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Rhetoric in the Digital Age

Edited by Gabrijela Kišiček and Davor Nikolić

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INTRODUCTION: RHETORIC IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Rhetoric in the Digital Age brings together a selection of papers presented at the 9th *Rhetoric in Society* conference, held in Zagreb in June 2025. The conference theme was chosen to explore the role and status of rhetoric in the contemporary digital era. As an ancient discipline, rhetoric has endured centuries of social change, technological development, and scientific discovery; yet none of these transformations has diminished its relevance or significance. While its institutional standing and pedagogical prominence have fluctuated throughout history, rhetoric has never disappeared from the intellectual landscape.

Today, we are confronted with a range of challenges, including misinformation, fake news, the pervasive influence of social media, and the proliferation of hate speech. In this context, rhetoric proves to be not only relevant but essential for navigating the complexities of the digital environment. Many of the contributions collected in this volume address precisely this point.

This is particularly evident in the opening chapter, *Setting the Grounds for Discussion*, in which Jean Wagemans, one of the conference's keynote speakers, examines the role of rhetoric in his contribution, "The Role of Rhetoric in Defending against Weapons of Mass Persuasion". Wagemans argues that "properly understood, rhetoric is not the enemy of truth, not a bag of tricks or a toolkit for spin. It is the disciplined study of how meaning is negotiated, how arguments can persuade, and how public judgment is shaped." In this way, he establishes a conceptual foundation for discussing rhetorical theory and practice in the digital age.

The volume is further divided into three main sections: *Predigital Rhetorical Concepts*, *Rhetoric and Digital Media*, and *Rhetoric and AI*.

The section *Predigital Rhetorical Concepts* addresses a range of topics that predate the digital transformation. Although the central concepts explored in these contributions originate in rhetorical theory prior to the digital age, all the papers demonstrate their continued relevance by establishing clear connections to contemporary rhetorical challenges.

In their paper, "Self-Correction in the Contemporary French Novel: Rhetorical Effects of a Paradoxical Ethos Strategy", Maud Armani and Thierry Herman examine the concept of self-correction. While self-correction may appear to undermine ethos, particularly in writing, where it can signal an initial failure to articulate the appropriate expression, they argue that it can also produce persuasive effects. From a pragmatic and rhetorical perspective, self-correction may function as a marker of sincerity. Thus, although it may weaken the communicator's ethos by suggesting linguistic inadequacy, it can simultaneously strengthen personal ethos by conveying authenticity. Their analysis of contemporary French novels explores variations of self-correction with respect to frequency, semantic contradiction, reformulation types, and meta-enunciative evaluation, in order to assess its positive and negative rhetorical effects.

In "Rhetoric of Doxastic Systems: Metaboly and Systasis as Validity-Oriented Operations", Fabian Erhardt develops a rhetorical theory of doxastic systems structured around the relationships between validity claims, validity criteria, and assignment rules (*Zuordnungsregeln*). He argues that the dynamics of such systems can be understood through three directional movements: the addition, subtraction, and transformation of relations among their components. Drawing on Jean-François Lyotard's distinction between narrative and scientific knowledge, Erhardt demonstrates that narrative knowledge operates primarily *systatically*, through the re-actualization of supporting relations and the preservation of core validity presuppositions, whereas scientific knowledge operates *metabolically*, by introducing new, potentially disruptive relations and generating difference from established knowledge. Despite their structural opposition, both forms of knowledge share a common doxastic-rhetorical foundation.

Jonas Gabrielsen contributes with "Orality in Danish Courts", in which he revisits a longstanding concern in rhetoric: the distinction between written and spoken discourse. He shows that this distinction also carries legal significance, particularly in the context of Danish courts, where oral proceedings are required to be delivered through "free presentation." This requirement is generally interpreted as prohibiting the reading of written manuscripts during oral pleadings; however, its underlying rationale has not been thoroughly examined in legal scholarship, nor sufficiently discussed in relation to rhetorical theories of orality. Gabrielsen's paper investigates the notion of free presentation, its interpretation in legal doctrine, and the reasons why such a mode of delivery is considered advantageous in judicial contexts.

In "Rhetoric in Times of Change: A Philosophical Defense against Epistemic Reductionisms", Maurizio Manzin examines the enduring relevance of rhetoric within Western intellectual history, particularly during periods of epistemic transformation. The paper argues that rhetoric recurrently emerges as a corrective and mediating force whenever dominant epistemological frameworks attempt to monopolize truth. Drawing on Karl Jaspers' concept of the Axial Age, Manzin identifies key historical moments in which rhetoric resurfaces in response to crises of meaning—from its origins in fifth-century BCE Sicily, through Augustine's reconfiguration of discourse in Late Antiquity, Petrarch's humanist critique of scholastic dialectics, Giambattista Vico's challenge to Cartesian reductionism, and Chaïm Perelman's twentieth-century "new rhetoric" as a response to formal logic. The paper ultimately presents rhetoric as a bridge across disciplines, cultures, and historical periods, enabling communication where singular epistemic systems prove insufficient.

Chapter "*Wise people create proverbs and proverbs create wise people* – On rhetoric of proverbs and proverbs in rhetoric", by Davor Nikolić, presents a preliminary study of his project research on the role of proverbs in rhetorical genres, with a special emphasis on proverbs as a tool of populism and a potential hate speech vehicle. The first part of the paper offers a concise overview of Classical rhetorical literature and its treatment of proverbs and maxims, reminding contemporary rhetoricians of the importance given to proverbial expressions by ancient authors and emphasizing folkloristic and linguistic insights about rhetorical power of proverbs. The second part of the paper offers a methodological frame for further research on rhetorical function of proverbs in political discourse.

In her contribution, "Rhetorical Topoi and Ethical Engagement in the Polish Oxford Debate: Understanding Teenagers' Moral Reasoning", Joanna Nowakowska offers insight into adolescents' moral reasoning. The paper examines how Polish high school students identify and articulate ethical dimensions within the framework of the Polish Oxford Debate. The findings show that participants tend to introduce moral considerations even when debating propositions that are not explicitly ethical. Recurring motifs, such as justice, responsibility for the future, safety, freedom, and the common good, serve as stable anchors shaping argumentation on both sides. Moreover, the study indicates that both engagement and rhetorical quality increase when debate topics resonate with students' lived experiences, generational concerns, and awareness of contemporary issues, including technological change and social inequality.

In "Reason, Reality, and Rhetorical Truth in the Digital Age", Federico Puppo explores the relationship between rhetoric and truth in the context of the digital revolution and the so-called post-truth era. Drawing on alethic realism, he defends a conception of truth grounded in reality, broadly understood. On this basis, Puppo emphasizes the importance of Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction as a necessary condition for meaningful discourse, rhetorical persuasion, and political life. The paper advocates restoring the unity of rhetoric, politics, and ethics, proposing a virtue-ethical framework capable of addressing the techno-moral challenges of the digital age.

Antonio Rauccio, in "Rhetoric and Law: An Insight into the Scholastic Doctrine of Legal Government", examines the relationship between rhetoric and legal theory. His analysis centers on the concept of legal government and the relationship between legislators and citizens, as mediated through legal discourse. This discourse operates on multiple interconnected levels in which the three classical rhetorical *pisteis* can be identified. Law, he argues, influences citizens' conduct simultaneously through the threat of punishment (appealing to fear), its directive force (guiding practical judgment), and its authority (eliciting respect and shaping the will), ultimately aiming to cultivate the civic virtue of justice. The paper highlights the explanatory power of this rhetorical framework for contemporary legal theory.

The section concludes with Charlotte van der Voort's paper, "A Mass Medium and Its Ambiguous Message: Isocrates' Literate Rhetoric". This contribution examines how fourth-century BCE rhetorical texts negotiate the tension between oral and written communication. Van der Voort argues that Isocrates uniquely reconceptualizes the constraints of written discourse by recognizing its potential as a form of mass communication that shifts part of the interpretive burden onto the reader. Echoing Marshall McLuhan's well-known axiom that "the medium is the message," and building on Jeroen Bons' insights into Isocratean composition, the paper suggests that the written medium enables the development of novel rhetorical strategies, such as *amphibolos logos* (ambiguous argumentation). As expanding media increase audience reach, such strategies become essential for addressing heterogeneous audiences.

The second part of the volume, *Rhetoric and Digital Media*, examines the pervasive influence of social media and digital platforms on contemporary rhetorical practices. Technological development and the expansion of digital media have profoundly transformed human communication and, consequently, the dynamics of persuasion across public domains, including health communication, advertising, politics, and science communication. Both professional and private communication have increasingly migrated to digital environments, and the contributions in this section analyze the rhetorical features that characterize communication in the contemporary media landscape.

In their paper, "From Frustration to Education: How Migrant Nurse-Influencers Use Instagram to Address AMR and Shape Trust in EU Healthcare Systems", Maryam Alavi Nia and Gilda Seddighi focus on health communication in digital contexts. Their study examines how Iranian-born, Germany-based nurse influencers on Instagram construct rhetorical spaces for negotiating competing medical epistemologies surrounding antimicrobial resistance (AMR), and how migrant audiences within the EU engage with these narratives. Through a qualitative analysis of selected posts and their accompanying comment threads, the authors identify two key configurations: first, the fracturing of medical authority through embodied testimony, in which antibiotics shift between symbols of care and markers of neglect; and second, the use of satire to expose the semiotic instability of clinical logic, where humour and role-play challenge assumptions about Iranian "excess" and German "minimalism".

In "Pop Culture, the Writing Classroom, and the Rhetoric of Hip-Hop", Tejan Green Waszak explores hip-hop as a dynamic rhetorical form and a valuable pedagogical resource. The paper demonstrates how the genre has evolved into a productive site for research and discussion within the writing classroom. Waszak argues that hip-hop artists engage audiences in ways that are both rhetorically powerful and, at times, deliberately unsettling. She highlights the advantages of integrating hip-hop into teaching rhetorical strategies, emphasizing its capacity to help students critically examine diverse modes of communication that operate across both traditional and digital media environments.

The paper "Witchcraft in Your Lips? Prosody as Persuasion in Advertising", by Gabrijela Kišiček, Agnieszka Bryła-Cruz, and Martin Hinton, investigates the role of prosodic features in advertising discourse. The authors emphasize the rhetorical and argumentative significance of elements such as accent, speech rate, and intonation. By analyzing the relationship between prosody and persuasion, the study offers insights that contribute to the interpretation of multimodal arguments, particularly those combining spoken and linguistic content, and demonstrates the adaptability and continued relevance of classical rhetorical categories in digital communication.

In "Is There a Speaker in This Post? The Eclipse of the Orator in Digital Social Networks", Manfred Kraus addresses the changing role of the speaker in online communication. He argues that in digital environments, not only does the meaning of a text become unstable, but the traditional rhetorical role of the speaker, or orator as the identifiable source of a message, also becomes increasingly blurred. Kraus analyzes the mechanisms and consequences of this transformation, suggesting that the erosion of the orator's role poses significant challenges to the possibility of balanced and reasoned argumentation in the public sphere.

Ivanka Mavrodieva, in "Rhetorical and Communicative Features of Podcasts in Bulgaria", examines podcasts as an emerging and increasingly significant communication genre. She argues that podcasts have developed into a distinct communicative channel encompassing content produced by business organizations, cultural and educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, and other actors. Based on an analysis of selected Bulgarian podcasts, the study demonstrates

that podcasts do not constitute a homogeneous genre; rather, their rhetorical features are shaped both during production and in the post-communication phase, particularly through promotion on digital platforms and social media. Mavrodieva concludes that digital tools contribute to the development of podcasts as a specific form of virtual, multimodal rhetoric.

The third part of the volume, *Rhetoric and AI*, explores how the most recent technological developments have reshaped both rhetorical practice and rhetorical pedagogy. While artificial intelligence undoubtedly offers significant advantages, it also introduces new challenges and raises complex ethical questions. The contributions in this section engage critically with these issues.

In "Digital Objects in the Rhetorical Situation: A Peculiar Kind of Constraint", Silvia Corradi argues that digital objects constitute a distinct type of constraint within the rhetorical situation. Her analysis highlights the specific characteristics that differentiate digital objects from so-called "natural objects", focusing in particular on the features of digital or "third-order" technologies. Corradi further examines how the use of digital objects can influence legal practice, emphasizing the need for caution in contexts where such technologies shape decision-making processes.

Daria Evangelista, in "Translated with AI: How Are Specialized, yet Highly Rhetorical Texts Translated by DeepL? An Analysis of Preambles in Normative Texts", investigates how AI-based translation systems handle rhetorical and genre-sensitive features in specialized discourse. Employing a qualitative, corpus-based approach informed by translation theory, rhetorical analysis, and text linguistics, the study assesses whether DeepL successfully captures rhetorical devices across different textual levels. The findings indicate that the system frequently fails to reproduce key rhetorical features essential for meaning and stylistic accuracy, particularly in normative preambles, thereby underscoring the limitations of current AI translation tools and the continued necessity of human oversight and expert post-editing.

In "Rhetoric in Crisis: The Value of Rhetorical Education in the Age of AI", Heather Hill poses a central question for contemporary rhetorical studies: what is the role of rhetoric in the era of generative artificial intelligence, and what remains to be taught if systems such as ChatGPT can perform many of the tasks traditionally associated with rhetorical training? Her paper examines how rhetorical education must adapt to a rapidly changing landscape, with particular attention to the capacities that AI cannot replicate. Hill concludes that, although AI may transform the ways rhetoric is taught and practiced, rhetorical education is not diminished but, on the contrary, becomes even more essential.

Carlos Monteiro and Alexandra Kuzmina address another set of challenges arising from AI in their paper, "The Rhetoric of Prompts: Multimodality, Intent, and Ethics in AI Meaning-Making". They focus on the interpretive and ethical complexities associated with synthetic media, whose origin, authorship, and intent are often ambiguous. These issues extend beyond misinformation to encompass the broader structures through which meaning is constructed, framed, and ethically justified. The authors propose a metatheoretical framework that draws on rhetoric and multimodality to reconceptualize AI-generated content, particularly visual outputs, as sites of ethical engagement and moral accountability.

Finally, in "Rhetoric as a Bridge between Ethics and AI in Predictive Justice", Serena Tomasi brings together rhetoric, law, and artificial intelligence. Drawing on the case *Re A*, as discussed by Neil MacCormick, she illustrates how legal reasoning addresses ethical pluralism through justification and deliberation rather than mere rule application. Using this case as a lens, Tomasi argues that the central limitation of predictive justice systems lies not only in their technical opacity but also in their inability to provide normatively grounded, publicly contestable justifications. Even so-called

interpretable models tend to explain correlations rather than reasons. In response, she proposes a rhetorically informed model of legal AI, in which systems function as deliberative interlocutors—mapping competing considerations, disclosing value trade-offs, and enabling contestation—rather than as authoritative predictors.

Rhetoric in the Digital Age brings together twenty contributions that address the evolving relationship between rhetoric and digital society. The volume highlights the challenges that rhetoric and rhetoricians face in the twenty-first century across a range of domains within public discourse. At the same time, it offers possible responses to these challenges by proposing new analytical tools, exploring modes of engagement with artificial intelligence, and providing historical perspectives on the recurring difficulties rhetoric has encountered over time.

We sincerely thank all the authors who contributed to this volume for their insightful, valuable, and highly relevant chapters. Their work has made this book a significant resource for scholars of rhetoric and argumentation, as well as for students of rhetoric, communication, media studies, and related disciplines within the humanities. We also believe that this volume will be of interest to a broader readership, particularly those concerned with public communication, persuasion, and critical thinking. We are especially grateful to our distinguished reviewers, Mika Hietanen of Lund University and Blake Scott of the University of Tübingen, whose expertise in rhetorical studies provided invaluable feedback and constructive suggestions throughout the editorial process. Their insights greatly contributed to the quality and coherence of this volume. We would also like to express our appreciation to all the reviewers of the individual chapters. Their careful evaluations and thoughtful recommendations helped the authors strengthen their contributions and ensured the overall scholarly quality of the book. Their commitment and generosity were essential to the editorial process and represent an important contribution to the advancement of rhetorical scholarship.

Rhetoric has consistently proven to be a crucial resource in periods of profound social and intellectual transformation. Although it is inevitably shaped by ongoing technological and societal change, there is little doubt that it will remain an essential discipline in the years and centuries to come.

Gabrijela Kišiček
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Setting Grounds for Discussion

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THE ROLE OF RHETORIC IN DEFENDING AGAINST WEAPONS OF MASS PERSUASION

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Abstract

We live in the Information Age, where digital technologies shape our individual, social, and political realities. A central challenge of this era is 'misinformation', an umbrella term that includes fake news, echo chambers, polarization, conspiracy theories, and troll factories. The rise of Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) has further intensified these concerns. Large Language Models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT reflect both Gorgias's description of rhetoric and Plato's criticism of it: they function like digital sophists, capable of generating persuasive texts on any topic and for any target audience at the push of a button, without any built-in guarantee of truth. They also enable large-scale rhetorical manipulation, mobilizing automated troll armies to sway public opinion. Is there anything we can do against these "weapons of mass persuasion"? And what is left of rhetoric, the art of crafting persuasive texts, now that these can be mass-produced by machines? In this keynote, I examine the shifting role of rhetoric in the face of these transformations. Rather than fading into obsolescence, I argue that rhetoric must evolve from a productive art into a critical one, arming individuals with the skills to analyze and resist manipulative discourse. In particular, I discuss the method of "rhetoric-checking" as a vital complement to fact-checking: while fact-checking verifies the accuracy of claims, rhetoric-checking assesses argumentation quality, emotional appeals, and deceptive persuasion tactics. In an era where persuasive language is both ubiquitous and machine-generated, democratic discourse hinges not only on crafting strong arguments but also on cultivating the ability to criticize them. By repositioning rhetoric as a safeguard against misinformation, we can preserve its role as a cornerstone of intellectual resilience in the digital age.

Keywords: *argumentation theory, critical literacy, digital persuasion, generative AI, misinformation, rhetoric-checking*

1. Introduction

It is no exaggeration to say that we are living through an extraordinary moment in the history of human communication. Digital technologies have not only expanded our capacity to speak and learn; they have transformed the very conditions under which we form beliefs, engage with others, and make sense of the world. The famous picture on the cover of Abbey Road was taken in 1969. Here is what it would have looked like if it had been taken in our time (see Figure 1).

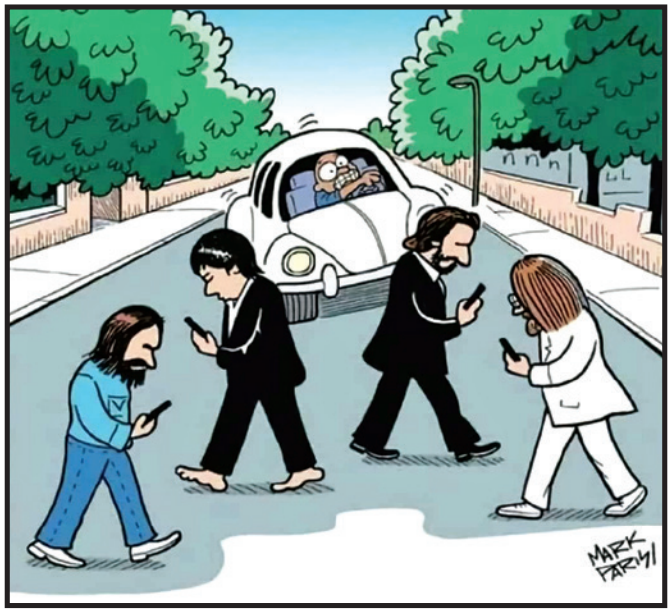

Figure 1. Crossing Abbey Road with mobile phones (2019). Mark Parisi.

We carry in our pockets tools that would have seemed like magic only a few decades ago. They allow us to summon vast libraries of information, join global conversations, and share our voices in real time. And yet, in this age of unprecedented connectivity, we are also more vulnerable than ever to communication's darker side: its capacity to distort, divide, and deceive.

The Information Age is increasingly shadowed by what might more accurately be called the Age of Misinformation. For all the data we can access, we are not necessarily better informed. Instead, we find ourselves confronted with fake news, filter bubbles, and algorithm-driven polarization. The challenge we face is not merely a surplus of bad arguments or misleading content. We are confronting highly complex systems that operate at scale to shape perception and influence belief. What we are up against are what I call "weapons of mass persuasion" (Wagemans 2024b, 1), i.e., digital tools that can mimic human communication, simulate emotional depth, and generate persuasive messages with alarming fluency. These technologies are embedded in our newsfeeds, our social media timelines, our personalized ads, and our generative AI platforms. They do not just speak *to* us, they learn how to speak *like* us.

And here's the irony: just when persuasion is being weaponized with unprecedented force, rhetoric, the discipline concerned with persuasion, still has a bad reputation. To call something "rhetorical" is often to dismiss it as manipulative, empty, or insincere. "That's just rhetoric," we say, as if to brush it aside. This dismissal of rhetoric has a long tradition. Look at this allegory of Dame Rhetoric, with golden chains coming out of her mouth, which guide the sheep wherever she wants (see Figure 2). You get the point.

Figure 2. *Rhetorica* (1628). Spencer Collection, The New York Public Library.

Contrast that with what we say about her sister, Dame Logic: when we call something "logical", it's a compliment, a marker of clarity and reason.

Today, I want to make a different case. Rhetoric is not the problem. In fact, it may be an important part of the solution. Properly understood, rhetoric is not the enemy of truth, not a bag of tricks or a toolkit for spin. It is the disciplined study of how meaning is negotiated, how arguments can persuade, and how public judgment is shaped. Far from obsolete, rhetoric offers us a crucial resource: a way to analyze and evaluate persuasive messages. A way to restore agency in our public discourse. A way to strengthen democracy not by silencing persuasion, but by making it more visible and more accountable.

My aim in this talk is to reclaim rhetoric in this critical sense: not as a weapon to win debates, but as a lens for understanding how influence works and how it can be resisted. To do that, we must look both backward and forward. Backward, to understand how rhetoric's reputation became so compromised; and forward, to imagine how it might be retooled for the challenges of our digital age.

Here is how I will proceed. First, I examine the nature of rhetorical practice in the digital age, focusing on how new technologies have altered the dynamics of persuasion. Then I revisit the deep roots of our cultural suspicion toward rhetoric, beginning with Plato's critique of the sophists.

Next, I trace how that suspicion shaped the development of modern argumentation theory, often leading to a rigid separation between rational argument and persuasive appeal. To offer an alternative, I then turn to Aristotle's more nuanced view of rhetoric as the counterpart to dialectic. Finally, I argue for a renewed role for rhetoric in our time, not merely as the art of persuasion, but as a critical literacy of resistance: a way to detect and defuse manipulative discourse in the digital public sphere.[1]

Let us begin, then, with the present.

2. Weapons of mass persuasion

The digital revolution, for all its wonders, has done more than accelerate the pace of communication. It has reshaped the very ecology of public discourse. On the one hand, it has democratized speech, connected us across borders, and opened unprecedented pathways for learning, collaboration, and civic participation. On the other hand, it has also unleashed new and deeply troubling forms of manipulation, forms that are faster, more subtle, and vastly more scalable than anything we've seen before.

This is the paradox at the heart of the Information Age. It offers us access to the treasure trove of knowledge and useful information, while just as often delivering confusion, distortion, and distrust. We are inundated with messages engineered not to inform, but to provoke. We scroll through headlines tailored to our prejudices, memes designed to incite outrage, and streams of content increasingly generated not by fellow citizens, but by machines optimized for attention, not for truth.

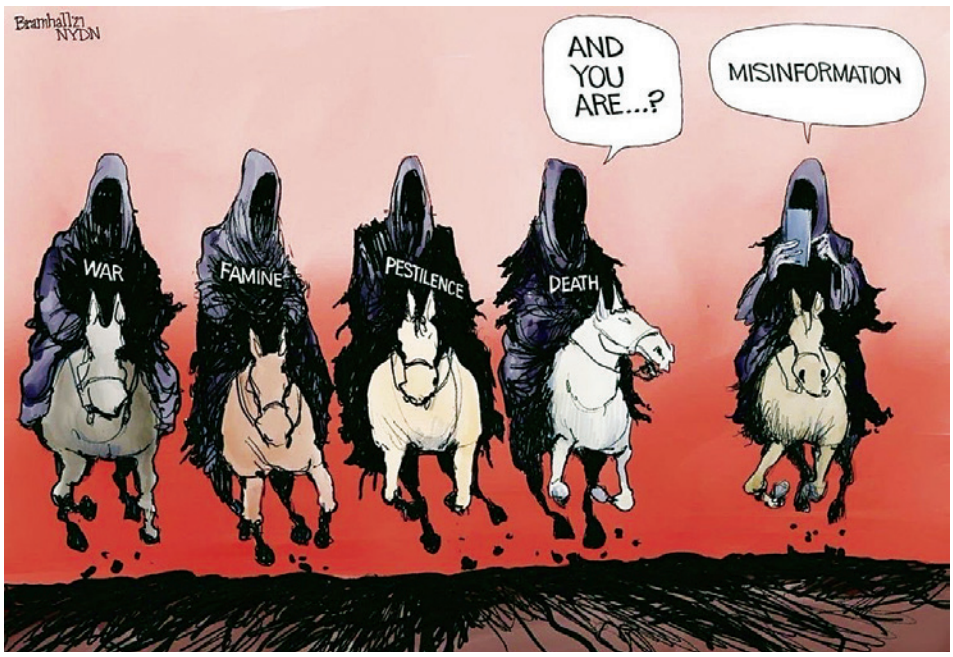

Figure 3. Misinformation (2021). Bill Bramhall, NYDN.

[1] Sections 2 and 6 of this keynote are based on Plug and Wagemans (2020), Brave, Russo, and Wagemans (2022), Wagemans (2024a; 2024b), and Plug and Wagemans (2024). Sections 3, 4, and 5 are based on Wagemans (2025). All parts were adapted to be read aloud in combination with slides (some of which have been printed here too). For this reason, I have refrained from mentioning references except where they directly accompany quoted materials. For all other references, please consult the sources just mentioned.

To grasp the nature of this crisis, we need to look beyond its surface symptoms, beyond "fake news", "alternative facts", and "misinformation" (see Figure 3). The deeper issue is not just *what* is being said, but *how* persuasion itself now operates in the digital domain. The traditional rules of rhetorical engagement have been fundamentally altered, not just in terms of content, but in the structural and technological conditions under which persuasive discourse is produced, distributed, and received.

Today's persuasive messages are often not composed by human agents advancing arguments, but by automated systems designed to exploit our cognitive vulnerabilities. These systems determine what happens in our social feeds, our personalized search results, our viral videos, and trending hashtags. They do not merely persuade; they predict, adapt, and optimize in real time.

The rise of generative AI has added a powerful new dimension to this transformation. Large Language Models such as ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, and others have supercharged the rhetorical capacities of machines to a near-human level. They can now produce fluent, convincing discourse on virtually any topic. They can imitate authority, simulate emotional resonance, and compose persuasive appeals with uncanny ease and without consideration of the truth. In this sense, they are the sophists of our time. Troll farms can generate realistic personas; bots can saturate comment sections with emotionally targeted messages; political campaigns can test hundreds of iterations of a slogan to find the one that most effectively incites fear or outrage. In short, rhetoric has become programmable.

These developments have two particularly alarming dimensions. The first is quantitative: the sheer volume of persuasive content that can now be generated and disseminated. What once required entire communications teams can now be done by a single person - or no person at all - using generative tools to flood the digital space with synthetic messages that are indistinguishable from those written by skilled human authors.

The second dimension of these developments is qualitative. We are entering an era in which the production of persuasive messages is guided not by intuition or tradition, but by data: biometric feedback, psychological profiling, and real-time analytics. This is the logic of neuromarketing fused with rhetoric, a convergence where every word, image, and emotional cue is fine-tuned to your individual susceptibilities. These systems don't broadcast; they narrowcast, targeting each of us with content precisely tailored to our fears, desires, and beliefs.

What does this new situation mean for the discipline of rhetoric? Has the ancient art of crafting persuasive speeches now become obsolete? Or can it be repurposed, as a form of resistance? I believe it can. But before we can reclaim rhetoric as a vital civic resource, we must first confront the barrier that stands in our way: rhetoric's damaged reputation.

3. Plato's criticisms of rhetoric

Ask the average person what the word "rhetoric" means, and you're likely to hear responses like "manipulation", "spin", "fluff", and "empty words." Even in academic and professional settings, rhetoric often carries a faint scent of suspicion. It's frequently regarded as ornamental rather than substantial, strategic rather than sincere, emotional rather than rational. In popular imagination, rhetoric is the stylistic gloss that conceals more than it reveals. If someone is being "rhetorical," they are probably trying to deceive us (see Figure 4). Rhetoric is what politicians use when they want to avoid answering the question. And it is what advertisers use to sell us things we don't need.

Figure 4. He knows it's just rhetoric. Yarn memes.

This reputation is not a recent development. It is ancient. And, to be blunt, it's all Plato's fault. More than any other figure, Plato shaped the Western suspicion of rhetoric as a dangerous, deceptive force. For centuries, rhetoric has been cast as a second-class discipline: morally dubious, intellectually inferior, and subordinate to logic, philosophy, and science. At best, it has been seen as a useful skill; at worst, a seductive threat to reasoned judgment.

Plato's critique of rhetoric is articulated most famously in two dialogues: *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*. In the *Gorgias*, Plato, through the voice of Socrates, portrays rhetoric as a pseudo-art, a form of persuasion concerned not with truth but with power. Socrates compares rhetoric to cookery: something that gratifies without nourishing, that appeals to the senses but fails to serve the good of the soul. Just as a sweet dessert may please the palate while harming the body, rhetoric, in this view, pleases the audience while leaving them intellectually and ethically malnourished.

What makes rhetoric dangerous, according to Plato, is its detachment from knowledge. The sophist Gorgias proudly claims that a skilled rhetorician can persuade better than any expert, even on subjects they don't truly understand. For Socrates, this is precisely the problem. It means that rhetorical power can be wielded by the ignorant, that persuasion can triumph over expertise, and that appearance can defeat reality. In a democracy, where public opinion matters, this becomes a civic threat: rhetoric turns political life into a competition of impressions, not ideas.

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato offers a more constructive, though still demanding, vision of rhetoric. He sketches out what a legitimate, philosophical rhetoric might look like and identifies three essential conditions. First**,** the orator must possess true knowledge of the subject. Persuasion divorced from truth is deception. Rhetoric must be grounded in dialectic, the method of philosophical inquiry, because only dialectic can uncover the essence of things. Second**,** the orator must understand the soul of the audience. Just as a physician must diagnose the body to prescribe a cure, a rhetorician must understand the psychological makeup of the listener. Without

this insight, persuasion becomes either accidental or manipulative. And third**,** rhetoric must be adapted to the audience, not to flatter, but to address the soul's genuine needs. This isn't just a matter of style. It requires a scientific understanding of how different discursive means affect different types of people. It can be compared to tailoring a treatment to a diagnosis: the right speech for the right soul.

So the basic idea of a "philosophically responsible" rhetoric is this: only when persuasion is grounded in truth, and guided by a deep understanding of human psychology, can it rise above flattery and manipulation. It is dialectic, the philosophical method to arrive at truth, which provides the intellectual foundation for rhetoric. This idea is connected to Plato's remark that the philosopher should be king, promoting expertocracy above democracy.

4. Rhetoric on probation

Plato's sharp opposition between rhetoric and dialectic - one manipulative, the other rational - has left a deep and lasting imprint. It shaped not only classical philosophy but continues to inform contemporary argumentation theory, a field that emerged in the mid-20th century as a response to the limitations of formal logic. Where logic focuses on validity, deduction, and form, argumentation theorists sought to build models that could better reflect how people actually argue in real-world contexts: law, politics, science, and everyday life. These new models aimed to be more flexible, more context-sensitive, and more in line with argumentative practice (see Figure 5).

And yet, even in this progressive turn, we often see Plato's hierarchy reappear. Dialectic is framed as rational, normative, and truth-oriented. Rhetoric, by contrast, remains the dubious sibling: strategic, audience-centered, and ethically suspect. Dialectic provides the rules; rhetoric decorates the message.

Figure 5. Argumentation in real life. Wagemans (2025, 1).

We see this clearly, for instance, in the extended pragma-dialectical theory developed by van Frans van Eemeren and Peter Houtlosser. Their notion of "strategic maneuvering" assumes that arguers operate with two goals in mind: remaining reasonable (the dialectical aim), while also being persuasive (the rhetorical aim) (see Figure 6). On this view, a fallacy occurs when the rhetorical impulse violates dialectical norms – when effectiveness wins out over reasonableness.

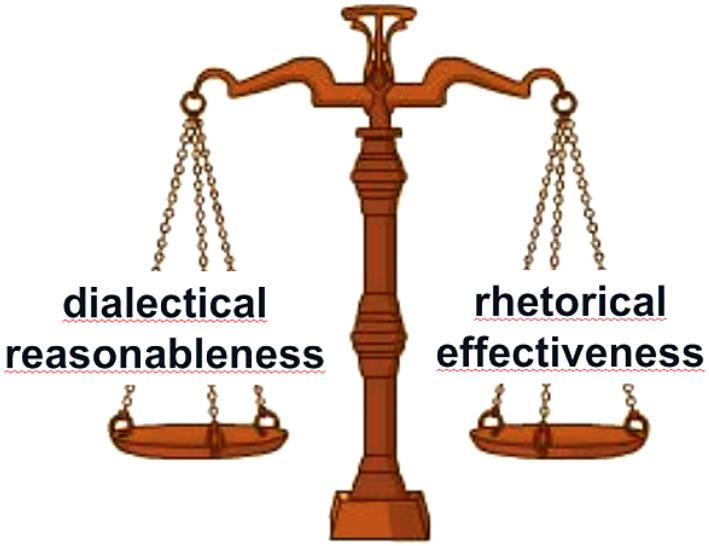

Figure 6. Dialectical reasonableness and rhetorical effectiveness.

But this model carries two problematic assumptions. First, it treats dialectic as the seat of reason and rhetoric as a kind of necessary indulgence, a way to adapt arguments to audiences. Emotional appeal, style, and framing are not treated as core properties of persuasive discourse, but as peripheral tools that operate within a dialectical framework. Second, it treats rhetorically designed moves as conditionally legitimate, acceptable only insofar as they do not conflict with dialectical rules. In this framing, rhetoric is not free to lead; it is, so to speak, permanently on probation.

Of course, there are also other views on the relationship between dialectic and rhetoric. Michael Leff, for instance, offers a more balanced metaphor: rhetoric and dialectic as partners in tension, each checking the other's excesses. Rhetoric prevents dialectic from becoming too abstract; dialectic reins in rhetoric's tendency toward manipulation. This is certainly an improvement over outright dismissal or incorporation. But the mutually corrective conversation between disciplines still remains within the Platonic frame: dialectic is the guardian of truth and rhetoric is the risky companion who must be watched closely.

The deeper assumption behind this frame is that rationality belongs to dialectic and that rhetoric can only be rational if it behaves like dialectic. But what if that assumption is mistaken? What if rhetoric is not a deviation from reason, but a form of reason in its own right? What if rhetoric is not the bug in the system, but a feature (see Figure 7)?

Let me be clear: Plato's concerns were not unfounded. The dangers of manipulation are real; we see them today in populist appeals, disinformation campaigns, and algorithmically tailored outrage. The fear that persuasion can be weaponized is well justified.

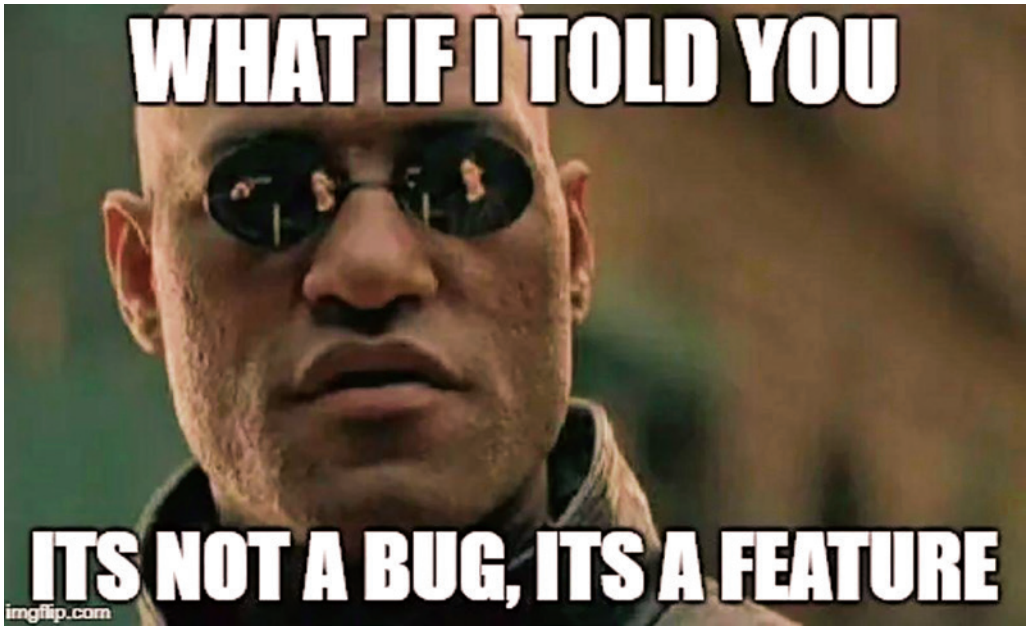

Figure 7. What if I told you meme. The Matrix, imgflip.com.

But Plato's solution, to *subordinate* rhetoric to dialectic, is not a solution at all. It simply brackets the problem. It reduces public persuasion to a philosophical ideal that few, if any, can live up to. What we need is a different starting point. One that doesn't see rhetoric as a tolerated risk, but as a rational resource. One that places rhetoric and dialectic on equal footing, not in a hierarchical relationship but as counterparts.

This was Aristotle's insight. For him, rhetoric is not merely ornamental, nor a compromise between reason and persuasion. It is its own form of rationality, distinct, but equal. And that is the perspective we must reclaim.

5. Aristotle's alternative

Aristotle opens his work on rhetoric with a striking claim: "Rhetoric is the counterpart (*antistrophos*) of dialectic" (*Rhetorica* I 1.1, 1354a1). This is no incidental remark. It's a philosophical repositioning, a deliberate challenge to Plato's hierarchy. Where Plato subordinates rhetoric to dialectic, Aristotle places them side by side, as counterparts.

For Aristotle, dialectic and rhetoric are parallel arts that have a lot in common. Both are general, not specialized. Neither has a fixed subject matter: they don't tell us what is true in ethics, politics, or science, but they do teach us how to reason and argue about such matters. Both rely on plausible reasoning, not strict demonstration. And both aim at persuasion, though in different settings: dialectic operates in dialogue, rhetoric in public speech.

What's more, from the speaker's side, both arts require the same fundamental skills: invention**,** arrangement, and expression (*inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio*). We often associate these "tasks of the speaker" only with rhetoric, but you can find them in Aristotle's work on dialectic as well:

> Anyone who intends to frame questions must, first of all, select the ground from which he should make his attack; secondly, he must frame them and arrange them one by one to himself; thirdly and lastly, he must proceed actually to put them to the other party. (Aristotle, *Topica* 155b)

And from the audience's side, both dialectic and rhetoric expect active engagement. Both place responsibility on the addressee of the argument to evaluate and judge.

Aristotle's vision directly undermines the Platonic framing still evident in much of contemporary argumentation theory: the idea that dialectic is about reasonableness and rhetoric about effectiveness. However, there are important exceptions. Take formal dialectician Erik Krabbe. He has criticized the simplistic view of rhetoric as manipulative and dialectic as pristine, and argues instead that both are strategic, audience-directed forms of discourse. Their primary difference, he suggests, lies in the *format*: rhetoric is monological, in the form of speeches; dialectic is dialogical, in the form of conversations. But even this boundary is fluid:

> [R]hetoric and dialectic must be pretty close; the only difference being that rhetoric deals with speeches, whereas dialectic deals with conversations. Indeed, their realms of interest do overlap, since conversations may contain speeches, and a series of speeches can often be described as if it were a conversation between their authors. (Krabbe 2002, 29–30)

In a similar vein, informal logician Tony Blair emphasizes that the essential difference between dialectic and rhetoric lies not in underlying logic or value systems, but in the communicative situation:

> What distinguishes rhetoric, understood as argumentative speeches, from dialectic, understood as argumentative conversations," Blair writes, "are features that follow from their essential difference – that in the former, the audience does not directly interact with the arguer, whereas in the latter, the interlocutor does. (Blair 2012, 149)

For Blair, dialectic and rhetoric share not only descriptive goals (explaining how people argue) but also normative ones: offering criteria for how arguments should be evaluated.

What an Aristotelian take on the relationship between rhetoric and dialectic offers us, then, is not a theory of rhetoric as decorative language. It's a theory of rhetoric as situated reasoning. From this perspective, rhetoric is not the enemy of truth. It is a theory about the means by which particular points of view are communicated, not in abstract, but in context.

And that view on the nature of rhetoric could not be more urgent today. In our digital age, where persuasion can be automated, scaled, and simulated by machines, we need more than logical formalisms. We need a theory of how people *actually* make judgments about what they believe and what they should do. A theory that accounts for emotion, context, timing, ethos, and audience. A theory grounded in lived reasoning. And for that, Aristotle is the better guide.

To safeguard the audience from being manipulated, Plato, and later Quintilian, emphasized the epistemic and ethical qualities of the speaker, in terms of the dialectician and the *vir bonus dicendi peritus*, respectively. But for Aristotle, the virtue of the speaker alone isn't enough as a guarantee. It is inherent in rhetoric, like in any other instrument, that it can be used for the bad and for the good. This implies that the audience members also have a certain responsibility. After all, they will have to distinguish between insight and illusion, between sincere persuasion and manipulative spectacle. This means that rhetorical education cannot be confined to speakers alone. It must also cultivate critical audiences: thoughtful readers, discerning listeners, responsible citizens.

6. Rhetoric as a critical art

And these thoughts bring me to the profound implications of embracing Aristotle's view of rhetoric as the counterpart of dialectic. Let me highlight just two.

First, it challenges the idea that arguments can be judged by abstract, context-free standards. Instead of measuring persuasion against universal criteria imposed from above, from this Archimedean point of reasonableness, it calls for what we might call situated normativity. What counts as a strong argument in a courtroom might be inappropriate in a private conversation. What persuades in a political rally might fall flat in a philosophical seminar. Sometimes, the perfect is the enemy of the good. Instead of to Plato or Quintilian, we may have to listen more often to what Mediocrates has to say about argument quality (see Figure 8).

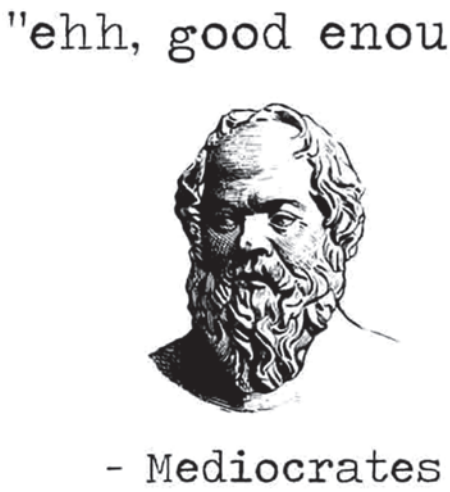

Figure 8. Mediocrates (2021). Via Charles Alday.

This is not relativism. It is realism. It's an acknowledgment that persuasion always happens *somewhere* – with specific audiences, under particular circumstances, and with real-world consequences. Context is not noise. It's the ground on which judgment takes place.

Second, it reminds us that rhetoric is not only a productive art, in the sense of a way to craft compelling messages. It is also a critical art: a way to interpret, question, and resist persuasive messages. A way to unmask what is being done with language, and why. Today, we rightly invest in fact-checking, and that work is essential. But facts alone are not the currency of persuasion. We also need rhetoric-checking: the ability to assess the quality of arguments, the structure of appeals, and the emotional levers being pulled. This is not about censorship. It's not about building a Ministry of Truth. It's about building a culture of discernment – training people to recognize how persuasion works, so they can make informed, reflective judgments about what to believe, and how to act.

For too long, rhetoric has been sidelined in modern education, treated as a soft skill, a stylistic extra, useful perhaps for sales or politics, but not central to intellectual or civic life. But if we take seriously the world we now live in, where algorithms mediate public discourse, where machines speak in fluent human tones, where attention is monetized and persuasion weaponized, then we must place rhetoric where it belongs: at the core of civic literacy. Because the old warning still holds: "Whoever does not study rhetoric, will become a victim of it" (Murphy et al. 2014, 3).

So let us move from Plato to Aristotle. Let's avoid dismissing rhetoric as mere ornament, spin, or manipulation and reclaim it as a central component of democratic life. Let us study it, teach it, and defend it. Not as a relic of the past, but as a key to the future.

Thank you.

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I. Predigital rhetorical concepts

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SELF-CORRECTION IN THE CONTEMPORARY FRENCH NOVEL: RHETORICAL EFFECTS OF A PARADOXICAL ETHOS STRATEGY

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Abstract

Self-correction may be seen as undermining ethos*, particularly in writing, as it suggests an inability to articulate the right word initially. However, it is pervasive in everyday conversation and has been studied for its persuasive effects in pragmatics (Younis et al. 2023) and rhetoric, where it signals sincerity (Plantin 2009). In literature, particularly contemporary French novels, self-correction is very frequent and represents everyday discursive movements and thought processes (Rouayrenc 2015), offering a lens to study its rhetorical effects.*

Self-correction can emphasize the "ethos of the communicating subject" (Herman 2005), as a counterpoint to the speaker's person. While it may damage the communicator's ethos by highlighting linguistic inadequacy, it can enhance the person's ethos by signaling authenticity. However, excessive self-correction or radical reformulations, frequently seen in French contemporary literature, risk undermining positive rhetorical effects.

This study analyzes French novels to explore the variations of self-correction based on factors like their number, semantic contradictions, reformulation types (Steuckardt 2009) and meta-enunciative evaluation to investigate their rhetorical effects (positive and negative). We aim to explore these rhetorical effects in various argumentative scenarios to deepen the understanding of the rhetoric-argumentation interface.

Keywords: *ethos, self-correction, contemporary novel, communicating subject, enunciative loops*

1. Self-Correction and Its Impact on Ethos

Self-correction is a frequent feature of everyday speech: we constantly rephrase our words to reaffirm, correct or emphasize them. However, its frequent use does not make it trivial. For instance, let us consider these two examples:

1) I am angry – **no, I am furious** about the delay.

2) "Her voice I was going to say above all that, **but no, not above, no.**" (Mauvignier 1999, 116)

Although each of these two utterances contains one self-correction, it serves two different purposes. In the first example, the second segment is a self-correction that functions as an amplification of the initial statement, reinforcing its orientation and extending its meaning in a consistent direction. In contrast, in the second example extracted from our corpus of French contemporary novels, the self-correction takes the form of a contradiction, or at least a questioning of the preceding segment ("but no"), without giving the final adequate word for the speaker. This excerpt reveals a paradox concerning the use of self-correction in contemporary novels: it highlights the rhetorical and narratological effects of the process of correcting an initial mistake in a published work. As Authier-Revuz notes, it is impossible to "retroactively cancel an error" in oral discourse; however, in writing, "even when it does not mimic oral speech, there is a deliberate choice" (1995, II, 563, our translation). This means that the decision to display self-corrections is an "unconstrained enunciative choice" (1995, II, 564), which calls into question the construction of the speaker as a communicating subject. Rather than interpreting this as mere incoherence, it is worth examining what such a move reveals about the speaker's strategy. When viewed through the lens of rhetoric and discourse analysis, self-correction reveals itself to be a way of strategically constructing identity and an important aspect of the creation of ethos, that is, the image we create of ourselves through discourse (Amossy 1999). Indeed, this apparent weakness may paradoxically serve to reinforce the speaker's ethos, as visible traces of hesitation can indicate rhetorical sincerity or transparency in the search for the right words. This raises a broader question: how does self-correction contribute to shaping the speaker's ethos in this literary context – by weakening or strengthening it?

We will question the impact of such corrections on the representation given by the speaker of themselves, through their discursive choices as a communicating subject. Ultimately, we question how this contributes to the construction of a specific ethos – one in which the speaker openly displays uncertainty in finding the most adequate formulation. This paper examines self-correction as a meaningful rhetorical act that operates in a more complex way than simply showing hesitations in discourse. Self-correction has significant implications for our corpus of contemporary French novels, as this process represents the "work in progress" of the speaker's thoughts or speech, highlighting their relationships with their own discourse in a meta-enunciative[1] dimension that exposes the process rather than the final product. It thus has strong implications for the construction of the subject's ethos in managing communication.

2. Background

To understand these effects, we adopt an expanded interpretation of ethos, based on French discourse analysis and argumentation theory. Since the work of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1958) and the symposium led by Amossy (1999), the concept has been broadened in the

[1] In this paper, we adopt a broad definition of meta-enunciation, understood as the "enunciation that takes itself as its object" (Pennec 2020, 64; our translation).

French-speaking world. It is no longer confined to the qualities that a speaker invokes in their speech to demonstrate credibility, such as sincerity, competence, and benevolence (Doury and Lefébure 2006, 53). Setting aside extra-discursive aspects, our work builds on the research of Herman (2005; 2018; 2022) and Maingueneau (2009; 2013; 2022). We consider the framework in which ethos influences ways of seeing, thinking or feeling without the intention of persuading. It operates in every speech:

> As soon as enunciation occurs, something of the order of ethos is released. Through speech, a speaker activates in the interpreter the construction of a certain representation of themselves, thus jeopardizing their control over their own speech. They must therefore try to control the interpretative processing of the signs they send. (Maingueneau 2013, 2)

Following Maingueneau, we argue that ethos is not merely a persuasive device, but rather a discursive phenomenon that is inseparable from enunciation. Furthermore, we build upon Herman's (2005) distinction between two "targets" of ethos: the ethos of the communicating subject (the image of the speaker as a communicator, as someone who manages discourse in terms of their discursive skills) and the image of the speaker as an individual with historical, social and cultural depth (in our case, this refers primarily to the characters in the novel and/or the narrator). These dimensions may coexist in any utterance, though one often dominates. For instance, "Sorry, I am not fluent in English" primarily targets the ethos of the communicating subject; however, this sentence may also impact the personal ethos, as in the case of someone publicly admitting a weakness. The ethos of the communicating subject can be expressed verbally, as in the above example, or demonstrated through non-verbal cues such as hesitations like "Ah, um, mm"; "I'd like to say... I mean...". In the case of self-correction, the ethos of the communicating subject is more salient because it highlights a problem with what was initially said in a meta-discursive way. Thus, we will rely on this aspect of the ethos throughout our paper, but we'll address the link created through discourse between the speaker as communicating and the speaker as personhood.

As for the literature on self-correction, it is a discursive phenomenon belonging to the broader category of reformulation. This process has been extensively studied in both spoken and written discourse: a significant body of scientific literature on it exists in oral (e.g., Fox Tree 2010) and written form (Roulet 1987; Rossari 1990; Steuckardt, 2009). These linguistic studies have identified various reformulation typologies[2]. According to Younis et al., who followed the definition given by Cuenca, reformulation "is thus characterized by an intention to present two segments as being equivalent on a pragmatic or semantic level" (2023, 14), "an equivalence operation" that presents "alternative formulations of a single idea" (Cuenca 2003, 1071).

Moreover, Normand defines reformulation as part of the communication process. It "involves revisiting what has been said by oneself or others with the aim of clarifying it" (1987, 6, cited in Bikialo 2005, 148). However, reformulation is not always synonymous with clarification or semantic enrichment. According to Steuckardt, it may serve to abandon or overwrite an initial formulation, thereby highlighting a failure of the initial utterance, "when the reformulation cancels out an initial, imperfect formulation, rendering the initial word as if crossed out or abandoned" (2003, 10).

Reformulation is a complex phenomenon that has also been investigated in enunciative theory, particularly by Jacqueline Authier-Revuz in the context of reflexive loops (1995). She analyzed a

[2] For example, they distinguish between paraphrastic and non-paraphrastic reformulations, as well as reformulations with or without glosses. These glosses can also be transparent or opaque (Bikialo 2005, 148–49).

wide range of situations in which the speaker comments on their own words while they are being uttered. We use her third form of non-coincidence – between words and reality – as it is particularly pertinent to our area of study. Through this lens, Authier-Revuz's notion of "nomination in progress" provides a valuable analytical framework through which to examine the self-corrections that emerge in our corpus. Bikialo's contributions to enunciation and discourse analysis complement this approach, particularly regarding his analysis of reformulation markers such as "or rather", which are significant in our corpus.

In the field of rhetoric and argumentation, recent research such as the AMoRe project (Oswald and Koszowy) extends this perspective by exploring the impact of rephrasing on speaker's ethos in strategic contexts.[3] According to Koszowy et al. (2022, 52), reformulation enables speakers to "clarify or emphasize the content of the message, help the audience memorize or comprehend it [...]" and helps the speaker to "establish their own ethos in terms of knowledge or eloquence". For his part, Plantin (2009) includes self-correction, alongside signs of doubt and hesitation, as part of the "sincerity component of ethos", which contributes to the image of a persuasive and credible speaker. This enables us to consider self-correction as a rhetorical and strategic gesture with significant implications for the construction of ethos, rather than merely as a corrective act: self-correction as part of the reformulation process can also strengthen ethos.

Literary studies introduce a different dimension to the analysis. Here, self-correction is often interpreted as a stylistic indication of cognitive effort or as an imitation of spontaneous speech. Reggiani interprets such moments as symptomatic of an "approximation of the corrected utterance", explicitly demonstrating "the difficulty of holding a discourse on things" (2012, 320) and Prak-Derrington views self-correction as an "effect of reality" (2005, 3), replicating the features of spontaneous, oral or even internal speech. This imitation of disfluency, including reformulations, abandoned clauses and unfinished syntagms, creates a sense of a text being a work in progress, with the hesitations and corrections shown (Pallaud, Rauzy and Blache 2013).

3. Hypotheses

Self-correction suggests that the initial segment was not adequate for conveying the speaker's intended meaning. In this sense, it may appear to undermine the credibility of the speaker. But if that is the case, why engage in self-correction in a published text at all? Two hypotheses arise from the analysis of our corpus.

The first posits that the ethos of the communicating subject is temporarily undermined, but "repaired" or reinforced through self-correction, which functions as a rhetorical strategy of discursive sincerity (Plantin), or at least a discursive success in showing himself as a "good" communicating subject, *in fine*, because they found the adequate word after a correction, and because they show discursive signs of credibility in being the most adequate in the nomination progress. From this perspective, ethos is "repaired" through the speaker's willingness to revise and improve their utterance. We then need to address how this reinforcement operates, and on what basis we can conclude that ethos is being strengthened, and by which observable discursive or semantic criteria.

The second hypothesis suggests that the communicating subject's ethos is undermined; the speaker struggles to find the right words and fails to repair the damage, yet chooses to leave the failed attempt visible. How is this undermining sustained? Why expose one's own discursive

3 We use reformulation and rephrase as equal in this paper, as we do not restrain reformulation specifically to a single term nor in single semantic or pragmatic context.

fragility? Why publish a "self-inflicted wound"? Though paradoxical, this gesture may generate a form of rhetorical credibility as well, by exposing the non-coincidence between words and reality. Therefore, the publication of such moments raises a deeper paradox: the act of attempting to communicate that which resists or exceeds communicability.

4. Parameters of Analysis of the Self-Correction Process

To analyze the process of self-correction and its rhetorical impact on ethos, this paper puts forward a three-part analytical framework comprising three interconnected parameters: assertion, reformulation and metalinguistic or meta-enunciative evaluation. Firstly, an assertion refers to the initial discursive position from which a speaker articulates a proposition. This can take the form of an assertive mode, in which the speaker expresses a statement with confidence, or a hypothetical mode, which is often indicated by expressions such as "let's say", suggesting a tentative or provisional stance. Secondly, reformulation involves modifying the initial assertion. This can result in various discursive outcomes: an adjustment, where the reformulation maintains semantic continuity and refines the original statement; a transformation, where the reformulated content shifts the semantic or rhetorical direction of the discourse; or a contradiction, where the new statement negates or destabilizes the original assertion. Finally, metalinguistic evaluation may accompany or follow reformulation, providing explicit commentary on the speaker's discursive struggle. Such evaluations may reveal the speaker's awareness of incommunicability – or the difficulty of conveying an experience through language, or they may reflect an assumed approximation, where the speaker embraces imprecision as a necessary or strategic aspect of expression. Together, these parameters clarify the internal mechanics of self-correction and its implications for constructing and repairing the communicating subject's ethos.

5. Corpus and Methodology

This study is based on a corpus of three contemporary French novels: *Loin d'eux* (1999) and *Des hommes* (2009) by Laurent Mauvignier and *La figure* (2025) by Bertrand Belin.[4] These texts are unified by their recurrent exploration of themes such as doubt, the fragility of speech, and the unreliability of memory. All three novels examine discursive hesitation and reformulation as literary strategies that mirror the characters' difficulties in expressing past trauma or emotional complexity.

Initially, the study focused on the prototypical marker of self-correction "or rather" ("*ou plutôt*", Bikialo 2005; Magri 2018) which appears frequently in *Des hommes* and serves as a revealing entry point into the mechanism of self-correction and its impact on ethos. However, as ethos is multidimensional by nature, the analysis has broadened to include the surrounding syntactic and narrative context to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how ethos is formed or undermined across a series of utterances.

In *Loin d'eux*, Laurent Mauvignier tells the story entirely through a series of interior monologues. Through these, multiple characters struggle with grief and solitude following Luc's death. The novel is characterized by repeated self-corrections and reformulations that complicate the narrative voice and contribute to the portrayal of an emotionally burdened, hesitant ethos.

4 Our analysis is based on our translation of the original French texts. Indeed, the self-correction phenomenon is also salient in English and can thus be highlighted and investigated.

The novel *Des hommes* revisits the lingering impact of the Algerian War on a group of men forty years after their conscription. Here, self-correction acts as a discursive rupture that enables the repressed past to resurface, particularly when denial or silence is replaced by involuntary memory. The frequent use of self-corrective structures signals a breakdown in narrative control, emphasizing the instability of identity and voice.

Finally, Bertrand Belin's *La figure* centers on a protagonist revisiting his childhood, which was marked by paternal violence. The novel highlights the limitations of recollection, with the narrator distancing himself explicitly from direct access to memory, and instead highlights the interpretive and reconstructed nature of remembrance. The fantastical entity "La figure" blurs the line between memory and fiction, thereby reinforcing the novel's meta-enunciative reflection on speech, narrative and ethos.

Through a comparative analysis of these texts, the study examines the strategic use of self-correction – including lexical reformulation, syntactic hesitation and enunciative loops – and its rhetorical function in shaping the ethos of the communicative subject.

6. Self-Correction: From Reinforcement to Dissociation in Ethos

6.1. Self-Correction as Reinforcement: A Repaired Ethos

The first example is taken from *La figure* by Bertrand Belin. It uses the prototypical marker "or rather". This is the only instance in our corpus where a self-correction results in the correct term being used.

a) Retaining the sensation [...] in childhood, which is metaphysics incarnate, confusion began, **or rather** the continuum was revealed, between my body, [...] its substance, and the substance of the elements that made up, and still make up, my immediate environment. (29)

It can be categorized as a "progression in the designation" between words and reality, as defined by Authier-Revuz. It consists of a "nomination with a hierarchical alternative" (1995, I, 566): the second term ("the continuum was revealed") rectifies a slight inadequacy in the first term ("the confusion began"), which remains acceptable. This differs from an utterance such as "I am angry – no, I am furious about the delay", where the second term does not rectify but rather "pursues greater adequacy in the direction already taken by the first segment" (Authier-Revuz, 1995, I, 566), which is positive. Nevertheless, even if it does rectify, we assume that it serves to strengthen the ethos of the communicating subject by showing the modification, and, moreover, because the adequate formulation is found by the speaker. At least, that is what can be inferred in the absence of other reformulations or meta-enunciative evaluations. In such a case, the impact on the speaker's ethos can be said to be efficient: ethos is here self-repaired through the quick process of a single reformulation, showing a discursive willingness to adjust words to experiment, as well as a discursive ability to articulate words to reality.

The other examples from our corpus show a complex way to find the right expression, by cumulation of reformulations. For instance:

b) His voice suddenly fell silent and crashed into a look of contempt for me. So, the bachelor. With his bachelorette. **A laugh**. **Or rather a kind of laugh, a hiccup, a quickly stifled giggle**. Then the silence. (*Des hommes*, 41)

This passage also provides an example of self-correction in the form of a prototypical marker of "corrective reformulation", that is "or rather" (Magri 2018, 36), but it is followed by a cascade of

multiple reformulations. The segment begins with a nominal phrase in assertive mode – "a laugh" – notably lacking a verb, which immediately signals a form of discursive assertion. The subsequent clause, introduced by "or rather" initiates a movement of specification: "a kind of laugh," followed by three further reformulations – "a hiccup," "a quickly stifled giggle" and finally, "then the silence." The "corrective reformulation" process is defined as

> substituting one word for another [which] can be seen in the linear construction of the text: the second occurrence is presented as a better translation than the previous one. [...] The textual progression is presented as an improvement in formulation, with the reformulation being credited with added expressive value. (Magri 2018, 36)

However, because the reformulation is not simple, but multiple in our example, it is not directly a "better translation", but rather a better translation that arises from the integration of each new term. The right formulation is found through a series of refinements. The multiple reformulations progressively refine the initial utterance, at least the text works towards adjustment by successive reformulations. Semantically, the reformulations are coherent; they do not cancel each other out but rather take place in a movement of densification (there is more to say than just a laugh). Each iteration contributes to a progressive refinement rather than mere hesitation. It is a discursive adjustment that relies on a constellation of approximations, which contributes to a more precise naming, offering a slightly different perspective on the same phenomenon. This process is linear and cumulative rather than self-negating. Because of this multiplicity, at first sight, this accumulation of reformulations might seem to weaken the ethos of the speaker, exposing a struggle to find adequacy, thus suggesting discursive fragility. Yet, when read through Magri's perspective , the sequence appears instead as a productive rhetorical movement. In this sense, reformulation does not signal rhetorical failure but rather exemplifies a successful discursive strategy that enhances the speaker's ethos by demonstrating an effort towards expressive precision.

Moreover, the sequence lacks any explicit metalinguistic evaluation (e.g., expressions of doubt such as "I don't know" or "perhaps"), which contributes to the perceived confidence and deliberateness of the process. The absence of such mitigation reinforces the speaker's authority over the discourse and lends credibility to the adjustment, suggesting that the ethos of the speaker is, in fact, strengthened by the careful modulation of meaning.

The next examples are much more complex, involving multiple self-corrections, reformulations, and metalinguistic evaluations.

6.2. Self-Correction as Stating the Inadequacy: Paradoxical Ethos

c) [...] that's when they attack, **the noises stored up** like in an electric sheath, a **whistling sound rises slowly and soon crosses my head from side to side, from one ear to the other like an iron rod, a metallic thing that twists** but doesn't wind, **no**, files rather, nibbles, **I don't know what to say. It's a whistle, but the word whistle doesn't pierce the head**. (*Loin d'eux*, 18)

In this passage, a series of reformulations emerges again, but these function differently from those in the previous example. The excerpt demonstrates the complex layering of discursive efforts to describe a sensory experience, characterized by hesitation, semantic approximation and the eventual meta-enunciative acceptance of failure.

The text begins with an initial assertion framed through comparison ("like an iron rod"), which already signals the slight inadequacy of the chosen term. This is followed by a further comparison,

"a metallic thing that twists but doesn't wind," which itself immediately gives rise to a correction. Within this correction, the movement of adjustment intensifies, producing a chain of micro-reformulations which signals an ongoing attempt to refine the utterance ("no, files rather, nibbles."). While the successive terms – "twists", "files", "nibbles" – are loosely connected semantically and attempt to capture aspects of the sensation, they ultimately underscore a breakdown of representation. The progression culminates in a meta-enunciative acknowledgment of insufficiency ("I don't know what to say. It's a whistle, but the word whistle doesn't pierce the head.").

Unlike case b), where reformulations led to semantic densification, the accumulation of approximations here foregrounds the speaker's difficulty in articulating the experience. Following Bikialo's argument with Authier-Revuz regarding the "or rather" structure:

> What is staged is the fundamental heterogeneity between words and things as experienced by the subject. This staging of a search for adequacy to reality ranges from the dissociation of two referents [...] to the explicitly discursive search [...], via a majority of forms that stage the gap between words and things. (Bikialo 2005, 155-156)

This is made explicit in the meta-enunciative comment: "I don›t know what to say". This open admission of expressive inadequacy marks a key shift. Here, the communicative subject is struggling not only to find the right term, but also to express the inadequacy of language itself in conveying internal sensory disturbance. After the rectification term "no", there is a meta-enunciative way of saying that this is not the right word, setting aside the possibility of finding the right word. This aligns with the typology of the "work in progress of nomination", which shows cases where the correction "cancels out" the first term by "replacing it" with the second term: this is the form of "X, no, Y" (Authier-Revuz 1995, II, 563). As a result, the ethos of the communicating subject is significantly weakened. Furthermore, this discursive fragility may spill over into the ethos of the character as a person in the fictional world, who is shown to be overwhelmed by their inability to control language and meaning. Following the distinction established by Authier-Revuz, it is not a complaint about the lack of words available in the language, the "inadequacy of language to name reality", but rather a testimony of "the speaker's failure to use language resources", as in the comment "I don't know how to say" (Authier-Revuz 1995, II, 584).

