

Professing Rhetoric

Selected Papers From the 2000
Rhetoric Society of America Conference

Edited by

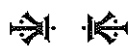
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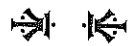
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Edited by

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Rhetoric and the Body: A Lesson from Ancient Elocutionists

There is *no less* eloquence in the tone of the voice, in the eyes and in the air of the speaker, than in his choice of words.

(*François La Rochefoucauld, Maximes*)

A real, living, growing language has always been a collection of spoken sounds. The sounds that accompany our thoughts, the prosodic features that join them in a complex “melody”, and the gestures that accompany any speech are moulds into which we pour our own thought. It is our voice that gives form and direction to our ideas; it is our body that gives life to them.

The strong link that joins rhetoric—in all its forms and functions—and gesture is too important a subject to be underestimated. It concerns linguists, who make a scientific study of language. It concerns phoneticians, who analyze the sounds of human speech. It concerns musicians, who are interested in the nature of rhythm. It concerns anthropologists, who must look at all communicative behavior as a whole and who will find in the human voice the spoken counterpart of facial expression and physical gesture. It concerns all those in the language arts, for whom the coloring of a phrase or the gesture accompanying it is as important as the phrase itself.

Many years ago scientists tried a “mechanical speech” approach, intended to develop machines that produced speech from a vocabulary of prerecorded words, joined together to form sentences. For very short messages this technique was valuable, but for more complex purposes the quality of speech was so unnatural that it was practically unintelligible. The failure of this approach has many lessons to teach us about successful oral speech. In fact, there can be no spontaneous oral communication without a balanced mixture of contents expressed with vocal sounds and physical gestures.

Thomas Sheridan taught us that there are two kinds of language:

The one is, the *language of ideas*; by which the thoughts which pass in a man's mind, are manifested to others; and this language is composed chiefly of words properly ranged, and divided into sentences. The other is the *language of emotions*; by which the effects that those thoughts have upon the mind of the speaker, in exciting the passions, affections, and all manner of feelings, are not only made known, but communicated to others; and this language is composed of tones, looks and gestures. The office of a public speaker is to instruct, to please, and to move. (132–33; my italics)

While studying two of the main aspects of any linguistic performance, namely its semantic content and its phonetic and/or phonological form, we have to deal with a basic principle of successful oral communication, that is, the perfect harmony between intonation and gesture, where intonation and gesture are the human ideal devices to convey meaning. Our "ancestors" in this field may be found among the so-called Elocutionists: the group includes all those eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British and then American scholars who concentrated on the study of voice management and elocution.

Intonation and Gesture

Intonation is different from most of the other channels of communication studied by rhetoricians and linguists, because it has more in common with gesture than with semantic contents or grammatical forms. Nevertheless, both gesture and intonation are tremendously important *to* any linguistic performance.

Intonation is the manner of utterance of the tones of the voice in speaking, the modulation of the voice, the rise and fall in pitch of the voice in speech. It indicates the act of performing the movements of pitch. Speaking sounds must have a slide, or inflection: any monotone inflection would be perceived as uninteresting by a listener. *Gesture* is any movement made with a part of our body, especially the hands and head, to express emotion or information, either instead of speaking or while speaking. As for intonation, there is no absolute gesture. Every intonational contour, as well as every gesture, is unique, because tones of intonation and body movements are relative, not absolute.

The objection which follows here is: if neither intonation nor gesture is absolute, may we have a model for "good" intonation and "proper" gesture, as the ancient elocutionists suggested, or not? The history of linguistics seems to demonstrate that a model for both was once considered possible. As far as the study of oral performance is concerned, examples are scattered throughout the centuries: the sixteenth-century treatises on punctuation (Hart 1569; Puttenham 1589; Dobson 1968) made the first steps towards the definition of a written transcription of an oral text; in the seventeenth century the study of English intonation and rhythm was improved with the precise aim of demonstrating the "Excellency" of the English language (Butler 1634); the eighteenth and nine-

