Functions and Characteristics of Verbal Discourse:
From Rhetoric to Anthropology

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The essay describes a common research field between rhetoric and anthropology composed by these elements: (1) the forms and model of verbal language; (2) the analysis of the peculiar properties of orality; (3) the elements of distinction between orality and literacy; (4) the study of factors and conditions that make the spoken word effective, and in the fact that it can exercise persuasive power over the people to whom it is addressed. These topics have been analyzed by prominent authors such as Gorgias, Aristotle, Cicero, Perelman, Goody, Lévi-Strauss.

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A Common Field of Study

Rhetoric and anthropology are certainly two very heterogeneous disciplines, in terms of both field of exploration and methodologies adopted. Nonetheless, they present a few common elements that are of great interest and importance, to the point that we can delineate a sphere of reflection and application that pertains to both. The first common element concerns the forms and modes of verbal language. For rhetoric as an art of discourse, since its foundation and successively following Aristotle's systematisation of it, the central reference point was oral discourse, although as a science or an art, it was and had to be a product of writing. The focus of its interest is public speech or oratory, which for centuries, even in chirographic and typographic cultures, remained the paradigm of all types of discourse, including writing. After all, even the celebrated discourses of Latin rhetoricians like Cicero were conceived to be pronounced orally, sharing the same space and the same time with the listener even long after they were transcribed. In fact, in that era it was not common practice for orators to employ or refer to a written text as they spoke before an audience, as they were supposed to demonstrate their ability to keep their discourse firmly in mind and to utilize it without difficulty. *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, the first work of rhetoric written in Latin between 86 and 92 B.C., considers memory—the capacity to hold present in one's mind arguments, words, and their proper arrangement—one of the abilities that an orator must have (Mortara Garavelli, 2011, p. 36). To put it bluntly, the need for a written text was considered a sign of incompetence (Ong, 1977, pp. 56-58). Even the founder of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure, drew attention to the primacy of oral discourse, which lies at the basis of all verbal communication (Saussure, 1962, p. 35).

Analogously, for anthropology, oral expression has been a privileged field of exploration because it can exist, and in fact has prevalently existed, independently of writing, while writing cannot do without the spoken word: The verbal element is to write what foundations are to a building. The oral element is a language's natural habitat, so writing must be considered a secondary modelling system that depends on the primary system of

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spoken language (Ong, 1982, p. 26). Much field research carried out by anthropologists has focused on oral societies, and numerous reflections, beginning with Goody's fundamental essay (1981), have dealt with the comparison between dynamics of primary oral verbalisation and written verbalisation, as well as changes in mental and social structures brought about by the introduction of writing. For example, in oral societies that have no means of recording or writing down things that happen, people can only think of the past in a very simple way: Some try to memorise the names of their fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers and so on to refer to the past, and others carve markings on a tree trunk or a stick to be able to count backwards and thus calculate past seasons (Mead, 1962, p. 10).

It is true that human beings communicate using their entire sensory sphere, and that non-verbal communication is rich and varied (Leith, 2011, pp. 73-80). But it is equally true that articulated sound is fundamental for language (Ong, 1977, pp. 1-9). The fundamental orality of language is a stable characteristic: We do not know when man began to speak, but it was surely tens of thousands of years ago, and man used only the oral form of language for a very long time; words were only spoken and heard. Not until around 4,000 years before Christ did man feel the need to set down words, which led to the birth of the first writings on stone, wood, or clay tablets, mainly for religious and economic reasons (De Mauro, 1980, pp. 9-13). In any case, of the thousands of languages spoken over the course of human history, only a small minority have had writing and literature, and even today, hundreds of languages in current use have never been written.

