

# Contemporary Rhetorical Theories

## Współczesne teorie retoryczne

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## Introduction: contemporary rhetorical theories

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## Introduction: contemporary rhetorical theories

Rhetoric as a communication practice is a constantly changing discipline. New forms and spaces of communication and evolving social norms and value systems provide new types of materials for analysis. There is a need to offer new methodological and theoretical solutions or to challenge old theories. This issue of *Res Rhetorica* aims to address that demand by dealing with contemporary rhetorical theories that respond to conditions in which rhetoric is used today.

What has changed together with scientific development and the emergence of new research centers concerned with rhetoric and the establishment of intercultural scientific contacts? To answer the question, we carried out a survey among scholars working in the field of rhetoric and talked to representatives of different scientific institutions.

The aim of the survey was twofold: 1. To draw up a reading list and collect names of authors recognized and acknowledged by scholars and practitioners of rhetoric representing different disciplines/fields of studies and countries of origin. 2. To compile a collection of theories and concepts to which academics refer in their research and reflect whether modern communication phenomena require new theoretical pursuits. The results are based on a survey of 56 participants, out of whom 44.6 percent were late-career academics (between 16 and 25 years of scholarly experience), 33.9 percent were mid-career academics (between 6 and 15 years of scholarly experience), 14.3 percent were emeritus academics, and 7.2 percent were PhD candidates. Such a group ensures that responses came from both experienced researchers and emerging scholars, with the latter perhaps being particularly sensitive to recent trends and changes.

Survey participants represented 18 countries. Most respondents were from Europe (Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Spain, Germany, Norway, Poland, Romania, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK, and Italy) and from the US. Some came from Australia, Japan, Canada, and South Africa.

By percentage, the survey participants represented the following disciplines/fields of studies: Media and Communication (46.4 percent), Languages and Literature (41.1 percent), other Humanities (30.4 percent), Philosophy, Ethics, and Religion (23.2 percent), other than Humanities and Social Sciences (12.5 percent), Political Science (10.7 percent), Educational Sciences, Law, History, and Archeology (between 7 and 8 percent). When asked which rhetorical theory/concept they referred to in their work, our respondents indicated: traditional theories, argumentation theories, Kenneth Burke's concepts (pentad, identification), discourse and power theories (Michel Foucault, Jacques Ranciere), multimodality, concepts of citizenship and public deliberation (Robert Asen, Robert Ivie, Christian Kock, Lisa Villadsen), and cultural diversity.

While the survey participants are not considered to be representative of scholars of rhetoric, the pluralism of age, location, and discipline/field of study provides a very good distribution of data. The survey was not designed to offer a quantitative analysis of theories but a map of the most popular theoretical and methodological trends.

Because it was indicated that rhetoric was an independent academic discipline only in some of the countries where our respondents worked in, we thought it was interesting to ask which texts and what authors one needed to know to do rhetorical research.

Some answers were traced to rhetorical studies and programs that the respondents taught; others were linked to individual scholarly, oftentimes interdisciplinary, pursuits. A list of authors, which was drawn up based on a term search across Wikipedia pages (in different language versions) which looked for the rhetoric term, was our starting point. We selected names of authors which appeared on the webpages. Although we were aware that the list was not complete and that a term search in Latin script favored a European perspective, we used the list as a pretext to ask our respondents to contribute to it the names of authors they thought were missing.

Aristotle was the clear winner. 93 percent of the respondents considered his works more essential readings for doing professional research in the field of rhetoric than those of any other ancient author (Cicero and Quintilian [65.5 percent], Plato [62 percent], and Isocrates [60 percent] or any contemporary rhetorical scholar (Kenneth Burke [65.5 percent], Chaïm Perelman [60 percent], Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca [54.5 percent], and Stephen Toulmin [50.9 percent]).