However, this discursive failure does not wholly discredit the speaker but rather places the highlight on the inadequacy of language: "Whether tentative or unsuccessful, the important thing is that naming is not reduced to the given outcome but rather unfolds as a progression or visible deletion". In following the reflexive loops developed by Authier-Revuz, we can say that this example highlights the struggle – the barriers – to coincide words and things, let us remind that in written discourse – novel, for our case – there is a deliberate choice to represent the process of nomination, as much as showing the subject grappling with language in the process of writing. (Bikialo 2005, 156)

The refusal to conceal linguistic inadequacy, and the willingness to expose it, generates what might be called a paradoxical ethos. Rather than demonstrating fluency in communication, the speaker reveals his inadequacy or failure5, showing the non-coincidence between words and reality, using meta-enunciative loops that questioned the "self-evident" of the words. It can be said to be a discursive posture that foregrounds the struggle rather than its resolution.

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5 or, at least, he draws attention to the text's hesitations. This aligns with Plantin's (2009) observation that features such as doubt, hesitation, and self-correction can serve as markers of sincerity.

d) Thing or non-thing, it doesn't matter. I'm stuck with them all the same. That's what it's all about. **Let's say I have the memory of my face-to-face encounter with what I was immersed in.** And that this face-to-face encounter must be seen as a weld. Let's say that there was and still is contact. **A bridge. Or contamination or assimilation, healing. Welding. More or less. I'll see. Cutting, welding, yes**. (*La figure*, 30)

Here, the excerpt from Belin exemplifies a different reflective and iterative process of self-correction, characterized by successive reformulations and metalinguistic evaluations concerning the precision of the terms employed. The reformulations are semantically linked through the central notion of "connection", although some alternatives, such as "contamination", function as substitutions rather than cumulative additions, signaling a strategic lexical choice. The presence of meta-enunciative commentary reflects the communicating subject's conscious engagement with the challenge of linguistic precision, yet simultaneously reveals a postponement of definitive resolution, culminating in an eventual, though provisional, acceptance of "welding".

This dynamic embodies a paradoxical ethos: while the speaker admits to imprecision and ongoing negotiation of meaning, there is no indication of communicative failure. Instead, this openness to approximation and indeterminacy can be interpreted as a deliberate rhetorical strategy, embracing the fluidity of language and the complexities of representing experience. Such an ethos reveals a subject who neither conceals uncertainty nor presents a fully polished discourse but rather invites interlocutors to engage with the provisional and evolving nature of expression.

6.3. Self-Correction as Contradiction: Dissociated Ethos

e) Coming up the social ladder all by my own, like a twat. How serious I am. **I'm gonna stop. I mean I'm gonna go on.** (*La figure*, 40)

This example shows a contradiction manifested through self-correction. The self-correction involves a single reformulation – "I'm gonna stop" followed immediately by "I mean I'm gonna go on" – without any accompanying meta-enunciative evaluation. This absence of explicit commentary suggests a superficially successful self-correction. However, this apparent success is undermined by the intrinsic contradiction within the utterance, which disrupts the coherence of the text.

From an ethos perspective, the communicating subject's image is destabilized by this contradiction, as it reveals internal ambivalence and indecision. Or a "rhetorical slip of the tongue that takes us from approximation to something more deliberate" (Authier-Revuz 1995, II, 571), in an attempt to mimic the orality of speech. While on the surface the self-correction might seem effective, its contradictory nature generates pragmatic effects that extend beyond mere textual coherence. The failure to resolve this contradiction linguistically invites readers to infer underlying psychological or rhetorical motivations. Specifically, the allowance of such a blatant contradiction may signal a deliberate rhetorical strategy, exposing vulnerability or ambivalence that paradoxically contributes to the speaker's ethos. Although the self-correction is presented as successful, it fails so clearly on a communicative level that it triggers inferences about why such a contradiction was allowed.

f) It began with words that were **flayed**, **or rather** planed, retracted, **a stream without asperity, without consonants or vowels** to form identifiable sounds, but [...] I knew, having heard him once, **always – no, not always** – his mumbled litany between his lips. (*Des hommes,* 40–41)

The passage opens with the assertion that the words are "flayed," invoking a violent, tactile image akin to skin being stripped away. This initial metaphor is immediately qualified through a

series of self-corrections introduced by the prototypical marker "or rather" which replace "flayed" with "planed" and then "retracted". These successive reformulations function to mitigate the harshness of the original image, shifting from the graphic notion of "skinning" (which evokes a living being) towards a less corporeal, more abstract conception of the words. The subsequent juxtaposition with "a stream without asperity, without consonants or vowels to form identifiable sounds" represents a semantic transformation towards indistinctness and formlessness, departing substantially from the initial metaphor. This gradation serves rhetorically to highlight the semantic distance and incompatibility between "flayed" and "a stream", emphasizing the instability of the speaker's representation of the verbal phenomenon. The self-correction here is not simply a clarification but a process of requalification and semantic modulation that reveals the speaker's struggle to depict an elusive or ineffable experience. The movement from a violent, concrete image to a fluid, indistinct one reflects a tension within the discourse between vividness and ineffability.

Immediately following this sequence, the assertion "I knew, having heard him once, always" is subjected to a bare and striking self-correction: "– no, not always –", with no mitigating discourse markers or further explanation. The initial use of "always" asserts a sweeping generalization, signaling narrative certainty and control. Yet, the immediate negation "not always" withdraws this claim, leaving a logical gap that destabilizes the speaker's authority. This contradiction explicitly violates the logical principle of non-contradiction developed by Charolles:

> For a text to be micro- or macrostructurally coherent, it must not introduce any semantic elements that contradict content established or presupposed by a previous occurrence, or that can be inferred from it (1987, 22).

Authier-Revuz discusses the non-coincidence between words and the realities they are meant to designate. She argues that specific reformulations should be viewed under the "modality of cancelling the statement". More specifically, naming here "consists of this statement of X, which is paradoxically carried out in the mode represented by its non-execution", meaning that "the statement is coupled with its own cancellation" (1995, II, 582). The segment "no, not always" plays this role throughout the chain of discourse as a corrective that, rather than representing dynamic progress towards the adequate word, appears as "an unresolved contradiction in the naming and the speaker" (Authier-Revuz 1995, II, 567). Something is said and then immediately cancelled. This represents the orality of discourse, but not only, as in written discourse, it is a choice that requires interpretation, such as representing the work in progress of naming a memory. By exposing this self-inflicted contradiction within the written text without meta-enunciative commentary, the text foregrounds the non-coincidence experienced by the speaker and leaves an unresolved tension in the repair of the communicative subject's ethos.

6. Conclusion: Gradual Repair of the Ethos of the Communicating Subject

Our analysis suggests that the process of self-repair in discourse initially undermines the ethos of the communicating subject to the benefit of the ethos of the person (as a sign of sincerity or honesty). However, the examples studied also indicate a gradual and dynamic process through which this damage may be mitigated or even repaired over the course of successive reformulations.

We propose that different degrees of self-correction can be distinguished according to specific criteria observed in the corpus. The simplest form involves a quick, single reformulation, which tends to produce a minimal disruption. When multiple reformulations occur, paired with marks of

correction rather than mere refinement, the struggle to find adequate expression becomes more salient, as does the concurrent process of repairing the damaged ethos.

In more complex instances, where embedded self-corrections appear within multiple reformulations, the communicative struggle is even more pronounced. Yet paradoxically, such cases may ultimately be interpreted as successful acts of self-correction, demonstrating a nuanced management of the speaker's ethos.

Conversely, there are cases in which self-correction is clearly unsuccessful from the speaker's perspective but remains temporarily acceptable within the narrative context (as in Belin's work). Additionally, some speakers explicitly acknowledge their communicative failure, choosing nonetheless to leave such failure visible in the text. This transparency can itself generate a paradoxical ethos: by openly exposing the limits of expression, the speaker may paradoxically reinforce their sincerity and credibility. The visible fragility of the writing or speaking process thus becomes a rhetorical resource that partially repairs the damaged ethos. The meta-enunciative evaluation, analyzed through the prism of the non-coincidence between words and reality, gives another layer of paradoxical ethos, where showing the failure shows, in the same way, the very experiment of the non "self-evident" use of language.

When no explicit evaluation of failure is present, semantic transformations or contradictions between formulations may violate the principle of relevance. In such contexts, the restoration of ethos depends on the emergence of a paradoxical ethos, wherein apparent flaws or inconsistencies become rhetorically significant, to signify a play with discourse or to show a self-inflicted wound, as part of a sincerity strategy aiming to highlight the inadequacy of the speaker or an inadequacy of the language to refer to reality.

This leads us to propose the notion of a paradoxical ethos, opening a new path for defining this concept and its multiple layers in discourse analysis.

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RHETORIC OF DOXASTIC SYSTEMS: METABOLY AND SYSTASIS AS VALIDITY-ORIENTED OPERATIONS

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Abstract

*This article develops a rhetorical theory of doxastic systems organized along relations between validity claims (*Geltungsansprüche*), validity criteria (*Geltungskriterien*), and assignment rules (*Zuordnungsregeln*). Doxastic systems are maintained because human orientation and action depend on the ability to coordinate with others under conditions of uncertainty. The assignment of validity claims and validity criteria operates across at least six coordinates (evidence, authority, tradition, pragmatics, consensus, coherence), which are always doubly conditioned: materially through the coordinates, modally through the asymmetric relationship between probability (object-oriented support) and plausibility (addressee-oriented connectability). The dynamics of doxastic systems exhibit three directional movements – addition, subtraction, and transformation of relations between components – which are operationalized through two opposing rhetorical operations: metaboly (introduction or reinforcement of challenging relations) and systasis (introduction or reinforcement of supporting relations). Following on from this, the classical concept of the* pithanon *can be reconceived as the situative configuration of plausibility potentials within which these operations acquire concrete directionality. Using Lyotard's distinction between narrative and scientific knowledge as an application: narrative knowledge operates primarily systatically (re-actualization of supporting relations, preservation of a core set of validity presuppositions), while scientific knowledge operates primarily metabolically (addition of new challenging relations, displacement of established validity presuppositions). Yet neither type operates purely in one mode – the systatic circularity of scientific knowledge serves the controlled steering of its metabolic reflexivity. Despite their structural opposition, both types of knowledge exhibit a common doxastic-rhetorical basic structure.*

Keywords: *rhetoric, doxastic systems, metaboly, systasis, plausibility, pithanon, types of knowledge*

> *I would hesitate to call [rhetoric] a "cunning of reason"; not only because it would then be in even more questionable company but also because I would like to hold to the idea of seeing in it a form of rationality itself – a rational way of coming to terms with the provisionality of reason.*
>
> Hans Blumenberg (2020, 203)

1. Point of Departure

Over the past three decades, a number of studies have contributed to the rehabilitation of the concept of *doxa* – its history, its philosophical implications, and its role in rhetorical theory (Bengtson 2024). Many of these contributions offer valuable reconstructions of historical positions, yet they rarely attempt to develop a systematic framework for understanding how *doxa* operates as a structural feature of human orientation. The present article undertakes such an attempt. Its central concept is that of "doxastic systems" – systems of validity claims, validity criteria, and assignment rules that organize the way individuals and groups establish, challenge, and maintain what they hold to be valid.

The transformations of the knowledge landscape in the second half of the 20th and the first quarter of the 21st century are well documented (Spinner 1997; Daston 2017; 2020). At the center of the following distinctions stands the question of how these transformations can be observed from the perspective of rhetoric at a fundamental conceptual level. At stake are the basic communicative operations by which validity claims are established and challenged – operations that are employed both in the domain of *episteme* and in the domain of *doxa* (Erhardt 2025).

2. Persuasive Fields of Tension

Before introducing these operations, three key concepts require clarification. Human orientation and cooperation under uncertainty depend on the ability to establish, challenge, and maintain what is held to be valid in a given context. Validity (*Geltung*) designates the status attributed to a claim, norm, or presupposition insofar as it is treated as binding, accurate, or connectable. It is not a property of statements, but a status that is communicatively ascribed and varies with context. A validity claim is the act by which a communicator claims that something is valid, thereby exposing themselves to the agreement or objection of others. It always operates in a field of presuppositions – epistemic, affective, social – that it does not itself generate but must presuppose. Validity criteria are the standards by which the legitimacy of such claims is assessed – what counts as a reason, as evidence, as a relevant authority in a given context.

Modern rhetorical research distinguishes between two operations that act directly on this status: metabolic and systatic operations (Knape 2012). Metabolic operations aim at inducing a shift from the acknowledgment of one validity claim to the acknowledgment of another – a de-plausibilization of validity claim_0 and a (re-)plausibilization of validity claim_1. Systatic operations aim at intensifying commitment to an already acknowledged validity claim – a re-plausibilization of validity claim_0.

The Tübingen rhetorician Joachim Knape defines these two modalities as follows and uses them to differentiate the concept of persuasion:

> [...], one of my definitions of rhetoric is that it is the communicative method by which a change (*metabole*) of opinion in a society or group can be peacefully achieved. To this definition I would add the following paradox: rhetoric is also the method of re-establishing order and connections (*systasis*) once such change has taken place. (ibid.: 1)

Metabolically and systatically oriented operations are often intricately interconnected in concrete persuasion processes: to generate new commitments, established ones must be de-plausibilized; to achieve certain shifts, certain commitments are necessary; in many cases, a successful metabolic intervention directly implies a transition to a systatic goal (Knape 1998; Knape 2025). This dynamic of substitution and reinforcement affects all validity claims – those raised in everyday lifeworld contexts no less than those raised in the sciences or religions, where validity is reinforced through specialized procedures.

Knape's use of "opinion" already points in the direction of the concept that forms the frame of reference for this validity-oriented dynamic: *doxa*. As developed in more detail elsewhere (Erhardt 2025), this refers to highly multifaceted fields of social probabilities that are mobilized in order to communicate and coordinate with others in an effect-oriented manner. However, the term "probability" requires qualification. Probability is object-oriented: it measures the degree to which a validity claim is supported by reasons, evidence, or experience. Plausibility, by contrast, is addressee-oriented: it measures the connectability of a validity claim to what specific addressees, under specific conditions, already presuppose as acceptable. Rhetoric is concerned with both, but gives primacy to plausibility: even the best-supported validity claim fails to persuade if it draws on resources of validity that are not shared by its addressees.

Consider a case in point: the assertion that a specific vaccine reduces infection rates by 70% may be excellently supported by clinical trials – its probability is high. Yet its capacity to orient action in a parliamentary debate, a village assembly, or a family conversation depends not on this support alone, but on whether the addressees share the presupposition that clinical trial data constitute a relevant basis for the decision at hand. Where this presupposition is not shared, high probability fails to generate plausibility. The two thus stand in an asymmetric relationship: probability presupposes that participants can agree on what counts as support – and this agreement is itself bound to plausibilities that cannot be equally in need of justification (ibid.). The distinctiveness of *doxa* consists in the fact that the socially shared plausibility potentials circulating within these fields do not merely provide the preconditions for individual language games or discourse genres, but rather the general preconditions for the very possibility of communicative follow-up.

Whenever validity claims are established, challenged, or confirmed, this takes place within doxastic fields. In scientific contexts, these fields are reshaped – not transcended – in an epistemically productive and reliable manner through methodological and organizational procedures; nevertheless, they remain part of a fundamental doxastic dynamic that must always be taken into account (Janich and Kalwa 2018). The central characteristic of this dynamic is that it performs its essential function unthematically: in a concrete situation where validity is communicatively at stake, it always provides more validity resources than it problematizes (Kopperschmidt 2018).

Whenever validity claims are problematized, this can only succeed if there exists a shared foundation of validity criteria – at least a partial overlap – on the basis of which the claim in question can be challenged or affirmed. This is the asymmetric structure identified above at work: the plausibilities on which a problematization draws must themselves be less problematic than the validity claim it targets. Peter Ptassek aptly writes: "Continuous action in the face of complex circumstances is only possible when perspectives and orientations are always already present and do not need to be specifically worked out"[1] (Ptassek et al. 1992, 1). Even a simple case illustrates this: whether someone asserts "water is H_2O" or denies it, both can draw on highly heterogeneous

1 All translations of German texts into English by the author.

criteria – scientific evidence, metaphorical recontextualization ("substance of life"), religious authority ("gift of a deity"). What these otherwise disparate strategies share is that each offers criteria to which others can connect. A justification such as "I say this because I am having a spontaneous epiphany" does not – and communication breaks down.

In what follows, it will be shown that the operations of metaboly and systasis are epistemologically productive concepts for analyzing how validity claims are established and challenged across different types of knowledge.

3. The Doxastic Infrastructure of Validity

The distinction between opinion and knowledge is central to what follows and requires brief clarification. Opinion (*doxa*) designates a communicative act that refers to something that could also be otherwise and that claims not correspondence with a state of affairs, but defensibility – the possibility of taking up a discursive position on justifiable grounds. Knowledge (*episteme*) designates a validity-enhanced form of opinion whose validity is secured through codified procedures and that claims addressee-independence. Yet knowledge rests on doxastic presuppositions that it does not itself generate. The two are not related as truth to untruth, but as different modes of claiming validity – a point already implicit in Aristotle's definition of rhetoric:

> Let rhetoric be [defined as] an ability, in each case, to see the available means of persuasion. This is the function of no other art; for each of the others is instructive and persuasive about its own subject: for example, medicine about health and disease and geometry about the properties of magnitudes and arithmetic about numbers and similarly in the case of the other arts and sciences. But rhetoric seems to be able to observe the persuasive about 'the given,' so to speak. (Aristotle 2007, 1355b)

From a rhetorical perspective, the persuasive is subject to a crucial requirement: it must connect to plausibilities that can be presupposed as shared among those whom it addresses (*endoxa*). Ptassek accordingly describes *doxa* as a "basis of social knowledge not present as knowledge" (Ptassek et al. 1992, 5) – a reservoir of plausibilities that becomes explicit only when validity is contested. Another example: A politician claims "We must lower taxes to stimulate the economy". The statement is persuasive only for those who share the plausibility that lower taxes promote investment. For someone who considers state investment more effective, it connects to different *endoxai* – and remains unpersuasive not because it is factually incorrect, but because it draws on validity resources that are not shared.

A terminological distinction is needed here. The *doxic* level concerns concrete validity claims: S holds that p. The *doxastic* level concerns the criteria by which such claims are justified: S holds that p is valid *because of* criterion v (Erhardt 2025). Rhetoric is interested in both dimensions. The rationality at work in this interplay is, as Ptassek et al. put it, a "rationality immanent to opinions" (Ptassek et al. 1992, 11) – not unfounded, but diffuse and not methodologically grounded. Hans Blumenberg captures the implications:

> One must be cautious with the accusation of irrationality where infinite, indeterminably extensive procedures must be excluded; in the domain of justification of life practice, the insufficient can be more rational than insisting on a 'science-shaped' procedure, and it is more rational than the disguising of decisions already made through science-typifying justifications. (Blumenberg 2020: 198)

The doxic-doxastic assignment operates along at least six coordinates:[2]

- *Evidence*: assignment through givenness – immediate perception supports the claim.
- *Authority*: assignment through competence – an expert supports the claim.
- *Tradition*: assignment through stability – the support has proven itself over an extended period.
- *Pragmatics*: assignment through practical success – the support functions sufficiently often in practice.
- *Consensus*: assignment through social convergence – many members of a group share the support.
- *Coherence*: assignment through heuristic integration – the claim is compatible with other accepted claims already successfully supported.

It is worth noting that the six coordinates operate on both levels of the distinction introduced above. Whether evidence supports a validity claim – whether clinical studies actually show an effect – is a question of probability. Whether the addressees accept evidence as a relevant criterion in the case at hand – whether they regard clinical studies as the kind of thing that should settle the matter – is a question of plausibility. The same holds for each of the other coordinates: whether an authority is competent is a question of probability; whether the addressees recognize the authority as applicable to the contested issue is a question of plausibility. The relational structure of doxastic systems is thus always doubly conditioned: materially through the coordinates, modally through the asymmetry of probability and plausibility.

As will become clear in the schematization below, the relations between components can be supporting, challenging, or indifferent – but the grounds on which they are so qualified are always drawn from one or more of these coordinates. Different language games weigh them differently: in the sciences, coherence and pragmatics dominate; in religions, authority and tradition; in politics, consensus and pragmatics; in law, coherence and authority; in everyday life, mostly evidence and pragmatics. Consider the claim "regular physical activity reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease". In a medical context, this claim is primarily supported through coherence (compatibility with established physiological models) and pragmatics (clinical studies show consistent effects). In everyday conversation, by contrast, the same claim may draw its force primarily from evidence ("I feel better when I exercise"), authority ("my doctor says so"), or consensus ("everyone knows this"). The claim remains the same; what shifts is the configuration of coordinates through which it is rendered plausible.

4. Doxastic Systems

Doxastic systems play a pivotal role in this dynamic. In the human lifeworld – except in explicitly demarcated special domains – no universally binding standard is available for the identification and evaluation of validity claims, validity criteria, and assignment rules. Every individual maintains a doxastic system that mediates between subjective and intersubjective plausibilities, enabling the admittedly relative, but immanently justified assignment of validity claims and validity criteria.

Such systems are not merely private repositories of belief. They are maintained because human orientation and action depend on the ability to coordinate with others under conditions

2 This list is not exhaustive, but it suffices for the development of the present line of thought.

of uncertainty – to establish shared expectations about what can count as valid in a given situation, even in the absence of definitive knowledge (Blumenberg 1981; Tomasello 2022). Doxastic systems are thus always both individual and social: they organize a single agent's orientation, but they do so by drawing on, and contributing to, collectively sustained plausibility potentials. Ptassek et al. write:

> It contains everything that a subject holds to be true and believes at a given point in time. Each individual opinion receives its justification relative to the doxastic system, just as conversely the system itself is continually corrected through alignment with individual opinions. [...] A concrete opinion is therefore justified when it coheres with the doxastic system, which means when it is reasonable relative to the system to accept it. (Ptassek et al. 1992, 14)

It should be noted that the authors do not consistently distinguish between the doxic and doxastic levels of opinion. What matters here is that doxastic systems consist of at least three components: doxic validity claims, doxastic validity criteria, and assignment rules. Between these components, complex relationships are possible, which will now be examined more closely.

From a rhetorical-theoretical perspective, the six coordinates specify the material grounds of assignment, but do not yet capture the formal structure of doxastic systems at the highest level of abstraction. This requires a further step of schematization: every component of a doxastic system – whether validity claim, validity criterion, or assignment rule – stands in either a challenging, supporting, or indifferent relation to every other component ("indifferent" here means: no mutual implications). Which of the six coordinates qualifies a given relation as challenging or supporting is a material question; that every relation *must* be one of the three is a structural feature of doxastic systems as such.

At least three things can be said about the constitution of such systems: 1. A doxastic system is consistent when the challenging relations between its components are minimized. 2. A doxastic system is coherent when it has a sufficient number of supporting relations. 3. A doxastic system is fragmented when it exhibits too high a number of indifferent relations.[3] An ideal doxastic system would accordingly be consistent and coherent; a consistent but fragmented system has "islands" without contradiction, but also without integration; an inconsistent and coherent system is characterized by many supporting, but also many challenging relations.

Doxastic systems form the irreducible horizon of human orientation. Even knowledge that claims general bindingness – scientific, religious, or legal – cannot "go back behind a certain doxastic foundation" (Ptassek et al. 1992, 13). The methodization, dogmatization, or codification of the production of validity claims, validity criteria, and assignment rules can reorganize doxastic systems under very strict conditions, without thereby transcending them. Scientific communities, for example, form specialized doxastic systems that are epistemologically reshaped through methodological, institutional, and normative procedures. Yet no entirely new type of orientation system emerges in the process: there are no thoroughly scientific systems opposed to doxastic systems, but only scientized doxastic systems. All knowledge has "doxastic roots" (ibid.).

The schematization developed so far provides the framework for specifying the operational logic of metaboly and systasis. Central to both operations is the dynamic of persuasion, which Knape characterizes as follows:

3 What "minimized", "sufficient number", and "high number" mean cannot be determined independently of context. The standards vary depending on the orientation of the doxastic system (everyday, scientific, religious, etc.).

> Accordingly, rhetorical action has the goal of transforming a state of consciousness of uncertainty or doubt (*dubium*) with regard to […] [various] orientation aspects into a state of consciousness of certainty (*certum*). Applied to an extended period of time, this means that permanent persuasion has to contend with a chain of emerging doubts, which must repeatedly be transformed into new certainties and, at the same time, into renewed stable commitment. (Knape 2003, 877)

Knape formulates this in psychological terms – as shifts between mental states. In the framework of the present investigation, such states are reconceived as relational patterns in doxastic systems: concrete opinions or attitudes correspond to specific configurations of validity claims, validity criteria, and assignment rules.

Metaboly and systasis are relational operations on the components of doxastic systems. The dynamics of these systems exhibit three directional movements: addition of new relations, subtraction of existing relations, and transformation of relations between components. Metabolic operations generate the degree of *dubium* required for a given persuasion process – through the addition of challenging relations, the subtraction of supporting relations, or the transformation of supporting relations into challenging ones. Systatic operations establish the targeted *certum* – through the addition of supporting relations, the subtraction of challenging relations, or the intensification and re-actualization of existing supporting relations. Knape calls the metabolic phases of a persuasion process *infestation*, the systatic phases *certification* (Knape 2025).

This schematization operates at a high level of abstraction. It describes the relational structure of doxastic systems and the operations that reorganize them, but it does not yet address the question of how this structure becomes operative in concrete situations of orientation and action. The classical rhetorical concept for this situative concretization is the already introduced *pithanon* – that which is capable of generating assent in a given case. In the framework of the present investigation, the *pithanon* can be reconceived as follows: it designates the situative configuration of plausibility potentials that determines, in a concrete case, which validity claims can be established or challenged on the basis of which validity criteria and assignment rules. It is the point at which the abstract relational structure of a doxastic system becomes action-guiding – the moment at which metabolic and systatic operations are not merely possible, but acquire a concrete direction. What can be de-plausibilized or re-plausibilized, and through which coordinates, is never determined by the system alone, but always by the system *as it encounters a specific constellation of addressees, stakes, and circumstances*. In this sense, the *pithanon* marks the interface between the structural analysis of doxastic systems and the situative analysis of communicative practices.

5. Narrative and Scientific Knowledge in Lyotard

The framework developed so far can now be brought to bear on a concrete case. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* is read in what follows as a contribution to the research on types of knowledge (Abel 2013). Lyotard examines two types of knowledge – narrative and scientific – and insists that one possesses "neither more nor less necessity" than the other (Lyotard 1984, 77). Neither can serve as the standard for the other: "Starting from the scientific, one could […] judge neither the existence nor the value of the narrative, and vice versa, for the relevant criteria are not the same in each case" (ibid.). They coexist and are incommensurable – which also means that scientific knowledge is not a further development of narrative knowledge, as if the latter "contained the former in embryonic state" (ibid.). In the terminology of the present investigation: they exhibit significant differences in their respective doxastic dynamics.

5.1. Narrative Knowledge

Put quite simply, "narrative knowledge" in Lyotard designates a type of knowledge whose legitimation and transmission occur through narration. In contrast, scientific knowledge relies primarily on procedures of argumentation and proof. Both procedures can also be part of narratives, but do not perform the primary work. For example: utopian as well as dystopian narratives of progress typically make use of the scientific knowledge available in a given period. Its knowledge-theoretical status changes in its translation into a narrative register: its validity criteria, validity claims, and assignment rules are recontextualized through narrative operations.

An obvious objection is that "narration" is a poetological concept referring to a form of representation, not to a type of knowledge.[4] Lyotard's perspective becomes accessible when one considers that his primary interest is directed toward the social function of knowledge: How is it generated? How is it justified? How is it transmitted? Essential for him is the observation that among humans there exists at least one type of knowledge that temporally orders past, present, and future events; links orientation and action options; is context-bound in its contents; and is learned through performative, not methodological, training.

According to Lyotard, this type of knowledge is not restricted to a particular class of statements. Rather, its distinctive feature consists in the fact that it offers pragmatic rules for linking different classes of statements. He writes:

> Denotative statements concerning, for example, the state of the sky and the flora and fauna easily slip in; so do deontic statements prescribing what should be done with respect to these same referents, or with respect to kinship, the difference between the sexes, children, neighbors, foreigners, etc. Interrogative statements are implied, for example, in episodes involving challenges (respond to a question, choose one from a number of things); evaluative statements also enter in, etc. (Lyotard 1984, 20)

Through the "interweaving of various networks of heteromorphous classes of utterances (denotative, prescriptive, performative, technical, evaluative, etc.)" (ibid. 1984, 65), narrative knowledge is significantly involved in establishing the social cohesion of a communication community. A narrative that accomplishes this demonstrates how the respective statements are used in a legitimate manner. Put differently: it contains schematizations of how one can denote, prescribe, evaluate, or question in socially accepted ways. As such, it brings together the "pragmatic rules" of symbolic interaction that "constitute the social bond" (ibid., 21) For Lyotard, the content of this knowledge cannot be separated from the practice of narrating it. Being able – and being permitted – to narrate the narrative in the appropriate manner is itself a form of knowledge, without which someone might reproduce a narrative but precisely not narrate it appropriately. Armin Nassehi pointedly remarks: "The legitimation of the narrative is the narration of the narrative" (Nassehi 1991, 197).

Nassehi's formulation shows that narrative knowledge exhibits a self-referential dynamic of affirmation: "The narratives determine [...] criteria of competence and/or illustrate their application. Thus they determine what in the culture has the right to be said and done [...]" (Lyotard 1984, 23). In the terminology of the present investigation: authoritative narratives define validity criteria and assignment rules and articulate validity claims that correlate with these determinations. With

4 There are good reasons, in the sense that: scholars have pointed to similar issues. Historical knowledge is essentially narrative (Danto, White, Ricœur). Identity knowledge is narrative (Taylor, MacIntyre). Everyday knowledge is often narratively structured (Schütz).

some sharpening, one could speak here of a *systatic circularity* of narrative knowledge: since the narrative is itself part of the reality that is grounded through it, it legitimizes itself through successful performance. In formal terms, this amounts to a *petitio principii* – but one that is socially effective precisely because its circularity generates binding force: the narrative presupposes the validity of what it establishes and establishes the validity of what it presupposes.

Due to this structure, such knowledge necessarily exhibits a "persistence" and an "affinity [...] with habit" (Lyotard 1984, 18). It can be responsive and open to surprise, but only under the condition of not changing "at least in certain sectors" (ibid., 19) – that is, of problematizing its presuppositions only in such a way that an indispensable core set of doxastic relations is preserved.

> The very idea of development presupposes a horizon of non-development, where the various competencies are thus assumed to be embedded in the unity of a tradition and do not dissolve into qualifications that are subject to innovations, discussions, and specific investigations. (ibid.)

This elementary form of performative self-legitimation – a systatic operation *par excellence* – is precisely the general doxastic principle identified above, now in its specific manifestation: it always provides more validity than it problematizes. In this sense, this type of knowledge is, according to Lyotard, "legitimating from the outset" (ibid., 70).

In relation to the schema of doxastic dynamics introduced so far, this means that the actualization of already existing supporting relations through repetition is foregrounded. Addition, subtraction, and transformation of relations generally serve the preservation of those relations that constitute the core set of presuppositions of a given narrative. What is striking is that often only as much is added and transformed as necessary to neutralize any challenging relations with which the doxastic dynamics of narrative knowledge finds itself confronted.

An example: The narrative knowledge that families transmit about themselves can certainly vary – new anecdotes are added (addition), unpleasant episodes are omitted (subtraction), and interpretations shift (transformation). Yet the core set – "We are a family with these values, this history" – remains unproblematized and is precisely reinforced through the variations. The coordinates primarily at work here are tradition (the support has proven itself over generations), authority (certain family members – typically elders – are recognized as legitimate narrators), and consensus (the narrative holds because its core is shared). Notably, the question of whether the family narrative is *well-supported* in an object-oriented sense – whether the events actually occurred as told – rarely arises: probability and plausibility remain fused. Where the doxastic fabric of this narrative knowledge is not sufficiently irritated, it can be transmitted for decades without any variation that touches the core.

Narrative knowledge, then, operates primarily systatically: it generates consistency and coherence through reconnection to already established constellations in doxastic systems, legitimated not through methodological principles but through performative self-legitimation. Its *pithanon* is configured accordingly: it succeeds when the re-actualization of the narrative connects to the core set of shared presuppositions in a way that is recognized as appropriate by the addressees – told by the right person, on the right occasion, in the right manner. What counts as "right" is itself determined by the doxastic relations that the narrative preserves.

5.2. Scientific Knowledge

"Scientific knowledge" is, according to Lyotard, "in conflict with narratives from the outset" (Lyotard 1984, xxiii) Where narrative knowledge legitimizes itself through successful performance, scientific knowledge is decidedly configured differently: at the center stands not whether the narration succeeds, but whether the statements at issue are "true". Lyotard writes:

> Scientific knowledge requires that one language game, denotation, be retained and all others excluded. A statement's truth-value is the criterion determining its acceptability. Of course, we find other classes of statements, such as interrogatives ("How can we explain that … ?") and prescriptives ("Take a finite series of elements …"). But they are only present as turning points in the dialectical argumentation, which must end in a denotative statement. In this context, then, one is "learned" if one can produce a true statement about a referent, and one is a scientist if one can produce verifiable or falsifiable statements about referents accessible to the experts. (ibid.: 25)

The acceptability of a statement that belongs to this type of knowledge is thus subject to at least four conditions: 1. it is denotative; 2. it is true; 3. its truth is determined through procedures that must themselves be considered scientific; 4. social acceptance is granted not by the group in general, but by a special group of experts. Particular attention is paid to statements that exhibit differences from the already known that can be argued and proven (ibid., 26). It is this orientation toward innovation – "the search for new argumentations, the invention of 'new' moves and even new rules of language games" (ibid., 53) – that potentially brings scientific knowledge into conflict with narrative knowledge.[5]

To the extent that the need to provide proofs and develop verifiable arguments establishes itself in knowledge culture, the pressure on narrative knowledge increases. At the latest since the 19th century, the legitimacy of all statements that cannot be methodologically justified has been put to the test. In the terminology of the present investigation: human lifeworlds have since been characterized by the coexistence of the *systatic circularity* of narrative knowledge with the *metabolic reflexivity* of scientific knowledge. Through the mobilization of immense cognitive, practical, and material resources, presuppositions that have already established themselves as "valid" are systematically problematized. The pragmatics of scientific knowledge is organized in such a way that "the knowledge accumulated in previously accepted statements can always be rejected" – no statement is ever "protected from 'falsification'" (ibid., 26).

In doing so, the current sender of a scientific statement is assumed to "have knowledge of earlier statements concerning his referent (bibliography) and to advance a statement about this object only insofar as it differs from earlier statements" (ibid.). What is at stake is precisely not the successful affirmation of existing relations between validity criteria, validity claims, and assignment rules, but rather systematically forcing the possibility that new, non-anticipatable moves may become necessary, which partially or fundamentally alter the "rules of the game" (ibid., 52). Yet even in the doxastic dynamics of scientific knowledge, certain presuppositions must remain exempt from problematization in order to undertake methodological problematization at all. Legitimacy itself inevitably becomes a "referent in the game of inquiry" (ibid., 23). Lyotard formulates the resulting difficulty: "What I say is true because I prove that it is – but what proof is there that my proof is true?" (ibid., 24).

5 This also applies to the long and still ongoing phases of the history of knowledge in which scientific knowledge seeks to legitimate itself through specifically configured narratives.

According to Lyotard, this leads to the coupling of systematic de-legitimation and systematic re-legitimation of doxastic relations. Even the rules governing admissible moves are subject to this dynamic. He designates them as "metaprescriptions": "Rules are not denotative but prescriptive utterances, which we are better off calling metaprescriptive utterances to avoid confusion (they prescribe what the moves of language games must be in order to be admissible)" (ibid., 65). Yet here too, it is a "consensus of experts" (ibid., 29) that decides which procedures of validity generation are to prevail – and whether new moves must be introduced.

At the level of the schematizations introduced above: scientific knowledge is oriented toward forcing the addition of new challenging relations, with an explicit readiness for the subtraction and transformation of existing ones. All three directional movements are subordinated to enabling innovative differences from the already-known, not the adaptive preservation of a core set. In this dynamic, supporting relations are always the effect of a challenging relation that fails to prevail. This principle extends beyond scientific knowledge: it formulates, in the language of doxastic systems, a general condition under which validity is consolidated – not through positive confirmation, but through the failure of contestation. The difference between knowledge types lies in how systematically and deliberately this mechanism is employed: in scientific knowledge, it is methodologically institutionalized; in narrative knowledge, it operates implicitly and is rarely recognized as such.

An example: Nutritional science's understanding of fats underwent several revisions. The validity claim "fat is unhealthy", once supported by the validity criterion "epidemiological correlation studies" and the assignment rule "authority of established nutrition research", was challenged by later biochemical analyses (addition of new evidence). These refuted the generalization (subtraction of existing explanations) and led to the differentiated validity claim "trans fats are harmful, unsaturated fats are healthy" (transformation), supported by the validity criterion "molecular mechanisms of action" and new assignment rules (pragmatics: clinical studies show effects / coherence: fits with biochemical understanding).

Scientific knowledge, then, operates primarily metabolically: it generates consistency and coherence not through narrative sequencing but through methodological operations oriented toward the addition of new findings (operationalization, experimental testing), the subtraction of refuted assumptions (falsification), and the transformation of existing explanations (reproducibility enables revision, deductive systematization integrates anew) – a process of legitimation that, as Lyotard shows, leads to interminable meta-legitimation. Yet scientific knowledge also keeps numerous presuppositions stable. The systatic circularity that is characteristic of narrative knowledge is not absent here – it serves the controlled steering of metabolic reflexivity. The best-known manifestations of this finding are the concepts of "thought style" in Fleck, "paradigm" in Kuhn, and "discourse" in Foucault. The *pithanon* of scientific knowledge is accordingly configured metabolically: it succeeds when a new finding establishes a difference from the already known that the relevant expert community recognizes as argued and proven. Yet even here, what counts as "argued and proven" remains bound to the plausibilities that a given paradigm or thought style holds stable – the systatic circularity that steers metabolic reflexivity determines which challenging relations can acquire the force of a *pithanon*.

The distinction between probability and plausibility introduced above sharpens this contrast. Narrative knowledge operates primarily on the level of plausibility: its legitimation depends on whether the addressees recognize the performative re-actualization of the narrative as connectable – whether it is told in the right way, by the right person, at the right time. The question of whether the narrative's content is well-supported in an object-oriented sense does not arise as

a separate concern; plausibility and probability remain fused. Scientific knowledge, by contrast, systematically attempts to disentangle the two: a validity claim is to be accepted not because the addressees find it plausible, but because it is well-supported by methods that claim addressee-independence. Yet as the meta-legitimation problem shows – "what proof is there that my proof is true?" – this disentanglement can never fully succeed. The criteria that determine what counts as adequate support remain bound to plausibilities that scientific knowledge presupposes but cannot generate on its own.

6. Conclusion

Within the scope of this brief comparison, it has been shown that the concepts of metaboly and systasis enable numerous instructive observations. I would like to clearly summarize the many distinctions that have been introduced in the course of this train of thought:

Operation	Directed at	Through	Example
Metaboly	Change of relations between validity criteria/assignment rules/claims to validity	Addition of challenging relations	Introducing alternative validity criteria, assignment rules and/or claims to validity
		Subtraction of supporting relations	Introducing doubt
		Transforming supporting relations in challenging relations	Re-interpret established validity criteria, assignment rules and/or claims to validity
Systasis	Corroboration of relations between validity criteria/ assignment rules/claims to validity	Addition of supporting relations	Introducing new validity criteria, assignment rules and/or claims to validity
		Subtraction of challenging relations	Exclude certain validity criteria, assignment rules and/or claims to validity
		Transforming challenging relations in supporting relations	Refute actual (and potential) objections

The framework developed here – doxastic systems organized along validity claims, validity criteria, and assignment rules; metaboly and systasis as opposing operations on the relations between them – provides a systematic vocabulary for analyzing how validity is established and challenged across different types of knowledge. The application to Lyotard's distinction between narrative and scientific knowledge has shown that both types share a common doxastic-rhetorical structure while differing in their operational logic: narrative knowledge operates primarily systatically, scientific knowledge primarily metabolically.

Yet as the analysis has also shown, neither type operates purely in one mode – the systatic circularity of scientific knowledge serves the controlled steering of its metabolic reflexivity, just as narrative knowledge tolerates limited metabolic irritation in the service of preserving its core set. The Lyotard application has primarily drawn on the metaboly/systasis distinction and the three directional movements. Further dimensions of the framework – particularly the six coordinates and the double conditioning of doxastic relations through probability and plausibility – await application to concrete cases in which the material configuration of validity conflicts can be analyzed

in finer detail. The reconception of the *pithanon* as the situative interface between structural and communicative analysis points in the same direction. Developing this framework further – toward a rhetoric of knowledge that accounts for the doxastic foundations of different types of knowledge production – remains a task for future research.

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ORALITY IN DANISH COURTS

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Abstract

The distinction between text and speech is a longstanding concern in rhetoric. It is, however, also a concern in law, where it is explicitly codified – for example, in Danish procedural law, which requires that oral proceedings in court be delivered through 'free presentation'. This provision is generally interpreted as prohibiting the reading of written manuscripts during oral pleadings, yet its rationale has not been examined in depth in the legal literature, nor has it been sufficiently discussed in relation to rhetorical knowledge about orality. This article investigates the notion of free presentation, its interpretation in legal doctrine, and the rationale underlying the requirement: why is it advantageous to proceed through free presentation in court? The study unfolds along two lines: a close reading of legal scholarship interpreting the rule, and an interview study with six experienced legal representatives who have argued cases both with and without manuscripts. The findings suggest that manuscript-based and unscripted proceedings differ not merely in delivery but in interactional dynamics, rhetorical form, and substantive content. Free presentation appears to facilitate greater responsiveness to judges and opposing counsel, encourage more focused and concise argumentation, and alter tone and attentiveness toward the parties involved. These results indicate that modes of preparation shape courtroom interaction and legal reasoning itself. The study thereby contributes to interdisciplinary dialogue between rhetoric and legal studies and offers new insight into how institutionalized norms of orality affect argumentation in practice.

Keywords: *orality, legal rhetoric, courtroom advocacy, memoria*

1. Introduction

Ever since Plato observed that writing offers, not truth, but only its semblance (Plato 1914, 274c), rhetoricians have long engaged with the relationship between text and speech. The difference between text and speech has been examined both in relation to speeches and to oral communication more broadly, linguistically, culturally and theoretically, and one may regard the discussion of the nature of orality as a core rhetorical issue (Alcidamas 2001; Ong 1996; Fafner 1997; Gabrielsen 2023). More surprising to a rhetorician is that discussions of orality also play a central role in the legal tradition. In Danish legal literature, one finds discussions of the nature of orality and the distinctive character of the spoken word, as well as reflections on the difference between oral and written conduct of proceedings. Despite the shared interest in the difference between text and speech, the two disciplinary traditions share very little knowledge. This is unfortunate, as legal knowledge about orality is also relevant to rhetoricians and vice versa.

In the legal tradition, however, orality is more than an academic topic, as it is also set out in law. The Danish Constitution states that "the administration of justice shall be public and oral to the widest extent possible" (Grundloven [The Constitutional Act of Denmark], § 65), and Retsplejeloven [the Danish Administration of Justice Act] § 148(2), further regulates how orality is to be managed in court: "In oral proceedings, free presentation shall be used"[1]. The latter provision is not only legally relevant; it is also rhetorically interesting. Does this mean that, in Danish courts, legal representatives may not read from a prepared manuscript, thereby placing considerable rhetorical demands on them? More importantly, why does Danish law regulate not only the form (written or oral) but also the legal representatives' manner of preparation and techniques of memoria? What considerations and rationales underlie the free presentation requirement in court, and might the answers to these questions also teach us something about orality in rhetorical contexts?

The free presentation requirement is the central focus of this article. I begin with a close reading of legal scholarship commenting on the requirement of free presentation. The aim is to identify what precisely is meant by free presentation and which considerations and rationales are highlighted in the various legal texts. As I show below, two considerations emerge: increased interaction between the parties and more focused and clearer communication in court. I then examine free presentation further by uncovering the above-mentioned considerations and rationales in relation to the parties' legal representatives in court. Through an interview study involving six legal representatives with experience of arguing cases with and without a manuscript in court, I examine what free presentation looks like in practice: What differences do they experience when arguing from a full manuscript versus free presentation? And do their practical experiences reveal additional differences beyond those mentioned in the legal literature?

2. Orality and Free Presentation in the Legal Literature

If one consults the legal literature, it becomes clear that there is considerable agreement on how the provision should be interpreted: the provision contains a prohibition on reading aloud from a manuscript. Gomard and Kistrup, for example, put it this way: "Reading from a manuscript does not satisfy the requirement of orality" (Gomard and Kistrup 2020, 481; see also Gammeltoft-Hansen 1998, 54; Munch-Petersen 1993, 154; Christensen 2014, 4). Gomard and Kistrup further emphasize

[1] All translations from Danish into English are the author's own, including translations of Danish legal texts and quotations from interviews.

that this naturally does not exempt the parties from preparing, and here we see another central point in the interpretation of the provision: section 148(2) should not be regarded as a prohibition of manuscripts as such, but as a prohibition on reading aloud from the prepared manuscript. In other words, it is the delivery that must be free; if a party can detach themselves from their manuscript in their oral submissions, this is not regarded as a breach of the requirement of free presentation (Kistrup 2019, 456; Garde and Høg 1991, 303; Hansen 1959, 96).

There are, however, several legal scholars who nuance the reading above. One example is Hansen, who points out that there are exceptions to the requirement: for "a self-represented litigant or a party represented by a legal representative who is not a lawyer, it is permitted to read from a prepared manuscript" (Hansen 1959, 95). Hansen underlines that parties differ, and that the extent to which the requirement of free presentation should be enforced must therefore also differ. Sune Fuglholm takes a similar view, although he reads the requirement less restrictively than Hansen: Fuglholm argues that fully written out manuscripts – especially for inexperienced legal representatives – may have several advantages, and that these may even outweigh the requirement of free presentation: "It may mean a shorter period of uninspiring reading aloud, but the reading of a well prepared and carefully considered manuscript is to be preferred to a legal representative who has stalled." (Fuglholm 2019, 446). Ideals are one thing; practice is another – and Fuglholm's pragmatic reading seems to underlie several of the legal texts consulted.

It is not only parties that differ; types of cases vary as well. As Garde and Høg point out, there are also types of cases that are not well suited to either oral proceedings or free presentation: "Extensive and/or complex accounting cases fit poorly within the traditional system's requirement of orality..." (Garde and Høg 1991, 303). Accounting cases have therefore always had a special status in relation to the principle of orality, and thus indirectly also in relation to the requirement of free presentation (Spleth 1969, 63).

Matters become more complex when one tries to uncover the rationales behind the provision – that is, why free presentation is preferred to reading aloud in court. On this point, the legal literature points in several directions, and in several of the legal texts, it is not unfolded as an explicit and distinct focus. An example here is the preparatory works to the Administration of Justice Act, that is, the documents and texts drafted while a law is being created, and which are typically where one finds information about the considerations behind the law. In the preparatory works, the overarching principle of orality is explained by reference to open justice and the immediacy principle, whereas the requirement of free presentation is not addressed (Forarbejderne 1892). One might argue that the requirement of free presentation is embedded in the principle of immediacy, since this principle establishes that the judge should have direct and unmediated access to the information and evidence in the case – a requirement arguably better served by freely delivered oral submissions with the words delivered spontaneously than by reading from a script. However, I have not been able to find this reading in the legal literature, and it is therefore more reasonable to conclude that the preparatory works provide no explanation of the requirement of free presentation. Perhaps this is precisely why the rationale is interpreted rather differently in the legal literature that does comment on the provision.

In contrast to the preparatory works, one finds in Munch-Petersen's major work on the Administration of Justice Act from 1923 several passages that address orality and, indirectly, the requirement of free presentation. Munch-Petersen focuses on the way in which oral proceedings increase the judge's ability to direct the proceedings and clarify ambiguities: "In place of the rigid maxims that, under a fully written mode of proceeding, cast a dead hand over civil litigation, the judge can

personally direct the case, tailoring its course to the requirements of the individual matter and, by questioning the parties, removing ambiguities or deficiencies in their account." (Munch-Petersen 1923, 154). Munch-Petersen does not explicitly mention free presentation, but in treating orality and free presentation as integrated, I read him as opening up a point of particular relevance to free presentation: it is clearly easier to adapt to the development of the case and answer spontaneous questions from the judge when one can detach oneself from the prepared manuscript and present one's position more freely.

This rationale is implicit in several of the legal texts; it is echoed by Gomard and Kistrup, whose focus is on interaction between the parties rather than between the judge and the parties: "... the taking of evidence and remarks from the opposing party may make improvisation necessary. Reply and rejoinder after the main submissions during the oral proceedings cannot be fixed in advance" (Gomard and Kistrup 2020, 481). Although Gomard and Kistrup are here pointing to the follow-up submissions that the parties deliver in response to the opponent's submissions, they at the same time underline a more general point: oral proceedings are not a static exercise that can be fully prepared in advance, which by definition makes it advantageous to be able to present the case more freely (Gomard and Kistrup 2020, 481). This is not a rationale that is explicitly developed in the legal literature in relation to the requirement of free presentation, but several texts point to the connection between interaction and orality, and thereby also between interaction and free orality.

A somewhat different interpretive frame is offered by Gammeltoft-Hansen. He does not focus on the wish for interaction, but on how free presentation makes the hearing vivid and personal: "To underline the enlivening function of the principle of orality, section 148(2) prescribes that, in oral proceedings, free presentation shall be used." (Gammeltoft-Hansen 1998, 54). Nor does Gammeltoft-Hansen elaborate on what he means by "enliven" or why this is the rationale behind the provision, but he explicitly notes that it is especially the oral submissions that benefit from the free form, because it opens "an extra dimension in the parties' ability to express their views" (Gammeltoft-Hansen 1998, 54). In Gammeltoft-Hansen's view, the rationale behind free presentation is understood not as increasing spontaneity and interaction in court, but as enhancing the individual legal representative's ability to explain their case.

A related interpretation of the requirement of free presentation is offered by former Supreme Court Justice Jens Peter Christensen. He writes: "The strength of orality is that it allows the lawyer, in simple and easily understandable language – what Grundtvig would call 'the living word' – to give a clear, concise overview of the case." (Christensen 2014, 4). Christensen goes, however, a step further than Gammeltoft-Hansen by articulating what characterizes lively, free orality as opposed to reading out a manuscript: a clear, focused presentation of the parties' cases. He makes the point explicitly, albeit in the negative: "The poor lawyer, on the other hand, loses himself in the many details of the case without distinguishing between major and minor points. What should have been an unscripted oral presentation becomes the reading aloud of manuscripts, documents and statutory provisions. For the judges, that sort of thing is of little help." (Christensen 2014, 4). Whereas Gammeltoft-Hansen emphasizes that lively language enhances the parties' ability to explain their case, Christensen emphasizes that free presentation increases understanding among those who must receive and decode the submissions (see also Fuglholm 2019, 447; Gomard and Kistrup 2020, 481).

Reading across the legal literature, one sees that while the principle of orality itself receives much attention, the implementation of the principle (orality qua free presentation) receives limited attention. The provision is delineated and understood through different concepts and rationales,

although two rationales in particular emerge: free presentation helps secure interaction in court, and free presentations generate more focused and readily understandable submissions. This brings us to the paper's second research question: can these rationales be found among legal representatives in court? And does a practical, actor-focused approach perhaps give us further insight into the difference between manuscript-based and unscripted submissions in court?

3. Case and Method: Free presentation in Cases on Compulsory Placement of Children

The interview study set out below is based on two group interviews with six legal representatives who, at the time, represented Ankestyrelsen [the National Social Appeals Board] in court. All six had appeared in a large number of cases - they themselves estimate 100–200 cases per person – and, more importantly, all had experience of arguing both with and without a full manuscript, which makes them relevant respondents in the present study. For a number of years, I was responsible for parts of the Appeals Board's litigation training and have, in another context, described the method the respondents use when they argue freely, that is, without fully written out manuscripts (Gabrielsen 2022). In brief, the method is: preparing the structure of the submission and the essence of the arguments, while the specific verbal formulations are not written out but delivered spontaneously.

Despite my earlier engagement with the Appeals Board, the present study does not amount to action research or related participatory research approaches. The study strives for reflexive objectivity (Kvale & Brinkmann 2015, 314), and the research interviews were conducted solely with the aim of gaining insight into practicing legal representatives' experience of the difference between a full manuscript and a freer, more unscripted style. The interviews were conducted as independent research interviews and were carried out with the consent of the Appeals Board.

The Appeals Board is a central government authority that handles appeals across various areas of law and types of cases. The six respondents, however, all appeared in cases concerning the compulsory placement of children and the regulation of parental contact. These cases are adjudicated in the district courts, where the Appeals Board represents the public authorities and a court-appointed lawyer represents the child and/or the parents. Cases on compulsory placement of children are, clearly, a special kind of case, and even though generalization from a single case can be legitimate (Flyvbjerg 2006; Halkier 2011), I do not claim my findings to be universal in Danish courtrooms. Several of the insights on interaction and focus can undoubtedly be transferred to other types of litigation and to rhetorical arenas beyond the courtroom, whereas other insights seem tied to the present type of case.

As stressed in the methodological literature, qualitative interviews are valued for the distinctive knowledge they generate about how respondents understand and experience their world, actions, and practices (Kvale 1994; Kvale & Brinkmann 2015). Although individual, in-depth interviews focused on respondents' worlds, might therefore appear to be the obvious choice in a study on legal practitioners' experiences of pleading, semi-structured group interviews were employed. Group interviews (and focus group interviews alike) have the advantage of facilitating the articulation of experiences that are not readily verbalized, as interaction among participants can create a "snowball effect," whereby hearing others' accounts stimulates reflection and expression (Harboe 2012; Halkier 2008; Wilkinson 1998, 190ff).

The "snowball effect" is particularly relevant in the present study, which focuses on legal practice. As pointed out in the legal literature, it is a domain that relies heavily on tacit knowledge, where

practitioners often act on skills acquired through imitation and experience, but find them difficult to articulate explicitly (Schaumburg-Müller 2015). As law professor and legal writing teacher Kristen Robbins-Tiscione observes in reflecting on her own teaching practice: "As a novice teacher, I noticed myself teaching writing more as imitation than as a skill grounded in argumentation theory [...] I was at a loss for the theory that explained what I knew intuitively, but could not articulate" (Robbins-Tiscione 2009, 3). This also appears to apply to the Appeals Board's legal representatives: much of their training was acquired through imitation and best practice, and the knowledge thus obtained was sufficient for effective courtroom performance, though not necessarily easy to articulate. Group interviews therefore, helped respondents to formulate insights that were initially implicit by engaging with one another's accounts.

Group interviews were selected over focus groups because the study required both respondent interaction and interviewer guidance. As discussed above, the importance of orality in court proceedings is well established in the legal literature, and the interviews were therefore designed to assess whether these theoretical insights could also be observed in practice. To ensure that themes identified in the legal literature remained central, group interviews were preferred, as interviewer intervention and imposed structure are typically less prominent in focus groups (Wilkinson 1998, 188ff). The same rationale guided the decision to organize the group interviews as two smaller groups (three respondents in each) rather than one larger group of six, since group size affects the researcher's ability to moderate and structure the discussion (Morgan 1988, 43).

A semi-structured interview guide was employed to combine structured inquiry with spontaneous interaction. The interviews began with open, experience-based questions (e.g., "Why do you conduct oral argument without a manuscript?", "Are there advantages to proceeding without a manuscript?", "Do you still use full manuscripts at times, and if so, in what situations?"), followed by theoretically informed probes derived from the legal literature (e.g., "Is it easier to respond to new and unforeseen developments when proceeding without a manuscript?").

4. Does Free Presentation Promote Interaction in Court?

As mentioned above, the requirement of free presentation can be understood as grounded in a concern for interaction: oral proceedings are an interactive process in which the parties must respond and reply to each other's submissions and to the judges' questions. This is easier when the parties are not dependent on full manuscripts and can act freely. This is borne out clearly by the respondents' answers. When asked open-ended questions about why they prefer to argue without a full manuscript, it is precisely the scope for interaction that they highlight: "It's easier to use the concrete points that are raised and work them into your own [submissions] when you haven't written everything out in advance" (Respondent 3). That is the experience they all, in different ways, describe: it makes me "more flexible" (Respondent 1), "freer in my submission" (Respondent 2), and I can now "slot it [...] in where it makes sense" (Respondent 4). The wording differs, but the experience is the same: a non-manuscript-based, free approach makes it easier to adapt to the other actors in the courtroom.

This is especially clear when respondents compare their current practice with their earlier practice of using a full manuscript: "You have a manuscript and then something comes up that you need to include – where exactly are you going to put it?" (Respondent 5). Or as Respondent 6 adds: "That was my problem too. I always wrote it [when I used a manuscript] at the end, but then it was as if I didn't get it into the hearing ... and then you'd forget it ... like, where was it supposed to

go?" In these comments, and others, the respondents describe how, with a manuscript, one easily loses overview of one's own material – and how that is precisely why it is hard to incorporate points raised spontaneously by the other side. The manuscript is described as a kind of "closed structure" that easily breaks when new material is inserted: "Yes, your structure breaks" (Respondent 5), which at times even results in misstatements: "I would sometimes end up saying the wrong thing first and then add, 'I know today we're hearing that the father…" (Respondent 6). It is, however, different when they use free presentation: it makes it easier to integrate new material and move information around in one's oral submissions. Several respondents even report that, with the free presentation, they can transform the material on the spot, so that prepared arguments, for example, are reworked into rebuttals of the opponent's arguments.

A second interaction-related aspect also emerges in the interviews. Several respondents note that the delivery format (manuscript/free) also affects their attention. Whereas a manuscript draws their attention towards the prepared text and the case files, the free presentation draws their attention towards the courtroom, its actors and the development of the case: "I think I have better focus on the case and on what's happening in court when I don't have a manuscript" (Respondent 2). The respondent also offers an explanation: "Because you're freer, you probably also spend more energy on what's being said in the courtroom – what the lawyers [the other side] say. Because that's what they [the judges] are interested in: what do we say to everything the lawyer has said today?" (Respondent 2). Respondent 5 makes a similar point: "I do think you address them [the actors in court] much more [with the free presentation]. And you also get a response to a greater extent." The free presentation draws the respondents' attention towards the courtroom – and they also experience that attention being reciprocated to a greater extent.

These statements indicate that the difference between manuscript-based and free presentation is not merely formal, but also substantive. In other words, the difference is more extensive than a matter of note-taking technique or the slightly banal observation that a manuscript makes it easy to lose eye contact with the actors in court. The respondents suggest that it is the very contact with the court that is diminished when one proceeds on the basis of a full manuscript, because attention is directed more towards the prepared at the expense of the immediate. This is an insight already advanced by the Roman (legal) rhetorician Marcus Fabius Quintilian. In a longer passage on improvisation and manuscripts, he points out that manuscripts have the disadvantage (unless thoroughly internalized) of capturing us mentally: "our thoughts will run back to what we have elaborated in writing and will not permit us to try the fortune of the moment" (Quintilian 1921, X.vii). Manuscripts affect the speaker's mental attention; the present study suggests the same applies in court.

Finally, respondents depict modern oral proceedings as a communicative situation that requires spontaneous and interactive competences to a high degree. The ability to interact and to adapt one's material spontaneously is required not only when responding to the other side's arguments – that is, in reply and rejoinder – but throughout the oral proceedings, for example because the other side withdraws claims on the day, or because the case develops: "I've had quite a few where you start in one place and end up somewhere completely different. I had a case the other week […] I had actually planned to say quite a bit about the difficulties the children and the mother each had. But it ended up somewhere else, entirely because the mother herself went in and described so clearly how many difficulties her children had. And then it came to be about EU law. A written presentation for that case would have been a waste of time" (Respondent 3). The respondents also note that there are at times errors in the written documents, which means they must respond

spontaneously to new information in the case: "I've also had situations where the child ran away from the residential facility. So, you show up in court and suddenly you're told that the child ran away [...] Then, all of a sudden, there's a completely different focus than you thought there was" (Respondent 1). Or as Respondent 2 puts it, aptly: "I think it happens often. I actually think almost always. You have to be spontaneous."

The high degree of unpredictability – and the attendant requirement to act spontaneously in court without the support of a planned manuscript – relates in particular to the specific case type, namely the compulsory placement of children. In these cases, the materially correct decision is the overriding focus, which is why new information is typically included on the day. This does not mean, however, that unpredictability and spontaneity are not general features of appearing in court. As we saw above in the review of the legal literature, spontaneity and interaction are described as general conditions of court proceedings – a point that can also be found in the legal-rhetorical literature. In several legal-rhetorical works, classical as well as modern, there is an insistence that one must master spontaneity in court, which Quintilian, for example, formulates as a non-negotiable requirement: "The man who fails to acquire this [the power of improvisation] had better, in my opinion, abandon the task of advocacy" (Quintilian 1921, X.vi; see also Beyer 2015). And the respondents' statements suggest that both spontaneity and interaction in court seem easier to achieve when one proceeds by free presentation rather than from a full manuscript.

5. Does Free Presentation Sharpen Focus and Increase Willingness to Listen?

As noted above, most notably by former Supreme Court Justice Jens Peter Christensen, oral submissions delivered by free presentation are more concise and focused than the written materials the parties submit to the court. In doing so, he touches on a theme familiar in rhetorical literature: textual and oral communication are fundamentally different (Gabrielsen 2011, 28ff; Gabrielsen 2022; Ong 1982; Kjeldsen et al. 2019, 133ff.).

These differences are also clearly reflected in the respondents' statements. They repeatedly note that the two modes of preparation generate two different kinds of submissions, including in terms of content: "Yes, definitely. It becomes less broad; I do think written submissions can range over a great many things, whereas the free one gets boiled down more" (Respondent 2). Respondent 4 offers the same characterization and adds an explanation: "I completely agree. When I write it down, I tend to include more because I want to be sure I've covered everything. Whereas when it's freer, I take the essentials and try to speak from that" (Respondent 4). I understand the respondents as saying that a written approach tends to be more comprehensive, whereas the free, oral style more readily fosters selection of material: "In writing you'd go into more detail. The citizen has major difficulties in the form of this, this, this and this. And can't manage this and that. And has problems here, here and here. Orally, I'd typically just say: we're dealing with a set of parents who have significant emotional difficulties and, overall, personal difficulties which, among other things, show themselves in that they don't turn up for the child ... as we can see from the contact notes" (Respondent 1). Put differently, the respondents indicate that how one prepares determines the content of the submissions.

Several respondents also describe the work processes involved in preparing manuscript-based versus free submissions: "And it's also that when you sit and write and formulate, you can go off on a tangent – yes, you can quickly end up piling on a lot that isn't really necessary ..." (Respondent 1).

Or as Respondent 5 puts it: "... when I prepare a free, non-manuscript-based submission, I make sure I've got a few key points. That makes it more straightforward. Whereas when I wrote it out, it wasn't always completely clear which point I wanted to drive home ... It became more of a list of information". As I understand the respondents, they experience not only that content is affected by the preparation; they experience that free, non-manuscript-based preparation produces oral submissions that are more concise and focused — and, one might add, closer to Jens Peter Christensen's ideal of giving judges something different from, and more than, the written materials.

For the respondents, it is less about ideals and more about what the free style actually does for them and for the judges at the moment: "It's more interesting to listen to ... And that is really why you're there ... sometimes you can get the thought: I'll just go up and say my bit, and then I've done my job. But if you stop and think why you're there, it's because there are three people who need to hear what we say – and actually take it in, right ... It's just more interesting to listen to ... when it's not so stiff" (Respondent 5). Respondent 2 goes a step further and reports how it also changes the judges' reactions: "For my part, I think it was that when I stood there with a manuscript, you'd stand there reading and turning pages, and I could see the child experts slump lower and lower ... they stopped writing and all that. It got so drawn out [...] that feeling that they didn't want to listen – that's what I got with a manuscript. It's pretty clear" (Respondent 2). As Respondent 3 puts it: "You are listened to more when it's free". Respondent 6 offers an example: "I had a situation the other day with an opposing party who was reading out. She paused, and the judge almost moved on to me ... where she said, 'No, no, I'm not finished.' It just became so heavy and – I think – the judge just wanted it over with". In short, the respondents experience increased willingness to listen when submissions are delivered by free presentation.

There is no basis in the present study to conclude that free presentation increases the judges' understanding, which is the claim Jens Peter Christensen tends towards. That would require audience research, however, there is no doubt that this is what the respondents themselves experience: "there's more listening" (Respondent 3); "you get, at least, a different kind of contact" (Respondent 2); "you also get those nods from the judges" (Respondent 6); "my audience just seems more receptive [when it's free]" (Respondent 6).

Overall, the respondents' answers indicate that there are substantive differences in the content of manuscript-based versus free presentation, and that these differences affect willingness to listen, presence, and perhaps even understanding. It is the material itself – the content and focus of the submissions – that is shaped by the preparation, which is why a submission drafted as a full manuscript does not become a free presentation just because the manuscript is memorized and delivered without reading. The respondents' statements rather support the view of text and speech elaborated by Walter Ong and found in the literature on oral legal cultures: text and speech involve different organizing principles and patterns of thought; accordingly, content – including legislation – is approached, formulated and understood differently in the two approaches (Ong 1982; Vesting 2018, 80ff).