Orality and Literacy

The analysis of the peculiar properties of orality is a particularly interesting and fertile field of research for those who intend to study forms and modes of human cultures. Ong (1982, p. 65 ff) identified a few characteristics of thought, and consequently of expression, in an oral culture. The first lies in privileging a paratactic pattern that corresponds to the use of an additive style based on polysyndeton, in which the redundant and iterative element is helpful for the memorisation of themes on which to expound in speech. Writing, on the other hand, favours a hypotactic modality that makes use of analytical, rational subordination, in which *variatio* is preferred over repetition. The redundancy effect pertains to epanalepsis and paronomasia, rhetorical figures that have in fact always been widely used in folk proverbs, liturgies, and rituals. Epanalepsis redoubles the expression by repeating it at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of a textual segment. Between the repeated words we might find vocatives, interjections, and conjunctions (Mortara Garavelli, 2010, pp. 129-131). Paronomasia is a different case, a linguistic game that presents a combination of words with a minimal variation of sound (and thus not a repetition) but a significant difference in meaning. And it is due to this deviation between expression and content that the figure draws the receiver's attention. It is standard practice to distinguish between apophonic and isophonic paronomasia: In the former, the game is based on aphonia, i.e. the vocalic alternation in the root of the word, as in the Italian proverb "chi non risica non rosica"; in the latter, the key element is isophonia, i.e. the sameness of the sounds on which the accent of the word falls, as in the saying "traduttore\traditore" (ivi: 74-76).

The second property has to do with the fact that in an oral culture, aggregative forms of expression are preferred over analytical ones, so groups of words like epithets or periphrasis are inserted into discourse. Periphrasis can be considered "a synonym in multiple terms" (ivi: 29), and its governing principle is the equivalence of meaning; it differs from a definition in that it is used in place of an expression and not in its presence. Once these expressions are crystalised and have entered into common use, it is considered useful to leave them unaltered and never break them up. As Lévi-Strauss wrote (1966, p. 267), the way reasoning is

perceived in oral cultures is always totalising and conservative, because knowledge is precious and the mind is the sole depository in which it can be conserved; this is why wise old people who specialise in conserving knowledge and telling stories about the past are so highly esteemed.

The third property refers to the fact that in oral cultures, abstraction takes a backseat to the experiential and situational element, which is preferred and utilised in most cases; in this way, knowledge becomes an integral part of concrete experience. The very meaning of a word, not being set down in dictionaries, is controlled by what Goody and Watt call "direct semantic ratification", i.e. by always making reference to situations and contexts from real life in which that word is utilised. In this case, the referential function of the discourse is central. Oral cultures tend to use concepts in situational and operative spheres of reference. For example, according to research carried out by Lurija (1976), illiterate people interviewed tended to identify geometric figures not with abstract names (circle, square, triangle, etc.) but with the names of everyday objects: Depending on the person, a circle was called a dish, a clock, or a moon, and a square was a mirror, a door, or a board. Keeping to this general theme, there is another profound difference, compared with written cultures where both the development of reasoning and the semantic processes of historical-natural languages are by their very constitution dependent on abstraction. For example, all of the words we use are general—even a concrete term like "tree" does not refer simply to this tree that exists in reality and that I am looking at now, but to an abstract, general concept that can be applied to every tree that exists, a general class based on common traits into which all trees can fit precisely because we make an abstraction of particular elements that these entities have in nature (Prato, 2012, pp. 66-70): "the classification that lies at the basis of general names does not reflect a natural classification of things" (Formigari, 1981, p. 66).

The fourth and final property involves both the agonistic element and the emphatic way of representing events. In the first case, we are dealing with a dimension of conflict, which in oral cultures is always in the foreground, since proverbs and riddles are used not only to stimulate memory, but also to challenge listeners to respond with a more appropriate one, or a contradictory one: Verbal battles are frequent and celebrated. The agonistic element in turn constitutes the primary factor in any rhetorical discourse, in which the orator is never alone, but is always presented in competition with an adversary who supports an opposing point of view. Thus the figure of antithesis, which "is the linguistic equivalent of the argumentative technique of contradiction" (Prato, 2012, p. 20) is often used. In the second case, we can see the extent to which oral discourse, in order to affect and sway the interlocutor to one's own side, is based on identification with the object of the discourse, and not on objectivity and personal detachment as is typical of writing. This is why prosopopoeia and hyperbole are often employed (Prato, 2021). The first, congenial to fable-telling and anecdotes, brings the inanimate to life, humanising abstract concepts, feelings, or natural elements; the second tends to amplify and exaggerate the representation of what is being communicated. To achieve its aim, hyperbole must maintain a connection to reality even as it goes beyond reality: We can use the expressions "to drown in a glass of water" because we know that in our experience one can drown in water. In any case, it is the discursive context that determines interpretation of the figure (Mortara Garavelli, 2010, p. 31).

