

Rhetoric, discourse and the hermeneutics of public speech

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Abstract

What insights and advantages do rhetorical approaches offer over other methods of exploring social and political discourse? This article aims to clarify the contribution of rhetorical analysis by exploring its distinctive, hermeneutic attention to public speech. Public speaking is, accordingly, viewed as a practice of assembling meaningful interpretations in specific situations. Central here is a temporal dimension. Analysing rhetoric involves grasping discourse, on the one hand, as concretely situated in response to proximate constraints and, on the other hand, as a medium to move beyond the situation towards a future. Following John Caputo's reading of Derrida, I argue that, examined rhetorically, public speech enacts a 'negotiation' of past and future, intertwining conditional – and hence partially calculable – positions with an 'unconditional promise' to prepare for what comes. Although compatible with other approaches, rhetorical analysis is uniquely attuned to this intrinsically ethical and political quality of discursive action.

Keywords

Caputo, Derrida, discourse, hermeneutics, temporality

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Introduction

What does rhetorical enquiry bring to the analysis of political discourse that other approaches do not? What is it to explore something called 'rhetoric' when more elaborate theories of discourse are readily available? Rhetorical analysis, I will argue, is attuned to fundamental, *hermeneutic* dimensions of discourse, that is, to its qualities as an activity of assembling and re-assembling the meaning of a situation. Where systematic analyses of discourse seek out generic patterns that align to wider problematics (such as power relations, social struggles, or linguistic communities), rhetorical enquiry takes as its initial object the particular 'moves' and strategies that generate, innovate and mobilise such discourses and give them singular expression. Where 'discourse' refers abstractly to the general domain of signs and symbolic exchanges, 'rhetoric' specifies quite determinate techniques, devices and strategies.

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Rhetorical analysis is, of course, compatible with other approaches to discourse and contributes productively to their application. But it starts out by exploring discourse at a finer scale than many discourse theories, observing the formulations and gestures of concrete ‘performances’. Here, it reveals its origins in the ancient study of public speech and oratory, with a focus on practical rather than theoretical knowledge. Rhetoric named and classified the many observable, yet flexible, formulations of words and symbols employed in delivering verbal arguments on particular occasions. Speakers were instructed to give attention to an occasion’s practical purposes, its peculiar conventions, and the character of its audiences, each of which was perceived to constrain the proper organisation of discourse.

Today rhetoric applies well beyond the paradigm of individual speakers and live, verbal speech to include forms of writing, imagery, and non-live communications, frequently consumed by audiences in ways other than attendance at formal occasions. Nonetheless, rhetoric’s unique focus on how meaning is figured for practical contexts by selecting known expressions and using repeatable techniques gives it enduring value for examining public discourse, which remains replete with speakers giving speeches, defending and challenging arguments, gesturing allegiances and making verbal announcements. These are certainly not the only types or scales of discourse at work in politics, for sure, but I will focus primarily on speech events because they constitute vital moments in the active generation and circulation of political meaning.

More than merely adding granularity to more encompassing theories, however, rhetorical enquiry also illuminates the ‘risky’ and open-ended nature of discursive action that other approaches frequently underplay. Speech interventions – whether verbal, textual, visual or some combination – are never guaranteed to work and never permanently fix meaning. That is precisely why they rely on certain conventions or known formulations in the first place. Political speakers undertake to negotiate the available gaps between convention and exception – between, that is, received interpretations and the invention of wholly new stances. Occupying that ‘in-between’ space, rhetorical activity recasts convention by exposing it, in varying degrees, to a more-or-less subtle ‘play’ so as to provoke new ways of thinking, speaking or acting. This, I want to suggest, aligns rhetorical analysis with what John Caputo, following Jacques Derrida, has called a ‘radical hermeneutics’, for which making ‘interpretations’ occurs against an unconditional temporal opening to the future. Because of its attention to specific situations, rhetorical enquiry encourages us to ask how – and how effectively – public speech negotiates the present and the future. More than other approaches to discourse, I claim, rhetorical study foregrounds the ethical risk and responsibility of speech as a means to encounter the unknown.

Rhetoric or discourse analysis?

Contemporary analysts have a rich variety of approaches to explore and explain the workings of public speech. These include nuanced accounts of political ideology, approaches to language and discourse drawn from linguistics, media studies, literary theory, and various theoretical methods such as ‘poststructuralist’ conceptions of power and identity (see, *inter alia*, Charteris-Black, 2014; Howarth, 2000; Mills, 1997; Reisigl and Wodak, 2001). Such approaches offer impressive, encompassing frameworks that highlight conceptual patterns and associations, formal and informal textual strategies, and the wider power struggles that shape, and are shaped by, public speech and communication. Despite many differences of emphasis, all acknowledge that the statements, arguments, and narratives

through which policies, perspectives, and disagreements communicate are fashioned in symbolic relations that enable and constrain the expression of meaning. They share an appreciation of speech as a form of ‘discourse’ – a complex system of often implicit, socially held coordinates governing the formulation of meaning.

