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ABSTRACT

This paper presents three units of study and discusses ways that teachers can incorporate Kenneth Burke's ideas on symbolic action into the basic communication course. The three units discussed in the paper address: meaning in language and symbolic reality; persuasion; and rhetorical criticism. Each unit includes a brief introduction to the topic, possible discussion topics and questions, and student handouts. (RS)

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BURKE AND SYMBOLIC ACTION IN THE BASIC COURSE

I. UNIT ON MEANING IN LANGUAGE AND SYMBOLIC REALITY[1]

Most of us teaching the basic course invite students to discuss the elements and definition of human communication. Burke's definition of humans implies that the essence of human communication is "symbol-using, making, and misusing."

To paraphrase Burke, all social scientific definitions of humans (i.e., culture-bearing, political, social, psychological, tool-using animal, etc.) can be reduced to a symbol-using principle. All definitions imply some ability to "develop and transmit conventions and institutions" (p. 23), and all require "attention not possible without a symbolic means of conceptualization" (p. 14). Burke appropriately quips that man "is the kind of animal that can haggle about the definition of himself" (p. 23).

Students may be instructed to read a handout on Burke followed by discussion. Possible discussion questions that can lead students to appreciate the explanatory power and parsimony of Burke's ideas include:

A. What does it mean to say humans are symbol-using? (What are symbols, how do they manifest themselves, how do we make, use and misuse them? - leads to questions of what constitutes "language," and intentional/unintentional communication.)

B. How do humans use symbols differently from nonhumans or animals? (Burke's distinctions between physicality, animality, symbolicity might be interesting here.)

1. Humans misuse symbols - "symbolicity implies no such temptation to self-flattery" (p. 9).
   a) Different cultural systems, languages
   b) Mistakes, misunderstanding
   c) Questions of intention - implication, inferences
   d) Interpersonal relationships and conflict

2. Humans engage in a second level of symbolicity
   a) Reflexive nature of language and meta-communication
   b) Quote from Burke: "Whereas many other animals seem sensitive in a rudimentary way to the motivating force of symbols, they seem to lack the "second-level" aspect of symbolicity that is characteristically human. The 'reflexive'capacity to develop complex symbol systems about symbol systems" (p. 24).

3. Humans can talk about what "is not."
   a) The negative is peculiar to symbol systems
   b) Hortatory negatives "thou shall not"
   c) Learning in humans vs. animals

[1]Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

SYMBOLISM AND REALITY

The 'symbol-using animal,' yes, obviously. But can we bring ourselves to realize just what that formula implies, just how overwhelmingly much of what we mean by 'reality' has been built up for us through nothing but our symbol systems? Take away our books, and what little do we know about history, biography, even something so 'down to earth' as the relative position of seas and continents? What is our 'reality' for today (beyond the paper-thin line of our own particular lives) but all this clutter of symbols about the past combined with whatever things we know mainly through maps, magazines, newspapers, and the like about the present? In school, as they go from class to class, students turn from one idiom to another. The various courses in the curriculum are in effect but so many different terminologies. And however important to us in the tiny sliver of reality each of us has experienced firsthand, the whole overall 'picture' is but a construct of our symbol systems. To meditate on this fact until one sees its full implications is much like peering over the edge of things into an ultimate abyss. And doubtless that's one reason why, though man in typically the symbol-using animal, he clings to a kind of naive verbal realism that refuses to realize the full extent of the role played by symbolicity in his notions of reality.

Taken from: Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966, p. 5.

II. UNIT ON PERSUASION

Burke's ideas[2] about the function of rhetoric complement the Aristotelian definition, "the art of persuasion," by reducing persuasion to "symbolic means," allowing students to explore its extent beyond traditional oratory. Also, Burke's concept of identification as a rhetorical strategy is useful and easily comprehensible to novice public speakers.

A. Rhetoric

1. Definition - "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (p. 43).

2. "Wherever there is meaning, there is persuasion" (p. 172).

