

# Retoryka różnych perspektyw Rhetoric of various perspectives

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## RECENZJA/REVIEW

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## **Recenzja/Review: Weixiao Wei, James Schnell (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Descriptive Rhetorical Studies and World Languages*, Routledge 2023**

The *Routledge Handbook of Descriptive Rhetorical Studies and World Languages* does not resemble classic handbooks containing a historically or thematically organized presentation of a subject. An example of such an approach in recent years can be found in *The Oxford Handbook of Rhetorical Studies* (2017), edited by Michael J. MacDonald, in which successive epochs are discussed in relation to the same spheres of public life (e.g., education, politics, law, art).

The structure of the reviewed volume resembles that of *The Routledge Handbook of Digital Writing and Rhetoric* (2020), edited by Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes, which is a heterogeneous collection of diverse case studies. Such a publication type is usually addressed to advanced scholars competent enough to set the single chapters within their relevant theoretical frameworks. According to Weixiao Wei and James Schnell, however, this is a volume for beginners: “As a result of reading this book, we hope more and more people will become interested in reading about rhetoric research, and even become ‘part-time’ rhetoric researchers themselves within their respective professions” (p. 5).

The editors of the volume proceed basing on the assumption that “[r]hetoric is an old concept and term that may require updating as communication methods and interactional purposes diversify with the advancement of time and technology” (p. 5). The goal of the volume is very ambitious: “This current handbook gives a relatively comprehensive coverage of rhetorical ideas across many subjects and disciplines. We aim to introduce a new research and presentation rationale in the study of rhetoric which we call Descriptive Rhetorical Studies. This is essentially a ‘bottom up’ approach where we gather evidence of the use of rhetoric (defined broadly here as the human perceptible symbols or signs that demonstrate a strong intention to achieve something important to the initiator) in multilingual and multidisciplinary settings in the hope of identifying patterns and regularities in genre-specific rhetorical practice for a given geographic region or virtual community at a given time. The approach we take is descriptive rather

than prescriptive, the method inductive rather than deductive, which we hope can contribute to the formation of a useful referential framework for conceptualizing current practice of rhetoric in a diversity of cultural settings and interpersonal contexts.” (p. 2).

In this very important paragraph, the rhetoric is described (rather than defined) extremely loosely: “the human perceptible symbols or signs that demonstrate a strong intention to achieve something important to the initiator”. It could potentially refer to any manifestation of intentional action, the result of which we care about. With such an all-embracing concept, virtually nothing can be considered non-rhetorical, which does not help the theoretical clarity of the proposed Descriptive Rhetorical Studies.

The editors of the volume rightly believe that the great changes taking place today seem to require new tools of description and analysis: “In view of the rapidly changing landscape of the world in the twenty-first century due to pandemic, warfare, climate change, food shortage, political confrontation, ideological conflict and false information, it is increasingly important for rhetoric scholars worldwide to consolidate their research findings and formulate a new body of rhetorical theory to enable critical distinction between rhetoric and reality (for example, will nuclear war be an option or is this merely a rhetorical trick at work?), develop an updated rhetorical framework for identifying new genres of speech such as provocative diplomatic talks and fake news, and offer abundant space and resources to work with other disciplines where rhetoric touches the discourse specific to the genre (e.g. scientific discourse, legal documents, medical reports, social media posts). The editors of this volume hope to draw from “the historical insights of rhetorical studies without being confined by its theoretical framework (...) or constrained by existing theory and terminology, while, at the same time, introducing innovative ideas and approaches that may update and enrich rhetorical studies for the academic disciplines to cope with contemporary discourses permeated with a bewildering variety of rhetorical tricks and strategies” (p. 2).

This formulation insists on using the topos of novelty (“updated rhetorical framework”, “innovative ideas and approaches that may update and enrich rhetorical studies”). However, this novelty is not related to any structured vision of the history of rhetoric as a discipline.