In key respects, these approaches are distinctly modern inventions: they emerge from a modern preoccupation with the *social* domain (rather than sacred texts, or inherited custom and tradition alone) as the ultimate horizon of meaning, one that is intrinsically open to variation and revision. Nonetheless, they are indebted to the historical tradition of rhetorical enquiry dating back to ancient Greece and Rome in as much as they focus on argumentative constructs and the mutual interplay of different positions and techniques. For example, the analysis of political ideologies explores conceptual constellations supporting argumentative traditions (see Freedon, 1996); ‘critical discourse analysis’ draws from linguistics but, in some instances, validates rational deliberation as a normative model (see Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012); and ‘poststructuralist’ discourse theories frequently highlight metaphors in political discourse (see Laclau, 2014). Although these approaches engage, sometimes closely, with rhetorical themes and concepts, they focus on exemplary motifs rather than the full range of its techniques and devices. Discourse tends to be conceived inclusively, but rather abstractly, and defined by generalising specific rhetorical motifs as the pivot on which discursive systems balance: for example, enduring ideological contests, linguistic repertoires, or struggles over identity.

The rhetorical tradition, however, lacks a single theoretical framework of its own. Its insights are not organised around an abstract theory of society but, rather, are culled from a multiplicity of observations and customs across more than 2000 years (see Herrick, 2005). There are numerous traditions supporting these insights, but few offer generic or systematic accounts of discourse ‘as such’. Rather, they mirror the shared, but also widely divergent, preoccupations of instructors and speakers in elite contexts that, in most instances, have long since passed away or transformed: public law courts, participatory democratic assemblies, and numerous popular ceremonies (see Pernot, 2015; Vickers, 1988). The rhetorical tradition’s approaches to speech are not that of a modern social science – with the goals of objectivity, expertise and ‘critique’ (see Felski, 2015) – but, rather, forms of civic instruction and its associated ‘practical wisdom’. The reason for knowing how to speak in public settings was to pass on, improve and promote effective speech in the polis. Ancient rhetoricians were usually instructors, not academic analysts or critics. By consequence, the knowledge they imparted presupposed environments where the display of attention to communal bonds, and the performed fashioning of selfhood in their light, was self-evidently valuable and allocated greater ethical significance than it is today. Also, to speak publicly, and to do so effectively, was not just a communal obligation, it was often a strategy of survival in highly competitive contexts. In ancient Greece and Rome, as Habinek (2005: 6–7) points out, public oratory staged struggles over the allocation of ‘honour’ and ‘shame’, where ‘silencing’ one’s opponent could often result in their personal ruin. Rhetorical advice may have sometimes invoked grand ideals, but it was acutely sensitive to what worked and what didn’t.

Contemporary rhetorical enquiry’s roots in the humanistic observation of speech practices, not in social theory, means its practical focus may appear narrower than the scope of the modern social sciences – on concrete strategies in very particular historical contexts rather than on meaning and symbols generally – and bound up with ethical assumptions that can seem very un-modern. These features are sometimes regarded as evidence of the weakness of rhetoric as a body of knowledge. The relative absence of theoretical

grounding to rhetorical enquiry, argued Plato in a criticism that has endured, deprives it of a 'universal' philosophical or moral basis for critical judgement. Likewise, its assumed ethical orientation is often perceived as flimsy, highly variable and therefore open to cynical abuse. Yet, this flexibility is also a strength. There is scope in rhetorical enquiry for a universalising approach to argument (see Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969) and for critical social enquiry (see Mckerrow, 1989). Tellingly, instructors of speech and communication, speech writers, and politicians still look to the practical knowledge of rhetoric as a body of examples and insights – rather than to complex and specialist discourse theories – precisely because of this concrete, mobile and civically attuned character.

We might well ask, then, what rhetorical enquiry brings to the study of public speech given these differences and specificities. Without roots in social theory, is it more than just a summary of speaking habits for different occasions? What deeper input, if any, can it provide? Below I want to claim that attention to rhetoric does indeed offer valuable resources for studying political behaviour, which can complement more encompassing theories of discourse. But it also provides a distinct perspective that contrasts with such theories' tendency to generalise around certain themes. That, however, requires we appreciate rhetorical enquiry has a distinct hermeneutic focus, namely the 'moves' that assemble and reassemble meaning in particular situations.

Situated interpretations

Public speech and communication are rarely included under the lofty label 'hermeneutics'. More often than not, such discourse is associated with partisan bickering, manoeuvring for positions of personal or party advantage, even ideological posturing – in short, contests for power and influence. Hermeneutics, by contrast, explores practices of textual interpretation and, as a branch of philosophy, is associated with weighty and rigorous enquiries into law, theology or aesthetics, where the question is how to understand the meaning of specific statements against a backdrop of received intellectual and textual traditions (see Grondin, 1994). Public discourse, by contrast, is – not unreasonably – perceived as the immediate flux of events, superficial opinions and disagreements, not statements of enduring significance to be closely deciphered. Yet such discourse involves making interpretations, too, and not all are reducible to tactical power contests. Public speech encompasses political disputation and campaigning but also diplomatic speech, formal statements and press encounters, memorial discourse and eulogies, confessional revelations, critical interrogations in public committees, legal clarifications and, increasingly, informal observations and interventions on social media. These draw upon traditions of thought, styles of address, and apply concepts and arguments, as well as reinvest ideas with practical or moral significance and are irreducible simply to one type of speech alone.