Names of authors, thinkers, and philosophers that our respondents added to the list included Anaximenes of Lampsacus, Prodicus, Tacitus, Sappho, Aspasia, Protagoras, Gorgias, Nāgārjuna, Al-Fārābī, Thomas Aquinas, Boethius, Christine de Pisan, Francis Bacon, Giambattista Vico, Richard Whately, and Thomas

DeQuincey. Clearly, the list is not consistent or comprehensive but is good evidence of the variety of resources that the scholars use and of their cultural backgrounds.

Our respondents offered an even larger variety in terms of contemporary authors. 120 names in total. Those which were subsequently repeated and thus could be considered to be clearly recognizable worldwide included Gloria Anzaldúa, Barbara Biesecker, Lloyd F. Bitzer, Frans H. van Eemeren, Walter Fisher, Cheryl Glenn, Leo Groarke, Debra Hawhee, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, George A. Kennedy, Jens Kjeldsen, LuMing Mao, Carolyn Miller, James M. Murphy, John Durham Peters, Krista Ratcliffe, Lisa Villadsen, Victor Vitanza, and Douglas Walton (listed in an alphabetical order). To comment on the choices, we suggest that they represent major trends within rhetorical studies: the attempt to specify the context and forms of contemporary communication practice and persuasion; the will to bring feminist voices and perspectives from outside of Europe into the center of rhetorical studies; the intention to focus on the relationship between rhetoric and argumentation.

When asked whether contemporary communication practices required new theoretical approaches, the majority of the respondents stated that visual and digital rhetorics did. Some, however, indicated that rhetorical studies did not need new methods. While they agreed that new communication practices called for reconsideration of some notions, tools, and definitions, they stressed that rearticulation of the existing theories was more important than formulation of new ones.

Still others suggested that the existing theories were no longer sufficient to describe and explain all aspects of mobile mass communication (e.g., massive open online courses (MOOC), webinars, online conferences); that some genres in digital media were problematic; that communication became despatialized. It was emphasized that sociological research regarding digital communities could be helpful in the same manner as informal logic and pragma-dialectics are in argumentation. The respondents were open about how difficult it is to apply “purely” rhetorical theories, since that was usually linked to considerations in Linguistics, Social Sciences (e.g. constructivism) or Philosophy.

The survey also registered topics that our respondents called interesting but rhetorically underexploited. Those included post- and de-colonization, interpretation of modernity, communication that negates references to scientific argumentation, challenges of artificial intelligence, algorithmization of digital communication, intercultural and multilingual communication, new materialism, non-human communication, and multimodality.

Have any new rhetorical theories developed in recent years/decades? Does contemporary communication practice require/call for new methods and principles? Since research is trend-oriented, which approach in rhetorical studies

has been most popular? Which theoretical concepts have been underestimated? Confronting those questions in preparing this issue of the journal, we asked renowned scholars in the field of rhetorical studies who hold professional positions that afford them the possibility to share their views on disciplinary traditions and challenges. We feel privileged (and thankful!) that our invitation was accepted by the American scholars of contemporary rhetorical theory and criticism: Sonja Foss, a professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado Denver and Karen A. Foss, a professor in the Department of Communication and Journalism at the University of New Mexico; Kendall R. Phillips, an American professor at Syracuse University, a researcher of public memory, popular film, and popular culture, and a former president of the Rhetoric Society of America; Christian Plantin, a French philologist, linguist, and theoretician of argumentation, a professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Université de Lyon, and an Honorary Research Director at the French National Centre for Scientific Research; Marc van der Poel, a Dutch specialist in philological research of Latin texts and the history of rhetoric, a professor in the Department of History, Art History, and Classics at Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, and the President of the International Society of the History of Rhetoric; and Alejandra Vitale, an Argentine professor at Universidad de Buenos Aires, a specialist in the analysis of Argentine political discourse and in the rhetoric that legitimized military coups in South America, and a former president of the Latin American Association of Rhetoric and the Argentine Association of Rhetoric.

