

## TOWARDS A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH TO RHETORIC AND COMMUNICATION

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The purpose of this paper is to present a basis for comparing, contrasting and, perhaps, combining theories of rhetoric and communication. The proposal is rooted in three of the major trends within the field of Speech Communication: the Doctoral Honors Seminar Program, the National Rhetoric Project, and the growing influence of General Systems Theory.<sup>1</sup> By synthesizing elements from these three trends, it is hoped that the proposal will prove to be a new development in rhetorical and communication theory.

## I

The idea for the proposal was first conceived at the Doctoral Honors Seminar in Comparative Rhetoric. It began with Professor Sereno's intriguing question: "Of what use to the rhetorician is Katz's 'Functional Approach'?" The immediate response at the Seminar was that Katz's paradigm for understanding attitudes was employable as an analytic and critical device.<sup>2</sup> Several years of thinking, however, have led to the conclusion that the immediate response failed to capture the essence of the question and, thus, to capitalize on the implicit question of Professor Sereno. From the vantage point of several years' time, the issues inherent in the question seem to concern the merits of combining theories as much as they concern the merits of a particular theory. A better answer, then, perhaps should have addressed itself both to the particular theory and to the issue of integrating theories.

The workshop on the National Rhetoric Project at the Central States Convention brought the same pair of issues to an even more clearly defined point. In seeking to redefine the "Province of Rhetoric," to renegotiate the functions and scope of the art, the workshop and the Project before it gave evidence of the desire for a reunified theory. Professor Johnstone's reported comment that he would publish any article on Rhetoric having the word "ontological" in the title gave more evidence on the same point. In support and development of the reunified theory, one of the conclusions of the workshop, a conclusion that brought great nods of approval from Professor Wallace and great clouds of smoke from his cigar, was that communication, however one defined it, was a survival skill.

At the same time, the workshop concentrated on the neglected canon of invention. The concern of the scholars involved was to find a better way of offering man a viable method of consciously recognizing the full range of communication alternatives afforded to him in any situation. The problems of perception inherent in this discussion of invention brought to mind once again Professor Sereno's question. In the context of the workshop, Katz's theory took on new meaning. The contention of Katz that man's attitude or mental posture vis-a-vis his environment functioned to help man survive began to translate into the hypothesis that any attitude was simply an informal theory of invention.<sup>3</sup>

Based on that hypothesis, new ideas began to formulate immediately. Inverting the initial proposition, for example, any rhetorical theory became a rather complex attitude towards language, man, and human interaction. Furthermore, if the previous proposition were true, then the history of the growth and development of rhetorical theory seemed

as if it ought to follow very closely the developmental patterns of attitudes.<sup>4</sup> In essence, the effect of the seminar and the workshop was to generate a series of propositions which themselves needed substantiation and integration.

General Systems Theory provided the basis for integrating and elaborating on the ideas generated earlier. While Systems Theory did not provide the substantiation necessary for validity, it did bring the concepts to a point where they might be operationalized and tested. What follows, therefore, is a proposal to be developed further and evaluated along the lines of the number of new ideas it can generate, the potential for operationalizing hypotheses, and the utility, validity, and reliability that such hypotheses prove to have.

## II

"A system may be defined as a series of specified variables standing in direct relationship to one another and operating as a single unit."<sup>5</sup> Open systems have exchange, actual or potential, of energy and information with their environments. Closed systems have no environment, or at least no exchange with environments. Finally, any environment is a set of objects and their interrelationships which has the potential of interacting with the given system.

Within this frame of reference, the human being can be considered as a system existing in its environment. During the life span of the human, a constant exchange of energy and information flows between the human system and the environment. The process of energy exchange is termed metabolism; information exchange, communication.

Generally, in exchanging energy, systems budget themselves. An identifying characteristic of open systems, self-regulation or budgeting operates at the energy level to reach a limit of taking no more out of the environment than is necessary to maintain existence within that environment. A system which cannot balance its budget, or loses its balance after once achieving it, will quickly deteriorate or close. Thus, at least in energy budgeting, survival depends upon balance.

While there are some points of direct interconnection between energy and information, most theorists have yet to claim a complete parallelism.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it has not been established that a human takes no more information out of the environment than is necessary to survive. It has been established, however, that without some balancing limit, communication gluttony or starvation will not only occur but will seriously threaten the survival of the system, and perhaps the environment.<sup>7</sup>

From systems theory, then, one can summarize that communication is the exchange of information between a system and its environment. Furthermore, although the process is self-regulating, it needs an outside, neutral, universal standard against which to measure itself. Without a standard, the system will fall out of its steady, balanced state with the environment.

A key to the problem of communication standards is suggested in Katz's "Functional Approach."<sup>8</sup> Katz argues that attitudes/for which we might substitute "informal theories of invention"/perform one of four functions for an individual: an ego-defensive function; a value-expressive function; an instrumental function; and a knowledge-seeking

function. The ego is defended, for example, when attitudes prevent an individual from seeing or acknowledging truths about himself or the environment. Obviously, this function is performed by controlling the exchange of information between man and world. At one level, therefore, ego-defense is a pattern of information exchange.

Each of the other functions is also performed by controlling the flow of information. The goal of the adjustment or instrumental function is to maximize rewards and minimize punishment; the goal of the knowledge-seeking function, to find meaning in the universe; the goal of the value-expressive function, to establish or imprint a self-identity upon the world. These goals can only be achieved through the sending and receiving of information. Thus, each of the functions is a standard for regulating the flow of information.

