Defining Rhetoric for Democratic Purposes

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Abstract

The writer tried to define rhetoric for democracy based on thoughts from Amossy, Burke, Hawhee and Rubinelli's works. Through study, the writer believes that for democracy, rhetoric can be defined as as using language or other media with rhetoric energy to construct pisteis to persuade people in a given political society. Such definition can adapt democratic purpose considering its emphasis on language.

Keywords

Rhetoric; Democracy; Terministic Screens.

1. Introduction

Rhetoric can be defined for various purposes. For literature, it may refer to a figure of language; for linguistics, it may mean a special way to recognize the world. But when it comes to democratic purpose, it can be defined using language or other media with rhetoric energy to construct pisteis to persuade people in a given political society.

To illustrate this definition, the first and foremost thing is to explain what is the role of language in this definition. Here, Burke's "Terministic Screens" theory can be quoted. For Burke, language can shape people's ideas, thoughts, and cognition of the world. Since each term has its own emphasis even it shares similar meanings with other terms, it can set up specific "screens" through which people can generate different opinions, attitudes, or even take opposite actions to the same thing. As Burke said, "We must use terministic screens since we can't say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another."(Burke, 50)

2. Case Description

An example of it could be the comparison of news report reflecting Hong Kong protests in 2016. While Chinese mainstream media like People's Daily reported it as "illegal gathering", western news agencies like the Guardian referred to it as "pro-democratic protests" (Han). Though these words were both describing a same thing and even correctly pointed out what was physically happening in Hong Kong, the differences in language still constructed different screens, through which readers from China and the UK could generate totally different attitudes on it.

Based on the analysis above, it has been demonstrated that terms and language can build up screens, via which people can have different ideas, attitudes to the addresser and the objective things. However, these illustrations are just considered language as the only media for conducting rhetoric. If so, the range of rhetoric and persuasion would be limited since there are still many situations in which rhetoric and persuasion can be achieved without the help of languages.

For the media to conduct rhetoric, language should not be the only one. According to Hawhee, communication, which is figured as the transmission of energy, can not only be achieved by language but also can be achieved by a greater range of logos from movements to sensations

(Hawhee, 42). Hawhee used rhetoric energy to explain animal's rhetoric, while such theories can also be used to explain human rhetoric. Just like language and terms which can generate screens, for movements, sensations, and the logos shared by humans and animals, all of them can also generate specific screens to construct specific meanings for the objective things. For instance, if someone sees two women laughing and crying respectively in two pictures, he or she probably deems that the laughing woman is experiencing happiness and the crying woman is experiencing sadness, while in fact both two women are experiencing happiness while the crying woman was weeping tears of joy. Here, two women's expressions are just like two different screens through which the audience gets two opposite conclusions even though two women were expressing the same thing. As a result, Burke's "Terministic Screen" theories can be implied to any media of communication that contains rhetoric energy.

Since that the media of rhetoric could be the thing with rhetoric energy has been illustrated, it is time to talk about how could these media become the bricks and mortar of persuasion by making up pisteis. According to Aristotle, pisteis is means of persuasion, which can be categorized from entechnic proofs (like pathos, ethos, and logos) to atechnic proofs(like potential speaker or witness in the court) (Aristotle, 31). Here, whether for atechnic proofs or entechnic proofs, they all need languages, movements, or other media with rhetoric energy to construct themselves. For entechnic proofs, they are just perfect instances for terministic screens since using entechnic proofs to persuade others share the same essence with terministic screens. Whether for ethos, pathos, or logos, when addressers want to use them, fundamentally they always have to consider what words should be picked up or what gestures or expressions should be acted to make them more credible, respectable, or logical, which could also be interpreted as what media with rhetoric energy should be used to create specific screens to make audience generate the specific attitudes towards the thing that the addressers are talking about. For atechnic proofs, though they could be objective, they still need media with rhetoric energy to illustrate or define themselves, in which the media with rhetoric energy can still shape these atechnic proofs' meaning.