Hermeneutics originally concerned how meaning is translated from one context to another, often where inherited truths and authorities must be brought to bear on new circumstances and problems. As a theory of meaning, it makes explicit the choices and conventions by which, in established fields of interpretation, we understand (or not) claims to 'truth' about the world. Zimmerman (2015: 10–15) usefully identifies three guiding principles in hermeneutic reflection: first, that human subjects are deeply bound up with their social and material worlds, not separate 'minds' sealed off from their environments. We are inescapably immersed in interpretive traditions and conventions that mediate our experiences and assign them meaning and value. Second, our capacity to

reason and determine truth is therefore never disengaged but always projected by way of the meanings we inherit that shape our practical encounters. Truth is not a ‘discovery’ about things ‘out there’ but an *event* that inhabits us and projects us forward. And third, we find and transmit this truth primarily by way of language, which, via vocabularies and concepts, metaphors and symbols, insert our reception of the unfamiliar into established ‘horizons’ of meaning. For the hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989: 385–391), famously, reaching understanding is properly grasped not as the achievement of accurate description but as an ongoing ‘conversation’, or dialogue, whereby we adjust and expand our conceptual and aesthetic horizons to encompass new perspectives.

Public speech might well be conceived as part of this ongoing interpretive conversation, even if hermeneutic philosophers have tended to set it apart. What is distinctive, however, is the apparent primacy of an *immediate* situation. Public debates and arguments are preoccupied less with ‘deep’ historical or universal meanings (as would be scholars of jurisprudence or art historians, for example) but with the practical significance of their pronouncements in the short run. For critics, that is precisely the problem: politicians compete to determine the course of events by purposefully ‘stretching’ truths and over- or understating problems to shape the situation in ways that, ultimately, favour their own quests for power – accusations that are currently made around, for instance, climate change, security threats, or the advantages of major policy changes such as Brexit.

Often, then, public discourse seems less a hermeneutical conversation than a crude struggle for attention or domination. Conflicts of interpretation and a tendency to mutual disruption, rather than dialogue, are frequent – as President Trump’s abundant stream of Tweets readily demonstrate. Yet, even if we acknowledge the public realm as a locus of competition, the interpretations at work are rarely reducible to some passing effervescence. Rather, they seek an enduring impact by orienting themselves towards a situation *in the present*, utilising what Aristotle (2018: 6) called the ‘possible means of persuasion’ to retrieve opportunities for the future and thereby to generate coalitions of interests and partial forms of consensus as platforms for policy. Rhetoric’s focus is therefore not on the superficial or ephemeral aspects of discourse (as is often decried) so much as on how meaning is figured in any instance to define a situation and determine its unfolding consequences.

My suggestion here, then, is that the focus of rhetorical enquiry is on discourse as a practice of meaning-making as it relates to a prevailing situation that both constrains and motivates speech. This lends it a quite distinct hermeneutical orientation. The ‘situation’, as rhetoric scholar Lloyd Bitzer (1968) put it, typically comprises a speaker, audience (or set of audiences), and motivating problem (or ‘exigence’) that, together, impose conditions on how meaning is effectively constructed (see Martin, 2015). I will return to the question of temporality shortly but, for now, we can already see how the situatedness of rhetoric underscores certain hermeneutical particularities. The interpretive process here involves orienting audiences towards an identified problem or circumstance, and not exclusively to a fixed tradition of ideas or doctrine. The latter may certainly be a resource (and hence also a constraint) for speakers but political speech itself involves reformulating such resources anew so that they respond to the present context. Rhetorical enquiry’s attention is on the strategies made in this response. The many and varied choices of argument, genres of address and linguistic styles in rhetoric are interpretative ‘moves’ that foreground problematic aspects of the situation, either in part or in general (e.g. as a crisis, or a failure of policy or leadership) – thereby rendering them meaningful and so amenable to practical resolution (see Finlayson, 2006). For example, in the United

Kingdom's 2019 general election, Conservative leader Boris Johnson's oft-repeated campaign phrase 'Let's Get Brexit Done' addressed the electorate with a simple and clear invitation to resolve a deadlock (Perrigo, 2019). What had been an entrenched and endlessly divisive policy disaster was successfully refigured as a discrete practical hurdle that merely required sufficiently motivated will-power to overcome.

