Res Rhetorica

ISSN: 2392-3113

Contemporary Rhetorical Theories

Współczesne teorie retoryczne

8 (4) 2021 EDITORS: AGNIESZKA KAMPKA, MARTA KOBYLSKA

RECENZJA/REVIEW

MARIA ZAŁĘSKA
UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW, POLAND
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2973-0173
m.zaleska@uw.edu.pl

Recenzja/Review: Martijn Wackers (2021) *Making messages memorable. The influence of rhetorical techniques on information retention*. Amsterdam, LOT.

License

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 international (CC BY 4.0). The content of the license is available at http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

DOI: https://doi.org/10.29107/rr2021.4.10

MARIA ZAŁĘSKA
UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW, POLAND
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2973-0173
m.zaleska@uw.edu.pl

Recenzja/Review: Martijn Wackers (2021) *Making messages memorable. The influence of rhetorical techniques on information retention*. Amsterdam, LOT.

Martijn Wackers' *Making messages memorable. The influence of rhetorical techniques on information retention* is about forms that make messages memorable. It is about techniques that extend persuasive influence. The orator's ideas are, so to speak, transferred into the listeners' memory and have the potential to become the force influencing their thoughts (and their actions) long after the orator has stopped speaking. Such ideas have the power to change mindsets and values that shape social attitudes.

Wackers' book has a clear layout, reflecting his multidimensional research project for exploring what makes messages memorable. The book is divided into four chapters followed by a discussion and conclusion section.

In a brief "Introduction", the author presents the rationale of the study of memorable messages in a knowledge society. Since he hints the "knowledge society", other concepts, relevant for the understanding of the specificity of a *rhetorical* approach to information retention, should be mentioned. While the rhetorical approach basically explores the influence of *persons* on the memory of others, memetics, for example, explores *a-personal* ideas that supposedly reproduce themselves like genes.

Next, Wackers shortly discusses the psychology of remembering messages, confronting the perspective with a rhetorical approach to information retention. The author's psychological considerations also serve as a point of reference for his the author's own design of two experiments on information retention described in chapter four (see below).

Chapter two, the longest in the book, is entitled "Rhetorical retention advice: classical and modern techniques." It is a valuable compilation of various theories and practical suggestions drawn from classical texts and modern public-speaking textbooks. Wackers distinguishes between those regarding the *orator's* and *audience's* memories.

The orator's memory involves rhetorical *memoria*, one of the five canons of rhetoric, offering methods for the speaker to remember their own "product", i.e. the text to be delivered in front of the audience. The author discusses such techniques as rehearsals, outlines, and speaking notes. He also considers whether the orator should at all take the time to memorize the text before delivering it.

The audience's memory, which Wackers concentrates on, is concerned with the efforts of the speaker to prepare the text (i.e. mainly at the level of *inventio* and *elocutio*, but also at the level of *dispositio*) to help the audience remember the message. Following a brief overview of classical rhetorical theories, the author turns to the recommendations that contemporary professional rhetoricians and/or public speaking teachers have offered to orators. This is based on two corpora: English-language and Dutch-language public-speaking textbooks. Wackers highlights the differences in both the content and the hierarchy of recommendations within each community of language being considered. Despite the relative heterogeneity of results, he is able to compile a list of the twenty five most frequently recommended retention techniques which are supposed to help the speaker manage impact. They are visual aids, anecdote, summary, repetition, imagery, chunking, humour, rhyme, metaphor, three variants of *brevitas* (one-liner, soundbite, and slogan), connecting to the audience, final statement, circle technique, quotation, example, audience participation, rhetorical question, call to action, parallelism, list of three, comprehensible language, systematic order, *partitio*, clear message, and *propositio*.

Wackers also draws up a shorter list of forms likely to negatively affect the audience's memory. The list features three most common warnings against information overload, ineffective conclusion, and complex language. Less frequent warnings relate the speaker's attention to ineffective delivery and ineffective use of style. Interestingly, the warnings do not correspond to the recommendations, for example, effective delivery skills are missing from the advice list, while ineffective delivery skills are included in the warnings list.

In the third chapter, "Organization and elaboration techniques in public-speaking practice", Wackers discusses practical application of suggestions drawn from public-speaking textbooks. This part of the study is based on three corpora: the speeches made by scholars, politicians and TED speakers. The author points to two types of differences regarding the use and distribution of the rhetorical devices likely to impact the audience's memory. First, he comments that the list of devices recommended in public-speaking textbooks and the repertoire of techniques actually used in public speeches diverge. Second, he remarks that the type of context (science communication, political communication, TED events) influences the selection of retention techniques used in the speeches under examination.

The fourth chapter, “Effects of three retention techniques”, describes Wackers’s two experiments whose aim was to verify whether and how the three selected rhetorical techniques (“announcement of the conclusion” and “circle technique” in the first experiment and different variants of “summary” in the second experiment) affect information retention.

The last part of the book – “Conclusion and discussion” – provides insightful commentary on the study findings and a critical discussion of the study limitations and perspectives for further research.

Although the book is inspiring and multifaceted, Wackers takes it as a starting point for rhetorical retension studies. The book's wide-ranging research design, covering three perspecitves on information rention (theoretical considerations, professional practices, and scholarly experiments) demonstrates the author's expert command of the subject matter and his outstanding ability to support assumptions with a wealth of examples and thought-provoking rhetorical interpretation. Such intellectual contribution makes Wackers' book truly memorable.