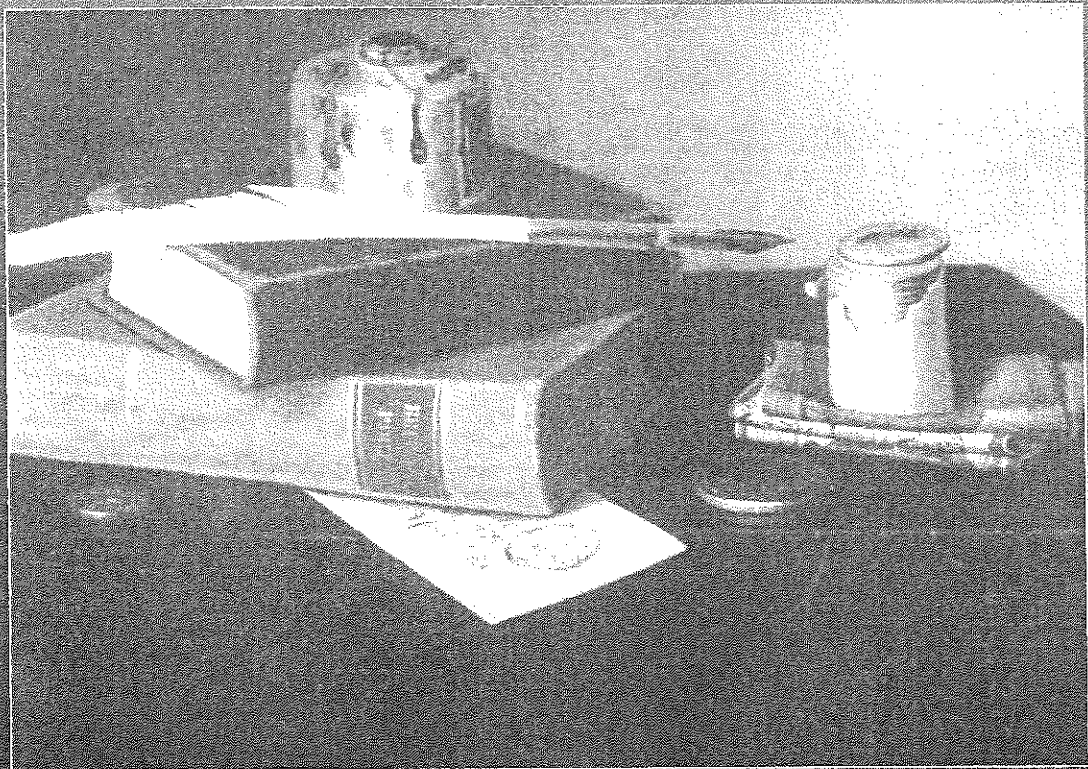


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# THE ECONOMY PRINCIPLE IN ENGLISH: LINGUISTIC, LITERARY, AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

Proceedings of the XIX Conference  
of the Associazione Italiana di Anglistica  
(Milan, 21-23 October 1999)

Edited by  
Giovanni Iamartino, Marialuisa Bignami, and Carlo Pagetti



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# THE ECONOMY OF VOICE AND GESTURE IN ENGLISH ORAL COMMUNICATION: THE AMERICAN ELOCUTIONARY MOVEMENT

*Annalisa Zanola Macola*

## 1. Introduction

*Oral communication* is our main concern here. Starting from the apparently obvious consideration that its effectiveness comes to nothing unless it is combined with variations in the speaker's voice and body movements, we will concentrate on the great value of *delivery*. The traditional fifth canon of classical rhetoric is reconsidered in our study as one of the historically important characteristics of powerful and persuasive speech. In the history of English language and linguistics, the analysis of a non-written suitable style in communicative situations appears sporadically before the 20th century, when the American Elocutionary Movement focused on the power of oratory, of eloquence, and of *effective speech*. It is precisely with this *power* that we shall deal, with particular attention to the updating of the contents and form of the American Elocutionists' manuals, which are – especially from a pragmatic point of view – much more original and interesting than those produced a century before by their British ancestors in the English schools of elocution.

## 2. Rhetorical Delivery, Pronunciation and Elocution

Speech communication can be considered a form of rhetoric in that it uses the five traditional rhetorical canons to get a point across 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, because it "refers to the way an orator uses his or her voice and gestures to accompany spoken words" (Covino *et al.* 1995: 43).

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*. We read in Cicero:

Pronuntiatio est ex rerum et verborum dignitate vocis et corporis moderatio (*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* (*De Oratore*, 1.31.142. My italics).

