

The Relevance of Rhetoric in Modern Politics

Bachelor Thesis Philosophy

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Summary

This thesis explores the continued relevance of rhetoric in modern politics, beginning with Aristotle's classical model of ethos, pathos, and logos. It examines how media, technology, and societal shifts have altered rhetorical practices. Theories by Kenneth Burke and I.A. Richards are introduced to address identity-based persuasion and language ambiguity. Using Antoine Braet's framework, three political speeches are analyzed. The study concludes that while classical rhetoric remains foundational, modern political discourse requires a multidimensional approach that includes symbolic identity, audience interpretation, and strategic media use.

Introduction

When was the last time you agreed with the arguments of a politician? Political topics such as the nitrogen policy, international tariff regulations or the Dutch “spring memorandum” are only a few of the many hotly debated topics. The constant flow of news dominates our lives, being brought to us through many channels. Debates on television, carefully curated tweets on X (formally Twitter) or an influencer’s reels on Instagram present us with content filled with rhetorical performances. But what is rhetoric? If one would ask this to a person on the street, most people would not know. As a general typification, we might say rhetoric is the art of persuasion.

Rhetoric can be traced back to ancient Greece, more than two millennia ago. Philosophers such as Isocrates, Aristotle and Plato laid the foundation of classical rhetoric as we know it today.¹ According to Aristotle, rhetoric is the ability to see what is persuasive in any given situation². This ability is useful for multiple purposes: (1) to make truth and justice prevail, (2) to convey knowledge to a non-scientifically trained audience, (3) to refute invalid reasoning, and (4) to defend oneself against allegations.³ These purposes are also relevant for our modern times. In a world with many sources of information, the ability to recognize rhetorical patterns can give the audience a more clear perspective and prevent misinformation.

¹ Aristotle’s Rhetoric (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy), March 15, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-rhetoric/>.

² Aristotle, *Retorica*, trans. Marc Huys, 4th ed. (2004; repr., Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 2020) 26.

³ Aristotle, *Retorica*, 20.

In the classical sense, ethos, pathos and logos were the building blocks of a rhetorical piece. In Aristotle's time through the spoken word speeches were given. When the speaker was charismatic (ethos), the emerging feelings good (pathos) and the argument sound (logos), persuasion could be achieved. In the current time, that might still be the case in modern politics, but the mediums in which speeches are given have changed. What used to be the medium of the spoken word, is now confronted with a mix of soundbites, (mis)information and media narratives. In debates nowadays less emphasis is placed on the logical arguments and more on the emotion that is generated by statements of the speakers. The classical framework of Aristotle might not hold up to this modern situation. It is no question that rhetoric has a place in this modern world, but to what extent?

In this essay, I will explore the question: *"To which extent is rhetoric still relevant in modern politics?"* Beginning with Aristotle's theory of rhetoric, I will describe its foundations (ethos, pathos, logos). I will examine the societal changes and technological advancements that have contributed to the diminishing role of classical rhetoric in contemporary political discourse. Then, I argue Aristotle's theory of rhetoric no longer accounts for modern politics on its own. This standpoint will be backed by contemporary examples and with multiple theories about the use of rhetoric having shifted. Modern theorists such as Kenneth Burke and Ivor Richards claim that the use of rhetoric has changed. Burke's claim that the new form of rhetoric is more concerned with identification rather than by "persuasion through any means" will be elaborated. Then Richards' focus on the misunderstanding and remedies of discourses, rather than focusing on the discourses themselves will be discussed. After that the theories of Aristotle, Burke and Richards will be used to explore the relevance of rhetoric in modern politics. This is done by

taking parts of the framework that Antoine Braet created to create a rhetorical criticism. With that framework three modern political speeches will be analyzed and put into context. Then an evaluation is presented about the findings of the analyzed speeches. Lastly, the question *to what extent rhetoric is still relevant in modern politics* is answered and a conclusion is made.

Aristotle's Classical Rhetoric

The usefulness of rhetoric as a discipline is clear. The success of speeches is dependent on three different elements in play: the speaker, the subject and the audience or addressee.⁴ The purpose of a speech depends on the last element, the addressee. A speech from a lawyer in a court defending an accused will be different from a speech in a debate on television. It is the intention that the addressee will make a judgement dependent on the speech, whether about something that has already happened or is yet to come. An addressee who judges from what has previously happened, can be a judge of a court, for instance, and someone addressed on the question of what will happen could be a member of parliament. With respect to the addressee, Aristotle suggests we may also distinguish three types of speech: the political speech, the speech before a court and the occasional speech. In this essay, we will limit our discussion to political- and occasional speeches.

Political speeches are either about recommending something or dissuading people from something. This can be done in a personal atmosphere; for instance in the case of a one-to-one

⁴ Aristotle, *Retorica*, 34.

conversation between two members of the same political party. It can also be done publicly, before an audience or a community of readers or listeners, such as in the case of a speech on television, or a newspaper article about the opinions of a political party. The purpose of political speeches is related to advantages and disadvantages. A politician could recommend eating breakfast in the morning, because they claim that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. This will give you an advantage over someone who does not eat breakfast in the morning. The aim of such a speech can be hidden for the reason that some context is left out. What if the same politician has ties with corn flakes lobbyists? The claim that breakfast is the most important meal of the day, will then be an idea of the corn flakes industry, with the politician persuading the addressees on its behalf. The politician seems to create an advantage for the people, while the intent of the persuasion comes from the cornflakes industry, thus creating an advantage in their best interest.

Occasional speeches either praise or criticize something. According to Aristotle, this praise or criticism is always associated with a question of time. The occasional speech thus refers to a state in the past or a state that can be had in the future. If a speech has the subject that the Netherlands should go back to the guilder, then that speech will refer to the time that the Netherlands still had the guilder as currency. Such a speech will accordingly imply that a certain amount of criticism is voiced about the use of the euro and will advocate the return of the guilder. The purpose of occasional speeches revolves around questions of honor and its absence. Similar to what we saw is the case with political speeches, occasional speeches often leave some context out and do not, for instance, consider whether the balance of someone's actions or something's presence is beneficial or detrimental. Going back to the guilder might increase the

“honor” of the Dutch currency, but may still ignore the steps necessary to achieve that. Negative consequences such a currency devaluation or the impact on debt are not mentioned while that gives a clearer picture of the situation. With these two types of speech defined, we may again return to the question what it takes, according to Aristotle, to persuade someone.