6. Does Free Presentation Prompt a Different Tone Towards the Citizen?

When reading across the respondents' answers, another interesting point emerges. One not addressed in the legal literature on orality: namely that the attitude towards the citizen (the parents of the children placed in care) also appears to be affected by whether submissions are manuscript-based or delivered by free presentation.

This is particularly evident where the respondents address the citizens' difficulties, which in many cases form part of the grounds for placement. Several respondents note that they expressed themselves in a harsher tone when their submissions were based on a full manuscript: "When I had written submissions, I could sometimes feel it … not nice … or even downright intimidating, having to stand there and read out so many harsh things about someone when we can all see … well, she [the citizen] has been sitting there crying for 20 minutes … She can hardly cope any more, but now I have to read out my submission … […] I've gotten over that completely now by using the other style [free presentation]" (Respondent 2). The more textual the preparation, the more explicit it becomes, and the harsher the tone.

The respondents themselves are in no doubt: they experience the harsher tone as a general feature of the manuscript-based style: "Yes … I think so" (Respondent 2); and "don't you think you get a bit more … harsh when you write it?" (Respondent 1). Respondent 2 even lifts the assessment to the level of individuals at the Appeals Board, where some proceed with a full manuscript while others use free presentation: "… at the office [the Appeals Board], we all know that we have different styles in terms of how hard we go at the citizen. And lawyers [the other side] have said as much – that some are nicer, others where it bloody hurts. You can avoid that with this style [free presentation]" (Respondent 2). Respondent 2 has clearly reflected on why manuscript-based submissions become harsher in tone: "Yes, because you write it when you're not sitting in front of the citizen … You address the case purely from the file. Whereas when you stand there and are either completely free or have written keywords, you also address the citizen: what situation are we in … when we have to say these things … I think that makes a real difference" (Respondent 2).

The explanation Respondent 2 offers is supported in the literature on the difference between text and speech. As rhetorician Christina Pontoppidan notes in her book on the nature of text, it is a basic condition of text that it is created in solitude – that is, in a different room and at a different time from the one the reader inhabits (Pontoppidan 2013, 12ff). When we write our reflections into a manuscript, the message rests on the case file and our mental image of the person we describe; in an oral communicative situation, we are in the same room as those we speak to – and, in this case, speak about (Gabrielsen and Christiansen 2010, 28ff.). This evidently affects words and tone, and the respondents themselves say how planned descriptions of the citizen must be changed and toned down when they meet the citizen physically in court. They do not themselves use the term 'empathy', yet their statements indicate that, in the live oral setting, they take the whole person more fully into account.

7. Conclusion: Free Presentation Makes a Difference

Free presentation makes a difference. Although the provision on free presentation by no means dominates the legal discussion of orality, the interview study identifies several reasons to pay closer attention to the provision. The ability to interact with the opponent and the judge, the ability to absorb and incorporate new information, and the ability to deliver a focused submission worth listening to are all affected by the preparation format. It is therefore puzzling that the provision does not attract greater attention and that it is not more consistently enforced in practice: reading aloud from a manuscript is today tolerated in many of the Danish courts, even though both the legal literature and the present study point to a number of advantages in using free presentation.

In this paper, I have focused on considerations already embedded in the legal literature. The interview study also identifies advantages of free, non-manuscript-based submissions that the

legal literature on orality does not address - above all, that the citizen's experience of the process may differ depending on whether information about them is set out in writing and at a distance or delivered orally and in the moment. However, the study also reveals further differences that warrant additional research: practitioners report (i) greater personal impact, (ii) reduced anxiety, and (iii) a stronger sense of meaning when appearing in court using free presentation; and (iv) preparation time is reduced by roughly half.

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RHETORIC IN TIMES OF CHANGE: A PHILOSOPHICAL DEFENSE AGAINST EPISTEMIC REDUCTIONISMS

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Abstract

This essay examines the enduring relevance of rhetoric in Western intellectual history, particularly during periods of epistemic transition. It argues that rhetoric recurrently emerges as a corrective and mediating force whenever dominant modes of knowledge attempt to monopolize truth. Drawing on Karl Jaspers' concept of the Axial Age, the study identifies historical moments in which rhetoric reappears as a response to crises of meaning, from the birth of rhetoric in fifth-century BCE Sicily, through Augustine's reconfiguration of discourse in Late Antiquity, Petrarch's humanist critique of scholastic dialectics, Vico's challenge to Cartesian analytic reductionism, and Perelman's twentieth-century "new rhetoric" as a response to formal logic. In each case, rhetoric does not function as a mere technique of persuasion: it mediates ethical, epistemic, and civic concerns, fostering plurality, dialogue, and interpretive flexibility. The essay aims to show that rhetoric serves as a bridge across disciplines, cultures, and temporal horizons, enabling communication where singular epistemic frameworks fail. By situating rhetoric as both an intellectual and ethical practice, the study underscores its humanistic value in contemporary contexts, particularly amid technological, ecological, and political disruptions. The analysis ultimately defends rhetoric as a civic and philosophical virtue, capable of negotiating uncertainty, cultivating moral responsibility, and sustaining the conditions for shared understanding in transitional and pluralistic societies.

Keywords: *rhetoric, epistemic transition, humanism, persuasion, knowledge plurality, ethical discourse*

1. Introduction: The Periodic Resurgence of Rhetoric

The following reflections aim to offer a synthetic yet conceptually rich overview of the enduring philosophical and historical significance of rhetoric[1], particularly in transitional epochs of Western civilization. The central question animating these pages is not whether rhetoric has survived through history (possibly as a mere artifact of classical education) but how and why it resurfaces with intellectual urgency whenever prevailing paradigms of knowledge and authority begin to fracture.

Could we therefore speak of a philosophy of history with regard to rhetoric? In other words, would it be possible to trace in the unfolding of human time not exactly a deterministic direction or fixed pattern (White 1973), but certain recurring constellations – moments in which rhetoric reemerges as a form of epistemic resistance, as a counter-movement against reductionist monopolies of truth?

Unlike Hegel or Voltaire, I do not assume that history advances toward an ultimate synthesis or *telos*, nor do I believe that some universal patterns govern the progress of reason. Yet, there are discernible epochs in which rhetoric gains renewed importance: epochs defined by crises of meaning, when inherited frameworks of understanding can no longer sustain collective intelligibility. In such moments, rhetoric functions not merely as an ornament or a means of persuasion, but as an existential and epistemological response to uncertainty.

Karl Jaspers' notion of the "*Achsenzeit*" (Axial Age) provides a helpful starting point for this reflection (Jaspers 1949). Jaspers identifies the Axial Age as a period of radical transformation in human consciousness, when humanity transitioned from mythic to reflective, philosophical modes of world-understanding. In the spirit of this framework, we might conceive of rhetoric as a phenomenon that flourishes in transitional epochs – those moments when epistemic certainties collapse, and a pluralistic reconstitution of meaning becomes necessary[2]. Rhetoric, in this sense, is not merely a symptom of instability but an active force that resists epistemic reductionism by reopening the field of meaning and dialogue.

Such transitional periods are rarely peaceful or coherent. They are marked by crises (political, social, and intellectual) where language itself becomes contested terrain. Communication breaks down; consensus dissolves; new vocabularies emerge to articulate experiences that the old ones can no longer capture. It is precisely here that rhetoric intervenes. It does not simply mediate discourse but reconstitutes the very conditions under which dialogue can occur. This reconstructive capacity makes rhetoric indispensable to civic renewal and cultural transformation (Arendt 1958; Nussbaum 2012).

2. The Birth of Rhetoric: Against the Monopoly of Myth

The first crucial moment to consider is the birth of rhetoric in fifth-century BCE Sicily, during the period of Magna Graecia. Figures such as Corax and Tisias, often remembered as the founders of rhetorical theory, lived in a world undergoing profound political change. The expulsion of the tyrant Thrasybulus from Syracuse in 465 BCE marked not only the fall of a despot but the emergence of a new political order, one that required public reasoning and civic deliberation.

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1 For an overview on the history of classical rhetoric from the beginning to modern age cf. Kennedy (1999).

2 A summary table of transitional epochs is provided at the end of the text.

Rhetoric thus arose as both a response to and a catalyst of democratic transformation. It provided citizens with a means to articulate, contest, and negotiate claims in the public sphere. What emerged was not simply a technique of persuasion but an epistemological and ethical revolution: speech became the medium of truth, not merely its vehicle. The old mythic justifications of power, anchored in divine will or genealogical destiny, were replaced by a discursive legitimacy grounded in shared reasoning.

This transformation was more than political. It signaled a deeper shift in consciousness: from monologic myth to dialogic reason. The rhetorical art made visible the plurality of perspectives that compose the social world (Bakhtin 1981). By legitimizing multiplicity, rhetoric became a democratic force, not because it guaranteed equality, but because it created the space where equality could be enacted (Vernant 1965).

Furthermore, rhetoric's emergence entailed a new conception of power. Power was no longer the exclusive property of divine or hereditary authority but a potential distributed among speakers within a *polis*. As Hannah Arendt later observed, action and speech are the modes through which human plurality is realized; to speak is to act in concert with others (Arendt 1958). Rhetoric, in this light, becomes the very grammar of the political: the art that transforms isolated individuals into interlocutors, capable of shaping shared worlds through persuasion rather than coercion.

At the same time, this first rhetorical revolution brought its own ambivalences. Plato's critique of pseudo-rhetoric in the *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus* exposes the danger inherent in persuasion divorced from truth. Yet even Plato's polemic against oratorical abuses reveals rhetoric's centrality: the philosopher's anxiety about true rhetoric is itself testimony to its power. The Sophists' relativism may have unsettled Plato, but it also marked the birth of a self-conscious awareness of discourse as a site of struggle over meaning.

The Sicilian origins of rhetoric thus encapsulate a broader anthropological lesson: whenever societies transition from mythic unity to discursive plurality, rhetoric becomes both symptom and instrument of that change. It mediates the passage from the sacred to the civic, from destiny to deliberation. In doing so, it inaugurates what we might call the first "epistemic pluralism" in Western history.

Rhetoric's early development also shaped education, selfhood, and civic identity. The *paideia* of the *polis* – the education of citizens – was inseparable from rhetorical training. Learning to speak well was not only an intellectual exercise but a moral and political apprenticeship: it meant learning to inhabit the shared space of reason. In this sense, rhetoric was foundational to the formation of what later thinkers would call the "public sphere" (Habermas 1962).

To summarize, the birth of rhetoric represents the first revolt against epistemic reductionism: the reduction of truth to mythic revelation. It marks the moment when human beings claimed ownership of language as a medium of mutual persuasion and critique. It was, in short, the first humanistic revolution.

3. Augustine of Hippo: Against the Monopoly of Grammar

The second transitional moment in our genealogy of rhetoric leads us to Late Antiquity and the early Christian era, where Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) stands as a liminal figure between the rhetorical culture of the Roman world and the emerging theological order of medieval Christianity. Augustine's intellectual trajectory – from professional rhetorician to bishop and theologian – reveals a profound transformation in the meaning and purpose of discourse itself.

Educated in the classical tradition, Augustine began his career as a teacher of rhetoric in Carthage and later in Milan. His early writings exhibit the technical brilliance of a trained rhetorician, yet he soon became disillusioned with what he perceived as the vanity of worldly eloquence. The conversion recounted in the *Confessions* marked not only a spiritual awakening but an epistemic reorientation: from (pseudo)rhetoric as persuasion toward rhetoric as illumination. Language, he came to believe, should not merely adorn thought but reveal truth (and truth, for Augustine, was inseparable from the divine *Logos*) (Augustine, *Confessiones*: IX).

In *De Magistro* and *Contra Cresconium*, Augustine developed a subtle critique of the grammatical formalism that dominated late Roman education. The grammarians, he argued, mistook linguistic correctness for wisdom. Their devotion to the purity of form had become a form of idolatry – a worship of the signifier detached from the signified. Augustine saw in this an early form of epistemic reductionism: the confinement of meaning to technical mastery rather than moral or spiritual insight (Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*: II).

For Augustine, grammar represented the ossification of discourse, the reification of language into rigid structures of authority. In contrast, rhetoric, reinterpreted through the lens of Christian charity (*caritas*), became an instrument of moral and pedagogical transformation (Manzin 1998). It was no longer the art of victory ("*ars vincendi*"), but the art of teaching truth in love ("*ars docendi in caritate*"). Persuasion was redeemed as an act of service, oriented toward the salvation and edification of others.

This reconfiguration of rhetoric marked a decisive shift in the Western tradition. Augustine's synthesis of classical eloquence and Christian ethics opened the way for a conception of discourse that was at once hermeneutic and ethical. His reflections anticipated modern concerns about the instrumentalization of language (a problem later taken up by Heidegger and Gadamer, who both saw in language not a tool but the "house of Being") (Heidegger 2010).

Augustine thus prefigures the hermeneutic insight that understanding is always mediated by language, and that language itself has an ethical dimension. His warning against the "vanity of grammarians" echoes through the centuries, reminding us that linguistic precision without ethical orientation leads to sterility. In contemporary terms, his critique could be read as a defense of the humanities against technocratic reductionism, intended as the tendency to value form and utility over meaning and truth.

Augustine's rhetorical theology also addresses the tension between interiority and communication. For him, the true teacher is not external but internal: the "*magister interior*," Christ as the inner Word who illuminates the human mind. Yet, paradoxically, this interior illumination manifests itself through speech, through the shared *logos* of the community. The implication is clear: communication, far from being a mere vehicle of thought, participates in the very unfolding of truth.

By transforming rhetoric into a practice of *caritas*, Augustine anticipated the idea (later articulated by Gadamer and Ricoeur) that understanding involves a fusion of horizons, a dialogue between self and other in the medium of language (Gadamer 1960; Ricoeur 1990). In his view, rhetoric was not abolished by revelation but transfigured by it, becoming a mode of communion rather than competition.

In sum, Augustine's work stands as an early philosophical resistance to epistemic reductionism in its grammatical form. Against the monopoly of linguistic formalism, he proposed a vision of discourse grounded in love, responsibility, and transcendence. His legacy continues to challenge any system, ancient or modern, that divorces the mastery of expression from the moral vocation of truth.

4. Petrarch and Early Humanism: Against the Monopoly of Dialectics

The third epochal resurgence of rhetoric appears in the figure of Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374), whose passionate critique of scholastic dialectics inaugurated the humanist revolution of the Renaissance. Petrarch's revolt against the intellectual abstraction of his time was not a rejection of reason per se, but of a particular kind of reason – one that had become sterile, detached from the living realities of human experience.

In works such as *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia* (*On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others*) and the *Familiares*, Petrarch attacks the pretensions of scholastic dialecticians, who, he claims, "know everything about the heavens but nothing of their own souls." His polemic encapsulates a crucial epistemological critique: dialectics, in its medieval form, had reduced truth to formal coherence. It could demonstrate "*veritas connexionum*" (the truth of logical connections) but not "*veritas sententiarum*" (the truth of lived judgment) (Petrarch, *Letters on Familiar Matters*: XIV; cf. Manzin 1994).

Petrarch's humanism sought to restore eloquence (*eloquentia*) as a mode of knowledge that embraces affect, imagination, and moral sensibility. He regarded rhetoric not as an inferior substitute for dialectic, but (Aristotelianly!)[3] as its necessary complement counterpart (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*: 135 a 1): a discipline that reintroduces the warmth of humanity into the cold machinery of syllogism. The humanist recovery of Cicero, Seneca, and Augustine reflected this aspiration: wisdom must be spoken beautifully, for truth divorced from eloquence risks becoming inhuman (Cicero, *De Oratore*: II).

In this respect, Petrarch inaugurates a second "axial" turning in the history of Western thought, one that anticipates later debates between scientific rationality and humanistic understanding. His elevation of rhetoric as a mode of ethical and emotional intelligence can be seen as a precursor to what modern philosophers call *phronesis*: practical wisdom that arises not from deduction but from engagement with concrete situations (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*: VI; Bitzer 1968; Farrell 1995).

Moreover, Petrarch's critique of dialectics possesses a prophetic resonance in our own time. In an era increasingly governed by algorithmic logic, predictive analytics, and the reduction of human meaning to data points, his humanism reminds us that truth is not exhausted by formal correctness. Understanding requires empathy, narrative, and moral imagination – dimensions that rhetoric, more than any other discipline, cultivates (Barthes 1994; Fisher 1984).

In this sense, Petrarch's revaluation of rhetoric anticipates what contemporary philosophers like Paul Ricoeur would call a *narrative epistemology*: the idea that human beings understand themselves and their world through stories that mediate between the factual and the meaningful (Ricoeur 1984). For Petrarch, the poetic and rhetorical imagination is not a deviation from truth but its deepening, its incarnation within the affective and temporal texture of life.

Petrarch's defense of eloquence also had political implications. By grounding knowledge in human experience, he implicitly challenged the scholastic claim to intellectual authority. The university dialecticians had built a monopoly over knowledge by defining it as syllogistic demonstration. Humanists like Petrarch broke this monopoly by asserting the legitimacy of *eloquentia humana*: the voice of lived wisdom that speaks from within, rather than above, the human condition.

3 In fact Petrarch accused the contemporary neo-Aristotelians of scholasticism of having an erroneous and reductive interpretation of Aristotle.

Thus, once again, rhetoric reappears at a moment of epistemic crisis: when the dominance of dialectical abstraction threatens to alienate knowledge from life. Rhetoric, in Petrarch's hands, became an act of resistance against intellectual desiccation and moral indifference. His humanism remains a call to remember that truth, to be humanly meaningful, must be not only thought but also spoken, felt, and shared.

5. Vico and the Enlightenment: Against the Monopoly of Analytics

The fourth pivotal moment in our historical survey of rhetoric emerges in the early modern period with Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), whose philosophy represents a decisive critique of Cartesian reductionism. Descartes' method, privileging deduction and mathematical abstraction as the sole pathways to knowledge (Descartes 1637), epitomized a form of epistemic reductionism in which human experience and cultural particularity were subordinated to universal rational structures (Toulmin 1992).

Vico, in his *Scienza Nuova*, argued that such a reductionist vision overlooked the historicity and cultural embeddedness of human understanding. Knowledge, he maintained, is inseparable from the practices, myths, and languages that constitute human societies. Truth is not merely discovered but enacted: it is "made" through human institutions, stories, and symbols (Burke 1969). Hence his famous dictum, "*verum ipsum factum*": truth is not just an abstract idea, but manifests itself in human arts and action (Vico, *The New Science*: §331).

In Vico's framework, rhetoric assumes a central epistemic function. Far from being mere ornamentation, rhetorical practice enables the human mind to grasp the socially constructed nature of reality. It mediates between analytic abstraction and the historical, mythopoetic texture of culture. By attending to narrative, metaphor, and persuasion, rhetoric complements logic and analysis, offering a fuller understanding of human experience.

Vico's critique is not only methodological but also ethical. Against the Enlightenment's universalist pretensions, he insisted on the particularity of human communities and the limitations of abstract reasoning divorced from social context. His work prefigures hermeneutic approaches in modern philosophy and cultural studies, emphasizing interpretation, historical consciousness, and the inseparability of cognition from culture (Cassirer 1923–1929).

Vico's insistence on the cognitive dimension of rhetoric underscores its enduring significance (Crosswhite 1996). In moments when analytic methods claim exclusive authority, rhetoric resurfaces to restore epistemic plurality. Through metaphor, narrative, and ethical persuasion, it maintains a connection between abstract knowledge and lived human reality, thus resisting the impoverishment of understanding that accompanies methodological reductionism.

6. Perelman and the 20th Century: Against the Monopoly of Formal Logic

The fifth stage in this historical survey arrives in the twentieth century with Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, whose *Traité de l'argumentation* (1958) inaugurated the notion of a "new rhetoric." Perelman responded to the growing dominance of formal logic, which, in his view, could not account for the richness and complexity of human reasoning in legal, moral, and political contexts.

Perelman argued that formal logic, while invaluable within its domain, imposes a reductive structure on discourse, privileging universality at the expense of context, audience, and ethical judgment. The "new rhetoric" sought to recover the art of reasonable persuasion, attending not

only to the structure of argument but also to its reception and its grounding in shared human norms. By emphasizing the concept of the "universal audience," Perelman bridged ethical considerations with epistemic practice, insisting that argumentation must aim at reasonable assent rather than coercive victory (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1958).

Of course, I am well aware of the ambiguities inherent in Perelman's notion of "new rhetoric," having also written about it in the past (Manzin 2012). But what seems relevant to me is that, beyond Perelman's fidelity to a correct interpretation of rhetoric, he believed this discipline should represent an argumentative renaissance capable of transcending logical formalism and restoring to public speech the dignity of which the oratorical techniques of totalitarianism had deprived it.

In historical perspective, Perelman's work represents *de facto* a continuation of the recurring pattern noted in our survey: rhetoric reemerges whenever a domain of knowledge claims monopoly over truth. Just as Augustine countered grammatical formalism, Petrarch resisted scholastic dialectics, and Vico opposed analytic reductionism, Perelman responded to the dominance of formal logic and to the past and present dictatorships' split between persuasion and reasonableness. Rhetoric, in each instance, functions as a corrective – a practice that restores plurality, dialogue, and ethical deliberation to discourse.

7. Conclusion: A Humanistic Defense of Rhetoric (Rhetoric as a Bridge)

Across the epochs of Western history, a consistent theme emerges: rhetoric operates as a *bridge*. It mediates between domains of knowledge, ethical perspectives, and temporal horizons (Weaver 1987). In political life, it facilitates deliberation amidst conflicting values; in the humanities, it restores suppressed or marginalized voices; in interdisciplinary research, it enables dialogue between scientific, historical, and social perspectives (Habermas 1981).

Rhetoric bridges not only disciplines but also generations and cultures. By cultivating epistemic plurality, it allows disparate forms of knowledge to coexist and interact. It mediates understanding without demanding conformity, enabling ethical negotiation and the possibility of consensus without coercion. In this sense, rhetoric is both epistemic and ethical, sustaining the delicate balance between disagreement and dialogue.

Moreover, rhetoric embodies a sort of philosophy of uncertainty. It flourishes precisely in transitional epochs, when dominant paradigms fail to fully account for the complexities of human experience. By creating spaces for reflection, dialogue, and ethical engagement, rhetoric contributes to the resilience of civic and intellectual life (Zappen 2004). It transforms moments of epistemic crisis into opportunities for renewal and humanistic cultivation. In a word, it is capable of responding to the uncertainties and (sometimes even apocalyptic) fears that mark periods of great transition, avoiding the twists and turns of epistemic authoritarianism and dogmatism or ideology.

To conclude, rhetoric must be recognized not as an antiquarian relic or a subsidiary art, but as a vital humanistic resource. As Susan Haack reminds us, human endeavor encompasses many forms of inquiry and creation beyond the scientific: historical, legal, literary, philosophical, artistic, and narrative practices all contribute to human understanding and flourishing (Haack 1993). Rhetoric belongs in a central position to this wider spectrum of humanistic activity.

In contemporary times, characterized by rapid technological change, political polarization, and challenges to epistemic authority, we may be entering a new axial moment. Artificial intelligence, ecological threats, and global interconnectedness pose not merely technical problems but ethical and hermeneutic challenges. Rhetoric, understood as a form of truth-seeking characterized by a

practice of persuasion grounded in ethical engagement and epistemic plurality, remains a crucial tool for navigating these challenges.

Rhetoric is not reducible to a technique (Zarefsky 2010); it is a philosophical orientation, a civic and ethical habit of mind. It cultivates dialogue, sustains plurality, and allows for disagreement without enmity. It resists the monopolies of reductionist knowledge while proposing alternative ecologies of understanding (Booth 2004). Above all, rhetoric teaches us to inhabit transitional epochs with critical discernment, imaginative empathy, and hope for shared understanding.

Let us therefore reclaim rhetoric as both an academic discipline and a civic virtue. Let us teach, practice, and defend it as one of the most humane ways of navigating uncertainty, cultivating community, and imagining a shared future where truth is not a dogmatic scarecrow nor a surrender to the suggestive force of the opinions of the strongest.

– Summary Table –

Reference Author(s)	Epochal Transition	Dominant Epistemic Reductionism
Rhetoricians of Ancient Greece	Aristocracy > Democracy	Myth, Superstition
St. Augustine of Hippo	Roman Empire > Middle Ages	Grammar
Francesco Petrarca	Middle Ages > Renaissance	Dialectics
Giambattista Vico	Renaissance > Modern Age	Analytics
Chaïm Perelman	Modernity > Post-modernity	Formal Logic
...	(in progress)	AI?

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WISE PEOPLE CREATE PROVERBS AND PROVERBS CREATE WISE PEOPLE – ON RHETORIC OF PROVERBS AND PROVERBS IN RHETORIC

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Abstract

Proverbs, being "the wisdom of many and the wit of one", have long been recognized by rhetoricians as a powerful expressive tool. Nevertheless there are no strict or even very general set of rules governing the appropriate and successful use of certain proverb in certain rhetorical situation. Opinions are divided on the usage and the frequency of proverbs in public discourse, especially among politicians, especially having in mind the rise of politicians and public leaders in recent decades who embrace the populist strategies. Appeal to "common wisdom" or even more specifically "folk wisdom" in many cases undoubtedly represents an example of ad populum *fallacy. However it can be argued that the surface structure of proverbs (rhyme, parallelism, contrast) offers the material for such (mis)use because many political slogans tend to imitate these typical features. The paper will focus on these rhetorical traits of proverbs as well as analyzing their occurrence in contemporary Croatian parliamentary debates.*

Keywords: *maxim, politics, proverb, rhetoric*

1. Introduction

Archer Taylor's (1962) famous remark: definition of the proverb is too difficult to reward the effort traditional, pithy, often formulaic and/or figurative, fairly stable and generally recognizable units (Norrick 2014) forming a complete utterance, making a complete conversational contribution and/or performing a speech act in a speech event making apodictic (expressed as undeniable truth) statements or evoking a scenario applicable to a range of analogous situations for *folklorists*, proverbs exist as items of folklore alongside riddles, proverbial phrases and jokes they provide highly recognizable, (relatively) fixed textual building blocks with unique rhetorical potential; they are valued as folk wisdom and bearers of traditional lore for *linguists*, proverbs unite features of the lexeme, sentence, set phrase, collocation, text and quote they illustrate interesting patterns of prosody, parallelism, syntax, lexis and imagery for *lexicographers*, proverbs are items to be collected, categorized and catalogued with information on their origins and distribution along with appropriate links to other proverbs, proverbial phrases, idioms and so on within and across linguistic communities proverbs contain "wisdom, truths, morals, and traditional views" (Mieder 1996, 4).

Most proverbs exhibit either direct didactic tendency as items of advice (*Put your best foot forward*), or indirect didactic tendency as potential advice summarizing past experience (*First come, first served*); others can be used with didactic intentions under appropriate conditions (*Little pitchers have big ears*) proverbs can be introduced with *frames* (***You should*** *strike while the iron is hot* or ***Always*** *look before you leap*) and introduced or followed by *proverbial affixes* (Norrick 1981) (*as the saying goes*, *as they say, it is said*) proverbs are both comparatively rare and variable in everyday discourse, but they remain recognizable to members of the language community due to their high salience (Moon 1998) metaphoricity (imagery): required/common attribute of proverbs surface features: rhyme (*Birds of a feather flock together*), alliteration (*Live and let live*), assonance (*Strike while the iron is hot*), metrical patterns and parallelism (both structural and semantic) the communicative potential of proverbs is founded in the first place in their rhetorical form (Sandig 2007, 161).

2. Classical rhetorical texts on proverbs

Ancient rhetoricians were dealing with proverbs along with similar and related terms, such as maxims and aphorisms. Anaximenes of Lampsacus in his *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* (11) classifies maxims (γνῶμαι) into two kinds, that generally accepted (ἔνδοξος) and that counter to common opinion (παράδοξος). Anaximenes classifies three sources: i) ἐκ τῆς ἰδίας φύσεος (by nature itself), ii) ἐξ ὑπερβολῆς (exaggeration), iii) ἐκ παρομοιώσεως (comparison) (Anderson 2000, 30).

Aristotle's *Rhetoric* 2.21 is devoted to the maxim (*γνόμη*). Aristotle defines it as a declaration concerning a general matter related to human action, or as the major premise or conclusion of a rhetorical syllogism (ἐνθύμημα) standing alone (i.e. a single proposition).[1] He distinguishes four forms (in two categories): Those that are παράδοξοι or ἀμφισβητούμενοι and need an explanation, of which some become ἐνθύμηματικαί but others merely add a reason (αἴτιον). He considers the latter the most popular. The second category are those which are quite clear and thus need no appendage, of which some are known beforehand and others are self-evident. Riddles or enigmatic expressions may also be used as γνῶμαι though the explanation should be short. Aristotle

[1] Kennedy (2007: 102) notes that in Athens orators sometimes quoted poets, oracles, or proverbs as "witnesses".

recommends that γνῶμαι should be used for older audiences and concerning subjects they are familiar with. When complaining or exaggerating one may use generalising statements (γνῶμαι) which are only partially true. Aristotle also notes that some proverbs (παροίμιαι) are also γνῶμαι. One may also deliberately contradict well-known γνῶμαι with effect, but a reason must be added (cf. Arist. *Rh.* 2.21.13 where two ways of doing this are suggested) (Anderson 2000: 31).

Aristotle notes two general uses of γνῶμαι. Firstly, the effect of a speech is greatly increased when the audience can (at least partially) sympathise with the sentiment expressed in the γνῶμη. This should therefore be aimed for. Secondly, γνῶμαι give speeches an ethical character because they make the moral choice or purpose clear (Anderson 2000: 31).

In 1.2.2 Aristotle divided the means of persuasion into artistic techniques—use of paradigms and enthymemes—and non-artistic pisteis that an orator uses but does not invent. The latter are described in the following chapter and consist largely of documentary evidence that can support or weaken a case at law. (Kennedy 2007: 102)

Quintilian deals with γνῶμαι in a similar manner in his *Institutio Oratoriae* (8.5.1–8), preferring a division into simple γνῶμαι and those requiring the addition of a reason. He also notes the common practice of introducing *sententiae* at the close of passages (cf. *Inst.* 8.5.11, 13–14). Demetrius in *De Elocutione* (110–11) also clearly implies that γνῶμαι were often placed last in an argumentative context. At 170 he argues that in certain contexts (e.g. loose parties) the γελοῖον can take the place of the γνῶμη and χρεία (Anderson 2000: 31).

Rhet.Her. 4.24 (*sententia*) notes the use of antithetical maxims (with or without a reason attached). He pleads for a sparse use, var iously interspersed (thus not specifically as the conclusion of an argument).

Sen. *Ep.* 33.7 notes that boys were expected to learn both sententiae and χρεῖαι by heart.

For γνῶμαι used in jesting, see Cic. *de Orat.* 2.286.

The term is found frequently in the works of Dionysius of Halicarnassus.

2.2. Aristotle on proverbs (Kennedy)

Also proverbs, [where the phrase] "as has been said" is a form of testimony; for example, if someone were to advise against making a friend of an old man, the proverb "Never do good to an old man" bears testimony to it. And [if someone advises] killing sons whose fathers have already been killed, [he may say] "Foolish he who after killing the father leaves behind the son." 256 (105)

3. Stylistic Features of Proverbs

Even a casual glance at folklore genres detects a certain order and structure in their sound and syllable organization, while a more focused analysis reveals that some genres are more structured than others, primarily when looking at sound and syllable repetition. The original purpose of this dataset and the tools which were used to create it was to measure the levels of sound repetition with the purpose of determining euphony in poetic expression of named poets such as A. G. Matoš (Nikolić and Bakarić 2018).

The first observed stylistic feature group was the repetition coefficient of sounds. The method used to measure the coefficient requires that the segments of the analysed corpora be of similar size for the comparison of results to be meaningful. It is impossible and thankless to talk about

constants because the repetition coefficient only makes sense when observed in relation (due to the mathematical model). It can further be divided into two approaches to measuring repetition; n-gram repetition which observes sounds (or the approximation of sounds through characters) and syllable repetition. N-gram repetition is independent of any kind of prosodic knowledge and therefore much simpler to measure. Syllable repetition requires that the text is separated into syllables, which is not a trivial task for Croatian language. The problem of syllabification has several levels but can be described by a rule-based algorithm which first solves specific and rare syllable border problems and then moves on to more general and common syllable types. Issues that affect the syllabification results are related to the difference between spoken and written text and, even though Croatian spelling is mostly phonetic, this should be taken into consideration when preparing the input text. Repetition of sounds adds to the euphony as alliteration, assonance and rhyme (Bishop 1985: 345) and is a distinguishing feature when comparing and classifying text.

An additional stylistic feature used to detect levels of euphony is the pronunciation difficulty coefficient. This feature looks at two phenomena which add to the difficulty of pronunciation within a given text. The authors focused on the syllabic r and consonant clusters within syllables. Reporting the occurrence of these phenomena also requires syllabification and additional analysis of syllable quality which is an integral part of the syllabification algorithm. The pronunciation difficulty coefficient, although essentially quantitative, still includes some qualitative elements. This concerns the counting of specific elements previously recognized as non-euphonic (syllabic r and consonant groups), but still neglects the vocal composition within the consonant groups. The coefficient does not differentiate between sets of voiceless and sets of voiced consonants. A thorough analysis of tongue twisters confirmed a high proportion of sets with voiceless consonants (Nikolić 2013: 119–120; Nikolić 2019: 200), which is an indisputable indicator of pronunciation difficulty and affects the overall reduced impression of euphony.

Computational stylistic is described as a data-driven field which promises new insights into text through digital methods (Herrmann et al. 2021). However, for its contribution in the analyses of euphony to be more interesting and useful to literary historians and prosodists, it is necessary to link the results of objective measurements at the phonetic level of the text with the content level. The results of such research would confirm (or perhaps refute) euphony as a distinguishing feature between genres or perhaps even individual authors of written literature. Using a dataset such as the one presented here as a distant reading toll can assist in detecting phenomena which can then be focused on and further analysed.

Aristotle's definition of maxim/proverb (*gnōmē*): a universal statement about which actions should be chosen and which avoided (*Rhet.* 1394a22–29)

Aristotle assigns maxims a crucial role in the practice of the rhetorical art (DiLeo 2020, 371)

proverbs represent generalizing statements "about factual and normative regularities (in the broad sense), which can act as argumentative warrants" (Kindt 2002: 280)

they function as generalized advice, instructions how to act, justifications of actions, or explanations of actions

particular persuasive power due to which they serve as convincing arguments in relevant contexts (Wirrer 2007, 175)

The argumentative function of proverbs is based on their syntactic-logical structure

The argumentative function of proverbs is based on their occurrence in syllogistic structures

The argumentative function of proverbs is based on the fact that they verbalize topoi

semantic ambiguity of proverbs results to a large degree from their being used in various contexts with different functions (Jason 1971)

proverbs also act as analogies, which adds to the complexity of understanding their precise meaning in a particular speech act (Mieder 2004, 133)

proverbs are not universal truths but rather limited pieces of folk wisdom that are valid only in certain situations

in contextual usage proverbs function effectively as social strategies (cf. Yankah 1984)

proverbial stereotypes used as nationalist, racial and/or colonial slurs (Dundes 1975; Mieder 1982; Nwachukwu-Agbada 1988; Arora 1994; Mieder 2002)

proverbs and the politics: Mieder 1997; 2000; 2003

apresidents try to express their political messages in a language that is accessible to all the American people, no matter what their ethnic, social, or intellectual background might be.

proverbs: the "common denominator" of wisdom of a nation (inaugural addresses)

4. Conclusion

Proverbs for being concise, having explicit message, being instructive and affecting addressee have been applied since long among different generations. Literary genres including epic, lyric literature and didactic literature also benefited from proverbs in various forms. but in epic literature for its topic and meter benefits from proverbs more at the end of story are when compiler or author wants to emphasize on addressee and advice.

In lyric literature since we can face up more to personal emotions of poet it is seem less proverb and proverbs mainly refer to personal issues like love and separation. But didactic literature specially if it have social aspect, is the place of appearance of proverbs types with different themes and observance of all features of a proverb, so didactic literature for application of proverb is comparable none of the both epic and lyric. In the new literary genres, short story and novel for more attention to social issues and being ritten in prose, are the places of proverbs appearances.

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RHETORICAL TOPOI AND ETHICAL ENGAGEMENT IN THE POLISH OXFORD DEBATE: UNDERSTANDING TEENAGERS' MORAL REASONING

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Abstract

The chapter examines how Polish high school students recognize and articulate ethical dimensions within the framework of the Polish Oxford Debate (POD). Drawing on empirical material collected during youth debate tournaments in 2023, the analysis employs selected elements of grounded theory to identify recurrent motifs, rhetorical topoi, and general argumentative strategies. The study reveals that adolescents instinctively introduce moral reasoning even when debating theses that are not ethical per se. *Ethical motifs – including justice, responsibility for the future, safety, freedom, and the common good – serve as consistent anchors that shape both sides' reasoning. The findings indicate that engagement and rhetorical quality increase when theses resonate with students' lived experiences, generational concerns, and awareness of contemporary challenges such as technology or social inequality. Teenagers tend to approach debates as moral laboratories, testing their collective values and civic identity through reasoning and persuasion. For educators, the study highlights the importance of formulating theses that incorporate implicit or explicit ethical considerations, as these seem to increase reflective participation and motivation. The chapter concludes that POD can function as an effective educational tool, connecting rhetorical training with ethical awareness and strengthening deliberative competence among young citizens.*

Keywords: *Polish Oxford Debate, topos, moral reasoning, deliberative debate*

1. Introduction

Oxford-style debate in Poland, locally known as the Polish Oxford Debate (later abbreviated as POD), has become a significant pedagogical tool in recent years. Although its current popularity stems mainly from tournament practice, it is increasingly used during school and university classes. POD provides students with a structured forum for developing public speaking, critical thinking, in-depth analysis, and collaborative reasoning (Rogowska and Będkowski 2025, 23). The format, consisting of two opposing teams of four participants debating an affirmative thesis under the guidance of a moderator, emphasizes rhetorical skill and argumentative coherence. Each debate (in the case of the tournament) is carefully observed and evaluated by a team of at least three judges – specialists in debate and rhetoric, and sometimes experts in the field related to the thesis. The criteria typically include the degree to which the discussion remains centered on the thesis, the persuasiveness and consistency of the team's reasoning, the formulation of complete arguments, and the ability to counter opposing claims. Within this framework, debates serve not only as exercises in persuasion and public speaking but also as an innovative means of deepening participants' knowledge. It is particularly worth noting POD's value as an educational laboratory for exploring political, social, historical, moral, and philosophical ideas.

The research project, on which this chapter is based, analyzed deliberative theses used in youth debates in Poland. While the broader project examined whether POD could serve as a method of ethical and philosophical education in high schools, the present chapter narrows its scope to explore what interests teenagers when they debate ethical questions. The research framework was grounded in selected elements of Kathy Charmaz's grounded theory, particularly the open and selective coding procedures applied to data collected during debate tournaments (Kathy 2014). Rather than reconstructing the complete set of findings obtained by the research team, I will examine recurring motifs and argumentative topoi and their consequences: the general rhetorical and substantive tendencies students most often employed. The central objective is to identify which themes and contexts most strongly engage adolescents and why these topics resonate with them. I will also explore what these tendencies reveal about the development of POD and the argumentative potential of young debaters.

This focus arises from a practical concern that emerged during the primary analysis: debates that genuinely fascinated students tended to be more vibrant, coherent, and persuasive, even if emotional intensity sometimes affected their formal quality. While not every thesis used in tournaments or classroom settings can be designed to be immediately captivating, there is pedagogical value in understanding which ethical motifs resonate most with teenagers. Such knowledge may help educators (including school teachers) and debate trainers frame theses that are both intellectually rigorous and rhetorically engaging, thereby raising the quality of deliberation. The aim is not to exclude topics perceived as less engaging, but rather to recognize which elements – when embedded in a thesis – enhance identification and encourage deeper reflection and more meticulous research, especially in ethical reasoning.

Naturally, the debating arena is not a spontaneous exchange between two opposing sides. From both the observer's and participant's perspectives, POD remains a structured simulation. However, the argumentation and engagement it generates are entirely authentic. As Będkowski and Rogowska (2024, 176) note on competitive debates in general, "Despite the simulation aspect, the rhetorical and argumentative phenomena in debates are genuine and provide a fertile ground for scholarly exploration" [my translation]. The analysis of deliberative theses revealed that ethical elements were present in nearly all cases, even when not immediately visible. For example,

a thesis on the reconstruction of the Saxon Palace in Warsaw (*The reconstruction of the Saxon Palace will unite Poles just as the reconstruction of the Royal Castle in Warsaw did 50 years ago*) – a topic seemingly political or cultural in nature – was interpreted by students as a moral dilemma over cost, solidarity, and national identity. They did not so much use these keywords for the singular arguments as built complex strategies around them, thus situating these motifs as topoi. Similarly, a thesis on the development of a finfluencing strategy by a state-owned company (*As the president of the management board of a state-owned company supervised by the Ministry of State Assets, I would incorporate a finfluencing strategy into the company's activities*) quickly raised questions about responsibility for education and the feasibility of such an approach. These examples demonstrate that moral dimensions, even when implicit, are often identified by young debaters and become central themes to their argumentation.

This chapter, therefore, pursues three guiding questions: Which motifs and topoi recur most often in teenagers' ethical debates? In which topics do they most readily identify moral elements? And how can this knowledge help educators select theses that resonate more strongly with students' lived experiences and cultural contexts, so that young people can benefit from POD as fully as possible? To address these questions, I will first outline the study's methodological framework, then present general tendencies observed in the debates, and finally provide a detailed analysis of the use of topoi. Finally, I will discuss why these themes are particularly attractive to teenagers and consider the practical implications of these conclusions for debate practice in schools.

2. Methodological Framework

The empirical basis of this study consisted of data collected during youth debate tournaments in Poland between April 27 and June 13, 2023. The research team, including the author of the following article, observed and analyzed debates held in five cities: Tarnów (tournament organized by *Stowarzyszenie Nowe Przestrzenie*), Toruń, Włocławek, and Poznań (all three hosted by the foundation *Projekty Edukacyjne*), and Warsaw (organized by the *Institute of National Remembrance*). We gathered material using specially prepared research cards designed to record both the formulation of theses and the course of the debates. As a previously trained team of researchers, we filled out these cards in real time while listening to debates that typically lasted about 1 hour.

In total, twenty-two cards were analyzed: fourteen corresponding to seven deliberative theses and eight corresponding to four demonstrative theses. In the final corpus, we counted only deliberative cards presenting ethical theses; thus, four cards representing three deliberative, but non-ethical theses were excluded. The analytical framework drew selectively on Kathy Charmaz's *grounded theory*, applied fragmentarily as a methodological orientation rather than a complete research design. The method's open and selective coding procedures were used to structure the data reduction and category formation processes. This approach enabled moving beyond mere description and identifying recurring ethical motifs and argumentative structures emerging from the data.

To maintain the material's relevance to our ethical focus and keep analytical coherence, the dataset underwent several rounds of selection. Each debate was documented on a standardized research card containing questions about the thesis content, the problem it raised, the axis of dispute, and its formal scope. Using these criteria, we identified whether the thesis contained a decision-making moment tied to ethical considerations and, if so, how this element was expressed. We retained theses that clearly involved moral dilemmas and could be debated from both affirmative

(proposition) and negative (opposition) positions – thus symmetrical in nature. Theses lacking an ethical component or balance between sides were excluded. In the end, fourteen cards represented seven deliberative theses with explicit or implicit ethical elements, and eight cards reflected four demonstrative theses used for comparative purposes. Multiple cards on the same thesis occasionally served to verify interpretations and to test the internal consistency of the analysis. This approach helped isolate debates with theses that can serve as examples of good practice for future educational use.

When examining the ethical dimensions, we paid particular attention to the use of topoi, understood as patterns of reasoning or argumentative "places" that structured the speeches. In addition, this paper includes remarks on the basic Aristotelian triad of ethos, pathos, and logos, since these modes of persuasion allow us to trace adolescents' tendencies in debates on ethical themes. Each research card required us to note the arguments and counterarguments raised by both teams and to identify the topoi on which they relied. In this way, we could reconstruct how students connected specific claims to broader ethical or social frameworks.

While the cards offered a structured tool observation, inductive interpretation – characteristic of grounded theory – remained integral to the analysis. We identified recurring motifs and noted instances in which participants framed arguments in atypical or surprising ways. The identification of ethical motifs and decision-making elements formed the core of the analysis, whereas ethos, pathos, logos, and topoi served as supporting categories for understanding argumentative strategies. Although the corpus yielded valuable insights, our study faced several limitations. The data came exclusively from debates held during selected tournaments in five cities, meaning that the corpus reflected contexts shaped by specific organizers, the competitive nature of the events, and the fact that debating teams often encountered one another for the first time – conditions that do not usually apply to school-based debates. We relied on research cards we had designed specifically for this project, which ensured a strong focus on ethical aspects while also setting the frame for how arguments could be recorded and analyzed. Time pressure during live debates also limited the depth of note-taking, making it easier to capture recurring topoi and general argumentative patterns than subtle rhetorical nuances. Despite these limitations, the consistency of procedure and comparability across debates strengthened the validity of the findings.

Taken together, these methodological choices provided us with a coherent framework for examining how Polish teenagers engage with ethical dimensions in Oxford-style debates. This foundation enables me to transition from the methodology and primary goal of the entire study to the broader tendencies observed in the debates themselves.

3. General Tendencies

The analysis of the debates revealed several general tendencies in how teenagers respond to ethical questions. First of all, topics that directly addressed everyday concerns or broader social relevance tended to spark the most vivid engagement. Theses related to new technologies, such as the development of chatbots (*Further development of chatbots will do more harm than good*), quickly led students to consider questions of safety, responsibility, and the future of human work – particularly given that the wording "chatbots" misled them and the debate in practice revolved around ChatGPT, the most recognizable large language model in the first half of 2023. Debates framed around cultural or historical matters, such as the reconstruction of the Saxon Palace in Warsaw or the granting of voting rights to women in Poland (*Granting women voting rights in Poland in 1918*

enabled their active participation in politics), also prompted ethical reflection, with participants weighing the value of national identity and solidarity against the financial costs and their social consequences in each case. Even when a thesis was not explicitly formulated as a moral dilemma, adolescents consistently introduced ethical considerations into their arguments. This pattern suggests that the appeal of a debate topic for teenagers lies less in its formal classification and more in its potential to be interpreted through the lens of justice, responsibility, or collective well-being. This becomes particularly significant when one recalls that the majority of the analyzed theses, although clearly connected to ethical reflection, cannot formally be classified as value debates but rather as policy debates (Houtlosser 2001, 39). The students' recognition of values appeared proportional to the perceived importance of the problem under discussion.

Among the thematic areas, debates on technology, bioethics, and social justice stood out as particularly engaging. When confronted with theses on technological innovation, students often moved quickly beyond pragmatic calculations to address broader consequences for human autonomy, critical thinking, or the distribution of opportunities between generations. In bioethical contexts, such as discussions of human enhancement or medical responsibility, participants displayed a strong tendency to frame arguments around the sanctity of life and the limits of scientific intervention. Issues of social justice: gender equality, education, or economic fairness, elicited passionate emotional appeals, though these were often accompanied by well-structured rational arguments characterized by the interplay of pathos and logos. In contrast, topics of primarily historical or commemorative character tended to elicit less spontaneous involvement unless students reframed them in terms of present-day dilemmas. This pattern indicates that adolescents are most engaged when the debate topic connects directly to challenges they perceive as relevant to their own futures. Such a tendency aligns with the deliberative nature of these debates, which, following Aristotelian classification, naturally orient themselves toward the future. Intuitively, students echoed Aristotle's description of deliberative rhetoric, in which reasoning frequently relies on examples – sometimes applied with greater, sometimes with lesser precision (Budzyńska-Daca 2017, 43).

The quality of argumentation varied depending – not solely but mainly – also on the topic being discussed. Although argumentation is often still studied without consideration of context, in this case, the situation was crucial (Gerritsen 2001, 68–72). Factors such as the participants' age, their generational background, and the nature of artificial disagreement characteristic of POD all influenced their reasoning patterns. These issues suggest that the full range of elements in the thesis significantly influences not only student engagement but also the rhetorical complexity of their responses.

From comparing different debates, a preliminary hierarchy of attractiveness emerges. At the top are themes directly linked to contemporary challenges – technological development, environmental crisis, and various forms of social justice – which students often interpreted as shaping their own futures. This pattern also remains Aristotle's observation that the perceived credibility of the speaker enhances the quality of persuasion (Aristotle 1995, 2194–5). Thus, the more authentic or truthful the issue appeared – regardless of which side the speaker represented – the more engaging the debate became for both participants and the audience. Slightly less captivating, though still intellectually productive, were cultural and economic topics, in which the ethical dimension was less immediate but could be activated through discussions of fairness, responsibility, or collective benefit. Historical or retrospective theses generally occupied the lower end of this hierarchy, as they required students to bridge temporal distance and seek relevance in contemporary contexts. Nevertheless, when participants successfully drew connections – linking past events, such as the twentieth-century reconstruction of the Royal Castle, to current concerns about sovereignty or

solidarity, as in the debate on rebuilding the Saxon Palace – these topics also generated substantial ethical deliberation.

This hierarchy should not be read as fixed but as indicative of general tendencies: adolescents tend to value POD debates that combine ethical dilemmas with tangible implications for their own lives and societies, and allow them to articulate moral reasoning through concrete, culturally resonant examples.

4. Motifs and Topoi in Teenagers' Argumentation

The analysis of debate transcripts and research cards revealed several recurring motifs and topoi, shaping the argumentative landscape of the discussions. In understanding the notion of topos, I follow Sara Rubinelli's definition, "that the value of a topos rests on its having two functions, namely a selective function (a topos is a device to find arguments) and a guarantee function (a topos is a kind of inference link that grants the plausibility of the step from certain premises to controversial claims)" (Rubinelli 2009, 23).

Among the most prominent was the motif of justice, which students often linked either to equality of opportunity or to fairness, mainly in terms of gender, and in the distribution of social goods. Closely connected to this was the topos of responsibility – especially focused on the future – where debaters emphasized the consequences of present decisions for future generations. Another concern was individual freedom, frequently pitted against appeals to the common good, allowing students to explore the tension between autonomy and collective responsibility. Issues of safety also arose regularly, particularly in debates over technology, where participants expressed concerns about risks to human health, critical thinking, and social cohesion. These motifs functioned as interpretive anchors, enabling students to translate abstract theses into concrete moral dilemmas that resonated with their own experiences and cultural environment.

At this point, it is worth returning to the topos of the future – one of the strongest and most consistent topoi identified in the debates. Students often framed their arguments by stressing the long-term consequences of present decisions, especially when discussing technological development or state policy, even when the thesis did not include a specific political or formal rule. In the debate on chatbots, for example, participants highlighted the risk of diminishing human critical thinking and reducing job opportunities for younger generations, suggesting that unchecked technological progress might undermine society's capacity for self-governance. In economic debates, the same topos appeared when students argued that short-term financial gains should not outweigh the obligation to create sustainable conditions for future citizens. Even in cultural or historical theses, teenagers frequently shifted the perspective from past or present concerns to what these decisions would mean for those who come after them.

A vivid illustration of this perspective appeared in the debate on the thesis *The narrative claiming that only popular artists should be considered successful is to be regretted*. The opposing team argued that many artists depend on public funding and that, given the ease of gaining popularity today – often unrelated to talent – the number of "successful" artists could expand to the point of overburdening the state budget. This orientation toward the future reflects a generational sensitivity to intertemporal justice, where responsibility is perceived both as an individual moral duty and as a collective imperative.

Another visible topos opposed individual freedom to the common good. Teenagers treated autonomy as a central value, arguing that citizens should be free to make personal choices without

excessive state interference. This perspective was evident in debates over economic policy, where some participants insisted that market actors should retain the freedom to act in their own interests. At the same time, many debaters countered such claims by invoking collective responsibility, stressing that individual actions must be limited when they harm social stability or undermine fairness. In the debate on state-sponsored investments, this tension between private initiative and public control formed the central axis of dispute, as students weighed the potential benefits of freedom against the moral obligation to protect the well-being of the broader community. Such persistent opposition between liberty and responsibility provided a recurring framework for argument, enabling adolescents to test the boundaries of both concepts in ethically charged contexts.

The topos of naturalness and progress also appeared with notable regularity, particularly in debates involving science, technology, and cultural change. Students frequently drew a contrast between what they considered "natural" human capacities or social arrangements and innovations that might disrupt them. In the debate on technological development, for instance, some participants argued that reliance on artificial systems such as chatbots – or, in practice, large language models – risked eroding authentic human interaction and violating the natural basis of community. Others countered by emphasizing the moral value of progress, claiming that innovation represents a collective obligation to improve living standards and expand opportunities. This tension between preserving what is perceived as natural and pursuing progress led students to articulate complex positions, sometimes blending both perspectives by acknowledging the benefits of technological development while advocating safeguards to protect human dignity and social cohesion.

Taken together, the above observations reveal a relatively consistent repertoire of topoi and motifs – repetitive references that do not quite meet the requirements of being the topos – which teenagers rely on when debating ethical issues. Justice, responsibility for the future, freedom, and the common good, safety, solidarity, and progress appear most frequently, often serving as the backbone of argumentation. Less common, but still significant, were references to sovereignty, participation, or superficiality, which broadened the ethical scope of certain discussions. The repeatability of these motifs indicates that adolescents instinctively approach public questions through ethical categories, even when the thesis itself does not explicitly demand such framing. Such a pattern suggests that the moral imagination of young debaters is shaped not only by school curricula or tournament contexts but also by broader cultural discourses in which values of fairness, responsibility, and collective well-being hold a central place.

This tendency finds indirect confirmation in supplementary materials produced within the POD community. One example is a manual prepared by high school debaters themselves, focused on climate change and environmental misinformation (Gajewska et al. 2024). Beyond the main topic suggested by the title, the position incorporates subtle linguistic choices – such as the consistent use of feminatives and gender-neutral expressions, which are highly visible when used in Polish – reflecting the exact value of equality observed in the analyzed debates (Gajewska et al. 2024, 5, 14). Similarly, findings from Natasza Lubik-Reczek's survey of Polish students support these observations: teenagers tend to find politics and social life the most interesting as per the POD topic. Although this study focuses on more general subjects, it clearly shows that many fewer teenagers find economics and history as highly captivating (in a 5-stage scale answer as "definitely yes") than worldview issues and social life, situating politics and culture in the middle of "definitely yes" (Lubik-Reczek 2024, 207–15).

5. Argumentative Strategies

Beyond the systematic appearance of motifs and topoi, this analysis highlighted several strategies that teenagers consistently used to make their arguments more persuasive. One of the most common approaches was to structure reasoning around clear contrasts – between safety and risk, tradition and innovation, or freedom and control – which allowed debaters to frame complex issues in accessible terms. Students also frequently employed examples drawn from contemporary life, such as references to social media or educational practices, to ground their arguments in familiar experiences. Another often observed strategy involved recasting the thesis itself, either by narrowing its scope to make it more manageable or by broadening it to connect with broader ethical concerns – although not always in full alignment with the formal rules of POD. These practices suggest that teenagers were not only reacting to the content of the theses but were also actively shaping the terms of discussion to strengthen and contextualize their positions.

Analyzing PODs through the Aristotelian triad, there appear some clear tendencies as well. Rational strategies (logos) were particularly evident in debates where students felt confident in using measurable criteria or causal reasoning. Participants often cited financial costs (past or potential), the efficiency of public policies, or projected long-term outcomes to justify their claims. Not all the logical arguments were, however, based on numbers. In the debate on state-funded investments (*The state should be the sole sponsor of strategic investments*), for example, several speakers argued that public sponsorship was the only way to guarantee stability and prevent misuse of private capital, grounding their reasoning in pragmatic assessments of economic risk. In other contexts, debaters referred to historical precedents or comparative cases from other countries as evidence that specific policies were either workable or doomed to fail. Although not always supported by precise data, these appeals demonstrated an effort to present arguments in a rational form and to frame decision-making as a matter of weighing probabilities and practical consequences.

Emotional strategies also played quite a substantial role in teenagers' debates, often making their arguments more immediate and memorable. Students appealed to empathy by highlighting the suffering of individuals or groups that might be affected by a given policy, such as workers displaced by automation or communities excluded from social assistance, in order to develop cultural projects. At other times, they drew on fear, warning that unchecked technological development could erode human autonomy or that neglecting cultural heritage might weaken collective identity. Anger and indignation were also occasionally mobilized, particularly in debates on fairness and equality, where participants denounced perceived greed, corruption, or social injustice. These appeals rarely stood alone; instead, they tended to intensify rational arguments, giving them urgency and a stronger connection to shared values.

Lastly, ethos-based strategies emerged when students sought to strengthen their position by appealing to credibility, authority, or shared identity. Some debaters invoked expert opinions or institutional authority, presenting them as reliable sources that could legitimize a particular stance. Others relied on historical figures or national traditions to anchor their arguments in a sense of continuity and collective experience. In several debates, participants appealed to their own role as responsible young citizens, suggesting that their generation had a special duty to reflect on long-term ethical consequences. These ethos-driven moves did not always introduce new evidence, and a valid explanation of the quotation did not always support them. Still, they provided a moral frame that made the argument appear more trustworthy and aligned with widely respected moral principles, as well as personal engagement.

In addition to these broader strategies, teenagers frequently employed some specific, often simple rhetorical figures and stylistic devices to reinforce their arguments. Rhetorical questions were commonly used, typically designed to expose weaknesses in the opposing side's position or to prompt reflection on an implicit moral choice. Contrasts and antitheses were also common, enabling speakers to sharpen distinctions between progress and decline, freedom and control, or solidarity and selfishness. Analogies drawn from everyday life or popular culture served to make abstract dilemmas more relatable and concrete. Hyperbole occasionally appeared in debates on technology, as students exaggerated potential risks to emphasize the need for caution. Particularly noteworthy was their advanced ability to construct arguments by association (Garssen 2001, 84–85), connecting seemingly unrelated elements within the hypothetical world of the debate to support a claim. While not always used systematically, the above techniques added intensity and clarity to speeches, helping participants capture attention and sustain engagement throughout the discussion and link their reasoning to shared moral principles.

A vivid example of these strategies appeared in the debate on whether further development of chatbots would bring more harm than good. The affirmative team built its case around rational arguments, pointing to the risk of reduced critical thinking and loss of human jobs, while reinforcing these claims with emotional appeals to the anxiety of a future shaped by machines. The opposing team, in turn, relied on ethos by invoking expert authority on technological progress and by framing themselves as advocates of innovation and social advancement (it seems that both strategies work regardless of whether our discussion is about chatbots per se or about large language models). Both sides employed rhetorical techniques: the affirmative speakers used rhetorical questions to challenge the necessity of chatbots, while the opposition used analogies to earlier technological revolutions – such as the introduction of personal computers – to argue that society ultimately adapts and benefits. Such a combination of logos, pathos, ethos, and stylistic means made this debate particularly dynamic, demonstrating how different strategies could be combined to transform a technical thesis into an ethically charged confrontation.

6. Why These Topics Fascinate Teenagers?

The debates we analyzed suggest that adolescents are most engaged when a thesis resonates with their lived experience or with issues they perceive as shaping their future. Topics related to technology, education, or social justice stood out because students could easily connect them to their own daily concerns – such as how they study, how they communicate, and what opportunities might be available to them in adult life. Even when a thesis appeared abstract or politically distant, participants tended to reframe it in light of questions that mattered directly to them, such as fairness, safety, responsibility, or financial security, and the collective obligation to make it possible. This tendency suggests that fascination arises not only from the novelty of a topic but also from its perceived relevance and its capacity to create space for ethical reflection grounded in everyday realities.

Cultural and social factors also shaped which debates captured students' attention. Adolescents often responded most strongly to topics that echoed broader public discussions visible in media, politics, or school life. Questions of technological development or state-sponsored projects, for instance, resonated because they mirrored national conversations on innovation, public spending, and cultural heritage. Likewise, issues of equality and gender reflected ongoing debates about social change in Poland and beyond. When theses tapped into these larger discourses, students appeared more motivated to participate, as they could situate their own reasoning within

narratives already circulating in their communities. This connection between debate topics and the public sphere suggests that fascination arises not only from personal relevance but also from the opportunity to engage with themes that teenagers recognize as part of collective cultural conversations.

Generational factors also contributed to the intensity of students' engagement. Many teenagers constructed debates in terms of their collective responsibilities and vulnerabilities, often contrasting their perspectives with those of older decision-makers. Concerns about climate change, technological dependence, social inequality, and technological awareness and capability to be a vivid part of this enterprise were frequently articulated as problems that the young would inherit, even if they had little power to influence present choices. This sense of limited agency, combined with a heightened awareness of long-term consequences, made debates a space where adolescents could voice aspirations for justice and sustainability. Their fascination with ethical dilemmas thus reflected not only intellectual curiosity but also a desire to assert generational identity and to position themselves as moral stakeholders in shaping the future.

Another critical factor was the extent to which a thesis addressed experiences close to students' everyday lives. When debates addressed education, the use of technology, or the distribution of cultural resources, adolescents often drew on their own experiences as learners, consumers, or community members. This immediacy enabled them to argue with greater confidence and emotional investment, since the dilemmas were not abstract but connected to choices they themselves faced. Even seemingly distant issues could become engaging once reframed in terms of everyday relevance – for example, linking the reconstruction of a historic building to questions of how public money should be spent during a financial crisis. The closer the thesis aligned with personal or collective experience, the more likely it was to stimulate active participation and nuanced ethical reasoning.

These observations have broader implications for both education and communication. If fascination in debate arises when topics resonate with everyday experience, generational concerns, or broader cultural discourses, then the design of theses can directly influence the quality of students' engagement. Ethical elements appear to serve as an entry point, allowing teenagers to link abstract policies or historical events to their own values and expectations. Recognizing this tendency may help educators and debate trainers craft topics that are not only pedagogically valuable but also rhetorically complex – by provoking more than just logos-type arguments, recently enormously popular in POD – thus encouraging deeper preparation and more reflective participation. In this sense, debates become more than exercises in public speaking: they provide a framework for adolescents to explore how their voices matter in conversations about justice, responsibility, and collective futures.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of aligning debate theses with themes that adolescents find both relevant and ethically stimulating. When students perceive a direct link between a thesis and their own lives or generational concerns, the quality of deliberation improves significantly: arguments become more developed, rhetorical strategies become more diverse, and engagement becomes more sustained. For educators and trainers, this suggests that the selection of theses should balance pedagogical objectives with the motivational potential of the topics. The value of selecting debate theses that inspire young participants was also observed by one of the authors of another POD manual (Kozaczewska 2024, 41) and confirmed by research showing that young people, through debating (not limited to POD), "apply their learning to real-world situations" (Akerman and Neale 2011, 16). Ethical framing need not dominate every debate, but even indirect incorporation of elements such as justice, responsibility, or fairness can help transform abstract issues into dilemmas that students are eager to explore.

7. Practical Implications for Debate Practice

The findings of this study highlight the importance of aligning debate theses with themes that adolescents find both relevant and ethically stimulating. When students perceive a direct link between a thesis and their own lives or generational concerns, the quality of deliberation improves noticeably: arguments become more developed, rhetorical strategies more diverse, and engagement more sustained. For educators and trainers, this suggests that the selection of theses should balance pedagogical goals with the motivational potential of topics. Ethical framing need not dominate every debate, but incorporating elements of justice, responsibility, or fairness can help transform abstract issues into dilemmas students are eager to explore.

The analysis demonstrates that teenagers instinctively seek ethical dimensions in almost every debate thesis, even when the topic appears to be strictly technical, historical, or cultural. The motifs of justice, responsibility for the future, freedom versus the collective good, and safety were the most recurrent, while solidarity, patriotism, and progress also shaped many discussions. A clear pattern emerged: fascination and rhetorical quality grow when theses resonate with adolescents' lived concerns and allow them to articulate moral dilemmas in tangible terms. Not all theses engage students equally – those linked to contemporary challenges such as technology, social justice, or identity tend to activate ethical reasoning more effectively and sustain motivation over time. It is worth remembering that in tournament contexts, motivation itself often plays a decisive role in determining debate quality (Gondek 2024).

These findings suggest that the pedagogical strength of debates lies not only in their format but in the careful selection of theses that align with teenagers' ethical curiosity. For educators and organizers, it is not enough to emphasize debate as an exercise in speaking and reasoning; what matters equally is to design theses that contain latent or explicit moral choices that students can identify with. From the theoretical perspective, this highlights the importance of rhetorical topoi as bridges between abstract theses and personal experience. In practice, debate design should consciously account for themes that young people recognize as ethically and culturally relevant.

It is also worth noting that while many POD theses are deliberative in character, a separate educational format known as *deliberative debate* exists and shares similar objectives. Both formats, though structurally distinct, aim to promote reflective civic participation through ethical reasoning. Their pedagogical goals may – and perhaps should – converge to integrate the strongest features of each approach, thereby enhancing the educational value of both (Kochan 2025).

Future research should extend this analysis by exploring how adolescents themselves perceive the ethical weight of different theses, perhaps through post-debate interviews or reflective essays following tournaments. Comparative studies across cultural contexts could also determine whether similar motifs dominate in other national debate traditions or whether local histories and discourses shape adolescents' ethical imagination differently. Another valuable direction would be to analyze how moderators and teachers frame debate theses in school settings and to what extent subtle variations in wording influence students' engagement with moral dilemmas. Deepening these inquiries would allow researchers to understand not only how teenagers construct arguments but also how debate topics can be tailored to include sustained ethical reflection and civic awareness.