Of course, premises for media with rhetoric energy to made up pisteis to persuade also exist. For the premises, in my definition, I limited it to a given political society. Here, a given political society means a society in which people share similar social contexts, doxa, and ideology. According to Aristotle, if rhetoric will be used for debates and persuasion around a specific topic, both the addressers and the audience should share "Koinon", or a degree of commonality (Aristotle, 84). Here, Aristotle believed that people must first understand and accept the common knowledge of a topic, then one can move into understanding the specifics and analyzing those. Amossy pointed out that all arguments have some accepted facts or assumptions that audience knows certain things. She also emphasized the importance of doxa, "a coherent and structured entity characterizing a certain state of society"(Amossy, 471), and the ideology, "the very nature of doxa as a set of collective opinions and beliefs coexisting in a given state of society"(Amossy, 471). Both of them, to a certain extent, believed that detailed persuasion with rhetoric can only happen in a society with common acknowledgment generally. It would be the premise for effective rhetoric happening. For instance, when an American and a Chinese person are asked what democracy is, their answers will be very different. The American will most likely say that democracy is a multi-party system, one person, one vote, and separation of powers, while the Chinese will most likely say that democracy is a system of people's congresses, a government that represents the interests of the majority, and the principle of collectivism. Their different perceptions of the term democracy fundamentally stem from the different social contexts in which they live and the different ideologies they possess. This difference also determines that it would be very challenging for them to persuade each other on specific topics of democracy effectively since the premise of rhetoric does not exist.

Till now, my definition of rhetoric has been illustrated, and the last thing would be to explain why such definition could be useful for democratic politics. The whole structure of my definition is based on Burke's "terministic screens" theory, and language or terms and other things with rhetoric energy naturally have unseparated relation with democratic politics. Using language as an example, as Rubinelli pointed out, "civic life was never, and never will be, without rhetoric because the language of politics is essentially rhetorical"(Rubinelli, 27). In ancient Greek, Aristotle divided rhetoric into three species based on ancient Anthene's democratic political situations: deliberative, judicial, and epideictic(Aristotle, 48), and all of them had their specific language requirements. Deliberative speaking usually requires the speaker to achieve exhortation or dissuasion, and its language would require the features of future; Judicial speaking usually requires the speaker to conduct accusation or defense, and its language would require the features of the past; Epideictic speaking usually requires the speaker to praise or blame someone, and its language would require the features of the present. These language requirements here essentially reflect the requirements of different screens generated by different terms for different democratic political situations. When the languages and terms could be used appropriately, rhetoric for the good can be constructed and so democratic politics can be developed positively. On the country, if the languages and terms would be used inappropriately, rhetoric for the bad would be built and democratic politics would be modified to a negative way, or even would step into death. A classic instance of it would be the death of Socrates. Socrates was sentenced to death by ecclesia, one of the charges being his opposition to democracy. But in fact, Socrates himself was innocent and did not deserve the death penalty, and his death itself could be seen as the loss of ancient Greek democracy. It was just the Athenian democratic body, ecclesia, that sentenced him to death in the name of democracy. In this instance, the term democracy was misused, since, in judicial situations, the only criterion for sentencing should be jurisprudence, not the simple democracy model in which people's death is simply decided by simply voting.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, based on the writer's understanding and the help of Aristotle, Amossy, Burke, Hawhee and Rubinelli's works, I define rhetoric as using languages or other things with rhetoric energy to construct pisteis to persuade people in a given political society. To be specific, languages and things with rhetoric energy can generate screens that can influence people's attitudes and opinions to the objective matters, and the pisteis made from them can, as a result, reach the effectiveness of persuasion. A given political society, determined by its doxa or ideology, can set the boundaries of rhetoric and determines its effectiveness. It's useful to politics, especially democratic, because it emphasizes the importance of languages and other media with rhetoric energy. Whether they are used properly and directly decides the development of democracy.

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