teenth centuries saw the flourishing of *delivery*, because speaking opportunities were developing rapidly in parliament, at the bar, in the pulpit, in the theatre and in polite conversation, and the demand for expressing ideas in oral English increased. In particular, that was the ideal period for the studies on intonation and gesture to be developed. In 1775 the first impressive study of English intonation by Joshua Steele appeared (Zanola Macola 1996): this work pioneered a number of important frontiers in the subject of prosodic features as a whole. It was followed by John Walker's *The Melody of Speaking* (1787), a markedly pedagogical treatise aimed at giving a guide to those who wanted to read and speak well. Apart from Sheridan (1762), other eighteenth-century elocutionists kept to the traditions established by early English grammarians and elocutionists. In fact, the great majority of eighteenth-century writings confined the treatment of oral language to inaccurate generalizations on the motivational power of words, but concentrated on the relationship between language and gesture. As a consequence, we have a consistent number of volumes that may be very interesting for a psychologist, a communication expert, or a rhetorician (cf. Burgh 1761; Blair 1788; Priestley 1762).

In spite of this long list of studies, no fixed rule about the correct and proper use of intonation and gesture can be found. However, what has been clearly stated since the seventeenth century (Hart 1569) is that the listener's *eye and* ^{16/10} *ear* (sight and hearing) should be harmoniously involved by the speaker's *melody of voice and gesture*. The parts of a speech ought to be combined into a suitable and attractive arrangement. Without harmony, the entire effectiveness of oral communication may fail. Harmony means agreement, cooperation, accord, unit, balance, and symmetry.

Principles of "Delivery"

We have started from the apparently obvious consideration that effectiveness in oral communication comes to nothing unless it is combined with variations in the speaker's voice and body movements. As a consequence, we are obliged now to concentrate on the great value of *delivery*.

The traditional fifth canon of classical rhetoric must be reconsidered as one of the historically important characteristics of powerful and persuasive speech. Highly regarded Roman orators such as Cicero and Quintilian both recognized delivery and its importance in speeches: although neither of them dealt directly with the relationship between the speaker and the audience, they both noted how speaking may be affected by variations in the voice and body movements. As a consequence, they stressed the necessity for proper sounds and gesture in meeting the situational demands of rhetoric.

The word used by the great Roman authorities to name this part of rhetoric was *pronuntiatio* or *actio*.

Pronuntiatio est ex rerum et verborum dignitate vocis et corporis moderatio. (Cicero, *De Inventione*, 1.7.9)

Cumque esset omnis oratoris vis ac facultas in quinque partes distributa; ut deberet reperire primum, quid diceret; deinde inventa non solum ordine, sed etiam momento quodam atque iudicio dispensare atque componere; tum ea denique vestire atque ornare oratione; post memoria saepire; *ad extremum agere cum dignitate ac venustate*. (Cicero, *De Oratore*, 1.31.142; my italics)

Est enim actio quasi sermo corporis, quo magis menti congruens esse debet. (Cicero, *De Oratore*, 3.59.222)

Pronuntiatio a plerisque actio dicitur, sed prius nomen a voce, sequens a gestu videtur accipere. (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 11.3.1)

In English, *pronunciation* had been established since the early sixteenth century as the technical term for the oral delivery of discourse. Only when the science of phonetics began to emerge did the term acquire a new technical meaning.¹ In 1617 Robert Robinson wrote *The Art of Pronunciation* (Dobson 1968: 200–14), a treatise on phonetics, describing in detail “the elements and parts of the voice” together with the main problems of spelling and pronunciation: this book was considered a work on voice and gesture for years, because in Robinson’s time the art of pronunciation would technically have referred to the art of delivering a speech. The dangers involved in having two different technical meanings for the same word may have worried the elocutionists, who were the first to withdraw the term *pronunciation* from its setting in rhetoric and to use it in an unambiguous technical sense in lexicography and phonetics.

If the difference between *delivery* and *pronunciation* is now clear, it is nevertheless not easy to understand why the word *elocution* was chosen by British, and then, by American elocutionists to name the fifth part of rhetoric. This is a problem widely discussed by Wilbur Samuel Howell in his tribute to *The British Elocutionary Movement (1702–1806)*:

After all, was not elocution already recognized in England as the term for the lore of the tropes and figures and for the doctrine of the three kinds of style? If so, how was a new ambiguity to be avoided when the term was made also to mean oral delivery? ... The elocutionists could have avoided this sort of confusion, of course, by calling the fifth and last part of rhetoric by the alternate name of *action*, as classical authorities would have authorized, or by the new term *delivery*, as the twentieth century was going to do. (149–50; my italics)

As a matter of fact, these rhetoricians refused both the term *action*, because it could be associated in English with the idea of gesture (physical motion) rather than of oral utterance, and the term *delivery*, probably because it had no roots in that Latin rhetorical tradition of which they were proud.