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REASON, REALITY AND RHETORICAL TRUTH IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between rhetoric and truth in the context of the digital revolution and the so-called post-truth era. After clarifying the different meanings of "post-truth", it argues that contemporary challenges to truth are not merely epistemic but also ontological, insofar as digital technologies increasingly reshape our experience of reality itself. Drawing on alethic realism, the paper defends a realist conception of truth according to which statements are true insofar as they are grounded in reality, broadly understood. On this basis, it highlights the crucial role of Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction as a necessary condition for meaningful discourse, rhetorical persuasion and political life. Far from being indifferent to truth, rhetoric presupposes it as the orienting horizon of judgement and action, especially in political, juridical and communicative contexts affected by digital misinformation and artificial intelligence. In conclusion, the paper argues for restoring the unity between rhetoric, politics and ethics, proposing a virtue-ethical framework capable of addressing the techno-moral challenges posed by the digital age.

Keywords: *rhetoric, post-truth, fourth revolution, digital ontology, alethic realism*

1. Introduction

How can rhetoric still orient judgement towards truth in a digital infosphere that erodes the very distinction between reality and appearance? This question frames the central problem addressed in this paper, with particular attention to the claim to truth that, according to the interpretation proposed here, accompanies rhetorical persuasion. The argument proceeds as follows. First, the salient characteristics that define the present era, widely described as the post-truth era, are examined. The discussion then explores the possible interpretations of this expression and its relationship to the digital revolution, a phenomenon that is both prominent and consequential in the contemporary world. The subsequent section considers the repercussions of these transformations for rhetorical persuasion, critically addressing the role of truth within it. To this end, the paper adopts the theory of truth known as alethic realism and illustrates some of its central concepts. This makes it possible to focus on the value of the principle of non-contradiction in an Aristotelian sense and on its fundamental role in intersubjective communication and rhetorical persuasion. Finally, some conclusions are drawn by reconnecting rhetoric and ethics from the perspective of virtue ethics, which proves indispensable for addressing the issues that have emerged.

2. Post-truth and the fourth revolution

As is widely acknowledged, it has become commonplace to claim that we live in a post-truth era, a concept that can be used

> within rhetorical studies, [to accentuate] two meanings of the word. The first – of post-truth as a description of a specific period – was popularised in 2016 and referred to what was understood as the present state of politics and public debate in Western society [...]. In theoretical discussions, a second meaning of the term "post-truth" tends to surface; namely, post-truth not as a period but as an approach to the world characterised by a denial of truth. When understanding post-truth in this second way, certain connections between the post-truth concept and the rhetorical tradition come to the fore (Bengtson 2024, 206).

This connection is hardly accidental, since "the question of truth – or rather the lack thereof – has been haunting the discussion of rhetoric since its Greco-Roman beginning" (Bengtson 2024, 3). At the same time, for precisely this reason, "there is nothing new with the so-called 'post-truth era'" (D'Agostini 2019, 266), since the problem of truth is not reducible to "a generalised indifference to fact-checking in favour of emotions or biased beliefs" (D'Agostini 2019, 266).

The question therefore arises: what is genuinely new in the present situation, and why does it require renewed philosophical attention?

From a general perspective, it may be useful to emphasise that we may be living in a kind of "double post-truth" era. As Franca D'Agostini suggests, "we live in a post-post-truth era, as the problem of truth has become generally acknowledged: the notion of truth has gained a new and unexpected importance in our lives" (D'Agostini 2019, 267), especially in political and juridical contexts, which are themselves rhetorical domains. Since the end of the Second World War, the emergence of supranational organisations has fostered a global focus on core values. The right to truth has become widely recognised within transitional justice, referring to the shift from totalitarian regimes to democratic systems. Alongside the development of human rights, there has been a growing legal emphasis on uncovering state and institutional crimes. Moreover, the urgent need to address the uncontrolled spread of online misinformation has significantly influenced the practice

of justice, particularly regarding truth and authenticity. In other words, "humans' need for truth has received new attention and has been universally acknowledged" (D'Agostini 2019, 282).

This renewed attention to truth is closely connected to a broader process of the democratisation of social life, understood as "a phenomenon variously involving any societies, in the entire world: the possibility of participating, sharing, expressing and defending ideas and opinions, conceded to more and more people, ideally to anyone" (D'Agostini 2019, 282). This process has been made possible by the digital revolution, which shows that we are "alethic animals" (D'Agostini 2019, 282). This expression highlights the fact that "we need truth, and we are aware of our need for truth, just because we have an uncontrollable quantity of truths, falsities, partial truths and partial falsities everywhere, and everywhere we risk being deceived and deceiving ourselves" (D'Agostini 2019, 282).

In other words, the need for truth becomes particularly salient when truth is lacking. In public and rhetorical contexts, we invoke truth when certainty is absent or when we must assess the reliability of others' claims.

The search for reasons, in this sense, presupposes a commitment to truth.

Despite widespread criticism of the concept, it is therefore worth reaffirming that "the very term 'post-truth' puts the question of truth, or rather the lack thereof, at the centre of the post-truth debate" (Bengtson 2024, 3). Yet this occurs at a historical moment in which "language seems to lack reference to facts, truth, and reality" (McComiskey 2017, 40), as evidenced by the increasing difficulty of fact-checking in public communication. This difficulty is closely related to the roles of rhetoric and digital technologies. Rhetorical persuasion can undoubtedly be used to obscure reality and misrepresent facts, and contemporary artificial intelligence tools significantly amplify this risk. The utilization of state-of-the-art artificial intelligence tools serves to facilitate this process, and maybe, to a certain extent, it may decree the definitive crisis of fact-checking, which is overwhelmed by large language models and generative AI systems, as well as pre- and debunking, echo chambers, and so on (see Zollo et al. 2017). We cannot say whether or not this will be the case, nor can we address it here, but we believe that, for the reasons we will explain, none of this overshadows the question of truth; rather, it makes it even more urgent as it is becoming increasingly difficult to ascertain.

These dynamics contribute to a situation in which it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish what is real, even when dealing with highly credible documents and images. As a result, scholars have argued that traditional fact-checking must be complemented by argument-checking aimed at evaluating the quality and validity of reasoning (see Lancar 2023).

While these issues cannot be explored in detail here, they highlight a paradoxical condition: the digital revolution intensifies our need for truth while simultaneously eroding our access to reality.

This paradox becomes even clearer when considered in light of what has been called the "fourth revolution", which, among other things, is giving rise to a new ontology through a massive transition from the analogue to the digital. "ICTs are transforming the very nature of, and hence what we mean by, reality, by transforming it into an infosphere" (Floridi 2014, 40). We are increasingly living "onlife", as "with interfaces becoming progressively less visible, the threshold between here (analogue, carbon-based, offline) and there (digital, silicon-based, online) is fast becoming blurred" (Floridi 2014, 43).

According to Floridi, these changes require a new ontology. Our traditional materialist ontology is challenged by the new entities that populate the infosphere, which "is not a virtual environment

supported by a genuinely 'material' world. Rather, it will be the world itself that will be increasingly understood informationally, as an expression of the infospheres" (Floridi 2014, 50). "Finally, the criterion for existence [...] is also changing [...] to be is to be interactable" (Floridi 2014, 53). In such a context, both objects and subjects undergo transformation, and identity itself becomes unstable.

In this context, it becomes plausible to speak of a progressive loss of reality. As Han observes, "the digital order de-reifies the world by informatizing it [...] We are today experiencing the transition from the age of things to the age of non-things. Information, rather than things, determines the lifeworld" (Han 2022, 2). In the pre-digital world, we believed that information (basically, statements on certain state-of-the-world) illuminated the world. But now we should rather say that

> information by itself does not illuminate the world. It can even have the opposite effect. From a certain point onwards, information does not inform – it deforms. [...] The rapid advance of informational entropy, that is, of informational chaos, pushes up into a post-factual society. The distinction between true and false is erased (Han 2022, 6).

The question thus becomes unavoidable: how can truth be preserved when reality itself appears increasingly elusive?

3. Some implications for rhetoric

Against this background, one conclusion can already be drawn: rhetoric is not indifferent to truth. On the contrary, rhetorical practices are precisely those contexts in which the need for truth becomes most acute, because they are inseparable from power – specifically, the power of words and political influence. The same discourse that enables the affirmation of truth can also manipulate it.

It might be objected that truth would be less necessary outside social contexts, for instance, in hypothetical situations of complete isolation. Yet even such thought experiments reveal its indispensability. Consider the case of an individual stranded on a desert island: believing that a fruit is edible does not make it so. The painful experience of error reveals the need for truth as a guide for action and self-understanding. From basic survival decisions to complex political choices, truth functions as an orienting principle.

Moreover, rhetoric is not limited to interpersonal persuasion. Individuals also engage in self-persuasion, questioning and evaluating their own beliefs through internal dialogue (Arendt 2003). We engage in self-dialogue, creating, through mental language, an image – and therefore a reality – of a certain kind, which we are able to experience and towards which we are able to express evaluations, that is, statements that may be true or false. This reflective activity presupposes the distinction between true and false and confirms that rhetorical and alethic dimensions are deeply intertwined. Human beings are, as Aristotle famously argued, *zoon politikon*: political and linguistic animals endowed with *logos*, the capacity to articulate what is just and unjust, expedient and inexpedient (for a deeper analysis of this conception, see Puppo 2024). The notion of being alethic animals is connected to this phenomenon, without one aspect preceding the other. The linguistic and political dimensions are co-original (Heidegger 2009), as the alethic dimension is.

Rhetoric, therefore, is first and foremost this very human way of being: our way of being *zoon politikon*. From this perspective, truth is not an object that we need to find. Rather, it is what we need when we discuss someone else's – or even our own – opinion, when someone, or even we ourselves, tell how things stand, and we seek to understand whether what is said is true or not.

We need truth when we ask how things stand, primarily together with others, aware that, as Aristotle observed, we possess *logos* because we persuade and are persuaded, and aware that we can be mistaken, since we can also be persuaded of falsehood.

In this sense, rhetoric expresses a fundamental mode of human existence rather than a mere technique. Truth, accordingly, is not an object to be possessed but a relation between discourse and reality (Agazzi 2014). As classical formulations suggest, "true is the discourse that says how things stand" (Plato, *Cratylus*, 385c) or, as Aristotle states, "falsehood consists in saying of that which is that it is not, or of that which is not that it is; truth consists in saying of that which is that it is, or of that which is not that it is not" (Arist., *Metaph.* IV, 7, 1011b26).

This is a form of realism (though not of the correspondence theory[1]); more precisely, it refers to the theory of truth known as alethic realism, first advanced by Alston (1996) and subsequently developed, among others, by Franca D'Agostini. Its main principle states "that if 'p' is true, then there must be something that makes it true. The theory is therefore based on the very general and unspecified idea that 'some existent, some portion of reality' makes a proposition true" (D'Agostini 2019, 275). In this case, a very broad concept of reality is assumed, in the name of an ontological pluralism that does not require reference only to hard facts (Puppo 2018; Puppo 2024).

This conception of truth is deliberately minimal and "sufficiently bromidic to be acceptable to common sense" (D'Agostini 2019, 275). Its importance lies in the fact that it operates across diverse domains – law, politics, science and everyday communication – providing a shared framework for evaluating claims. Despite the multiplicity of statements that can be made (and consequently a plurality of verification methods), the fundamental structure of truth remains constant and corresponds to the model mentioned above: a statement is true insofar as it conveys how things are. This is the "conceptual function of truth and when it is mentioned or thought, what people normally think and mean is the reference to things (*ta onta*)" (D'Agostini 2019, 275), even though "being is said in many ways" (Arist., *Metaph.* 1003a 34).

The relationship between language and reality thus constitutes the space in which the truth value of discourse is at stake. When the objectivity of reality is undermined, truth itself begins to erode, eventually giving way to forms of relativism that risk engulfing reality rather than merely interpreting it. This condition is not unprecedented. As noted earlier, similar dynamics of "loss of reality" can be traced back to the Sophists, for whom man, rather than reality, was taken as the measure of all things. It is therefore significant to recall Aristotle's response to this drift, especially in light of the fact that today the role of "measure" appears to be shifting not from reality to the individual, but from the individual to digital technologies. This issue deserves careful consideration, since the digital revolution – and the consequent destabilisation of traditional ontological categories – has also generated a crisis of responsible persuasion. Increasingly, the formation of opinions

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[1] "The important point that needs to be stressed now is that there is a certain primacy of realism, as far as T[ruth] is concerned, but it does not seem to imply all the features we normally ascribe to the notion of 'correspondence'. Actually, another factor of misunderstanding is that the concept T has been taken as implying a conception of reality informed by the idea of language 'mirroring' reality or facts, whereby 'real' is mainly intended as what is graspable by perceptual means, and/or facts are only static facts and not events, and/or the only world of facts is the natural world, and similar ideas. In fact, our use of the concept of truth does not seem to imply any of these theses. [...] The realism [...] (and of the ancient T-theory) does not involve the main distinctive features of correspondence: it does not imply any isomorphism of reality and language, or any one-one relation between them either; it does not imply any 'compositional-atomistic' conception of reality, or any symmetric relation language-world" (D'Agostini 2019, 274–275). A more extensive discussion of the realism under consideration here is presented by D'Agostini 2013. Some aspects of the issue can also be explored in greater depth in the more recent De Caro 2020.

is delegated to large language models and generative AI systems, which now play a pervasive role in shaping how reality is perceived and interpreted. For many, access to the world no longer occurs primarily through direct experience but through the screens of mobile phones, tablets and computers – devices that risk functioning not merely as windows onto reality, but as substitutes for reality itself.

4. Brief notes on the role of the principle of non-contradiction

It was precisely in defence of reality and truth that Aristotle fought, developing his metaphysical conception of the principle of non-contradiction, for which he "fought [...] not as one fights for one's theoretical ideas, which may be right but are emotionally colourless, but as one fights for vital goods" (Łukasiewicz 2006, 131; my translation). Even critics such as Łukasiewicz acknowledged its fundamental practical and ethical value, describing it as "the only weapon against errors and lies" (Łukasiewicz 2006, 140; my translation).

Without the principle of non-contradiction, affirmation and negation could coexist without exclusion, making it impossible to expose falsehood or to convey how things actually are. Every act of speaking or thinking involves reference and determination: to say something is necessarily to distinguish it from what it is not. If this distinction collapses, discourse itself loses meaning. Aristotle's defence of this principle was deemed necessary because those

> were periods of significant social dissolution in Greece, characterised by national discord and pervasive political corruption at the hands of Philip of Macedon [...]. In that challenging political juncture, the Sophists introduced elements of intellectual and moral dissolution. The attack was of a severity that far surpassed that of Macedonian rule; by dismantling the tenets of reason, the attackers effectively undermined the very foundations of both social life and individual existence (Łukasiewicz 2006, 130; my translation).

Aristotle's philosophical edifice was erected in defence of this principle, safeguarding the principle of non-contradiction, knowledge and the social nature of human beings as *zoon politikon*. For Aristotle, as is well known, the principle of non-contradiction cannot be denied (e.g. Puppo 2018; 2024): its undeniability depends on its ontological value. This is demonstrated by the fact that every discourse or thought is characterised by the act of designating, that is, by saying or thinking something. This "something", in order to be precisely that which is said or thought and nothing else, must be determined with respect to everything else and therefore distinguished from it. The link established through the act of designating between language and reality must be non-contradictory. Otherwise, at best, something else would be said or thought; at worst, nothing meaningful would be said or thought. In the absence of this condition, it would be impossible to distinguish one thing from another. "And we thus get the doctrine of Anaxagoras, that all things are mixed together; so that nothing really exists" (Arist., *Metaph.* 1007b).

This line of reflection retains its full theoretical relevance. Thought and discourse are intrinsically intentional and referential: whenever we think, speak or act, we relate to something that is taken to be the case. Even if reality undergoes profound transformations in its ontological articulation, this referential structure cannot be suspended without undermining the very possibility of meaning. The issue, therefore, does not concern the disappearance of reality as such, but the erosion of a shared ontological horizon. Reality increasingly presents itself as fragmented and discretised, in a manner analogous to digital images composed of pixels: internally discontinuous yet phenomenologically seamless.

Digital post-truth dynamics function as a practical denial of the principle of non-contradiction. Under these conditions, reality is no longer experienced as a common framework within which claims can be evaluated as true or false, but as a plurality of relative and self-enclosed constructions, each apparently capable of coexisting with the others (as in echo chambers and self-confirmation phenomena). Such a scenario, however, is incompatible with the logic of public reason and collective decision-making, which presuppose a minimally shared world to which rhetorical persuasion can appeal. Seen in this light, the contrast with the sophistic condition becomes sharper. In the classical context, the loss of objectivity consisted in the substitution of reality with a persuasive narrative that still functioned as a unifying horizon for the community. In the contemporary digital condition, by contrast, the risk lies in the disintegration of any common horizon into a multiplicity of singular, non-communicating ontological perspectives, within which persuasion no longer orients judgement but merely reinforces isolation.

5. Conclusion

This paper has argued that contemporary challenges to truth are characterised by a dual movement: a distancing from truth and a distancing from reality. These movements are distinct yet deeply interconnected, as illustrated by the framework of alethic realism, which links the truth of discourse to its grounding in reality. Against this background, the analysis has highlighted the role of rhetoric as a practice oriented towards judgement rather than mere effect and has emphasised the enduring relevance of the principle of non-contradiction.

This complexity must also be borne in mind when considering another aspect. The Aristotelian view, based on the anthropological concept of *zoon politikon*, links politics with rhetoric (e.g. Tessitore 1996) but also with ethics (Herrick 1992; Johnstone 1980; Rowland and Womack 1985), a triad that has been lost over time – according to Arendt (2003), it definitively disappeared with Kant, who was also responsible for the birth of moral philosophy in the strict sense. However, the time has come to restore this fundamental unity, particularly in light of the complex technological phenomena we are currently experiencing. We have previously seen, in discussing the democratisation of social life, the link that exists between politics, rhetoric, and technology. At the same time, what unites technology and ethics is clear: they are

> connected because technology invites or affords specific patterns of thought, behaviour, and valuing; it opens up new possibilities for human action and forecloses or obscures others. [...] Today's technologies open their own new social and moral possibilities for action. [...] Thus, 21st-century decisions about how to live well –that is, about ethics – are not simply moral choices. They are technomoral choices, for they depend on the evolving affordances of the technological systems that we rely upon to support and mediate our lives in ways and to degrees never before witnessed (Vallor 2018, 2).

Of course, the triad referred to above includes the ethical dimension in relation to the Aristotelian model of virtue ethics, which might appear ill-suited to addressing issues related to technological innovation. However, this is not the case, and in fact "with emerging technologies, a virtue ethics approach will generally be more useful than one that relies upon consequentialist or deontological principles" (Vallor 2018, 26). We cannot go into detail here about the different ways in which the main concepts of virtue ethics – particularly *phronesis*, which is also central in the rhetorical-legal context (Tomasi 2024; Mangini 2025) – can be applied to emerging technologies (Vallor 2018; Holmes and Colton 2018).

From this point of view, the issues discussed in this article can hardly be fruitfully addressed without adequate ethical reflection. Communication and rhetorical persuasion in political contexts are never neutral, just as the use of new technologies is not. Adequate reflection on these issues therefore necessarily requires an ethical discussion, which can only be postponed to future research.

In conclusion, this paper has examined the relationship between rhetoric and truth in the context of the digital revolution and the so-called post-truth era, suggesting that contemporary challenges to truth are not merely epistemic but also ontological in nature. Against this background, three interconnected considerations emerge that may serve as a basis for further inquiry.

First, the analysis indicates that rhetorical persuasion presupposes a minimal commitment to the principle of non-contradiction. When this commitment weakens, persuasion risks being reduced to the production of effects or stimuli rather than functioning as a practice oriented towards shared judgement and understanding.

Second, the pervasive role of digital technologies in shaping communicative environments suggests that digital rhetoric cannot be adequately addressed solely through rules or procedural constraints alone. Instead, it calls for a virtue-ethical perspective capable of accounting for responsible judgement in contexts characterised by technological complexity, opacity, and rapid transformation.

Finally, the paper proposes reconsidering the relationship between rhetoric and truth from a realist perspective. Rather than opposing truth to rhetorical practice, truth may be understood as its enabling condition: the orienting horizon that allows persuasion to retain its political and ethical significance, particularly in juridical and public contexts increasingly affected by digital misinformation and artificial intelligence.

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RHETORIC AND LAW: AN INSIGHT INTO THE SCHOLASTIC DOCTRINE OF LEGAL GOVERNMENT

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Abstract

Ancient scholasticism, from the Middle Ages to the height of the modern age, delivers us a conception of legal government that, despite significant internal differences, presents a unified underlying structure. One aspect, however, tends today to be overlooked: the rhetorical character of this structure, which harmoniously fits within an anthropological and ethical conception that has its theoretical paradigm in Aristotelian thought. The relationship between legislator and citizens, centered on legal discourse, is articulated at various interconnected levels, in which the three traditional πίστεις of rhetoric can easily be recognized. At first glance, it is possible to say that the law influences the conduct of citizens at the same time through the threat of punishment, which inclines to fear; through its directive force, which compels practical judgment about the action to be performed; and, finally, through its authority, which inclines the will to respect, ultimately aiming at generating the civic virtue of justice. This paper aims to highlight and deepen this rhetorical structure, showing its fruitfulness for contemporary legal theory.

Keywords: *rhetoric, law, government, scholasticism, virtues, morality*

1. Introduction

The theme of this paper is the relationship between rhetoric and law from a scholastic perspective. More precisely, our intent is to reconstruct scholastic doctrine with particular reference to the relationship of legal government, in order to show how it is possible to find a rhetorical character in this conceptual structure.

Before getting into the matter, however, it is worth clarifying what we mean when we talk about scholasticism, since it is actually a concept that may seem simple at first glance but, when examined in depth, proves to be quite complex. Furthermore, it is not possible to understand the scholastic doctrine of legal government without briefly mentioning the fundamental concepts and structure of scholastic practical philosophy in general. Therefore, our discourse will be divided into the following three parts: first, we will outline the meaning of scholasticism that will be used in this presentation, distinguishing it from other meanings which represent some common assumptions that, nevertheless, raise some concerns; secondly, we will provide an overview of the fundamental concepts of scholastic practical philosophy and the relationship of legal government therein involved; thirdly, we will attempt to highlight the rhetorical nature of this relationship, emphasizing the perspectives, questions, and risks that such a line of research must address.

2. What is scholasticism?

To clarify what we mean by scholasticism, it is best to proceed by exclusion, examining some common meanings that, while certainly true in some respects, are nevertheless somewhat reductive overall[1].

Firstly, by scholasticism we do not mean medieval thought or, more precisely, the school of thought whose greatest exponent was Thomas Aquinas (Thomism). This is, for example, the perspective that had the greatest following in neo-scholasticism, a movement spanning the late 19th and early 20th centuries, exemplified by an important Belgian neo-scholastic historian, Maurice De Wulf (Wulf 1934).

At the same time, when we speak of scholasticism, we do not simply mean a theological method, as believed, for example, by another important historian, Martin Grabmann (Grabmann 1980), who identifies scholasticism with a method of thinking that, in the field of theology, combines theological faith and philosophical reason.

Although both of these perspectives undoubtedly capture important points of truth, we believe they have certain limitations.

Firstly, it is certainly true that scholasticism originated in the Middle Ages, thanks to the spread and establishment in young Europe of specific institutions for the transmission of knowledge, in particular universities. At the same time, however, scholasticism cannot be confined to the medieval period of European culture, nor to the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas alone. Its existence seems to follow the development of the university itself, together with similar educational institutions (e.g., colleges), extending peacefully throughout much of European cultural history at least until the end of the 18th century. Thus, in the field of philosophy, we are used to speak of 18th-century

[1] In this regard, we will mainly follow the reconstruction of the concept of scholasticism developed by the historian of philosophy Quinto (2001). This in-depth study, conducted using a lexicographical method, traces some of the main 'events' of the concept of 'scholasticism' and related terms, from the first medieval attestations to the 18th century, before comparing some widespread definitions and providing a new and more comprehensive one.

German scholasticism, emblematically represented by Christian Wolff, or of 16th- and 17th-century Hispanic scholasticism[2].

Secondly, it is undoubtedly true that for centuries theology has been the cornerstone of intellectual development in European educational institutions. Moreover, together with jurisprudence, as we will see shortly, it could be said to constitute the paradigmatic academic discipline precisely because of the relationship between faith and reason that it puts into practice, even before theorizing it. However, scholasticism cannot be reduced to theology, given that the same characteristics that seem to characterize this discipline are found in all university faculties, starting with law: the application of reason to the understanding of authoritative texts (*interpretatio*), which progresses in the questioning of dubious propositions (*disputatio*) and is accomplished in the elaboration of an organic and unified body of knowledge (*summa*).

It seems to us, then, that scholasticism stands out in European history as *the institution* or *common ground* for a multitude of peoples who, despite being separated by time and increasingly marked differences, are *involved in it,* receiving the virtue of speaking, disputing, and even arguing among themselves about every area of knowledge, giving rise to a flourishing *community* of dialogue[3]. The secret of this involvement lies not so much in the fact that only in this place it was transmitted the *lingua communis,* the Latin, but in the peculiar *teaching* practiced there, based *on listening to the words of authority and doctors.* The engaging *power* of the school, in other terms, could be said to be the power of the word unleashed to its fullest potential: the word read, interpreted, repeated, discovered (*inventio*), and determined (*judicium*). In short, the *word commented on (*from the Latin *cum- meditare*), that is to say, listened to and meditated upon in order to draw from it the essential nourishment for *one's own* speech[4]. The main fruit of the work of this educational institution is an extraordinary *continuity* of thought and language, capable of challenging the centuries, which in each discipline takes the name of *doctrine*.

With specific regard to practical philosophy, which we intend to deal with here, it is precisely to the existence of such a doctrine that authors such as J. Ritter (Ritter 1983) and G. Bien (Bien 1985), leading exponents of the 20th-century movement for the rehabilitation of practical philosophy together with G. Gadamer, refer to when they point out that from the Middle Ages to the beginning of the 19th century European knowledge has been characterized by a fundamentally common language together with a common core of terms and conceptual structures constituting a sort of grammar of philosophical discourse, whose main source was represented by the thought of Aristotle.

All this considered, therefore, our intention will be to reconstruct the scholastic doctrine in practical philosophy, with specific reference to the relationship of legal government, in order to show how it is possible to find a rhetorical character in this conceptual structure[5].

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2 On second scholasticism more generally, see Ramis-Barceló 2024.

3 Quinto (2001) highlights this inseparable connection between educational institutions and scholasticism, also referring to the similar perspective of De Rijk (1985) and Wieland (1981).

4 As is well known, commentary, together with *quaestiones disputatae*, is the ancient school's favorite literary genre. The centrality of the word can be seen from the very beginning of the school curriculum, represented by the *artes sermocinales* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric). These arts would go on to form the *studia humanitatis* in the humanistic age (cf. Manzin 1994).

5 On the general importance of rhetoric for European culture during the central centuries of scholasticism cf. Fumaroli 1980.

Before beginning, one last important clarification is needed. Since we inevitably had to base our reconstruction on certain authors, we focused on some of the most representative ones: Thomas Aquinas, Samuel Pufendorf, Christian Thomasius, Christian Wolff, and, despite the important limits we will point out, Immanuel Kant, who prefaces his treatise on law and virtue with a clearly scholastic *philosophia practica universalis*[6]. The preferred criterion in the selection of these thinkers, in addition to the fact that they cover a period of about five centuries, is that they were authors of textbooks, i.e., treatises intended for educational (scholastic) purposes and, as such, aimed primarily at providing an overview of moral discipline in its fundamental concepts and structure (a doctrine, in fact). It is no coincidence, however, that with the exception of Thomas Aquinas, the various authors considered are concentrated in the Germanic area between the 17th and 18th centuries: it is in this context, starting with Pufendorf, that a 'canon' of the discipline, strictly philosophical[7], emerges for the first time and in the most organic way, as will be followed in schools at least until the mid-19th century.

Given this alert, it should also be noted that the idea of a common doctrine among these authors does not imply that they say the same things: their thought develops in very different and sometimes incompatible directions. In this sense, scholasticism should not be confused with any particular school, but rather identified with a certain doctrinal horizon within which a plurality of different schools has been defined over time. Furthermore, our intention is not so much exegetical-philological but only aimed at showing how the *mindset* underlying these thoughts is related to rhetoric in a way that is not usually highlighted. Due to space limitations, we will limit ourselves to an essential reconstruction of a common theoretical paradigm and then analyze its implications in rhetorical terms.

3. Scholastic practical philosophy and the relationship of legal government: an essential framework

At the heart of scholastic practical philosophy lies the concept of human action (*actio*), i.e., the specific action of man[8]. This action is determined by two different competing *principles*.

On the one hand, there is the *intrinsic* principle represented by the agent himself, which moves by his own power. More precisely, this drive to act is given by two operating principles disposed on different levels. First of all, we have the human faculties (*facultas* or *potestas*), mainly passions, intellect, and will, which do not move separately but are closely intertwined. Only an action that proceeds from these faculties, and above all from the intellect and the will, can be said to be a specifically human action, since intellect and will distinguish man from every other animal[9].

6 To facilitate comparison, the references to the works of these authors that we will provide do not follow the edition we consulted (for which, see the bibliography below), almost always in Italian, but the internal and standard structure of the works themselves, analytically divided into parts, books, sections, chapters, paragraphs or questions and articles.

7 In this sense, for example, we have chosen not to consider authors such as Francisco Suárez, Hugo Grotius, or Thomas Hobbes, whose philosophical and moral treatises, although they were highly influential precedents, focus mainly on certain areas of the discipline. Even Thomas Aquinas' moral reflection is theological in nature, although it follows Aristotle's philosophical approach of the Nicomachean Ethics in many respects.

8 Thomas Aquinas, S.*Th. I-IIae,* q. 6 (*proemium)*; Pufendorf, L.I, V, 1-3; Thomasius, L.I, I, 53-72; Wolff, L.I, I, 1-7.

9 Thomas Aquinas, S.*Th. I-IIae,* q. 49 (*proemium)*; Pufendorf, L.I, III-IV; Thomasius, L.I, I, 5-6; Wolff, L.I, I, 16-34, where the defects of rectitude in human action are analytically reviewed and distinguished on the basis of the agent's failure to use their intellect or will; Kant, pp. 11-15 (Introduction to the Metaphysics of Morals, I).

Thanks to the adequate and continuous exercise of these faculties, then, there arises the other intrinsic operating principle of action: *human virtues* (*virtus*), which constitute stable *dispositions* to good action, bringing man increasingly closer to attainable perfection[10]. Virtues can be considered an intensification and consolidation of faculties (the term "virtue" derives from the Latin *vis,* meaning 'strength'), therefore there is a direct correspondence between virtues and faculties. In particular, virtues are traditionally distinguished in the *dianoetic* virtues (wisdom, intellect, science, prudence, and art), which consolidate the intellectual faculty, and the *ethical* virtues, which consolidate the appetitive faculties, namely the will (justice) and the passions (fortitude and temperance). Prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance constitute, as is well known, the four cardinal virtues, that is to say, the virtues around which the entire practical life of man revolves[11].

On the other hand, we have the *law*, which exerts a certain pressure on the agent from *outside*, prompting him to act. In a mirror-like way, the law is first and foremost the act in which the power of governors (*potestas legis* or *imperium*) is expressed, while the exercise or expression of this power is called the force of law (*vis legis*)[12]. This force has a *dispositive* nature (we usually refer to legal requirements as dispositions of law): it consists in disposing the agent in a certain way, inclining him or her to perform the action in accordance with the law. The main dispositions to legal action, as direct effect of the force of law, are the obligations (*obligatio*) and the subjective rights (*jus*)[13], which in this perspective we could also call "*cardinal legal dispositions*".

What we need to understand, therefore, is how these two principles of action intertwine and combine with each other or, in other words, how the law relates from the outside to the faculties and dispositions that drive man from within to ensure that he performs actions that are legally binding. To understand all this, it is necessary to comprehend how the relationship of legal government is structured and, therefore, how the agent relates to the force of law.

Turning, therefore, to the structure of the relationship of legal government, we must first consider this relationship from the point of view of the governed. They find themselves in a peculiar position before the governors, which is called *subjection* (*subjectio*)[14]. Now, we must consider that both the force of law and the subjection of the agent articulate themselves in different forms, between which there is a certain correspondence.

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10 Thomas Aquinas, S.*Th. I-IIae,* q. 49, a. 1; Pufendorf, L.I, IV, 6, where he states the futility of a detailed review of individual virtues since the moral philosophy of the time had already spread widely on the point, almost reducing the treatment of the entire discipline to a list of virtues; Kant, pp. 227-230 (Introduction to the Doctrine of Virtue, I).

11 Aquinas, S.*Th. II-IIae* (*proemium)*.

12 Aquinas, S.*Th. I-IIe,* q. 90 (*proemium)* and q. 96; Pufendorf, L.I, VI, 4, 9-10; Thomasius, L.I, IV, 31-54 (who distinguishes within the law the two forms of *consilium* and command in strict sense) and V, 1-6; Wolff, L.I, II, 39. Kant, 27-30, (Intr. to the Metaphysics of Morals, IV), who, as is well known, while admitting that moral law is the non-subjective principle of the agent's action, distinguishes within it between ethical law and legal law, depending on whether it combines the representation of duty with an internal motive (virtue or holiness) or an external motive (coercion or reward). In this way, external or legal law, while binding in conscience, does not constitute a *force* that influences the will, moving the agent only from the outside, which will open up a sort of gap between the strictly ethical level and the law as traditionally understood, even though preserving the comprehensive moral framework.

13 Pufendorf, L.I, I, 17-21; Thomasius, L.I, IV, 56-61 and V, 7-9. Wolff, L.I, II, 37 and 44-46.

14 Aquinas, S.*Th. I-IIae,* q. 96, a. 5; Pufendorf, L.VII, II, 8; This applies to all scholastic authors, including so-called contractualists such as Samuel Pufendorf, who base legislative power on a pact between individuals. This pact, indeed, is known as *pactum subjectionis* and has the effect for citizens to assume a position of subjection before the power that is going to be established (cf. Palladini (2019)).

Thus, firstly, the force of law manifests itself as a promise of *punishment* (*penalty*) in the event of transgression or *a reward* (*premium*) in the event of compliance with it, which have the effect of producing in the agent, respectively, the *fear* of being punished and the *hope* of being rewarded, namely two passions of opposite sign[15].

Secondly, the content of the law as such exerts its own influence on the agent, since the latter perceives this content as binding on his practical judgment. Now, practical judgment bound by law is called *conscience* (*conscientia*), which is understood as the application of the law to the concrete practical case[16]. In this sense, it can be said that the law of civil government obliges in conscience[17].

Finally, we see how the force of law also manifests itself in a more strictly subjective sense, which is related to the authority of the legislator, to which corresponds in the subject an attitude especially involving the faculty of will and known as *respect* (*reverentia/observantia*)[18]. This is a very peculiar attitude of the will consisting in esteeming and recognizing the law as something that has ethical value in itself and, therefore, requires voluntary obedience (*oboedientia*)[19].

4. The rhetorical character of the relationship of legal government

Before the picture just outlined, it seems possible to make some observations which, while taking us beyond the formulas expressly used by scholastic authors, seem to bring out in a rather recognizable way at the heart of the dynamics of human action and legal government a properly rhetorical character.

Firstly, we can observe how the effects produced by the force of law in the agent involve all three types of human faculties described above. Fear and hope, in fact, are passions; conscience, as we have said, concerns practical reasoning and the judgment of action that is achieved through it; finally, respect for the law constitutes a specific attitude of the will. We can therefore see how the relationship of legal government operates at three levels: *pathos*, *logos* and *ethos.* From a static point of view, therefore, it is not difficult to glimpse in this structure the three *πίστεις* of classical rhetoric[20]. It is worth remembering, moreover, that fear is one of the main passions analyzed by Aristotle as an effect of the rhetor's speech in the second book of his *Rhetoric*[21].

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15 Aquinas, S.*Th. I-IIae,* q. 95, a. 1; Pufendorf, L.I, VI, 14 (who also considers only the threatened punishment, with the fear that follows it, to be a truly essential part of the law, and not the reward); Thomasius, L.I, IV, 65-69; Wolff, L.III, S.II, V, 1070.

16 Aquinas, S.*Th. I,* q. 79, a. 13; Pufendorf, L.I, III, 4-9; Thomasius, L.I, IV, 14-30 (who, however, contrasts the importance traditionally attributed to individual conscience in regulating human action); Kant, pp. 252-253 and 299-301 (Ethics, P.I, L.I, C.II, S.II).

17 This is a point of great importance that all scholastic authors agree on, but which is not always given adequate emphasis: Aquinas, *S.Th. I-IIae,* q. 96, a. 4; Pufendorf, L.I, VI, 5 and 10 (where, on the basis of this criterion, obligation is distinguished from mere coercion);

18 Aquinas, S.*Th. II-IIae,* q. 102; Pufendorf, L.I, VI, 9; Thomasius, L.I, VI, 3-5; Kant, p. 255 (Introduction to the Doctrine of Virtue, XII, D.) and pp. 333-341 (Ethics, P.II, C.I, S.II) , where respect for the law takes on central importance and becomes the foundation for universal respect among men.

19 Aquinas, S.*Th. II-IIae,* q. 104, according to whom obedience is an integral part of the virtue of observance; Thomasius, L.I, VI, 3-5; Wolff, L.III, S.II, V, 1079.

20 For a legal interpretation and update of classical rhetoric, which we follow, see Puppo 2023; Manzin 2014; Tomasi 2020.

21 Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1382a20-1383b10. For a reconstruction of Aristotelian rhetoric, see Piazza 2008.

But there is another very important aspect to note, namely the fact that in this doctrine of the relationship of legal government, these three dimensions are not separate compartments but combine and intertwine in a unified dynamic. In this regard, we will limit ourselves to two examples that seem to be particularly significant and emblematic: first, the fear and hope induced by the promise of punishment or reward are not only effects that incline the agent to act in accordance with the law, but also have an impact on the consideration of the content of the law. These passions, in fact, *temper* and moderate the subject's excessive emotional inclinations towards different actions and thus allow the intellectual sphere and then the volitional sphere to come into play more effectively[22]. Another, even more eloquent example is the effect that the dimension *of ethos* generates on the level of *pathos:* when the agent adopts an attitude of respect for the authority of the legislator, a further form of fear arises within the agent, which is no longer the fear of punishment, but the so-called *timor reverentialis*, i.e., the fear of offending the authority with one's own transgression[23].

All this, in our opinion, allows us to glimpse a rhetorical character within this complex and articulated dynamic: in other terms, we can see how at the heart of this relationship, ultimately, there is a need for *persuasion*. The legislator does not simply want to compel agents to act in accordance with the law, but wants them to be persuaded and thereby actively adhere to the prescribed action. It must be admitted that the idea of placing persuasion at the center, although it is possible to find references to the expression "*persuasio*" in scholastic literature about law[24], is not sufficiently attested in the authors that we have briefly reviewed; however, it seems we still have sufficient elements to develop the doctrine examined in this direction.

Being able to explain the relationship of legal government in rhetorical terms could offer important clarifications that shed light on a further aspect that recurs in scholastic authors and concerns the relationship between law and morality.

According to a fundamental principle of scholastic legal doctrine, law has *moral* value. More precisely, applying this principle to the categories of practical philosophy that we saw at the beginning, this principle means that the disposition of law is a force that instills in the agent those dispositions to act that are virtues, in particular the virtue of social justice[25]. In other words, we could say from this perspective that law performs an act of justification.

Obviously, there are very different ways in which this function can be conceived, and it is exactly here where rhetoric could come into play to tell us something about this dynamic. Rhetoric, in fact,

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22 Aquinas, S.Th., I-II, q. 95, a. 1, co.; this dynamic is subject of an in-depth analysis in Thomasius, L.I, IV, 72-77, regarding the use of commands or precepts (covered by penalties and rewards) as a means of elevating governed to a level where mere *consilium* is sufficient, that is, the prescription that appeals first and foremost to the agent's reason (cf. Dioni 2009).

23 Quinto (1998), which shows how, in the context of European scholasticism, a very thorough level of analysis will be achieved on this point, distinguishing up to seven different types of fear, fundamentally resolved in the distinction between *timor servilis* (typical of a servant towards his master) and *timor filialis* (typical of a child towards his parents), which differs from the former precisely because it relies on esteem and not on the risk of punishment.

24 In the context of law, it is usually associated with the form of *consilium* (e.g., Thomasius, L.I, IV, 55), to distinguish an influence focused on the convenience of the proposed action and not on the threat of punishment. As regards Thomas Aquinas, cf. Hibbs 1990.

25 That the purpose of law is to make citizens virtuous and to preside over the common good is clearly attested to in Aquinas, *S.Th.,* I-II, q. 92; Pufendorf, L.VII, IX, 3-4; Wolff, L.III, S.II, V, 1068-1073. With regard to Thomasius, see Dioni 2009; in Kant, on the other hand, it is only ethical law that presides over virtue, not legal law, which, as has been said, also has a purely moral purpose in any case.

is characterized by an approach to communication dynamics that goes beyond the mere objective presentation of the message's content, focusing on the subjects: both the person who sends the message and those who receive it. In this sense, rhetoric takes into account the influence that law exerts not simply on the action, but on the agent himself, which we have said to be the intrinsic principle of human action. It therefore allows us to view the law as an activity that is not limited to imposing a prescription from outside to be followed regardless of one's subjective state, but rather involves the subject in all his faculties, instilling in him *from within* the subjective inclination to act. In essence, the law reveals itself to be an intrinsic aid to the agents, strengthening their faculties from within, contributing in this way to the formation of human virtues, especially those concerning social life.

Everything that has been said so far would obviously require much further study and, above all, would require each individual author to be considered separately. With a view to such further study, we believe it would be useful to raise some questions and point out some risks that such a perspective must address.

Firstly, it is clear that a relationship such as that of government is asymmetrical, with the two parties not on the same level. But what does this mean? Are the categories commonly used to understand rhetorical relationships and communications adequate, or is there a need to rethink them and conceive of this form of rhetorical interaction as a special one?

The second question, which is theoretical but also clearly very practical, deals with a fundamental aspect of human action: the element of freedom. In the same scholastic perspective, as we have seen, human action is characterized by freedom understood as being master (*dominus)* of one's own actions. But how can such an aspect of freedom be reconciled with the fact that the intrinsic force of the agent is in some way infused from outside by the force of law?

A final risk, perhaps the easiest to perceive on a practical level, is that when we interpret the relationship with the law in rhetorical terms, we open up the scenario and possibility of a force of law that is not rhetorical but sophistical, that is to say, a corruption of government even worse than that of open abuse and violence because much more subtle. This requires us to commit ourselves to seeking limits to power that are as clear and precise as possible.

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A MASS MEDIUM AND ITS AMBIGUOUS MESSAGE: ISOCRATES'S LITERATE RHETORIC

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Abstract

No less revolutionary than the contemporary transition into a digital age, the discipline of ancient rhetoric emerged at a time when classical Greek society was transitioning from mere orality to literacy. This paper examines how ancient texts on the art of rhetoric of the fourth century BC negotiate the interplay and tension between oral and written media, and particularly argues that Isocrates uniquely redefines the constraints of written discourse. Unlike his contemporaries Plato (in Phaedrus*), Alcidamas (in* On those who write written speeches*) and Aristotle (in* Rhetoric *3.12), who stress a text's fixed form, untimeliness (loss of* kairos*), and separation from its creator and hence the need for a precise style (*akribeia*), Isocrates sees the potential of the written text as a mass medium that shifts the burden of precision of the reader. This paper argues – echoing McLuhan's (1964) axiom "the medium is the message" and building on Jeroen Bons's insights on Isocrates's written composition (1993) – that the written medium creates the opportunity for novel rhetorical techniques, such as Isocrates's introduction of the* amphibolos logos *('ambiguous argumentation'). Since new media increase audience reach, strategies to address heterogeneous audiences emerge.*

Keywords: *amphibolia, ancient rhetoric, literacy, media ecology, Isocrates, written style*

1. Introduction: technological revolution in antiquity

No less revolutionary than the contemporary transition into a digital age were the invention of writing and the transition from mere orality to literacy in ancient societies, particularly in Greece, with its extensive literary output. When new media arose in our previous century, the earliest introduction of a new medium – the advent of literacy in oral societies – became a major scholarly topic (for a bibliography on this, Werner 2011). Scholars like the classicist Eric Havelock (1963; 1982; 1986) and cultural historian Walter Ong (1982), a student of the media pioneer Marshall McLuhan, argued that the transition from orality to literacy fundamentally altered humans' way of thinking. According to Havelock (1982, 7–8), the introduction of the (easy, phonetic and vowelized) alphabetic script in Greece in the eight century BC brought about "a new state of mind" for "the alphabet converted the Greek spoken tongue into an artifact, thereby separating it from the speaker and making it into a 'language', that is, an object available for inspection, reflection, analysis".[1] Havelock argued that, different from oral transmission, which was characterized by performance, cultural memory, and a mythic worldview, the written word enabled the literate mind to develop abstract, rational thinking, causing a "literate revolution" by the fifth and fourth centuries BC.

Not all scholars (classicists in particular) have agreed with Havelock's strong claims. His work has since been criticized for being deterministic, overdrawn, and overestimating literacy and reading skills in ancient society (e.g., Burns 1981; Harris 1989; Thomas 1992; Halverson 1992). Next to what Brian Stock (1990, 5–6) has called the "strong thesis" that argues for major mentality changes with the advent of literacy, the "weak thesis" instead accounts for a less rapid but gradual change in both the transition to literacy and the cognitive changes. As the classicist Rosalind Thomas has argued (1992), oral and written practices were not incompatible but were often connected and interdependent in ancient Greek society. Writing was normally used to record oral practices (Thomas 1992, 74–100), and written works were commonly read aloud (for examples and counter-examples of reading aloud, Knox 1968; Johnson 2000). Many literary texts of the fifth and fourth centuries BC represent oral practices (Haskins 2001), such as the Socratic dialogues, the sophists' showpieces, and perhaps even Aristotle's works that served as teaching notes. Although writing and reading became more common, especially for the elite, the oral was still dominant (Harris 1989, 65–92)

The interplay between both media is especially foregrounded in the developing field of rhetoric: in its early days, the art of speaking was inextricably bound to the upcoming art of writing (Worthington 1995; Gagarin 1999; Thomas 2003; Enos 2012). For instance, the earliest rhetoricians, the so-called sophists, were known both for their public performances and oral teachings *and* their special relationship with the written word and the books they published (Jarratt 1991; O'Sullivan 1996). As some have argued, rhetoric took its technical form not only when writing became common, but also because it did, since putting communication into a visible form catalyzed theorizing about language (e.g., Connors 1986; Cole 1991; Thomas and Webb 1994; Enos 2006; 2020). However, the rise of the written word also raised new questions for these specialists in the spoken word (Harris 1989, 90–92).

This paper examines how ancient texts on the art of rhetoric of the fourth century BC negotiate the interplay and tension between the oral and written medium, and particularly argues that Isocrates redefines what others saw as the constraints of written discourse. Unlike his contemporaries

[1] Recent studies, e.g., Waal (2023), show that the alphabet was in use earlier than previously assumed and that the so-called Dark Ages (twelfth to eighth century BC) were not as illiterate as traditionally believed.

Plato, Alcidamas, and Aristotle, who stress a text's fixed form, untimeliness, and separation from its creator and hence the need for a precise style (*akribeia*), Isocrates sees the potential of the written text as a mass medium that shifts the burden of precision to the reader. This paper argues – echoing McLuhan's (1964) axiom "the medium is the message" and building on Jeroen Bons's insights on Isocrates's written composition (1993) – that the written medium creates the opportunity for novel rhetorical techniques, such as Isocrates's introduction of the *amphibolos logos* ('ambiguous argumentation', *Panathenaicus* 240). Before turning to Isocrates in the last section, the first two sections first illustrate the use of written texts in rhetorical practice, by means of Plato's *Phaedrus*, and subsequently the critiques on writing by the sophist Alcidamas and Plato, and Aristotle's description of the differences between written and spoken styles in *Rhetoric* 3.12. The (r)evolution of the written word in rhetoric did change minds, though not all in the same way.

2. Oral practices in written texts, written texts as an oral practice

The opening of Plato's *Phaedrus* (written around 380/360 BC)[2] tells us about the oral and written practice of early rhetoric (Reames and Sloey 2001, 6–9; Thomas 2003, 171). At the beginning of the dialogue, Phaedrus eagerly tells Socrates about a speech on love by Lysias he just heard and discussed with others (227a–228e). Socrates asks Phaedrus to repeat Lysias's speech verbatim for him, but Phaedrus protests that his memory is not good enough to "recall what Lysias, the most accomplished of today's writers, has put together at leisure over a long period of time" (228a).[3] Socrates then teasingly remarks that he thinks Phaedrus had asked Lysias to repeat his speech several times, and "ended up borrowing the book (βιβλίον) and scrutinizing" it so that he knew it by heart to impress others (228a–c). Phaedrus pretends to protest again that he does not remember the exact words and that he can only tell the gist of it (228d). Socrates sees right through him: Lysias has hidden the actual speech of Lysias (τὸν λόγον αὐτόν) under his cloak (the physical book is referred to again in 243c). Socrates asks Phaedrus not to practice the memorized speech on him but instead to read (ἀναγνῶμεν) Lysias' original piece together (228e). And thus Phaedrus reads the speech aloud (231a–234c), which prompts the rest of the dialogue.

In this playful opening paragraph, we see how oral and written practices functioned together in the education of the intellectual elite. The speechwriter Lysias is said to have carefully composed an *epideixis* in text that he delivered orally, even several times, to a group of listeners who then used the lecture as discussion material. There are thus several written versions of Lysias' speech with different functions: the text is used as a vehicle to memorize by the speaker, to record by the listener (Phaedrus possesses a copy of the speech), to discuss (after rereading) by students, and probably also to revise, publish and distribute the work to a wider audience (Worthington 1995, 171–173; Gagarin 1999; Thomas 2003, 170–173). At that time, the written "texts [were] servants to the performance" (Thomas 2003,171): rhetorical pieces were put into text merely to support or supplement an oral performance (Gagarin 1999, 165). As we learn from Aristotle, reading and memorizing speeches was a common didactical principle of the early sophists, who "gave their pupils to learn by heart speeches which were either rhetorical or eristic" (*On Sophistical*

2 The exact dating of ancient texts is always difficult, and so is it for Plato's *Phaedrus* (see e.g., Usacheva 2010 for the discussion on the dating of this text). As this paragraph shows, there were several versions of a (published or unpublished) text that were discussed before, during and after the final publication of a text.

3 All translations of *Phaedrus* by Emlyn-Jones and Preddy 2022.

Refutations 183b, quoted in Kennedy 1963, 52). Teachers themselves also often performed their written pieces before large audiences to showcase their rhetorical expertise and attract new students (Alcidamas, *On Sophists* 31).

Besides their speaking skills and public performances (which, according to Thomas 2003, 186, were still dominant over their literary output), the sophists were known, already in antiquity, for their books and their interest in prose language (O'Sullivan 1996, 121; Thomas 2003, 168–170). That the early rhetoricians wrote many books is, for example, showcased when Phaedrus and Socrates list "the stuff that's written in the handbooks about the art of speaking" (266d, cf. 271c; see also Thomas 2003, 167). The sophists were so closely associated with writing and publishing that Phaedrus thinks people "are ashamed both of writing speeches and leaving their own writings behind, fearing for their reputation in time to come: that they'll be called sophists" (257d). By the end of the fifth century BC, rhetorical manuals, published speeches, and the profession of the *logographos* had appeared and became popular (Kennedy 1963, 127–129). The rise of the new medium also brought new problems. Whereas reading aloud or memorizing a written text was a common didactical rhetorical practice, it was not the convenient mode of expression for orators: the written texts or notes had to be learned by heart and recited persuasively, since speaking extempore (or at least the appearance) was still highly valued (Thomas 1992, 92).

3. Rhetoric and the literate (d)evolution: speaking versus writing

Opposing the increasing dominance of the written word in rhetorical practice, the sophist Alcidamas, student of the famous sophist and skilled speaker Gorgias, wrote his pamphlet *On those who write written speeches* (also known as *On sophists;* c.390 BC; for analyses of this text, O'Sullivan 1992; Muir 2001).[4] In this work, Alcidamas criticizes his colleagues who "are proud and boastful about their practice of writing speeches and displaying their own intelligence through their books", but who "are just as inexperienced in the practice of speaking as ordinary men" (1). Alcidamas paints a teasing picture of his rivals' methods: they take all the time to write and rewrite, to consult the works of others, and "to imitate passages that happen to be expressed well" (4) – Alcidamas must have been shocked by the current rise of LLMs. On the other hand, to speak "appropriately, on the spot, [...] to find just the right speech to match the current situation (τῷ καιρῷ) and people's desires" (3), is way more difficult and requires more talent and training, according to Alcidamas. This conviction leads him to make a paradoxical statement (especially when you take into account that not everybody was literate, see Harris 1989, 93–115): "since writing is easier for us than speaking, it is reasonable to conclude that the ability to write is of less value" (5). To support this claim, Alcidamas argues that skillful speakers are easily able to write well, whereas a skilled writer will panic over the lack of time to perform a spontaneous speech (6–8).

In the rest of his pamphlet, Alcidamas repeats the benefits of kairotic extempore speaking over the slow process of writing. He mocks the persons who, when they are given the floor, first grasp for their writing tablet to compose a speech and are hence tongue-tied (9–11). He complains about the difficulty of memorizing complete speeches, while remembering only the essential arguments of a speech is much easier (18–21; cf. Kennedy 1963, 53, remarks that orators commonly learned commonplaces by heart but composed the rest of the speech extempore). He further explains that extempore speakers can adapt more easily to live situations and the arguments of their opponents, while those who have carefully composed a speech have difficulty deviating from their prepared

4 All translations of Alcidamas by Gagarin and Woodruff 1995.

text (24–28). Alcidamas compares written texts to "bronze statues or stone sculptures or pictures", which might be pleasant to look at but are otherwise useless. Similarly, written speeches "may have some striking effects when viewed in a book" but are useless in a specific situation because of their fixed form, whereas spoken words are "animated and alive" (ἔμψυχός ἐστι καὶ ζῇ, 28), and can adapt to the real-life situation (cf. *Phaedrus* 275e, see *infra*). It does not escape Alcidamas that there resides some irony in the fact that he shares his critique of writing via the written medium (29). He does not dismiss writing altogether (30) but thinks it should be done only ancillary to speaking (2). Alcidamas sees, however, some advantages in writing: in this way, he can reach more people than by speaking alone (31), and with a written text he can "leave behind a memorial of myself" (32).

Alcidamas also discusses stylistic differences between spoken and written speeches. The latter is characterized by its "verbal precision" (ἀκρίβεια 13, 14, 16, 25, 33, 34; on the concept of *akribeia,* Kurz 1970; Harris and Taub 2023), but because of its precision, it also loses "spontaneity and verisimilitude" and causes "distrust and resentment" in the listeners' minds (12). For this reason, Alcidamas argues, professional speechwriters "imitate the style of extemporaneous speakers" (13). Some decades later, Aristotle makes a similar distinction in *Rhetoric* 3.12 (for a detailed analysis, Graff 2001; Innes 2007), where he describes differences between written and adversarial styles (λέξις [...] γραφικὴ καὶ ἀγωνιστική, 1413b4): "the style of written compositions is most precise (ἀκριβεστάτη), that of debate requires the most in delivery (ὑποκριτικωτάτη)" (1413b7–8).[5] The first is suited for the epideictic genre ("for its function is reading" 1414a16), while the latter is used mostly in deliberative and judicial settings. Whenever a written speech is read aloud in a public debate, it is seen as "meager", while reading a recorded speech appears "amateurish" because the performance is absent (1413b14–15). Aristotle remarks that the style of a delivered speech is "least precise" (ἥκιστα ἀκρίβεια, 1414a14), and compares this adversarial style with "shadow painting" (σκιαγραφίᾳ), since "the greater the crowd, the further off is the point of view; thus in both too much detail (ἀκριβῆ) is superfluous and gives a worse impression" (1414a7–9). As Aristotle noted, the written style is intended for "others" (1413b7), not the immediate audience present at a performance (Innes 2007, 154–155). As the gap between author and listener/reader becomes bigger, more accuracy is required in the communication process.

Alcidamas's pamphlet echoes the ending of *Phaedrus*, which is famous for what is often called Plato's critique of writing (e.g., by Derrida's 1981 interpretation of *pharmakon*; see also Hyland 1968, 38–44). After three speeches on love – one by Lysias, and two by Socrates – the dialogue turns to the topic of speech-writing. According to Socrates, speech-writing itself is not disgraceful, but it can be practiced either well or badly (258d), just as rhetoric, which Socrates (261a; cf. 271c) defines as "the art of leading the soul by means of words" to knowledge. Elaborating on the art of writing, Socrates tells the myth of the Egyptian god Theuth, who invented the script (γράμματα, 274d). Promoting his invention to the king of gods, Thamus, Theuth argues it "will make the Egyptians wiser and improve their memory" (274e). The king, however, answers that he suspects the art of writing will lead to the opposite result of forgetfulness, for its users do not have to memorize everything anymore (275a). Moreover, while reading, students only get a "semblance of wisdom" rather than the "real thing", yet think they are knowledgeable (275b). Socrates endorses this myth and thinks writing is nothing "more than a reminder for him who knows what the written words are about" (275c). He then compares the written word with a painting (ζωγραφία, with the same root as γράφω 'writing'), since both seem lively but do not answer when you ask a question (275e).

5 Translation Freese and Striker 2020.

A text "always needs the help of its father" (275e) to clarify when it is (deliberately) misunderstood by the reader.

Although this passage is often understood as a mere critique of writing, Socrates's argument regarding the written word in *Phaedrus* is more subtle. According to Socrates, it is wrong to think that written texts produce "something clear (σαφὲς) and constant (βέβαιον)" (275c; cf. 277d), adjectives that were seen as characteristics of written style (O'Sullivan 1992, 46; cf. 234e) and which are a paradoxical Platonic (word)play since only true knowledge is clear and stable. The mute written discourse is juxtaposed by the "living and animate speech" (276b), which "is written with knowledge in the soul [and is] capable of defending itself" (276a). Written texts are hence an imitative image or reflection of this dialectic type of discourse (276e). While the written word may thus not be the "real thing", it is not completely written off by Socrates (Street 2022, 404). Just as the case was with rhetoric, there are good and bad types of writing. To show this, Socrates compares writing to sowing: you can grow plants in a very short time for decoration, but these will also die quickly, or you let plants grow slowly and sustainably so that they reproduce themselves (276b). In a similar way, writing without knowledge is like "writing in black water" (276c) where the words will fade away, while the knowledgeable writer, who seemingly writes "gardens of letters [...] for fun (παιδιᾶς)", writes to "store up for himself a treasure house of reminders when he attains an old age of forgetfulness" (276d) and, more importantly perhaps, to let others grow when they read and discuss the text (276e–277a). Just like a well-cultivated plant propagates itself, writing can be fertile ground for readers.

The analogy of writing as agriculture establishes something more: it separates the producer from the product and from the recipient. It objectifies discourse, just as writing does. For that reason, Socrates and Phaedrus are able, after their first bewilderment by its persuasive power, to reread Lysias's text and analyze it carefully sentence by sentence (262c–264e). It is also telling that the dialogue in *Phaedrus* takes place outside Athens' walls in the countryside and not on the city's agora. As Socrates remarks at the beginning: "the countryside and trees don't want to teach me anything but people in town do", but Phaedrus "by holding speeches in books in front of me, appear[s] to be about to lead me around the whole of Attica and wherever else you wish" (230e). Different from the spoken word, the written word can speak to people elsewhere in time and place, also in the silent countryside. Only the good writer, who Socrates calls "philosopher", knows that written words are merely seeds of wisdom, and not the wisdom itself, as "poets, speechwriters and lawmakers" believe about their writings (278d–e).

4. Isocrates's final work and the birth of the precise reader[6]

Isocrates (436–338 BC), contemporary of Plato, Alcidamas, and Aristotle, had a strong preference for the written over the spoken word and hence wrote speeches – and was, therefore, perhaps a target of Alcidamas's criticism (O'Sullivan 1992, 24–31; Muir 2001, xiv). Isocrates is a remarkable figure in the history of rhetoric: he is listed in the canon of the Ten Attic Orators, although he never delivered speeches publicly because he lacked "a strong voice and courage (*Panathenaicus* 5; *To Philip* 81; *Epistle* 8.7; see Too 1995, 113–150, for this deliberate self-depiction). Furthermore, Isocrates is celebrated as "the master of all rhetoricians" (Cicero, *De Oratore* II.94), but no technical

6 In this paragraph, I build largely upon the sophisticated interpretation of Isocrates's written-to-be-read style by Bons (1993). I add to his reading the insight that Isocrates reverses the characteristics of the written style from negative to positive evaluations and from writer to reader.

handbook of him was handed over to us (although there are indications that a handbook of Isocrates existed, see Cicero *Brutus* 48, Quintilian II.15.4). Instead, Isocrates wrote oratorical speeches and read these with his students, since, according to him, "the study of political discourse can help more than any other thing to stimulate and form such qualities of character" (*Against the Sophists,* 21).[7] As a teacher, Isocrates saw it as his task to "in himself set such an example of oratory" (*Against the Sophists* 17–18; cf. *Antidosis* 276–277), and hence produced written political speeches to teach his students critical capabilities useful for their rhetorical and political careers (on the Isocratean curriculum, Poulakis 1997; Haskins 2004).

Throughout his oeuvre, Isocrates reflects on his deliberate choice for the written medium (Too 1995; Haskins 2001, 163–168; Enos 2012, 170–175; Viidebaum 2021, 62–73). In doing so, he subtly recasts the characteristics of written discourse that his contemporaries deemed negatively (a similar point made by Too 1995, 113). For example, just like the other authors, Isocrates compares the written medium to visual art in his *Evagoras* (c.370 BC), an encomium on the Cypriot king, but has a completely different purpose with this comparison. To leave a memorial to a distinguished person, says Isocrates, one could better compose an artful encomium than erect a statue, for "images must of necessity remain solely among those in whose cities they were set up, whereas portrayals in words may be published throughout Hellas" (74). Different from an art piece, a written text is fixed but not stationary, and can travel through space and time. It was the first mass medium, and Isocrates was well aware of that.

In his speech *To Philip* (346 BC), a letter to the Macedonian king, Isocrates explains the benefits of reading by reversing the negative features of writing (also analyzed by Bons 1993, 162–164; Too 1995, 119–122; Graff 2001, 22–24). Isocrates acknowledges that works written to be read are usually considered inferior to those delivered orally, because the latter exudes importance and urgency (25), while a speech of the former is "robbed of the prestige of the speaker" (26; see Too 1995, 121), its persuasive delivery, and "the advantages of timeliness (τῶν καιρῶν)". When someone reads (out loud) such a "deserted and stripped" speech without persuasive power or any personal character (ἦθος), one will be bored (26–27). However, just because the speaker's authority lacks in a written speech, a reader is "in the best position to discover with accuracy (ἀκριβέστατα καὶ κάλλιστα) whether there is any truth" in it (Bons 1993, 164). When a reader scrutinizes the text "with good reasoning and philosophic reflection" (29), one will "form a sounder judgment about such discourses" than passively listening and "relying upon the opinion of the masses" would do. The burden of precision (*akribeia*) that others attributed to the written style and thus the writer, Isocrates shifts to the reader as well. Over two thousand years ago, Isocrates already recognized that the death of the author is simultaneously the birth of the reader (Barthes 1967; cf. Kennedy 1989, 495).

How this precise reading can be done is shown in Isocrates's last work, *Panathenaicus* (342/339 BC), a political encomium on Athens in honor of the Great Panathenaic Festival, which he finished at the age of 97 (*Panathenaicus* 267). This work can be read as a testament to his oeuvre (Eucken 1983, 3–4), for Isocrates reflects in it on his career, curriculum, and reception as well. In the prologue of the work (1–38), Isocrates explains he was prompted to start another ambitious writing project at his high age because of the many misunderstandings and harmful misrepresentations of his works "by obscure and worthless sophists and [...] by the general public" (5). Not only did they deny him his good reputation, but they were also "abusing [his] discourses, reading

7 Used translations of Isocrates' texts are the following: *Against the Sophists* and *Panathenaicus* by Norlin 1929; *To Philip* by Norlin 1928; and *Evagoras* by Van Hook 1927.

them in the worst possible manner side by side with their own, dividing them at the wrong places, mutilating them, and in every way spoiling their effect" (17). A written text, robbed of the prestige of the speaker, cannot defend itself, but since this author was still alive, he decided to respond to his criticasters: not with a direct answer but, in the Isocratean fashion, with a full-blown speech on "the achievements of Athens and the virtues of our ancestors" (5) in order "to prove that our city had been the cause of more blessings to the Hellenes than the city of the Lacedaemonians" (24).

