

Kenneth Burke's Rhetorical Theory within the Construction of the Ethnography of Speaking

*Gregory Hansen
Indiana University*

I find it regrettable that social scientists automatically ignore Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. I don't say Aristotle has given us the last word on these matters. But I submit that his actual treatment of topics is fundamentally correct. You could add new topics and develop accordingly. But what you got 2,000 years ago was the kind of approach that can be built on in principle. (Burke 1967:327)

So begins Kenneth Burke's introduction to dramatism in *Communication: Concepts and Perspectives*. I don't say that Kenneth Burke has given us the last word on these matters. But I submit that his actual treatment of topics is fundamentally correct. Scholars have added new topics and developed them accordingly. But what we had seventy years ago is the kind of approach that has been built on in principle within the *Ethnography of Speaking*. Burke's writings on rhetorical theory demonstrate his passionate concern with artistic communication within social life. And, his work provides a broad, useful approach for understanding various architectonic girders that theorists have constructed in the initial development of their theories of how people use language within social contexts.

To understand Burke's contributions to the *Ethnography of Speaking*, it is useful to follow his lead and first consider his theories in relation to Aristotelian rhetoric. As does Burke, Aristotle rejected the Platonic conception of rhetoric as a distraction at best and base sophistry at worst; as did Aristotle, Burke discusses rhetoric as the "counterpart to dialectic" (Aristotle 1354a.1). Aristotle's 2,000 year-old treatise laid out essential themes that Burke develops in his own system and theory of rhetoric. In good Aristotelian fashion, Burke does not reject rhetoric as a trivial play on the emotions. He uses Aristotle's approach as a model when he orients his writing about language specifically to its social context. As did Aristotle, Burke recognizes that the social context of language cannot be reduced to principles of pure

reason; therefore, he studies language use as involving more than logical discourse and grammatical structure. Similar to the Aristotelian system that allows a speaker to generate rational and eloquent arguments from material premises and *topoi*, Burke's system of rhetoric is a grammar that models the dynamic aspects of creative expression. Burkean rhetorical theory provides a systematic means for tracking down the significance of different ways of speaking within varied contexts.

The forms and content of classical thought have shaped essentially the substance of contemporary academic discourse. Exposure to this intellectual tradition molded Burke's thought much as it continues to shape contemporary writers' perspectives. Scholars of the intellectual history of communication theory have tracked down classical influences on Burke's thought by considering how his theory is related to the Socratic bifurcation of dialectic and rhetoric (Heath 1984:135). Robert Heath and others demonstrate how the division of art from science influenced Burke's thought. The schism is reflected in Burke's interest in studying rhetoric as a necessary counterpart to the purely scientific approach to knowing the world. Robert Heath states Burke's orientation well when he places Burke "between scientism and formalism," seeking to understand specific instances of aesthetic appeal without reducing artistry to mechanistic principles (Heath 1984:134).

Burke regarded his theories as a contribution to the "new rhetoric." The key term of the "old rhetoric," he argued, was "persuasion" (Burke 1951:203). Unlike classical rhetoricians who prescribed resources for orators to use in developing the persuasive design of their speeches, Burke regarded his contemporary rhetorical theorists as creating broader concepts of the social use of language. He and other communications scholars proposed that "identification" should be the central concern within the new rhetoric (Burke 1951:203 and Ehninger 1975:450). The new rhetoricians regarded persuasion as only one potential function of discourse, and their analyses frequently focused on the use of language as a means for addressing social exigences (Bitzer 1980:5). Whereas the old rhetoricians placed identification as a means for persuasion, the new rhetoricians reversed the proposition. They argued that persuasion is but one means for identification within rhetorical discourse.

Burke's use of his key term "identification" merits special consideration. He agrees with Aristotle's observation that identification can be a function of persuasive appeal "as when the politician seeks to identify himself with his audience" (Burke 1951:203). Identification in this respect is an appeal to the speaker's *ethos*, a strategy discussed in Book One of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. But Burke's primary interest in "identification" is as an end in itself "as when people earnestly yearn to identify themselves with

some group or other" (Burke 1951:203). Thus, from his perspective on rhetoric, communication is a means for establishing and maintaining social life. Douglas Ehninger's concept of "social rhetoric" reflects this contemporary perspective. Ehninger regards the old rhetoric's emphasis on persuasion as dehumanizing; under the old rhetoric, people are objects to be manipulated through words (Ehninger 1975:452). Ehninger and others argue that the focus of contemporary rhetorical theory provides a wider context for studying how people use language within all aspects of social life. In particular, this includes the study of discourse as a means for solving social problems (Hauser 1986:134).