In the eighteenth century the word *elocution* was finally used in its full present meaning: traditionally connected with rhetoric, this term was a close relative of *eloquence*. Thomas Sheridan, one of the most influential British elocutionists, employed this word in its new sense in 1756, translating it directly from the Latin *pronuntiatio* in the well-known passage taken from *Rhetorica ad Herennium*: "Elocution is a graceful management of the voice, countenance, and gesture" (Sheridan 1756: 158).²

British Studies

As a modern study, elocution originated in England in the eighteenth century. Training in elocution became a need especially for the clergy, often criticized for their colorless reading; on the other hand, the seventeenth-century growing interest in the English language had brought an increased attention towards all its aspects, both written and spoken. The Elocutionary movement was a direct development of the main seventeenth- and eighteenth-century linguistic trends. All the greatest English lexicographers, grammarians, and, in some way, phoneticians of these two centuries have left wonderful pages on voice management and elocution.

The movement may best be understood by an examination of the books that were produced in its name. There were hundreds published, but we can distinguish three main categories:

1. *Investigative treatises*. They are volumes which contained the substance of the elocutionary ideas and established the subject (Burgh 1761; Sheridan 1762; Walker 1787; Bell 1867);
2. *Manuals designed for use in different professions*; namely, manuals for clerical elocution (Wesley 1770);
3. *Books for school and home use*, from the "reasoned textbooks" to the illustrative anthologies and the books of extracts (Thelwall 1812).

The printed page, the voice, language and the body supplied the material upon which the movement brought to bear philosophy, rules, principles and notation. In devising ways to analyze these materials the elocutionists used the precepts of ancient rhetoric as well as the practices of the stage. They generally referred to their subject as an art during the whole of the eighteenth century, but with the beginning of the new century the subsidiary subjects investigated became nearer to science, in the sense that elocution tended to be concerned with speech correction, with the anatomy of vocal physiology, and with the physics of

sound production. Only nineteenth-century elocutionists, such as Thelwall (1812) and Bell (1867), looked upon elocution as a science.

Scientific or artistic, their contributions concentrated on three main fields: bodily action (modifications of facial expressions, manner and attitude, movements of arms and legs); voice management (vocal flexibility, control, and buoyancy through proper use of accent, emphasis, force, rhythm, tone, pause, pitch); pronunciation (identification and production of speech sounds, standard vs dialectal variations, first studies on the anatomy of speech mechanisms). All these writings aimed at improvement in delivery, together with development of a taste for culture and quality.

American Studies

The work of British rhetoricians was eagerly accepted in America. The demand for elocution in this country being as great as, or even greater than, in England, it is not surprising that British elocutionists found there the market for their publications. The Elocutionary Movement in America takes origin from the British school of Elocution and until the second half of the nineteenth century shows little originality. The Americans, in the early stages of the movement's history, republished British authors, copied them, sometimes modified and adapted their teachings to their own situations. They finally created a U.S. movement "which possessed attributes of independence as well as adaptation" (Wallace 105).

Desire for education and *the wish to be entertained* contributed to the elocutionists' success. Many people, often trained for professions such as medicine or the theatre, became "teachers of elocution" in response to a growing demand for training in this field; their personal background was often vital to the scientific knowledge of the vocal system, and of the most suitable teaching methods, as a consequence. One of the greatest elocutionists of the time, James Rush (1893), was a doctor; Jonathan Barber (1830) worked as a physician while teaching elocution in Harvard and Yale; Andrew Comstock (1837, 1844) did the same. Rush, in particular, made a very detailed analysis of human vocal expression, based on philosophical and scientific enquiry. His study was divided into fifty-one sections devoted to: the English sounds (description and production), the melody of speech (intonation, tones, rhythm, accent, stress, emphasis, pause), and elocutionary practice (with particular attention to time, force, pitch, cadence and monotony). The book's apparent and immediate usefulness to teachers made Dr. Rush a recognized authority in the discipline of elocution: influential teachers of preachers, doctors, actors, together with all the specialists in speech therapy, phonetics and voice training were attracted to his masterpiece. A great disciple of Bacon, Rush experimented his theories with his own voice (he was also a musician) and narrated the process of his evolving ideas: his method demonstrated that it was time physiology took the study of the human voice out of the hands of rhetoricians and grammarians. The development of a natural,

systematic, analytic science had to be supported by new and precise observations. His way of describing and teaching elocution not only signalled the end of the British elocutionary practice, but also stimulated many American teachers to produce their own textbooks.