Among the means of persuasion, Aristotle distinguishes three major ingredients: (1) the perceived character of the speaker (*ethos*); (2) the arousal of feelings of the hearer (*pathos*); and (3) the reasoning of the argument (*logos*).

Ethos

As for the relevance of the character of the speaker in persuasion, this relates to the fact that the speech must result in the speaker being perceived as credible. Aristotle mentions that speakers must therefore display the following competencies:

1. Practical intelligence, prudence or competence (*Phronêsis*)
2. A virtuous character (*Arete*)
3. Good will (*Eunoia*)

Without all three competencies the speaker is prone to being perceived as anything but credible. They can be seen as manipulative if they have the practical intelligence, but not the good will. Or being called incompetent when missing the practical intelligence the back their statements. If the speakers display none of these, no one will trust the contents of their word. The competencies are

important to being perceived as credible.

Pathos

When persuading someone by means of evoking emerging feelings on the part of the hearer, the speech must result in such feelings as the speaker is trying to achieve. The feeling will have a profound impact on the hearer's judgment. Aristotle claims that feelings are disorders that make people have different judgements depending on the feeling.⁵ This is something that applies to everyday practice as well. Asking permission for an extension of a deadline is easier when the professor is spoken to in such a way that they develop a good mood, instead of becoming angry or agitated. If the speech provokes anger, the resulting judgment may be unduly harsh or unfavorable, shaped not by reason but by emotion.

Aristotle further analyzes different feelings in three ways. Let us take the emotion of anger as an example:

1. How do angry people tend to behave?
2. Toward what kind of people are people usually angry?
3. For what kinds of reasons?

Angry people tend to behave from a viewpoint of being pained.⁶ Those who experience pain will want to pursue something, and those who get in the way of others will often spark a feeling of

⁵ Aristotle, *Retorica*, 101.

⁶ Aristotle, *Retorica*, 104.

angriness. If someone is thirsty and a person will not let them drink, or if one refuses to let a poor person become rich, one impedes the victim from reducing their pain. Angriiness also arises, however, whenever the opposite happens of what a victim expects. For example, going to Spain expecting it to be warm and sunny, but it rains the whole time that you are there. Aristotle elaborates on many other emotions in his analysis. When trying to persuade the audience, the speaker must think about the emotions they want to provoke to achieve their result.

Logos

When persuading someone on the basis of the argument itself, a speech has to be effective in proving something, or has to make it seem it is able to prove something. This rhetorical type of proof is called the enthymeme. In this means of persuasion, the argument consists of premises and a conclusion. Due to this structure, it is possible to work towards the conclusion the speaker is aiming to achieve. If the speaker aims to make consumers reach the conclusion that they should travel less, then they will have to be presented with premises that teach them that less travel promotes a better environment and a better environment promotes their well-being, for example. Keeping in mind that this argument is not strictly conclusive from a syllogism point of view, it is necessary to offer as much proof as possible for both of these claims.

With his core principles of ethos, pathos, and logos, Aristotle's rhetoric highlights the importance of understanding the relationship between speaker, subject, and audience in any persuasive speech. Aristotle's theory offers a comprehensive framework for crafting persuasive discourse by aligning character, emotion, and logic with the expectations of the audience. While

this framework provides the necessary elements of a persuasive speech, it relates to a period in history in which the political system was less complex than the current system. In the next section we will elaborate on some of the factors behind this increasing complexity.

The Decline of Classical Rhetoric in Modern Politics

The way rhetoric was practiced in ancient Greece was limited. The context in which Aristotle explained his rhetorical doctrines was during a time when people primarily communicated through the spoken word. Face to face during a trial, during a democratic gathering, or by means of conversation, the people exchanged their information and ideas. With only the spoken word a speaker could be persuasive if they were good with their words. Through the character of the speaker (ethos), the resulting emotion on the part of the hearer (pathos), and the argument itself (logos), the speaker had the tools to convince the audience.

As time progressed, the traditional rhetorical framework changed. The way to persuade an audience was not only through the spoken word. The invention of the printing press opened the doors to spreading information throughout the world. Not only did it help to create a more uniform language, it also considerably lowered the prices of books, making them more affordable for the masses. News could travel faster to whole communities, cities, and even internationally. This helped educate more people instead of relying on information to be passed down through generations and could thus reach a broader public. Books became more accessible and raised the overall literacy. Being able to read made it possible to gather information by oneself instead of information only being passed down.

Regarding rhetoric, I will argue that ethos and pathos would become less relevant because of this development. With the accessibility of books, ideas were more easily spread. The rhetoric that comes with it was more focused on the argument within a book rather than the character of the person offering the argument or the sentiments resulting from it. While both ethos and pathos continued to make a contribution to the spread of ideas, the framework has shifted. Aristotle's theory was based on a direct democracy where only adult free men were allowed to participate in politics. With more people having access to literature, the audience became larger and there were more ways present to persuade an audience.

Another shift occurred with the progression of telecommunication. Landlines, television, and – more importantly – the internet made it possible to exchange information at a faster rate than ever imagined. Where communication had first only been possible through the spoken word in the same room or the same marketplace, it was now possible to communicate with one another on the other side of the world. Speeches could be broadcast live with people watching at a distance of 4000 kilometers.

While the speed of communication drastically increased, the rhetorical framework changed as well. The emergence of radio and television turned political communication into a performance. Special emphasis was placed on the image, tone, and charisma of the speaker, rather than on their arguments. Visual appeal and the way politicians sounded, became more crucial, since they were now more seen than heard. A famous example of this is the Kennedy-Nixon debate, in which the audience's perception was more focused on the style of the speech rather than the

substance.⁷ With Nixon's experience both in the Senate and House of Representatives, along with the previous eight years in which he served as vice president, he was favored to win. Seventy million people tuned in to watch the debate on television. John F. Kennedy, being only a single-term senator, turned the debate in his favor with his performance. Being dressed well, looking directly into the camera, and radiating self-assurance. This shift incentivized politicians to project confidence, authority, and reliability rather than lengthy arguments.