A lofty praise of Athens and a harsh critique of Sparta are followed by a puzzling epilogue (199–272), in which Isocrates discusses his written speech so far with a group of (ex-) students to evaluate it, just as was the practice of the early rhetoricians, as we have seen. Whereas most of the students just applaud Isocrates's rhetorical firework, one former pupil "who had lived under an oligarchy and had chosen before to extol the Lacedaemonians" (200) takes the floor and gives a critical reading of the speech. The Laconophile remarks that Isocrates had praised Sparta before and has, therefore, to meet the expectations of both his Athens- and Sparta-favoring audience at the same time (passage also discussed by e.g. Bons 1993; Too 1995, 124–127; Blank 2023):

> Pondering this difficulty, you proceeded to study in what light you could represent each of these two cities in order that you might seem to speak the truth about them both and that you might be able to praise your ancestors, just as you purposed to do, and at the same time to appear to be censuring the Spartans in the eyes of those who have no liking for them, while in reality doing nothing of the sort but covertly praising them instead. Seeking such an effect, you found without difficulty arguments of double meaning, which lend themselves no more to the purpose of those who praise than of those who – blame, but are capable of being turned both ways and leave room for much disputation – arguments the employment of which, when one contends in court over contracts for his own advantage, is shameful and no slight token of depravity but, when one discourses on the nature of man and of things, is honourable and bespeaks a cultivated mind. (Isocrates, *Panathenaicus* 239–241)

Because of the employment of ambiguous arguments (λόγους ἀμφιβόλους), Isocrates' speech could be interpreted in two different ways (Bons 1993, 167). The ex-student explains that, whereas Isocrates's characterization of the Spartans as "arrogant, warlike, and greedy" (241) are valued negatively by an Athenian audience, people who normally "praise and admire the Spartans" (242) could interpret these three characteristics also positively: a feeling of dignity rather than arrogance, heroic instead of warlike, and providing and taking care of oneself instead of being greedy (243–244). The Laconophile concludes that Isocrates composed his speech "with such intent" (245) that his discourse "to those who read it superficially (ἁπλοῦν) will appear to be ingenuous and easy to comprehend, though to those who scan it thoroughly (ἀκριβῶς) and endeavor to see in it what has escaped all others it will reveal itself as difficult and hard to understand, packed with history and philosophy" (246). The Sparta-sympathizer suspects that Isocrates might not be happy with his exegesis, "for by implanting understanding in those who are without knowledge I render the discourse naked and strip it of the honor which would otherwise attach to it through those who study hard" (247). In this case, the discourse is not (only) bereft of the speaker's authority but also of the critical reader's interpretative work (which is, for some, reason to read the Laconophile's interpretation as ironic, e.g., Gray 1994, 225).

Although his former pupil advises Isocrates to clarify his intent (249) so that his reputation may benefit from it (262), Isocrates's final remarks remain inconclusive and enigmatic. He praised his former pupil, but he "uttered not a word about the sentiments which he had expressed, as to how his conjecture had hit upon my purpose or missed the mark, but let him remain of the same opinion which he had formed for himself" (265). Perhaps it is not surprising that the author

Isocrates, who preferred written texts bereft of their authoritative voice to be studied critically by the precise reader, here withholds his purpose. Whereas Aristotle warns against *amphibolia* listing it as a stylistic sin in the third book of his *Rhetoric* (1407a31–36; and as a logical fallacy in *On Sophistical Refutations*; see Blank 2023), Isocrates seems to realize that a written text with its potentially infinite audience is, by definition, open to multiple interpretations. This insight provides the rhetorician with a novel technique: one could remain ambiguous on purpose to communicate different messages to different audiences. That it is hard, if not impossible, for a reader to grasp the intended meaning of a text is not altogether problematic for Isocrates: since the text will not talk back to you, you have to think for yourself.

5. Conclusion: *verba volant, scripta manent*

While rhetoric is undergoing turbulent times in our digital age, the ancient art of rhetoric came to fruition in the time of another "revolution". The gradual but impactful societal transition from orality to literacy produced a dynamic interplay of oral and written modes of communication. Rhetorical practices were facilitated but also complicated by the use of writing: while texts could be (pre)recorded, the written draft had to be learned by heart and converted into a persuasive delivery. The rise of the written (rhetorical) word was not received positively by everyone in the fourth century BC. As we have seen, written texts were criticized for their fixed form and their inadaptability to the situation (losing *kairos,* for Alcidamas) or to the reader's questions (losing the dialectical virtue, for Plato). Since an author cannot explain to or alter his text for every reader, its style should be very precise (*akribeia*), but such a precise style is ill-suited for a lively delivery (thus wrote Aristotle).

Isocrates, however, redefines the constraints of writing. While a text may be as steady as a statue, unlike the visual arts, written art can move around and thus be used as a mass medium reaching people all over Greece and beyond. Moreover, just because a text is bereft of its authorial intent, it is the reader's task to scrutinize with precision (*akribeia*) what the author could have meant. Embracing the complexities and possibilities of literacy, Isocrates points to a novel rhetorical technique of not avoiding but using ambiguous argumentation to address a divided audience. I do not want to pose here the "strong thesis" (*supra*) that this argumentative technique could only arise because of the new written medium. After all, the need to use ambiguity in front of a divided audience can also occur while speaking extempore. But since the chance of encountering a heterogeneous audience is much greater, if not always the case, when you spread your thoughts via the written word (let alone via the digital word), this technique is all the more useful. Whereas what you say may be heard by only some, what you write can last for over two millennia, from ancient Athens into our modern, digital age.

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II. Rhetoric and digital media

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FROM FRUSTRATION TO EDUCATION: HOW MIGRANT NURSE-INFLUENCERS USE INSTAGRAM TO ADDRESS AMR AND SHAPE TRUST IN EU HEALTHCARE SYSTEMS

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Abstract

An urgent challenge in the antimicrobial resistance (AMR) "silent pandemic" is developing cross-culturally attuned communication that recognises how antibiotic knowledge is continually negotiated across socio-cultural systems. This study addresses this need by examining how Iranian-born, Germany-based nurse influencers on Instagram create rhetorical spaces for negotiating competing medical epistemologies around AMR, and how EU-based migrant audiences engage with these narratives. The analysis draws on Bhabha's (1994) theory of the Third Space, contemporary trust scholarship, and affordance theory. Through qualitative analysis of two influencer posts and their comment threads, the study identifies two configurations: (1) fracturing medical authority through embodied testimony, *where antibiotics shift between symbols of care and signs of neglect; and (2)* satirizing clinical logic to expose semiotic instability, *where humour and role-play unsettle assumptions about Iranian "excess" and German "minimalism". Across both configurations, influencers increase their visibility through relatable, culturally attuned performances that blend professional insight with humour and satire. Trust, rather than eroding online, is continually re-signed as users navigate tensions between institutional authority and lived experience. More broadly, the posts and comment threads function as participatory classrooms where peer exchange fosters health literacy while resisting polarization, demonstrating the pedagogical potential of Third-Space mediatization in AMR communication.*

Keywords: *AMR, migrant nurse-influencers, Third Space, trust, affordances, Instagram*

1. Introduction

In an Instagram thread sparked by a viral video from an Iranian-born, Germany-based nurse influencer, users debated Iranian and European approaches to antibiotic prescribing. The video humorously contrasted an Iranian doctor who hastily prescribes a long list of antibiotics for a mild cold with a German doctor who insists on "water only" even for severe symptoms. The post circulated widely among Iranian migrants across Europe, South Africa, Canada, and Australia, prompting exchanges that ranged from banter to heated debate over what counts as proper care. One user calling for optimal access to antibiotics finally commented, *"Just because our doctors may be wrong doesn't mean theirs are right. It's possible that both approaches are flawed"*.

It is in these frictional encounters that *time lag*, to use Homi Bhabha's (1994) term, becomes visible in medical modernity, moments when divergent histories of care, expertise, and progress collide within a single digital conversation. Migrants in these threads inhabit overlapping temporalities of medicine: one shaped by immediacy, abundance, and the culturally embedded expectation of being "treated" quickly; the other shaped by minimalism, long-term prevention, and institutional caution. These asynchronous logics do not align neatly. Instead, they generate irony and negotiation as users make sense of their past and present healthcare worlds. Crucially, these frictions take on heightened significance in the context of antimicrobial resistance (AMR), a domain where delays and prescribing cultures are not merely symbolic but carry real public health consequences. It is within this temporal gap, where the promises of two healthcare systems fail to coincide, that this study situates its analysis. *We examine how migrant healthcare professionals on Instagram create rhetorical spaces for negotiating competing medical epistemologies around AMR*.

Public health communication often frames online health debates in binary terms, *polarized, compliant vs. resistant, pro vs. anti* (Henkel et al. 2022; Wagner and Eberl 2024). Such framings are too narrow for the textured meaning-making visible in transnational migrant comment cultures, risking the reduction of complex knowledge negotiations into measurable sentiment (Christodoulou and Zembylas 2025). This study instead treats the discursive knowledge produced in these interactions as analytically significant. Migrants do not merely consume information; they re-signify medical "truths" through lived histories, emotions, and the participatory affordances of Instagram. In line with Charani's (2022) argument that AMR strategies must identify opinion leaders and understand the ecosystems they inhabit, we ask: *What makes Instagram-based storytelling by migrant healthcare professionals compelling, and how do these creators translate antibiotic rhetoric within digital Third Spaces?* We further examine how trust is formed as migrants navigate European healthcare systems, arguing that trust is not eroded by social media but continually re-made in culturally hybrid spaces where authority and experience intersect.

Trust is foundational to healthcare, shaping whether patients seek help and adhere to treatment (Tucker et al. 2016). For migrants in the EU, this trust is strained by structural, linguistic, and cultural barriers (WHO, Regional Office for Europe 2023), often pushing individuals toward informal markets and self-medication, thereby increasing vulnerability to AMR. AMR among migrants is driven less by cross-border transmission and more by structural factors like overcrowded living conditions and socio-economic inequality (Häsler et al. 2018). Migrants may also carry diagnostic expectations from their countries of origin, leading them to pressure doctors for antibiotics (Lescure et al. 2022; Kjøllesdal et al. 2020), underscoring the need for AMR strategies that foreground cultural sensitivity and relational trust.

Charani (2022) conceptualizes antibiotic use as embedded in socio-cultural systems, calling for co-designed interventions. Similarly, Harandi et al. (2025) show AI-driven stewardship tools

require socio-cultural adaptation to avoid undermining trust. The WHO/RIVM's Tailoring AMR Program (2021) highlights the need for context-specific communication, yet little is known about how such knowledge circulates on social media among migrants. Research on influencer communication provides a key entry point. The concepts of microcelebrity (Senft 2013) and relatability (Abidin 2017) explain how influencers cultivate credibility. In health contexts, they become mediators who translate expertise into relatable narratives through "influencer pedagogy" (Hendry, Hartung, and Welch 2021), leveraging parasocial connection (Horton and Wohl 1956). However, most studies emphasize influencer output, not the dialogic audience interactions that co-produce meaning. While Roe and Kjeldsen (2025) analyze AMR communication by a nurse influencer, they retain a national, top-down perspective. Our study extends this by repositioning comment threads as participatory arenas where transnational audiences, specifically Iranian migrants, actively negotiate medical authority.

1.1. Global and Iranian contexts of AMR

AMR forms an urgent backdrop to these debates. The WHO (2023) characterizes AMR as a "silent pandemic" and one of the top global health threats of the 21st century. While antimicrobials remain essential to human, animal, and plant health, their overuse and misuse are the main drivers of resistance. An estimated 1.3 million deaths annually are directly attributable to bacterial AMR, a figure expected to rise without coordinated, multisectoral action. The WHO (2023) further warns that AMR will deepen global health inequalities and disproportionately affect low- and middle-income countries, underscoring the need for One Health governance and sustained public engagement.

In Iran, the country of origin for the influencers and migrant commentators examined in this study, AMR is shaped by intertwined institutional and sociocultural dynamics. Studies highlight barriers to rational prescribing, including limited diagnostics, inconsistent guidelines, weak oversight, and uneven clinical competence among physicians (Mehtarpour, Najafi and Jaafaripooyan 2025). Public misconceptions, patient pressure, and widespread over-the-counter access to antibiotics also fuel misuse. Addressing AMR in Iran, therefore, requires public education, stronger trust in diagnoses, and cross-sector collaboration across human and animal health systems. Biomedical scholarship similarly emphasizes therapeutic innovation. Penchovsky and Traykovska (2015, 631) argue for "unconventional strategies" in antimicrobial development. Extending this call, we suggest that equally unconventional approaches are needed in communication, where antibiotic risks are negotiated across diverse cultural logics and digitally mediated spaces.

The following sections outline the theoretical framework, describe the data sets and methodology, present the findings and discussion, and conclude with reflections on the implications for authority–migrant communication and health literacy.

2. Theoretical lens

This study employs a tripartite theoretical framework integrating Bhabha's (1994) concepts of the Third Space, time-lag, and the semiotics of sign and symbol; Affordance theory (Gibson 1979; Norman 1999; Hutchby 2001); and contemporary conceptualizations of trust (Hardin 2002; Uslaner 2002; Warren 2018). This combination is necessary because the communication under analysis unfolds on Instagram, a multimodal platform shaped by technological affordances; because migrants translate and re-mediate AMR information through recurrent semiotic anchors such as *water* and *antibiotics*; and because trust in institutions, clinicians, and peers is continually destabilised, renegotiated, and rerouted.

2.1. Third Space, time-lag, sign and symbol

Bhabha's postcolonial theory offers a lens for understanding how cultural meaning is generated in the "in-between," rather than within fixed or "pure" traditions. He argues that "all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation" (Bhabha 1994, 54–55), which he calls the Third Space. Historically shaped by colonial encounters and reproduced today through migration and displacement, the Third Space is characterized by tension and creativity: it enables hybrid cultural forms that exceed binary models of assimilation or separation and allows individuals to "be turned into subjects of their own history and experience" (Bhabha 1994, 255).

A key feature of this space is time-lag, the temporal disjunction that interrupts linear narratives of cultural continuity. In this "temporal break," inherited frameworks cannot simply be reproduced but become objects of revision (Bhabha 1994, 275). Within this interval, Bhabha distinguishes symbols (i.e. meanings that appear stable and taken for granted) from signs, which emerge when these symbolic certainties are disrupted and re-articulated. When the sign "ceases the synchronous flow of the symbol," it "seizes the power to elaborate... new and hybrid agencies and articulations" (Bhabha 1994, 275). This study draws on these concepts to analyze how "water" and "antibiotics" oscillate between symbols of proper care and signs open to contestation within migrant medical discourse.

2.2. Affordance theory

Affordance theory complements Bhabha by grounding these semiotic processes in the material structures of Instagram. Following Gibson (1979), Norman (1999), and Hutchby (2001), affordances refer to the actions an environment enables or constrains. They are relational rather than inherent to technology. Ronzhyn et al. (2023, 3180) define social media affordances as "the perceived actual or imagined properties of social media, emerging through the relation of technological, social and contextual factors." Because antibiotic discourse on Instagram is embedded in a multimodal, algorithmically shaped environment, affordances such as images, captions, stories, and comment threads must be considered to understand how meanings circulate and are reinterpreted.

2.3. Conceptualizing Trust

Trust is multidimensional and contested (Nannestad 2008). Rational-choice perspectives define trust through strategic evaluation. Hardin's (2002; 2006) theory of encapsulated interest holds that we trust when we believe others incorporate our interests into their own, while Yamagishi and Yamagishi (1994) distinguish between assurance (aligned incentives) and social trust (risk assessment). Normative approaches treat trust as a generalized moral belief in the goodwill of others. Uslaner (2002) differentiates generalized trust from particularized trust grounded in familiarity and shared identity. Warren (2018) emphasizes institutional trust, inferred from the legitimacy and norms of systems rather than direct experience. Because migrants' trust in clinicians, institutions, and digital peers shifts across these modes, trust theory is essential to interpreting how AMR messages are re-signified.

3. Data-sets

Two Iranian-born, Germany-based nurse-influencers serve as case studies. The dataset consists of two publicly accessible posts and their full comment threads. The table below provides a detailed overview of their content and engagement metrics:

Table 1. An Overview of the Dataset

	Influencer 1	Influencer 2
Date	Feb. 12, 2024	Nov. 9, 2024
Number of followers	188000	88000
Likes	29.2 K	46.011 K
Number of comments	1655	1886

Influencer 1 shared frustration over receiving advice to drink water for a lung infection, contrasting German doctors' cautious approaches with Iranian doctors' proactive use of antibiotics. The post, which was titled "Medicine in Germany is about as useful as a fart in a fan factory when water fixes everything 😂", was captioned as follows:

> You're hearing this from someone who was hospitalized, then spent two weeks resting at home with a lung infection, and guess what? They didn't actually treat me! All they kept saying was 'Drink water' and pumping me with paracetamol, either in pill form or as an injection. Like, come on, even a donkey knows that infections only go away with antibiotics, but these guys still haven't figured that out 🤦 🤦 🤦 All I gotta say is much love to Iranian doctors! They actually saved me from these German-certified, theory-based so-called doctors.

In the video, the influencer mockingly recounts her personal experience with exaggerated sarcasm, saying:

> Man, in Germany, they have something called water therapy. What even is that? Your whole body is infected, filthy, sick to the point of death, and your illness is basically messing with you... Then the doctor tells you, 'Just drink some water, you'll be fine.' Like, I don't get it. They say water is the essence of life. Bro, it's not some damn disinfectant! If water could actually cure infections, then the mother fucker who invented antibiotics was just talking nonsense, right? I honestly don't get why they're acting like we're still in the Middle Ages!

Influencer 2 (88,000 followers), however, humorously compared Iranian GPs' liberal antibiotic prescribing with German GPs' restraint. In the video, she first enacts a "typical" doctor-patient interaction in Iran, followed by a contrasting one in Germany. In the transcriptions that follow, *P* refers to the patient and *GP* to the general practitioner:

Iran (The original conversation is in Persian)

GP: *[shouts]* Next one, come in!

GP: So, what's the problem?

P: Uh, my throat feels a bit sore, Doctor.

GP: Sore throat, right? *[already starts scribbling the prescription]*

P: I mean, it doesn't exactly hurt... It's more like a weird feeling at the bottom of my throat. I thought, just to be on the safe side... But antibiotics? Umm... maybe I should explain... I mean, thank you, but...

GP: *[Interrupts, still writing]* I've prescribed Penicillin, an Azithron, one every two hours, Metronidazole injections every six hours, and Ciprofloxacin. Don't forget that one. Take it for sure. And drink fluids, if you feel like it.

P: *[hesitates, trying to speak]*

GP: *[cuts her off]* I'm listening, madam, say what you like.

[under breath] Why do you meddle in what I prescribe? Just go to the pharmacy, get the meds, use them, and you'll be fine.

[Hands over the prescription sheet. Turns away.]

Send in the next patient. I'm in a hurry.

[The patient mumbles something as she slowly walks out.]

Germany (originally in German with Persian and German subtitles)

GP: Good day, I'm Doctor X. What brings you in today?

P: *[speaking hoarsely]* Hello Doctor. Since last week, I've had a sore throat, high fever, a terrible cough, and I feel constantly nauseous.

GP: *[immediately, calmly]* Drink water. 💧

P: Also, I have diabetes... and my toe... it's turned black.

GP: *[with a more serious face and a firm, almost heroic tone]* Drink **more** water. 💧💧

P: *[panicking]* But Doctor!!!

GP: *[camera zooms in dramatically as she slowly says, eyes narrowed]*

Drink.

Water. 💀

Both posts used such Instagram's affordances as visual storytelling, multimodal cues, subtitles, and active comment threads. Users responded through likes, emojis, anecdotes, and counter-arguments, demonstrating platform-specific modes of participation. Such environments enable networked health activism, where professionals and lay users articulate experiences and advance alternative perspectives (Vicari 2021). In this sense, the posts and their comment threads operate as mediated social practices situated within what Bhabha (1994) terms the Third Space, where meaning is produced through ongoing translation and reinterpretation.

4. Methodology and Procedures

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive design to examine how Iranian-born, Germany-based nurse-influencers and their audiences negotiate AMR discourse on Instagram. Both posts, captions, comment threads, and relevant semiotic cues (e.g. emojis) were systematically anonymised and archived into Word files. Following Sikt[1] guidelines, no identifiable information is disclosed, and no verbatim quotations are attributed to individual users.

[1] Norway's national agency for shared services in education and research

Analysis proceeded in two stages:

1) Inductive thematic reading to identify recurrent discursive patterns: A clear polarity emerged between comments praising or criticising Iranian and EU healthcare systems (Table 2). This stage also showed that "water" and "antibiotics" functioned as key anchors of debate, prompting a semiotic analysis in stage two.

Table 2. Polarised Comment Themes: Critiques and Defences of EU Healthcare

Anti-EU	Pro-EU
"Come on, whatever pain you have they tell you: go drink lots of water and rest 😮 Is this for real? Does this even make sense? 😡 (angry red face)"	"They don't give you antibiotics for no reason. In Iran they prescribe antibiotics even if you have a virus. Look at Germans, they live to 95 and still ride bikes. In Iran, by 50 we're saying, 'It's too late for us to change.' 😬😀"

2) Applying Bhabha's (1994) distinction between symbol and sign to trace how meanings attached to water and antibiotics were stabilized, contested, or re-signified across posts and threads. Comments were coded as symbolic when they invoked taken-for-granted meanings linked to medical authority or institutional expertise, echoing the historical trajectory in which antibiotics operate as mid-century symbols of biomedical triumph and, more recently, as markers of AMR-related risk. Conversely, signs were coded where users actively reworked these meanings through medical jargon, humour, testimony, cultural memory, or platform vernaculars (e.g., emojis, multilingual puns), producing hybrid or ironic interpretations characteristic of Bhabha's time-lag. This analysis revealed a dynamic semiotic process:

   - As a symbol, *water* was invoked as a taken-for-granted marker of rational Western minimalism: *"But honestly, water therapy is better than antibiotics and chemical medicines* 😉." As a sign, it emerged in contexts where its meaning was contested or reinterpreted, often framed as neglect or dismissal: *"Your whole body is infected, filthy, sick to the point of death, and your illness is basically messing with you.. Then the doctor tells you, 'Just drink some water.."*
   - *Antibiotics* appeared as a sign of care and competence as their meaning was argued for, justified through personal testimony and detailed medical terminology: *"German doctors aren't good at diagnosing. I got sinusitis, and if they had given me antibiotics from the beginning, it wouldn't have turned chronic, and it wouldn't have spread to my ear. I've had dizziness for a year now."* At other times, they were refracted into signs of ignorance and future risk: *"If you knew what antibiotics do to the immune system and the digestive system, and what awful side effects they can cause, you'd actually be grateful* 😮." Only occasionally did antibiotics function as a symbol, invoked as self-evident markers of proper care without needing justification.

These shifting meanings were often embedded in narratives of pain and prior medical encounters, with Instagram's affordances adding affective and contextual layers that intensified or redirected meaning. As symbols fractured into signs, trust was reconfigured, moving from institutional authority toward relational, experiential forms. These dynamics form the empirical basis for the subsequent theoretical analysis.

5. Findings and Discussions

This section presents the findings, examining how antibiotics, water, and broader healthcare practices are negotiated across the influencers' posts and comment threads. Each subsection outlines a configuration within this semiotic negotiation. The section concludes by considering the implications of these re-significations for trust.

5.1. Fracturing medical authority through embodied testimony

Influencer 1 performs an embodied critique of contrasting medical cultures. Her narrative begins with personal frustration: she recounts a hospitalization for a lung infection treated only with paracetamol and repeated injunctions to "drink water." In contrast, she celebrates Iranian doctors' readiness to prescribe antibiotics. At first glance, the post seems to juxtapose two systems of care in which antibiotics appear as obvious symbols of proper treatment; yet its semiotic, temporal, and affective dynamics reveal a more intricate negotiation of truth and trust.

At the semiotic level, water and antibiotics function as condensed emblems of divergent epistemologies of health. In her account, water embodies the symbolic authority of European biomedical restraint, a logic of strict protocol adherence by what she calls *"German-certified, theory-based so-called doctors"* who privilege guidelines over responsiveness. Antibiotics, by contrast, represent decisive and attentive care, a culturally familiar assurance that suffering is recognized and acted upon (Lindenmeyer et al. 2016). This symbolic stabilization, however, is conditional: only when the illness is cast as non-viral does the influencer assert that "even a donkey knows that infections only go away with antibiotics", a moment in which the meaning of antibiotics temporarily settles into a taken-for-granted symbol of effective care.

The influencer's rhetoric fractures these assumed stabilities and converted symbols into signs through humour and multimodal play. Her sarcastic portrayal of German healthcare, "They have something called water therapy", paired with laughter and facepalm emojis (😂 🤦) and vernacular phrasing, destabilizes the symbolic authority of clinical rationality and re-signifies water as a sign of inflexibility or absurdity in the context of her own suffering. Conversely, antibiotics shift from culturally familiar signs of care and attentiveness to temporarily stabilized symbols of biomedical competence. Instagram's affordances intensify this semiotic slippage. These patterned performances create what Zappavigna (2013) terms *ambient affiliation*: social bonding through shared discursive and semiotic cues that allow dispersed audiences to commune around affective and cultural alignments.

Underlying this semiotic tension is a time-lag, a collision of asynchronous medical temporalities that no longer align neatly. The influencer draws on a temporal logic shaped by past experiences in which antibiotics functioned as immediate, reliable interventions, while German clinical practice operates within a present-day temporality that is, according to her, akin to the *"Middle Ages"* (zero antibiotics). What the German system frames as prudent, long-term stewardship is experienced by migrants as inappropriate minimalism, especially in cases they perceive as requiring decisive action. This mismatch produces the time-lag of modernity, when regimes of progress and care fail to coincide. The influencer's affective performance converts this rupture into algorithm-ready performance, rendering the temporal clash intelligible, relatable, and even entertaining for her audience.

The comment thread amplifies this semiotic instability: each user's engagement acts as a micro-re-signification, generating hybrid meanings that travel beyond professional or national boundaries. Many responded with humour or parallel experiences. One recalled nearly dying after

being told to *"just drink water and tea"*, writing, *"I was a student.. The doctor thought I didn't want to go to school.. Anyway, the doctor said, "Go home, drink some water and tea, viel trinken, you'll be fine* 🤪*"* (131 likes). Others countered with biomedical correction: *"If you knew what antibiotics do to the immune system, you'd actually be thankful* 😮*"*. The influencer intervened to clarify that her illness was bacterial rather than viral, disrupting the inflexible German "truth" through detailed, medically grounded counter-arguments to destabilize the symbols and re-signify them:

> "Don't defend this medical system too much 😂 because my illness was bacterial, but the German doctor diagnosed it as a virus. I kept losing weight, couldn't drink water or eat anything because, excuse my language, my body would throw it back up. I had a constant fever fluctuating between 38 and 39 degrees, with severe muscle pain and extreme thirst, and when I told the doctor about my symptoms, they still said, 'It's normal, just drink water.' I honestly don't know what would've happened to me if I hadn't found an Iranian doctor 😢" (778 likes).

The interplay between her clarification and the audience's mixed reactions illustrates how institutional and experiential knowledge co-produce meaning.

Out of this friction emerges a hybrid zone where institutional truth and lived experience are continually reworked. The influencer occupies intersecting ethe: as a medically trained professional, as a migrant whose expectations of care derive from Iranian and German clinical norms, and as a social-media performer whose visibility depends on relatability. Relatability functions as both a communicative strategy and a platform affordance, inviting followers to re-signify water and antibiotics through their own lived experience and humour. By aligning professional expertise with the emotional vernacular of her network, she converts biomedical discourse into affective storytelling calibrated for Instagram engagement. This "calibrated amateurism" (Abidin 2017) bridges professional authority and everyday frustration, transforming the clinical encounter into a shared, platform-native performance.

Within this Third Space, trust ceases to operate as an institutional given. Instead, it is re-performed and re-signified through communal laughter and trauma. By harnessing Instagram's affordances of visibility, immediacy, and emotional reciprocity, the influencer shifts AMR communication from a unidirectional expert discourse to a transnational, participatory negotiation of what counts as care and credibility.

5.2. Satirizing clinical logic to expose semiotic instability

Influencer 2 appears to invoke familiar stereotypes of Iranian doctors who overprescribe antibiotics and German doctors who prescribe only water, yet her performance simultaneously reveals her awareness of these tropes. Through a comic double role-play, she stages both figures against each other, mocking the usual for/against polarization. This pairing exposes the symbolic certainties of each regime (antibiotics as an unquestioned cure, water as responsible stewardship) only to render both as caricatures. In doing so, she fractures these symbols into renegotiable signs, creating a Third Space where neither medical system retains uncontested authority, and audiences are invited to interpret for themselves.

By quadrupling herself into the roles of both physicians and their bewildered patients, figures that mirror the confusion of a transnational audience, the influencer dismantles the very binaries she stages. Her laughter, gestures, and emoji-laden captions (💧💀😂) further accentuate this slippage from symbolic coherence to semiotic play. The "💧" emoji, repeated across captions and

subtitles, functions as a portable sign of care's absurd minimalism, a shared in-joke among viewers that translates frustration into humour, commiserating, and peer-learning. Instagram's affordances turn this satire into a participatory semiotic field where followers can recognize and amplify the joke through remixing, comments, and emojis.

The sketch also dramatizes a time-lag between two medical temporalities, in which "a moment for revision" (Bhabha 1994, 275) becomes imperative for the migrant patient, allowing alternative knowledges to emerge. As mentioned above, the history of antibiotics has not been flowing smoothly from past to present to future, but it has rather been non-linear and fractured as the past narrative of progress can no longer sustain itself. Moreover, the juxtaposition of the two tempos (hurried abundance versus deliberate inaction) creates a temporal dissonance emblematic of migrants' lived encounters with asynchronous modernities of care. Within this lag, formerly stable symbols fracture into contested signs: what counts as responsible action or prudent restraint shifts across frames, making trust unstable.

As with Influencer 1, Influencer 2 adopts a multiply hybrid ethos: a healthcare professional trained in biomedical rationality, a migrant navigating institutional difference, and a content creator whose success relies on relatability. Her satire draws authority from medical expertise while performing humility through humour, creating an ethos that is simultaneously expert and ordinary, i.e. *calibrated amateurism*. Humour further strengthens her relatability, echoing Knight's (2013, 69) argument that humour "brings friends together in solidarity around particular values" and fosters a sense of shared belonging.

The comment threads that follow, filled with laughing emojis and anecdotes, extend this hybrid authorship by turning spectators into co-interpreters of what counts as sensible care. A highly liked comment voiced shared frustration: *"You might make a joke out of it... but in Germany this is literally what the doctor tells us: drink water, drink tea.."* re-signifying water from a symbol of prudent stewardship into a sign of neglect. Replies layered empathy and critique embedded in personal testimony revealed competing semiotic frames. Some reaffirmed German minimalism: *"I personally agree with the German doctors.. just water, fluids, soup, and rest"*, stabilizing *water* as a symbol of rational care. Some valorized Iranian decisiveness: *"The best medical staff are in Iran.. I always get my treatments done in Iran* 😍*"*, recasting *antibiotics* as a symbol of competence and responsiveness. Across these exchanges, symbols of 'proper' care continually fracture into signs open to reinterpretation, producing a collaborative negotiation of meaning in which neither regime retains uncontested authority.

The influencer's humour becomes a soft technology of trust: by showing that she, too, finds both systems flawed, she forges solidarity across difference, a message a follower clearly endorsed through saying *"Just because our doctors may be wrong doesn't mean theirs are right. It's possible that both approaches are flawed."* In Bhabha's (1994) terms, such a stance emerges within the Third Space, where meaning is not constructed through opposition but through translation and partial understanding. Here, the polarity of "Iranian excess versus German minimalism" dissolves into a collaborative questioning of what care ought to look like, and thereby care fractures into signs. In tandem with care, trust experiences resignification.

5.3. Resignifying trust

The influencers' satire exposes how institutional trust falters when expectations of responsiveness collide with the perceived procedural minimalism of German/EU healthcare, raising doubts

about both competence and moral integrity (Warren 2018). In Influencer 1's complaint that doctors *"just say drink water"*, institutional trust shifts toward interpersonal and particularized trust placed in Iranian doctors viewed as attentive and action-oriented (Uslaner 2002). Influencer 2's parody, by contrast, underscores the fragility of rational-choice trust, the form grounded in predictable, incentive-aligned behaviour (Hardin 2002; 2006; Yamagishi and Yamagishi 1994). By highlighting mismatches between clinical action and patient need, her sketch destabilises the calculations on which such trust depends.

The comment threads show users moving between these trust modes, with humour acting as a key mediator. Shared laughter produces what Uslaner (2002) terms social or generalized trust: an affective, temporary bond rooted in mutual recognition of frustration. As Heath (2000) notes, "people identify with those they trust, and they trust those with whom they identify", and humour strengthens this identification (Meyer 2000). On Instagram, trust becomes a relational affordance, enacted and validated through emojis, likes, replies, and cascades of laughter (Hosking 2014). These practices form a Third Space where biomedical authority and experiential knowledge intersect, and trust is continually re-signed across geo-cultural and digital boundaries.

6. Conclusions: Implications for education and communication

The Instagram posts and comment threads analyzed in this study show how digital platforms function as informal, participatory classrooms where critique, trust, and health literacy develop through peer exchange. Users debated when antibiotics are needed, distinguished bacterial from viral infections, and shared treatment experiences, echoing Westerling et al.'s (2020) call for patient-centred, trust-based education on rational antibiotic use. Unlike formal campaigns that are costly and slow (Allom et al. 2018), nurse-influencers already translate biomedical concepts into relatable narratives for large, affectively engaged audiences. Through humour, role-play, and direct interaction, they generate emotional resonance and sustained dialogue that institutional communication rarely matches. Policymakers should recognize and support this culturally embedded, influencer-led pedagogy.

These findings extend research on health influencer communication, which has tended to prioritize content analysis over interaction. The dynamics of microcelebrity (Senft 2013) and relatability (Abidin 2017) are evident here, as influencers domesticate biomedical knowledge into accessible, hybrid narratives (Wellman 2022). Yet our data show that these processes unfold dialogically: influencers engage directly with followers through replies, clarifications, and commentary, moving beyond parasociality toward what Hendry, Hartung, and Welch (2021) term *influencer pedagogy*. This dialogic exchange resembles the hybrid expertise described by Roe and Kjeldsen (2025) but extends transnationally, turning comment threads into collaborative spaces of cross-cultural health learning and navigating unfamiliar systems.

The dialogic exchanges exemplify Bhabha's (1994) Third Space, where meaning emerges through negotiation. Influencers and followers re-signify AMR messages within migrant cultural life, translating biomedical authority into shared, emotionally resonant understanding. Rather than reproducing binaries, participants co-produce culturally legible health knowledge, making the Third Space a pedagogical site of care and trust.

These insights align with the WHO/Europe and RIVM's Tailoring AMR Strategies (TAP) framework (2021), which stresses that "knowledge alone is not enough", and with Charani's (2022) claim that AMR interventions must attend to socio-cultural contexts. Influencer-led exchanges illustrate

such context-specific engagement. Lindenmeyer et al. (2016) likewise highlight the importance of understanding migrants' perspectives to improve antibiotic communication. The interactions examined here respond to that need by creating communicative bridges where cultural expectations and biomedical rationales intersect. Integrating these trust-based practices into formal AMR education could enhance equity. More future research should examine how migrant nurse-influencers operationalize participatory learning.

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POP-CULTURE, THE WRITING CLASSROOM, AND THE RHETORIC OF HIP-HOP

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Abstract

In this paper, I will contextualize hip-hop in the digital space, building on discussion centering on hip-hop's earliest days to consider how the genre has evolved in a way that continues to make it a rich site of research and conversation in the writing classroom. I will focus on a few key artists with great impact on the genre (based on established metrics used to measure popularity, such as streams, album sales, and recognition). These artists, I argue, push their audiences in particularly important, if sometimes arguably unsettling ways. I will also draw connections to social media, with a specific focus on Instagram as an extension of the creative output of current popular hip-hop artists to demonstrate the far-reaching potential of such digital spaces. I later discuss some of the advantages of hip-hop in the context of new technologies as a tool for teaching rhetorical strategy. I will identify the relationship between hip-hop and key objectives of the writing classroom, identifying how hip-hop can offer students an opportunity to examine different ways of communicating a message that accommodates both traditional and innovative media spaces.

Keywords: *performance, communication, hip-hop, media, popular culture, social media*

1. Background

I seek to engage with some important components of the scholarship on the musical art form of rap, and of hip-hop culture more generally, with particular attention to its continued value to the undergraduate writing and rhetoric classroom. Through engaging research within the areas of performance studies, writing studies, and Black digital rhetoric, I aim to showcase some of the reach and strategic use of hip-hop in the writing and rhetoric classroom as a tool for teaching.

I'll first share some of the background that is foundational to the argument for the form in the classroom. Some scholars have laid important groundwork within this conversation and championed the place for hip-hop in the college curriculum, highlighting the genre's importance as part of popular culture in the United States. In the book, *Hip-hop Music,* Marcia A. Lusted reminds us how young a genre hip-hop is, highlighting the importance of the historical context of it emerging in the 1970s. She writes,

> Popular mainstream music was making a transition from the protest songs of the 1960s, which often dealt with issues such as the antiwar movement and questioning authority, to the songs of the 1980s, which included more lighthearted party and dance music... Funk music grew out of the rhythm and blues, jazz, and soul music of the 1960s, but with a heavier beat and psychedelic sounds. Compared with the lighter, dance-oriented popular music, hip-hop stood out as a very different musical genre. It was closer to the rebellion songs of the 1960s, which protested the Vietnam War (1954– 1975) and other social problems (Lusted 2018, 16).

Lusted highlights the social climate hip-hop emerges in, and it's important to note that as the genre grew, so did the various components that come together to make hip-hop culture. From the start, hip-hop wasn't only about the lyrics. Geneva Smitherman highlights in "The Chain Remain the Same: Communicative Practices in the Hip Hop Nation," that "The term hip-hop refers to urban youth culture in America. Hip-hop is manifested in such cultural productions as graffiti art, breakdancing, styles of dress..." (Smitherman 1997, 3). As the music developed, so did the various elements that were a part of the culture, including hairstyles, haircuts, and fashion. As the well-established hip-hop artist KRS One emphasizes in "Hip-Hop vs. Rap", "Rap is something you do, hip-hop is something you live".

In conversations about hip-hop's influence, it is important to keep in mind the impact the culture has had not just in the United States, but globally. With its roots in the 1970s, Bronx, New York, hip-hop's influence extends far beyond its early beginning by DJ Kool Herc, who is credited as its founder. Vanessa Oswald points out in *Hip-Hop, A Cultural and Musical Revolution*, "As hip-hop culture became more widespread in American society, it also expanded its reach into different countries, with each country incorporating a bit of their own cultural heritage into the movement" (Oswald 2019, 73). That people worldwide would be inspired by hip-hop culture and seek to be a part of the movement is not surprising. The genre invites creative approach, style, expressive language, and authenticity. The 2023 special issue of the academic journal *Global Hip-hop Studies,* titled "Hip-hop Atlas," is one publication that sought to document some of that growing impact and global conversation. This issue, released as part of a celebration of hip-hop's 50th anniversary, offers helpful information to readers wanting to get a sense of the wide reach of hip-hop culture in the world, including how hip-hop has developed in each country featured in the issue. This far-reaching and dynamic impact continues to be a subject to be researched, and the genre serves as a rich site of conversation. As scholar Jeff Chang points out, "...hip-hop's internal creative force does not rest. In the time that it takes for a group of kids in the neighborhood to go from wide-eyed youngans to confident teen arbiters of style, slang, swing and swagger to grown-folk moving

on and out…the culture has turned over again" (Chang 2006, x). Chang conveys hip-hop's fast-paced nature and its propensity for change. Hip-hop is ever-evolving, which makes it a continuously productive and enriching site of study and discussion.

2. Modern ways of accessing music and identifying artist impact through social media

In our current technological landscape, digital spaces factor into this conversation shifting the narrative to extend how hip-hop artists' content is consumed. It is important to consider some of the ongoing influences of hip-hop, including the influence of some key artists who have recently had a great impact on the genre. This is based on established metrics used to measure popularity, such as streams, album sales, and recognition. These are artists who've musically had a great impact in recent years and who I identify as having a matched influence in the online narratives they've started to create. These artists, I argue, push their audiences in particularly important, if sometimes unsettling, ways.

Much has changed in recent years regarding how music is accessed, primarily now through sources such as Apple Music and Spotify streams, YouTube, Clubhouse, and SoundCloud. CDs and records are very often now artifacts of nostalgia. According to the music data tracking site, Chartmasters.org, Drake was recorded as the most-streamed rapper in 2024 with 12.11 billion streams. This was also his eighth year taking the honor of the most-streamed rapper. Runners up included Travis Scott, 2nd, Ye, 3rd, Eminem, 4th, and Kendrick Lamar, 5th (Turner-Williams 2024). In pure album sales, however, the top-selling album of 2024 was Eminem's *The Death of Slim Shady* with 160,745 units sold, while his total units sold, including streams, were 772,470.

Radio and music videos have become just a few of the many ways people can access music, with traditional outlets facing decreasing audiences. With all these choices that audiences now have, artists and their management are tasked with developing innovative ways to engage listeners and maintain support. A key part of this has become listener engagement, with artists linking to their work and posting about new releases on social media.

3. The hip-hop artist and social media

We might look at a digital social media platform such as Instagram as a productive context for examining communication and presentation in connection with the messaging in hip-hop artists' musical output. Social media spaces like Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, Twitch, and Snapchat present audiences with the opportunity to examine different ways of communicating a message, capitalizing on aspects of performers' discographies with visuals that also build a narrative. As Luke Fox points out in XXL magazine, "In the amount of time, it takes you to say "trigger fingers turn to Twitter fingers" [a quoted reference from Drake's 2015 diss track, "Back to Back," in response to fellow rapper Meek Mill's diss track]

> …your favorite rapper has likely tweeted a fresh music video. They could've revealed a new 'fit on Instagram. Maybe they shared an album update on Facebook or thrown down a dance challenge on TikTok. They might've teased a song snippet in an IG story, hosted a discussion through Clubhouse, published a down-and-dirty image on OnlyFans, offered a sneak peek at a studio session on Snapchat or uploaded a vlog on YouTube. And, there's a big chance that you interacted by liking, commenting or posting an emoji. Social media has become hip-hop's outlet of choice to get straight to the point with a message in myriad ways (Fox 2021).

There are layered references here. The initial reference of "trigger fingers turn to Twitter fingers" makes a tongue-in-cheek reference to rappers who may typically be associated with violence, becoming what might be considered internet thugs, opting to type out their frustrations through a tweet. Fox goes on to point to the dynamic nature of the visual and written communication of artists on various social media platforms, but also the speed at which rappers can release new material. Audiences might even come to expect some of their favorite artists to make themselves accessible in this way if the artist has been engaging through social media consistently. With so many ways of quickly sharing with their audiences online, there is constantly new content to watch, read, listen to, and unpack.

In the "Report of the Committee on the Advancement and Refinement of Rhetorical Criticism", the authors demonstrate how a rhetorical perspective "...may be applied to any human act, process, product, or artifact" that "may formulate, sustain, or modify attention, perceptions, attitudes, or behavior" (Sloan et al. 1971, 220). The authors call on us to think about what counts in the list of artifacts that can be studied using rhetoric. They extend an approach that can broaden the way we engage visual texts when applied to modern day social media contexts. I highlight Instagram as a platform that offers the ability to present curated grids that audiences can view by visiting a user's profile. On Instagram there is more value placed on visual aesthetic than on a text-based social media platform such as Twitter. The addition of Instagram posts and curated grids to the way in which artists can present themselves, I argue, has become a point of reference that invites a comprehensive look at how several actors work together towards the fullness of impact of those artists who capitalize on these digital spaces.

Drawing connections to social media sites more generally, with a specific focus on these sites as extensions of the creative output of current popular hip-hop artists, it is evident that digital engagement has far-reaching potential. There is an opportunity for artists to have contact with fans directly, potentially strengthening their fan bases and growing their follower counts, which can then result in additional revenue through support of their projects. An artist's increased visibility can work to their benefit in online community engagement. Many hip-hop artists in social media spaces have furthered their impact, for better or worse. One example of the effectiveness of this can be found in one of hip-hop's most notable rap battles, a heated exchange of diss tracks between Drake and Kendrick Lamar. As Promoed reports, "Over on Instagram, California hip-hop artist [Kendrick] Lamar gained an impressive 1.7 million followers, while Toronto hip-hop artist Drake gained 247,000" (Gliku and Lynagh 2024). This rise in follower count occurred towards the start of Drake and Kendrick Lamar's diss track exchange in 2024 and the general popularity of Lamar's single titled "Not Like Us" might be credited with the great increase of social media followers. Notably, Drake released his diss track to Lamar, titled "Taylor Made Freestyle," directly to Instagram. Spaces like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat provide outlets for artists to extend their impact as fans flock to these digital spaces where promotion for new music can help to boost sales for artists' records and increase their impact.

Social media access, of course, comes with its share of challenges for artists, especially regarding ease of access to their audience. Since social media operates on a rapid currency of exchange between users and their audiences, the moment an artist with a large follower count puts out a message, there is potential for it to spread quickly. Controversial hip-hop artist Kanye West, for example, has become as known for his social media rants, mental health struggles, and hateful online posts as much as for his music. West's X account has previously been restricted for antisemitic comments and other material deemed inappropriate or offensive. As The Stanford Daily Reports, "Kanye West's social media activity on X...presents a disturbing case study in how

platforms continue to struggle with the intersection of celebrity influence and content moderation" (Gottlieb 2025). According to the outlet,

> ...platforms shouldn't ignore the harm caused by giving someone in an apparent mental health crisis unchecked access to and influence over millions of followers. In fact, 32 incidents of antisemitic attacks linked to West's online hate speech have been recorded since 2022. It doesn't help that social media platforms benefit from high engagement. Since contentious posts drive more traffic, companies profit more, potentially at the expense of people's health (Gottlieb 2025).

Gottlieb exposes the incentives for social media platforms that make stricter regulation less likely. With this freedom, artists can cultivate their social media spaces, and fans who follow them can get more access than ever before. An Artist's unfiltered rant shared with an audience can create a cycle with fans having harmful accessibility and potentially encouraging the artist further through their continued engagement. We might ask how the choices these artists and their teams make in representing themselves online serve as effective or ineffective in relation to the messaging in their music.

Nicki Minaj is one such hip-hop artist who serves as a prominent example of a celebrity with a notable social media presence and following, having 220 million followers as of June 2025. The artist famously announced her pregnancy on social media and maintains an active online presence that promotes her work while visually reinforcing the themes in much of her music, particularly those centered on a luxurious and exciting lifestyle. Minaj's posts that range from stylized photoshoots and business promotions to curated glimpses of her everyday life (often featuring bright pink, which has become a signature element of her branding) make for visually captivating images that can attract an audience. Referring to her fans as Barbies or Barbs is one way the artist endears them to her, since fans who adopt this title often indicate their devoted status as members of the artist's fan community. An artist's maintenance of a strong social media presence helps to keep fans actively engaged.

Social media sites present spaces where hip-hop artists can further share with the public about themselves, building more of a connection than would have been possible in earlier days of the art form. I refer here to the limit in reach of spaces most popular in the 90's, such as street ciphers, MTV music videos, and interviews in music magazines like The Source, Vibe, and XXL (Double XL), which can be credited in helping to popularize hip-hop culture, music, and trends during that time. In these days, artists maintained more mystery as without social media, there was more distance between the artists and their audiences. With so much added access to artists' work and lives, depending on what they share, there are also new ways to observe an artist's impact. Looking at how various actors work together helps to consider the fullness of artists' influence, and this invites an array of possibilities for sites of exploration and conversation.

4. Approaches that can yield productive results in the first-year classroom

With attention to analyzing artist messaging, we might consider the value of a multimodal approach. In her book, *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture*, Deanna Sellnow emphasizes that the rapid technological advances we've seen since the 1960s call for updated rhetorical methods. Sellnow writes, "Although the neo-Aristotelian approach remains a viable method for rhetorical criticism today, it is no longer the only or even the primary method for examining the many kinds of

rhetorical texts that may influence us today" (Sellnow 2017, 43). This neo-Aristotelian approach is well-established using Aristotle's theory of rhetoric to analyze persuasive messages for effectiveness with attention to the audience and the use of rhetorical principles such as pathos, ethos, and logos. While this method can be effective in a variety of rhetorical situations, many scholars have worked to develop effective strategies for engaging new media.

In using social media platforms such as Instagram as sites of study for the classroom, an approach that includes focused attention to visual rhetoric can help students to think about layers of meaning and the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of artists' messaging. In *Defining Visual Rhetorics,* Sonja K. Foss explains its importance by identifying the "pervasiveness of the visual symbol and its impact on contemporary culture" (Foss 2012, 303). Foss identifies that "Three characteristics appear to define artifacts or products conceptualized as visual rhetoric: They must be symbolic, involve human intervention, and be presented to an audience for the purpose of communicating" (Foss 2012, 304–305). These characteristics convey that images carry ideas to be interpreted. Additionally, it supports that visual artifacts become rhetorical when they have the potential to influence others. Emphasis is placed here on intentional creation and audience impact. Furthering this, in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks points out that images participate in the production and circulation of shared beliefs. She writes, "Fierce critical interrogation is sometimes the only practice that can pierce the wall of denial consumers of images construct so as not to face that the real world of image-making is political–that politics of domination inform the way the vast majority of images we consume are constructed and marketed" (hooks 1992, 5). Hooks references interrogation as a "practice" important to challenging the images we encounter. The meaning of an image is not fixed as the viewers become active participants in meaning-making. Importantly, she makes clear that images are not neutral. Foss's and hooks's consideration of visual rhetoric can help students in the first-year writing classroom to understand how images shared by artists work together to communicate meaning to their audiences. Bell hooks's attention to visual rhetoric elucidates this in specific ways relevant to engaging African American rhetoric, as she details in her work how visual representation is deeply implicated in systems of power and identity.

One approach Sellnow highlights that can be particularly useful when engaging visual media in the classroom is the narrative perspective, "a rhetorical method for examining ideological arguments conveyed through storytelling" (Sellnow 2017, 43). Scholars such as Walter Fisher, Sonja K. Foss, and Kenneth Burke highlight narrative as a mode through which audiences interpret and construct meaning. As Sellnow states, "A narrative perspective is valuable for studying popular culture texts because it proposes a systematic means by which to analyze how they function as stories and what underlying ideological messages are being conveyed in them" (Sellnow 2017, 54). This approach suggests that artifacts such as music, performances, and online content can be interpreted as narratives that reflect cultural values and beliefs.

The method of centering storytelling works well in a hip-hop context as the form, by nature, values storytelling. Additionally, scholars such as Geneva Smitherman have put forward in their scholarship the value of the role of the griot within a historical context and within the hip-hop community. The "griot" historically is a "storyteller and cultural historian" (Smitherman 1997, 4). Relatedly, Adam Banks provides additional ways of thinking of the griot in a digital context in his book *Digital Griot: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age*. Banks draws a relation between African American rhetorical traditions and digital communication, exploring the possibilities for the classroom. Banks states,

> I'm interested in the rhetorical possibilities that emerge from the culture that gave us the remix. The Preacher, storyteller, standup comic, everyday black people in conversation, and the DJ can help black students see themselves reflected more genuinely in the writing classroom and theory and can benefit all students looking for a greater appreciation of the multiple connected and diverging cultural influences on writing in a society that is (very slowly) becoming more genuinely inclusive and multicultural (Banks 2011, 14).

Banks points to various roles within Black communities, placing emphasis on the value of Black students seeing themselves through their recognition of these figures. Here, Banks also highlights the value to the entire classroom. Recognizing different rhetorical traditions can give all a greater understanding of others and create a more inclusive learning environment.

By examining how artists construct narratives about themselves through social media posts, music videos, and public statements, we can better understand how these digital stories shape audience perceptions and communicate broader cultural messages. We might then examine this in relation to the messages in the artist's music catalogue to consider how they work in tandem. As a method, storytelling and the role of the griot give flexibility to adapt to many hip-hop contexts, offering approaches that can act as a common meeting ground to consider the narratives that are created.

5. A model for social media analysis: Gilyard's & Banks' Insights on Black Twitter

With emerging technologies come new spaces for engagement, but also the opportunity to consider approaches that might be best suited for a given object of study. In their book *On African American Rhetoric*, Keith Gilyard and Adam Banks discuss Black Twitter as a rhetorical community. Black Twitter refers to the community of Black social media users on Twitter (now X) who collectively engage in cultural and political commentary often creating humorous posts and communicating through shared linguistic and rhetorical practices. Gilyard and Banks center Black Twitter as a modern space of African American rhetorical production. The authors' study serves as a model for approaches scholars might take to highlight sites of production in the ways they make meaning in culturally specific ways. The authors emphasize that scholars of African American rhetoric should look to these new technologies "as a site of inquiry rather than as merely a site of production of discourse" (Gilyard and Banks 2018, 123). This positions similar spaces as potential sites for further exploration, potentially leading to greater understanding of processes and practices. We might use this as a call for more attention to these sites of meaning-making and expression and lead with thoughtful curiosity within these spaces.

6. Hip-hop in the writing classroom

In Marc Lamont Hill's book, *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity*, Hill identifies three questions that drive the research of his essential book. These questions are, "Why does it work?" "For whom does it work?" and "What's at stake when it works?" (Hill 2009, xviii). I've adopted these questions as helpful to my teaching practice, as they inspire intentional assignment planning. In his book, Hill examines how hip-hop can be used in the classroom to create meaningful learning experiences for students. An important part of this work and other works that champion hip-hop in the classroom is the willingness to try new methods and

to engage a genre in the classroom that is both an obvious and often overlooked site of inquiry. In *Schooling Hip-hop: Expanding Hip-Hop Based Education Across the Curriculum*, Eve L. Ewing writes, "given the tremendous force of hip-hop as a global phenomenon, in greater and greater numbers students at all levels are denizens of a hip-hop universe" (Ewing 2014, 127). As hip-hop has such a powerful reach, globally many students have grown up immersed in the culture. This positions hip-hop not only as a rich site of study, but also as a necessary one.

Here, I highlight the inclusion of hip-hop as a tool to advance key objectives of my themed first-year writing class on race and ethnicity. In this class, I assign students to read a variety of texts on our theme, and they are encouraged to think critically about matters of identity, culture, and social justice. In the class, students spend a few weeks during the semester researching and writing about strategies in communication within the genre of hip-hop as it relates to the aforementioned topics.

Students are encouraged to consider how meaning and persuasion are produced through symbolic forms that influence how audiences perceive and interpret messages. This offers students an opportunity to examine popular audio and visual texts with a focus on different ways of imparting messages, accommodating both traditional and innovative spaces. Some of the goals I identify for the class are helping students to become more astute in their research capabilities through strengthening their reading of audio, written, and visual texts. In this undergraduate classroom, some key common interests are: critical analysis, argument, revision, collaboration, meta-cognition, and research. Hip-hop as a form in the writing classroom has the potential to help students build skills in each of these areas since it offers varied cultural texts that communicate relevant social perspectives.

In past versions of this class, students analyzed an artist's Instagram rhetoric with attention to how digital storytelling can shape perceptions of hip-hop artists' identities. Students are also advised to think about how digital platforms can change the way we understand messaging and audience. Engagement with hip-hop audio and visual texts invites them to do innovative work that requires research and draws inspiration from the artist(s) to build something new, akin to a hip-hop remix. It opens the door for important reflection and meta-cognitive work.

The shape a student project can take includes traditionally written work as well as multimedia work, bringing together written text and media formats such as audio, photography, memes, screengrabs, and video. A multimedia approach gives students the chance to try out basic media production using their own tools or making use of relevant resources on campus. Adam Banks speaks to the call to embrace new technologies, stating "even scholars once perceived as Aristotelians...are making the case for multimedia writing as central to how we reimagine composition as a field" (Banks 2011, 11). Banks points to the need to "reimagine" the field, a position put forward in 2011 that remains relevant as our world has become even more digital.

I frame the potential of students' writing on hip-hop as deeply valuing the history and conventions of the genre as well as its evolving nature. I encourage focus on the variety of ways hip-hop invites audiences to think about the contexts it emerges in and the development of the genre, not only the music, but as a cultural movement and influential lifestyle. I see the inclusion of hip-hop in my first-year writing classroom as a productive way to teach communication strategy through a contemporary lens, identifying how audio, written, and visual language is used and to what effect. Students are asked to locate specific areas of interest within the genre to write about and/or create responses to. Students' assignments for assessment also include written and audio submissions.

Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz makes the argument in the *English Education* themed issue titled "Why Black Girls' Literacies Matter: New Literacies for a New Era" that "...instruction must be urgent and purposeful in responding to and anticipating the social context of our times" (Sealey-Ruiz 2016, 295). Sealey-Ruiz prompts educators to think about what "urgent" and "purposeful" instruction might look like in our classrooms. The question emerges of how we meet the new technologies in ways that can help us to empower our students to feel equipped to better engage and think critically about the rhetorical situations they encounter. I draw a connection here to scholar Keith Gilyard who states in *Voices of the Self* that, "A pedagogy is only successful if it makes knowledge or skill achievable while at the same time allowing students to maintain their own sense of identity" (Gilyard 1991, 11–12). Gilyard underscores the significance of fostering classroom environments that not only support learning, but also enable students to express their individual identities. The dynamic force and impact of hip-hop invite students to consider rhetorical strategy and components of construction while also considering autonomy in art and the importance of representation. Students are given the opportunity to conceptualize research projects, taking into account not only the music the artists put out into the world, but also artist engagement with the audience by other means through digital spaces. The reality of digital spaces as an important aspect of how hip-hop culture is currently experienced and discussed has become an essential matter of consideration that also invites inventive projects as students further develop multimedia literacies.

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WITCHCRAFT IN YOUR LIPS? – PROSODY AS PERSUASION IN ADVERTISING

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Abstract

In this study, we consider the way that elements of prosody are used in advertising texts to produce effects corresponding to the three classical strands of persuasion: ethos, logos, and pathos. By looking at the connection between prosodic features and persuasion, we aim to draw conclusions which will assist in the interpretation of multimodal arguments featuring linguistic content expressed in speech and to illustrate the flexibility and continued relevance of the traditional rhetorical categories in the age of digital communication. By considering several examples of audio-visual persuasive texts, we are able to illustrate the range of effects that can be achieved and the variety of rhetorical and argumentative techniques with which they can be combined. We show that the features of accent, rate of speech, and intonation can all be employed with the goal of persuasion across a variety of contexts and wgenres.

Keywords: *advertising genre, argumentation, prosody, rhetoric*

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Persuasive power of prosodic features

Prosodic features of spoken language, such as intonation, voice quality, tempo, pitch, and pauses, have been extensively examined within the field of nonverbal communication. They are considered a crucial component of nonverbal communication because prosody conveys information that goes beyond the lexical content of speech. Prosodic cues can reveal information about a speaker's emotional state, personality traits, socioeconomic status, and their relationship to both the topic and the audience. These insights are particularly important, sometimes even crucial, in rhetoric.

When individuals aim to achieve their primary rhetorical goal, namely persuasion, they may deliberately manipulate their voice and other prosodic features. For example, speakers may attempt to enhance perceptions of confidence and self-assurance or to reduce cues associated with nervousness, fear, or insecurity. A substantial body of research demonstrates widespread awareness of the persuasive importance of prosodic features, both among those who seek to persuade and those who are the targets of persuasion across various social contexts.

Experimental studies involving systematic manipulation of human voices have provided strong evidence that changes in vocal characteristics significantly influence perceptions of speakers. For instance, Puts et al. (2006; 2007) manipulated male voices and found that lower-pitched voices were rated by other men as more physically and socially dominant. Similarly, when female voices were altered to have a lower fundamental frequency, they were also perceived as more dominant (Borkowska and Pawlowski 2011). Anolli and Ciceri (2002) further demonstrated that men who employed greater vocal modulation and gradually deepened their voices during interactions with unfamiliar women were more successful in securing future dates in a simulated dating scenario.

The sound of an individual's voice thus appears to be an important external attribute used as a cue in assessing potential mates and plays a significant role in interpersonal attraction (Oguchi & Kikuchi 1997). Feinberg et al. (2005) experimentally lowered the fundamental frequencies of recorded male voices, which led to higher ratings of masculinity, physical size, and age by female listeners. These findings are consistent with a broader body of research (e.g., Zuckerman & Miyake 1993), which suggests that vocal attractiveness can be as influential as physical attractiveness in everyday social interactions.

Similar effects of vocal characteristics have been observed across different types of discourse. Bartsch (2008), for example, examined the influence of voice in customers' evaluations of voice-to-voice service encounters. Her experimental study showed that service providers with more attractive voices were rated higher in terms of competence and effort, and overall customer satisfaction was also greater. Surawski and Ossoff (2006) investigated the effects of physical and vocal attractiveness on perceptions of politicians and found that higher attractiveness in both domains positively influenced impressions, leading to perceptions of greater similarity, better comparative judgments, and increased affiliation. Importantly, the combined effect of physical and vocal attractiveness was synergistic: targets rated high on both dimensions were viewed most favourably, highlighting the persistence of attractiveness stereotypes in political contexts. In political discourse more broadly, Rezlescu et al. (2015) demonstrated that voices, much like faces, contribute to the formation of consistent trait impressions, including trustworthiness, attractiveness, and dominance.

Across contexts and professions, a general conclusion emerging from this body of research is that attractive voices tend to elicit more positive impressions. Zuckerman and Driver (1989) showed that judges reliably agreed on assessments of vocal attractiveness and that more attractive

voices were associated with more favourable personality evaluations. Subsequent studies replicated these findings, indicating that the effects of vocal attractiveness are comparable in magnitude to those of physical attractiveness (e.g., Berry 1991; 1992; Zuckerman et al. 1990; Zuckerman and Miyake 1993).

More recent research has further extended these findings by demonstrating that attractive voices are more likely to be judged as possessing higher levels of moral goodness (Wu et al. 2024). The authors argue that perceptions of vocal beauty and moral goodness involve parallel cognitive and emotional processes and may rely on shared underlying mechanisms, thereby supporting the well-established "beauty is good" effect.

In addition to influencing evaluations of attractiveness and character, prosodic features also play a crucial role in conveying emotions. Vocal expressions of specific emotions such as anger, fear, happiness, and sadness are generally recognized with accuracy well above chance levels, even across cultures, and are associated with relatively distinct acoustic patterns (Juslin and Laukka 2003; Laukka 2008).

Taken together, these findings illustrate the persuasive potential of prosodic features, which are frequently exploited in specific persuasive contexts, such as the advertising genre.

1.2. Prosodic features in the advertising genre

Advertising represents a distinct genre within public discourse. Some authors, such as El-daly (2011), argue that advertising can be considered a form of discourse in its own right, insofar as it influences not only linguistic structures but also lifestyles and the content of everyday interactions and exchanges. Similarly, Beasley and Danesi (2002) claim that advertising has become an integral part of the "spiritual encyclopedia" of almost everyone living in contemporary society. As a genre, advertising has its own specific characteristics, functions, and goals, which have been widely examined in genre studies (e.g., Bhatia 2005). For the purposes of this paper, the most relevant of these characteristics is its persuasive nature.

As O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2004, 27) note, "effective advertising is, almost always, persuasive advertising; and advertising that does not seek to persuade (relying, for example, on attention-getting or repeated exposure effects alone) is really missing an opportunity." The role of prosodic features in the advertising genre has been explored in previous research by Kišiček (2014; 2016; 2018) and Groarke and Kišiček (2024), who conclude that prosodic features may contribute to persuasion through ethos and pathos, and even logos, that is, they can function as arguments.

The clearest, strongest, and most direct connection between prosodic features and the classical rhetorical modes of persuasion is their relationship to pathos. Pathos, according to Aristotle (1991), involves shaping the emotional disposition of the audience: "There is persuasion through the hearers when they are led to feel emotion [pathos] by the speech; for we do not give the same judgment when grieved and rejoicing, or when being friendly and hostile" (*Rhetoric*, 1.2.1356a). In line with this view, O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2004) emphasize that emotion is a major factor in persuasive advertising, particularly when the aim is to change viewpoints rather than merely to demonstrate the logical implications of data. When individuals are in the grip of emotion, they not only feel differently but also tend to think differently. Consequently, advertising that resonates emotionally has a greater chance of inducing changes in beliefs, values, motives, wants, and desires than advertising based on logic alone.

Prosodic features of spoken language are closely linked to emotional expression. Empirical research has shown that emotional expressions conveyed through voice can regulate social behaviour by eliciting affective responses in listeners (e.g., Darwin [1872] 1998; Ekman 2003; Russell 2003). At the same time, O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2004) argue that although emotionally resonant appeals can attract attention and even prompt action, persuasive advertising typically also needs to demonstrate that the proposed action, such as purchasing a product, is socially appropriate and can be "rationally" justified.

In this respect, prosodic features may also play a crucial role in the structure of arguments themselves (see Kišiček 2014). Moreover, prosodic cues contribute to perceptions of speaker credibility. In the context of video commercials, this role is often fulfilled by a voice-over, whose prosodic qualities can significantly enhance the persuasive force of the verbally expressed argument.

1.3. Argumentative value of prosodic features

The argumentative value of prosodic features is most commonly examined within the field of multimodal argumentation (see Kišiček 2026). At first glance, or rather, at first hearing, it may seem difficult to conceive of prosodic features such as intonation, voice quality, or pitch as performing an argumentative function. One of the most obvious obstacles lies in the difficulty of separating the verbal component of speech from its prosodic realization. Because prosodic features are inseparably connected to words, it may appear problematic to determine how prosody could override, modify, or independently contribute to arguments expressed verbally.