The editors advocate full liberation from disciplinary rigors: rhetoric is studied “without being confined by its theoretical framework (...) or constrained by existing theory and terminology”. According to these declarations, the criterion for including a study in rhetoric is not the theory and method but simply the subject of “the human perceptible symbols or signs that demonstrate a strong intention to achieve something important to the initiator”.

The editors write: “This handbook offers a collection of articles which, while revealing the authors’ knowledge and training in classical rhetoric theory, conscientiously flag newly-spotted developments in rhetorical studies which may help conceptualize the directions current trends of research in rhetoric are heading and point out ways forward. With the escalation of the global situation in aspects of war, hunger, disease and ideology, and the increasingly diversified use of rhetorical means to persuade, deceive and unnerve, we believe the time is ripe to bring out a ground-breaking handbook showcasing innovative ideas and new findings in uncharted territories. In compiling this book, we undertake the responsibility of uncovering the truths behind deceptively innocent talks and seek solutions to defend ourselves against cognitively invasive rhetorical tricks” (p. 2).

The editors do not specify what they actually mean by “classical rhetoric”. The authors of the individual chapters, each with a different rhetorical background, refer to a variety of concepts originating in China, Egypt, Arabia, Greece and Rome. The chapters focus on details and seemingly unimportant minor points, showing that they actually contribute to the complex rhetorical meaning-making processes.

The editors write: “This handbook offers a collection of 27 articles that present rhetorical analysis of the discursual practice of many facets of social lives from a variety of cultures. Covering issues from America to Europe and Asia, and topics from politics to media, education to science, agriculture to literature and so on, we trust the handbook has something to offer to everyone interested in knowing how language works to guide listeners’ interpretation, alter their perception and shape their worldviews” (p. 5). An unquestionable advantage of the book is its geographical and cultural differentiation. The volume brings examples from different cultures and eras, encouraging the search for similarities and opportunities to construct comparisons: do relatively similar situations prompt speakers to use the same rhetorical tools?

The first part of the volume, titled *Historical Dimension of Rhetorical Studies*, according to the editors “marshals five chapters to set the tone of the book and connect the present to the past in respect of rhetorical ideas and studies” (p.2).

Let’s, therefore, take a closer look at the texts it contains, relating to history and the present. In the chapter “Mandate of Heaven at the Root of Chinese Political Rhetoric: Origin, Transformation and Legacy”, Weixiao Wei and Yuqian Wei analyze China’s political discourse, explaining that “[f]rom a descriptive rhetoric point of view, it is desirable to find comparable rhetorical practice elsewhere in the world to explore the rhetorical power of language in similar contexts and to facilitate the study of international relations, for example, by moving from idiosyncratic rhetorical behavior to political ideology of individual countries and to compare

and contrast such practice across the globe” (p. 19). This declaration conveys the main premise of this book: to provide some materials for comparison, which can become a starting point for further research. In the chapter “Gods of the Thresholds: Liminality and Analogy as Rhetorical Theory in Ancient Global Myth”, Shawn D. Ramsey has a similar starting point. His analysis of selected mythologies serves to point out that “[t]he message of many of the aforementioned myths is that language is a liminal force that derives from the gods. The gods themselves, as liminars, are thus an analogical argument about the nature of rhetoric in these cultures. The implication is multifold, but it underscores that liminars, as personifications or analogical exempla, were themselves a way of theorizing rhetoric. But in terms of the symbols they employ, the liminars associated with writing in its component parts are themselves analogical arguments about rhetoric, for cultures who may not have had comparable linguistic units to describe rhetoric. The liminal symbols they control are not decontextualized marks on wood, paper or stone, but an abstract process of organization” (p. 36). In the chapter “Rhetoric and Silence in Corporate America: Ending the Patent War between Google and Microsoft”, Joshua Welsh refers to the findings of ancient Egyptian, Roman and early Christian rhetoric and shows how silence can be used as a rhetorical tool in a very contemporary context. The author focuses on context because it is the context that makes silence acquire rhetorical meaning at all. Moreover, context can be helpful in dealing with manipulation: “The difference between a non-manipulative genre choice and a manipulative one seems to lie in the intent of the author. Puzzling out authorial intent is always risky, but by developing a context model it becomes possible to make reasonable assumptions about what could have been said but wasn’t” (p. 51). In the chapter “From the Learning of Classical Rhetoric to the Learning of Communication. The Evolution of Rhetoric in the Secondary Education Systems of Spain and Portugal”, Gracia Terol Plá points out some pathways of change in school education. The chapter can provide a starting point for comparative studies. In the chapter “Evolution of Arabic Rhetoric: from Classical Balāgha to Modern Concepts of Persuasion”, Marcin Styszyński discusses the peculiarities of Arabic rhetoric and the persistence of traditional communication patterns. Thus, in the first part of the volume, the authors of the chapters show first of all the geographical and historical diversity of the case studies, which can become a starting point for comparative research. The researchers explore Chinese rhetoric, Middle Eastern rhetoric, Arab, European and American rhetoric in political, educational, religious and business contexts.