In the current digital age, the rise of social media resulted in an even greater focus on projection rather than arguments. Nowadays, the (local) news and political coverage include short fragments and striking phrases. The message is fragmented and is often put into a clip or into a short text of 280 characters (Twitter / X). Hours of speeches can be reduced to 15-second soundbites. The messages are designed for sharing and creating engagement. This encourages the speed of the delivery rather than a deliberation about what is delivered. These soundbites often miss context and can be framed into a narrative. The fragments also encourage politicians to make repeatable and memorable slogans. Slogans such as “Yes We Can”, “Make The Netherlands Ours Again” or “Make America Great Again” have found their way into the political environment.

These social media developments transformed the political discourse into a form of attention economics, according to which the loudest voice with the most emotional delivery matters more than a structured argument.⁸ Populist politicians who claim to represent their people benefit from

⁷ Oxford University Press, “Substance, Style, and Myth in the Kennedy-Nixon Debates,” OUPblog, October 16, 2015, <https://blog.oup.com/2015/09/kennedy-nixon-debates/>.

⁸ Chantal Line Carpentier, “New economics for sustainable development: attention economy.” *United Nations Economist Network* (2023).

this "attention economics". They portray themselves as the embodiment of the people and build their support through their individual appeal. Politicians such as Geert Wilders and Donald Trump may be considered well-known examples of this.

The rise of social media soundbites affects the elements of classical rhetoric. Persuading someone by the means of the character of the speaker (ethos) is now achieved through charisma and repetition. Credibility through discourse is less likely due to the fragmented character of media coverage. By repeating the same slogan and creating an image that represents that slogan, the speaker will be identified by that slogan. By saying "Yes We Can" or "Make America Great Again" the politicians that use a slogan come to mind immediately, without the person being mentioned. Persuading someone by means of the emerging feelings of the hearer (pathos), also becomes exaggerated. Since formats such as reels are designed to grab attention quickly, emotional content is amplified to make a stronger impression to the audience. The effect that is created due to the exaggeration creates more engagement and can make the audience identify with the speaker. Persuading someone through the argument itself (logos) becomes compressed or even eliminated, since there is no time to prepare or lay down an argument, as the engagement time is simply too short to achieve this. As media theorist Neil Postman argues, "we amuse ourselves to death" by letting the medium shape the message, and letting the message itself become a form of entertainment.⁹ While speeches create the opportunity for a prepared argument, the emotions that the speaker sparks and the identity of the speaker have a greater role in politics. While Aristotle thus continues to provide a rhetorical framework for explaining the effect of persuasion in politics, he is still missing out on some elements that explain our current

⁹ Neil Postman, *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business*. Penguin, 2005.

politics. To fill this gap, Kenneth Burke has a theory that gives more insight into our modern politics.

Rhetoric by Identification

Traditionally, the key term in rhetoric is persuasion. With the technological advancements mentioned in the previous section, the emphasis in rhetoric has shifted in a direction away from the rules of classical rhetoric. To explain this shift, Kenneth Burke has introduced another term that defines rhetoric, the concept, namely, of “identification”. Burke was an American literary theorist and philosopher who was one of the first persons to move beyond traditional rhetoric. He suggests that when we try to persuade someone, identification with the subject or speaker is needed.¹⁰ The person who is being persuaded must connect with the speaker in such a way that they may be said to belong to the same group of people. Identifying or connecting can apply on a personal level, such as comparing a turtle to a human being. The turtle is just like us because they need a home, just as we do. Identification happens not only on a personal level but on a group level as well. When looking at American politics, an American citizen usually identifies either as a Republican or Democrat. When someone from the Republican party makes a speech about a controversial topic, then many Republicans identify with that, because it is a representative of their party that presents the speech.

Before we delve deeper into the nature of modern politics, it is worthwhile to draw a sharper

¹⁰ Kenneth Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, University of California Press eBooks, 1969, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520353237>, xiv.

contrast between identification and persuasion. According to Burke

Rhetoric is par excellence the region of the Scramble, of insult and injury, bickering, squabbling malice and the lie, cloaked malice and the subsidized lie.¹¹

Burke states that rhetoric comes into public discourse with an aspect of conflict and manipulation. The “par excellence” part suggests that this is not an occasional feature, but a defining one. This description, in other words, indicates that rhetoric operates in real-world social and political life and that it revolves around identification.

Modern politicians use identification over logical appeal. The way a speaker uses their language along with their style and symbols can affect the target audience. Politicians such as the current president of the United States of America (USA), Donald Trump, use simple, but blunt language in order to align themselves with their specific audience. With symbols such as his red hat with the text “Make America Great Again,” Trump rallies become events of identification, rather than that they depend on the acceptance of logical explanations. Not only is his message shared with the audience, but the audience shares his view. And here, identification is crucial:

You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his.¹²

¹¹ Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 19.

¹² Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 55.

Shared struggles and narratives are used to identify with the audience. Being part of a community when growing up or telling personal stories from the past can help one identify with a certain speaker. Former American president Barack Obama used this type of narrative in his speeches. He mentioned his mixed-race background and community-organizing roots as part of a larger American story of opportunity and progress.¹³ This speech created a shared identity filled with hope for the voters. While logical appeals were present in this speech, the identity-based connection between Obama and the audience created a greater emphasis.

Referring to the earlier quote from Burke, we may say that rhetoric goes hand in hand with the creation of common enemies and division. According to Burke¹⁴ identification is affirmed, because there is division. If there was no distinction between “men”, then no unity would have to be created between them. A “they” versus “us” narrative is created in order for the audience to identify with either party. Especially populist politicians align themselves with “the people” versus numerous “enemies” such as the corrupt elite, the media, or immigrants. In the Netherlands, there is currently an immigration debate. In this debate, a narrative is created of immigrants versus “the people of the Netherlands”. This narrative is not based on logical arguments at all, but basically draws its force from an emotional appeal to identity.