Of course, electoral campaigning lends itself to pithy slogans because it involves a rhetoric aimed at compelling a judgement on the part of the audience. But other types of rhetoric are free of this overt compulsion. Epideictic (or 'display') speech – such as US Presidential inaugurals, memorial orations or award-giving events – comprise ritual occasions that grant speakers platforms to indulge praise or direct blame, define current problems, and selectively invoke common feelings with audiences who, largely, remain passive (Condit, 1985). Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg's recent widely publicised speeches, for example, employ an epideictic form of moral accusation regarding the inescapable urgency of climate change (see Milman, 2019). Here, the display of anger and frustration is itself the message – rather than any new information or insight. Such declamations are now widely consumed and recirculated on social media – from Tweeting to blogging, podcasting and broadcasts on YouTube: digital platforms designed for transmitting personalised responses to situations with observations, characterisations, and emotive expressions that invite 'spontaneous' acclaim from audiences rather than critical judgement.

Understood hermeneutically, then, a rhetorical approach to discourse focuses on interpretative choices formulated within the constraining horizon of a prevailing circumstance. Unlike the traditional concerns of philosophical hermeneutics, however, public speech rarely involves the achievement of 'shared understanding', though it may aspire to. If it does, such understanding remains provisional, unevenly distributed, and vulnerable to disagreement. Unlike expert legal or theological conversations, public disputes and commentary unfold on the assumption that full moral agreement is unlikely, or at least precarious. Political audiences are permanently ready to disagree and disrupt the prospect of consensus, positioning themselves as critics with alternative interpretations and offering contrasting stances. Of course, democratic debate typically occurs within the parameters of a general agreement on *how* to disagree (e.g. within the terms of the law, convention, taste and so on), although even that is open to challenge and variation. The ultimate authority in formal politics, however, tends to be the procedural formation of numerical majorities, not a substantial consensus. That lends political speech, in particular, the positional and conflictual character that makes it distinctive since interpretations retain a partisan nature that can seem deliberately performed for the sake of affirming one side rather than aimed at achieving moral understanding.

For these reasons, we might characterise a hermeneutics of public speech as one of *action* rather than *text*. Although speech is usually expressed in the form of spoken or written text, and arguments draw upon known concepts and doctrines, the overtly positional nature of political dispute means that, in rhetoric, we are dealing not with the strict application of language alone but, rather, the framing of the space of argument itself. Rhetorical speech encourages audiences to perceive their situations from distinct standpoints, thereby disposing them favourably or unfavourably to positions (regarding policy outcomes, moral opinions, events or leaders) that may or may not be announced directly. Making an interpretation of that kind entails judging where to place emphasis, how to characterise an issue, emphasise certain features over others, invoke doubt or certainty, and so on – all of which involves combining manoeuvres that purposively reorder and

subtly transform their objects, rather than simply describing facts or setting out concepts. 'Interpretation' here entails not merely offering a narrative but, rather, *disposing* audiences towards a given meaning of the situation. Rhetoric's interpretive work, we might say, involves dynamic action to shape an audience's confidence about the stance on offer, not always to demonstrate conceptual validity or analytical integrity. That, of course, is why Plato railed against rhetoric since, to him, it appeared more a way to play with feelings and manipulate audience predispositions than to do rigorous philosophy, which reasoned from principles deemed 'eternal'. For others, such as Machiavelli, rhetoric's quality as a form of *doing* politics was precisely what suited it to the public realm (see Fontana, 2009). Far from signalling an offence against the static order of ideas, rhetoric's proclaimed virtue is precisely that it is an activity for turning a situation to one's advantage.

Untimely remarks

If public speech is hermeneutically distinctive in its addressing a practical circumstance, nonetheless it is not exhausted by its situational context, even if rhetorical analysis typically starts from there. A situation is only ever a relatively closed context, unlike a game where various 'moves' are contained within a fixed set of rules that enable degrees of precise calculation. Public and political situations, however, are multifaceted and shifting, forever opening up and closing opportunities for speech, and rarely sealed off from wider, exterior circumstances. Indeed, discourse can itself dramatically alter its own context as certain arguments, ideas, images or vocabularies take hold. By consequence, public speech retains an underlying sense of risk, of acting in precarious conditions where interventions are just as likely to succeed, fail, or have an unforeseen, possibly even detrimental impact. Rhetoric therefore operates not just *in* time but also as a means to *reorganise* time, daring to reorder it so as to make situations amenable to certain kinds of action. In the next section, I will argue that these considerations align rhetoric with what John Caputo calls a 'radical hermeneutics' receptive to the negotiation of conventional interpretations and those that open up to an incalculable future. But first, what does it mean to say that speech has a temporal character?

Although we tend to think of speaking as happening *in* the context of time, or addressing the 'issues of the time', it is also a way to shape time by resetting agendas, foregrounding some opportunities over others, or moving on from past legacies. As well as a response *to* a situation, speech undertakes to transform it, or more precisely, to retrieve possibilities from it that, left unsaid, may otherwise go unrealised. To understand this dimension, we need to think about the relation of language to time, setting aside the commonplace view of speaking as contained within 'objective' or 'linear' time. This is where Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction is instructive.