A further element of distinction between orality and writing lies in the fact that for a literate person, words can be "seen"—they are similar to things, and can be "looked for", in a dictionary, for example. If literate people were asked to think of the word "notwithstanding", they would probably think of how the word is written, and it would thus prove difficult for them to think only of its sound. The power of writing is such that a literate person cannot totally recapture the sense of what that word means for those immersed in a primarily oral culture (Ong,

1982, p. 31). Use of the expression "oral literature" should thus be avoided, as it suggests the utterly reductive concept of oral tradition as a variant of writing.

Words without writing have no visual presence; they are only sounds that can be recalled or remembered, but not looked for. They are not located in a space; rather, they are events. The Hebrew term "dabar" means both word and event (ivi: 60). Malinowski observed that for primitive peoples, language is more a mode of action than a marker of thought. So it is not surprising that nearly all peoples with oral traditions attribute great power to words: One cannot emit sound without somehow exercising a form of power, and every sound is dynamic. This power has often been considered magical, and words are associated with magic in that they are actions, events. Oral peoples think of names as entities that have power over things, which demonstrates that a reflection on *logos* was in existence even before the rise of Greek philosophy.

Calling something by name means creating. Words can create and destroy; a curse spoken in some circumstances proves inescapable; a word can determine a fate, i.e. the thing said: The term *fatum* is derived from the Latin *fari* which means "say" or "speak" (Seppilli, 1962, p. 17). In Sumerian theology, it is said that the god of water creates by means of the word, and the power of the word is proclaimed in numerous hymns called *Enem*—that is, "word". And of course, the myth of the creating word is found in Christian tradition as well: think of the passage in *Genesis* (I, 50) that reads "God called the light Day and the darkness he called Night. Evening came, and then morning: the first day". The power of the word is also indicated in terms of its possible therapeutic effect, underscored by Lévi-Strauss (1966, p. 168) in reference to the case in which a sick person is healed not by touching his body or administering some drug, but simply by means of the suggestion conjured up by the word that narrativizes an event (the healing) that in reality has never happened. Forms of ritual, myths, and rites of passage are constructed on the basis of this suasive power of the spoken word (Lewis, 1976, pp. 115-134).

But at the same time, we must underscore the fragility of words, which is due to the nature of sound and its peculiar relationship with time: The spoken word exists as it is dying; it cannot be held, it cannot be revisited, and it is perishable, impalpable, fragile, evanescent. This has significant repercussions on ways of thinking, which in this case must be structured, as we have seen, in the form or repetitions, formulas, set phrases, proverbs, and the like; since there are no texts and one cannot take notes, one must think in mnemonic modules created specifically for quick oral recovery, so thought tends to be rhythmic, exploiting alliterations and assonances as memory aids. In fact, law is conserved in formulas that are not mere exterior decoration but the very essence of jurisprudence.

Persuasive Function of Language

At this point we can delve into another element, in addition to interest in orality and relationships with writing, that is common to rhetoric and anthropology and that allows us to construct a common field of reflection for the two disciplines: the interest in the study of factors and conditions that make the spoken word effective, and in the fact that it can exercise persuasive power over the people to whom it is addressed. This persuasive function—the phenomenon by which, without any type of coercion, people are induced to support an opinion, to adopt a behaviour that was not usual for them before, or in some cases, to alter an opinion about something they believed in or a behaviour with which they identified strongly—has naturally always been the focus of interest for scholars of rhetoric (from Aristotle to Perelman and beyond), but is also very much present in the work of one of the most important exponents of anthropological research, Lévi-Strauss.

Gorgias of Leontinoi (485-375 B.C. circa) dealt on several occasions with the idea of the power of the spoken word. He has been born in Sicily and has been a pupil of Empedocles, and has moved to Athens in 427 B.C. With Gorgias, rhetoric began to widen its field of analysis from the strictly judiciary sphere to forms of literary discourse like the elegy and the panegyric, which were the types of discourse he had a particular talent for. Among the sophists, Gorgias is the only author of whom a few works have survived intact; the best-known and most discussed of them is undoubtedly the *Encomium of Helen*. The entire work is a demonstration of the power of the word, which is capable—through opportune even if incorrect use—of turning the tide of public opinion to its liking, exploiting the potency of eloquence which acts upon the intellect and the emotions of those it addresses: "speech is a powerful master which, with the smallest, virtually invisible body achieves absolutely divine feats: in fact, it has the power to stop fear, relieve pain, spark joy and increase pity" (Diels & Kranz, 2006, p. 1633).