In the theatre circuit, from Boston to New Orleans and to California, more than fifty companies were scattered throughout the United States in 1850 (Wallace 180): most of the actors gave programmes of readings in schools and universities.³ Also among the clergy we find some elocutionists who made history: Rev. James Chapman (1821); Rev. William Bryant, episcopal schoolmaster in Philadelphia (Bernstein 5); Rev. Ebenezer Porter, professor of Sacred Rhetoric in Andover Seminary (Wallace 181).

As in England the century before, the production of treatises, manuals or textbooks on the subject was enormous. The elocutionists' manuals soon began to have wide circulation. They were in most cases small volumes of easy consultation, very concise and clear in theoretical explanation, and full of precious suggestions and advice for the reader.⁴ Inside them, there emerged a lesson on the typical gestuality of conversation and public speaking on one hand, and on the main prosodic features of the voice on the other: posture, hands, eyes, and voice were given the same importance as the content of words and sentences in the whole act of communication.

Conclusion

The linguist Dwight Bolinger used a wonderful metaphor to describe the human voice:

The surface of the ocean responds to the forces that act upon it in movements resembling the ups and downs of the human voice. If our vision could take it all at once, we would discern several types of motion, involving a greater and greater expanse of sea and volume and water: ripples, waves, swells and tides. It would be more accurate to say ripples *on* waves *on* swells *on* tides, because each larger movement carries the smaller ones on its back. (19)

Like a sea-storm, the human voice produces waves of sounds, supported by the intermingling of intonational contours and by gestures. We think that a "new approach" should be given to the study of oral communication. Speech communication should be considered a form of rhetoric in that it uses the five traditional rhetorical canons to get a point across to the audience effectively. *Invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery* are fundamental keys to speech. The last one, *delivery*, particularly influences the effectiveness of any oral performance.

Although elocution was sometimes declared a subject distinct from the study of rhetoric, classical rhetoric always considered delivery as an important part of speech. The orator, lawyer, politician, actor, minister of the church have all been

always concerned with the manner of speaking. In the American Elocutionists' writing, a first attempt was made to develop a science of speech: their manuals are an endless mine of information about reading and speaking skills, speech sounds (isolated or in context), prosodic features, speech defects and speech correction. The teachers from this movement were all eclectic in their theories and methods, taking what they considered best from other colleagues and adding ideas of their own. Their common aim was the sincere desire to improve the speaking and reading of the American people; their common interest was to study vocal mechanism and body movements, as the main cues to effectiveness in oral communication in general, or to public speaking in particular. Unfortunately, their followers sometimes brought discredit upon their scholars, by misinterpretation and lack of serious study and appreciation.

We think it is time for the value of the American Elocutionary movement to be brought to light again. Thanks to its efforts, elocution became an important part of the educational plan of any American student: the subject matter and purposes of public speaking courses nowadays present a heritage in the U.S. universities as classical as that of literature, while yet suiting the pragmatic temper of the modern United States.

Notes

1. For various instances where *pronuntiatio* has been rendered into English as "pronunciation," see Howell 1961: 81-82, 89, 104, 112, 255-56, 325.
2. The Latin version was: "Pronuntiatio est vocis, vultus, gestus moderatio cum venustate" (*Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 1.2.3).
3. James Murdoch, for example, extended the Rush system by his lectures and public reading entertainments (Bernstein 1974: 12, n. 15).
4. From an examination of college catalogues (1821-1859), Guthrie (1954) found that the most used textbooks were those written by three well-known teachers of elocution: Rev. E. Porter (Wallace 1954: 181), followed by J. Barber (1830) and W. Russell (1845).

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