In comparison to Aristotle’s framework, Burke shifts the focus from persuasion to identification; offering the latter as the new central concept of rhetoric. In classical rhetoric, rhetoric is viewed as the art of persuading an audience by means of ethos, pathos, and logos. A crucial aspect of

¹³ Npr, “Transcript: Barack Obama’s Speech on Race,” *NPR*, March 18, 2008, <https://www.npr.org/2008/03/18/88478467/transcript-barack-obamas-speech-on-race>.

¹⁴ Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 22.

such an analysis is that a difference or distinction is made between the speaker and the audience. The goal of the speaker is to convince the audience of their view. Burke argues that identification is more important than persuasion with regard to communication, and so the distinction between speaker and audience dissolves. A common ground has to be laid down between the audience and the speaker, be it in the form of a shared identity, values, or experiences. Instead of the division between speaker and audience, there is a need for unity or commonality.

The identification theory makes it clear that rhetoric does not only entail logic or stylistic techniques, but also social and psychological dynamics. Instead of trying to create a sound argument in order to persuade an audience, a sense of us versus them has to be created. This is in line with the rhetoric of modern politics, in which the practice of identity politics is more common than having a rational argument. Burke does not reject persuasion techniques, but presents them as a subset or outcome of identification. Once the audience has a sense of identification with the speaker, or once the speaker has identified with the audience, persuasion is possible.

Rhetoric and Misunderstanding

Ivor Armstrong Richards challenges Aristotle's classical view on rhetoric. Richards¹⁵ was an English educator and rhetorician who had often collaborated with Charles Kay Ogden,¹⁶ a British

¹⁵ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "I.A. Richards | British Critic, Poet & Literary Theorist," Encyclopedia Britannica, July 20, 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/I-A-Richards>.

¹⁶ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "C.K. Ogden | Linguist, Philosopher, Educator," Encyclopedia Britannica, May 28, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/C-K-Ogden>.

linguist and philosopher. Rather than emphasizing the goal of rhetoric to persuade someone, Richards claims that rhetoric is the study of misunderstanding and its remedies.¹⁷ This thought originates from the assumption that language is inherently unstable. The meaning that a word carries might not be the same between different persons. For example, “Getting the laundry done soon” can mean that the laundry is done in the next hour, but also in a couple of days. This can cause a misunderstanding.

The leading cause of misunderstanding is what Richards calls the Proper Meaning Superstition.¹⁸ That is the belief that a word has a meaning on its own, independent of its use; indeed controlling its use as well as the purpose for which it should be expressed. While most people often assume that words carry clear and objective meanings, Richards argues that this is rarely the case. Stability in a word’s meaning is not something to be assumed, but always something to be explained.¹⁹ The stability of a word varies. The stability of the word spoon is different from the stability of the word crisis. The word spoon gathers similar thoughts and references from many people, such as eating soup with a spoon. The word crisis however can have different meanings depending on the situation and person. The meaning of words can be shaped through multiple factors. Elements such as personal context, cultural background, emotional state, or even work associations can change the meaning of a word. To explain how words can have different references, Richards has made a foundational model in communication theory.

In collaboration with C.K. Ogden, Richards created the semantic triangle to explain the

¹⁷ Ivor Armstrong Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965) 3.

¹⁸ Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, 11

¹⁹ Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, 11.

relationship between language and meaning.²⁰ The triangle consists of a symbol or word, thought or reference, and a referent, see figure 1. If we take the word dog as a symbol, then the thought of reference symbolizes a poodle for one person. After that reference is made, the reference (the poodle) refers to the referent. For another person, the word dog symbolizes a Golden Retriever, which refers to a different referent. In this example, the symbol does not stand for the same referent. As seen in the picture, the symbol does not go directly to the referent. Richards and Ogden explain that the meaning depends on how the audience interprets the symbol. This instability in meaning can be used in a political context..

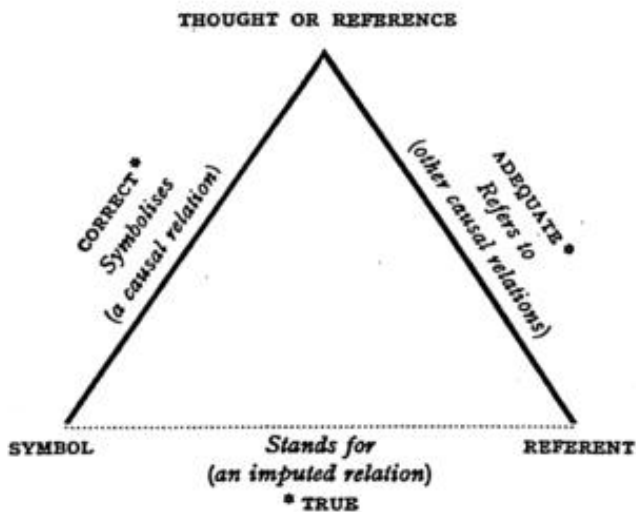


Figure 1.²¹

Because meaning is unstable and interpretive, a speaker is able to negotiate it. Rather than

²⁰ Charles Kay Ogden and Ivor Armstrong Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923) 11.

²¹ Charles Kay Ogden and Ivor Armstrong Richards, *The Triangle of Reference*, 1923, Charles Kay Ogden and Ivor Armstrong Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923) 11.

delivering a message, the speaker must anticipate different interpretations, adjust language for clarity, and bridge gaps of understanding with the audience. If there is a lot of violence in a particular neighborhood and in a speech a politician addresses this to the people of the neighborhood, then the politician should negotiate the meaning. By addressing why the violence is happening, they exclude other interpretations of possible reasons. Using layman's terms to explain a problem in the neighborhood instead of using complex words creates an understanding with the audience. Rather than sending a one-way transmission during a speech, negotiating the meaning makes rhetoric a collaborative and dynamic process. Misunderstanding is not a problem to resolve, but a starting point of rhetorical work.