"Identification" as the key term within Burke's rhetoric demonstrates some of the depth and elegance of Burkean thought. On a simplistic level, it is linked to the use of language as an act of naming: a speaker identifies aspects of experience through language. In other approaches, such as the one provided previously, Burke interprets identification as the use of language to negotiate identity within groups. A third usage of his key term is his consideration of how rhetoric negotiates personal identity, a phenomenon he terms the "paradox of substance" (Burke 1967:330). Using the simile of drama to illustrate everyday social realities, Burke argues that language paradoxically creates interdependent identities among people in the same way that characters in a play mutually allow each other to enact their roles (Burke 1967:330). According to Burke, an individual's identity is defined by his or her actions within various social contexts, and to a large extent these actions are linguistically defined. The result is that communication does not simply play a role in establishing group identity; it also plays a vital role in establishing an individual's identity.

Classical rhetoricians discussed another concept central to Burke's thought: the status of art. Reacting against Platonic theorists who would reduce artistry to the realm of the inconsequential and trivial, Burke's essays demonstrate innovative approaches to conceptualizing artistic expression. His first book, *Counter-Statement*, was his reaction against "the encroachment of scientific truth into art," and in his 1924 essay "Psychology and Form," he discusses eloquence as "simply the end of art, and thus its essence" (Burke 1968:41). Influenced by the modernist project of uniting art with technology, Burke views style as not merely the decoration of texts but as an activity central to their construction. His essay "Lexicon Rhetoricae" in *Counter-Statement* can be read as a formalist discussion of style in which rhetorical and literary tropes make oral and written communication possible. Because Burke regards human expression as dependent upon aesthetic standards, he has little patience for those who would rely on scientific criteria to evaluate a creative act. For example, Burke challenges literary critics who favored Freud's writings over Joyce's *Ulysses* because of the greater amount of

psychoanalytical material in Freud. He writes, "To his objection. . . one might, similarly, denounce Cezanne's trees in favor of state forestry bulletins" (Burke 1968:32). Burke's arguments form a strong challenge to the contemporary critical theorists who eliminate aesthetic consideration from their inquiries and examine human creative expression only for its political implications.

In Burke's writings, he questions the spirit of scientific optimism, but he uses a rationalistic approach to support his arguments. By treating words as real entities and examining the psychological consequences of symbolic expressions, Burke argues that an inquiry into aesthetics should not be reserved for the metaphysicians. Artistic form is more than a cultural convention; form is actively produced by the use of language by both speaker and audience. His oft-quoted definition of form as "the arousal and fulfilling of expectations" appears in *Counter-Statement* to support this perspective (Burke 1968:31). Using numerous examples from drama, literature, music, and the visual arts, Burke demonstrates how information appeals to different aspects of an individual's psyche in two distinct ways. Whereas the "psychology of information" refers to the way in which an individual processes new information, the "psychology of form" refers to the way an individual receives the information in relation to the formal structuring of the message. Burke's argument is that artistic communication cannot be understood if it is reduced to sheer information.

Many ethnographers have referred to Burke's theories of form in their essays. In "The Expressive Profile," for example, Brian Sutton-Smith examines the relation between formal and functional analysis in studying children's dreams, stories, and games in what he terms the "social science of expressive forms" (Sutton-Smith 1975:92). Sutton-Smith demonstrates how understanding the symbolic expressions of children requires that the researcher integrate investigations of analytical constructs with consideration of the aesthetic appeal of forms. Bruce Rosenberg also cites Burke's essays in "Oral Sermons and Oral Narratives" and discusses how the affective appeal of symbolic expression is an essential aspect of meaning (Rosenberg 1975:91). But the implications of Burke's thought have yet to be fully explored within the Ethnography of Speaking and folkloristic theories of performance. Consider, for example, the following interpretation of Burke's concept of rhetoric:

He has shown in a number of works that words have power and that performance therefore is a way of persuading through the production of pleasure as well as the assertion of idea or course of action. . . Therefore the more artistic the utterance (or performance) the larger amount of word-magic is being brought to bear. (Abrahams 1968:145)

While this function does occur within artistic discourse, Abrahams' interpretation does not fully reconcile with Burke's concept of rhetoric as a means of identification nor with Burke's plea that aesthetic communication also be considered on its own terms—aesthetic communication should not be studied solely with regard to the "psychology of information" nor to persuasive appeal. *Counter-Statement* and later writings show him interested in pure form within rhetoric and literature, and demonstrate his interest in celebrating the importance of the artistic textures of performances. Burke's approach thus provides useful lines of inquiry for investigating the aesthetic appeal of formal devices on its own terms. The Burkean theory of rhetoric as a means of identification, coupled with his approach to aesthetics, may contribute to our understanding of ways in which people establish and negotiate their identity within a social context—rather than simply showing how the speaker uses artistic discourse for persuasion.

Some folklorists are investigating these areas through Ethnography of Speaking, and especially through Ethnopoetics. A major orientation in contemporary folklore and ethnographic theory is examining the aesthetic appeal of language. For example, John McDowell's recent contrasting of commemorative speech and the informative style describes how speaking addresses both the psychology of information and the psychology of form (McDowell 1992). But when folklorists conceptualize rhetoric solely in terms of persuasive speech, their definition inherently orients the research toward the social use of language for purposes of personal power and social constraint. As Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin argue in "A Feminist Perspective on Rhetorical Theory," even Burke's latent interest in understanding effective strategies for speaking is commensurate with the masculine bias of many theories of communication (Foss and Griffin 1992:338). Foss and Griffin argue that if a researcher presupposes that rhetoric is persuasive speech, then he or she is apt to focus on the coercive aspects of the communication and overlook how language is used to build *communitas* and express purely aesthetic values.

Although ethnographers and folklorists have yet to exploit the range of Burke's theories in full, his work on rhetoric as a means for identification and his interest in aesthetics have had a major influence on ethnographers. Dell Hymes regards Burke's theories as a cornerstone of the foundations of the Ethnography of Speaking (Hymes 1962:27). In particular, Hymes discusses how Burke's dramatism and dramatisitic pentad are useful to ethnographers, and he and others have recommended that students of ethnography can greatly benefit from studying Burke (Glassie 1982:725).

One logical entry point for understanding dramatism is Burke's "Definition of Man." Burke described a human being as:

- (1) The symbol-using animal
- (2) The inventor of the negative
- (3) Separated from his [and her] condition by instruments of his [and her] own making
- (4) And goaded by the spirit of hierarchy. (1964:199)

I am presenting this definition in its complete form to emphasize how Burke considers the use of symbols vital to social life. Through this definition, one can begin to explore various aspects of Burke's thought. Unlike earlier rhetorical theorists, he focuses on the symbols themselves, not solely on prescriptions and descriptions of their use.

Because it is goaded by the spirit of hierarchy and "rotten with perfection," the everyday philosophy of a human being is not one of being or becoming but one of "the bin" (Burke 1967:329 and 303). "The bin" refers to the categories and classifications into which humans characteristically place the phenomena they name. The building and filling of "the bin" is a natural part of symbolic expression and of the use of language as an act of naming. Through the symbol's ability to create terms for order, language emerges as a tool. Burke's theories address the implications of considering language as a tool that separates us from our natural condition. He suggests that through linguistic categories and the use of "the bin" we are deluded into imagining that we control the natural world (Burke 1967:329).

A corollary to his orientation on the use of the symbol itself is his interest in the linguistic convention of the negative. Burke does not study the use of the negative to explore ontological issues of non-being; instead he theorized that the ability to use the "linguistic convenience of the negative" contributes to the ability to order the world, or construct "the bin". By being able to say "no," one can make distinctions within a hierarchy and pronounce value judgments. Burke credited Henri Bergson with discovering that negatives do not exist in nature, and his perspective is that value judgments are possible through the use of the word "no." His own interest in the negative became especially evident in his "particular aesthetic." Formulated in *Counter-Statement* as "When in Rome, do as the Greeks," Burke argues that by purposefully taking an oppositional stance, a theorist gains a useful means for discovering "perspectives by incongruities" (Burke 1968:119). In a positive application of this particular aesthetic, he advocates comparing incongruent works of art to ascertain their similarities (Burke 1967:302). He is not advocating willful behavior; instead Burke asks that a critic use the negative to consider the underlying assumptions and conceptions inherent within human beings' systems of order.

