

Rhetoric and Cross-Cultural Inspiration

Dr. Clarke Rountree, University of Alabama in Huntsville

This essay is offered as a spur to discussion. It draws upon what I believe are some of the most relevant findings of rhetorical theorists for our discussion of cross-cultural inspiration. I begin with a brief description of my academic training to explain how I believe rhetoric is related to our joint project.

I come from a speech communication tradition of the oldest sort, drawing upon rhetorical studies. Rhetorical studies looks at discourse as a mode of persuasion that can be described, explained, and analyzed to better understand its place and function in human societies. It draws principally upon the ancient Western tradition of studying rhetoric, which started with the Greek Sophists, built upon work by Plato and Aristotle, was Romanized by Cicero and Quintilian (among others), was christianized by Augustine, became one of the seven liberal arts during the middle ages, was reinvigorated with the discovery of the ancient rhetorical texts during the Renaissance, grew more popular with the growth and spread of democratic institutions in the West, and was expanded enormously by 20th century scholars to include the rhetorics of particularized discourse communities (such as the rhetoric of science) and of new media (e.g., television and the Internet).

Aristotle thought of rhetoric as a “faculty” or ability that allows one to discover the available means of persuasion in a given case. Cicero, who was not only a great orator, but a notable rhetorical theorist, held that the offices of rhetoric were to instruct, to delight, and to move. Classical rhetorical theory conceived of the rhetorical art as consisting of five sister arts:

- invention (focusing the topic; coming up with arguments, evidence, appeals; adapting to audiences)
- arrangement (choosing how to arrange the body, how to prepare the audience in an introduction, how to conclude the speech, how to transition between parts)
- style (issues of language, figures of speech, and figures of thought)
- memory (preparing to deliver the speech, memorization systems, use of notes)
- delivery (the physical presentation of the speech, considering voice, eye contact, gestures, body posture, and visual aids)

The late Donald C. Bryant of the University of Iowa described rhetoric as working through a process “of adjusting ideas to people and of people to ideas” (413). Kenneth Burke provided the most sweeping definition of rhetoric, claiming that “Wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is ‘meaning’ there is persuasion” (*Rhetoric of Motives*, 172). Over the past twenty years, scholars from a range of academic studies have noted the “rhetorical turn” in their disciplines, as those who produce knowledge consider how such productions involve persuasion of those inside and outside their disciplines (see, for example, Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey).

From a rhetorical point of view, discourse that crosses cultures is simply discourse that faces a new audience. And like any rhetorical process, it requires thoughtful adaptation of messages to the knowledge, assumptions, beliefs, values,

perspectives, biases, ideologies, and forms recognizable, acceptable, and compelling for those audiences. The challenge, however, is finding mutual ground where rhetor and audience can meet. Unless the rhetor or the audience is thoroughly steeped in the culture of the other, so that thoughtful adaptations may be developed to ensure effective communication—adaptations by the rhetor or by the audience (the ideas or the people, in Bryant’s formulation)—then communication will be problematic.

Of course that is the rub. We may want to reach out to others even if we do not have the time or the ability to thoroughly understand those with whom we would communicate. When the effort is mutual, with two communicators seeking to understand one another, a complex exchange can occur as each tries to adapt to the other.

We can reach across cultural differences as communicators if we can find a more fundamental common ground upon which to build our exchanges. This essay will consider a few of the bases for communicative common ground discovered by rhetorical studies scholars.

First, we might note that although many forms of communication may involve the five sister arts of rhetoric identified in the classical period, and those arts may be universally employed, they do not provide universal standards for effective communication across cultures (Okabe). Standards for effective argument, for example, differ significantly by culture; indeed, within a given culture, various fields have their own particular standards (Toulmin). Consider the different standards for evidence in literary studies and biology, for example. The arrangement of that content is not universal; the linear sequence preferred in the West is not preferred in the East. Style, in terms of formality of discourse, varies greatly by culture, and may take into consideration who is communicating with whom, when, where, and for what purpose. Whether an oral communication should be memorized, given off-the-cuff, or something in between varies among cultures. And, delivery is greatly influenced by cultural contexts. What is proper in the use of eye contact, for example, is significantly influenced by cultural practices. So, while every oral communication must consider invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery, what is appropriate will vary significantly across cultures.

The rhetorical process of finding common ground has been explored extensively, notably in the work of Kenneth Burke. Burke notes that humans, in their nature, are “separate neurological systems” (*Conversations with Kenneth Burke*). That is, regardless of whether a given culture emphasizes a group orientation (as in many Asian cultures) or an individual orientation (as the United States emphasizes), it is a matter of fact that individual humans are existentially separate. If you have a toothache, you are the one in pain. Although I can empathize with you, you’re the one who suffers.