A productive way to examine the argumentative value of a prosodic feature is to reconstruct the argument and then test whether the argument changes when the prosodic feature in question is altered. In most cases, prosodic features merely reinforce the verbally expressed argument by supporting the verbal message. However, in some of the most analytically interesting cases, prosodic features play an essential role: altering them results in a change to the argument itself.

For this reason, it is important to distinguish between the rhetorical value of prosodic features, namely, their contribution to ethos or pathos and their argumentative value, that is, their contribution to logos. This distinction is not always easy to make, given the often thin line between rhetorical and argumentative functions. In particular, ethos may simultaneously function as part of logos. For example, politicians commonly invest considerable effort in speech delivery and vocal training, fully aware that vocal cues strongly influence how they are perceived. By cultivating prosodic features associated with strength, determination, and confidence, qualities highly valued in political leadership, speakers enhance their ethos. Yet in a political campaign in which a politician explicitly argues that they should be elected president because of their confidence, determination, and strength, prosodic features that convey these qualities no longer merely support ethos; they become part of the argument itself. This effect relies on a widely shared stereotype according to which a strong voice signals a strong character and confidence. In such cases, prosodic features function as components of the argumentative structure.

Similarly, appeals to pathos and logos often intertwine. Consider, for instance, a speaker seeking help as a victim of abuse or violence. While such a plea clearly involves an appeal to emotion, the appeal to empathy may also function as a legitimate argument. Prosodic features such as a shaky voice, reduced volume, and slow tempo can contribute to the perception of the speaker as vulnerable, fragile, or distressed, thereby strengthening the argument for assistance.

The main objective of this paper is to examine when prosodic features have rhetorical and/or argumentative value and to reconstruct arguments in order to test whether prosodic features merely provide additional support for verbally expressed arguments or whether they constitute an essential part of the argument itself.

2. Methodology and data

For the purposes of this analysis, three audiovisual advertisements were examined: two public service announcements promoting social campaigns and one commercial advertisement.

The first example is *Smoothness*[1], a public ser vice announcement created in 2011 by the Swedish organization IQ with the aim of raising awareness about alcohol addiction. This advertisement formed part of a broader campaign designed to challenge the "glamorized" image of alcohol frequently promoted in international marketing.

The second example, *Audition*[2], was also part of a wider social campaign addressing domestic abuse. The advertisement was released in 2016 by Amnesty International as part of its *Stop Violence Against Women* initiative.

The third example is a commercial for the insurance company GEICO. The *Don LaFontaine* GEICO commercial[3], which first aired in 2006, is one of the most well-known entries in the company's "Real People" campaign. It features the legendary voice actor in a rare on-screen appearance, humorously referencing his iconic status as the "King of Movie Trailers".

Although these examples differ in purpose, genre, and communicative goals, they are all particularly relevant from the perspective of prosodic features in advertising. In each case, prosodic elements are carefully designed and deliberately incorporated to achieve specific persuasive effects, and they constitute a crucial component of the overall message.

The prosodic features subjected to perceptual and acoustic analysis were pitch and voice quality, pitch variation, speech rate and pauses, and accent. While other prosodic features – such as intonation, rhythm, or intensity – could also be examined in different datasets, the initial perceptual analysis of the selected examples indicated that these features were particularly salient and, therefore, warranted more detailed examination using acoustic measurements. Pitch was analyzed by measuring fundamental frequency (F0) using Praat (Boersma and Weenink 2021), a software program for acoustic analysis. Pitch range was calculated on the basis of minimum and maximum F0 values. The pitch contour settings were adjusted to the speakers (50Hz and 300Hz for the floor and ceiling of male voices and 100Hz and 300Hz for female voices).

Speech rate was expressed in syllables per second following a common practice (Shriberg et al. 2000). The number of syllables in each of the recordings was counted with the use of Text Analyzer[4]. Pauses were traced and measured with the use of Praat. The accent of the protagonists in the commercial was analyzed perceptually by a native speaker, namely one of the authors of this paper.

The results of the perceptual and acoustic analyses were compared across the three examples and interpreted within the framework of multimodal rhetorical discourse.

1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovfyUUO68FA&t=3s

2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-f2LFUCnqU

3 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJMGS7lowT8

4 Online Utility – Free Online Software Utilities https://www.online-utility.org/

3. Results and discussion

3.1. *Smoothness*

The advertisement opens with cinematic, atmospheric shots of a bar accompanied by a narrator who describes the refined qualities and "smoothness" of whisky. The visuals depict cheerful people enjoying drinks in an elegant setting. At a crucial moment, however, the narrator's tone changes. While the "smooth" visual setting initially continues, he begins to recite statistics about the harm caused by alcohol consumption in Sweden, such as: "*One in five children suffer because their mum or dad drinks too much*".

As these facts are presented, the bar scene gradually deteriorates. Viewers are shown people passed out, visibly distressed, or engaging in violent behaviour, culminating in the arrival of the police. What initially appears glamorous and pleasurable ultimately becomes disturbing rather than joyful. This shift is a central element of the film, creating a stark contrast with conventional alcohol advertising and implying that such advertisements conceal the darker realities of alcohol abuse.

From an argumentative perspective, the film can be reconstructed as follows:

- Claim: Alcohol abuse is a serious social problem in Sweden.
- Reasons: Verbally expressed data concerning harm caused by alcohol (e.g., children suffering due to parental alcohol abuse, alcohol-related violence, addiction).
- Additional support: Auditory elements, including both prosodic and non-prosodic sound features.

Sound plays an important, indeed, crucial role in conveying the message of the film. Non-prosodic elements such as background music and sounds associated with drinking (e.g., pouring and gulping) contribute to the atmosphere. However, it is the prosodic features of the narrator's voice, particularly changes in tone, pauses, and speech rate, that signal the shift in the core message.

The transition is first marked by a long, meaningful pause:

"Taman. Smoothness in a bottle." (pause: 6.6 seconds)

"But there's more than smoothness."

Further long pauses underscore the gravity of the message:

"In Sweden, for example, one in five children suffer because their mum or dad drinks too much." (pause: 3 seconds)

"Eight out of ten acts of violence in public places are alcohol related."

The speech rate slows considerably toward the end of the video (approximately 3 syllables per second), culminating in the rhetorical question: *"Now, how smooth is that?"* Pauses and reduced speech rate function as key prosodic devices here. As Rodero (2020) argues, a slower speech rate influences cognitive processing and modifies listeners' physiological responses. In this film, pauses not only slow down information processing but also add dramatic emphasis, reinforcing the seriousness of the verbally expressed content.

Another important prosodic feature is pitch variation. High levels of pitch variation have been shown to correlate with perceptions of liveliness and charisma (Chun 2002; Hinks and Edlund 2009), perceived competence and agency (Zhang et al. 2016), and increased persuasiveness (Suppes 2015). These effects are also evident in this example, where pitch variation contributes to

the expression of the narrator's changing attitude. Acoustic measurements confirm differences in pitch range corresponding to shifts in the message:

- *"Taman. Smoothness in a bottle."*
  (min F0 = 65 Hz; max F0 = 128 Hz; range = 63 Hz)
- *"But there's more than smoothness."*
  (min F0 = 70 Hz; max F0 = 123 Hz; range = 53 Hz)
- *"Now, how smooth is that?"*
  (min F0 = 69 Hz; max F0 = 96 Hz; range = 27 Hz)

The most dominant prosodic feature in this video, however, is the narrator's Scottish accent. The narrator employs a standard Scottish accent, characterized by stereotypical rolled /r/ sounds, particularly in the first part of the commercial (e.g., *created, experience, carefully, ingredients*). Accents evoke culturally shared associations and stereotypes, and speakers with standard accents are generally perceived as more competent and socially attractive than those with regional or foreign accents (Adank et al. 2013). In this case, the Scottish accent exploits a well-established stereotype linking Scotland with whisky production, tradition, and authenticity.

In the first part of the video, the accent serves to mislead viewers into assuming they are watching a conventional whisky advertisement, thereby enhancing the impact of the subsequent shift. In the second part, the same accent contributes to the narrator's perceived competence when discussing the dangers of alcohol abuse. As a speaker originating from a country strongly associated with whisky, the narrator is implicitly positioned as knowledgeable about alcohol and its consequences. The accent thus enhances the perceived authenticity and credibility of the message.

In conclusion, prosodic features play a crucial role in the persuasive effectiveness of Smoothness. They contribute to persuasion through logos, by supporting the argument that despite its sophisticated portrayal, alcohol causes serious social harm; through ethos, by enhancing the narrator's credibility via accent; and through pathos, by shaping the emotional atmosphere, initially pleasant and later disturbing. Together, these prosodic elements function not merely as stylistic devices but as integral components of the advertisement's argumentative structure.

3.2. *Audition*

This example employs a distinctive "bait-and-switch" storytelling strategy to highlight how domestic violence often remains hidden in plain sight. Visually, violence is represented through fists, which function as a visual synecdoche for abusive behaviour. The video is framed as an "audition" for the "fist face" of domestic abuse—a deliberate parallel to familiar "poster boy" or representative-selection competitions in various areas of public discourse. This ironic framing suggests that domestic abuse has become so normalized and pervasive that it can be presented as something for which auditions might be held. While provocative, the concept is also deeply sobering.

As the "audition" progresses, viewers are introduced to different fists that personify distinct types of domestic abusers. One represents a strong and silent abuser; another appears overtly hateful and dangerous, but in a manner that is almost too obvious. The climax of the film comes with the third example, which subverts expectations. This abuser is presented as well-educated, classically trained, sophisticated, and belonging to a higher social class. The advertisement concludes with a reversal of roles: the woman who leads the audition, initially portrayed as confident and authoritative, becomes a victim of abuse herself.

This message is communicated predominantly through prosodic features, while the film as a whole instantiates an argument from example. The argument draws on well-established sociolinguistic research on language attitudes, which shows that speakers with certain accents are perceived as more educated, sophisticated, and belonging to higher social strata. Both the male and female speakers in this example use Received Pronunciation (RP) British English, a strong marker of socioeconomic status, at least for native British English audiences (see, e.g., Trudgill 1995; Coupland and Bishop 2007; Andersson and Trudgill 1990; Giles, Scholes and Young 1983). Accent is closely linked to perceptions of speakers' status, occupation, intelligence, economic situation, and prestige.

The video exploits these sociolinguistic insights to advance an argument that can be reconstructed as follows:

- Claims:
  1. Anyone, even a highly educated man of high social status, can be a perpetrator of domestic abuse.
  2. Anyone, even an educated, confident woman in a position of authority, can become a victim of domestic abuse.
- Reason:

  An argument from example: a sophisticated, educated man of high social status is shown to be an abuser, while a sophisticated, confident woman of similarly high social status becomes a victim.
- Support for social status and education:

  Prosodic features, most notably the use of RP British English.

In addition to accent, prosodic features such as pitch range, voice quality, and speech rate further support the main argument. Changes in pitch range and voice quality in the male speaker are perceptually salient and are also confirmed acoustically:

- *"Hello, everyone."*
  (min F0 = 71 Hz; max F0 = 205 Hz; range = 134 Hz)
- *"Do you know that, on average, you can beat a woman 35 times before she calls the police?"*
  (min F0 = 49 Hz; max F0 = 262 Hz; range = 213 Hz)
- *"Listen, sweetie."*
  (min F0 = 90 Hz; max F0 = 236 Hz; range = 146 Hz)
- *"I'm so sorry. I don't know what came over me."*
  (min F0 = 80 Hz; max F0 = 151 Hz; range = 71 Hz)

When the male speaker reveals himself as an abuser, his fundamental frequency increases and his pitch range widens, signalling emotional volatility and menace. In contrast, the female speaker exhibits the opposite pattern. Initially confident, with a wide pitch range, her pitch range subsequently narrows, her voice quality changes; in the second line, there is some harshness in her voice, which makes her sound more masculine and powerful, then she becomes quieter, with a perceptibly shaky voice:

- *"Now, thank you all for attending. You've all been superb."*
  (min F0 = 145 Hz; max F0 = 307 Hz; range = 162 Hz)
- *"Lovely start, keep going."*
  (min F0 = 141 Hz; max F0 = 302 Hz; range = 161 Hz)

- *"Sorry, sorry."*
  (min F0 = 259 Hz; max F0 = 328 Hz; range = 69 Hz)

In this example, prosodic features constitute an essential component of persuasion. They contribute through logos, as they form a crucial part of the argument structure; through ethos, by signalling the social status and credibility of both protagonists; and through pathos, by shaping the emotional atmosphere. The contrasting changes in pitch range and voice quality of the male and female speakers vividly convey the dynamics of domestic violence: the male speaker's voice disturbs and illustrates how abuse *sounds*, while the female speaker's vocal degradation appeals to empathy and highlights the vulnerability of victims.

3.3. *Don LaFontaine* GEICO

The final example analyzed in this paper differs substantially from the previous two. It is a commercial produced by the insurance company GEICO and is overtly humorous and strictly commercial in nature, without an explicit social or ethical agenda. Accordingly, prosodic features in this advertisement are employed primarily for humorous effect, including a strong element of self-deprecating humour performed by Don LaFontaine, who appears as himself.

Don LaFontaine was an iconic American voice actor, best known for narrating movie trailers, having recorded more than 5,000 over the course of his career. He became particularly famous for the phrase *"In a world..."*, which is explicitly referenced in this commercial. For viewers, the parallel between the dramatic conventions of movie trailers and the comparatively mundane topic of insurance is immediately recognizable and forms the basis of the advertisement's humour.

From the perspective of rhetorical and multimodal analysis, this commercial is especially interesting because it juxtaposes two contrasting speech styles. A "real customer" initially describes her experience with GEICO in a neutral, conversational manner. LaFontaine then rephrases her testimony, transforming it stylistically by delivering it in his signature cinematic voice. This contrast allows for a clear demonstration of how prosodic features, specifically pitch, pitch range, and speech rate, can dramatically alter the perceived meaning and impact of the same content.

Acoustic analysis shows that the male speaker's speech rate is significantly slower than that of the female speaker (Figure 1), and his phrases are shorter and more segmented. These prosodic choices contribute to the creation of a dramatic, suspenseful atmosphere that is characteristic of movie trailers and highly engaging for the audience. As a result, the woman's otherwise ordinary account is reframed as tense, dangerous, and epic. The humour of the commercial arises precisely from this mismatch between content and delivery, illustrating how prosodic features alone can reshape interpretation.

In this example, prosodic features do not primarily function to support a substantive argument or advance a social claim. Instead, they demonstrate their rhetorical power by transforming meaning through exaggeration and parody. The commercial thus provides a clear illustration of how prosody can operate independently of propositional content, reinforcing the central claim of this paper that prosodic features play a decisive role in shaping audience perception within multimodal rhetorical discourse.

Fig. 1 Comparison of speech rate between the female ("real customer") and the male speaker (voice actor)

Phrase	rate	
	female	Male
When the storm hit, both our cars were totally underwater. (female) In a world where both of our cars were totally underwater. (male)	4.6 s/s	2.8 s/s
We thought it would take forever to get some help. (female) But a new wind was about to blow. (male)	5.2 s/s	3.3 s/s
With Geiko, we had our check in two days. (female) Payback, this time it's for real. (male)	3.7 s/s	2.5 s/s

Clear differences emerge in the acoustic measurements of pitch range, which is lower in the case of the female speaker, implying less excitement and more down-to-earth attitude:

- *"When the storm hit, both of our cars were totally underwater."*
  (min F0 = 218 Hz; max F0 = 318 Hz; range = 100 Hz)
- *"In a world where both of our cars were totally underwater."*
  (min F0 = 53 Hz; max F0 = 159 Hz; range = 106 Hz)

The male speaker exhibits a very low fundamental frequency, which is perceived as a deep voice. In addition, his voice quality, characterized by harshness, contributes to an overall perception of seriousness, drama, and danger. Together, these prosodic features create an atmosphere reminiscent of a complex thriller plot with an unexpected twist, typical of movie trailer narration.

The argument presented in the commercial can be reconstructed as follows:

- Claim: GEICO operates quickly and competently in dramatic situations.
  (Supported by the male speaker's prosodic features, which frame the situation as highly dramatic.)
- Reason: Even in situations that could be experienced as dramatic, customers remain calm, resolve the issue quickly, and end up completely satisfied.
  (Supported by the prosodic features of the "real" customer, the female speaker.)

Prosodic features thus support both the depiction of a potentially dramatic situation (car damage caused by a storm) and the calm, matter-of-fact attitude of the person who experienced it and was assisted by GEICO. The implicit concluding claim can, therefore, be formulated as: "There is no need for drama when you have GEICO insurance".

A crucial persuasive effect in this commercial is achieved through pathos, generated primarily by the contrast between the speakers' prosodic styles. This contrast creates humour and establishes an atmosphere in which drama appears artificial, exaggerated, and unnecessary. The audience is implicitly persuaded that such drama only applies to those without GEICO, while GEICO customers can continue with "business as usual" thanks to reliable insurance cover.

Prosodic features also contribute significantly to ethos. Don LaFontaine brings a strong pre-existing ethos to the commercial: his voice is immediately recognizable, as is his signature phrase *"In a world..."* and the cinematic manner of his delivery. In this context, his established authority and seriousness are deliberately subverted through self-deprecating humour. By contrast, the prosodic features of the female speaker contribute to her credibility as an ordinary, "real" person whose life is generally free of drama. Her testimony suggests that although the situation had the potential to be serious, it was rendered unproblematic by GEICO's efficient response.

4. Conclusion

Advertising, as a genre, most often constitutes a form of multimodal rhetorical discourse with a clear persuasive intent. Prosodic features represent an important, sometimes even crucial, mode through which this persuasive goal is achieved. As the analyses presented in this paper have shown, prosodic features in commercials are frequently deliberately selected and strategically employed, with clearly identifiable functions in the persuasive process. They may contribute to persuasion through ethos, pathos, or logos, and in the most effective cases through all three classical modes of persuasion simultaneously.

Prosodic features such as pitch, pitch range, speech rate, accent, and voice quality can significantly shape the interpretation of verbally expressed messages, and in some cases, they may even carry the persuasive message themselves. This is particularly evident when prosody activates social stereotypes, which are often implicitly exploited in advertising discourse. In such cases, meaning is not merely supported by verbal content but is co-constructed through vocal delivery.

Prosody, therefore, constitutes an essential component of multimodal rhetoric and merits more systematic investigation in future research. This type of inquiry calls for an interdisciplinary approach, bringing together scholars in rhetoric and argumentation with phoneticians and (socio) linguists. As contemporary communication increasingly relies on multimodality, rhetoric and argumentation should likewise be conceptualized and analyzed as fundamentally multimodal phenomena. While words remain the foundation of persuasive discourse, the manner in which those words are delivered should neither be neglected nor overlooked.

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IS THERE A SPEAKER IN THIS POST? THE ECLIPSE OF THE ORATOR IN DIGITAL SOCIAL NETWORKS

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Abstract

In 1980, Stanley Fish advocated the reader-response-dependence of the meaning of a textual message. In today's digital social networks, it is not only the meaning of a posted text that becomes unstable, but the traditional rhetorical role of the speaker or orator (as the authorial sender of a message) likewise gets progressively blurred. Based on parallel theories by Barthes and Foucault on the 'death of the author', McLuhan's media theory and Fish's concept of interpretive communities, the paper addresses five points that are responsible for this erosion: a) the multimodality of communication in digital networks that marginalizes orality; b) the interactive character of communication that foils the traditional speaker-audience relationship; c) the potential anonymity of senders that enables offensive speech without accountability; d) the transitivity of communication and the growing distance between sender and recipient that progressively disconnects a message from its initial creator; e) the role of artificial intelligence that completely erases the role of an individual human orator and facilitates the creation of deceptive fake messages. The analysis of the reasons, mechanisms and effects of this eclipse of the orator role in digital media exhibits serious threats to an unbiased exchange of arguments in the public sphere.

Keywords: *digital networks, interpretive communities, orator, recipient, rhetoric, social media*

1. Introduction

When U.S. literary theorist and legal scholar Stanley Fish published his famous essay "Is There a Text in This Class?" (Fish 1980), his intention was to illustrate by way of a funny campus anecdote his theory that the source of the meaning of a text is not to be found in the text itself, but that it is cognitively created, rather than discovered, by the reader, based on his or her own individual subjective presuppositions and expectations. This theory, known as reader-response theory, has meanwhile gained broad adherence not only in literary criticism, where it is linked with reader-response aesthetics as propounded by Wolfgang Iser (1974; 1978) and Hans Robert Jauss (1977; 1982a; 1982b) in the 1970s and 1980s, but also in communication theory at large. In line with constructivist theories of cognition, the inferentialist model of communication developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson since the 1980s (Sperber 1982; Sperber and Wilson 1996; 1990; 1995; Wilson and Sperber 1986; 2002; 2012) and further refined and advanced among others by Robert Brandom in the 1990s (Brandom 1994; 2000; 2008) likewise claims that communication does not work as a simple transport of units of information from communicator to recipient, but by way of inferences that recipients reasonably and legitimately draw about the communicator's intentions from the informational input provided.

As an unnoticed by-product, however, this shift of focus in communication and argumentation theories from the message to the recipient has also progressively obfuscated and diminished the importance of the role of the speaker as the sender of a message within the communication process. Not only is the text of a message no longer regarded as a stable item with a determinate meaning, but the speaker's original intentions are likewise no longer directly relevant to the meaning of a message; they can only be indirectly inferred by the recipient, who ultimately holds full power over the interpretation of a message.

Rhetoric, as an important subdiscipline of communication, has long tried to resist these tendencies and to maintain and uphold the role of the speaker. In the rhetorical communication model, the speaker, traditionally called the orator, is a central figure. Defined as a strategic communicator with a clear, persuasive aim, the orator is a person who has something to say and actively seeks to bring about a change in opinions by way of speech. From the point of view of reception theory, by contrast, the intentions of the speaker seem entirely left at the mercy of the individual recipient's interpretation. The recipient's interpretive strategies seem to gain greater momentum than the speaker's persuasive strategies. This is not to say that traditional rhetoric had not acknowledged the importance of a speaker's audience. On the contrary, at least since Chaïm Perelman (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1958, 22–46), and actually ultimately since Aristotle (see especially *Rhetoric* 1.2–3 and 2.1–17), rhetoricians have always strongly emphasized the role of the audience in rhetorical communication. Christopher Tindale's book on *The Philosophy of Argument and Audience Reception* (Tindale 2015) is only one more recent outstanding example.

My intention in this paper is to demonstrate that this sneaking devaluation and erosion of the orator's role and function are particularly prominent in the domain of modern digital social media networks, with partly detrimental effects on society. This is partly going to be a contrastive complement to a recent study by Fiona Rossette-Crake, who rather foregrounds the positive prospects of a novel enhancement of classical oral oratory by the technical means of digital media (Rossette-Crake 2022, especially 283–316: "Enacting Oratory on Social Media"). Both views need not necessarily be in contradiction, since Rossette-Crake mainly focuses on the technical support that digital aids (such as PowerPoint slideshows, real-time video captions or the like) may provide for live oral presentations, yet less on interactive social networks.

Contrary to Rossette-Crake, I see at least five major points that are responsible for an erosion of the role of the orator: a) the multimodality of communication in digital networks; b) the interactive character of communication and the multiplicity of communicators; c) the at least potential anonymity of senders; d) the transitivity of communication and the growing distance between sender and recipient; and e) the role of artificial intelligence that completely erases the role of an individual human orator.

2. Some Remarks and Definitions

Before we turn to these five points, a few preliminary remarks and definitions may be in order. First, in the 1960s already, in accordance with the described tendencies toward a more recipient-centered theory of literary texts, French structuralist critics such as Roland Barthes or Michel Foucault proclaimed the "death of the author", famously so in Barthes' short 1967 essay "La mort de l'auteur" (first in English translation in Barthes 1967, then 1968 in the French original in Barthes 1968, reprinted in Barthes 1984) and in Foucault's 1969 lecture "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?" (What Is an Author? Foucault 1969), affirming the primacy of each individual reader's interpretation of a particular work over any "authoritative" meaning intended by the author. Hence the whole idea appears not to be really new. But there is still a difference between the author of a literary text and an orator. While a literary text is deliberately put out to the world for any recipient to read and interpret it each in their own particular way, an orator typically addresses a particular audience and with a specific strategic agenda to bring about a change in opinion in the addressees by employing the available means of persuasion. An orator is a person who is convinced that he or she has something important to say on a certain issue and wishes to communicate this with a clear persuasive aim. In rhetoric, the personality of the orator is thus an integral part of the message and cannot be easily disregarded.

It may still be possible in the context of social-media communication to distinguish – in analogy to the distinction between author and narrator in literary theory – between the external author of a message (a real person in the real world) and the internal speaker (a functional role within the posted message), as suggested for instance by discourse analyst and media expert Patrick Charaudeau, who, with explicit reference to Barthes' and Foucault's author-theory, calls them "sujet communiquant (Sc)" and "sujet énonciateur (Sé)" respectively (Charaudeau 2023, 123; but see already Charaudeau 1984; 2020). The mere possibility of this differentiation is actually a consequence of the dissociation of a message from its creator, which typically occurs in social media, as we shall see. In direct face-to-face oral communication, which is still the basic model of rhetorical theory, by contrast, this distinction makes little sense, since it collapses in the role of the authorial orator, who is at the same time also the speaker of the message.

Second, the famous media theory by Marshall McLuhan (1964), which defines media as extensions of the abilities of the human body, is basically an extension of this oratorial model of communication to a progressively complex world in which the classical face-to-face communication of oratory is increasingly enhanced by the employment of technical means of communication (see Rossette-Crake 2022). But even the "classical" electronic media that McLuhan had in mind (such as telephone, radio, TV, or video recordings) were still characterized by an 'unidirectional' communication model with a clear distinction between the sender and the recipient of a message, and with the governing power over the communication process, at least to a great extent, still in the hands of the sender. As McLuhan, who died in 1980, could not foresee, in the world of contemporary digital social media, however, precisely this clear allocation of roles gets progressively blurred

and leveled out, with the consequence that the rhetorical model of communication is less and less considered adequate for describing the activities going on in these complex media networks. When I speak of digital social networks, what I have in mind are predominantly various blogs and newsletters that pop up everywhere on all kinds of topics, or social networks like twitter/X, telegram, Facebook and WhatsApp, or online photo and video platforms with marked social network functions such as TikTok or Instagram. As we shall see, all of these are in several respects clearly different from the "classical" electronic media that McLuhan still had in mind.

Finally, while since the 1980s at least we have got acquainted with Niklas Luhmann's 'systems theory' that has put into perspective the individuality of speakers by describing them as functions of so-called 'autopoietic systems' (see Luhmann 1984; 1995; 2013), from the point of view of reader-response theory it is not only the message and the sender that get fuzzy as individual entities, but the same is true for the recipient. According to Stanley Fish, recipients, too, do not act as self-determined individuals, but as members of what he calls 'interpretive communities' (as indicated by the subtitle of his 1980 essay collection; see also Fish 2004). Each of us, as a recipient of a message, is necessarily part of various interpretive communities, each of them defined as "communities" by a specific, distinct cognitive epistemology. We are all prisoners of our interpretive communities, from which we cannot escape; and what is more, we cannot even know their range and limits, nor determine whether some other person is also part of the same interpretive community, because such a determination would again involve interpretation, which would again be biased by our interpretive communities, which creates a vicious circle. This last point will turn out to be crucial.

3. Five decisive points

Let me now turn to my five points. Which are the main factors that threaten and eclipse the role of the speaker or orator in digital social networks?

3.1. Multimodality

A first, almost trivial point is that communication in those media occurs through a multimedia mix of representational modes, within which orality is at best marginal (one more point of difference from McLuhan's traditional media such as telephone, radio or TV). Instead of oral communication, basic in the rhetorical model, messages in digital media are mostly posted in written or visual form. This fundamentally disconnects the message from its sender. The issue of a written text getting detached from its author and being helplessly exposed to the interpretation by any odd recipient was already raised by Plato in his dialogue *Phaedrus* (274c–278b) as an argument directed against writing and literacy in philosophy, but it equally applies to rhetorical texts. The larger the distance between the author and the recipient gets, the greater the helplessness of the text.

In social media networks, recipients often do not even know the primary author of a message. Hence, the situation is rather similar to that of a literary text. Significantly, social media posters often understand themselves as 'content creators' rather than orators. Such content may also appear either completely or partly in visual form, as a picture, video or meme, often without any explicatory text, perhaps just accompanied by a number of guiding hashtags, which need to be interpreted by each recipient according to his or her cognitive and interpretive community background. Hence, the general problems of the concept of visual rhetoric apply. Once a post is out in

the network, its original creator has kind of waived and foregone the authority over its meaning and interpretation. So, even if there was some persuasive intention at the beginning, the poster of a social network message resembles a literary writer much more than an active orator. To be sure, some persuasive effect may very well be produced, but it is not within the original sender's power.

3.2. Interactivity

In contemporary social networks, hierarchies between the sender and the recipient are notably flat. In 1993 already, in his book on *The Electronic Word*, Richard A. Lanham wrote: "What happens when text moves from page to screen? First, the digital text becomes unfixed and interactive. The reader can change it, become writer" (1993, 31). This is a really fundamental difference from the classical one-way electronic media such as radio, TV or video. In fact, as soon as a recipient spots a particular message in a social network, he or she is free to respond, share, forward or rebuke. Thus, within seconds, the recipient can turn into a sender and communicator.

What emerges in this way is a rather complex mycelium-like interactive meshwork of multiple communicators, quite different from the simple idealized model of classical rhetoric with its well-defined roles and agents. It is no longer evident who is active and who is passive in this process. What is more, whereas Rossette-Crake (2022, 103–23) rather perceives a revival of memory and delivery by digital memory aids such as prompters or by multimodal effects such as slideshows for staging presentations more effectively, it may equally be said that even the classical orator-governed rhetorical processes of memory and delivery entirely move over onto the recipient's side: It is some anonymous internet cloud or the recipient's computer hard drive that a posted message gets stored on, and it is the recipient, and the recipient alone, who decides when, and even if at all, the process of delivery will be activated. It is thus the recipient who ultimately controls and navigates both memory and delivery. The speaker's or orator's role, by contrast, gets dwarfed and fades away.

3.3. Anonymity

Another important factor, I think, is the potential anonymity of senders in many social networks. In most of these networks, it is possible to hide one's identity by posting under a so-called nickname. And even if senders are identified by their real e-mail accounts, some e-mail addresses are cryptic enough to effectively hide or obscure the identity of their holders. As a consequence, the important impact of the speaker's character and reliability (*ethos* in Aristotelian terms), so pivotal in the theory of rhetorical communication, drops out and vanishes. This anonymity has at least two unpleasant effects: First, it makes it possible to post any kind of aggressive, offensive or abusive content without any risk of being held personally accountable; and second, the dwindling of the ethos factor shifts all the weight of non-rational persuasiveness onto the side of a corrupted pathos.

Consequently, even if modern dual models of argument processing such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Petty and Wegener 1999; O'Keefe 2008) explicitly allow for both ethos and pathos as determining factors of what they call the "peripheral route" of argument processing, in digital social media this well-balanced equilibrium gets seriously disturbed and destabilized in favour of a strong prevalence of irrational appeals to the emotional state of the recipients' minds, especially so to 'bad' emotions such as fear, outrage, hate or envy.

3.4. Transitivity

A particularly typical feature of digital social networks is the transitivity of messages from one sender to another. This effect is basically parasitic on the interactive character of these networks. Due to the latter, recipients can easily switch roles to sender and share or forward particular content to their own community of friends or followers. Moreover, this can happen in almost no time and to multiple addressees simultaneously, which leads to the effect of a particularly popular message "going viral". But in this process, not only does a message get replicated infinitely, it also gets progressively detached and disconnected from its initial creator. What is more, while the original source gets more and more obliterated and concealed by multiple reposting, each reposter again boosts the message with his or her own parasitic authority. Hence, the paradoxical effect is that the more the distance from the original source increases, the more the impact of the message on recipients will snowball.

3.5. Artificial Intelligence

A pretty novel and most alarming threat to the orator's role in social networks, however, is the growing influence and impact of artificial intelligence. By the use of automated generative AI chatbots such as ChatGPT or similar Large Language Models, it is meanwhile possible to generate network content completely from scratch without any intelligent human source involved that could be held accountable. In its ultimate consequence, this development would mean the total eclipse of the orator's role in digital networks. This is to say that uncontrolled purely artificial content may be under way in social networks, or, what is even more frightening, fake content that is created by the use of artificial intelligence to look deceptively realistic.

The danger is pretty real, for examples are not far to seek. For instance, during the turmoil in Los Angeles in the summer of 2025 following protests against mass deportations of allegedly illegal immigrants by agents of ICE, on June 7, 2025 the notorious Trump supporter David J. Harris Jr. posted on Facebook a picture showing a huge pallet of bricks, accompanied by the text "Soros funded organizations have ordered countless pallets of bricks to be placed near ICE facilities to be used by Democrat militants against ICE. What's your reaction?" A simple fact check by a reverse image search published by *AFP Fact Check* on June 11 (McCarthy 2025) disclosed that the picture actually stemmed from the PR website of a Malaysian construction hardware dealer and had been uploaded no less than eight years earlier to a Malaysian online marketplace.

Such deepfakes even attempt to conjure up alleged catastrophic events in order to create panic and distrust within societies at large. Especially the popular video platform TikTok is a notorious source of such fakes. Quite recently, for instance, in April and May 2025, in Germany, AI-faked sham pictures of a deadly truck attack on a market in Dresden, or of an alleged terrorist bomb attack on a fast-train bridge were posted and broadcast on TikTok (see Rohwedder 2025). The problem was that despite glaring orthographic errors in the accompanying texts all these fakes were not only taken for real by many recipients following TikTok, but also shared and reposted multiply, i.e. they "went viral" and promptly provoked hundreds of outraged comments about these alleged catastrophic events having been deliberately and irresponsibly hushed up by government and standard media, since they were never reported there (of course they could not possibly be, since they had never happened; but none of those blind reposters ever took the pains to double-check). What is more, self-governed algorithms based on and steered by mindless counts of clicks and likes (a mechanism known as clickbaiting) consequently also cybernetically reinforce such effects.

Such cases of rampant misinformation and concomitant societal disruption can only be fought by educating public audiences to take a critical stance and acquire rational and critical ability to effectively debunk utter fakes.

4. Conclusion

These five points (multimodality, interactivity, anonymity, transitivity and the intrusion of artificial intelligence; perhaps more could be added) strongly suggest that communication in digital social networks progressively and rapidly moves toward a complete disposal of the role of a speaker or orator. Content once posted online almost autonomously and uncontrolledly makes its way through the platforms. Especially in recent times, platform owners increasingly refuse to exert any sort of control under the pretext of freedom of speech.

Also, recipient users progressively act irresponsibly by taking at face value whatever they find posted that fits with their preconceived worldviews and 'belief-boxes'. In a paper I wrote a couple of years ago (Kraus 2024), I argued that the selection of content worthy of getting attention by users of social media is basically guided by the cognitive principle of relevance. However, this relevance is mainly defined in terms of their personal views.

Here is the point where Fish's theories come in again. Fish's long-standing theory that recipients do not really act as autonomous individual personalities, but are dependent on the influence of their various interpretive communities, seems to be surprisingly borne out with respect to the effect of the odious filter bubbles and echo chambers that tend to constantly self-reinforce themselves and suppress any potential counterargument. As pointed out earlier, search algorithms lead in the same direction. In addition, since the eclipse of the orator's role also entails a loss of the corrective effect of oratorial *ethos*, appeals to irrational *pathos* also play a decisive role in that selection process.

As rhetoricians and argumentation theorists, we must watch these trends with concern. Unless a new and sustainable model for reliable standards of rational communication in social media networks can be found, there is a serious danger that these self-referred and self-sustaining communicative bubbles will entirely lose contact with reality, yet nonetheless continue to have a detrimental influence on actual politics. Warning examples are at hand. Especially in our professional capacity as rhetoricians, we should therefore resist these developments and actively insist as much as we can on the importance of the classical rhetorical communication model with a strong and visible role of a speaker or orator endowed with good and reliable expertise.

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RHETORICAL AND COMMUNICATIVE FEATURES OF PODCASTS IN BULGARIA

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Abstract

Podcasts are establishing themselves as a media genre in the 21st century in different countries and particularly in Bulgaria. Podcasts are also evolving into an independent communication channel featuring content created by representatives of business organizations, cultural and educational institutions, NGOs, and others. The dialogical format of podcasts is preferred in its implementation and has specific communicative and rhetorical features. The subject of analysis is the dynamics of directing the dialogue, asking questions, giving answers, using rhetorical techniques, and ad verecundiam*. A selection of podcasts in Bulgaria for the period 1st January 2024 – 1st February 2026 is made. The methodology includes rhetorical and critical discourse analysis. The results of the analysis show that podcasts do not represent a homogeneous genre or format, and their rhetorical features are realized both during the creation of podcasts and in the post-communication stage, when they are advertised and promoted on platforms and social networks. Digital tools contribute to podcasts functioning as a specific manifestation of virtual multimodal rhetoric. Ethos, as a fundamental rhetorical canon, has specific manifestations in podcasts through the use of appeals to authority and storytelling. Another feature of podcasts is the presentation of advice and expert assessments based on the principle of sharing. A third feature at the rhetorical level is the use of humour and self-irony by both podcasters and participants.*

Keywords: *rhetoric, podcast, ethos, argumentation, storytelling, humour, platformization*

1. Introduction

In Bulgaria, podcasts have emerged as a significant cultural and media phenomenon during the second and third decades of the twenty-first century. As a relatively new form of communication, podcasting constitutes a specific activity within the broader framework of the media ecosystem as well as the creative industries. While initially associated primarily with journalism and electronic (radio and television) and online media, podcasts have evolved, and their producers are now business organizations. Increasingly, podcasts are produced by individuals, businesses, cultural and educational institutions, as well as non-governmental organizations. Podcasts present topics to AI, GenAI, personal self-improvement, career development, and even esotericism as well as current processes in internal and international environments. Podcasts address not only a wide range of topics but they are also used to convince virtual audiences by combining arguments with storytelling, humour, etc. Podcasters and guests discuss the topics in an engaging way from communicative and rhetorical perspectives. The participants provide commentary on societal trends, and offer in-depth interpretations of issues relevant to specific communities and small or large groups' interests.

2. The emergence and development of podcasts in the world

July 2003 is considered the beginning of podcasts, according to the publication First podcast[1], when American journalist Christopher Lydon and software developer Dave Winer created the conditions for audio files to be delivered automatically via subscription to a blog.

In 2004, ARTE[2] was launched, offering on-demand audio opportunities and establishing this model not only in France and Germany but also in Europe. This platform influenced the development of so-called narrative podcasting. The development of podcasts is in content, technology, creativity, and the media ecosystem.

In February 2004, chronologically, the term "podcasting" was first coined by Ben Hammersley in an article in The Guardian (Hammersley 2004).

Podcasts emerged in the first decade of the 21st century, when systems and software that allowed automatic audio files to be downloaded were already in use. The creativity of the creators, the development of technology, and changes in the media ecosystem are some of the factors behind the dynamic development of podcasts and their changes, some of which include the use of not only audio but also video formats and the transition from distribution via blogs and websites to platforms and multichannel distribution.

Podcasts are developing rapidly and dynamically across Europe, North and South America, Australia, and Africa, while scholars and analysts are examining their diverse manifestations and forms of expression.

Britta Jorgensen presents results of a study conducted by "semi-structured interviews with 16 Australian podcast producers and participant observations at three consecutive Audiocraft events (national podcasting conference)" and comes to the conclusion that "Independent podcasting in Australia continuously evolved throughout 2016–2019, with an increasing focus on generating economic capital" (Jorgensen 2021, 1).

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1 First podcast. Guinness World Records. https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/381973-first-podcast.

2 ARTE Radio. ARTE Radio presents itself as "La fine fleur du podcast par ARTE Des podcasts à gogo: émissions, témoignages, documentaires audio". https://www.arteradio.com/.

Podcasting is also becoming recognizable in South Africa, research shows Edison Research study:

> According to a 2019 Edison Research study in South Africa, 22 percent of the country's population had heard of podcasting, which was considerably lower than the 77 percent who were aware of podcasting in the United States for the same year. The same report noted that 19 percent of South Africans had listened to a podcast in comparison to 51 percent of Americans who had. (Fox and Karianjahi 2021)

Leoz-Aizpuru Asier and Pedrero-Esteban Luis Miguel underscored the potential of storytelling to redefine the canon of audio news narratives and to position radio in Spain in the digital ecosystem (Asier and Miguel 2022, 1–15).

David García-Marín analyses the first Spanish podcast community and the pioneers of podcasting in Spain, and he concludes that:

After its first two decades, radio began a period of increased professionalism, the establishment of a robust business model, and the introduction of its own industry language, which are precisely the challenges that Spanish podcasting must address in the coming decades. (García-Marín 2022, 11)

Lisbeth Morlandstø and Birgit Røe Mathisen analyze four Norwegian podcasts in 2020 and 2021; they use the term "commentary journalism" and discuss how podcasts draw commentary journalism in a dialogical direction (Morlandstø and Mathisen 2022, 61–83).

The authors Vera Katzenberger, Jana Keil and Michael Wild conducted an online survey of 378 podcast journalists from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland and concluded that "Podcasts have established themselves in the digital media landscape as an integral part of information gathering and opinion forming for many consumers" (Katzenberger et al. 2025, 1).

30 political podcasts in the USA are analyzed with a focus on conversational structure, repetitive patterns, figurative language, organic patterns, and harmful language (Rizwan et al. 2025, 1).

Podcasts in the context of the Ibero-American community are studied through semi-structured interviews with podcasters, and the second focus of examination is on artistic and experimental formats, radio reports, narrative structures and storytellings practices (Rodríguez-Ortiz and Fernández-Sande 2025, 1–19).

Over the past two decades, podcasts have undergone rapid and dynamic development, not only in Europe and the US. The changes are that podcasts are created and distributed not only through radio, but are also entering television. Now, podcasts are no longer created and recorded only by journalists and media outlets in professionally equipped studios, but also by representatives of educational institutions, business corporations, non-governmental organizations, artists, psychologists, doctors, and others. These podcasts are published on YouTube as videos and then as audio files.

Podcasts are studied from multiple perspectives and with diverse methods. For instance, Samuel Kakungulu examined podcasts in Uganda, emphasizing their dual nature as platforms of both reliable information and disinformation (Kakungulu 2025, 60–66). Storytelling, as a rhetorical and narrative practice, is increasingly central to podcasting.

Podcasting is developing at different rates across countries, displaying marked asymmetries; nevertheless, it is gradually consolidating as a stable communicative form. Its evolution typically begins with audio formats rooted in radio traditions, progresses toward video formats, and advances incrementally toward platformization and multichannel distribution.

Narrativity, personal storytelling, the sharing of lived experience, and the provision of expert knowledge are among the defining characteristics of podcasts as a genre. The information presented in "Podcast Statistics 2026: Top Highlights" show that:

> As of January 2026, there are 4.58 million podcasts available worldwide. 480.6K podcasts were published in the last 3 months, and 332.7K podcasts were published in the last 30 days. Around 584.1 million people across the globe listened to podcasts. One in three people in the U.S. listen to podcasts on YouTube, making it the most popular platform for podcasts. On average, podcast listeners spend about 7 hours per week listening to their favorite shows.[3]

Given that the present objective is not to provide a historical overview or comprehensive mapping, the focus is instead placed on identifying the types of podcasts and their manifestations within a specific national context, as well as on the modes of organization and media techniques they employ. Podcasts are increasingly established as a parallel – and at times alternative – communication channel. They inform diverse segments of society and are produced not only by media organizations and journalists but also by educational institutions and business entities.

3. Podcasts in Bulgaria

Podcasts in Bulgaria emerged at the beginning of the 21st century, with the first notable example being *Binar*, produced by the Bulgarian National Radio (BNR) in 2009. This podcast combined analog, digital, and internet technologies, functioning as a streaming platform for six hours during the tenure of Valeri Todorov as Director General. The hosts varied, while BNR's music library provided content as part of the creative production process. *Binar* continues in 2026, and the present-day platform's slogan is "Your new digital world".[4] BNR expanded this initiative, creating a dedicated podcast platform on its website featuring over ten different series, some exceeding 200 episodes, including *The Ambulance* and *The Patrol*. Another example is *Dama Cast*, collaboration between Bulgarian National Television (BNR) and BNR.

The concept of modern information delivery was well received in Bulgaria's competitive media market. Private media outlets such as Darik Radio, Radio Free Europe, and newspapers like *Capital* and *Banker* launched podcasts thematically focused on politics, business, and finance. The business sector also began developing specialized podcasts addressing human resources, real estate, finance, credit, architecture, and more, including titles such as *Career for You*, *Women Speak Leadership*, *Finance in Focus*, *Money Talks*, *TechBalon*, *Beyond Numbers*, *Life Unbottled*, *Social Snack*, and *Podcast of Things*. Entrepreneurial and creative individuals, such as those behind *Internet Speaks*, established podcasts as virtual tribunes for diverse opinions, addressing current and socially sensitive topics such as AI, drug addiction, and gambling.

The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed podcast production in Bulgaria by providing timely information, facilitating collaboration and experience sharing, and demonstrating the potential for individuals outside traditional media to create podcasts. According to data from Everybodywiki[5], by January 2026, there were approximately 300 podcasts in Bulgaria, spanning various thematic areas. Episode durations range from 20 to 120 minutes, with both audio and video formats being established.

3 Podcast Statistics 2026: Top Highlights. https://podcastatistics.com/

4 Binar. Bulgarian National Radio. https://binar.bg/

5 Everybodywiki. https://bg.everybodywiki.com/

Podcasters include journalists producing content within media organizations – for example, the public broadcaster BNT offers podcasts such as *Geopolitics* with Simeon Ivanov, *The Truth About* with Nadya Obretenova, and podcasts aimed at youth audiences hosted by Flora Stratieva. Experienced journalists such as Martin Karbovski, Yavor Dachkov, and Neli Hadjiyska also produce independent podcasts. Most podcasts contribute to the development of Bulgaria's media ecosystem by focusing on thematic content for specific audiences rather than attempting comprehensive media coverage.

Bulgarian podcasts have attracted researchers' attention in the country. Genika Grigorova analyzed musical podcasts and categorized the different types of Bulgarian podcasts using the criteria of genre, topics, duration, content quality, changes in the media ecosystem, etc. (Grigorova 2019, 290–318). The role of podcasts in marketing, particularly their influence on target audiences in Bulgaria, has also been explored, and the focus is on establishing popularity and recognition of business organizations, managers, and products (Boychev 2019, 94–99). Desislava Antova studied media-produced podcasts in Bulgaria, concluding that they exhibit a hybrid media form and that podcasters expnd on topics including socially significant problems (Antova 2021, 178–198). Ilia Valkov, Georgi Minev, and Antonina Lozanova examined university podcasts designed to support academic education, including within Bulgarian universities (Valkov et al. 2021, 52–79). Justine Toms, in her monograph *Podcasts – The Voice of the Internet*, offers a thorough analysis including methodological and practical guidance for creating and producing podcasts, examples from Bulgaria, and practices drawn from interviews with podcasters (Toms 2022). In summary, Bulgarian podcasts have evolved into a diverse and dynamic medium, bridging traditional media, independent creators, and specialized thematic content, while simultaneously serving as a platform for public discourse, education, and audience engagement.

4. Theoretical observation, manifestations, and features of podcasts

Some of the main features of podcasts can be outlined through a brief theoretical overview. Before discussing the specific features of podcasts, attention is paid here to an aspect that has been insufficiently explored by rhetoric from the perspective of sound, voice, and audio. Petra Aczél explains the term "aural rhetoric", she concludes, "Neglected as it is, aural rhetoric does not cease to offer an enriched view of new media argumentation and persuasion. It highlights the aural dimension of a media-message as a rhetorical activity" (Aczél 2013, 341–42). The audio aspect and the so-called 'aural rhetoric' or 'aural virtual media rhetoric' are features of podcasts in a different virtual media environment. Podcasts start out as audio formats, but even when they are already in video clips, thanks to platformization and digital tools, they also have audio versions. That is why it is important to note this feature of podcasts.

Tiziano Bonini analyzes podcasts, and the focus is on technological aspects: podcasting is a technology used for the distribution, reception, and on-demand listening to audio content, traditionally produced by institutions such as radio stations, publishers, journalists, and educational organizations (Bonini 2015, 21). Bottomley also compared podcasts to radio and analyzed their innovations at the audio level (Bottomley 2015, 164–69). Later, he emphasized modes of distribution and consumption, referring to podcasts as a form of "internet radio" (Bottomley 2016).

Lionel Felix and Damien Stolarz have expanded the discussion to include podcasts beyond audio. They compared video podcasts to video blogs and even provided practical and methodological guidelines in the form of a handbook (Felix and Stolarz 2016).

Podcasts possess distinct genre features and undergo dynamic transformation throughout the first three decades of the twenty-first century.

David Nieborg and Thomas Poell emphasized the role of platformization, which encompasses both the post-production stage – making podcasts available on multiple platforms – and their contribution to the cultural industries (Nieborg and Poell 2018, 4275–92). John Sullivan also examined platformization, focusing on services that reach users, virtual audiences, and storage practices for podcasts (Sullivan 2019, 1–7). Scholars have thus assessed platformization as a contemporary mode of audio and video consumption across digital devices.

Digital technologies shape distinctive patterns of communicative behaviour across virtual audiences. Listeners and viewers interact with podcasts selectively, choosing between complete episodes, shorter fragments, or promotional teasers, and often returning to specific segments while omitting others. This selective consumption reflects a new behaviour from a rhetorical standpoint in digital media.

The essence of podcasting is characterized by the integration of elements from the creative industries with expert knowledge and practical skills in media production, combined with the digital media competence of creators and podcasters. This synergy allows for the development of sustainable formats that combine narrative techniques, expert analysis, and personalized content for the audience.

Podcasts have gradually established themselves as a parallel information channel, providing opportunities to present diverse perspectives, tell personal and collective stories, and share professional expertise and experience from established figures in business, the arts, culture, and science. Podcast content is distributed through various digital platforms, available in both audio and video formats, reflecting the trend toward multiplatform distribution and adaptability to contemporary virtual audience habits.

The dialogical format remains preferred by most podcasters, while in academic and scientific podcasts, monological structures are also observed, emphasizing the analytical nature of the content. The language used in podcasts is accessible and comprehensible to the audience, avoiding communicative barriers and often employing strategies such as humour, narrative metaphors, and storytelling techniques to capture attention and engage listeners.

Podcasting emerges as a flexible, innovative, and multifunctional media format that combines digitalization, creativity, and expert competence, while simultaneously expanding opportunities for civic engagement and social communication in the digital era.

5. Methods and materials

A selection of podcasts in Bulgaria for the period 1st January 2024 – 1st February 2026 is made. The selection of 100 episodes from 25 podcasts is based on predefined research objectives, covering criteria such as title, subject matter, podcasters, hosts, and participants. With regard to format, podcasts can be categorized as either dialogic or monologic, with the former predominantly featuring interview-style dialogue. Despite the fact that some podcasts discontinue their activity, the dynamics of the media environment attest to a pattern of steady expansion: as of February 2026, approximately 250 active podcasts are in operation.

The methodology includes rhetorical and discursive analysis. The rhetorical analysis is oriented toward the examination of ethos, appeals to authority, *argumentum ad verecundiam*, rhetorical

techniques, as well as visual and multimodal elements in podcasts. For the sake of clarity, the concepts and terms are introduced in each section prior to the analysis during the process of creating, implementating, and distributing podcasts.

The methodology includes a critical discourse analysis (CDA), as presented by Teun van Dijk (Dijk 2015, 466–85). In the past two decades, CDA approaches to the media have multiplied. These studies have not only investigated the social and communicative contexts of news and other press or broadcast genres, as is the case in critical media studies, but have also related these to a systematic analysis of the structures of media discourse, such as lexicon, syntax, topics, metaphor, coherence, actor description, social identities, genres, modality, presupposition, rhetorical figures, interaction, news schemas, and multimodal analysis of images, among many other structures (Dijk 2015, 466). This method has been adapted to the objectives of this study, assuming that podcasts are part of the media ecosystem, have specific genre characteristics, and influence the opinions of certain groups in society by sharing opinions, personal, and professional experiences.

The first hypothesis is that the ethos of the podcast and the ethos of the guest in the dialogical form of podcasts have specific manifestations, realized through behaviour in which the participants aim to share expertise and experience, in most cases avoiding the demonstration of a unilateral and universally valid opinion and allowing for counterarguments.

The second hypothesis is that the argumentation includes the argument from authority, the argument *ad verecundiam*, personal experience, and personal stories, which creates a specific media rhetorical situation in which a change in the traditional media discourse between journalist and interviewee is achieved, and sometimes even a semi-formal conversation between the podcaster and the guest takes place.

The third hypothesis is that humour and self-irony are combined with words and expressions from colloquial language, which also contributes to a change in media rhetorical communication, turning podcasts into a virtual platform for presenting personal experience, giving advice and recommendations, and announcing news from a given field.

6. Ethos and arguments

6.1. Ethos

In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defines ethos (ἦθος) as one of the three fundamental modes of persuasion, alongside logos and pathos. His most systematic descriptions are presented in Rhetoric, Book I, Chapter 2. There Aristotle argues that persuasion is achieved not only through logical demonstration or emotional appeal, but also through the character projected by the speaker in the act of speaking itself. Aristotle maintains that ethos is not merely a matter of prior reputation; it must be established by the audience during the delivery of speech in a concrete rhetorical situation (Aristotle 1986, 98–101). Aristotle further specifies that credibility grounded in character arises from three qualities manifested in discourse: phronēsis (practical wisdom), aretē (moral virtue), and eunoia (goodwill toward the audience). Ethos functions as a rhetorical canon, generated through speech rather than imposed externally and the credibility emerges from the character of the orator, and persuasion depends on the integrity of the orator (Aristotle 1986, 98–101).

In the book *Institutes of Oratory* (Institutio Oratoria XII.1.1), Quintilian articulates a conception of ethos that is inseparable from moral philosophy and civic responsibility. Quintilian grounds the authority in the ethics of the speaker. For him, rhetoric is intrinsically bound to virtue: "Vir bonus

dicendi peritus" (Quintilian 1982, 702–6). This concise formulation presents Quintilian's entire ethical-rhetorical doctrine. The orator must first be a vir bonus – a morally good person – before he can properly be described as dicendi peritus, skilled in the art of speaking. Ethos in Quintilian is not merely a persuasive strategy constructed within discourse, but the outward manifestation of an authentically virtuous character. The credibility of the speaker arises from lived moral excellence – virtus – which must be cultivated through comprehensive education, ethical discipline, and civic engagement. Quintilian concludes that rhetoric attains legitimacy only when grounded in moral goodness, and the orator is defined by the unity of ethical being and rhetorical competence (Quintilian 1982, 702–6).

Jens Kjelsen and Aaron Hees analyze ethos in new rhetorical communication and how ethos is constructed by the debate system Project Debater (from IBM) and ChatGPT chatbots, they talk about machine ethos, and conclude that phronetic ethos appeals through general arguments and facts and "Simultaneously, in an algorithmic attempt to take a position of authenticity, debating chatbots may use strategies for animating the inanimate" (Kjelsen and Hees 2024, 1–32).

Agnieszka Budzyńska-Daca analyzes ethos as a rhetorical category through by reviewing major works on rhetoric, tracing its development from classical theory to contemporary scholarship in philosophy and psychology, with a particular emphasis on positive psychology and, more specifically, on the VIA model of character strengths. The author concludes that

> "Both the classical formula vir bonus dicendi peritus and the contemporary VIA model, based on the recognition of character strengths, stem from the same conviction: that rhetoric does not begin with technique, but with the human person. At the foundation of effective and responsible communicative action lies ethos – understood as a value-rooted disposition to be oneself in and through speech. (Budzyńska-Daca 2025, 154–55)

Ethos should be understood as a multidimensional category that extends beyond the rhetorical dimension of charisma, moral, education, and expertise. Ethos in podcasts is constructed through a complex interplay of social, cultural, professional, and personal elements. In this context, the personal branding of podcasters and participants in different episodes emerges as a dynamic process in which personal narrative and the demonstration of expertise acquire particular significance. These components enable podcast hosts and their guests to establish an authentic and trustworthy image with their audiences. The communicative behaviour of podcasters and guests involves ethos manifestations through sharing and narrating in specific ways in the context of virtual media communication. The fundamental components of ethos as professional experience, friendly and positive attitude towards the audience, striving to provide reliable information are present,, but their configuration varies, and each element carries a different degree of weight in different podcasts. The assumption is that charisma, rhetorical skills, expertise, credibility, transparency, and visibility, not only within the professional domain but also in the media and public spheres, play a significant role in the development of a personal brand of podcasters and podcast guests.

The principle "Vir bonus dicendi peritus" has manifested in podcasts in a different way, as participants pursue concrete aims of sharing and convincing (persuasion from a rhetorical point of view) the virtual audience. Podcast guests combine narrative, personal storytelling and information in understandable, moderately figurative language avoiding communication barriers.

6.2. Ethos and arguments from authority

Ethos has specific manifestations in podcasts, with the analysis focusing on the participants and how they use the argument from authority when presenting these ideas, proposals, and analysis results. The ethos of the participants is the basis for achieving rhetorical and communicative impact. It includes charisma, talent, education, experience, expertise, and adherence to moral and ethical standards. The results are presented in stages, so the definitions must be presented before the analysis.

Leo Groarke and Christopher Tindale give the following definition:

> Arguments from authority provide evidence for a claim by establishing that it is endorsed by authorities. A good argument from authority supports a claim on the basis that the person or group that endorses it is deemed to have (1) certain stated credentials, which are (2) relevant to the claim in question, and (3) no biases that are likely to interfere with their assessment of the claim, provided that (4) the claim in question concerns an area in which there is wide agreement among the relevant experts, and that (5) the claim concerns an area of knowledge in which consensus is possible." (Groarke and Tindale 2012, 318)

The results of the analysis of authority-based argumentation, conducted according to its definition, reveal several specific features in the podcast environment. Podcasts do not represent a typical rhetorical situation; rather, they constitute a hybrid form positioned between media rhetoric and virtual communication. Within this framework, the argument from authority is constructed in distinctive ways. The first structural element of authority-based argumentation remains valid: participants often possess professional qualifications and expertise, and they are recognized figures in their respective domains – from medicine to information technology. However, regarding the second element, these qualifications are not always directly related to the claims being made. Specialists in philosophy, sociology, political science, medicine, or artificial intelligence may also speak on cultural topics, approaching them from the standpoint of engaged citizens. The third element involves bias. Even when not extreme, personal sympathies or antipathies toward a cause, idea, or process are frequently present. With respect to the fourth structural element, one cannot claim that podcasts express broad expert consensus; in fact, they typically serve as a virtual media forum for articulating perspectives that differ from official or institutionalized opinions. The fifth element indicates that the purpose of podcasts is not to achieve consensus but rather to present arguments in support of positions that diverge from those promoted through institutional public relations and certain traditional media outlets.

In podcasts, arguments from authority and ethos are combined, thereby grounded in different parameters. Hosts and participants are often well-known public figures, professionals with established experience, and individuals displaying active civic engagement.

For example, Hristo Popov, an entrepreneur of international experience who returned to Bulgaria, contributes to initiatives such as *Bulgaria Wants You*. In podcasts, he discusses career development, motivation, values, and behavioral models, presenting himself as both charismatic and communicative. In the Limitless podcast, he reflects on governance, society, and democracy, and presents quotes from famous philosophers from antiquity to support his thesis with arguments of authority.

> What is the problem with democracy? Both Socrates and Aristotle say something smart. The power of your vote should be proportional to the education you have. The voice of an economics professor cannot have the same weight as the voice of someone who has never read a single book in their life.[6]

6 Limitless. Peace in the chaos with Hristo Popov. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cE3tt2RdUPc

Professor Ivo Hristov, a Bulgarian lawyer and sociologist, addresses topics related to history, domestic and foreign politics, social processes, education, culture, and the Z generation as well. Professor Daniel Valchev, lawyer and former Minister of Education and Science, analyzes processes in society and current events on the international stage, giving examples from history from antiquity to the present day, and demonstrating erudition and expertise not only in the field of law and the judicial system.

The Internet Speaks podcast and its sub-brands (*Money Speaks*, *Artist Speaks*, *Amateur*, *Television on Radio*, *Natural Intelligence*, *Transistor*) cover a wide range of themes. The participants are experts and the dialogues include the introduction of the euro currency in Bulgaria; open data with Boyan Yurukov (computer scientist, blogger, activist); open science is discussed with the scientist Ana Lazarova; scientific communication and funding with Lyubo Baburov from Ratio (scientific podcast), digital marketing with Genadi Vorobyov, discussions on OpenAI with the host of the podcast and the newly adopted AI Act, the impact of social media on children, manipulative practices in television series, as well as regional and local issues. Even within a single episode, participants address a broad spectrum of topics, illustrating the diversity and rhetorical richness of the podcast genre.

6.3. Ethos and *argumentum ad verecundiam*

Jean Goodwin describes two types of manifestations of *argumentum ad verecundiam*, namely the authority of command, the authority of expertise, and posits a third type, the authority of dignity, as a manifestation of the real *ad verecundiam* (Goodwin 1998, 278).

The *argumentum ad verecundiam* manifests in all three of its classical forms within the rhetorical conduct of participants in Bulgarian podcasts.

Podcast participants frequently present themselves as specialists or experts in particular domains. Some are political leaders, such as Svetlyo Vitkov (leader of the party Vox populi vox Dei) and Kornelia Ninova (former leader of the Bulgarian Socialist Party). Others have achieved prominence through successful careers in music and production, such as Denis Rizov. A further group comprises individuals who have managed business corporations (Hristo Popov, Plamen Petrov), as well as figures with experience in non-governmental organizations and the media (Slavi Vassilev, Kristian Shkvarek).

A second category invokes the argument from expertise more explicitly, consisting of participants who hold academic degrees and occupy university positions. These include Prof. Mihail Mirchev (associated with *People Power*), Prof. Petar Stoyanovich (featured in *CoMinds Chatters* and *The Bureau of Konstantin Valkov*), and Assoc. Prof. Mariana Todorova (appearing in *CoMinds Chatters*, *Chefo*, *5stotinki podcast, At ToTo Podcast*).

A third group encompasses active participants in Bulgarian civil society processes, such as attorney Tatyana Doncheva. A fourth group derives authority from frequent appearances in media programs, for example, the psychologist Madlen Algafari and the singer Denis Rizov in *Freedom of Speech* – podcaster Karbovski, and *Chefo Podcast*.

The *argumentum ad verecundiam* appears in multiple forms here. Podcast participants present their public visibility and professional status as sufficient grounds to offer analysis and advice beyond their areas of expertise. Through these appearances, they reinforce their prominence by commenting on Bulgaria's domestic and foreign policy and on criminal cases, as in the cases of Prof. Ivo Hristov and Assoc. Prof. Valentin Vatsev.

For example, Svetlyo Vitkov – singer, performer, and leader of the political party Vox populi vox Dei – states in *Chefo Podcast*: "I selected politicians using a polygraph."[7] He explains that he evaluated team members during interviews to assess whether they had experience, moral integrity, and principled commitments. Vitkov employs argumentum *ad verecundiam* in the form of positional authority – the legitimacy derives from the office he holds rather than from his actual competence.

Denis Rizov, who has lived and pursued a professional career in the United States, declares in *Chefo Podcast*: "Trump became arrogant and acquired absolute power!" – a statement framed in the episode as coming from "the Republican from Florida, Denis Rizov".[8] Here, the appeal to authority is grounded in biographical proximity and experiential capital (residence and career in the U.S.), which implicitly serves to legitimize his political evaluation of developments in American governance.

Kristian Shkvarek, in the *The New Knowledge* podcast hosted by Stoycho Kerev, comments on the Epstein affair: "How can such a crime be excused? Even the national security of a state does not excuse and cannot excuse such monstrous acts."[9] In this case, the rhetorical force stems from moral absolutism combined with public-intellectual positioning, whereby condemnation is advanced with the implicit authority of civic and ethical judgment.

Psychiatrist Vladimir Simov states in the podcast *Limitless*, hosted by Zhivko Krastev:

> Only 15% of the human population has a stable psyche, and they are called super-normal. You can see that society has been completely shaken. We are whipping our own brains and our own psyches with various substances.[10]

In this instance, professional medical authority is mobilized to frame broad social and psychological diagnoses. The appeal derives its persuasive force from Simov's clinical status, which implicitly legitimizes generalizations concerning collective mental stability and contemporary social dynamics.

Daniel Gekov, a criminal psychologist, declares in the *Consciousness and Meaning* podcast, hosted by Eli Aleksandrova:

> It is no coincidence that major fraudsters are individuals with high intelligence, creativity, and cognitive capacity. However, we must not confuse the fear and anxiety of an innocent person with the deceptive behavior of a guilty one.[11]

Here, the argument draws on criminological expertise to differentiate psychological states, invoking disciplinary knowledge as a source of epistemic authority in the interpretation of criminal behaviour. Tatyana Doncheva states in a podcast hosted by Martin Karbovski:

> The decentralization of the registration of parties and associations has now led to a situation in which some clerk at the Registry Agency makes the assessment. But that person is either a lawyer with very limited qualifications or perhaps not even that. They have simply been told the formal criteria that must

7 Chefo Podcast. Guest Svetlyo Vitkov. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUynjOTQh6c

8 Chefo Podcast. Guest Denis Rizov. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dt4oE9RMWXw

9 The New Knowledge. Guest Kristian Shkvarek. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BbAjyLGh-8k

10 Limitless. Guest Vladimir Simov. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23oomeszViM

11 Consciousness and Meaning. Guest Daniel Gekov. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leOEFEOTnUE

> be met. When such a person sees that two professors have signed the documents, they begin to feel a sense of deference.[12]

In this case, the rhetoric explicitly foregrounds academic titles ("two professors") as a trigger for institutional deference, thereby illustrating a direct and reflexive acknowledgment of *argumentum ad verecundiam* in practice – authority functioning as a persuasive substitute for substantive evaluation.