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

Quintilian uses the same words used by Cicero with the same meaning:

Pronuntiatio a plerisque actio dicitur, sed prius nomen a voce, sequens a gestu videtur accipere (*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<sup>1</sup>. In 1617 Robert Robinson wrote *The Art of Pronunciation*<sup>2</sup>, a treatise on phonetics, describing in detail "the elements and parts of the voice" together with the main problems of spelling and pronunciation. Unfortunately, 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. William Phillips Sandford said of it, for example, that it was "probably the first book written in English devoted exclusively to the subject of delivery" (Howell 1971: 148). 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 (1971: 149-150. 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"

<sup>1</sup> For various instances where "pronuntiatio" has been rendered into English as "pronunciation", see Howell 1961: 81-82, 89, 104, 112, 255-256, 325.

<sup>2</sup> Robinson's work is reproduced in *The Phonetic Writings of Robert Robinson*, Dobson E.J., ed. 1968<sup>2</sup>: 200-214.

(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)<sup>3</sup>.

### 3. *The British School of Elocution*

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 "dullness, colorlessness and absent-minded reading" (Wallace 1954: 182); 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 outgrowth 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 us wonderful pages on voice management and elocution.

The movement may best be understood by an examination of the books which were produced in its name. There were hundreds published, but we can distinguish three main categories. The first includes those volumes which contained the substance of the elocutionary ideas and established the subject: they were investigative treatises, such as those of John Mason (1748), James Burgh (1761), Thomas Sheridan (1762), John Walker (1787), and Alexander Melville Bell (1867); another category is that of the manuals designed for use in different professions, such as those of clerical elocution (Wesley 1770; or, James Wright's *The Philosophy of Elocution*, 1818 and Richard Cull's *Garrick's Mode of Reading the Liturgy of the Church of England*, 1840, both quoted in Wallace 1954: 199-120); a third group is made up of books for school and home use, from the "reasoned textbooks" to the illustrative anthologies and the books of extracts (one example is 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.

<sup>3</sup> The Latin version was: "Pronuntiatio est vocis, vultus, gestus moderatio cum venustate" (*Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 1.2.3.).

Only nineteenth-century elocutionists, such as Thelwall (1812), Bell (1867), and Rush (1893), 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.

The work of these 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.

#### 4. *The American Elocutionary Movement*

The Elocutionary Movement in America took its origin from the British school of Elocution and until the second half of the nineteenth century showed little originality. The first elocutionary studies were apparently well accepted in America during the eighteenth century as readily as in England, but developed even more assiduously in the next century. The Americans, in the early stages of the movement’s history, republished British authors, copied them, sometimes modified and adapted their teachings to their situations. They finally created a U.S.A. movement “which possessed attributes of independence as well as adaptation” (Wallace 1954:105).

Mary Margaret Robb, in her study on “The Elocutionary Movement and its Chief Figures” (Wallace 1954: 178-201), considered the nineteenth century as the ideal time for this movement to flourish:

This was a time which demanded orators, ministers, lecturers, and actors who could make themselves heard over the noise of a lusty and vociferous populace.

The oratory of this period proclaimed the ideals of America and debated her problems; *the lyceum* popularized the lecturer as a form of entertainment combined with instruction; and *the theatre*, especially in urban centers, became an accepted part of the cultural pattern. When Puritan restraints were somewhat relaxed, the public which had been starved overlong demanded a generous and hearty dramatic fare in public speech (1954: 178-179. My italics).

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. 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 1954: 180): most of the actors gave programmes of readings in schools and universities<sup>4</sup>. Also among the clergy we find some elocutionists who made history: Rev. James Chapman (1821); Rev. William Bryant, episcopal schoolmaster in Philadelphia (Bernstein 1974: 5); Rev. Ebenezer Porter, professor of Sacred Rhetoric in Andover Seminary (Wallace ed. 1954: 181).

As in England the century before, the production of treatises, manuals and 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<sup>5</sup>. 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.

#### 4.1. *The Philosophy of the Human Voice*

The greatest single influence upon teachers and textbook writers during the early period of the Elocutionary Movement was Dr. James Rush (1786-1869), who introduced scientific aspects of vocal production in *The Philosophy of the Human Voice*, published for the first time in 1827 and for the last time in 1867 (there were four other publications in 1833, 1844, 1855, and 1859).

Rush 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. Unfortunately, some superficial applications of his systematic description of the English language were drawn from it: many abridgements and abuses of *The Philosophy* obscured and distorted its significant and serious purpose<sup>6</sup>, which was clearly declared in the *Preface to the Third Edition* (Rush 1893: xxxix):

<sup>4</sup> James Murdoch, for example, extended the Rush system by his lectures and public reading entertainments (Bernstein 1974: 12, n. 15).