B. Identification

1. Definition
   a) Lecture/discussion
   b) Handout

2. Functions of identification[3]
   a) Means to an end
   b) Joining to oppose
   c) Unconscious

3. Possible exercises or assignments
   a) Show students a videotaped speech, or have them read a speech you assign, then place students in groups and ask them to discuss the various ways identification functions.
   b) Place students in three groups and give each a separate speech or communication act that embraces each function respectively. Ask students to identify which function is predominate or would be most effective and why.
   c) Ask students to read a speech you assign and to write a one page paper on the functions of identification. Possible question to guide them include:
      (1) Which function is predominate?
      (2) Which function do you think is most effective and why?
      (3) How does identification help a speaker plan a speech?
      (4) In what ways is audience analysis related to identification?

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[2]Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950).

[3]Sonja K. Foss, Karen A. Foss, and Robert Trapp, *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric*. (Prospect Heights, Ill: Waveland Press, 1985), pp. 158-160.

IDENTIFICATION AS RHETORICAL STRATEGY

A speaker persuades an audience by the use of stylistic identification. Burke says, " You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, or idea, identifying your ways with his."[1]

In order to understand identification, we need to understand Burke's concept of "substance." According to Burke, individuals form themselves through various properties of substances such as people, images, ideas, experiences, and attitudes. Through such associations we share some substances which make us "consubstantial" with respect to those properties we share. For example, protesters share substance in that they value social change, board members of IBM value profit margins, and mothers are concerned about their children's safety. When a rhetorian can find a means of achieving consubstantiality, he or she is achieving identification. Burke states, "A is not identical with his colleague B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so."[2]

Burke also believes that biological and neurological differences inevitably present in humans separate and divide us from each other. Therefore for Burke, rhetoric intends to eliminate such division and achieve consubstantiality or identification.

THREE WAYS IDENTIFICATION FUNCTIONS:[3]

1) Deliberately, as a means to an end: For example, A identifies his or her interests with B, as would a politician seeking political office by showing similar values, ideas, affiliations, and codes of conduct.

2) To join opposing parties on the basis of a common enemy: This is the case when a larger threat mitigates internal conflict in organizations or when U.S. international crisis skirts domestic squabbles, e.g., the S & L controversy was relegated to less "newsworthy" by the media when the U.S. invaded Iraq.

3) To affect opinions, attitudes, behavior in a way that 'goes unnoticed': Effective advertising often promotes unconscious consumerism. Likewise, people are often moved by the sheer aesthetic beauty of art, literature, and other kinds of image making.

Notes:

1. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950, p. 55.

2. Ibid., p. 20.

3. Adapted from Sonja K. Foss, Karen A. Foss, and Robert Trapp, *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric*. Prospect Heights, Ill: Waveland Press, 1985, pp. 158-160.

III. UNIT ON RHETORICAL CRITICISM

Many of us teaching the basic course include a rhetorical criticism unit near the end of the semester to engage students in a final critical thinking challenge and to whet students' interest in subsequent advanced communication study. Kenneth Burke's cluster criticism method can be used to expose students to basic rhetorical criticism concepts and to analyze speeches commonly studied in the basic course.

First, assign students to read a short noteworthy speech and to review the handout on page 7 of this packet that explains the steps of Burke's cluster criticism method. Then engage students in lecture/discussion on the following concepts:

A. Rhetorical Criticism

1. What is rhetoric? The term "rhetoric" means persuasion or "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols."[1]

2. What is criticism? Criticism is a process of evaluating or analyzing discourse in order to draw well-reasoned conclusions about the discourse or its author.[2]

3. Why is rhetorical criticism useful? The process of rhetorical criticism can broaden our understanding and appreciation of the discourse. The process can help us understand the effects of a persuasive act from multiple perspectives. (The process is subjective and can yield multiple conclusions.)

B. Cluster Criticism

1. What is it? Burke developed the cluster method of analysis as a tool for discovering the world view and motives of speakers, writers, and artists reflected in their speeches, literature, and art.[3] World view is the social reality created by the language we use.[4] When using the cluster method to analyze a speech, you can discover the meanings that key words hold for the speaker by identifying the words that cluster around those key words in the speech. Often the clusters that you discover in the speech are unconsciously used by the speaker, resulting in insights about the speaker's world view and motives that may not even be known to the speaker.[5]

2. How is it done? (Use student handout on page 7 as an explanation of the four step process.)

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[1]Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), 43,172.

[2]Lawrence W. Rosenfield, "The Anatomy of Critical Discourse," in Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth Century Perspective, 2d ed., rev., eds. Bernard L. Brock and Robert L. Scott (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1980), 148-50, 153-55.