In short, the story of Helen and Paris is a pretext for a more general reflection on the power of language (Reboul, 1991, pp. 32-33). Here, Gorgias explains the power of persuasion, in words that we still find letter-perfect today:

> It would be possible to see the force of persuasion, which does not have the form of necessity, but does have the same power. For speech that is successful in persuading a soul forces that soul to trust in what was said, and to approve of what was done (…) Persuasion, added to speech, shapes the soul at will. (Diels & Kranz, 2006, p. 1635)

The efficaciousness of speech—what Jakobson calls its conative function (Kucera, 1983; Manetti & Fabris, 2006, pp. 32-33), i.e. the way in which the source tends to act on the addressee, which might be pragmatic if configured as a "making someone do something", or cognitive if it is a "making someone believe something"—depends on the *kairós*, the orator's capacity to adapt to different circumstances and to time, to keep track of the context in which his speech unfolds in order to know what is opportune behaviour at that moment. The circumstances comprise the states of mind of both the speaker and his listener, as well as the time, the place, and the occasion of his speech. He must know the various rules of speech to avoid contravening opportuneness, and to appropriately vary his elocution, choosing forms in consonance with the situation.

The *kairós* is a fundamental element of rhetoric for Aristotle as well, and is in turn closely linked with polytropia, or the fact of mastering different means of expression concerning a given subject. The epitome of this linguistic power was Ulysses, who possessed it among his various attributes. This capacity was viewed by the sophists as a distinct sign of wisdom, while it was considered a sign of ignorance to adopt the same form of speech with listeners of different mentalities and expectations. Regarding the concept of *kairós*, rhetoric was similar to medicine, in that the healing of the sick also had to take the circumstances into account, considering the various predispositions and different physical and psychological conditions of sick people.

In the *Encomium of Helen*, Gorgias sets himself the objective of exonerating Helen, Menelaus' wife, from the terrible culpability of having caused the bloody Trojan war by abandoning her husband to follow Paris to Troy. To explain her behaviour, Gorgias presents a series of hypotheses according to which Helen was not really guilty of provoking the conflict between the Greeks and the Trojans; in fact, all of the hypotheses Gorgias proposes concern only causes beyond her will, none of which take into consideration the possibility that Helen betrayed her husband and fled by her own choice. Helen was innocent because the motive behind her gesture was outside the realm of her responsibility: a divine decree (Helen could not oppose fate), an action of force (Helen was kidnapped), an irresistible persuasion (she had been convinced by Paris' words), or an emotional involvement

(she was swept away by passion). Note that all four of these hypotheses meet the condition of Helen's innocence and thus constitute a petitio principii, or petition of principle, i.e., a strategy of argumentation that takes as a given the thesis it would in fact need to demonstrate, limiting itself to enunciating said thesis; it is the driver of the construction of prejudice. All of the possible causes to which Gorgias attributes Helen's behaviour are those that, in effect, exonerate her; the hypothesis that Helen may have absconded of her own free will is not even taken into consideration, because it does not fit into the thesis held to be valid without any demonstration.

Conclusion

The study of factors and conditions that make the spoken word effective is very important and it has many elements in common with the other topics we have discussed: (1) the forms and model of verbal language; (2) the analysis of the peculiar properties of orality; (3) The elements of distinction between orality and literacy. The power of word is even more evident with the petition of principle: If, generally speaking, an argumentation is an expression of reasoning in the course of which one intends to provide reasons supporting a given assertion, taking into consideration the possible counter-arguments that must be refuted, then the petition of principle is a flawed form of argumentation because it is limited to dealing only with explanations that confirm the speaker's hypotheses, intentionally ignoring all others. Despite its evident unsoundness, this type of argumentation may, however, prove to be persuasive if the listener is unaware of the logical error being presented. The question of the persuasive power of speech is thus an important one, because it concerns our critical reasoning capacity, without which we lose both the possibility of resolving problems that may be simple but not intuitive, and our ability to judge things independently.

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