The following sections of the volume develop these main themes. The second section – *Descriptive Rhetorical Studies: Regional Diversity* – brings together diverse examples of rhetorical practices. Massimiliano Tomasi writes about

the importance of onomatopoeia in Japanese rhetoric (“Rhetorical Devices in Japanese: The Case for Onomatopoeia”). Russian identity discourse expressed through religious rhetoric is examined by Natalia Bruffaerts (“Rhetoric of Russian Civilizational Identity: A Case Study of Patriarch Kirill’s Discourse”). Sony Jalarajan Raj and Adith K. Suresh describe stereotypical representations of India in media rhetoric (“Media Sensationalism of the West and the Rhetoric of Poverty Porn in India”). Agnieszka Kampka analyzes selected Polish songs, showing them as part of political rhetoric using global popular culture patterns (“Rhetoric of Protest, Tradition and Identity: Polish Songs of Freedom and Resistance”). Rabeea Al-Mubarak and Ian E. J. Hill trace cross-cultural themes in Arabic rhetoric (“A Descriptive Study of Rhetoric in Arabic”).

The third part of the volume, *Descriptive Studies of Political Rhetoric*, offers analyses of political texts. Teresa Fernández-Ulloa and María del Carmen López-Ruiz examine American presidential rhetoric (“Rhetorical Resources in Political Speeches by Barack Obama and Joe Biden: The Democrat’s Linguistic Stance toward Migration in Electoral Campaigns”). French and Spanish rhetoric on immigration policy is discussed by Isabel Negro (“The Rhetoric of the Immigration Discourse of Far-Right Parties in Spain and France”). Rosa María López-Campillo, referring to Swift’s pamphlet, discusses the functioning of selected rhetorical tools in political debate (“Political Rhetoric in Jonathan Swift’s *Conduct of the Allies*. Boosting and Hedging as Persuasive Devices”). Ewa Bogdanowska-Jakubowska and Nika Bogdanowska analyze how the topic of family is addressed in Polish political discourse (“Rhetoric of Polish Political Discourse on Family”). Eemeli Hakoköngäs and Inari Sakki describe nationalist rhetoric in Finnish media (“Multimodal Nationalist Rhetoric in Finland”), while Assimakis Tseronis and Dimitris Serafis discuss the rhetoric of crisis related to the Greek political situation (“Between Adversariness and Compromise: A Rhetorical Analysis of Greek Political Discourse in Times of Crisis”).