The use of the negative in forming value judgments supports Burke's rationale for making the "action-motion distinction", the central concept of his dramatistic position. The ability to use symbols and values purposefully, Burke argues, makes "action" different from "motion" (Burke 1978:810). The assertion that "things move, people act" is his literal description of life, for Burke asserts that principles of action cannot be reduced to sheer motion (Burke 1967:331). An individual acts to program a computer; however the computer can only move (Burke 1967:329). By studying people's actions, Burke theorizes that a researcher could track down the implications expressed through symbolic forms. The methodology he proposes is the use of the "dramatistic pentad."

The pentad's five terms—act, agent, scene, agency, and purpose—are a paradigm for making a "prophecy after the event," or an account of how actors size up the situation within which action occurs (Burke 1972:44). People express their assessments of the situation through symbolic forms, and their conceptions about what is occurring is at the crux of the action-motion distinction. The theory becomes less abstract when it is applied through the use of "ratios," a comparison between any two terms of the pentad. For example, a scene-act ratio is evident when the change in one term dramatically changes the way in which the entire action is viewed. If, in a story, a birth takes place in a taxi-cab, this is a scene-act ratio. If the birth were to take place in a home, then the significance of the action would change. The writer's choice to place the scene of the birth in a taxi, instead of in a home or a hospital, reveals how she is assessing the situation. Burke argues that these assessments are "motives" and that they can be educed through the use of the pentad. He develops his theory further and argues that dramatistic analysis could be applied to any human interaction. Described as "shorthand terms for situation," "motives" define the action-motion distinction. Burke's theory is presented in full in *A Grammar of Motives*, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, and *Dramatism and Development* (Burke 1969:xvi).

In "Literature as Equipment for Living," Burke's interpretation of the use of proverbs provides a clear illustration of how people use language to name social realities. The analysis of the use of proverbs, Burke argues, discloses the speaker's motives as "strategies for dealing with situations" (Burke 1967:296). For example, he explains that a proverb such as "When the fox preacheth, then beware your geese" can be classified in a foretelling category, for the adage is a recipe for practical living (Burke 1967:295). In using this proverb, the speaker employs a resource for handling a social situation. Burke uses this example to demonstrate that all artistic forms serve this function, and he argues that critics need to formulate a "strategy of strategies," or a means of understanding the artist's assessments of events (Burke 1967:304). Although dramatism, Burke's particular strategy of

strategies, emerges after this essay, his early thought demonstrates his focus on studying communication in relation to its social setting.

Dell Hymes credits Burke as having contributed to his interest in studying the social use of language, and he credits Burke with having influenced his formulation of component factors within speech events (Hymes 1962:25). Expanding upon Firth and Jakobson's work, Hymes's seven factors—sender, receiver, message form, channel, code, topic, and setting—are analogous to terms of the dramatic pentad. The formulation of other models for studying verbal art within the performance approach, such as Richard Bauman's four functions of event—act, role, and genre—also can be compared to Burke's pentadic model (Bauman 1975a:299-300).

A major development from the Burkean system within the *Ethnography of Speaking* is the expansion of Burke's concept of "ratios," particularly as they relate to "motives." Burke's method of comparing the functions through ratios is relevant when writers within the *Ethnography of Speaking* ask that ethnographers "consider relations between elements, or consider all as evident about a certain one" (Hymes 1962:29). Bauman's examination of the interaction between his four terms and analysis of their interdependence in an event, for example, is compatible with Burke's approach.

In Bauman's article, "Verbal Art as Performance," Burke's dramatism is further developed to encompass another Burkean theme within dramatism. Bauman's interest in elucidating "cultural themes and social-interactive organizing principles that govern the context of performance" is resonant with the Burkean approach of using the pentad to track down implications of what is acted out within a speech event (Bauman 1975a:299-300). What ethnographers regard as a "cultural theme" bears a certain similarity to a Burkean "motive." As does the term "motive," a "cultural theme" identifies how people assess speech situations. Burke's theory of dramatism and the heuristic device of the pentad provide ethnographers with useful models for adapting an approach to literary criticism and rhetorical theory to analyze cultural expression within the social sciences.