With respect to the question about new theories, the scholars commented on a move away from theories that are focused exclusively on persuasion and argumentation and addressed the role of theories of change in fields such as psychology, counseling, and feminist studies. They discussed a move beyond colonial, white, male-centered theory and noted the importance of Afrofuturism, Queer theory, Disability studies, Latinx studies, and trans theory to rhetorical theorizing. The Stock Issues, Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's *New Rhetoric*, and Dominique Maingueneau's and Ruth Amossy's theories of ethos were also named influential.

As for old theories, mentions were made of rediscovering Kenneth Burke's and Michel Foucault's works. For some scholars, Isocrates' rhetoric, stasis theory, and Jean-Blaise Grize's theory of natural reasoning remain underexploited. For others, feminist rhetorical theories are underestimated in that they are not considered to be part of the discipline of rhetoric. Integrating them into the canon of rhetorical studies, as the scholars argued, would broaden views of how rhetoric works and expand the toolbox of rhetorical choices.

Within rhetorical studies, a few trends were identified as having become more prominent over the past few years.

- 1) Critical theory, which is based in the assumption that artifacts produce oppression and aims to indicate and document instances of that oppression and the transgression of the powerful and the privileged;
- 2) Affect – a turn in the Humanities which rearticulates the way feelings are communicated;
- 3) Temporality – an important topic in Interdisciplinary studies which questions traditional understanding of past, present, and future and the relationships among them;
- 4) Case studies – a trend which focuses on an artifact analysis and fails to go beyond to do theory building which could be useful for explaining and practicing rhetoric;
- 5) Presidential rhetoric studies, which are largely context dependent;
- 6) Public memory studies.

When writing about the challenges facing rhetorical studies today, the scholars suggested that digital communication and social networks called for new approaches. Some answered that analyzing different kinds of rhetorical action was crucial for assessing whether theories were effective and explaining reasons for change if that occurred. Rhetorical studies, it was argued, needed questions whether rhetors were effective, not assumptions about effectiveness of rhetorical action. Others responded that both old and new methods could be reexamined, for example, on instances of the cancel culture modes of arguing, argumentation in a post-truth, no-truth world, argumentation and science acquisition, and argumentation in socio-politico-scientific debates. It was indicated that principles underlying the dichotomy of facts and values or the “two cultures” should be subject to discussion again.

Both the survey and interviews demonstrated the breadth of rhetorical research in different countries. There seems to be consensus among the scholars that the emergence of new forms of persuasion does not undermine the existing theories or research tools, just the opposite, it allows us to rediscover their universality. There also appears to be a common belief that studying contemporary rhetoric requires taking into account and understanding new perspectives and ways of interpreting the world as well as recognizing points of view of social groups or cultures that are ignored or underestimated.

The authors of the articles in this issue reflect on the limits of rhetoric and its relations with other disciplines. Cezar Ornatowski addresses the questions of what role visual persuasion plays today and how effective in studying it the tools

used for writing and analyzing narratives are. Carleigh Davis discusses memetic rhetorical theory as a model for contemporary understanding of what information is communicated and how it is disseminated. Jacek Grębowiec uses a selected political statement to explore the usefulness of crossing pragmalinguistics, rhetoric, and discourse theory. Paweł Pawiński draws on the relations between rhetoric and marketing communication to talk about problems facing message writers who are expected to both demonstrate creativity and adhere to conventions.

In the *Varia* section, there are three texts dealing with important and current phenomena in rhetoric. Magdalena Bednorz analyzes digital rhetoric, Dorota Miller examines multimodal rhetoric, Emilija Radibratović discusses persuasive discursive practices regarding controversies over COVID-19 vaccine.

In the *Reviews* section, Estera Głuszko-Boczoń, Monika Grzelka, and Maria Załęska critically review selected publications. The *Reports* section includes accounts of interesting academic projects and events demonstrating various forms of cooperation among scholars of rhetoric.