MODERNA SPRÅK

KATIE WALES

Current Trends in Rhetoric

Katie Wales är Senior Lecturer i engelska vid University of London, Royal Holloway and Bedford New College. Innevarande år är hon också *British Academy Senior Research Fellow*. Hon har publicerat ett stort antal arbeten, främst inom områdena engelska språket, språk och litteratur, stilistik, t ex *Dictionary of Stylistics (1988)* och *The Language of James Joyce* (1992). Hon har vidare intresserat sig för feministisk lingvistik. Dr Wales är andreredaktör för den nya engelska stilistiktidskriften *Language and Literature*.

It is true to say that in literary and linguistic studies of different kinds we are witnessing a revival of traditional rhetoric and also the emergence of new rhetorics, of value in the analysis of both text and discourse, and of use to teachers of both literature and language.

First I shall look briefly at "traditional" rhetoric, to establish what of this classical tradition actually survives into the late twentieth century; forming the basis, indeed, of some current approaches to the study of literature. Rhetoric (Gk. "art of speech") was of course a discipline originally concerned with the skills of public speaking (oratory, politics and law), skills for persuasion. Five major aspects or "divisions" of rhetoric came to be formalized and these remained influential in Western Europe until the study of rhetoric declined in the early nineteenth century, as the study of classical languages declined: (1) *inventio (*the "finding" of topics) (2) *dispositio* (arrangement of ideas) (3) *elocutio (*style of expression) (4) memory (prepared delivery) (5) pronunciation (enunciation and gestures). Given a subject or "case" which an orator had to argue, these aspects, or competences (structural, argumentative, stylistic, etc.) all helped to structure his argument and to strengthen it in order to "move" the emotions of the hearer. Not surprisingly, these were adopted by literary authors, even in classical times, and remained strongly associated with literary composition and appreciation ever afterwards. In the medieval European school curriculum rhetoric was studied in close alliance with two other communication skills (forming the *trivium),* grammar and dialectic. Grammar was rightly recognised as the foundation of good composition; dialectic was concerned with logical disputation or argument (as in some of Donne's love poems). Pupils were encouraged to engage in what nowadays is called "roleplay": to

present orally different "sides" to an argument.

It is a pity that in the modern British education curriculum rhetoric and its divisions have fallen out of favour, although recent changes in the National Curriculum in English studies augur well for the return of guidance in compositional skills, as well as oral. Undergraduates confess that they have learnt to structure their essays largely by trial and error, though these are an important type of persuasive argument and central to the pedagogy of tertiary education. They have to learn argumentative strategies and how to open and conclude; paragraphing; and how to make their sentences cohesive.

In the United States the picture is traditionally rather different. Freshmen have courses in compositional skills, and numerous handbooks exist which are clearly a continuation of the rhetorical tradition; some incorporating *rhetoric* in their titles (e.g. Brooks & Warren, 1972). Just as sixteenth-century poets and playwrights like Spenser and Shakespeare learnt to analyse the writings of others and to apply rhetorical techniques to their own compositions, so American students are encouraged to analyse texts grammatically, stylistically and structurally, and to learn how to structure their own essays or reports, noting points of grammar and style in the process. This very practical approach to composition does, I think, have interesting possibilities for stylistic analysis in a classroom situation both in native English and EFL teaching. Working, for example, with ideas of "introduction", "statement of thesis", "development" and "conclusion", could lead to the discussion of the structuring of novels and drama; the notion of "synonymy" at the level of lexis could lead to the discussion of paraphrase and stylistic variation of meaning.

This kind of "modern" rhetoric has not entirely been ignored in Britain. One of the most stimulating publications in the last decade or so was Nash's *Designs in Prose* (1980), subtitled "a study of compositional problems and methods": stimulating particularly because most of the examples were actually composed by the author. By design and *exemplum* it provides a clear illustration of the idea of style as "meaningful choice".

As the 1980s proceeded, in fact, an interest in compositional structure was intensified by parallel work elsewhere in the field of text-linguistics. The monumental grammar of Quirk *et al* (1972) contains a chapter on sentence connection (cf. Halliday & Hasan, 1976), but in the revised edition (1985) the chapter has grown to incorporate notions of "text" and much practical detail and exemplification of textbuilding strategies: "relational structures" between sentences; designs of exposition, etc.

So far, then, we can see that traditional rhetoric survives in one kind of "modern rhetoric" which analyses textual structures and encourages students to apply strategies to their own compositions. But we can also note, what has often been noted, that one particular division of rhetoric has never, in fact, been underplayed; rather the opposite. Out of *elocutio* modern

stylistics may be said to have developed. Indeed, even in the Renaissance, *elocutio* became increasingly identified with the whole art of rhetoric, the art of "speaking well"; and handbooks describing the devices of expression were very popular indeed. Dominant among these devices were the so-called "figures of speech".

Again, a decline in the study of classics may well have contributed to their comparative neglect in modern British education, although a "hard core" are known and used in traditional literary criticism (e.g. metaphor, metonymy, alliteration, parallelism). Although we are often told that ours is not a rhetorical age, even in modern poetry figurative language remains a predominant feature, and in public speaking and advertising rhetorical figures are much exploited.