With regard to politics, there is accordingly more to rhetoric than persuading the audience; politics is also a question of guiding how messages are interpreted and of framing reality. Managing the meaning under the constant threat of misunderstandings fits Richards' Proper Meaning Superstition. In Richards' view, rhetoric is about solving the misunderstandings that occur as a result of the meaning of symbols or words. In political environments, many words cause misunderstandings. Freedom, security, and justice are some of the many examples of concepts that activate different references in the audience. "Freedom," for example, can mean 'less government regulation' to a conservative, but it may equally mean 'reproductive rights' to a liberal voter. In this way, the semantic triangle is particularly relevant to politics.

During speeches, politicians often make use of political spin. This refers to the attempt to influence the communication that is used to deliver the preferred message of a speaker²².

²² Braun and Sandra, "Political Spin | Media Manipulation, Spin Doctors & Propaganda," Encyclopedia Britannica, October 27, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-spin>.

Political spin can be seen as an application of the semantic triangle of Richards and Ogden. The symbol remains the same, but the reference and the referent are deliberately directed. For example, calling war casualties ‘collateral damage’ is a question of reframing the casualties in terms of an operation, without mentioning the human cost. Labeling a tax increase as a ‘penalty for success’ reframes the increase emotionally. Richards would argue that rather than lying to the audience, the framing exploits the many interpretations of language that would be prevented if the misunderstandings were addressed. Politicians often leverage a misunderstanding rather than trying to resolve it. Making a statement ambiguous causes a statement to be interpreted in multiple ways, thus appealing to broader audiences. Also, deliberate misinterpretations of the statements of opponents are likely to create outrage and division among people. Political language can never be neutral. There is a side to be chosen and the political environment can spin and frame the narrative.

Richards’ rhetoric differs from Aristotle’s and Burke’s. Aristotle saw rhetoric as a teachable skill rooted in logic and classification. It had a foundation in ethos, pathos, and logos, which together formed the basis of a persuasive argument. A politician using data (logos), a trustworthy image (ethos), and a heartwarming story (pathos) could pass a new law. Richards would argue that Aristotle was too optimistic and assumed too much stability in language and meaning. What the one person could see as a heartwarming story, might be seen very differently by an entitled victim. Aristotle’s work stems from the fourth century BCE²³. A time when only adult free men were allowed to participate in democracy. While they only represented thirty percent of the population, the language these men used would have been more stable than the language used in

²³ “Aristotle’s Rhetoric (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy),” March 15, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-rhetoric/>.

our current age. In modern politics a greater emphasis has to be laid in the meaning of a word or symbol to prevent misunderstandings.

Comparing Richards' work to Burke's, Richards would say that Burke works with ambiguity, but focuses on identity more than misinterpretation. Burke centers his view of rhetoric on identity politics and collective symbolism, whereas Richards centers it on cognitive and emotional precision. Both authors agree that the symbols are an important aspect of connecting the speaker to the audience. The difference is that the accent lies in identification in Burke's case, while Richards focuses on misinterpretation.

The theories of Aristotle, Burke and Richards each reflect the rhetorical needs of their time. Aristotle mentions order and persuasion in an era of democratic Athens. Richards' theory is based on his lectures, dating from 1936, before World War II. Ambiguity and confusion have grown in this rapidly modernizing, globalized, and interpretive world. Burke's book was written in 1950, a post-war age which may already be seen as a mass-media age as well. Aristotle saw rhetoric as a rational art of persuasion, suited for debate. Burke saw rhetoric as a symbolic tool for creating social bonds through identification. Richards, however, considered rhetoric as a potentially corrective means to resolve misunderstandings in an unstable language. With these three theories, we have gathered the tools to analyze modern political speeches – the question that we shall turn to in the next section.

A Framework for Rhetorical Criticism

With the theories of Aristotle, Burke, and Richards rhetoric can be placed in the modern context. To be able to approach rhetorical texts and speeches, a framework is needed. Antoine Braet wrote a book made for rhetorical criticism.²⁴ Antoine Braet was a Dutch professor of the history of rhetoric at the University of Amsterdam. His goal was to revive and modernize classical rhetoric by offering a systematic approach to analyzing persuasive texts in contemporary contexts. His book contributed to making a framework for analyzing texts based on Cicero's work in *De Oratore*.²⁵ Parts of this framework are used to analyze rhetoric in modern political contexts.

The context of the situation is an important aspect of analyzing why the speech is given and can give strength to the speech. That is why the historical and societal background of the speech needs to be examined. The "I Have a Dream" speech by Martin Luther King has been considered one of the most inspiring speeches of all time due to the conditions of African Americans at that time.²⁶ Slavery was outlawed constitutionally, but African Americans experienced a period of backlash from white supremacists. Over 250,000 supporters watched from the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. The situation in which the speech is communicated plays a role as well. Whether it is in a town hall, on the radio, or via social media, the interaction with the audience is affected. Giving a pre-recorded speech prevents the opportunity to interact with the audience

²⁴ Antoine Braet, *Retorische Kritiek: Hoe beoordeel je overtuigingskracht?* (Den Haag: Sdu uitgevers, 2011).

²⁵ Braet, *Retorische Kritiek*, 23.

²⁶ Npr, "Read Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' Speech in Its Entirety," *NPR*, January 16, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>.

while on a live debate on television, the amount of interaction is high. It also depends on whether the speech is in a judicial, political, or occasional situation. The argumentative role of the speaker or writer is limited to the political situation in the analysis. When the background information is clear and set, then the content of the speech can be analyzed.

Braet makes use of Cicero's framework to analyze a rhetorical piece. Cicero links this framework with the duties of a public speaker. The framework has many similarities with Aristotle's theory of rhetoric. For a public speaker, the presentation is of importance, especially during speeches. The impression that a speaker gives with their appearance and presentation to the audience, influences their perceived competence and trust. This is linked to Aristotle's meaning of ethos. Think about the way a speaker uses humor or brings up an emotion at the right time (pathos). The order in which a speaker presents their arguments influences the impact of the speaker's message. Beginning with something controversial can spark the attention of the audience, while a controversial ending can spark engagement after the speech. A speaker has to think in which order the content of the speech can be delivered in the best possible way.

