmur of indignation made the crowd roar.
- They burned.
- They're burning money. If money is the only thing that justified the deaths and whether what they have done, they have done now for money and now they burn it, it means that they have no morals or motives: they act and kill free, for the sake of evil, by pure evil, they are murderers from birth, insensitive, inhuman criminals. Outraged citizens who observe the scene screamed in horror and hatred, as in a medieval covenant (according to the newspapers) (...)
- Burning innocent money is an act of cannibalism. (...)
- But everyone understood that this act was a declaration of total war, a direct war against the entire society.
- You have to put them against the wall and hang them.
- They have to die slowly and scorched. (Piglia 2000, 171-173)

Thus, to everyone, the criminals become “nihilists” and the brutal police crackdown is a peaceful and necessary punishment for the sake of social order. There also lies the conspiratorial condition of the act; the character of the plot being clandestine and secret. The gesture of burning money could seamlessly integrate the long series of ironic and political conspiracies that allow Ricardo Piglia to think his novel belongs in a common frame of Argentine literature about conspiracy (Piglia 2007). The film adaptation (*Burnt Money*, 2000, dir. Marcelo Piña) gives a crucial relevance to this scene of burning money, placing it in the last minutes of the film to emphasize the imminent tragedy and the loving link between the characters before being killed by police.

Around the act of burning money, artistic metaphor manages to combine despair, rebellion, love and death. The novel multiplies viewpoints and the potential significance of the event, setting polyphonic and metaphorical possibilities around the idea of burning money. Facing the metaphor of everyday speech, art finds new meanings and, in the hundreds of fragments of a broken mirror, shows the complex state of Argentine society.

6. Conclusions

So, we can talk about a property of the metaphor that always refers, in its movements and transformations, to another implicit entity, thus composing an arc with different shades. Sometimes we use metaphors whose meanings are crystallized;

in other cases – for example art – they are reversed or their significance moves to other cultural texts and contexts.

To account for these phenomena whose semantic constructs differ, we have extended the notion of metaphor to that of “metaphorical order.” If we observe them running jointly, we can say that they really constitute a large prism that aims to reinforce the same idea holding a differential logic and rhetoric that is not arbitrary or casual.

In our perspective, the two sets of examples we have cited constitute two rhetorical orders: one revolves around a recurring metaphor, even in its differential discursive form and logic. The second extends the metaphorical order and displays an interesting constellation: money as robbery, desire, despair, rebellion, love and death.

To summarize, we have argued that the metaphorical order, which is a cognitive and ideological order, functions at least in two manners:

- a. Strong (we might call it), as a base metaphor that moves in the cultural field and that we can find reworked in different texts, without being exact in its formulation, but semantically pointing to the same order of things. For example, the metaphors which make reference to drug dealing have one thing in common that makes them recognizable. We have used the concept of *chain* to set the mode of operation of this type of metaphorical order: “Drug traffickers and narcopolice have taken over the social spaces”, for example.
- b. As a metaphor that multiplies in *constellation* and points to open singular interpretations. This happens when metaphors circulate in different areas of the cultural field, through many of its languages and also penetrate the field of art. Their variables carry on their past and present, are connected with them, contain and can be contained in other metaphors and can affect or be affected by History. In this second type, we use the notion of *constellation* to refer to another internal and more complex organization of the metaphorical order.

These types of metaphors that are ordered and disordered are repeated and metamorphosed; they constitute a system of dynamic forms more than a set of single images, an intensity that goes beyond itself.

In the restricted field of everyday communication or media communication they point toward social subjectivities, emotions, intensities, reports, conflicts. Ernesto Laclau (2014) calls it “the rhetoric basement of society,” because metaphors are not only a central rhetorical trope but a mode of cultural cognition and ideology: in their forms of transposition, displacement and conversion, they enable individual and collective world experiences.

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