

Some Interesting Rhetorical Terms

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There is an ancient proverb, “the one who ascends the platform without preparation descends it without honour”. The ancient Greeks and Romans developed a complete system by which the aspiring public speaker could prepare for standing on the podium. Whether the speech to be given was deliberative, judicial, or panegyric, one could learn much by studying the art of rhetoric. The ancient Greeks and Romans developed and identified numerous devices or patterns of language which the speaker could use to enhance the meaning of his words. Many of these figures of speech are employed in the English language today, and readers may find it interesting to learn the meaning and purpose of a few rhetorical tools.

Let us begin by noting some rhetorical devices that are well-known. At the level of word-choice, there is onomatopoeia (in Latin *nominatio*). Understanding of the etymology of the Greek word onomatopoeia helps one to appreciate the function of the figure: *onoma* means ‘word’, while *poiein* means ‘to make’. Onomatopoeia refers to the coining of a word to signify the thing or matter, and involves the formation of a word from the sound that is associated with the thing named. ‘Splash’ and ‘sputter’ are two English examples. The effect of such a device was to increase the meaning of the word and its impact upon the hearers. One should not abuse the device by creating a large number of new imitative words, however, as this was thought to detract from the effectiveness of it. Another well-known rhetorical term is alliteration (*paroemion*). It denotes the repetition of sounds in short compass, often at the beginning of words. The expression ‘are you a *man* or a *mouse*?’ is an example of alliteration. It is believed that this figure intensifies the meaning of the words and lends an emotive quality.

While onomatopoeia concerns individual words, alliteration concerns several; it is in manipulating the relative position of words that public speakers employ numerous devices. For example, though we may not recognize the term immediately, we are familiar with the use of *anadiplosis*. *Anadiplosis* is the immediate repetition of the last word(s) in a phrase in the next, as in “I am hungry, hungry and tired.” A similar trick is *anaphora*, that is, the repetition of a word, often at the beginning of a phrase. When you read a sentence like “knowledge provides power, knowledge leads to wisdom, knowledge can make you happy”, you see *anaphora* in action. Ancient rhetoricians believed that this rhetorical device can be used to add charm, or gravity, or bitterness to a sentence. Another device that concerns the arrangement of words is *commutatio*, which means ‘interchange’. When using this figure, the orator alters the order of words, as in “you must work to eat, not eat to work”.

In presenting a speech, the speaker can manipulate the relationship between listener and speaker in order to heighten the impact of his words. The Greek term *anakoinosis* means ‘communication’, and in oratory refers to the consultation between speaker and audience or opponent. For example, the speaker may address the listeners directly when he states that they are well-placed to make an informed decision about the matter being debated. *Apostrophe* (literally, ‘a turning away’) is a figure of speech whereby the orator turns away from the expected audience, or the real audience, and addresses someone else or someone not present. In Cicero’s first oration against Catiline, the orator addresses his opponent repeatedly. Some scholars think that Catiline was not

present when the senate met to listen to Cicero; if so, Rome's greatest orator employs *apostrophe* repeatedly. The effect may have been to draw attention to the possible reasons for Catiline's absence, or to heighten the impact of the powerful questions and charges levelled at Catiline.

Another useful rhetorical device in manipulating the relationship between speaker and audience is *deminutio*, or 'diminishment'. If the orator must deal with a matter in which his own role is significant or consequential, he must be careful not to appear self-aggrandizing. *Deminutio* serves to lower the apparent significance of the speaker, and so prevents an unsympathetic reaction in the listener. Occasionally a speaker may interrupt the flow of the argument with an exclamation (*exclamatio*, or *emboesis* in Greek). This device allows the speaker to reflect upon what he has just said, and to express an emotional response to it. Cicero's well-known cry, "o tempora, o mores" comes to mind as an example of this figure of speech. When leading the listeners from one topic to another, the rhetor may wish to use *metabasis* (*transitio* in Latin). This figure serves to make the transition smooth, as this example illustrates: "we have treated the events of the day before the murder; we shall now turn to the day of the murder." If a speaker has permitted himself to digress from the topic, he may wish to show that he has done so knowingly by using *aphodosis*. *Aphodosis* is the figure of speech whereby the speaker calls himself back to the main point, as in "but I digress." As last example of a device that functions in the manipulation of the speaker-audience relationship we offer *praeteritio* (a passing over). Claiming that he will not deal with a certain topic, the speaker mentions it anyway. Often rhetors will use *praeteritio* to make a point by innuendo rather than by evidence. Consider the example, "I shall not delve into the rumours that X was present when the horrible crime was committed." In this sentence the speaker alerts the audience to certain rumours and suggests that X witnessed the crime; he has no hard evidence, but implies that there may be truth to the statement.

In certain types of speeches complete and accurate depiction is critical to the speaker's persuasiveness. The vivid description of an action or its results is called *diatuposis*. Prosecutors employ this figure regularly, when they depict in detail the events which comprise the context of the issue. Frequently such depictions are not presented in an objective manner, however, but with a certain moral disposition, such as anger, amazement, or pity. Thus the effect of *diatuposis* is to produce emotional response in the audience. Actions, people, places, and objects may be the subject of *diatuposis*.

Lastly, we offer two terms which describe rather than define rhetorical devices. The Greek term *griphos* means 'fishing basket'. A fishing basket was an intricately woven contraption, and when applied to the art of public speaking, it meant an intricate or convoluted statement. One ancient rhetorician defines *griphos* as a series of unrelated statements which puzzle the listener. This device appears to be quite common in our age, though one wonders whether public speakers employ it intentionally. Another descriptive rhetorical term is *klimax*, from which the English "climax" derives. The Greek word means "ladder". The term is applied to the rhetorical device whereby the speaker builds up the argument to a high point. For example, a subject may be the cause of an increasing number of things, and as he lists them the speaker 'steps up' the gravity of the consequences. Thus a deed may have an impact for 'hours, days, months, years'. An anticlimax occurs when the speaker goes 'down the ladder' of importance: "that car isn't worth one thousand dollars; it isn't worth one hundred, not even one!"

It will be appropriate to end with the Latin term *conclusio*, from which ‘conclusion’ derives. The *conclusio* may consist of a brief summary of the points made, as in “appreciation of the meaning and function of rhetorical terms is useful for any speaker”. It is interesting to note that *conclusio* means ‘a closing,’ or ‘a shutting up’, which is precisely what the speaker does when he has finished holding forth.