With the necessary background information together with Braet's and Cicero's framework modern texts can be re-examined, such as political speeches, newspaper columns, and opinion pieces. Braet emphasizes modern argumentation theory through classical rhetoric. This combines logical validity, persuasive effectiveness, and strategic maneuvering in the public discourse.²⁷ By analyzing rhetorical pieces, hidden assumptions can be exposed, manipulative techniques can be identified and strength of reasoning can be evaluated. Rhetoric is not dismissed as manipulation

²⁷ Braet, *Retorische Kritiek*, 166.

but studied as a cultural and political force. The framework of Braet is used to give rhetorical criticism to modern political speeches based on the theories of Aristotle, Burke, and Richards.

Case Studies: Rhetoric in Modern Political Contexts

Since Aristotle's theory on rhetoric is based on the democracy of Ancient Greece, the case studies are picked based on democratic political environments. Speeches from politicians from the USA, the Netherlands, and the European Commission are analyzed. Based on Braet's framework the theories of Aristotle, Burke, and Richards are used to give a rhetorical criticism about the speeches. The impact of a speech cannot be immediately measured. Its impact is realized months or even years after the initial speech. The analyzed speeches have had a lasting impact and are still referenced in daily life. In the first speech, former American president Barack Obama's victory speech of 2008 is analyzed. Then a short speech is highlighted by the Dutch politician Geert Wilders that sparked controversy in Dutch politics. While the speech was short, it made international news and a lasting impact. Lastly, the speech of the announcement of the European Green Deal by the president of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen is analyzed.

Barack Obama's First Election Speech

Obama's victory speech in 2008 marked a significant point in American politics. During that time, the USA was facing multiple crises, such as an economic recession, two ongoing wars, and

a sense of division among its citizens.²⁸ As the first elected African American president, it symbolized progress and hope to marginalized communities who fought for equal rights and representation. Obama has built his credibility with personal humility, acknowledging his opponents and emphasizing unity. During his speech he praised his opponent John McCain for his achievements. His ethos is not just about the image, it is about trust. He affirms that he sees all Americans, even those who did not vote for him.

In his speech emotion (pathos) is central. The story of Ann Nixon Cooper, a 106-year-old Black woman, creates a living timeline of American struggle and progress.²⁹ The themes of hope, perseverance, and historical justice trigger an emotional response across racial, generational, and political lines. The refrain “Yes, We Can” becomes a chant of collective empowerment. Together with the emotional responses created by the chant, Obama uses logical arguments to strengthen that shared purpose. He diagnosed the problems of the USA, wars, economic crises, and climate change. By outlining the challenges ahead without overpromising, he invokes shared American values and history to justify change as both necessary and achievable. Mentioning the crumbling schools of not only white children but also black, Hispanic, Asian, and native children creates an incentive for unity. While all rhetorical elements are present in Obama’s speech, some elements cannot be explained with Aristotle’s theory.

Aristotle treats persuasion as a relatively neutral craft, but in reality, Obama's speech operates within deep power structures. Systematic inequalities that constrain those whose voice is heard

²⁸ Junling Wang, "A critical discourse analysis of Barack Obama's speeches." *Journal of language teaching and research* 1, no. 3 (2010), 256.

²⁹ Npr, “Transcript of Barack Obama’s Victory Speech,” *NPR*, November 5, 2008, <https://www.npr.org/2008/11/05/96624326/transcript-of-barack-obamas-victory-speech>.

or believed, such as racial history, partisan media, and economic inequality are not accounted for. Aristotle assumes a unified audience that can be reasoned with, but Obama was speaking to a fragmented audience. Supporters, skeptics, and international observers, each with different emotional and ideological investments. The public has different identities that have to be accounted for. Obama tries to address both of these identities in his speech.

The story of Ann Nixon Cooper allows the audience to identify themselves in the American story which fits Burke's narrative. White, black, young, old, progressive, and conservative. The yes we can becomes a symbolic act, binding the audience to Obama and each other. The country transitions from a history of division to a moment of potential unity. The repetition, the inclusive lists, and the layering from past to future all serve to symbolically transform the audience from spectators into agents of change. By addressing the misunderstandings of the audience Obama achieved the miracle of merging speaker and audience.

Richards would also address the misunderstandings from the audience. Obama's speech functions as a corrective to years of division, cynicism, and political hostility. He directly challenges partisanship: "Let us resist the temptation to fall back on the same partisanship..."³⁰ He clarifies shared meanings by redefining what it means to be American. Not red versus blue, but united in values like democracy, opportunity, and hope. Obama's language is rich in metaphor and association using terms such as "arc of history" and "bending toward hope". Richards would note how Obama depends on contextual meaning to shape understanding. "Yes, we can" isn't just a phrase, but a vessel filled with the surrounding narrative of civil rights, war,

³⁰ Npr, "Transcript of Barack Obama's Victory Speech."

depression, and resilience. Words such as “change,” “unity,” and “hope” are semantically flexible and gain persuasive power through the possibility of their broad application in emotional and historical contexts. Obama’s rhetorical ambiguity is strategic as it invites projection from diverse groups without committing to specifics.

Geert Wilders on Immigration

“Do you want more or less Moroccans?” On March 19th, 2014 Geert Wilders, a Dutch politician, asked this question to his audience.³¹ The audience consisted of voters of his party, “Partij voor de Vrijheid” (PVV), and people watching television. It was the night of the municipal elections and Wilders gave a speech for his voters. In Wilders’ speech, he asked the audience if they wanted more or less of three things. The European Union, the Workers Party (PvdA), and Moroccans. These questions do not come as a surprise. As a nationalistic party, Wilders puts the focus on Dutch citizens. Wilders is also known for his anti-Islamic stance. His anti-Islamic short movie “Fitna” created commotion both nationally and on an international level.³²

As the leader of the by then third-largest-party Wilders already established some credibility. With a physical audience that did not need to be persuaded, Wilders could suit his speech to the needs of the audience. He structured his speech by the power of three. By beginning with a less controversial question Wilders builds up to the question that generates the most emotions. At the

³¹ NOS, “PVV Aanhang Scandeert: Minder Marokkanen,” March 19, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BaB75uznT8o>.