For Derrida (here following Heidegger), we tend to think of time in terms of 'the present' – that is, as an immediate 'living' moment that, at any time, is directly there before us. Past and future are, in that respect, merely preceding or superseding presents in an infinite linear series. But, Derrida argues, it is impossible to delineate this temporal present without spatially distinguishing it from past and future (or 'non-present') moments. Past and future are never wholly exterior to the present but, rather, non-presences contained within it: there is no pure 'now', no founding 'origin' or a self-same moment that is not marked by differentiation from before or after (see Derrida, 2011). Our measure of time is not therefore strictly neutral or objective but dependent on a 'spatial' inscription that records and thereby inflects it with rhythm, pace, qualities of duration or interruption

that make the present appear by way of what is absent. Rather than a neutral universal backdrop to all events, time is experienced in particular ways through processes – both social and technological – that inscribe it: memorials, recordings, writings, photographs and so on. Deconstruction underscores the inescapable *impurity* of time and all other motifs of self-presence, highlighting how we remain entangled in, and responsible to, legacies of pasts that we can neither fully retrieve nor simply relinquish (see Dooley and Kavanagh, 2007).

If the temporal present is distinguished only by way of marks (such as performed rituals, graphic writing, or other kinds of marks) that effectively ‘archive’ the moment then, by definition, those marks exceed their original enunciation and expose its meaning in the present to potential alteration: this risk, or exposure to modification, is not external, or accidental, but the very condition of any idea being communicable (Derrida, 1988: 15). Symbols can be received and consumed long after the death of the author and by readers/listeners who are not its original recipients. That is why writing, and other such technologies, are frequently regarded with disdain by western philosophy – because they betray the conceit that meaning arises directly in a pure ‘self-presence’ such that subsequent repetition or reproduction is a secondary distortion of an original ‘living’ thought. Derrida’s project was precisely the effort to demonstrate that there is never an original presence without language, and so no ‘ideal’ meaning that is not also subject to the effects of delay, deferral and hence ‘distortion’ (or ‘dissemination’) by time. All expression is internally ‘haunted’ by this exposure to a generic otherness (or alterity) that violates the integrity of identity. To communicate is to engage in a curious interplay of presence and absence that instantiates this intrinsic tension: foregrounding what appears to be an original presence (such as a thought, feeling, or an event) but simultaneously distancing us from it by also making it available for repetition. Philosophers have tried to erase the purported ‘corruption’ of identity through writing so as to find meaning on a self-identical utterance, memory, or event exempt from the play of signification – in what Derrida refers to as the ‘metaphysics of presence’, typically revealed in binary thinking that asserts a violent hierarchy between pure and impure (or original and ‘supplemental’) moments. But deconstruction insists that all self-presence is subject to what he calls ‘archi-writing’ – the delay and differentiation by marks – rendering any original temporal foundation desirable yet ultimately irretrievable (Derrida, 2011: 73).

Rhetoric shares profoundly in this practice of archi-writing. Whether written or spoken (and public speech typically is both) it seeks to say something about a singular ‘now’ by way of marks that nonetheless surpass the situation and render its meaning available to re-interpretation at other, later moments. There is, consequently, no situational context that can fully or unequivocally fix the meaning of any utterance or the object it describes – or, as Derrida says, ‘a context is always open’ (Derrida and Ferraris, 2001: 20. See also Derrida, 1988: 18). Rather than a linear series of discrete, unfolding presents in and about which speakers speak, time (and consequently meaning) is much less stable or coherent. Speech does not simply respond externally to the times but, rather, *intervenes* so as to reorder time itself. It punctuates time in order to confirm, contest or reset priorities, to close off alternative paths of thought and action, to make present or amplify certain aspects of a situation, to indicate urgent threats and thereby set new expectations. Speakers re-inscribe time by altering the frame, insisting on particular priorities, evoking imagery, erasing or minimising alternatives so as to make some issues ‘urgent’ and exhort us not to ‘waste time’. In UK politics, for example, citizens are routinely reminded by politicians

at elections that they have one ‘last chance to save the NHS’, or that referendums instantiate some moment of ‘choice for a generation’.

Time in Derrida’s (1994: xix) work is ‘aporetic’. The living present is always ‘non-contemporaneous’ with itself; which is to say, it is fractured and dis-adjusted. Or, as he frequently characterises it, following Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: ‘time is out of joint’. From this we can further argue that there are, at any instance, multiple overlapping temporalities, figured by numerous forms of inscription: the rhythms of work, leisure, economy, the media, the environment, personal and social health, politics and so on. These are temporal frames – or what Wood (2007) calls ‘economies of time’ – that enclose certain transformations (such as labour and wealth creation, aging, shifting values) inside repeating processes, but they never cohere spontaneously under one uniform or harmonious logic. Indeed, the aporetic character of time is precisely the condition in which different rhythms, durations, scales and paces in society collide and mutually disfigure each other. What we have called the rhetorical situation may be better understood not as a determining context all contained in one temporal moment or sequence, as Bitzer would have us think, but an ‘overdetermined’ context in which apparent temporal coherence breaks down and a dramatic uncertainty is introduced.