The great woman’s rights leader Elizabeth Cady Stanton spoke of this fact of human existence in one of her final speeches, entitled “The Solitude of Self.” In it she defends the right of women to have their own independent rights to education, jobs, and suffrage. She notes:

Whatever the theories may be of woman's dependence on man, in the supreme moments of her life he can not bear her burdens. Alone she goes to the gates of death to give life to every man that is born into the world; no one can share her fears, no one can mitigate her pangs; and if

her sorrow is greater than she can bear, alone she passes beyond the gates into the vast unknown.

* * *

[I]n the conflicting scenes of life, in the long, weary march, each one walks alone. We may have many friends, love, kindness, sympathy, and charity to smooth our pathway in everyday life, but in the tragedies and triumphs of human experience each mortal stands alone. (380-81)

Burke believes that our separation from others makes us long to be one with them, in part to overcome this doleful solitude about which Stanton speaks so eloquently. And, while we cannot really be one with others (or “consubstantial,” sharing substance, as he puts it), we may *symbolically* become one through the process of identification, proclaiming or seeing ourselves as part of a larger whole. If Burke is correct, and I believe he is, then this fundamental feature of human existence provides the grounds for connecting with others. As he notes:

Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity. If men were wholly and truly of one substance, absolute communication would be of man’s very essence. It would not be an ideal, as it now is, partly embodied in material conditions and partly frustrated by those same conditions; rather, it would be as natural, spontaneous, and total as with those ideal prototypes of communication, the theologian’s angels, or “messengers.” (*Rhetoric of Motives*, 22).

How does identification work? Burke says that “[y]ou persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his” (*Rhetoric of Motives*, 22). Identification may be conscious or unconscious, based upon strategic or incidental factors in communication. When crossing cultures, then, it becomes important either to *be like* those with whom you communicate (such as speaking with the same accent they use) or to offer *tokens* of that likeness (such as appealing to common values).

Because cultures have their own particular beliefs, attitudes, and values, cross-cultural inspiration must draw upon those beliefs, attitudes, and values that reach across cultures—those that are more widely shared. This may require a rhetor to move toward “higher levels” for “sharing substance.” Burke illustrates the process of identifying with people’s values at increasingly higher levels in his poem, “He Was a Sincere, etc.”:

He was a since but friendly Presbyterian—and so

If he was talking to a Presbyterian,
He was for Presbyterianism.

If he was talking to a Lutheran,
He was for Protestantism.

If he was talking to a Catholic,
He was for Christianity.

If he was talking to a Jew,
He was for God.

If he was talking to a theosophist,
He was for religion.

If he was talking to an agnostic,
He was scientific caution.

If he was talking to an atheist,
He was for mankind.

And if he was talking to a socialist, communist, labor
Leader, missiles expert, or businessman,
He was for
PROGRESS. (*Collected Poems*, 238)

The moral of this poem is that identification may be wrought across cultural divides by moving up a level of generality just to the point at which common ground can be located. Generally, the “lowest” common ground possible will be the most potent. (Think of how closely Orthodox Jews can cling together based upon their particular shared values as opposed to Unitarian Universalists, who welcome Jews, Christians, Muslims, Pagans, and Agnostics into their flock.)

In the search for universal common ground, one rhetorical scholar has suggested a basic form for discourse provides that ground: narrative. Walter Fisher adds to various definitions of “human” the appellation, *Homo narrans*, the story-telling animal. He explains:

The idea of human beings as storytellers posits the generic form of all symbol composition. It holds that symbols are created and communicated ultimately as stories meant to give order to human experience and to induce others to dwell in them in order to establish ways of living in common, in intellectual and spiritual communities in which there is confirmation for the story that constitutes one’s life. One’s life is...a story that participates in the stories of those who have lived, who live now, and who will live in the future. (63)

Storytelling is universal, he insists, because “[a]ctualization of narrative does not require a given form of society” (65). Rather, he urges, “the narrative impulse is part of our very being because we acquire narrativity in the natural process of socialization” (65). He quotes Hayden White in support of this claim:

Far from being one code among many that a culture may utilize for endowing experience with meaning, narrative is a metacode, a human universal on the basis of which trans-cultural messages about the shared reality can be transmitted.... The absence of narrative capacity or a refusal of narrative indicates an absence or refusal of meaning itself. (qtg. White, 6 at 65)

Stories are assessed, Fisher argues, based upon two universal standards: narrative probability and narrative fidelity. Narrative probability is an “internal” standard which considers whether the story “hangs together” (47). Narrative fidelity is an “external” standard which considers whether the story “rings true with stories we know to be true in our lives.” Thus, when communicating across cultures, one should tell a story that is coherent and that is consistent with stories accepted by an audience’s culture. To meet the latter standard, a rhetor crossing cultures may draw upon ubiquitous stories, such as myths, that reflect widely held human values.