Associate Professor Mariana Todorova – a philosopher and futurist researching artificial intelligence – appearing as a guest on *Chefo Podcast*, addresses a topic outside her immediate specialization, yet advances her interpretation in an expert capacity:

> Lifestyle determines longevity to a much greater extent than genetic predisposition. Epigenetics is a very interesting science because it shows that the sense of poverty in African countries was embedded generations ago, and people there are more responsible toward food.[13]

In this case, academic authority in philosophy and futurology, together with experience in artificial intelligence research, is extended to areas such as epigenetics and socio-cultural behavior. The claim does not rest on evidence presented in the discussion, but on the speaker's academic status, which implicitly legitimizes cross-disciplinary generalizations.

In the *CoMinds Chatters* podcast, Assoc. Prof. Mariana Todorova further states:

> Artificial intelligence is the perfect sociopath. It understands logical human action extremely well and imitates it, but there is no emotion behind it, no shared experience, no empathy. Not because AI is evil or demonic, but because it is not a natural biological consciousness.[14]

Here, metaphorical framing ("the perfect sociopath") functions as a rhetorically powerful interpretative device. The authority of academic expertise in AI studies lends epistemic weight to an ontological claim about the nature of artificial intelligence, illustrating once more how *argumentum ad verecundiam* operates by projecting scholarly credibility into broader philosophical and anthropological generalizations.

6.4. Ethos, narratives, and storytelling

Ethos should be understood as a multidimensional category that extends beyond its rhetorical dimension of credibility. It is constructed through a complex interplay of social, cultural, professional, and personal elements. Within this framework, personal branding emerges as a dynamic process in which personal narrative, demonstrating expertise, and expressing vulnerability play a decisive role. These components enable podcast hosts and their guests/participants to establish an authentic and trustworthy image before their audiences.

When speaking about India, Professor Ivo Hristov is remarkably engaging: he weaves a narrative that combines facts from diverse domains – history, geography, and mythology – while employing vivid, yet accessible metaphors. He recalls:

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12 Freedom of Speech. Guest Tatyana Doncheva. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=waf-LFhO3ik

13 Chefo Podcast. Guest Mariana Todorova. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIk00418Ndw

14 CoMinds Chatters. Guest Mariana Todorova. https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1176774091284383

> An astonishing world. I found it fascinating as we approached the Taj Mahal by plane. It is located in the capital of Uttar Pradesh, a state in the Himalayas, which is now the residence of the Dalai Lama. High in the Himalayas, when you fly at 2,000 meters from the south, from Punjab toward the mountains, you see five rivers rising: the Indus, the Ganges, the Brahmaputra... before you stands the 'roof of the world,' the Himalayan wall, eight kilometers high. Behind it stretches the Tibetan Plateau. The scale is gigantic, incredible, incomparable. One realizes, in the words of Nehru, that when you lean over it, India seems to be the very source of history. It does not merely reflect like a well – it gushes forth. This is the world of the Mahābhārata, the realm of India's epic heroes. It is a living history. It is a nation of 1.5 billion young people. If one has the sensitivity, one there feels the very engine of history throbbing. A colossal mechanism that has once again been set into motion.[15]

Dr. Miroslav Nenkov, an anesthesiologist with a brief tenure as Deputy Minister of Health, is a skilled communicator and a popular media figure. He provides arguments on issues of high social sensitivity, not only in healthcare but also in education, institutional functioning, decision-making mechanisms, and project funding. He explains one of the reasons for the problems in healthcare and the dissatisfaction of patients as follows:

> The lack of training in our education as doctors on how to communicate with patients, how a doctor should treat a doctor, a nurse, an orderly and the patient's mother. I was lucky to learn from practice that in front of me is a patient, but this is a person. Patients receive information, but it is not enough. Patients want someone to sit down and talk to them. However, doctors do not have time for this, unfortunately.[16]

From a communicative and rhetorical standpoint, content analysis reveals that participants in podcasts frequently employ argumentation strategies to substantiate claims grounded, albeit subjectively, in ethics and fairness. In doing so, they not only reinforce the moral dimension of their messages but also create a sense of social responsibility and engagement. At the same time, through personal stories and statements, participants continuously reaffirm their credibility, thereby strengthening their connection with the audience and sustaining a high level of trust. Manager and entrepreneur Hristo Popov states:

> And the second conclusion that I have at least made, how you feel, should not be related to whether you have achieved the goal or not [...] You have to fall in love with the process of achieving the goal. And then you can't go wrong. You have to fall in love with your image 10-15 years later. You have to imagine, this is what I want to be.[17]

7. Rhetorical techniques, visual and multimodal arguments

As already mentioned, podcasts are a specific manifestation in the media ecosystem; they most often take the form of a semi-formal conversation, there are no communication barriers, there are stories and examples, and participants give advice as experts. This requires images that are easy to understand, so allegories and symbols are avoided. On the other hand, the stories also include irony and self-irony to attract and retain the audience's attention.

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15 Yavor Dachkov podcast. Guest Ivo Hristov. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=161pCeVOjqw&list=PLSYi15wAFyR-pLpN2cp1VA6KAEwterO9OX

16 Podcast About Health. Guest Dr. Miroslav Nenkov. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fn_Ewt6yDAY

17 To slay the dragon. Guest Hristo Popov. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3QFTxv8q7W8&ab_channel=%D0%94%D0%B0%D0%A3%D0%B1%D0%B8%D0%B5%D1%88%D0%94%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%9F%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82%D1%81VelizarV

The humour used by the participants helps them appear more human and approachable, even though they are experts and well-known personalities. The listener and viewer feel that they are not just receiving information, but are "attending" a friendly conversation. In addition, selected parts of the podcast, such as funny excerpts, can easily be turned into TikTok clips or memes for. In this way, the podcast can reach an audience through teasers or as a secondary product after its publication on the platforms.

Doctor Miroslav Nenkov (an anesthesiologist and a comedian who also tells jokes) provides answers and shares fascinating stories from his practice as a doctor, using his sense of humour:

> The anesthesiologist puts you to sleep. His job seems very easy. Bye-bye and you fall asleep. I spend a lot of time talking to my patients. Whoever walks into the operating room feels fear. I am able to help overcome that fear to some extent.[18]

He participates in the *5 Stotinki* podcast, wears a T-shirt with the inscription "I am a doctor, not a magician" and says: "An idiot generates an idiot."[19]

Irony and self-irony are communicative techniques for some participants, for example, Militsa Gladnishka – a comedian actress - as a participant in the *At To To's* podcast, uses this technique several times:

> I was not a very beautiful child, but then I blossomed like Monica Bellucci.
> I did not lose weight, but I took very good pictures of the landscapes.[20]

Representatives of the artistic community and science use images, and their style and language are interesting and aesthetically pleasing from a rhetorical point of view.

The combination of figurative and everyday language is not typical of official public statements, but given the specific characteristics of podcasts, it is common, especially when participants present examples from their practice and describe their expertise in a popular and understandable way.

Psychologist Madlene Algafari uses the same model; she mixes popular language and pronouns ("we," "you") as anaphora from a rhetorical standpoint. The aim is to bridge the distance and to present that all are members of a community, she uses a mechanism of identification.

> In this, authenticity is not about mindset.
> We are full of clichés. But we also differ.
> We have different introjects.
> We believe different things. But what makes us most individuals is what we feel.[21]

The topic of visual elements, signs, and rhetoric is studied by scholars and researchers from various universities and schools. The terms rhetoric of vision, visual rhetoric, visual mode of rhetoric,

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18 At ToTo: The doctor who will make you laugh! Guest Doctor Miroslav Nenkov https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvG-zPkl68a8&ab_channel=ToToYotovл Retrieved on 12.08.2025.

19 5stotinki podcast. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHs8ocOX7CQ&ab_channel=5stotinkipodcast. Retrieved on 12.08.2025.

20 At ToTo: Guest Militsa Gladnishka. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-hz4VHsR-k&ab_channel=ToToYotov

21 Authenticity podcast. Episode 180. Guest Madlene Algafari. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZDK8btYn2tI&ab_channel=%D0%9F%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82%D0%90%D0%B2%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82. Retrieved on 12.08.2025.

language of vision, etc. are explained by Stanly Meltzoff (Meltzoff 1970, 27–38). Semiotic researchers also study visual elements from the perspective of signs and channels for conveying meaning and messages (Groupe μ 1992, 58). Sonja K. Foss has displayed a constant interest in visual rhetoric (Foss 2004, 303–314). The term visual rhetoric is used in connection with photojournalism and democratic public culture (Lucaites and Hariman 2001, 37–42). Leo Groarke and Christopher Tindale give a definition of visual arguments:

> Visual arguments – are arguments that convey premises and conclusions with non-verbal images one finds in drawing, photographs, films, videos, sculpture, natural objects, and so on. In most cases they combine visual and verbal cues that can be understood as arguments. (Groarke and Tindale 2012, 455)

The analysis, from the perspective of visual argumentation, demonstrates that the microphone is the most frequently used symbol in podcast logos, followed by headphones and sound wave motifs. In order to enhance recognizability and indicate thematic orientation, some podcasts incorporate elements drawn from cooking, the arts, sports, and other fields. The analysis indicates that such images do not generate communicative barriers; rather, they consist of standardized or stylized representations of animals, plants, buildings, well-known geographic landmarks, and similar elements. In short-format episodes designed for platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and in the so-called thumbnails, there is an increasing reliance not on abstract symbols or metaphors, but on participants' faces. Recognized as public figures, these faces function as promotional devices for the episode. In addition, large fonts, concise messages, short titles, legible typefaces, and vivid colours are employed. Within mainstream environments, these strategies aim, first, to ensure recognizability; second, to attract attention; and third, to motivate virtual audiences to watch and listen to the complete podcast.

The multimodal elements in podcasts manifest on several levels. First, in the full video recordings of episodes, practices reveal a tendency to integrate dialogue images: photos, logos, maps, diagrams, infographics, etc. Secondly, short video clips or teasers include images often generated with the help of artificial intelligence, chatbots, etc. From rhetorical and communicative standpoints, these assembly techniques create dynamism and sustain audience attention during viewing.

The multimodal argument combines sound, image, and text, and is employed by podcast producers and hosts to capture attention, reinforce the message, and persuade audiences of a given thesis, claim, or cause. Multimodal arguments are frequently created after the initial recording of a video file using digital tools. These arguments are subsequently integrated and incorporated into the original recording, thereby generating an additional layer of rhetorical impact. In this way, in the final version of the podcast, multimodal arguments unfold across a network of modalities. From both rhetorical and communicative perspectives, this constitutes a relevant mode of content production, particularly in light of platform-based dissemination.

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It is not possible to provide an unequivocal evaluation of the use of multimodal arguments in podcasts. On the one hand, multimodality enhances audience engagement – primarily through visualizations, animated effects, and interactive elements that attract and sustain attention. The production of multimodal arguments in podcasts also takes into account the dynamics of platformization, including algorithmic filtering, the fluidity of the virtual environment, the rapid decline of audience attention, and the redirection of users toward other mainstream video content. On the other hand, platformization can also lead to fragmented attention.

8. Conclusion

The present study examined the rhetorical and communicative characteristics of podcasts within the contemporary Bulgarian media environment, focusing on ethos construction, argumentative strategies, and communicative style. Through the combined application of rhetorical analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis, as proposed by Teun van Dijk, the research demonstrates that podcasting functions as a distinct format within the digital media ecosystem. The findings indicate that podcasting operates as a dynamic virtual tribune, where hosts and guests not only present content but actively construct immediate connections with their audiences through rhetoric and argumentation.

The ethos of the podcaster and the ethos of the guests in dialogical formats manifest in specific ways, grounded in the sharing of expertise and experience, while generally avoiding unilateral and universally valid claims. Hosts present themselves as facilitators of discussion. Guests build credibility primarily through references to professional competence. and they present different or alternative points of view.

Argumentation combines argument from authority, *argumentum ad verecundiam*, and appeals to personal experience, thereby producing a different communicative situation. This integration of formal and informal argumentative modes reshapes the media interaction. The findings show that humour functions to reduce communicative distance and signal authenticity of podcast participants. Colloquial expressions and conversational markers further differentiate podcast discourse from traditional journalistic registers. Informality becomes a communicative resource used by podcasters and guests. Podcasts operate as virtual platforms where participants present advice, commentary, and current information, combining expertise and relatability.

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III. Rhetoric and AI

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DIGITAL OBJECTS IN THE RHETORICAL SITUATION: A PECULIAR KIND OF CONSTRAINT

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Abstract

The paper attempts to achieve a twofold goal. On the one hand, it claims digital objects' aptness to be a peculiar kind of constraint in the rhetorical situation; on the other hand, it shows peculiarities of digital objects compared to "natural objects". In fact, due to the binary nature of the former and their specific materiality, it is suggested that there are different epistemological consequences compared to the latter. In light of these purposes, the inquiry is structured as follows. In section 2, differences between digital objects and natural objects are recalled, focusing on peculiarities of digital technologies or "third-order technologies". In section 3, the debate between Bitzer and Vatz is recalled, in order to clarify constraints' presence in the rhetorical situation and, thus, to the purpose of reinforcing digital objects' candidacy as constraints. Section 4 will show how the usage of digital objects is able to influence the legal practice: the example of recidivism risk assessment algorithm will be recalled, underlying the need for caution in such practice.

Keywords: *digital technologies, rhetorical situation, law, rhetoric, recidivism risk assessment algorithm, epistemology*

1. Introduction

The paper focuses on the introduction of digital objects into the rhetorical situation, exploring their peculiarities and claiming for their aptness to constrain the rhetor. For the sake of clarity, it is worth mentioning that, on the one hand, the purpose of this paper does not consist of claiming for the promotion of natural objects instead of digital ones or vice versa: rather, the general scope consists of underlying the different modality of making sense of phenomena and situations between the two. On the other hand, the inquiry cannot be placed under the label of "digital rhetoric" studies, focused on "help[ing] to explain how traditional rhetorical strategies of persuasion function and how they are being reconfigured in digital spaces" (Zappen 2005, 319). In fact, the focus will not regard "traditional rhetorical strategies of persuasion", but rather one specific (epistemological) aspect of the more limited topic of the rhetorical situation. Furthermore, the reconfiguration of rhetoric in digital space is not exactly the topic addressed here, because, as the example of recidivism risk assessment algorithms aims to show, digital objects are analyzed in an "onlife" environment, as Luciano Floridi would call it, because digital and analogue dimension are intertwined.

In light of this purpose, the second section will clarify what is meant by digital objects, comparing them to natural objects; secondly, the third section will briefly focus on the digital objects construction process, investigating why digital objects become constraints in the rhetorical situation. Finally, I will make an example of risk assessment algorithms in the legal context in order to explain how using machine learning tools can influence the rhetorical situation and, more precisely, the judicial one.

2. Peculiarities of digital technologies

In order to explain the peculiarity of digital objects, it is worth noting the difference compared to "natural objects" (Hui 2012, 380–395; Capone and Bertolaso 2020, 49–67). Natural objects do not refer to objects given "by nature" like plants or animals, but rather natural objects refer to the way human beings approach phenomena. This peculiar human way of approaching phenomena includes the use of "representative schemes", such as space and time, but also quantity, quality, relation and modality (originally formulated by Kant). Therefore, our capacity to know has always been characterized by the possibility of collocating a certain phenomenon in a given place, at a certain time, possibly also understanding what other phenomena were somehow linked to the one under analysis.

> Let's make an example: flexibility and length of a branch are salient traits of this object; [...] The ability of the branch itself to flex, loading itself without breaking, is an overriding trait, which an individual [...] can take up to make a bow. This simple example offers a glimpse into the way *human beings contextualise objects around them, giving them meaning in a holistic manner, in relation to the world they inhabit and the form of life they constitute*. Intellect, therefore, is not only assisted by its schematic framework that orders a world of objects endowed with superficial qualities and relations, but also by a historically connoted sensibility, we would say by a culture. The subject in experiencing the world around her takes on this culture in the process of knowing her objects (Capone and Bertolaso 2020, 56, my italics)[1].

[1] Original version: "Vediamo un esempio: la flessibilità e la lunghezza di un ramo sono tratti salienti di questo oggetto [...]. La possibilità dello stesso ramo di flettersi, caricandosi senza rompersi, è un tratto sopravveniente, che un individuo (in questo caso anche primitivo) può cogliere per fabbricare un arco. Questo semplice esempio offre uno sguardo sul modo in cui gli esseri umani contestualizzano gli oggetti che li circondano, conferendo loro significato in maniera olistica, in relazione al mondo che abitano e alla forma di vita che costituiscono. L'intelletto dunque non è

Thus, for natural objects, "the given is closely related to sense data" (Hui 2012, 388). Considering the example just mentioned, natural objects can therefore be experienced considering a broad spectrum of representative schemes that allow human beings to orient themselves in the world, grasping not only a single property of the object under analysis, but also the context where that certain property (like the length or flexibility of the branch) can be found.

It seems not to be the case with digital objects. From a general point of view, the term "digital" is used in opposition to the term "analog" (Eyman 2015, 18), which seems to pertain to natural objects. More precisely, the term "digital" can refer to at least two nouns:

1) Digital "dimension". This suggestion is provided by the Independent High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence, nominated by the European Commission in June 2018, in the Artificial Intelligence system definition[2]; from this point of view, a digital dimension has been defined, with a metaphor, the "water we find ourselves in" regardless of our willingness to it (Andronico 2021, 11). A digital dimension, from this perspective, is a different type of interaction environment: "[E]merging technologies is that they are not only making new discoveries, but are altogether creating new environments" (Russo 2012, 67). In these environments, also legally relevant actions can be conducted, such as signing a contract or establishing a company.
2) Digital "technology". It is possible to point out three different kinds of technology (for these distinctions, Russo 2022, 204; Floridi 2013, 111–16):
    a. First-order technology (what Hui calls "technical objects", see Hui 2012, 384): in this case, the technology is between the human being (the user) and "nature", meant as the environment. An example of first-order technology is a pair of sunglasses, interposed between sun rays and the user. The scheme provided by Floridi (2013) in this case is the following: "[humans – technology – nature]".
    b. Second-order technology: it regards a technology between a user and another technology. Thus, in this case, the technology involved is more sophisticated: an example in this regard is the remote control to start television or scissors to cut paper. The scheme is "[humans – technology – technology]".
    c. Third-order technology: this is the case of digital technology; in this case the role of humans is less evident compared to the others, and there is more interaction within different technologies. Examples in this regard are the Internet or deep learning algorithms, and the scheme is the following one: "[technology – technology – technology]".

According to these distinctions, only third-order technology is digital technology. Of course, this is not the only possible way of understanding "digital": in fact, following an etymological perspective,

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assistito solo dalla sua intelaiatura schematica che ordina un mondo di oggetti dotati di qualità e relazioni superficiali, ma anche da una sensibilità storicamente connotata, noi diremmo da una cultura. Il soggetto nell'esperire il mondo che lo circonda assume questa cultura nel processo di conoscenza dei suoi oggetti".

2 "Artificial intelligence (AI) systems are software (and possibly also hardware) systems designed by humans that, given a complex goal, act in the *physical* or *digital dimension* by perceiving their environment through data acquisition, interpreting the collected structured or unstructured data, reasoning on the knowledge, or processing the information, derived from this data and deciding the best action(s) to take to achieve the given goal. AI systems can either use symbolic rules or learn a numeric model, and they can also adapt their behaviour by analyzing how the environment is affected by their previous actions" Independent High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence, *Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI*, 08.04.2019. My italics.

it has been pointed out that in Latin, "digitalis" means "fingers", and it has been argued that digital technologies have "a connection to the material production of texts" (Eyman 2015, 19). From this perspective, they have always been (at least since the earliest forms of writing in human history) the *medium* through which "literacy" has spread (Eyman 2015, 19). Following this reading, due to this continuity, there seems to be nothing exceptional regarding even the most advanced forms of digital technologies, which might be understood as the later stage of this "material production".

A similar reading can be found in Garapon and Lassègue (2021, 35–42). Nevertheless, they underline that informatics and more precisely "computer literacy" or "computer processing of writing" inaugurated a different form of word registration compared to handwriting, because the former implies "rewriting rules", which are absent in the case of the latter (Garapon and Lassègue 2021, 40–41). "Rewriting rules" imply, according to the authors, a transformation process, provoked by informatics, able to change the traditional modality of literacy transmission.

The schemes proposed by Floridi (2013) seem to account for the feature underlined by Garapon and Lassègue and ultimately to emphasize the crucial role played by informatics. Therefore, these distinctions might help to understand the, so to speak, 'epistemological shift' from natural objects, which seems to be proper of only third-order technology according to Floridi's classification (and not to first and second-order technologies)[3]. Think, for instance, of "Mesopotamian clay tokens (dating from the ninth millennium BCE)" (Eyman 2015, 19; Garapon and Lassègue 2021, 36), which, interposing between humans and a paper, enabled the first printing processes. In this case, there seems to be no difference between knowledge of Mesopotamian clay tokens and that of a branch in the wood; on the contrary, both of them are natural objects, and precisely due to this reason, the tokens can be used as writing instruments whereas the branch can serve for making a bow. This is not the case for third-order technology, where the materiality and the degree of autonomy seem different compared to first-order and second-order technologies. For example, "some algorithms in finance buy and sell stocks autonomously and human agents often do not know or understand anymore how these algorithms make decisions" (Russo 2022, 205). The degree of "autonomy" in such cases is higher compared to tools in the previous examples: machine learning (henceforth "ML") algorithms can gain the so called "knowledge base" for its functioning without human intervention (Sartor 2022, 45) – although human agent is still indispensable, basically for providing to algorithms the possibility to do that (see also Russo 2022, 205–206).

For our purpose, it is worth noting that in third-order technologies no natural objects are involved, because every possibly relevant phenomenon for algorithm functioning is already digitalized (I will talk about digitalization shortly): therefore, also thanks to informatics, the third-order technology operates within a digital dimension, not an analogue one. Furthermore, the entire amount of information feeding the ML algorithm cannot be grasped in the same way as natural objects. In this regard, Russo points out the example of calculation: "[E]ven if us human epistemic agents are able to make calculations, we are not able to make calculations on *significantly large* data set: much of statistics nowadays cannot be done without computers, and all the more so in the era of Big Data" (Russo 2022, 205). From this latter perspective, digital technologies operate as epistemic access to information that would not be in any other way reachable by human minds.

3 Technologies seem to be apt to be the medium through which a certain outcome can be realized (Mesopotamian clay tokens used for printing purposes). However, technologies can also be a purpose in themselves. In this latter sense, the term "data" (datum, in Latin) seems to be used, referring to "[a thing] given" (Hui 2012, 388). Thus, from this perspective, technologies can be referred to both the construction process and the outcomes of this process.

This point can perhaps be clarified by recalling the two phases needed for digital objects construction:

1) The first phase is called "datification of objects" (Hui 2012, 389) (or "digitalization" for Garapon and Lassègue 2021, 43), implying a passage from physical dimension to semiotic dimension. To digitalize means "converting the phenomenon into a signal that can be transcribed in the form of a sequence of numbers" (Garapon and Lassègue 2021, 43).
2) The second phase is called "objectification of data", for which "data must be conceptualized as graspable entities by both the human mind and the computational mind" (Hui 2012, 389). Data should thus be able to be transferred from one device to another, but also to be understood by users.

In the phase of digitalization, the physical dimension needs to be translated into a lexicon able to be processed in a digital dimension: in this way, some features of natural objects are, so to speak, "lost in translation". More precisely, digital objects are translated into the so-called "bit-strings", namely objects "made up of bits, the 0s and 1s employed in a binary numbering system, where these bits are structured according to an appropriate file format so as to be readable by the kind of computer hardware for which they are intended" (Faulkner and Runde 2019, 1285). As a consequence, in the example of the branch mentioned at the beginning of the paper, it means that only some information will be reproduced in the digital environment: thus, for instance, in a digital image, length and colour might be reproduced, but not flexibility or smell. Of course, as the previous example of calculation shows, thanks to peculiarities of third-order technologies, other possibilities are available: huge amounts of data, in fact, can be processed and new epistemic accesses are allowed. In this latter case, an emblematic example is that of scientific knowledge: techno-scientific tools usage provides epistemic access to features that would be otherwise precluded. For this reason, it is argued that it is more appropriate, when it comes to scientific knowledge, to always emphasize the "co-production" of scientific knowledge between techno-scientific tools (as epistemic *medium*) and human beings, as for instance, the case of omics technologies for biomarker identification shows (Russo 2022, 51–52).

3. The constraints of the rhetorical situation

The rhetorical situation, originally formulated by Lloyd F. Bitzer in 1968, includes three main constituents: exigence, audience and constraints. Among various discussions this paper has sparked, this section will depart from the debate between Bitzer and Richard E. Vatz, following the reading of Scott Consigny, in order to clarify the role of constraints: subsequently, the introduction of digital objects will be suggested. The definition of constraints provided by Bitzer is the following:

> [C]onstraints are made up of persons, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence. Standard sources of constraint include beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests, motives and the like (Bitzer 1968, 8).

Although tautological, the definition suggests a strong influence of a variety of factors in rhetorical decision-making. Therefore, these factors are part of a situation that, for Bitzer, is somehow already given and waits to be discovered by the rhetor: from this perspective, the rhetorical situation is independent from the rhetor, it exists on its own. On the contrary, Vatz affirms that there is nothing already predetermined in the rhetorical situation: every constituent is "created" by the

rhetor (Consigny 1974, 176; Vatz 1973, 158; for a debate reconstruction, see also Biesecker 1989, 112–14). Following Vatz, then, we should conclude that constraints are also created *ex nihilo* by the rhetor: thus, digital objects would not be of interest for the rhetorical situation, because the choice of considering them as constraints is entirely up to the rhetor. However, as Consigny notes, this is not the case. In fact, "Vatz correctly treats the rhetor as creative, but he fails to account for the real constraints on the rhetor's activity" (Consigny 1974, 176). Thus, Consigny advocates a third way between Bitzer and Vatz.

For the sake of clarity, the most salient aspects of Consigny's proposal for our purposes are summarized. He suggests treating rhetoric as an art, characterized by two features: "integrity" and "receptivity". The first feature consists of an "universal" capacity that allows the rhetor "to disclose and manage indeterminate factors in novel situations without his action being predetermined" (Consigny 1974, 179): this capacity is needed for Consigny because the rhetor will always face new problems to deal with, and thus she is required to have the ability to "manage" them (in fact, rhetoric is considered by Consigny a "managerial art": Consigny 1974, 184). The second feature of rhetoric as art is receptivity, meant as that capacity to "become engaged in individual situations without simply inventing and thereby predetermining which problems he is going to find in them" (Consigny 1974, 181). This second condition, which emphasizes the heuristic value of rhetoric ("The art of rhetoric is thus a 'heuristic' art, allowing the rhetor to discover real issues in indeterminate situations" (Consigny 1974, 180)), focuses on specific features of a novel situation. It seems to imply rejection of Vatz's idea, according to which the entire rhetorical situation is "created" by the rhetor: if the rhetor must be able to catch particularities of a situation, it means that those particularities are already present without her "creation". In similar terms, Garrett and Xiao 1993, 38, commenting on the debate between Vatz and Bitzer, underline that "this freedom [of the rhetor] is inherently limited, that no rhetor can completely break free of the fundamental values and presuppositions of his or her discourse community and tradition".

In order to satisfy these two conditions, Consigny proposes to consider rhetoric as "an art of topics or commonplaces" (Consigny 1974, 181). Within his proposal, topics are considered in a twofold way: as "instrument" and as "situation". On the one hand, concerning the first concept, "the topic or commonplace is an instrument or device for the invention of arguments and the disclosure of phenomena". Thus, "the topic is a device which allows the rhetor to discover, through selection and arrangement, that which is relevant and persuasive in a particular situation" (Consigny 1974, 181). This is also called the formal instrument at the disposal of the rhetor: it emphasizes the creative role, due to certain selections in preparing the speech and not others.

On the other hand, topics are meant as "realms". "In this second sense, 'place' of the rhetor is that region or field marked by the particularities of persons, acts, and agencies in which the rhetor closes and establishes meaningful relationships. The topic location or site, the Latin *situs*, from which we derive our 'situation'." (Consigny 1974, 182). This component represents the concrete situation in which the rhetor operates, and from which the deliberation begins; it is also called the context or material situation (Consigny 1974, 183).

For the purpose of resolving the tension between Bitzer and Vatz, Consigny suggests considering these two meanings of "topics" intertwined, which means that there is always an "interplay" between the two. If this is not the case, both alternatives are contestable positions: thus, on one hand, meaning rhetoric only as formal topic, emphasizing its creative role, would lead to Vatz's conclusion, according to which the entire rhetorical situation is "created"; on the other hand, preferring the material situation at the expense of the formal instrument would confirm Bitzer's

position, for whom the situation is already determinate, therefore the creative role of the rhetor is neglected. Rather, Consigny claims that

> the topic is thus both instrument and situation in that as merely formal device the topic has no significance: it must be concretely engaged in a particular experiential context. But the context or material situation independent of the formal topic is indeterminate and without meaning. The formal and the material factors must exist in a dynamic interrelation if the rhetor is to be able to discover and manage the particular exigence of the situation (Consigny 1974, 183).

In this way, Consigny refuses the idea of Bitzer, according to whom "rhetorical situation is empirically *determinate*, consisting of an objectively recognizable 'exigence' or urgent problem potentially modifiable through persuasive discourse" (Consigny 1974, 175). However, at the same time, Consigny criticizes the stance of Vatz, underlining that he "provides no means to distinguish relevant problems from those imaginary or hypothetical ones the rhetor merely "invents"" (Consigny 1974, 180). Instead, for Consigny, the distinction exists, and thus some components of the rhetorical situation are not available for the rhetor, so they cannot be "created" by her. Therefore, it is plausible to conclude that at least some constraints, because constitutive of the rhetorical situation, are not manageable by the rhetor and, therefore, are given in a certain (rhetorical) situation.

In light of these considerations, how can digital objects influence the rhetorical discourse at the level of constraints? As pointed out in the previous section, digital objects, due to their binary nature, possess different features compared to natural objects, because the latter ones need to be translated into the digital dimension. In fact, as already mentioned, the context where specific information is grasped cannot be taken into consideration: thus, the precise space and time where information originally derives cannot be experienced. It is therefore suggested that digital objects will be apt for constraining the rhetor in a peculiar way (different compared to the one possibly happening with natural objects), which is given by the intrinsic structure of digital objects.

In order to stress this aspect, Hildebrandt (2008) suggests referring to this aspect as "technological normativity", i.e. "the way a particular technological device or infrastructure actually constrains human actions, inviting or enforcing, inhibiting or prohibiting types of behaviour" (Hildebrandt 2008, 173; for an analysis on the relationship between technology and normativity see Radder 2009, 896 who, similarly to Hildebrandt, affirms that "technology is inherently normative if its realization implies one or more norms or normative claims about what to say or do"). In order to explain how technological normativity works, she recalls the Berlin key example developed by Bruno Latour (2000, 12–14). As long as this explanation is concerned, it is worth recalling that the Berlin key was used in apartment buildings in Germany, in which there was a need to lock the door of the main entrance during the night and leave the door open during the day. Due to the risk that people would forget to do so, the Berlin key was invented. Its peculiar shape allowed people from outside the building to insert the key and to open the door, but the key could be pulled out only from inside the building, and thus on the other side of the door. A person using the Berlin key "cannot withdraw her key after having bolted the door by a 270° rotation as is her habit with every key in the world, [but] she must be able to make the key, now horizontal, slip from the other side through the lock" (Latour 2000, 14). Only by going through the keyhole, could the Berlin key be removed, provoking the door closure. As Hildebrandt explains,

> [t]his key forces the user to open the door by pushing the key through the keyhole to the other side of the door, and after entering the house, the door can only be closed by turning the key and thus locking the door. This key demonstrates how a technological device actually regulates and constitutes the interactions of a resident, the key, her door and others who wish to enter the house (Hildebrandt 2008, 173).

Although the Berlin key does not regard a third-order technology but a second-order technology, it seems to be an example suitable for providing an idea of how tools can be constraints to human behaviour. In the next section, the example of recidivism risk assessment algorithms as third-order technology aims to clarify the constraints for judicial decision-making.

4. The constraints of recidivism risk assessment algorithms

In a recent paper Ratti and Russo (2024) point out that the relation between science and values can have two "directions": the first one is "*from values to science*, in the sense that values shape the concepts, the methodologies, and the choices made by scientists throughout the entire scientific process"); the second direction is "*from science to values*, in the sense that methodologies or scientific concepts create the conditions for some values, rather than others, to be promoted" (Ratti and Russo 2024, 3, their italics). As example of the second direction, which is the one this inquiry is interested in, they explain how ML tools promote certain values and not others: departing from the (nowadays well established) assumption that "any piece of technology is not morally neutral" (Ratti and Russo 2024, 6; among many, Miller 2024, 6–10), their example focuses on recidivism risk assessment algorithms, used to estimate risks for an individual to be rearrested for a future crime (involved, for instance, in the legal case State vs. Loomis, also known as "COMPAS" case).

For our purposes, the example seems able to clarify how digital objects enter the rhetorical situation and provide peculiar kinds of constraints. Departing from the research conducted by Ratti and Russo, two different constraints can be underlined. While the first one regards the promotion of recidivism risk assessment algorithms of "a formalist interpretation of legal principles – namely, that laws have one correct, mechanically discoverable meaning" (Pruss 2021, 1103), the second constraint concerns punishment purpose. In fact, the risk assessment algorithm "presupposes that the purpose of punishment is consequentialist (crime control) rather than deontological (retributive)" (Pruss 2021, 15; Ratti and Russo 2024, 16). These two approaches are summarized as follows: "Deontological views of punishment see offenders' blameworthiness and culpability (such as seriousness of harm and intent) as central to determine punishment, while consequentialist views emphasize the importance of consequences (good or bad) of punishment" (Ratti and Russo 2024, 16). Thus, while deontological/retributive views would emphasize illegal behaviour and guilt of the accused, the consequentialist views would focus on the consequences that a certain punishment would provoke. The point made by the authors in this regard consists in claiming that risk assessment algorithm usage in courts would promote consequentialist views of punishment, because ML tool scope, by its nature, will provide "predictions" precisely contributing to predict how likely it is that the offence will be committed again (Ratti and Russo 2024, 18). "To put it more precisely: *given* the specific characteristics of ML tools, *if* such tools are used in the justice system, *then* the notion of punishment and justice that will be promoted is CVP" (Ratti and Russo 2024, 18, where "CVP" stands for "consequentialist views of punishment").

At first glance, it might seem that ML tools constraints can be understood as many others in the rhetorical situation: Bitzer, in fact, mentions a wide range of factors and perhaps values promotion connected to risk assessment algorithms might be placed under the label of "beliefs". From this perspective, as Hildebrandt points out, constraints "should not be understood as a negative term: constraints are the condition of possibility of (inter)action, they do not only inhibit or rule out certain behaviour, they also create or induce certain types of behaviour" (Hildebrandt 2008, 174).

However, when ML tools operate in specific contexts, the risk underlined is the one of "domain distortion" as Pruss calls it (Pruss 2021, 3), which seems to suggest that these technologies have

an impact on the way in which one operates, that may not be adequate within a specific context. More precisely, it seems that there is the risk that using ML tools, due to their implicit values promotion, would lead to neglecting some specific features linked to the purpose (which, in the case of recidivism risk assessment algorithms, consists in a public function) of a certain activity. For example, regarding the first constraint mentioned above, the value promotion that "laws have one correct, mechanically discoverable meaning" is not respectful of legal interpretation theories supporting skeptical positions, which generally affirm that "more than one meaning can be determined for each normative utterance"[4] (Velluzzi 2008, 494; see also Poggi 2018, 294–95). This aspect is relevant if connected to judicial decision-making, because it has been argued that the intrinsically vagueness and indeterminacy of legal language (on this topic see, by way of example, Trujillo 2019; Puppo 2012) is actually a desirable condition:

> [A]djudicators have good reason to conceal their extant uncertainty on a particular issue or to maintain a degree of future unpredictability. For example, human judges might obfuscate the grounds and limits of their precedential decisions today in order to preserve room for jurisprudential maneuvering tomorrow" (Re and Solow-Niederman 2019, 265).

These considerations suggest that there are specific features pertaining to a certain practice (in this case, the legal interpretation of judges) that must be safeguarded due to the scope of that practice. Similarly, recalling the example of the branch mentioned at the beginning of the paper, if the purpose is to make a bow, the construction activity would require someone to know how long, flexible, sturdy, etc. that branch is. And any interference with regard to knowledge of these characteristics will hinder the construction process.

5. Conclusion

The paper attempted to show that digital objects enter the rhetorical situation, and thus they are apt to influence the rhetor's speech. After a clarification on peculiarities of digital objects and their difference compared to natural objects (section 2), it has been suggested that usage of such technologies provoke epistemological shifts: on one hand, digital objects increase epistemic accesses; on the other, however, for their binary nature made through datification and objectification stages, they cannot provide the same possibilities proper of natural objects (section 3). Finally, the example of recidivism risk assessment algorithm was recalled, in order to explain how digital objects can operate as constraints in the judicial context (section 4).

A clarification is worth emphasizing as a conclusion. The fourth section underlines a risk concerning the use of ML tools in courts: the reason why this risk was pointed out was not the one of arguing that the introduction of digital objects into the rhetorical situation necessarily implies harmful effects, but rather to raise awareness and caution on this epistemological shift, which is not without consequences. And, in the case of the judicial context, caution must be particularly high: considering constitutional guarantees and the complexity of judging, it is not surprising that a variety of concerns have been raised concerning the ML tools usage in courts (by way of example, Re and Solow-Niederman 2019, 262–78; Schwerzmann 2021, 1893–98; Lo Giudice 2021, 193–200). Nevertheless, the point made here was different: namely, the one of underlining digital objects' aptness to be constraints in the rhetorical situation. The example of the risk assessment algorithms attempted to address this claim, suggesting that due to their peculiar features, digital objects may hide risks of which it is necessary to be aware, especially in the legal context.

4 Original version: "[P]er ogni enunciato normativo è determinabile più di un significato".

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TRANSLATED WITH AI: HOW ARE SPECIALIZED, YET HIGHLY RHETORICAL TEXTS TRANSLATED BY DEEPL? AN ANALYSIS OF PREAMBLES IN NORMATIVE TEXTS

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Abstract

DeepL, a widely used Neural Machine Translation (NMT) system, can translate entire paragraphs holistically (Belinkov et al. 2020). The program has been found to improve fluency compared to traditional machine translation methods (Volkart, Bouillon and Girletti 2018). However, to date, no research has explored how AI systems like DeepL handle the translation of rhetorical phenomena and genre-sensitive traits in specialized texts. This paper examines how DeepL translates rhetorical devices in the preambles of normative texts, which typically contain a multitude of rhetorical phenomena (Evangelista 2025, 54–64). Using a qualitative, corpus-based approach informed by translation theory, rhetorical analysis, and text linguistics (cf. e.g. Bassnett 2014; Prandi 2015; Ferrari, Lala and Lampese 2021), the study investigates whether DeepL captures key rhetorical devices at various textual levels. The analysis reveals that DeepL frequently fails to translate critical rhetorical features essential for meaning and stylistic accuracy in preambles. These findings underscore the limitations of current AI translation systems in contexts requiring rhetorical precision, and highlight the need for human oversight and expert post-editing.

Keywords: *translation, rhetoric, figures of speech, preambles, normative texts, DeepL*

1. Introduction

In an era where our thoughts, and consequently our words, are influenced by the massive use of artificial intelligence, the task of linguists and rhetoricians alike is often to evaluate the impact of these new instruments on communication and language use. A tough task indeed, which is further complicated by the limited understanding, both among the general public and within academic circles, of how such tools actually function (Belinkov et al. 2020). A simple search on scholarly databases reveals a gap, as (apart from very specialized and extensive works, such as Koehn 2020), there are few articles dedicated solely to explaining aspects concerning the inner workings of these programs. Instead, existing studies that attempt to evaluate their performance, studies just like the present one, as well as the ones consulted for this paper, typically spend only a few paragraphs in order to explain their general functioning mechanisms.

The degree to which we are not aware of what happens when we, for example, generate a text by using an AI-powered tool, or translate one with the help of an AI-powered translation software, is so high that in order to cope with this lack of awareness, we end up humanizing the program: we conceive it as if it was a rational human being. Metaphors in this sense are developing at a rapid pace (Mitchell 2024), fuelled by the original framing process that gave birth to the entire conceptual field, a process that found its fortune in what constitutes the head of the syntactical compound "artificial intelligence", that is, *intelligence*. Undoubtedly, the adjective *artificial* is placed before the noun, reminding us that we are not dealing with *natural intelligence*, that is, the intelligence of a living being. But what started as a creative metaphor, artificial intelligence, with all the connotative latitude such a term allows, is now latently solidifying into a conventional way of thinking – and into lexicalized language. This shift inevitably carries the risk of disorienting us, leading to uncritical acceptance of these metaphorical framing processes. Needless to say, that, as a consequence, when confronted with AI-generated content, it is necessary to redouble our efforts in critical thinking – and linguistic discernment.

2. Research questions and methods

With this in mind, the aim of this article is to conduct a linguistic and rhetorical analysis of a particular kind of material which can be produced by artificial intelligence, namely, translated content. The intent of this study is not to focus on just any kind of text, but more specifically on a highly specialized genre that typically contains plenty of rhetorical phenomena, namely preambles at the beginning of normative texts. The choice of focusing on this text genre is justified by a specific aim: the ultimate objective is to assess how an AI-powered translation program such as DeepL handles the various degrees of human creativity conveyed through rhetorical phenomena. Such phenomena are also crucial for the text genre of normative preambles itself, which is stylistically prone to containing many rhetorical traits (Evangelista 2023; 2024). This analysis thus seeks to address two main questions: i) how are rhetorical phenomena rendered by the translation program? And ii) are the specific rhetorical features that are codified into the style of the text genre kept intact in the translation process? Additionally, if the features are retained (or not), what are the potential consequences?

2.1. Translating rhetoric: theoretical approaches for the analysis

The primary theoretical framework adopted in this paper is that of rhetorical analysis. Drawing on linguistic theories such as, most importantly, the theorization of Michele Prandi (2023), while still keeping as reference points the studies of Fahnestock (e.g. 2011), rhetorical analysis is understood

as a broad discipline encompassing a wide range of conceptual and linguistic components. Particular attention is given to figures of speech, and especially to metaphors, which are nowadays increasingly examined through the lens of cognitive science. But conspicuous space in such theorization is also taken by theoretical tools from other disciplines, e.g. pragmatics and text linguistics, that have now been made explicitly part of an overarching view of rhetoric (Evangelista 2025, 19–21; Prandi 2023, 29–35).

In addition to the broad theoretical framework rooted in rhetorical analysis, this study also engages with key insights from the field of traductology. The interplay between rhetorical analysis, on the one side, and key theories in traductology, on the other, is important for two reasons: first, because until now the two disciplines have "regrettably been one of those reciprocally ignorant neighbors" (Dávila-Montes 2017, 3). Second, because translation has increasingly prioritized meaning: as we know, a good translation is not one that keeps the exact same words of the original, but rather one that, despite changing words and their order, succeeds in conveying the communicative content contained in the source text. In its hermeneutical and dialectic process, translation is, in Dávila-Montes (2017) words, "a rhetoric of meaning", which pays particular attention also to those levels that are oftentimes the most neglected, namely those that fall within the scope of rhetorical analysis. Moreover, having as the object of analysis translated rhetorical texts produced by AI systems, this article contributes to a still relatively small but emerging body of rhetorical scholarship (cf. e.g. Majdik and Graham 2024) that takes up AI-generated content as an object of critical rhetorical analysis.

Lastly, in analyzing AI-produced translations from the rhetorical point of view, particularly useful are theories drawn from traductology, and especially the concept of translation universals, which has played a central role in identifying linguistic patterns observed in translation corpora that tend to emerge in translated texts regardless of the languages involved (cf. Scarpa 2008, 108–113; Bassnett 2014). Universals offer valuable tools for evaluating how linguistic and rhetorical features are transformed in translation. Furthermore, specific attention in the study is given to theoretical perspectives on metaphor translation, with a focus on how different types of metaphor (ranging from conventional to highly creative) are treated in the translation process. In this regard, Prandi's (2015) typology of metaphor proves particularly useful, as it allows for a more nuanced analysis of the challenges that AI-powered translation systems face when confronted with metaphorical language of varying complexity and originality.

2.2. The corpus

The analysis draws on a qualitative and corpus-based methodology and is done manually, by systematically observing the rhetorical traits of preambles in their original versions, and then comparing this original version with the translation in Italian made by the AI-powered translation program DeepL, which uses a neural machine translation (NMT) system. The corpus of texts that was analyzed for this paper is divided into two parts. The first part consists of a group of 24 preambles[1] coming from Swiss constitutional texts (that of the Federal Constitution and 23 preambles of the cantonal Constitutions[2]), which original languages are mostly French and German; the second part consists of 24 preambles of international treaties in their original versions, which are English or

1 The number corresponds to the number of cantonal preambles, 23, to which the federal preamble is added.

2 Swiss Cantons are 26, yet the Constitutions of the Cantons of Aargau, Appenzell Innerrhoden and Zug have no preamble.

French. Both parts of the corpus containing original texts are available on the Swiss publication platform for federal law "Fedlex".[3]

The idea of considering preambles of international treaties along with preambles of Swiss Constitutions is justified by literature on the Swiss Federal Constitution, which states that the structure of the preamble of the Swiss Constitution is based on the structure of the preambles of international treaties (Confederazione Svizzera 1996, 114). Moreover, it is also justified by the intention to broaden the pool of analysis compared to the 24 Swiss preambles alone, and thus to be able to count on a broader and more balanced repertoire of translation examples. The selection of international preambles was made according to a criterion of importance in the hierarchy of treaty law and according to the function of the text in which they were found, preferring texts with the constitutive function of bringing into being an international body or organ (e.g. the Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO). This is to allow a closer comparison with the preambles of the Swiss constitutions, considering their similar pragmatic intent.

2.3. Preambles of laws as a text genre: rhetorical traits

The object of analysis of the present research is AI-produced translations of preambles of normative texts, and as this text genre so far has not been the focus of broad linguistic studies, it is useful to introduce here its textual characteristics. Despite not being a well-known text genre, preambles constitute the optimal testing ground both for observing the translation of various rhetorical phenomena – as they contain many of them – and for discovering if and how text genre is taken into account in AI-produced translations – as they are a highly specialized genre that largely relies on rhetoric for meaning construction.

That said, it is true that when thinking about a plausible prototype of a creative text, what comes to mind might not be the preamble of a normative text. This does not come as a surprise: the language of normative texts is considered by many scholars (cf. e.g. Sabatini 1999; Irti 2016) to be denotative, explicit, clear, and interpretively binding. Despite this common conception of the language of law texts, it is crucial to note that recent research, on the contrary, has shown many examples of rhetorical phenomena found in the law that are, instead, connotative, implicit, vague, leave space for interpretation, and serve different pragmatic functions (Evangelista 2025). These phenomena are contained throughout the normative text, but above all, they are condensed precisely in the introductory section of the preamble, which has the important function of offering a key for guiding the interpretation of the whole text by mentioning contextual information, values, and principles in an introductory partition which is not legally binding.

From the linguistic point of view, preambles are characterized by a macrostructure based on the rhetorical figure of the anaphora. Moreover, their sentences contain a multitude of rhetorical figures. Together, the incipit position, macrostructure, and rhetorical figures within the sentences add up to form a textual section which stylistically may seem more like a literary composition rather than a normative text. As a representative example, we can observe the preamble of the Swiss Constitution, here in its official English translation:

3 https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/en/treaty?news_period=last_year&news_pageNb=2&news_order=desc&news_itemsPerPage=10

(1) Preamble

In the name of Almighty God!
The Swiss People and the Cantons,
mindful of their responsibility towards creation,
resolved to renew their alliance so as to strengthen liberty, democracy, independence and peace in a spirit of solidarity and openness towards the world,
determined to live together with mutual consideration and respect for their diversity,
conscious of their common achievements and their responsibility towards future generations,
and in the knowledge that only those who use their freedom remain free, and that the strength of a people is measured by the well-being of its weakest members,
adopt the following Constitution:

(Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation)

Set aside some small details, the structure of the preamble is identical to that of preambles of international treaties, with a very present and rhythmical syntactic anaphora (*mindful, resolved, determined,* etc.) and the figures of speech within the sentence (e.g. the antithesis: "the *strength* of a people is measured by the well-being of its *weakest* members"). We can note the similarity by observing the preamble of a treaty, for example, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which is also built through anaphora and contains figures of speech within its sentences (e.g. the metaphor of the *mosaic* and the *accumulatio* of nouns: *children, women and men*, etc.):

(2) Preamble

The States Parties to this Statute,
Conscious that all peoples are united by common bonds, their cultures pieced together in a shared heritage, and concerned that this delicate mosaic may be shattered at any time,
mindful that during this century millions of children, women and men have been victims of unimaginable atrocities that deeply shock the conscience of humanity,
recognizing that such grave crimes threaten the peace, security and well-being of the world,
affirming that the most serious crimes of concern to the international community as a whole must not go unpunished and that their effective prosecution must be ensured by taking measures at the national level and by enhancing international cooperation,
determined to put an end to impunity for the perpetrators of these crimes and thus to contribute to the prevention of such crimes,
[...]
resolved to guarantee lasting respect for and the enforcement of international justice,
have agreed as follows:

(Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court)

3. Results: a general overview

Observing the comparison between preambles in their original language and their translations in Italian produced by DeepL, the first striking remark is that rhetorical phenomena in the translated versions are frequently not preserved, or are only partially rendered.

In order to have an overview of how rhetoric is treated by DeepL, we can observe below the German original version of the preamble to the Swiss Constitution, on the left, and its Italian translation made by DeepL on the right. In this comparison, the present rhetorical phenomena are

marked in bold, while those that have not been accurately translated are in italics in the target text in Italian. This overview already makes it possible to see that a good half of the rhetorical phenomena present in the text are left untranslated:

(3)

Präambel Im Namen Gottes des Allmächtigen! Das Schweizervolk und die Kantone, **in der Verantwortung** gegenüber der Schöpfung, **im Bestreben**, den Bund zu erneuern, **um Freiheit und Demokratie, Unabhängigkeit und Frieden in Solidarität und Offenheit gegenüber der Welt** zu stärken, **im Willen**, in gegenseitiger Rücksichtnahme und Achtung ihre Vielfalt in der Einheit zu leben, **im Bewusstsein** der gemeinsamen Errungenschaften und der Verantwortung gegenüber den künftigen Generationen, **gewiss, dass frei nur ist, wer seine Freiheit gebraucht,** und dass die **Stärke** de**s** Volke**s** sich mi**ss**t am Wohl der **Schwachen**, *geben sich folgende Verfassung:*	Preambolo Nel nome di Dio onnipotente! Il popolo svizzero e i Cantoni, *nella responsabilità* verso il creato, *si sforzano* di rinnovare la Confederazione per rafforzare **la libertà e la democrazia, l'indipendenza e la pace nella solidarietà e nell'apertura verso il mondo**, *nella volontà* di vivere la propria diversità nell'unità, nella considerazione e nel rispetto reciproci, **consapevoli** delle nostre conquiste comuni e della nostra responsabilità nei confronti delle generazioni future, *riconoscendo* che *solo chi usa la propria libertà è libero* e che la **forza** *del popolo* **s**i mi**s**ura dal bene**ss**ere dei ***d*eboli**, *adottano la seguente Costituzione:*

(Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation)

As we can see in the comparison, the solemn anaphora that builds the structure of the German text is missing in the translation. This anaphora in preambles is usually translated with a past participle or gerund by Italian-speaking human translators (Evangelista 2024), whereas in this case, the program's output consists of a prepositional syntagma at the beginning of each sentence. This output clearly follows the syntactic structure of German (*in der Verantwortung* becomes *nella responsabilità*, *im Willen* is translated with *nella volontà*). Therefore, an evident interference with the structure of the German sentence is to be observed.

The mistranslation by DeepL of the structural anaphora is data that cannot be overlooked. The anaphora represents the core structure of preambles, a structure that is encoded in this textual genre and, by being so, forms one of its most characteristic rhetorical traits. More specifically, the macrostructural anaphora in preambles has two functions: to make the whole text portion more salient within the normative text, compensating for its lack of normativity, and to formulate the principles contained therein as presuppositions (Pecorari 2022) through the use of participial or gerundive constructions. This rhetorical strategy positions such principles as foundational to the legal provisions that follow. If we think of the preamble as a text genre, it is therefore significant that DeepL does not holistically recognize one of its most characteristic traits, and does not reproduce it in a coherent structure in the target language, as these are exactly the sorts of patterns one expects ML systems to classify and predict.

If we focus on figures of structure, we can observe that the anastrophe *frei nur ist, wer seine Freiheit gebraucht*, is also not translated. The respective sentence contained in the Italian AI translation, *solo chi usa la propria libertà è libero*, is not built through a word inversion, but instead follows the canonical word order of the Italian grammar. In this case, we are confronted with a case of normalization (a tendency to conform to the syntactic norms of the target language), as the content of the message is rendered in unmarked, non-rhetorical, denotative terms.

Figures that intertwine content and structure, but in which the word order is unmarked from the syntactical point of view, such as the *enumeratio*, are well-reproduced in the target language. This

is evidenced, for instance, in the accurate translation of the excerpt *um Freiheit und Demokratie, Unabhängigkeit und Frieden in Solidarität und Offenheit gegenüber der Welt zu stärken*, as well as in the rendering of the antithesis between the concepts of *strong* and *weak*, in the sentence *gewiss (..) dass die Stärke des Volkes sich misst am Wohl der Schwachen*. This data suggests that the translation program tends to favor a word-for-word approach in such cases. When the syntactic structure of the source language can be directly mapped onto the target language without significant adaptation, the output remains both structurally sound and semantically faithful, minimizing the likelihood of error.

Amid this general overview, a minor yet curious detail deserves brief mention, although it may ultimately be attributed to coincidence and thus does not warrant deeper investigation. In the final line of the German preamble, the text features an alliteration on the letter *s*, which is accurately, although partially, reproduced in the Italian AI translation: *die Stärke des Volkes sich misst am Wohl der Schwachen*. This alliteration, which was originally conceived by the Swiss German writer Adolf Muschg (Egger and Evangelista 2022, 385), is kept almost intact in the Italian AI translation, which echoes *la forza del popolo si misura dal benessere dei deboli*, thus compensating the missing "s" sound in *deboli* and *popolo* by adding it earlier on, in *benessere*.

3.1. How the rhetorical macrostructure is translated

As we have seen, rhetorical phenomena in preambles can be found at three different levels: at the level of the macrostructure, which invests the whole text; at the level of the utterance and of the sentence, where we find figures of construction and content; and finally at the level of syntagms, where we find tropes which do not invest the syntactical construction of the sentence. We can now focus on the translation of each of these levels, starting from the macrostructure.

As already observed, the macrostructure of preambles is based on a very solemn and rhythmical anaphora. In this regard, it is worth noticing that the program is inclined to reproduce the same morphosyntactic structures contained in the original version. As a result, the more the original version uses regular forms of *repetitio*, that are, in this case, forms that repeat identical syntactic structures at the beginning of each sentence, the more the program translates them into regular anaphoras, thus reproducing the identical repeating structure.

One of the representative examples for this case is found in the preamble of the UN Charter, which we can observe below, along with its Italian translation made by DeepL. The comparison shows that every -ing form opening a sentence in the English original version corresponds to a verb in the gerund form in the Italian DeepL translation, so that the repetition is marked by the same syntactic element.

(4)

The States Parties to the present Convention, **Considering** the fundamental role of treaties in the history of international relations, **Recognizing** the ever-increasing importance of treaties as a source of international law [...] **Noting** that the principles of free consent and of good faith and the pacta sunt servanda rule are universally recognized, [...]	Gli Stati contraenti della presente Convenzione, **considerando** il ruolo fondamentale dei trattati nella storia delle relazioni internazionali, **riconoscendo** l'importanza sempre crescente dei trattati come fonte di diritto internazionale [...] **constatando** che i principi del libero consenso e della buona fede e la regola pacta sunt servanda sono universalmente riconosciuti, [...]

(United Nations Charter)

It is important to highlight that the performance of AI-based translation systems varies significantly depending on the language pair involved. In general, translations from English into Italian tend to exhibit relatively high levels of fluency and accuracy, whereas translations from French or German into Italian are often less consistent and prone to errors. This disparity is largely attributable to the size and quality of the training corpora available for different language combinations. Given the dominance of English in digital communication and published content, NMT systems such as DeepL are typically trained on far larger and more diverse datasets for English than for other source languages (cf. Toral and Sánchez-Cartagena 2017; Koehn 2020). As a result, the quality of output can vary considerably depending on the linguistic input. This discrepancy is clearly observable in the translation of the preamble to the Constitution of the Canton of Vaud, where a comparison between the French original and its Italian rendering by DeepL reveals notable divergences:

(5)

Pour favoriser l'épanouissement de chacun dans une société harmonieuse qui **respecte** la Création comme berceau des générations à venir, **soit** ouverte au monde et s'y sente unie, **mesure** sa force au soin qu'elle prend du plus faible de ses membres, et **conçoive** l'État comme l'expression de sa volonté, *le peuple du Canton de Vaud se donne la Constitution suivante:*	Per promuovere lo sviluppo di ogni individuo in una società armoniosa che **rispetti** il Creato come culla delle generazioni future, **sia aperta** al mondo e si senta unita ad esso, *misura* la sua forza dalla cura che ha dei suoi membri più deboli, *e vede* lo Stato come espressione della sua volontà, *il popolo del Cantone di Vaud si dà la seguente Costituzione:*

(Constitution of the Canton of Vaud)

The Italian translation produced by the program contains several errors that undermine the rhetorical structure of the original text. Notably, the French version constructs a morphosyntactic anaphora through the consistent use of the subjunctive mood, which plays a crucial role in creating rhythmic and syntactic coherence. In the Italian translation, however, only the first two clauses retain the subjunctive correctly, while the final two are rendered using the indicative. This grammatical error breaks the pattern and cancels the anaphoric repetition. Consequently, the passage loses much of its rhetorical impact and would require significant editing by a human translator to properly reproduce its structure.

3.2. How figures mixing content and structure are translated

As previously noted, figures at the utterance level that intertwine content and structure are generally well rendered in AI-generated translations. An example can be found in the well-known chiasmus from the preamble of the Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. In this instance, the Italian translation produced by the AI program faithfully reproduces the original structure, preserving the chiastic form and maintaining the word order of the source text intact:

(6)

The Governments of the States Parties to this Constitution on behalf of their peoples declare: That **since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed**; [...]	I Governi degli Stati parti di questa Costituzione, a nome dei loro popoli, dichiarano: che, **poiché le guerre iniziano nella mente degli uomini, è nella mente degli uomini che devono essere costruite le difese della pace**; [...]

(Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, UNESCO)

A similar observation applies to the translation of the rhetorical figure of *accumulatio* found in the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. In this case, the AI-generated Italian version preserves the original word order, effectively maintaining the cumulative rhythm and semantic progression intended by the source text:

(7)

Convinced that any doctrine of superiority based on racial differentiation is **scientifically false, morally condemnable, socially unjust and dangerous**, and that there is no justification for racial discrimination, in theory or in practice, anywhere [...]	Convinti che qualsiasi dottrina di superiorità basata sulla differenziazione razziale sia **scientificamente falsa, moralmente condannabile, socialmente ingiusta e pericolosa**, e che non vi sia alcuna giustificazione per la discriminazione razziale, in teoria o in pratica, in alcun luogo

(International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination)

3.3. How metaphors and similes are translated

Focusing on the sentence level, it is worth noting that tropes, especially metaphors, tend to be only partially preserved in AI-generated translations. More precisely, these figures tend to be faithfully rendered when they are conventional and isolated in the sentence, *i.e.*, when they do not engender a semantic web of creative collocations that last through several sentences. An example of this case is present in the Constitution of the Canton of Vaud (example 5), where the isolated simile connotating the Creation *as the cradle of future generations* was kept intact in the translation process.

While the source domain of a metaphor is often accurately rendered at the lexical level, the full conceptual mapping – including the intricate network of semantic associations and pragmatic inferences – frequently becomes attenuated or fragmented in the target text when it lasts throughout several sentences. In this case, we observe a process of normalisation, in which stylistically salient or contextually rich expressions in the source language are replaced by conventional and unmarked equivalents in the target language. In NMT, this tendency can be due to the probabilistic nature of the models, which are trained to optimize for the most statistically likely output, often at the expense of figurative complexity.

An illustrative case is found in a metaphor-rich passage from the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, in which part of the metaphoric web is flattened in the Italian version:

(8)

PREAMBLE The States Parties to this Statute, Conscious that all peoples are united by common bonds, their cultures **pieced together** in a shared heritage, and concerned that **this delicate mosaic may be shattered at any time**, [...]	PREAMBOLO Gli Stati parti del presente Statuto, consapevoli che tutti i popoli sono uniti da legami comuni, le loro culture sono *unite* in un patrimonio condiviso, **e preoccupati che questo delicato mosaico possa andare in frantumi in qualsiasi momento**, [...]

(Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court)

As we can see from the comparison, the metaphor in this passage, namely that all cultures are pieced together to form a shared heritage that is a delicate mosaic, a balance that may be subverted at any time, is not completely translated. The information that cultures are *pieced together*, like the tiles of a mosaic, is simply not present in the AI version, in which the meaning is normalised by using the word *unite* (united). Such an outcome highlights a limitation of current NMT systems, namely their difficulty in handling metaphoric webs that extend throughout several utterances

– a limitation that weighs heavily in genres such as preambles, where rhetorical force is integral to meaning construction.

4. Conclusions

The results of this study make it evident that significant rhetorical phenomena present in the source texts of the preambles remain untranslated or are only partially rendered in the AI-generated versions. In particular, figures that rely on syntactic structure and word order at the macrostructural level and that are typical of the text genre, such as the anaphora, can get lost in translation, as DeepL seems to privilege single sentence fluency over macrostructural organization.

By contrast, figures that combine syntactic and semantic features at the sentence level, such as chiastic structures and *enumeratios*, are generally well preserved. These constructions are often translatable without significant alteration to the sentence structure of the source text, which makes them more accessible to the model's pattern recognition capabilities. Similarly, figures of content, including metaphorical expressions, are often retained at the lexical level, especially if they are conventional and isolated. However, when metaphors are creatively woven into several sentences, the AI system can normalize them. This results in the loss of semantic nuance and implicit content.

A further consideration concerns the language pair under analysis, which significantly affects the quality of the translation. In this study, the German-Italian combination showed notable weaknesses, partially due to the syntactic distance between the two languages. German's rather fixed word order poses substantial challenges to translation systems trained predominantly on English-centric corpora. In comparison, French-Italian and English-Italian pairs tend to yield more accurate translations, and this reflects both greater corpus availability and closer typological proximity.

The analysis also highlighted that NMT errors can be qualitatively different from those made by human translators. As we have seen, NMT systems may produce grammatically plausible but contextually inappropriate outputs, such as a sudden change in grammatical mood that breaks the anaphoric rhythm. This type of change disrupts not only the grammatical coherence of the whole text but also undermines its rhetorical function.

This observation leads to a final, and perhaps the most critical, reflection. As we have seen, the preamble as a genre is characterized by a high degree of rhetorical density, marked by stylistic devices such as anaphora, metaphorical mappings, and a formal register. These features are not ornamental but central to the communicative purpose of the genre, which aims not only to inform but to symbolically frame foundational principles in order to keep them salient throughout decades. In this regard, the consistent inability of AI-powered systems to identify and reproduce such genre-specific features exposes a fundamental limitation, namely that in this case current NMT models remain ill-equipped for genre-sensitive translation. The reason underlying these observations is to be found in the architecture of NMT systems, which is designed to process language in probabilistic terms, generating output that is statistically likely rather than rhetorically or contextually optimal. As a result, key elements of the genre – its persuasive, symbolic, and performative dimensions – are attenuated or entirely lost in translation.

In light of these findings, ethical and deontological issues come to the fore, particularly in domains such as legal discourse, where rhetorical precision crucially influences the interpretative process. If AI-made translations of such texts are relied upon without the benefit of rigorous post-editing by expert human translators, the risks are manifold: the intended message may be misrepresented, the rhetorical impact diminished, and ambiguities introduced, potentially with

consequences on legal interpretation. For all these reasons, the growing reliance on AI-based translation tools must be tempered by a critical awareness of their serious limitations. Their use in high-stakes, rhetorically complex contexts demands responsible oversight, as these systems are still far from substituting the interpretive judgement that human translators bring, particularly in genres where language functions not merely as a vehicle of information, but as a specialized carrier of legal principles and values. If translation is to be understood as a rhetoric of meaning, as previous studies have suggested (Dávila-Montes 2017), it follows that this art continues to be a distinctly human prerogative.