To think of speech as an intervention to shape time brings to the fore its rhetorical character. Aristotle (2018: 12–13) himself famously divided rhetoric into three ‘kinds’ differentiated broadly by their relation to time: judicial speech dealt with the past, deliberative speech dealt with the future, and epideictic speech dealt with the present. Each, accordingly, prioritised different persuasive ends (e.g. deciding justice/injustice, expedience, and allocating praise/blame, respectively). These distinctions helped classify common ways that rhetorical interventions manage the aporia of time by rendering its interruption meaningful. We can therefore understand contemporary speech interventions as efforts, in Derrida’s terms, to re-mark time by articulating various devices and conventions.

For example, public speech is frequently performed in specific institutional settings set apart from a wider, ongoing situation, in order to comment on that situation. In assemblies, town halls, conference chambers, digital streams and so on, speakers are given a special platform whose local time economy differs from the events about which they talk: a parliamentary session, an evening TV interview, an annual ceremony, a press call, or a statement at a public event. Such settings permit speakers to suspend themselves from the dynamics of the situation with which they are concerned. That way, their ‘voices’ appear as commentaries and observations that coincide with what they think, permitting them to punctuate the time *as if* from the outside. In so doing, of course, they operate within conventions that are not always visible, appearing as more-or-less ‘spontaneous’ interventions secure in their own presence. The immediate conditions of speaking nonetheless recede into the background as personalised voices come to the fore: speakers insert themselves within localised economies of time such as parliamentary debates (see Palonen, 2019), after-dinner slots, media cycles, or conference performances to confer degrees of duration, intimacy, impact and so on that permit them, momentarily, to interrupt other economies of time and to figure a sense of urgency. These conditions enable ways of delivering untimely interventions to remark time, displaying what Derrida (2002: 92) calls ‘an untimeliness that comes on time’.

Rhetorical strategies are also comprised of linguistic and argumentative techniques that entail a temporal play of presence and absence. In that respect, speech is a way of ‘playing for time’. Speeches are structured temporal economies that contain symbolic

transformations in a particular duration and sequence, delaying and deferring their insights by adapting them to a ‘genre’ of communicating that arranges them according to certain pattern: as direct assertions (the prepared comments made ‘in passing’ to the media), via observations in dialogue with the situation from which they speak (comments while touring factories or high streets, with ordinary people as a natural audience), or according to a more articulated set of insights, observations, and judgements given a length of time for elaboration (the political interview or set-piece speech). Different genres allow for alternative ways of organising the duration and intensity of speaking, the speed at which a point will be made and the ability to employ devices (such as repetition, aphorisms, or rhetorical questions that invite their own answer) as well as evade criticism.

In all these techniques, speakers not only articulate time through emphasis, delay and repetition; they also work on the audience’s memory. Rhetorical history provides archives of say-able and repeatable phrases. Public speaking re-assembles our memory of historic events, established ideas, or attitudinal dispositions by way of recollection in phrases, commonplaces, analogies and other references that prompt and refashion memory. For example, Trump’s call to ‘Make America Great Again’ recycled a previously employed phrase (used by Ronald Reagan in 1980) but also invoked an established nostalgia for American exceptionalism (see Jouet, 2017). The deployment of old and new words, catchphrases and popular cultural references, capture, in a passing instant, echoes of earlier presences. Rhetorical invention rarely involves saying anything utterly novel but, rather, the creative repetition and reworking of known argumentative stances, stories, and phrases that refresh a certain position that then (it is hoped) will be repeated and recirculated by the press and wider audiences. That way, we are provoked into responding to an argument by recollecting through its traces something we remember. Audiences are surprisingly willing to tolerate repetition and cliché in public speeches, particularly when speech is part of a recognised ritual. But even non-ritual speech assembles its components from familiar arrangements and utilises formal devices (such as schemes of repetition or three-part phrases) whose structure an audience will recollect. Rhetoric thus describes a practice of ‘re-memoring’ – putting the parts together again in a similar but different form – so as to condense the familiar and the novel in a seamless fashion, as if one’s insights sprang effortlessly from common knowledge itself. That way, the fracturing of time is diminished by a momentary glimpse of resurgent presence. It is no surprise, then, that certain speech moments – presidential inaugurals, war time orations, sermonic declarations – are frequently looked upon with an intense nostalgia, casting them as culminating interventions that uniquely ‘capture’ their times.

The promise of speech

What does it mean for a hermeneutics of public speech that rhetoric is both timely and untimely? I want to argue – following Derrida’s lead and by way of John Caputo’s radical hermeneutics – that we conceive speech as a practice of ‘negotiating’ the conventional and the novel. That is to say, a hermeneutics of public speech invites us to grasp its interpretive force in terms of its combined calculation of context and its ethical opening to an incalculable future. Rhetoric is neither purely techniques to manage the immediacy of a situation nor, alternatively, the effort to say something entirely new or different, but an ethical and political practice conjoining the one to the other. The accent here is not on the past or the present but, rather, the future; not a future understood as a set of predictable

circumstances, but the future as such. It is because this future is intrinsically unknowable that decisions have to be made and interpretations ventured. The ethics here are minimal, concerned not with meeting explicit virtuous ends (such as moral agreement or the ‘good’ of the community) but, rather, an implicit responsibility to prepare for what cannot be known.