It is very hard for teachers of English literature not to be aware of such figures – traditionally divided into "schemes" and "tropes"; and it is very hard for teachers not to want to draw students' attention to them in literature, so obvious are they as devices of "foregrounding", of prominence or highlighting. The problem, however, is how to talk about such figures without bemusing or bewildering students with a multitude of technical, Latinate terms. The danger is that teachers might collude with students in admitting the difficulty of terminology, and so hesitate to point figures out in the text, however significant they are. But insights provided by stylistics, discourse analysis, etc., can be fed into, as it were, our treatment and discussion of these traditional figures, and so also provide a not too difficult terminology, a set of working tools, to aid perception as well as analysis.

A pioneer work in the study of rhetorical figures from a stylistic viewpoint was Leech's *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (1969), which combined traditional rhetoric with Formalism. Terms like "foregrounding" and "deviation" owe a great deal to Leech's popularization, and can be usefully applied to the effects and nature of figurative language generally. *Schemes* are usefully distinguished, as rule-enforcing devices, according to their "regularity of expression", involving repetition essentially: of sound, syntax, lexis (cf. anaphora, alliteration, etc.). *Tropes*, as rule-violating devices, involve "irregularity of content" or meaning, "deviation". In Nash's later work (1989), which is, interestingly, a plea for the renewal of interest in traditional rhetoric in a wider range of discourses, tropes are themselves sub-divided into figures of word meaning (e.g. metaphor, metonymy) and of utterance meaning ("discourse sense", p. 112). This latter category would take into account what modern linguists might call "pragmatic" figures (traditionally "figures of thought"), speech act types important at utterance level in the presentation of argument or theme: e.g. rhetorical question, apostrophe, *concessio*.

Although it might be argued that the basic division involving "regularity" of expression and "irregularity" of content is too crude (as, indeed, the traditional division itself is), the point is that by using simple terms like

"regularity" and "irregularity", "repetition" and "deviation" we can devise a matrix for our own needs in teaching, and for the needs of the text, in order to encourage students to look for significant patterns of language. It also allows us to admit as figures devices that may not have been traditionally so classified. Indeed, in Belgium, the Groupe μ (see Dubois *et al,* 1970) have been working on a linguistic matrix which will "generate" new figures, new possibilities of marked language, especially useful with the proliferation of new genres since the Renaissance (the novel, advertising, TV soaps, etc.).

It must also be noted that figurative language was traditionally regarded as a means for delighting and entertaining the reader, many figures involving *paronomasia* or word-play. Following Barthes (1973) on "pleasure" we could argue that devices of repetition evoke the *plaisir* that comes from familiarity and reassurance, devices of deviation such as metaphor evoke the *jouissance* of the struggle to make connections, unfamiliarity. And the playfulness of literary language especially is part of what Jakobson (1960) terms the aesthetic function of language, its self-reflexive nature.

Two works of the 1980s in Britain do seem to have recognised this important element of linguistic play as a rhetorical technique, both works at the same time going beyond traditional rhetoric in the light of developments in linguistics to produce new kinds of rhetoric. Leech (1983) turns away from form to function, building on the work of Grice (1975) and his "co-operative principle" of conversation and maxims of relevance, truthfulness (quality), informativity (quantity) and clarity (manner). What interests Leech is the way(s) in which figures of speech, even in ordinary conversation, violate the maxims: e.g. irony breaks the maxim of quality because we say the opposite of what we mean; and also how they are reinforced or contravened by other "principles" textual and interpersonal. The figures of hyperbole and metaphor reflect not only intensity of feeling ("it makes my blood boil") but also a desire to add interest and vividness to what we say ("expressivity principle").

In the second book, by Leith & Myerson (1989), the approach to rhetoric is free, because they wish to "reactivate" not the letter of traditional rhetoric, but its spirit. Rhetoric is not seen as a system of rigid categories, but as a process in the production, transmission and interpretation of utterances. Their approach is based on three principles or "foci": (i) address (vocal/vocative) (ii) argument (dialogic) and (iii) play (ludic). Applicable to non-literary as well as literary language, (i) address concerns the relations between "speaker" and addressee, implied or real; (ii) utterances, they say, are "replies" to other utterances, existing in a "dialogue" with other utterances. The notion of "dialogue" in this extended sense owes much to the work of the philosopher-linguist Mikhail Bakhtin, currently much in vogue (see, e.g. 1981). (iii) "Play" involves not only the (conscious) play of form, wordplay but also the (unconscious) play of meaning: the rich ambiguity

and ambivalence of literary language particularly which lead to multiple interpretations, a potential endless chain of signification (cf. Derrida, 1967).

Although Nash (1989) points to the current revival of interest in rhetoric, he himself does not attempt to account for it. But I think this revival is taking place precisely because stylistics and text-linguistics have provided ways of analysing textual patterns and typologies; because work on the "principles" of cooperative speech behaviour has opened up textual and interpersonal rhetoric; because the re-discovery of Bakhtin has heightened an awareness of the dialogic and intertextual. There are also contributory disciplines and critical ideas I have not had space to describe: literary theory is tackling basic notions of "figurative" meaning; speech act theory examines truthfulness and lying (Socrates condemned rhetoric as the "mother of lies"); reception theory, like speech act theory also, has reawakened an awareness of "affective" language. There is also the pedagogical fact that students in secondary and tertiary education in Britain have come more and more to need practical guidance in compositional skills.

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