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RHETORIC IN CRISIS: THE VALUE OF RHETORICAL EDUCATION IN THE AGE OF AI

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Abstract

With the advent of generative artificial intelligence, such as ChatGPT and others, rhetorical educators must begin asking themselves what the purpose of their field is if AI can do everything they typically teach their students. This chapter discusses what we can still teach our students that will benefit them when the landscape of rhetorical education is changing rapidly. In particular, this chapter discusses what AI can't do, and thus what we, as rhetorical educators, need to still be teaching our students. While the advent of AI may change the ways that we teach and use rhetoric, rhetorical education is as important or even more important now than it ever has been. Teaching students to think critically about rhetoric in an age of AI is vitally important to their future success in academics as well as in professional and social settings. In the end, this chapter is an argument for why we, as a field, are still needed and should continue to exist.

Keywords: *artificial intelligence, rhetorical education, writing, critical thinking*

1. Introduction

Recently, discussions across the university have focused on how we might have to adapt our teaching in the face of generative artificial intelligence (AI). Rhetorical education, in particular (and its related field of writing studies), seems to be having an existential crisis. This may sound overly dramatic, but with the advent of generative AI such as ChatGPT and others, many are asking themselves: Why do we exist? What is the purpose of our field if AI can do everything that we typically teach our students? As an illustration of why these are important questions to answer, consider the following: While on a tour of our campus, a group stopped by our writing center, which has peer tutors to help students with writing papers for their classes. A parent asked the tour guide, loud enough for the tutors to hear: "Why do you need a writing center when AI can fix their papers for them?" This and others like it are the kinds of questions we are contending with. Thus, we need more discussion about the effects of AI on student learning and ways we might have to adapt our pedagogical approach, especially in rhetoric classes. Many across the university are embracing the new era of AI, but others are more wary or may even be downright against their students using it at all. While I am not going to argue that we should ban AI completely in our classes, the purpose of this chapter is to discuss what rhetorical education still has to offer that large language models can't do, what we can still teach our students that will benefit them when the landscape of rhetorical education is changing rapidly. Focusing on rhetorical concepts such as style, voice, ethos, kairos, ethics, and audience awareness, this chapter will discuss what AI can't do, and thus what we, as rhetorical educators, can still offer our students. While the advent of AI may change the ways that we teach and use rhetoric, rhetorical education is as important or even more important now than it ever has been. Teaching students to think critically about rhetoric in the age of AI is vitally important to their future success in academics, as well as in professional and social settings. Along with this, a major challenge is to justify why we exist to people outside our discipline. How do we convince students, as well as academic stakeholders, that our discipline is still needed? What arguments can we make in the face of very real threats of having our programs and thus our jobs cut? In the end, this paper is an argument for why we, as a field, are still needed and should continue to exist.

2. Rhetorical Education in U.S. Universities

In the United States, people who study rhetorical theory can mostly be found in two places at the university: departments of communication, where they focus mostly on oral communication/speech-giving/oratory, etc., and writing studies, a discipline often called Rhetoric and Composition, where they focus on using rhetorical theory in written arguments. I come from the latter tradition, so my focus is on the teaching of writing. In the United States, nearly every university has a required introduction to academic writing course that all students must take. Often this course is called "First-Year Composition." My own university has a 2-course sequence: Composition 1, which is called "Writing in Academic Contexts," and Composition 2, "Writing in Personal and Public Contexts." Something similar to our Composition 1 is required at almost every U.S. university. This course, along with an often similarly required "Introduction to Oral Communication" is very often the only place where students get any explicit rhetorical education. They are also required to take some "general education" courses in history, science, art, social and behavioral science, and several others, but the rest of their education is narrowly focused on career training.

At my university, I am a half time administrator with the title of Composition Coordinator, a job often called at other universities the Writing Program Administrator. One of the purposes of my job is to help my fellow professors teach writing in the most effective ways possible. But here

is the problem: Composition is a required course that students don't want to take. Either they just hate writing and don't want to have to take a writing course, or they think that they don't need it because whatever career path they are going into won't require them to write, or any number of other reasons. Whatever the reason, teaching this course is already difficult because the class is full of students who don't want to be there. Then, along comes generative AI and gives them a way to not do any of the work, by just having AI do it for them. We have had more academic dishonesty cases in the past 2 years than the whole rest of my career combined. So, many in my department are looking at AI through the lens of academic dishonesty – students are just using it to cheat, to not do the work assigned, and just turn in papers written by generative AI.

What I want to focus on in this chapter is what students lose by just using AI instead of writing their own papers. I am not advocating for a total ban on AI. I believe that AI can be a very powerful and useful tool to enhance writing, but I want to focus on what we still need to be teaching students, what they lose by not learning from and applying skills taught by rhetorical professionals. As argued by Sano-Franchini, McIntyre, and Fernandes (2025), "Writing studies teacher-scholars understand the relationship between language, power, and persuasion," while ChatGPT does not. They go on to argue that "we must recognize the harms that will result when writing is primarily treated as a tool to transcribe answers, including its implications for critical thinking, democratic decision-making, and linguistic variation and expression" (n.p.).

3. What Do Students Lose by Using AI to Write Their Papers?

The question of what students lose when they use AI is an important one because it leads us to what they need from us and therefore what arguments we can make for why we are important. The following list is not comprehensive but does give some of what I believe are the most important issues to consider.

- **Linguistic diversity/Use of individual voice and style**. There are 30 dialects of American English, and 160 total English dialects. In the U.S., we have what linguists call Standard American English (SAE), which is what many people think is the most important dialect for U.S. speakers to know how to use. Many linguists argue against this, though, stating that all dialects should be valued equally (Cameron 1995; Lippi-Green 1997). In the U.S., there is a major debate among Composition scholars about whether we should make students learn SAE in our classes or whether we should be advocating for all dialects to be accepted (Young 2011; Inoue 2019; Baker-Bell et al. 2020; Kynard 2023). Many people of color see SAE as racist because it's typically only spoken as a first dialect by upper-middle-class white people (Alvarez 2017; Patanayak 2017). For example, in the writing program at Stanford University that is run by Adam Banks, rather than seeing so-called "non-standard" dialects as deficits, they "are committed to honoring the wide range of language, literacy and rhetorical practices students bring with them, and to helping all our students see those practices and the traditions they come from as offering strengths and assets they can bring to academic writing and speaking" (teachingwriting.stanford.edu 2023, n.p.). This debate has sparked questions about whether AI should be used since it only spits out "perfect" SAE in everything it writes. Many are calling this racist and biased against people of color. For example, "Alfred L. Owusu-Ansah has shown how ChatGPT advances linguistic homogeneity and white language supremacy" (qtd in Sano-Franchini et al. 2025, n.p.) Thus "we must go beyond merely acknowledging that new writing technologies reinforce linguistic homogenization to actively resist contributing to this outcome, particularly when

the known benefits do little to outweigh the established risks" (Sano-Franchini et al. 2025, n.p.). However, even if you don't want to get into that debate, what AI spits out is stale, voice-flattening prose with no individual style. It can write something "correctly" in terms of SAE grammar, or "well organized" in a super boring definition of "organized," but it never gives you flare; it doesn't show an individual's voice or style; it doesn't let a writer's own personality come out. These are the kinds of things that rhetorical educators can teach. We help students find their own voice, to use their own individuality when they write in order to write in ways that represent who they are and where they are from. I don't want students who just know how to put prompts into AI. I want students who use their individual voice in their own way to argue for what they believe in.

- **Critical thinking (about Kairos, audience, effectiveness of sources, etc.)**. Historically, in the USA, a major purpose of higher education was to create citizens who could think critically and deeply about the world, who could analyze texts and keep themselves from being manipulated, who could recognize fake news when it was presented to them, etc. If students are using AI to read for them, to analyze and summarize arguments for them, to write papers for them, they lose the ability to think critically. When it comes to concepts such as Kairos, audience awareness, effectiveness of sources, and the appropriateness of a particular argument, AI can't make those adjustments. ChatGPT does not know the particulars of a person's rhetorical situation, who their particular audience is, the particulars of their kairotic moment, etc. ChatGPT's writing is so very general that it can't work well for any particular situation with all the nuances of that situation. Students need to learn to think critically about the nuances of rhetorical situations if they are to use rhetoric effectively. Using AI hinders that. Therefore, rhetorical educators are still needed to teach them that. In addition, students lose the ability to write and make arguments themselves without using AI. I like to compare it to using a calculator to do simple math. Why do we teach 7-year-olds to add and subtract? Why don't we just teach them how to use a calculator? My university department has recently added a writing class called "AI Prompt Engineering". It feels a bit like we are just teaching students how to use a calculator. In this writing class, we are not teaching them to write; we are teaching them to use AI to create texts. What happens when someone needs to make an argument, and they don't have access to the internet? I know this sounds like that old math teacher's line: "You won't always have a calculator with you," when, in fact, we do actually always have calculators with us on our phones now. However, I still believe that if students don't have the skills to actually make arguments or write well themselves (without relying on AI), they won't be successful. Rhetorical educators are needed to teach students how to actually make reasoned and logical arguments themselves without the use of or help from AI.
- **Writing to learn**: When students write a paper about a subject, and I mean, really write it themselves without any AI, they learn so much more about the subject than if they just read about it or if they memorize some facts about it to pass a test. This is what composition scholars call "writing to learn." It is why writing studies experts advocate for the use of essays and other written texts for assessment purposes rather than just relying on tests. However, if students use AI to write their papers for them, they do not actually learn the content of what they write about. This becomes a problem when the content is essential knowledge for their degree or career path. If a student is in college to become a history teacher, for example, and uses ChatGPT to write their history papers for them, they fail to learn a lot of content that they are going to need in teaching history. This could have much

more disastrous consequences if they are going into medical fields or engineering, etc. The Association for Writing Across the Curriculum (AWAC) hypothesized that generative AI tools would cause a negative impact on the use of writing to learn and think critically. Their statement on AI argued that "Writing to learn is an intellectual activity that is crucial to the social development of learners and writers. This vital activity cannot be replaced by AI language generators" (Crystal N. Fodrey et al. 2023). In addition, recently, an important empirical study from the Michigan Institute of Technology (MIT) came out that shows evidence that "LLM users consistently underperformed at neural, linguistic, and behavior levels," when compared to students who wrote their papers themselves or only used search engines such as Google or Bing (media.mit.edu 2025).

- **Metacognition**: In writing pedagogy circles, we talk a lot about transfer of learning, the idea that learning in one context positively affects tasks performed in another context. If a student learns some things about writing in my class, for example, and that knowledge helps them more effectively write a paper in another class, they have had a positive transfer of learning. What is important to our conversation about AI is that students have to learn the original knowledge very well in order to transfer it. In addition, they have to use metacognition in the new context in order to access that learning and know when and where to use it. None of this is likely to happen if they just use AI to write their papers because when using AI, they never actually learn to think critically about what they are learning or to reflect on how that learning might be useful in other contexts. Metacognition, as well as active, engaged learning, is a necessary component for transfer to happen. AI allows students to do the work of a course without active, engaged learning, and therefore, they are less likely to transfer that knowledge.
- **Ethics**: One thing we have to keep in mind, even when we do use AI in our classes, is ethics. I won't go into great detail about this because it has been covered extensively by others, but rhetorical educators are needed to help students know how to use AI ethically. We cannot just allow students to use it however they want without teaching them about all the ethical issues that come with that. We are uniquely qualified to help students understand the ethical issues related to AI and thus are needed to help students navigate this issue.

4. Possible Pedagogical Adaptations Needed

It is not business as usual for rhetorical educators. Changing technology is going to cause us to have to adapt our teaching, whether we like it or not. In this final section, I want to suggest some possibilities for adaptation that might keep students from over relying on technology while helping them continue to grow their critical thinking and rhetorical skills. What I will discuss in this section is by no means all-inclusive, and there might be better ways of doing things. These are simply a few things that I am currently doing in my own classes that you may also want to try.

- First, it is vitally important to be very clear on what "appropriate use of AI" means to you in your class. Opinions vary greatly across the university, and if students do not know what is allowed in your class, they are likely to cross a line they didn't know you had. In my own classes, I have had students tell me that they are very worried about being accused of using AI when they didn't. I have also had conversations with students who (in my opinion) crossed a line only to have them say, "but this is exactly what my other teacher told me to do." If we are not being clear on how and when students are allowed to use AI, they will

cross lines without meaning to and be confused as to why what they did was wrong. In my classes, we discuss AI quite a lot in the first two weeks of class. I explain to them that it is important to ask their teachers about AI use because there are so many varying opinions. We then create an AI use policy together as a class, which I have students sign, saying they agree to follow it. This does not guarantee that students will not use AI in other ways, but it does deter them to some extent and provides clear guidelines that they helped create. Even if you don't have them create their own AI use policy, transparency is extremely important so that students know where you draw the line.

- This term, students in my class are doing all the work (writing, reading, etc.) in class. There is very little outside work required. This is to ensure that students aren't using AI in ways that are not ethical. I have them write their papers in class, and I walk around and observe them writing as well as offer help during the writing process. Many other professors are moving back to in-class essays or oral reports rather than having students write papers outside of class. In many ways, this feels very wrong. It's an inauthentic writing situation; it's not the way real writing gets done. It also feels like a bit too much surveillance. Additionally, it means that I have had to cut some content from the course because we don't have time in class to cover it. However, I think the pros outweigh the cons in this particular moment. If this approach causes students to do their own work, to learn to think critically about the topics they are writing about, to make effective arguments themselves without needing to rely on AI, these outcomes are more important than the loss of a bit of process authenticity or the removal of a few topics we might have talked about in previous classes.
- One option for making sure students are revising their own work and not just plugging it into AI to "fix" it, is to make them turn on the "track changes" function in Word so that you can see all of the revisions and edits they make. I like this for two reasons: it does help me see that they did their own revisions, but also, it just helps me see their writing process more clearly. I can see how much revision they have actually done much more easily than going back and forth between earlier drafts. If I want them to make significant revisions on their drafts, this helps me see whether they really did.

  If it sounds like all of these suggestions are just about keeping students from using AI, you are correct. While I mentioned above that I'm not necessarily for AI being completely banned in our classes, I do think in our writing classes, students should be doing their own work, without the use of AI as much as possible. Because, as mentioned above, students lose the ability to use critical thinking, to write to learn, to transfer their knowledge, etc., it's important to limit their use of AI when possible. The three suggestions above are not going to work in every classroom situation, and they are not the only adaptations you may need to make. They are simply things that I have tried or I am currently trying, which I think will have positive results. See Appendix 1 for a larger list of possible classroom adjustments.

5. Conclusion

As Adam Banks has argued, rhetorical educators "are committed to helping students become strategic, ethical, thoughtful communicators who are deeply attuned to audience and situation" (teachingwriting.stanford.edu). We can't do this well if students are using AI to write their papers. He goes on to say that "no matter … the tools and technologies at our disposal," what "available means of persuasion" we are discussing, "the more we are embedded in various technological

ecosystems to communicate, the more we need discernment and deep cultural knowledge(s) to write, speak and create" (n.p.). I agree that discernment and critical thinking are key. While we are going to have to change some ways we teach rhetoric because of generative AI, I agree with Sano-Franchini et al. when they argue that "radically revising and restructuring our discipline around GenAI is premature at this time, given the uncertainty and instability of the future of these technologies" (Sano-Franchini et al. 2025). While I do think it is incredibly important at this moment to reconsider how we teach writing in the face of the increasing amount of AI use across our campuses, embracing AI fully and integrating it into our classes wholesale is not the right answer.

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Appendix 1:
Other classroom ideas

- Have them do an AI response to the reading, and then critique the response AI gives them.
- If they are doing interviews, have students upload the audio of their interviews.
- Ask them to write non-traditional genres. For example, ask them to write a dialogue or narrative using the texts you read, rather than an essay.
- Do oral exams/recitations.
- Use hand-written tests in class rather than papers they write outside of class.
- Make them put phones and/or computers away (tech-free while in class).
- Move around the class, watch what they are doing on their computer/etc. (this is especially important if you are having them do most of their writing in class).
- Use Lockdown Browser with video for take-home tests.
- Make assignments more personal and different, using local sources, something AI really can't do.
- Add into the assignment prompt, in white text, something not related, so that if students cut and paste the prompt into ChatGPT, it will discuss that thing (tomatoes or Mickey Mouse, etc).
- Show them something written by ChatGPT and talk to them about why it is not good, and why their own writing is actually better.

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THE RHETORIC OF PROMPTS: MULTIMODALITY, INTENT, AND ETHICS IN AI MEANING-MAKING

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Abstract

The rise of generative AI poses new challenges to public discourse, particularly through synthetic media whose origin, authorship, and intent are often ambiguous. These challenges extend beyond misinformation to the underlying structures through which meaning is constructed, framed, and ethically justified. Addressing them requires a conceptual framework that treats AI-generated content not as neutral or purely technical output, but as rhetorical artefacts embedded within broader ethical and communicative systems. This article proposes a metatheoretical approach that draws on rhetoric and multimodality to reframe AI-generated content – specifically AI-generated imagery – as sites of ethical activity and moral accountability. Central to our argument is the notion that rhetorical intent can still be identified in the human agents who design, prompt, and disseminate these outputs. Prompts function as rhetorical acts that encode thematic, stylistic, and ideological directives, translated across semiotic modes into persuasive visual forms. Building on foundational theories in rhetoric (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969), multimodality (Kress and Leeuwen 2001; Poulsen 2015), and visual argumentation (Kjeldsen 2015; Žagar 2020), we conceptualize intentionality as a distributed process enacted through user-system interaction, thus enabling a richer understanding of how values, identities, and ideologies are encoded, circulated, and interpreted in AI-mediated communication, especially within hybrid public discourse.

Keywords: *AI ethics, argumentation, generative content, language models, multimodality, rhetoric*

1. Introduction

A growing body of research warns that AI-generated content may be exploited to manipulate perception, manufacture consensus, or distort political and social realities (cf. Fisher, Howard, and Kira 2024). But while scholarship on algorithmic bias has advanced considerably (cf. Lendvai and Gosztonyi 2025; Hadley, Blatecky, and Comfort 2025), critical analysis of AI-generated media – particularly visual content – remains comparatively underdeveloped. This gap can be attributed, in part, to the inadequacy of traditional frameworks of authorship, intention, and accountability when applied to hybrid outputs produced through a combination of user prompts and algorithmic inference.

In conventional media, authorial intent is typically reconstructible through the conscious, communicative acts embedded in the creative process – what Jürgen Habermas would describe as speech acts oriented toward mutual understanding (Habermas 1984, 110–29). Such works reflect the author's intention to convey meaning, subject to normative claims of truthfulness, sincerity, and appropriateness. By contrast, generative AI systems produce outputs through probabilistic pattern recognition across large-scale datasets, modulated by textual prompts that may or may not fully reflect the user's ethical, rhetorical, or intentional aims. This entanglement of human agency and machinic computation raises pressing questions: Where does intent reside in AI-generated content? Who bears responsibility for the meanings or persuasive effects such content may produce? Can we establish normative frameworks capable of addressing ethical accountability in the production and circulation of AI-generated media?

These questions become particularly salient in the realm of visual content. Compared to linguistic discourse, images often carry a greater degree of ambiguity regarding their meaning (Barthes 1977, 32) – yet it is precisely this ambiguity that grants them rhetorical power, as one of the central strengths of visual media lies in its capacity to transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries: a single image can evoke universal themes – defiance, victimhood, martyrdom, power – making it a potent instrument in the rhetoric of global movements (McClanahan 2023, 12–50). This visual "universality" is especially significant in today's fragmented online environment, where audiences from diverse sociocultural backgrounds may nonetheless converge around shared grievances or ideological affinities.

AI-generated imagery introduces unique analytical challenges, particularly because its creation diverges significantly from traditional image-making. Rather than being drawn, painted, or assembled by hand, these visuals are produced by generative models that *convert textual prompts into visual output*. Prompts function as the interface through which the system interprets and recombines vast corpora of pre-existing imagery. As a result, the final image does not arise from a user's individual creative *poiesis*, but from large-scale pattern recognition. Yet users still play an active curatorial role: they evaluate the system's output for coherence and alignment with their intended message, often refining prompts through multiple iterations. What ultimately circulates online is typically the result of this iterative, user-guided process.

In the context of AI-mediated communication, the question of intention is not merely speculative – it bears directly on debates around liability (in law and criminology), authorship (in media studies), and agency (in anthropology). As Ted Chiang provocatively suggests, generative AI "reduces the amount of intention in the world" by automating decisions that would otherwise require deliberative human agency (Chiang 2024). This challenges longstanding philosophical accounts of intention as a consciously enacted mental state expressed through action (cf. Aristotle 2000, 37–59; Kant 1997, 1–16; Anscombe 1963, 20–50; Davidson 1978, 41–50). To engage this tension, this article proposes a metatheoretical framework that brings rhetoric and multimodality

into dialogue, enabling a nuanced identification and interpretation of the intentionality embedded in AI-generated content. Central to this framework is the understanding of prompts as *deliberate, intentional acts* and the resulting outputs as *rhetorically charged expressions with ethical implications*. In doing so, this approach lays the groundwork for theorizing ethical accountability that encompasses and is attentive to the intricate moral issues involved in the creation, dissemination, and reception of AI-generated media.

2. Intent, Rhetoric, and Meaning

Our philosophical starting point is Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, a work that had a foundational impact in reconceptualizing rhetoric beyond classical Aristotelian models. According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, the study of rhetoric, at its core, is the study of how meaning is constructed, contested, and communicated with the intent to persuade. Rhetoric, in this view, is not merely concerned with the transmission of information but with *framing*: shaping how ideas are interpreted, which values are foregrounded, and what inferences an audience is likely to draw. Persuasion, thus, is not reducible to speech alone; it is a relational act grounded in the implicit negotiation of meaning between speaker and audience (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 14–31, 65–70).

This conception of rhetoric aligns naturally with the principles of multimodality, which reject the primacy of linguistic form and instead emphasize that communication is constituted by the interplay of multiple semiotic modes – visual, textual, gestural, spatial, and auditory (Flewitt, Price, and Korkiakangas 2023; Kress and Leeuwen, 2001, 1–3, 20–24; Stöckl and Tsenoris 2024, 167–72; Forceville 2009, 382–83). From a multimodal perspective, *meaning* is emergent and situated: it arises not from isolated symbols but from the structured coordination of modes within specific contexts (Poulsen 2015). Crucially, multimodal theorists argue that visual or spatial cues often do the rhetorical "work" that language alone cannot accomplish, particularly in highly compressed or emotionally charged content such as propaganda, advertising, or meme culture (Bülow and Johann 2023; Kjeldsen 2016, 266–72). This emphasis on situated meaning and audience engagement is closely aligned with Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's "new rhetoric", which similarly foregrounds the contextual and value-laden nature of persuasion. Both frameworks emphasize that rhetorical effectiveness (i.e. persuasion) depends on how meaning is shaped, negotiated, and rendered persuasive through the resources available in a given communicative situation (Pflaeging and Stöckl 2021; Johnstone 1990; Burke 1969, 49–64).

In the context of generative AI, a dual framework that draws on *both* rhetoric and multimodality is especially pertinent. Models such as GPT and Stable Diffusion are not merely computational tools; their outputs are generated from massive training datasets that reflect specific cultural, political, and historical conditions – none of which are ideologically neutral (Bender et al. 2021, 610–15; Crawford 2021, 4–14). The curation of training data – what is included, excluded, and how it is labeled – constitutes a form of rhetorical selection, shaping the range of meanings these systems are capable of producing. In short, they are discursive systems that organize knowledge, encode ideologies, and shape public perception.

But generative models do not simply reflect the world; *they participate in constructing it*. Although they lack intent, they nonetheless function as agents of framing, shaping how audiences encounter and interpret meaning through probabilistic language generation. In doing so, they contribute to the *axiologization* of discourse – assigning value to ideas, legitimizing certain narratives,

and normalizing particular associations. This presents a paradox: rhetorical influence is seemingly exercised through systems without agency, intention, or accountability. To address this paradox, we must reorient our analytical focus: from system to user, from output to prompting, and from authorship to *delegated* intention.

The distribution of persuasive force across this human-machine assemblage demands a rethinking of how we theorize authorship, responsibility, and communication ethics. If we accept that language – and by extension, generated language and imagery – is a primary tool for worldmaking (whether individually, socially, or politically), then the rhetorical stakes of AI systems become unmistakable. Those who engineer, fine-tune, and deploy these systems exert disproportionate influence over the prescriptive dimensions of meaning: what is persuasive, what is believable, and even what is *thinkable*. In this sense, AI systems function not merely as tools of automation, but as infrastructures of epistemic power. Analyzing AI systems through a rhetorical and multimodal lens allows us to foreground this power and critically examine its effects – not only in terms of bias or error, but in terms of the narratives and values they normalize.

3. The Problem of Intentionality in AI-generated Content

When analyzed through a rhetorical/multimodal lens, the first thing to note is that AI-generated content diverges fundamentally from classical rhetorical models, which typically rely on a triadic structure: *speaker*, *audience*, and *message* (Bitzer 1968, 1–6; Fidalgo 2009, 232). These models presuppose an intentional speaker – someone with beliefs, goals, and a communicative purpose – who strategically crafts discourse to influence a target audience (Aristotle 2012, 5–19). In contrast, generative AI lacks a unified speaker; the message it produces is the result of stochastic pattern-matching across vast training corpora. This absence of communicative intent raises a fundamental question: *Is rhetorical meaning possible in the absence of a rhetor?*

Rhetorically speaking, communication presupposes at least minimal intentionality, even if that intent is implicit, contested, or fragmented (Charland 1987, 137–40). However, language models and image generators possess no beliefs, intentions, or awareness of an audience. They neither respond to feedback nor "*mean*" anything in a semantic sense (Bender et al. 2021, 611, 615–18; Dennett 1988, 180–98). Their outputs simulate coherence and relevance via probabilistic approximations of prior linguistic patterns. Such systems are "*stochastic parrots*" mimicking the surface form of language without accessing its semantic depth. The result is a kind of *pseudo-discourse* – language that appears meaningful but originates from systems incapable of communicative intent (Bender et al. 2021, 616–19).

However, if we understand prompt engineering as a form of performative utterance, it becomes legible as what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca would describe as a rhetorical act (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 14–21). In this view, the prompt functions not merely as a descriptive instruction but as an illocutionary act, intended to elicit a visual or textual response aligned with the user's communicative goals. Thus, prompt-writing can be understood as a rhetorical practice – one that encodes thematic, stylistic, and ideological directives (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 115–25, 142–53). When a user instructs an AI to generate an image of "a politician as a monster" or "a holy warrior in flames", they are not merely issuing a command; they are designing a communicative event, shaping both the argumentative and affective contours of the output. The prompt projects an intention that will later be judged based on the perceived coherence between the input and the result. This means that AI-generated materials are neither ethically neutral nor

rhetorically inert. They emerge from *distributed intention*: shaped by human judgment, filtered through machine learning architectures, and, ultimately, interpreted by audiences through socially contingent lenses.

This model of communication – fragmented, mediated, and iterative – requires a reconceptualization of rhetorical agency. Rather than locating agency in a single, authorial figure, we must trace it across a chain of actions: prompt composition, model inference, output selection, and public dissemination. Only by following this chain can we begin to theorize accountability in communicative environments where authorship is partial, collaborative, and technically opaque.

4. The Rhetoric of AI-generated Images

However, the transformation of a textual prompt into a visual output introduces a cross-modal rhetorical dynamic. In this process, linguistic discourse becomes the interface through which users activate latent visual forms encoded within the model's training data. But this is not merely a case of description leading to depiction; it is an act of *semiotic translation*. The resulting image bears the imprint of *both* user intention and algorithmic bias, forming a hybrid communicative artifact. Even when the prompt remains invisible to downstream audiences, its influence is embedded in the structure, tone, and ideological resonance of the generated image.

The rhetorical function of visual media has long been underestimated within traditions that privilege verbal discourse (Cardoso e Cunha 2009, 223). Yet as digital environments become increasingly image-dominant, visual forms have emerged not as supplements to argumentation, but, some would argue, as its primary vehicles (Delicath and DeLuca 2003, 315–25; Buhel 2016, 3–12). This is especially evident in the case of AI-generated images, which are constructed through textual prompts but often encountered without any accompanying linguistic context (Alikhani, Khalid, and Stone 2023).

This shift compels a reexamination of foundational questions about visual meaning. Do images inherently carry meaning, or do they become legible only through linguistic or cultural codes? Roland Barthes' use of the distinction between *denotation* (what is shown) and *connotation* (what is meant) offers a useful starting point (Barthes 1977, 42–46) – but AI-generated imagery complicates this binary. These images are produced through textual prompts, yet the originating text is often invisible to the viewer (Trinh et al. 2024). As a result, the connotative dimension of the image both *precedes* and *exceeds* it, being shaped by user intention, platform affordances, and algorithmic patterning. To fully grasp the persuasive force of such images, we must move beyond the question *"What does this image depict?"* and instead ask: *"What does this image do – and how does it do it?"*

The rhetorical power of an image resides primarily in its connotative function – its capacity to suggest, evoke, or insinuate rather than explicitly state (Barthes 1977, 46–49). AI-generated images excel within this connotative realm. They evoke ideological positions, frame social realities, and reinforce cultural myths – all without overt declaration. Their strength lies in suggestive ambiguity, inviting audiences to "complete" the argument themselves. This makes them especially potent in persuasive contexts such as political propaganda, ideological memes, symbolic martyrdom, or deepfakes. Such images often deploy shared visual grammars – halo effects, military aesthetics, and ethno-nationalist iconography – to generate emotional resonance while simultaneously disavowing authorial intent.

In traditional media, textual anchoring – through captions, headlines, or surrounding discourse – plays a crucial role in guiding interpretation (Barthes 1977, 37–41; Liu 2020). With AI-generated

imagery, however, this anchoring is displaced: the textual prompt that shapes the image is typically *invisible* to its audience, yet its influence is inscribed within the composition. A prompt such as "*a Zionist leader as a fascist dictator*" or "*a martyr ascending to heaven*" does not appear alongside the image but fundamentally structures the image's affective and symbolic cues. Viewers are thus invited to infer intent through composition, symbolism, aesthetic framing, and cultural resonance. In this sense, AI-generated images are *pre-anchored* – not by visible text, but by invisible prompting.

These images represent a complex assemblage of human intent, machinic patterning, and audience interpretation. Their rhetorical power does not derive from fidelity to truth, but from their ability to mobilize symbols, shape inferences, and invoke shared cultural frames. To understand these images as persuasive acts requires more than visual literacy – it demands a theory of meaning that accounts for prompt authorship, algorithmic constraints, and multimodal inference.

4. Multimodal Argumentation and the "Visual Argumentation" Behind Meaning-making

Contemporary rhetorical and argumentation theories have increasingly emphasized multimodal persuasion, recognizing that arguments are not confined to verbal syntax but often emerge through the interaction of text, image, layout, and other semiotic modes (Kjeldsen 2015, 115–21). Visual elements can perform distinct argumentative functions – such as analogy, causality, or moral appeal. For instance, juxtaposing an AI-generated image of a crumbling cityscape with a smiling politician can visually imply that the politician is responsible. Crucially, these visual arguments do not rely on accompanying text for persuasiveness; rather, they depend on the audience's inferential labour, cultural background, and visual literacy.

Multimodal argumentation is not only epistemic but also affective and symbolic. It goes beyond expressing opinions to actively constructing shared realities. (Mehu 2015) AI-generated imagery often operates rhetorically through visual enthymemes – implicit arguments where key premises are unstated but assumed by viewers (Kjeldsen 2015, 117–18). A visual depiction of a burning flag or broken bridge may not explicitly outline causality, but it strongly suggests themes of guilt, failure, or betrayal. Such images invite viewers to "fill in" the missing meaning, thus engaging them directly in the act of persuasion. In this sense, AI-generated visuals do not simply illustrate arguments – they *are* arguments, albeit fragmented and inherently multimodal (Gonçalves-Segundo et al. 2021, 722–27).

This dynamic is precisely why multimodality offers rhetoric and argumentation theory a crucial and refreshing framework for understanding how meaning is not simply stated but assembled through the interaction of diverse semiotic modes, each contributing uniquely to the communicative effect. Multimodality highlights this relational process by treating images, text, layout, and spatial organization as co-constitutive elements of meaning-making. Unlike structuralist models that view meaning as static and hierarchical, multimodal theory acknowledges communication as inherently relational and inferential (Flewitt, Price, and Korkiakangas 2018). Audiences do not decode messages mechanically; instead, they actively interpret by drawing inferences across modes. Visual arguments function not as mere illustrations but as inferential structures inviting the audience to "connect the dots" – to draw conclusions based on resemblance, contrast, spatial framing, and symbolic association (Pflaeging and Stöckl 2021). This inferential work is indispensable for understanding how persuasive meaning is constructed, especially in AI-generated visuals where linguistic anchoring is often absent.

From this perspective, AI-generated images are not merely outputs – they are argumentative acts. They function according to distinct patterns of visual reasoning: analogical, indexical, or iconic (Kuzmina 2024, 519–20; Chung et al. 2024; Noord and Garcia 2025). These arguments do not depend on deductive syllogisms but rather on a "visual argumentation" (Kjeldsen 2015, 115–16). For example, a composite image of a politician superimposed onto a battlefield invites viewers to infer associations with war, culpability, or betrayal – without any explicit statement. The rhetorical power derives from what is implied rather than overtly declared. In such cases, multimodality facilitates a form of enthymematic reasoning where audiences "fill in" unstated premises based on visual cues and shared cultural narratives (cf. Žagar 2020).

The generative process adds another layer of complexity. Prompts act as rhetorical blueprints, encoding user preferences for composition, affect, and ideology. These preferences are actualized through what Nataliia Laba terms "affordance activation" (Laba 2024, 5): users employ stylistic modifiers – such as "dramatic lighting," "hyperreal," or "military aesthetic" – to shape the aesthetic and emotional tone of the output. While the AI model generates images based on statistical patterning, the user exerts rhetorical control through prompt engineering. This hybrid interaction produces meaning that is neither entirely authored by humans nor fully automated – a co-created output characterized by distributed intentionality.

This process is neither deterministic nor random. It is probabilistically constrained and rhetorically guided. The user's prompt initiates a direction, the model interprets it through latent patterns, and the audience completes the meaning through visual inference. The resulting message's meaning must be reconstructed across multiple semiotic modes. Rhetorical analysis in such contexts shifts from seeking a singular authorial intent to evaluating the legitimacy of the inferences invited by the multimodal design (cf. Wu 2020). Which premises are visually implied? What values are embedded? What conclusions are made available to the audience?

Multimodality offers more than interpretive insight – it creates a critical space for ethical reflection. When persuasion operates through distributed prompts, latent aesthetics, and inferential frames, accountability can no longer be assigned to a single authorial subject. Instead, responsibility is dispersed across prompt design, the affordances and constraints of the model, and the interpretive context of the viewer. Multimodal theory thus compels us to ask: *What is being made persuasive? How is it being achieved? And to what end?*

In sum, multimodality exposes the inferential processes by which AI-generated imagery persuades through visual inference, symbolic association, and cross-modal framing. It equips us with the tools to analyze how images argue, how audiences are guided toward conclusions, and how meaning is constructed in the absence of a singular speaking subject. This inferential model of persuasion is essential for understanding AI-generated visual ideological content, where explicit claims may be absent, yet symbolic cues perform the argumentative work.

4. Ethical Theorising and the Problem of Moral Accountability

This axiological dimension underscores that generative AI is not a neutral tool but a site of ideological contestation. The values and biases embedded in prompts and training data shape not only what images are produced but also how they resonate within cultural and political contexts. Consequently, AI-generated visuals become vehicles for reinforcing or challenging dominant narratives, often in subtle and indirect ways. The rhetorical power of these images lies precisely in their ability to normalize particular worldviews by presenting them as self-evident or commonsense

through visual form. Understanding this dynamic demands a critical lens attentive to the ethical implications of prompt design, model biases, and the social frameworks that govern interpretation.

The ethical challenges posed by generative AI defy resolution through traditional models of authorship and responsibility. Conventional ethical frameworks assume a singular agent – such as a speaker, writer, or designer – whose intentions can be examined and held accountable. However, in AI-mediated communication, agency is not only obscured but also distributed, delegated, and fragmented across multiple actors: the user, the AI model, the curators of training data, and the interpretive audience. This dispersed configuration demands a new mode of ethical reasoning – one grounded in rhetorical and multimodal analysis rather than solely in computational or technical accountability (Floridi 2016).

At the core of this reconceptualization lies a simple yet profound premise: generative AI operates through language - *and language is never neutral*. Every act of classification, from interpreting a prompt to generating an image, encodes assumptions, values, and ideological positions (Crawford 2021, 123–50; Noble 2018, 171–82). Even labelling an image as "*hyperreal*", "*feminine*", or "*traditional*" reflects embedded cultural scripts. In rhetorical terms, this process is known as *axiologization* – the embedding of value judgments within seemingly descriptive communication (Grácio 1998, 85–98). Despite its opacity, AI-generated content actively participates in this ongoing ordering of the world.

Ethical theorizing about AI must begin by recognizing that communication itself is a form of power. It structures perception, legitimizes authority, and organizes moral hierarchies. In AI contexts, this power often operates subtly – through the aesthetics of an image, the emotional tone of a generated narrative, or the symbolic associations embedded within visual composition. These elements are not mere stylistic flourishes; they constitute ethical arguments rendered in multimodal form. To overlook this dimension is to mistake form for content – and persuasion for mere output.

A multimodal-rhetorical framework is uniquely positioned to interrogate these issues because it treats ethics not as a set of abstract principles but as a practice of meaning-making under conditions of uncertainty. It asks not only whether an image is true or fair, but how it persuades, whose worldview it reflects, and which values it promotes or erases. This approach reframes ethical evaluation from being a technical application of normative principles to a nuanced analysis of rhetorical effects. In short, it foregrounds the *how* and *why* of persuasion, not just the *what*, enabling us to ask new and critical ethical questions, such as:

1. How do AI-generated images of gendered or racialized bodies participate in the reproduction of cultural hierarchies?
2. What visual tropes are being amplified or normalized through generative media?
3. How do stylistic choices (e.g., heroic lighting, decayed architecture, ethereal glow) frame moral judgments?
4. Who benefits from these framings, and who is excluded?

These questions move the focus away from abstract principles and toward rhetorical practice. They underscore that ethical evaluation in AI cannot rely solely on fixed standards but must be situated within dialogical reasoning – where moral justification relies on the capacity to withstand critique and counterarguments.

Indeed, rhetoric is not merely a tool for persuasion; it is the very space in which values are negotiated. Ethical reasoning, from this perspective, is not grounded in universal truths but

emerges through ongoing engagement within pluralistic societies. This means debates about harm, bias, or fairness are never purely technical – they are inherently argumentative acts, shaped by power, perspective, and politics (cf. Perelman 1962; Kock 2009; Rigotti 1995; Pedersen 2015). In today's digital media landscape, these debates increasingly unfold through multimodal channels. Emotional tone, visual symbolism, facial expressions, and interface aesthetics all influence how we perceive and engage with AI. A multimodal-rhetorical approach reveals how these elements function not as mere decorative extras, but as central to the meaning and ethical force of communication.

A key contribution of this framework is its capacity to render distributed agency analyzable. Prompts are not simply technical commands – they are rhetorical events. Each prompt encodes choices about what to depict, how to depict it, and why. The user's act of prompting constitutes a form of delegated speech – a persuasive authorship enacted through the interface. Thus, the interface itself becomes a site of rhetorical affordance, providing templates that shape not only what can be said, but also what is likely to be said (Laba, 2024, 15–17).

Ultimately, we argue that AI ethics must move beyond abstract principles and embrace situated rhetorical reasoning. Ethics is not imposed from above; it is constructed through communicative interaction, cultural expectations, and symbolic form. A multimodal-rhetorical approach offers a path forward – one attentive to distributed agency, emergent meaning, and the persuasive structures through which AI systems shape social reality. In doing so, it does not claim to resolve ethical ambiguity but provides a framework for navigating it.

5. Concluding remarks

In this article, we propose that integrating rhetorical theory with multimodal analysis provides a vital framework for examining how meaning is constructed, shaped, and circulated in AI-generated content. Rather than treating AI outputs as mere technical artifacts, this approach views them as communicative events that engage in persuasive and ideological processes. Within this framework, intentionality is not conceived as a fixed mental state but as a distributed and relational function – traced through prompt creation, algorithmic mediation, and interpretive reception. Consequently, meaning-making becomes an ethically charged practice.

We also argue that developing an ethical approach to generative AI requires more than abstract normative principles; it demands attention to the discursive mechanisms through which language and imagery construct social meaning. Language models do not simply describe the world – they actively participate in defining, categorizing, and legitimizing it (Noble 2018 1–14). From this perspective, generative systems are not ethically neutral tools but rhetorical infrastructures: their outputs encode embedded assumptions, reinforce dominant narratives, and influence what is accepted as credible, persuasive, or legitimate.

At the same time, AI-generated outputs remain epistemically opaque: the pathway from prompt to image is not fully traceable. This opacity complicates causal responsibility but does not negate it. Instead, it calls for a form of forensic ethics – an effort to trace intention, effect, and persuasive structure across semiotic modes and technical systems. This entails reconstructing how meaning was produced, who influenced it, and which interpretive possibilities were activated. Žagar's theories on inferential reasoning (Žagar, 2021, 67–100) provide a valuable tool for this task – not by ascribing intent to machines, but by tracing how meaning is inferred despite the absence of traditional authorship.

We propose a way to trace intentionality not as a binary presence or absence, but as a distributed and iteratively enacted function emerging through cross-modal interaction, enabling a reconceptualization of authorship and meaning in machine-assisted communication – one that remains sensitive to ethical implications without falling into technological determinism. It calls for a shift in understanding the *locus* of meaning itself – not as the product of a singular speaker, but as a negotiated space among symbolic form, interpretive context, and agentive input, even when those agents are partly machinic. Such a perspective challenges traditional communicative paradigms by emphasizing hybridity, contingency, and the ethical labour inherent in guiding machine-mediated persuasion.

In doing so, we lay a (meta)theoretical foundation for ethical media analysis in the era of generative AI. While our argument remains conceptual, it sets the stage for future empirical research into how prompts are rhetorically constructed, how users engage in iterative meaning-making, and how multimodal outputs function persuasively within diverse socio-technical contexts. These investigations are crucial for testing and refining the framework we propose. Without such empirical grounding, ethical theorization risks becoming disconnected from the very communicative practices it seeks to illuminate.

Future research should rise to this critical challenge by bridging theoretical insights with practical investigations – examining real-world cases of AI-generated content, exploring user practices of prompt crafting and iterative refinement, and assessing the social impacts of multimodal persuasion across different communities and contexts. This work should engage interdisciplinary perspectives, combining rhetorical analysis, media studies, ethics, and human-computer interaction to develop robust, actionable frameworks. Only through such comprehensive, evidence-based inquiry can we hope to responsibly navigate the ethical complexities of shared authorship in AI-mediated communication and ensure that the evolving dynamics of meaning-making serve inclusive, just, and transparent ends.

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RHETORIC AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN ETHICS AND AI IN PREDICTIVE JUSTICE

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Abstract

The Re A *case, discussed by Neil MacCormick, shows how courts confront ethical pluralism through reason-giving rather than through mere rule application. Authorizing the separation of conjoined twins, and saving one child at the cost of the other, forced judges to acknowledge the parents' Catholic convictions while still offering publicly defensible reasons for a tragic choice. This paper uses* Re A *as a lens to argue that the central weakness of predictive justice is not only technical opacity but a deeper deficit: the inability to provide normative justification contestable by a public audience. Even interpretable models often explain correlations, rather than reasons. I therefore propose a rhetorically informed model of legal AI: systems should function as deliberative interlocutors that map competing considerations, disclose value trade-offs, and support contestation, rather than as authoritative predictors. The paper proceeds in three steps. First, it analyzes* Re A *to show how rhetoric enables legal institutions to justify decisions under conditions of moral disagreement. Second, it examines predictive justice, arguing that its epistemic structure tends to reproduce patterns while sidelining the justificatory discourse on which legal legitimacy depends. Third, it sketches design-oriented requirements for AI that support judicial deliberation by structuring reasons, surfacing alternatives, and making value conflicts explicit. The core claim is that rhetoric can bridge computational inference and ethical judgment, provided AI is designed to assist reason-giving and public accountability, rather than to replace practical wisdom with scores and predictions.*

Keywords: *legal rhetoric, legal reasoning, predictive justice, artificial intelligence, legal ethics, reasonableness*

1. Introduction: law, ethics, and the problem of justification

A persistent challenge in legal theory concerns how law can remain legitimate when it must decide under conditions of deep moral disagreement. The issue is not simply whether ethics 'enters' law, but how ethical considerations can be articulated as reasons that are publicly intelligible, contestable, and institutionally accountable. This challenge becomes acute in hard cases, where neither legal rules nor moral principles yield an uncontroversial answer, and yet a decision is still required.

Re A (children) [2001] 2 WLR 480 (CA) (the "conjoined twins" case[1]), analyzed by Neil MacCormick in *Rhetoric and the Rule of Law* (2005) and in Practical Reason in Law and Morality (2008), offers a paradigmatic example. The court had to authorize a surgical separation that would save one child while inevitably causing the other's death. The judges faced a stark conflict between the parents' Catholic convictions, rejecting the procedure as morally impermissible, and the medical and legal reasoning oriented toward survival and harm prevention. The legal resolution was inseparable from the ethical conflict it sought to navigate.

MacCormick treats *Re A* not merely as a doctrinal puzzle, but as a privileged site for examining the rhetorical structure of legal reasoning: how arguments are framed, how value conflicts are acknowledged, and how justification is addressed to an audience beyond the immediate parties. Rhetoric, in his account, mediates between law and ethics not by eliminating disagreement, but by making decisions intelligible and answerable to public scrutiny.

This paper takes *Re A* as a conceptual starting point to address a contemporary problem: the rise of AI in judicial contexts and, in particular, the development of predictive justice. By predictive justice, I mean data-driven tools that forecast outcomes or risks (e.g., recidivism scores, sentencing or parole predictions, case outcome probabilities) by learning patterns from past decisions (Deffains 2022). The guiding question is whether such systems can support the kind of justificatory practice that Re A exemplifies, or whether, even when accurate, they risk weakening the public reason-giving that underpins the rule of law (Sartor 2020).

2. The Re A case: ethical conflict and legal decision-making

Re A arose from a tragic medical situation involving conjoined twins, Mary and Jodie. Medical evidence indicated that without separation, both would die within months, while separation would likely save Jodie but inevitably result in Mary's death. The parents, devout Catholics, refused consent, regarding the operation as the intentional killing of one child to save another. The court thus confronted a dilemma that could not be resolved by mechanical rule application: competing ethical frameworks (the sanctity-of-life doctrine and a consequentialist concern with minimizing death and suffering) were built into the legal question itself.

For MacCormick, the philosophical significance of *Re A* lies less in the final outcome than in the form of justification the judges provided. The court did not dismiss the parents' position as irrational or irrelevant; instead, it treated it as morally serious while concluding that it could not be determinative for public decision-making. This is a crucial rhetorical move: ethical disagreement is not excluded but managed through a justificatory process that seeks reasons a plural audience can evaluate.

[1] *Re A* (children) (conjoined twins) [2001] Fam 147: [2000] 4 All ER 961 (22 September 2000), Court of Appeal (England and Wales).

The judgment's reasoning is addressed to multiple audiences at once: the parties, the medical professionals, and a broader public that must be able to see the decision as more than an exercise of institutional power. The judges make explicit the tragic structure of the choice and frame the decision as a constrained response to circumstances, rather than as a moral triumph. In doing so, they cultivate what MacCormick calls the argumentative character of law: in hard cases, decisions are not deductions, but outcomes of structured deliberation.

3. Rhetoric and the justification of legal decisions

MacCormick's reading of *Re A* embeds the case within a broader view of legal reasoning as a rhetorical practice. Here, rhetoric does not mean manipulation or ornamentation, but the disciplined practice of offering reasons that can be publicly defended. On this view, the legitimacy of legal decisions depends not only on rule-conformity, but also on their capacity to withstand critical scrutiny.

In *Rhetoric and the Rule of Law* (2005), MacCormick argues that the rule of law presupposes justificatory discourse. Legal certainty is important but not absolute: it coexists with interpretive openness and the need to argue about the meaning and implications of norms. Rhetoric is what holds together stability and flexibility, allowing law to adapt without collapsing into arbitrariness.

Re A illustrates this dynamic particularly well. The judges do not present a morally conclusive solution; they present a decision that is justified as the least unreasonable option under tragic constraints. The persuasive force of the judgment lies in how it frames trade-offs, acknowledges moral loss, and still explains why a public institution must act. Rhetoric, in this sense, functions as a condition of ethical responsibility: deciding without reasons would be arbitrary power; deciding with reasons that erase moral stakes would reduce law to technique. *Re A* shows a third path: publicly accountable justification under disagreement.

4. Reasonableness, *prudentia*, and practical wisdom

A key concept in MacCormick's analysis of *Re A* is reasonableness, which he explicitly connects to the classical virtue of *prudentia*, or practical wisdom (De Caro and Vaccarezza 2020; De Caro, Vaccarezza, and Niccoli 2018). Drawing on the Aristotelian tradition of *phronesis*, MacCormick understands reasonableness not as a purely cognitive or formal capacity, but as an embodied virtue guiding action and judgment in concrete situations. Reasonableness, in this sense, is inseparable from the ethical and rhetorical dimensions of legal deliberation (De Caro, Navarini, and Vaccarezza 2024).

As MacCormick makes clear, the reasonable person is not an abstract rational agent, but a deliberator endowed with *prudentia*, a virtue that is "incompatible with fanaticism or apathy" and oriented toward the balanced consideration of competing values (MacCormick 2008, 166–67). The reasonable judge is aware that any practical dilemma involves a meeting point of different interests and moral perspectives, and that legal judgment requires sensitivity to this plurality rather than its elimination.

This conception is particularly evident in *Re A*. The judges did not treat the case as a problem to be solved by the mechanical application of rules or a simple moral calculus. Instead, they exercised practical wisdom by acknowledging the tragic nature of the choice and by engaging in a process of deliberation that sought to justify the decision in light of the values at stake. The court's

reasoning exemplifies *prudentia* insofar as it reflects an ability to "see and feel the situation" (167), to take distance from one's own commitments, and to evaluate the human significance of the consequences involved.

MacCormick insists that *prudentia* is not a form of subjective moral intuition, but a disciplined capacity shaped through experience, argument, and public accountability. It involves the ability to listen, weigh reasons, and justify decisions in terms that can be understood and assessed by others. In this sense, *prudentia* is inherently rhetorical: it presupposes an audience and unfolds through justificatory discourse rather than through demonstrative proof.

Reasonableness, therefore, should not be conceived as a first-order value competing with other values, but as a higher-order virtue that governs the balancing of reasons (167). A decision is reasonable not because it realizes a predetermined moral truth, but because it emerges from a process of deliberation that responsibly navigates ethical conflict: this is precisely what distinguishes legal judgment from both moral dogmatism and technical optimization.

If legal reasonableness depends on *prudentia* as a rhetorical capacity, the question arises whether contemporary forms of algorithmic decision-making can even approximate the conditions under which such practical wisdom operates.

5. From *Re A* to contemporary challenges

The *Re A* case demonstrates that legal decision-making in ethically charged contexts cannot be reduced to rule application or outcome optimization. It requires a form of reasoning that is sensitive to values, attentive to audiences, and capable of articulating justifications under conditions of disagreement. Rhetoric, as MacCormick understands it, provides the conceptual framework for this task. This insight forms the basis for the transition developed in the next part of this paper.

As AI systems increasingly inform judicial decisions, particularly through predictive analytics and risk assessment tools, a crucial question arises: can such systems accommodate the rhetorical and ethical dimensions that cases like *Re A* make visible? Or do they risk transforming legal judgment into a "black box" that produces outcomes without justification?

The growing use of artificial intelligence in judicial decision-making has generated significant expectations regarding efficiency, consistency, and predictability. Predictive justice systems, in particular, promise to support judges by identifying patterns in past decisions and forecasting likely outcomes in future cases (Sartor and Branting 1998). However, while these systems may enhance certain technical aspects of adjudication, they raise serious concerns when evaluated from the perspective of legal reasoning as a justificatory and rhetorical practice.

A central problem lies in the epistemic structure of predictive justice. Algorithms typically rely on large datasets derived from past judicial decisions, transforming historical regularities into probabilistic models. As several scholars have noted, this approach risks reproducing and reinforcing existing biases embedded in legal practice (Bex and Prakken 2021; Lagioia, Rovatti and Sartor 2023). More fundamentally, however, predictive justice systems operate in a way that is largely indifferent to the ethical reasoning underlying judicial decisions. They deliver outputs (risk scores, probability estimates, or predicted outcomes) without articulating the normative reasons that would make those outputs publicly intelligible and contestable.

From the standpoint of MacCormick's theory, this represents a serious limitation: legal reasoning, as exemplified by the *Re A* case, is not merely about arriving at a decision, but about justifying

that decision through reasons addressed to an audience. Predictive systems, by contrast, tend to function as black boxes: they produce results without explaining how competing values have been weighed or why certain considerations should prevail over others. This opacity undermines a core requirement of the rule of law, namely that legal decisions must be open to rational scrutiny and criticism.

The problem is not simply one of transparency in a technical sense. Even when algorithmic models are made partially interpretable, they often fail to provide the kind of normative justification that legal decisions require. Explanations framed in terms of statistical correlations or feature importance do not address the ethical dimension of judgment, nor do they engage with the plurality of values at stake in concrete cases. As a result, predictive justice systems risk reducing legal decision-making to a form of instrumental rationality, detached from the rhetorical practices through which law negotiates moral disagreement.

This gap becomes particularly evident when predictive tools are applied to cases involving ethical conflict or human vulnerability, such as sentencing, parole decisions, or family law disputes. In such contexts, the legitimacy of a decision depends not only on consistency with past cases but on its responsiveness to the specific circumstances and values involved. Without a rhetorical framework capable of articulating and balancing these values, AI-assisted decisions risk appearing arbitrary, even when statistically well-founded.

6. Rhetoric, accountability, and ethical sensitivity in predictive justice

In light of these limitations, this paper proposes a different way of conceptualizing the role of AI in legal decision-making, inspired by the rhetorical insights drawn from MacCormick's analysis of *Re A*. Rather than treating AI systems as authoritative decision-makers or neutral predictors, they should be designed as rhetorical interlocutors within the judicial process.

Drawing on Christopher W. Tindale's conception of rhetorical argumentation (Tindale 2006; 2010; 2024), a rhetorical interlocutor does not deliver final answers, but presents reasons, highlights tensions, and exposes alternative perspectives (Tindale 2004). Applied to AI systems, this approach suggests that predictive tools should assist judges by structuring the space of reasons, rather than by replacing human judgment. Instead of producing a single outcome, an AI system could identify competing considerations, indicate how different values have been treated in similar cases, and make explicit the trade-offs involved in alternative courses of action.

Seen through this lens, the limits of predictive justice systems become even more evident. As typically deployed, algorithms lack *prudentia*: they do not perceive moral salience, feel the weight of tragic choices, or take responsibility. This limitation is not intrinsic to computation in general, but to the design of most current predictive systems, which are optimized for correlation and outcome prediction rather than for normative deliberation. Predictive systems operate at the level of abstraction, whereas legal judgment, as MacCormick's analysis of *Re A* shows, must remain anchored in lived experience.

This gap is structural in standard data-driven predictive systems: they output scores, probabilities, or classifications without articulating the normative reasons that would make those outputs publicly intelligible and contestable. Absent explicit design constraints aimed at reason-giving, these systems reproduce patterns of inference but not the justificatory discourse on which legal legitimacy depends. *Prudentia* cannot be reduced to computational reasoning, because it involves sensitivity to context, ethical imagination, and responsiveness to human vulnerability.

When AI systems are deployed without a rhetorical framework, they risk transforming law into a form of power detached from life, an abstraction that produces outcomes without understanding or justification.

For this reason, the proposal to reconceptualize AI as a rhetorical interlocutor acquires its full significance. A rhetorically informed AI system does not aspire to replace practical wisdom, but to support it. By mapping arguments, exposing value conflicts, and making justificatory structures visible, AI can assist judges in exercising *prudentia* rather than bypassing it. The goal is not to automate judgment, but to preserve the conditions under which reasonable judgment remains possible.

Such a model aligns with MacCormick's emphasis on reasonableness as a higher-order value. Reasonableness, understood as the capacity to balance competing reasons in context, cannot be automated in a strict sense. However, AI systems can be designed to support this balancing process by making relevant factors visible and by facilitating deliberation. In this way, rhetoric becomes not merely an external interpretive lens but a guiding principle for the ethical design of legal technologies.

This rhetorical conception of AI also addresses concerns about accountability. If an AI system is understood as a participant in a deliberative process rather than as an oracle, responsibility for the final decision remains with the human judge. At the same time, the system's contribution can be evaluated, criticized, and improved based on how well it supports ethical reasoning and public justification. This preserves the core features of the rule of law while allowing for technological innovation.

Importantly, treating AI as a rhetorical interlocutor acknowledges the role of the audience in legal decision-making. Judicial decisions are addressed not only to legal professionals but to citizens whose acceptance depends on their perception of fairness and reasonableness. By facilitating explanations that resonate with human values and concerns, rhetorically informed AI systems can help maintain trust in legal institutions in the digital age. To avoid remaining at the level of conceptual metaphor, the next section specifies how the idea of a rhetorical interlocutor can be translated into operational design requirements. These are not technological blueprints, but normative and functional constraints that can guide the development of legal AI systems toward deliberative rather than merely predictive roles.

7. Operationalizing the rhetorical interlocutor: what legal AI should do in practice

If the claim that legal AI should operate as a rhetorical interlocutor is to be more than a metaphor, it must be translated into concrete functional expectations. The discussion that follows refers primarily to current data-driven predictive systems that tend to optimize correlation rather than justification.

The central shift proposed here is simple: in adjudicative contexts, the primary contribution of an AI system should not be to output a prediction as a quasi-decisional signal, but to support the public practice of reason-giving. In other words, the system should be designed to help decision-makers articulate, compare, and contest the considerations that could justify different outcomes to a plural audience, rather than to replace practical judgment with a score.

Operationally, this requires that the system's main output take an argumentative form. A rhetorically informed tool should foreground reasons (legal grounds, principles, and case-specific

considerations) showing how they connect to the facts and why they might count in favour of, or against, a given resolution. Predictive estimates may still be present, but only as secondary epistemic inputs, explicitly framed as fallible and contextual information rather than as justificatory grounds. This distinction matters because interpretability typically explains how a model produced a result, while justification concerns why a certain consideration should be treated as relevant, with what weight, and under which normative constraints. A system that can display feature importance without exposing and organizing the normative premises at stake remains descriptively informative but justificatorily weak.

A second operational requirement concerns comparative framing. Legal justification rarely consists in stating that an outcome is correct in isolation; it often proceeds by showing why one course of action is preferable to plausible alternatives, or why it represents the least unreasonable option under the circumstances. For this reason, a rhetorical interlocutor should present more than a single best answer. It should display alternative resolutions that a reasonable decision-maker could consider and make visible the trade-offs implied by each, including the kinds of objections each pathway would have to address. This design choice encourages deliberation rather than deference, and it mirrors the way courts aim to justify decisions in a manner that can be evaluated by others.

Because the aim is public justification under ethical pluralism, such a system must also make its value-laden assumptions explicit. In domains like sentencing, bail, parole, or family law, the choice of what to optimize and what to treat as salient inevitably expresses a normative stance: prioritizing security over liberty, consistency over individualized equity, risk minimization over proportionality, or welfare maximization over rights-based constraints. A rhetorically oriented tool should therefore not conceal value commitments behind the appearance of neutrality. It should disclose when and where value conflicts arise, what balance is implicitly being adopted, and what kinds of factual or normative changes would plausibly shift that balance. In this way, the system does not pretend to resolve ethical disagreement; instead, it helps render disagreement explicit and discussable.

Contestability is the next essential condition. Justification is not a one-way communication but a practice structured by the possibility of challenge. A rhetorical interlocutor must therefore allow users to contest the inputs and the assumptions that shape its outputs. This means enabling corrections to data, supporting exception-handling and distinguishing factors, and offering counterfactual exploration that clarifies what would have to be different for a competing conclusion to become reasonable. The system should also preserve a record of contested points, so that disagreement does not disappear within the tool but remains visible for accountability. Without such mechanisms, the AI risks functioning as a closure device – ending deliberation rather than enabling it.

A further requirement concerns epistemic modesty. In legal contexts, the authority of reasons depends in part on clarity about their evidential status. A rhetorical interlocutor should present the provenance of the information it relies on, the scope and limits of the data, and the uncertainty associated with any statistical component. It should flag distributional mismatch and out-of-sample cases and explicitly indicate where it lacks a stable basis for inference. In rhetorical terms, the system should reveal when it is not entitled to speak confidently. This is not a purely technical concern: hiding uncertainty or coverage limits undermines the very public accountability the system is supposed to support.

Finally, because judicial reasons are addressed to multiple audiences, the system should be capable of layered communication. The same justificatory structure must be intelligible, in different registers, to judges and lawyers as well as to the parties affected and, more broadly, to citizens whose trust in legal institutions depends on perceived fairness and intelligibility. A rhetorical

interlocutor should therefore support differentiated explanation layers: one that connects considerations to legal authorities and doctrinal categories, another that discloses methodological constraints and uncertainties for expert scrutiny, and a plain-language layer that makes the reasoning understandable without erasing its complexity or its contestable character.

These requirements can be implemented through a minimal workflow that preserves decisional responsibility in human hands. The system can begin from a structured representation of the case, flag missing or bias-sensitive information, and then generate a map of considerations relevant to the legal issue. It can present plausible alternative pathways, highlight the trade-offs each implies, and invite challenge by allowing users to revise facts, test counterfactuals, and introduce distinguishing circumstances. On this basis, it can offer a justification scaffold, an outline of reasons and anticipated objections, without producing a final judgment or assuming institutional authority.

A final clarification concerns two risks that a rhetorically oriented interface may exacerbate if left unchecked. The first is post-hoc rationalization: a system may generate fluent, persuasive-sounding reasons that merely decorate an output rather than subject it to genuine justificatory scrutiny. To mitigate this tendency, the system should be constrained to keep descriptive statistical claims distinct from normative premises, to anchor each stated consideration to identifiable authorities, facts, or openly declared value assumptions, and to present alternative resolutions with comparable argumentative richness rather than privileging a single pathway by default. The second risk is undue deference: the more coherent and legalistic the system's language becomes, the more likely users are to treat it as a surrogate decision-maker. This can be reduced by design choices that avoid recommendatory phrasing, foreground uncertainty and scope conditions, and frame outputs as deliberative prompts, while making explicit that the justificatory and institutional responsibility for the decision remains with the human judge.

In sum, a rhetorical design for legal AI transforms prediction into deliberation, enabling technological systems to serve rather than supplant the justificatory practices that sustain the rule of law.

8. Conclusion

Ultimately, the lesson of *Re A* is that legal judgment cannot be reduced to prediction and calculation. Its legitimacy depends on *prudentia*: the capacity to deliberate responsibly in the face of ethical conflict and to justify decisions through reasons addressed to others (Tomasi 2024; Puppo 2023). Rhetoric is the medium through which this practical wisdom becomes publicly visible and open to contestation.

If predictive justice systems are to be integrated into legal decision-making without undermining the rule of law, they must be designed to respect and support this rhetorical and ethical structure. Treating AI as a rhetorical interlocutor rather than as a decision-maker allows technological tools to contribute to legal reasoning while preserving the central role of human judgment. In this way, rhetoric can indeed function as a bridge between ethics and AI, ensuring that law remains a practice grounded in life, responsibility, and justice rather than an exercise of abstract power.

At the same time, the growing use of predictive tools must not obscure what remains irreducible in legal practice. Such tools may assist lawyers and judges by identifying patterns, estimating outcomes, and clarifying argumentative tendencies, but they do not reach the core of adjudication. Law is not exhausted by the management of probabilities, because forensic practice is not merely a technical operation of optimization: it is, rather, a situated, relational, and interpretive practice in

which facts must be reconstructed, conflicts must be understood, and reasons must be articulated in a form capable of doing justice to the singularity of the case.

This is precisely where the Italian legal philosopher Mittica's idea of a legal *sentire* becomes decisive (Mittica 2019). If legal thought is also a thinking that feels, that is, a form of understanding grounded in attentive openness, listening, and responsiveness to the living reality before it, then no predictive system can replace its essential movement. Mittica's reflection shows that law is not only a system of forms, but also a measure of the living, and therefore a practice that requires sensitivity to what exceeds abstraction, formalization, and calculability. Predictive justice systems can process data; they cannot feel the normative weight of testimony, the human meaning of vulnerability, or the practical urgency of deciding well in the presence of another person. They operate on facts already translated into data, already selected and formalized, whereas lawyers and judges must still confront lived facts in their ambiguity, contestability, and moral thickness.

For this reason, the spread of AI systems used in adjudication may transform the environment of legal reasoning, but it cannot alter its essence. The essence of forensic practice lies in the responsible mediation between fact and norm, between conflict and justification, between institutional form and lived experience. It lies, in other words, in a mode of judgment that is rhetorical, prudential, and responsive to the human stakes of the case. Predictive tools may support this practice, but they cannot find it; they may inform deliberation, but they cannot replace the sensible and ethical dimension through which law remains a genuinely human practice. Only by preserving this dimension of *sentire* can the integration of AI into law avoid reducing justice to computation and instead remain faithful to law's deeper vocation: not simply to decide efficiently, but to decide responsibly in the presence of life.

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