John Caputo argues that the temporal instability of meaning stressed by Derrida invites a distinctly ‘postmodern’ approach to hermeneutics (see Caputo, 1987, 2018). Making interpretations, on this account, is always an encounter with the alterity of the future; what we retrieve from interpretative traditions and conventions will lack purity because they face new and different circumstances. There is no foundation or original truth that is not, in its being recalled under new conditions, exposed to alteration or even corruption. To repeat (an insight, a phrase, an argument, etc.) is to ‘repeat forwards’, rather than backwards, since every new context will figure conventions anew, if only subtly so. Without absolute anchoring to the past, interpretation enacts a negotiation between convention and the unknown future: ‘An interpretation happens in the *space between* the regular and the irregular, the commensurable and the incommensurable, the normalized and the exceptional, the centre and the margins, the same and the other’ (Caputo, 2018: 139. Italics in original).

Interpretation, on this account, is always a process of negotiation, of making meaning by opening up to the ‘undecidability’ of the future – its potential to be otherwise or what Derrida calls ‘the coming of the other’ – yet without entirely surrendering to it (see Derrida, 2002: 16–17). In the face of social and political uncertainties and our inevitable lack of preparation for whatever situations may arrive, we must calculate with the argumentative and moral resources we have. The recent arrival and spread of the Corona virus around the world, for example, saw a revival among political leaders of the language of ‘war’, command, technical expertise and collective mobilisation. Yet we also need to discover (or, as rhetoricians put it, ‘invent’) new arguments, altering – sometimes mildly, sometimes radically – the way we speak and argue. Thus, the response to the virus also renewed a language of national solidarity, state intervention, and public service that, for some leaders, was hard to square with their former faith in markets and self-reliance.

Whereas conventional hermeneutics conceives interpretation largely as a process of retrieval – drawing upon (and so repeating faithfully) traditions of understanding to confront the new – Caputo’s radical hermeneutics underscores how the very prospect of the new distorts or transforms inherited traditions from within, altering our sense of being. Derrida’s project is neither to refuse the other nor is it, as some have misunderstood, to open up entirely to it. Rather, we are obliged to negotiate inherited truths, positions and phrases in light of what disrupts and fractures their self-evidence. The difference with traditional hermeneutics here is perhaps slight but nonetheless significant. Whereas Gadamer views interpretation from the perspective of the tradition that confronts and eventually reconciles itself to a new understanding, Derrida views it from the perspective of the new that persistently haunts and disrupts tradition.

As Caputo underlines, this small switch in emphasis – from ‘pious interpretation’ to ‘poetic impiety’ – nonetheless has important consequences (Caputo, 2018: 140). Assembling meaning rhetorically is never merely the reassertion of cultural norms in new contexts but an active *intervention*, a process of exposing established positions to degrees of disorder and renewal. That is why Caputo insists on interpretation as a risky process, one that cannot ever fully control a situation so much as participate in the destabilisation it brings to convention such that new and different situations might emerge as a consequence.

Thus, Trump's 'Make America Great Again' was more than mere nostalgia; it gambled on refiguring exceptionalism as a requirement to withdraw from global leadership or progressive goals, not expand them. Public speech, we might say, intervenes by negotiating the conventional and the irregular, with the risk that such intervention will fail, or that the events will turn out differently because of the intervention, or that it will be utterly ineffectual. The risk of rhetoric lies, therefore, in its effort to intervene – not in its faithful 'relaying the facts' or repeating the accepted convention. In this, speakers must calculate in the context of the incalculable.

All 'language acts', claims Derrida (1995: 384), 'entail a certain structure of the promise'. A promise is a commitment to something in the future, but it is a commitment that cannot ever be guaranteed. If a promised act was certain, then it would not be a promise. Promises only work *because* they can fail, be betrayed, or forgotten. The promise has exemplary status for Derrida because, in its affirmation to the other (person, or even oneself) of something to come, it instantiates the negotiation of a future. When that future comes, its trace then holds us to a past commitment, in what Derrida (2002: 50) describes as a 'fabulous retroactivity'. All speech involves this retroactive structure because, by necessity, its traces transmit across time. As we have seen, such traces are precisely what rhetorical enquiry explores: styles and schemes of argument that carry meaning beyond the moment of its enunciation, conjoining us with something of the past in our new circumstances.