When acting separately, moreover, at least two of the functions control the flow of information in an imbalanced fashion. Ego-defense prohibits some input. Value-expressive prohibits some output. On the other hand, the remaining two functions, especially when they are working in conjunction with one another, create a balanced flow. In essence, one can conclude that when a single function serves as the standard by which the flow of information is regulated, the system begins to move out of balance. In contrast, when the knowledge and adjustive functions serve as standards simultaneously, it would appear that balance can be maintained.

For Professor Johnstone one can ontologically summarize that being is the process of exchange. Non-being is a closed system. Being is comprised of the flows of energy and information. Survival, the maintenance of being, depends upon a balanced exchange among systems. That

balance among humans, in turn, depends upon a regulating standard serving a dual function for the individual: one of seeking information in the universe, and of maximizing rewards.

Communication, thus, is necessary for survival but insufficient without exchange of energy as well. Communication can support survival, moreover, only as long as the balance between input and output is maintained and the process of exchange continued. Finally, the standard by which the process is maintained and balanced must have at least two aspects to it. First, the standard must promote and evaluate investigation, the seeking for meaning in the universe. Second, the standard must promote and evaluate the effects of input.

It is the major contention of this paper that the "standard" which balances the flow of information in a self-regulating fashion is and/or ought to be a theory of rhetoric or communication. Furthermore, following from the criteria established in the previous paragraphs, the function and scope of such a theory ought to encompass three major categories: (1) the investigation of environment; (2) the promotion of input; and (3) the evaluation of such input. Not only would any theory adequately covering these three areas have a strong emphasis on invention, but more importantly the skill in employing such a theory would indeed be a survival skill. For all of these reasons, the "Functional Approach" proposed here does provide a taxonomy for comparing and integrating present theories of rhetoric and communication.

### III

The proposed approach to rhetorical and communication theory deserves the name functional for a variety of reasons. First, it grew



out of the "Functional Approach" of Katz and others. Second, at an ontological level the theory is a function, much like a calculus function, of an understanding of being. In addition, it is functional because it deals with a vital human function. Most importantly, it's functional because it's handy.

First of all, the approach is handy because it equips one with the potential for dealing with theory on a sophisticated level. Any rhetorical or communication theory may be measured through any methodology against the standards proposed above. The Functional Approach, thus, provides a potential basis for comparing, integrating, and building theories.

Similarly, the functional approach is of great value within the classroom. First it provides the teacher with a basis for setting goal for the students not only in terms of the acquisition of knowledge but more importantly in terms of behavior. In addition, it is helpful in designing courses to meet those goals.<sup>9</sup>

In research as well, the approach can be of service. The example of the proposal's leading to the rhetoric of the Oxford Reform Movement was previously cited. Inherently, all description, analysis, evaluation and prediction of cases in which the data are derived from the system-environment relationship will be accomplished in the service of understanding and, perhaps, maintaining a balanced flow of information.

In teaching, theorizing, researching, the approach is functional. In addition, the concept of self-regulation provides the grounds for reinstating ethics as an integral portion of the theory. The same grounds have the potential for simplifying some of the problems of the

freedom of speech. Yet, in spite of all this potential, perhaps the greatest strength of this proposal is that it does not depend upon scapegoating some other theory as primary justification for acceptance. Indeed, it is a proposal which admits of the proposition that we may all grow upon the industry of past scholars. Born of three trends within the field, this proposal is presented in the hope that it might repay in some small measure the gift of life of its parents.



## FOOTNOTES

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<sup>1</sup>The most comprehensive definition of the theory is Ludwig von Bertalanffy's General Systems Theory (New York, 1968). Systems theory often reminds me of a line from one of Pat Boone's earliest songs: "Her separate parts are not unknown, but the way she's assembled them's all her own!" For further selected reading, see bibliography.

<sup>2</sup>Daniel Katz, "The Functional Approach to the Study of Attitudes," Public Opinion Quarterly, XXIV (1960), 163-204. Katz suggests that holding an attitude towards a given object may serve one of four functions (ego-defense, adjustive, value-expressive, and knowledge-seeking). These functions have been used in research as paradigms to explain the motivation of speakers although I am not aware of any widely published work of this nature.

<sup>3</sup>By informal I mean to suggest that while attitudes and theories of invention share an almost identical function of helping a person to perceive (or not perceive) the world about him, they critically differ in origin and sources of growth and development. The canon of invention, when presented, is most generally found in a formal educational setting.

<sup>4</sup>Following this line of thinking that rhetoric was an attitude, I was led while teaching Renaissance Rhetoric to seek out why rhetoric came to Oxford. Contrary to the answers most often suggested in histories of rhetoric, I found that the initial outburst of interest in the art came from Colet, Linacre, More, and crowd who wished to use it for critical purposes. The results of this research are presently being prepared for publication as "Rhetoric and The Oxford Reformers."

<sup>5</sup>Raymond K. Tucker, "General Systems Theory: Application To The Design Of Speech Communication Courses," The Speech Teacher, II (September 1971), 159. For further selected reading see Tucker's bibliography in footnote on 159.

<sup>6</sup>"Energy and Power," Scientific American, 224 (September 1971). See especially the sections comparing energy and information.

<sup>7</sup>William N. McPhee, "A Note on Feedback and Instability," Studies In Public Communication (Chicago, 1962), 35-44. McPhee writes: "The danger in feedback in culture and its companion, forward feed, is not a too-conservative stability but a too-radical instability. Without a healthy independent norm, the culture will quickly close down and die." The norm he refers to is akin to setting a thermostat at a given temperature.

<sup>8</sup>See also: M. Brewster Smith, Jerome S. Bruner, and Robert W. White, Opinions and Personality (New York, 1967). Instead of four, three functions are presented here. The "social adjustment function" of this work is a combination of Katz's adaptive and knowledge functions.

<sup>9</sup>Tucker, 159-166.

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