<sup>5</sup> 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 (the first editor of the *American Journal of Education*, published from 1826-1829).

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion on this topic, see: Bernstein ed. 1974: 1-14; L.L. Hale, "Dr. James Rush", in Wallace ed. 1954: 219-237.

One of the purposes of this Work is to show, by refuting an almost universal belief to the contrary, that elocution *can* be scientifically taught; but the manner of explanation and arrangement in too many of these garbled school-book compilations, has gone far towards satisfying the objectors that it cannot.

By "scientifically taught elocution" he meant

the vocal Representation of thought and passion; and properly includes every form of correct Reading, and of Public, and Colloquial Speech. And yet we shall, by license, often apply the terms Reading and Speaking, each as that of Elocution, to designate the whole of the Art (87).

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.

#### 4.2. *The Schools of Elocution*

From the nineteenth century on, elocution became part of the college programme: it was sometimes offered as a separate study, or often combined with the courses in composition. The flourishing of courses in Elocution in U.S.A. universities is widely testified: at Amherst, in 1842-43 a course was offered for "freshmen" called *Elements of Orthoepy and Elocution*; at the same time, the University of Alabama was offering a course, *Elocution*, which included original compositions in Latin and in English; in 1861, Harvard gave a course entitled *Elocution*; the Yale catalogue for the same years describes one of its main courses as *Elocution, Declamation, and Composition* (Robb 1954: 179).

The teachers of elocution were often itinerant: they used to give lectures or private lessons outside the universities, sometimes in the educational institutions of the area where they lived. In some cases they set up their own private schools of education. The towns where elocution developed with greater strength were two in particular: Philadelphia and Boston. Oratory had long been popular in both. Both cities were known throughout the U.S.A. as cultural centres<sup>7</sup>. The first of the well-known private schools of speech was established in Philadelphia in 1875<sup>8</sup>: it was "The National School of Elocution and Oratory", by J.W. Shoemaker. It was followed by "The Emerson College of Oratory" (Boston, 1880), "The Columbia School of Oratory" (Chicago, 1890), "The School of Expression" (Boston, 1895, later

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion on this topic, see Edith Renshaw's study on "Five Private Schools of Speech", in Wallace ed. 1954: 301-325.

<sup>8</sup> Some studies say the school was opened in 1866 (Wallace 1954: 181), but we refer here to the first official date attested.



called "Curry College"); and "The Leland Powers School of the Spoken Word" (Boston, 1904). The peculiarity of their "philosophy" consisted in explaining that all faults of delivery can be traced directly or not to incorrect attitudes of the mind: expression is the result not of a physical, but of a mental action at the moment of utterance. As a consequence, all the five schools recommended practising exercises for voice, action, and interpretation, because these were believed to give the students mastery of expression. In the teaching of voice development, in general the training consisted of drill routine to establish good habits of posture, relaxation, breathing, and articulation. As for action, the way it was taught depended on the school and on the teacher, but as a rule they suggested exercises to free the body from restrictive habits. As for oral interpretation, there was common agreement about what constituted a "desirable delivery", which should be "natural", free from artificial voice patterns, stereotyped postures, personal eccentricities, or obtrusive habits.

### 5. Conclusion

The term *rhetoric* is misemployed almost daily by members of the media, politicians, jurists and educators. As a result, its meaning is often corrupted. Notwithstanding this, the authentic goal of rhetoric should be to intensify an adherence to values; instead of being divorced from reality, rhetoric is joined to it; rather than being separated from action, rhetoric embraces it. Any form of oral communication should concentrate on producing the desired effect on the listener: to enlighten the understanding, please the imagination, move the passions, influence the will. Rhetoric is, in a sense, more a philosophy of communication and a science of management than an art of entertainment.

The American Elocutionary Movement understood these basic principles more than one century ago. Elocutionists lighted upon a multiple economy of using voice and gesture in oral communication, led the way to the contemporary trends in public speaking, and created some milestones in the study of vocal sounds, public action, and oral delivery above all. Their teaching manuals have been among the most valid examples of "economically" (i.e. efficiently) written textbooks: they show ways whereby speakers may express emotion verbally and nonverbally, narrowing their focus to the use of the voice and body in oral presentation and public speaking. Being both theorists and teachers, American elocutionists fitted into the pattern of education which responded to the increased interest in science, emphasizing the *physiological* and the *psychological* aspects of speech.

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' writings, 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.A. universities as classical as that of literature, while yet suiting the "pragmatic temper" of the modern United States<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion on this topic, see D. Smith (1954: 464-467).

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