Now, if all speech and writing contain this 'promissory' quality (i.e. it can all be repeated at a later date), public speech routinely makes an explicit, thematic point of it: think of Martin Luther King Jr's reference to the 'promissory note' in his 1963 speech in Washington DC. Political campaigns and debates, party manifestos, public ceremonies, and so on, involve modes of speaking that, in various ways, explicitly commit speakers (and, by implication, their audiences) to a future that they cannot actually guarantee. Indeed, it is *because* they cannot guarantee the promise will be kept that the formulation of speech carries such force; the words momentarily incarnate the gesture they enact, and often come to be the tangible token of the sentiment (hence even Churchill's 'we will fight them on the beaches' retains its force as the trace of a moment most people cannot recall). Rhetoric is filled with such tokens to help usher in the future. It is here that the negotiation between the calculable and the incalculable takes place. Promises are always qualified, either explicitly or implicitly: 'vote for me and I give you my word to make things better', 'Accept this reasoning and you'll see the consequences of my opponent's error', 'Have faith and you'll get the reward', and so on. Inevitably, the promise is entangled in a calculation by being delivered in a particular way to and for particular audiences.

This entanglement of the calculable and incalculable is partly why political speech can be so disappointing and infuriating – the immediate calculation (for advantage, or even mere caution) is sometimes all too visible and the promise seems half-hearted or, alternatively, promises accumulate wildly and fail to be credible and, eventually, are reneged upon. Democratic politics, which enable substantial opportunity for speaking and hearing speech, are likely to encourage calculations that allow parties and politicians either to gamble on hyperbolically overstating their commitments to change or, alternatively, to avoid risks by remaining dully pragmatic and short-termist. In such conditions, it is not surprising to find the language of politics filled with evaluative terms that indicate the centrality and precariousness of promising to its discourse: 'trust', 'responsibility', 'betrayal', 'deception' and so forth.

But the promise of speech is not strictly about actual futures but about the future as such (or what Derrida calls the ‘absolute future’). That is, it concerns the future as an unknowable dimension of the present, a future that is constantly coming. Overt promises and commitments play on the prospect of futures that can be concretely described, anticipated and realised, that is, made genuinely present. But the promise that *inheres in* speech (whether or not presented as an overt promise, a threat, or even as a refusal to promise) is not the indication of some state of affairs whose realisation will or not become fully present. In itself speaking enacts a responsibility – that is, a ‘response’-iveness – to the very otherness of the situation, to welcome it in one form or another (if only as an utter disaster or disappointment). Trump’s rhetoric, for example, makes a regular commitment to the idea of contemporary America being in perilous decline, or what in his Inaugural he dubbed ‘American carnage’ (Trump, 2017). How one chooses one’s words, then, involves a choice about how to take up the promise that speaking affirms simply as language. What matters here is not only the character of the outcomes that one promises (however realistic or idealistic) but, as an interpretive act, how any enunciation sustains (or not) an opening to the future – for example, by affirming or refusing it, offering some qualified or deferred response, providing a new vocabulary or even by avoiding classifying it rigidly in advance (see Derrida, 1989: 84–86). A negotiation is an ethical commitment to the future but one that is rhetorically formulated – for instance, as a threat, danger, tragedy, or as an opportunity, relief, or opening – and that shapes how audiences themselves may choose to confront the future.

It is all too easy to dismiss politicians and public speakers for being ‘all talk’ yet such resignation only ever returns us to an urgent desire for more promises since, for all our righteous indignation at the failings of public discourse, we cannot avoid facing an unknown future. Rather than dismissing speech as such or, alternatively, seeking to replace it with the expert or bureaucratic management of policy, we might choose to reflect on how rhetorical negotiation operates in any instance. A hermeneutics of public speech alerts us to the way situations are interpreted simultaneously through political calculation and gestures of ethical responsibility.

Conclusion

What, then, is the peculiar advantage of rhetorical enquiry? I have argued that its distinctiveness over other approaches to discourse lies in a hermeneutical attention to the concrete ways public speech practically assembles meaning. There are two key aspects to this.

First, the focus is on speech as a response to a particular situation. The situation that gives rise to speech also conditions what can be said and how. Rhetorical enquiry explores the ways this unfolding, proximate context is addressed (or interpreted) and so it invites appreciation of the singularity of the moment that gives any discourse its distinctive weight and force. Of course, wider questions can and should be asked about the social conditions of rhetoric and the struggles and power relations they articulate. But rhetorical enquiry’s attention to this singularity permits us to regard such conditions, struggles and relations as entailing precarious choices open to inflection and strategic revision.

Second, rhetorical analysis is attuned to its situation as an opening to the future. Speakers are always ‘doing things with words’ because situations are never closed-off contexts. Rather, as I have tried to argue by reference to Derrida and Caputo, they are evolving conjunctures of fractured temporality. We speak so as to shape situations, not

merely to describe them. Speakers may frequently be calculating, but they undertake varying degrees of risk in venturing interpretations, deploying temporal qualities of delay and distance to negotiate an incalculable future. That is not to say, of course, this is always done effectively or responsibly. But unlike discourse theories that invest greatly in the idea of critique (i.e. in ‘revealing’ the contingency and partiality of speech and thought), rhetoric’s hermeneutics is not one of suspicion but, rather, action. It invites us to ask the ethical question of how and how well speech prepares its audiences for situations to come.

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