The fourth section of the volume – *Rhetorical Analysis of Academic and Professional Texts* – starts with two texts addressing rhetorical education in digital settings: Bradley Hammer’s “The Failing Essay: Broadening the ‘Composition’ of Critical Pedagogy in the Age of Digital Literacy” and Mary F. McGinnis’ “Diverse Voices?: A Rhetorical Analysis of First-Year Composition Textbooks and Open Education Resources”. The issue of knowledge transfer is discussed by Ferenc Jankó and Priscilla Hafenscher (“Demonstrating and Debating Climate Change: the Function of Rhetoric from Science to the Public”). This section of the book closes with studies of two different speech genres. Mansup Heo examines the topic of value in the speeches of Korean businessmen and the audience’s reaction to these speeches (“A Descriptive Study of Rhetoric in South Korean Business Texts:

CEOs' Quality Management Rhetoric and Audience Responses”). Dominika Topa-Bryniarska analyzes the film review genre, looking at ways to create the ethos of reviewers (“Discursive Strategies of Persuasion in the Film Review Genre: the Case of the Reviewer’s Ethos”).

The final part of the volume – *The Visual and Affective Domains of Descriptive Rhetorical Analysis* – is a collection of studies on the rhetoric of image and emotion. Jari Martikainen describes the rhetorical representations of Otherness in the press (“Visual Rhetoric of Otherness in Newspaper Photographs of the European Refugee Crisis”), and Fatma Nazlı Köksal and Ümit İnatçı present food in films (“Visual Representation of Food in Italian Cinema”). Samuel Mateus analyzes the emotional dimension of a pandemic advertising campaign (“The Ethos-Pathos Continuum in the Portuguese ‘Obrigado’ Advertising Campaign”). Maria Joanna Gondek and Paweł Nowak discuss the emotional aspect of rural and agricultural images in Polish literature (“Emotional rationality as an indicator of rhetoric discourse in Polish agricultural texts”), while David Taranco addresses rhetorical strategies in various travel texts (“Rhetoric in Travel Writing: A Tool to Enhance Verisimilitude and Persuade Readers”). Tetsuta Komatsubara proposes a method for analyzing narrative (“Ethos, Pathos, and Logos in Culture: a Rhetorical Analysis of Narrative in Japanese”).

It is clear that the structure of the volume is rather arbitrary; several other possible chapter configurations would be possible. This is primarily due to the fact that many topics overlap and many rhetorical mechanisms interlock, which demonstrates the ubiquity of rhetoric.

In their introduction, the editors express the hope that “The outcome will be a huge number of publications describing the rhetorical conventions and innovations in many walks of life in the global setting. Eventually, a body of knowledge and theory about rhetoric will be formed as a result of increasingly pervasive descriptive rhetorical studies around the globe. By that time, rhetoric will have acquired abundant resources and built solid foundations to become an essential discipline in arts and humanities from which to develop formidable theory and applications in linguistics, literature, history, cultural studies, political science, sociology, and so on, just as AI means to many science and engineering disciplines” (p. 5). The editors thus suggest that rhetoric is at the stage of simply collecting a variety of case studies, and only in the future can it become “an essential discipline in arts and humanities from which to develop formidable theory and applications” in other disciplines. Rhetoric, with its centuries-old tradition, has long achieved a solid status and influence on other disciplines, offering developed theories of persuasive influence. However, the idea that rhetoric in the humanities will have a function analogous to that of AI in science seems to be only a catchy formulation.

In these Descriptive Rhetorical Studies, the reader can appreciate the thematic and material diversity. On a personal note, I can express satisfaction that the volume includes such a large representation of Polish rhetoricians, which increases the visibility of Polish rhetoric research.

However, the volume as a handbook of Descriptive Rhetorical Studies is full of contradictions. Even the stated goals – “identifying patterns and regularities in genre-specific rhetorical practice for a given geographic region or virtual community at a given time” (p. 2) – have not been achieved. In the absence of common theories and methods, there is no comparability of definitions and theories, and therefore no basis for generalizations. The objectives of the volume were to develop a “useful referential framework” and “to consolidate their research findings and formulate a new body of rhetorical theory.” In this volume, so heterogeneous, it is difficult to see any form of consolidation or coherence of any “body of rhetorical theory.”

To sum up – depending on the reader’s preferences and expectations – the volume's heterogeneity, selectivity, theoretical diversity and the deliberately chosen micro-level of description may function as either advantages or disadvantages.

## **Bibliografia**

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