³² “DPG Media Privacy Gate,” n.d., <https://www.nu.nl/algemeen/1456432/taliban-dreigen-met-aanvallen-wegens-wilders-film.html>.

end of his speech he affirms that he is going to take care of the answers of the questions by the audience. In a rhetorical context this order of arguments is simple, but effective. The order in which Wilders framed his questions also sparked some emotions. It created a choice for the audience whether they wanted more or less of the European Union, PvdA, and Moroccans. In that campaign, Wilders created a sentiment that less influence of the European Union would result in more power for the Netherlands.³³ Including the audience in his speech sparks the emotions of that statement. As PvdA is a left-leaning party and the PVV is right-leaning, the choice created a divide in the audience. With the previous statements resulting in less, the audience is more prone to repeat their answer in the next question. The anti-immigration stance of the PVV, together with the previous anti-Islamic statements of Wilders lets the audience align with Wilders' last statement. As most persons in the room during the speech were supporters of Wilders, the physical audience identified with him.

Burke would agree that the audience identifies with Wilders. According to Burke, Wilders would try to identify with the audience to persuade them. With Wilders' speech, he addresses the audience by asking a question. In this question, he mentions "we". By using "we" he lets the audience identify with him and confirm his beliefs. The structure of the more or less questions primes the audience to respond predictably but also encourages participation. Not just persuasion is the goal, but also symbolic affirmation of group values. Wilders creates a common enemy. By mentioning the EU, the PvdA, and Moroccans a shared adversary is created, which is a mechanism for strengthening their identification against these instances. An us versus them narrative is created where the audience of the PVV represents us and the other three parties are

³³ NOS Nieuws and NOS Nieuws, "PVV Scandeert: Minder Marokkanen," NOS, March 19, 2014, <https://nos.nl/artikel/625563-pvv-scandeert-minder-marokkanen>.

them. Wilders' rhetorical success does not lie in his argumentation, but in fusing his political symbolism with his supporters, making the speech an act in pursuit of social cohesion rather than rational persuasion.

Richards would approach this from a different angle. He would focus on how language creates misunderstanding and how the meaning is negotiated. Through emotive meaning. The word Moroccans is not neutral. It carries contextual connotations shaped by media, political framing, and public sentiment. The audience does not hear just Moroccans as an ethnic group but as a loaded symbol tied to crime, otherness, and threat. With Wilders' binary question "more or less," the complexity of the symbol is concealed. There is no room for nuance or clarification. The question creates a misunderstanding by implying that fewer Moroccans equates to more opportunities without defining what that means. Lastly, the power of the speech is not the deliberation of what Wilders is saying, but the emotional reaction it creates. Wilders is not communicating facts but is triggering conditioned emotional responses.

Ursula von der Leyen and the European Green Deal

The current president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, gave a speech to announce the European Green Deal.³⁴ The European Green Deal is an inclusive roadmap toward European Union (EU) climate neutrality by 2050. The audience of the speech was EU citizens, national leaders, the European Parliament, and global observers. The speech was held during a

³⁴ European Commission, "Press remarks by President von der Leyen on the occasion of the adoption of the European Green Deal Communication," <https://ec.europa.eu>, December 11, 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/speech_19_6749.

time when the global climate concern was high and the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP25) was just around the corner.³⁵ Von der Leyen had credibility (ethos) due to being the head of the European Commission, drawing institutional legitimacy. A vision was shared, the European Green Deal and an action was made out of that vision. A roadmap of fifty actions to achieve climate neutrality. With the vision and the actions to achieve that a justification was needed. The justifications were laid down in multiple parts. By claiming that fossil-fuel models are out of date she implies that there is a new path forward, the Green Deal. The Green Deal can reconcile the economy and the planet. The argument that is usually made against climate action is at the expense of the economy.³⁶ By framing that this “is a strategy for growth that gives more back than it takes away” it deals with that argument. The feasibility of the plan also is reinforced by having a fund for the vulnerable sectors that provides a socially just safety net. By targeting the possible doubts of the audience, the arguments made were logically structured. The speech also sparked some possible emotional responses. One-liners such as “We owe it to our children” spark intergenerational responsibility. Using “This is Europe's man on the moon moment” as a heroic metaphor elevates the appeal of the Green Deal and creates an attempt for collective pride. Speaking of the “most vulnerable regions” and “no one left behind” stirs empathy and inclusion. These examples are all triggers to make the audience identify with Europe.

Von der Leyen uses the values of Europe such as innovation, fairness, progress, and sustainability to connect with the people of Europe.³⁷ These values are mentioned to express

³⁵ “What Is COP25?,” n.d., <https://unsdg.un.org/latest/blog/what-cop25>.

³⁶ European Commission, “Press Remarks by President von Der Leyen on the occasion of the adoption of the European Green Deal Communication.”

³⁷ “THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development,” n.d., <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

collective language. By using the words “our people” and “our planet” solidarity is created between the institutions and the citizens of Europe. The narrative that von der Leyen uses creates a contrast between the old model and the new strategy, aligning the audience with the future she wants to represent. What Burke does not address is multilingual or multicultural rhetorical translation. The European Union is inherently multilingual, multicultural, and cross-border. Burke’s theory is based on the English language and does not fully account for how rhetoric must navigate different cultural codes or translate symbolically across nations. Concepts like growth, justice, and responsibility may carry different historical and political connotations in different member states. Von der Leyen aims to seek identification across Europe which requires negotiating linguistic, cultural, and ideological pluralism, something that Burke does not explore. Richards however does mention the negotiation of meaning.