To ensure that the probability standard is met, one must construct characters, settings, and actions that “hang together.” Burke provides a more developed account of coherence in his discussion of the “grammar of motives.” He says that stories featuring human action will offer answers to basic questions: what was done, who did it, how and why did he/she/they do it, and when and where was it done? Answers to these questions constitute what Burke calls the pentadic terms: act, agent, agency, purpose, and scene.

The pentadic terms “hang together” in particular ways which, I have argued, are universal (Rountree). The scene “contains” the act, so that given a particular scene, action may follow. Thus, we understand the actions of people running out of a burning house as motivated by that threatening scene. Agents are the authors of their actions. Thus, we posit that “good acts” spring from “good agents.” Agencies are adapted to purposes, or ends determine means. Thus, one may take a car, rather than a bicycle, in order to get somewhere quickly.

Admittedly, many relationships among the pentadic elements are determined by more specific, more culturally situated, understandings. In the South, someone who calls a soft drink a “soda” is assumed to be a “Yankee” (this act determining this understanding of the agent). But, understanding the general relationships among pentadic elements informs the construction of “coherent” stories.

A final rhetorical scholar who offers insight into crossing cultures is Michael Osborn. Osborn has examined metaphors and discovered that some of them are universal. He calls these “archetypal metaphors,” because they are rooted in basic human experiences. Among these are metaphors for light and dark, heat and cold, the seasons, water, the sea, disease-remedy, and hunger. Osborn notes that these metaphors have been used ubiquitously throughout human history, that they have a special rhetorical potency, and that they have a “potential for cross-cultural change” (117). For example, he considers the potency of *light* as a metaphor:

Light (and the day) relates to the fundamental struggle for survival and development. Light is a condition for sight, the most essential of man’s sensory attachments to the world about him. With light and sight one is informed of his environment, can escape its dangers, can take advantage

of its rewards, and can even exert some influence over its nature. Light also means the warmth and engendering power of the sun, which enable both directly and indirectly man's physical development. (117)

Metaphors such as *light* provide a fundamental resource for communicating ideas and feelings to any audience. They may even be a necessary precursor to the use of more specific, shared metaphors (126).

Overall, rhetorical scholars offer much to inform our understanding of cross-cultural communication and inspiration. They tell us to look for the five sister arts of rhetoric as necessary components of oral speech, while cultural deployments of these arts may differ. Burke shows us the fundamental human need to be consubstantial with others, and how (in general) that may be achieved. Fisher makes us heed the story as a universal form for reaching audiences, explaining that our stories need narrative probability and narrative fidelity. Burke shows us how to build narrative probability by highlighting the elements of action that function as a "grammar of motives." Finally, Osborn describes a universal resource in the archetypal metaphor.

These considerations are tied to a practical art, rhetoric, which is known for its strategy and (less kindly) its guile. However, rhetoric also helps us understand the workings of non-strategic communication as well, for as a human construction, communication is laden with motive. The most innocent (or poetic, or artful, or personal, or witless, or philosophical, etc.) of communication is, nonetheless, interpreted as the product and process of human action, as something *addressed*. And we need to understand its rhetorical function. I hope these brief remarks will contribute to that understanding.

Works Cited

- Bryant, Donald C. "Rhetoric: Its Functions and Its Scope." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 39 (1953): 401-24.
- Burke, Kenneth. *Collected Poems: 1915-1967*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968.
- Burke, Kenneth. *Conversations with Kenneth Burke*. Iowa City, IA: Department of Communication Studies, University of Iowa, 1987. (A series of videotaped interviews with Kenneth Burke.)
- Burke, Kenneth. *A Grammar of Motives*. 1945. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.
- Burke, Kenneth. *A Rhetoric of Motives*. 1950. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.
- Fisher, Walter R. *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archeology of Discourse*.
- Nelson, John S., Allen Megill, and Donald N. McCloskey. "Rhetoric of Inquiry." In *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences: Language and Argument in Scholarship and Public Affairs*, edited by John S. Nelson, Allen Megill, and Donald N. McCloskey, 3-18. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1987.
- Okabe, Roichi. "Cultural Assumptions of East and West: Japan and the United States." In *The Rhetoric of Western Thought*. 8th edit. Eds James L. Golden, Goodwin F. Berquist, William E. Coleman, and J. Michael Sproule. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Pub., 2004. 479-92.
- Osborn, Michael. "Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric: The Light-Dark Family." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 53 (1967): 115-26.
- Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. "The Solitude of Self." 1892. In *Man Cannot Speak for Her: Key Texts of the Early Feminists*. Vol. II. Compiled by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell. Westport, CN: Praeger, 1989. 371-84.
- Toulmin, Stephen. *The Uses of Argument*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958.
- White, Hayden. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980): 5-27.