[3]Sonja K. Foss, "Cluster Criticism," in Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice. (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 1989).

[4]Kenneth Burke, Language as Symbolic Action (Berkeley: University of Claifornia Press, 1966), 5, 28, 48.

[5]Foss, "Cluster Criticism."

3. How can we use cluster criticism in the basic course?

a) Individually or in groups students can use the four step cluster criticism method to analyze noteworthy speeches such as "The Struggle for Human Rights" by Eleanor Roosevelt, "Keynote Address to the Democratic Convention--1988" by Ann Richards, "The Fight Against Terrorism" by Ronald Reagan, "Remarks to Students on Drug Abuse" by George Bush, "Declaration of War" by Franklin Roosevelt, and "I Have a Dream" and "I've Been to the Mountain Top" by Martin Luther King, Jr.

b) Bill Clinton's 1993 Inaugural Address provides a short, current speech that can work well with cluster analysis in the basic course. A brief sample analysis conducted by a student of Clinton's Inaugural using the four step cluster procedure follows:

(1) Key words: The words *renewal* and *change* emerge as key words on the basis of frequency. The word *Spring* is a key word because it serves to introduce the theme of the speech and to introduce the call-to-action. The word Spring also metaphorically and visually reinforces the key concept--*renewal*.

(2) Terms that cluster around the key words:

Renewal--American, democracy, challenge

Change--America, preserve, friend

Spring--force

(3) Patterns in the clusters that suggest the speaker's world view:

Renewal--America(n) appears five of the seven times that the key word renewal is spoken. Possibly, Clinton views *renewal* as an orderly process that is unique to American government. Some administrations have been stagnant. It is especially important for renewal to begin after periods of stagnation.

Change--America appears four of the eight times that *change* is mentioned. As with *renewal*, "orderly change" is American within the expressed world view. *Preserve* appears twice with the key word *change*. Although Clinton says that *change* is sometimes required for preservation, he never fully develops that idea, thus suggesting a possible contradiction in his world view.

Spring--Force(d) appears two of the three times that Clinton speaks of *Spring*, suggesting that this current *Spring* did not come in its own season and that Clinton and the U.S. public forced this *Spring* to arrive early in an act of urgency. Within Clinton's world view, *change* and *renewal* must be orderly; however, desperate times may require a hastening of the process.

(4) Speaker's motives: The analysis of questions 1-3 helps us to identify Clinton's possible motives. One of Clinton's audiences is a reluctant, suspicious audience of voters more conservative than Clinton. How can he assure them of his patriotism, wisdom, and maturity without sounding defensive? He can show them how change and renewal are not radical ideas, but American ideals. Clinton indirectly quotes Thomas Jefferson, "...to preserve the very foundations of our nation, we would need dramatic change from time to time." Clinton uses his inaugural address to convince his listeners that he and the American people are the agents of needed change and that he is going to be an activist president. Not only is he going to create change, but the change and renewal will start immediately--"We force the Spring."

CLUSTER CRITICISM

(Procedure for Analyzing a Speech)

1. Identify Key words in the speech. Select the most important five or six words used in the speech on the basis of frequency or intensity. A term the speaker uses frequently likely represents a key idea in that person's world view. A key term may not appear often in the speech, but may express a world view or motive by the term's intensity in degree, size, strength or depth of feeling conveyed.

2. Identify terms that cluster around key words. The terms may appear near a key word, or may be connected to a key word by a conjunction such as "and." Also you may discover that the speaker implies a cause-and-effect relationship between the key word and a term.

3. Discover patterns in the clusters. If the speaker often associates a particular term with a key word, that connection suggests that the term influences the key word's meaning in the speaker's world view. Also, look for opposing terms that cluster around key words--possibly suggesting that the speaker is ambiguous about the idea that key word represents. And, look for key words that contradict other key words, suggesting a conflict in the speaker's world view.

4. Identify the speaker's motive. Use the patterns that emerge from your analysis to identify the speaker's motive by asking yourself, "Given that these terms have special meaning for the speaker, what was the motive for producing this particular speech in this specific way likely to have been?"

NOTE: Handout is adapted by Ralene Hearn and Sue Collins from the following work: Foss, Sonja K., "Cluster Criticism," in Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice. Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 1989.