According to Richards, abstract terms are framed in Von der Leyen’s speech. Growth, justice, and responsibility are terms that resonate while avoiding detailed definitions. Growth is defined as clean jobs, not fossil-fueled expansion. A just transition is framed as fairness to vulnerable regions and sectors. The Green Deal is explained with both a vision and a policy roadmap. The Semantic Triangle can be applied here. The symbol that is used is climate neutrality. The thought is the idea of zero-emissions and a green future and the referent is the 2050 EU policy goal and the emission metrics. The Green Deal is not fully explained technically, but rhetorically it is made to mean ambition, justice, and the future of Europe. Semantic control over meaning is the issue here. The abstract policy is grounded in shared symbols and moral claims avoiding misunderstanding. A feedforward is created to prevent the opposition from misinterpreting her

stance. Skepticism from the industry is countered by boosting innovation. The fear of job loss is countered with job creation. The public concern is countered with a just transition mechanism.

Multi-Dimensional Rhetoric

Aristotle, Burke, and Richards each offer a unique perspective on persuasion and meaning. Aristotle's rhetorical triangle (ethos, pathos, logos) offers a structured method for evaluating persuasive discourse. With his approach to the credibility of the speaker (ethos), emotional appeal to the audience (pathos), and logical argumentation (logos) the analysis of speeches becomes effective. Elements in Obama's victory speech or von der Leyen's Green Deal speech could be explained in great detail with Aristotle's theory. However, Aristotle's model assumes a shared rational framework and a relatively unified audience. That is often absent in modern fragmented democracies. In a digital age with diverse audiences and cross-cultural communication, Aristotle's framework alone feels insufficient. He does not account for the manipulative potential of media or the role of virality, memes, and decontextualized content in shaping public opinion. Classical rhetoric relies on the good faith of deliberation, but digital platforms often reward distortion over deliberation. With Wilders' speech it is shown that deliberation is not needed to persuade the audience. Audiences today are fragmented by ideology, identity, and media ecosystems. Political communication often involves symbolic affirmation, emotional association, and strategic ambiguity.

Burke fits some gaps that Aristotle is missing. With his symbolic and relational view of rhetoric, instead of only persuading, rhetoric creates identification between speaker and audience. Burke's

concepts of shared narratives, narrative framing, and consubstantiality help explain how Wilders creates an “us versus them” dynamic. Obama’s inviting unity through his storytelling and Von der Leyen’s shared European mission also enriched Aristotle's model. By addressing the psychological and sociological elements of persuasion, the persuasion of the audience is not only reasoned with but symbolically brought together. However, Burke's emphasis on unity and shared identity may overlook the political consequences of reinforcing echo chambers. In today’s polarized climate, identification may encourage division rather than bridge difference. While identification can create solidarity, it may also fuel populist rhetoric and exclusionary politics. In the USA there is a great division between Democrats and Republicans.³⁸ Just by mentioning that someone identifies with being a Republican, many prejudices are created about that person without any other context.

Richards enriches both Aristotle's and Burke’s theories by shifting focus from speaker-centered rhetoric to audience interpretation and semantic precision. With the Proper Meaning Superstition, he makes it clear that many people think a word has a meaning on its own. Through the Semantic Triangle (symbol, thought, referent), he explores how meaning is negotiated, not assumed. That explains Wilders’ use of “Moroccans” which highlights emotionally charged semantics and Obama’s slogan “Yes, we can” as a vessel for collective hope. By pointing out context-dependent terms such as “growth” and “justice” the rhetorical analysis of Von der Leyen’s speech has been deepened. Richards emphasizes that words carry baggage from culture, history, and media and that clarifying meaning is central to effective communication. His theory is especially useful for understanding the subtleties of rhetorical ambiguity in a time dominated

³⁸ Lee Drutman, "*Political Divisions in 2016 and Beyond*." Voter Study Group, June (2017), 17.

by political spin and reframing. However, it also presupposes rhetoricians who are committed to clarification rather than obfuscation. Clarity is something that is not always present in the political realm. Politicians often deliberately choose vague deliberations to misguide the audience and mask other intentions. His theory is more idealistic than pragmatic in environments driven by media spectacle and political polarization.

Altogether, each theory highlights a different emphasis within rhetoric: Aristotle emphasizes structure and ethics, Burke highlights symbolism and community, and Richards focuses on meaning and interpretation. Taken together, they reveal that effective rhetoric in the modern world is multi-dimensional. A unified rhetorical framework must incorporate all of these elements to be able to fully grasp the complexity of modern political discourse.

Conclusion

To answer the question “*to which extent is rhetoric still relevant in modern politics*” the fundamentals of classical rhetoric are still present in modern politics. The strength of classical rhetoric is providing structure and clarity for rhetorical analysis. With ethos, pathos, and logos being present to a certain extent in every political rhetorical piece, Aristotle’s theory teaches us to compose arguments logically and effectively. However, rhetorical analysis today cannot rely on a single theoretical model. With a complex digital society like our current time, more views are needed on the developments that we are seeing nowadays. In a fragmented and media-saturated public sphere theories are needed for ideological conflicts and identity politics. While Aristotle gives us the foundational logic of persuasion, Burke reveals its social and symbolic

function, and Richards alerts us to semantic pitfalls and interpretive ambiguity. Braet's modern framework helps reconnect classical rhetoric with these newer insights, offering tools to critically assess contemporary political communication.

Together these theories form a hybrid model combining the strengths of classical structure with modern insights into language, identity, and media. This approach is essential in a post-truth, emotionally charged political climate, where speeches are not just persuasive texts but symbolic performances. Rhetoric in modern politics is no longer confined to the stage or the parliament; it lives in tweets, memes, interviews, and reels. Understanding this expanded field of rhetoric helps us navigate democratic dialogue more critically and responsibly. Being able to analyze the rhetorical aspects of our political atmosphere guides us to a world of fewer misunderstandings. A hybrid rhetorical practice is not only possible but necessary for navigating the complexities of today's global, multicultural, and media-driven public sphere. It offers a democratic skill set. By empowering citizens to interpret, question, and engage with political messages it shifts from an academic exercise to a civic imperative.

In conclusion, rhetoric remains relevant, but only if we adapt its frameworks to the realities of our time. With the classical tools of Aristotle, the symbolic richness of Burke, and the interpretive awareness of Richards together offer the foundation of a renewed rhetorical literacy. This literacy is essential to rebuild trust, clarity, and dialogue in our democratic public sphere shaped by division, emotion, and ambiguity.

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