Within the limited constraints of this essay, it is difficult to address the nuances involved in comparing the vastness of Burke's theories and methods to the approaches suggested within the *Ethnography of Speaking*. Burke's theories addressed central concerns in the initial formulation of the *Ethnography of Speaking*. His focus on language within its social context, his concern with aesthetic qualities of expression, his emphasis on humankind's ability to categorize and classify, and his development of systematic ways of interpreting the verbal artistry of speech events all are major themes developed in the foundations of the *Ethnography of Speaking*.

What I find more interesting are the broader issues that a study of Burke invites ethnographers to consider. With the refinement of ethnographic

approaches, Burke's writings continue to provide insight into important concerns. Not only are Burke's perspectives on the aesthetic qualities of speech relevant to contemporary interests in artistic communication, but his approach to rhetoric as a form of identification offers new viewpoints on the study of speech acts within groups. Furthermore, by tracking down the implications of treating words as real entities, Burke's theories support the contemporary proposition that knowledge is socially constructed (Heath 1984:139). Burke asks that we consider language as a tool that separates us from our natural condition, and he suggested that the use of language deludes us into believing that we control nature. A most relevant concern, then, is the social consequence of using the linguistic conventions inherent within the Ethnography of Speaking. In other words, Burke's theory suggests that the ethnographer's "equipment for living" shapes the social construction of disciplines engaged in the study of symbolic expressions. Burke's writings ask that those engaged in cultural study examine the moral, rational, and aesthetic consequences of being "rotten with perfection" within their study of culture.

References Cited

- Abrahams, Roger D. 1968. Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore. *Journal of American Folklore* 81(320):143-159.
- Aristotle. 1954. *Rhetoric*. Trans. W. Rhys Roberts. New York: The Modern Library.
- Bauman, Richard. 1975a. Verbal Art as Performance. *American Anthropologist* 77(2):290-311.
- _____. 1975b. Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore. In *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*, eds. Americo Parades and Richard Bauman, pp. 31-41. Publication of the American Folklore Society. Austin and London: University of Texas Press.
- Bitzer, Lloyd. 1980. The Rhetorical Situation. *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1:1-14.
- Burke, Kenneth. 1950. *A Rhetoric of Motives*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- _____. 1951. Rhetoric—Old and New. *The Journal of General Education* 5:202-209.
- _____. 1964. *Perspective by Incongruity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- _____. 1967. *Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

- _____. 1968 (1931). *Counter-Statement*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- _____. 1969. *A Grammar of Motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- _____. 1972. *Dramatism and Development*. Barre, MA: Clark University Press.
- _____. 1978. (Nonsymbolic) Motion/(Symbolic) Action. *Critical Inquiry* 4:809-838.
- Ehninger, Douglas. 1975. A Synoptic View of Systems of Western Rhetoric. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61(4):448-453.
- Foss, Sonja K. and Cindy L. Griffin. 1992. A Feminist Perspective on Rhetorical Theory: Toward a Clarification of Boundaries. *Western Journal of Communication* 56(4):330-349.
- Glassie, Henry. 1982. *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community*. Publications of the American Folklore Society Volume 4. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Heath, Robert L. 1984. Kenneth Burke's Break with Formalism. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70(2):132-143.
- Hymes, Dell. 1962. The Ethnography of Speaking. In *Anthropology and Human Behavior*, pp. 13-53. Washington D.C.: The Anthropology Society of Washington.
- McDowell, John. 1992. Folklore as Commemorative Discourse. *Journal of American Folklore* 105(418):403-423.
- Rosenberg, Bruce. 1975. Oral Sermon and Oral Narrative. In *Folklore: Performance and Communication*, eds. Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth Goldstein, pp. 75-101. The Hague: Mouton.
- Sutton-Smith, Brian. 1975. The Expressive Profile. In *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*, eds. Americo Parades and Richard Bauman, pp.80-92. Publication of the American Folklore Society. Austin and London: University of Texas Press.