

## Classical Rhetoric and Cognition II: *Enargeia*

Hello and welcome to this video series about “Classical Rhetoric and Cognition”! My name is Silvio Bär, and I am a Professor of Ancient Greek at the University of Oslo. The goal of this video series is to explain traditional concepts of classical (Greek and Roman) rhetoric in light of modern cognitive science.

In this video, I am going to talk about *enargeia*. – “Enargeia” is an Ancient Greek noun, normally translated as “vividness”. And, “enargeia” is a term we can find in ancient writings about rhetoric.

But what does “vividness” in a rhetorical context mean? What *is* rhetorical “vividness”? To find an answer, let’s turn to the most important ancient expert on rhetoric: Quintilian! Quintilian was a Roman professor of rhetoric and the author of a treatise called “The Institutes of Oratory”. Quintilian explains “enargeia” as *evidentia*, which means “distinctness”, “vivid presentation”, “visualisation”, and as *repraesentatio*, which can be translated as “manifestation”, “exhibition”, or (simply) “representation”.

Further, he also gives an example: an excerpt from a speech by Cicero, which, according to Quintilian, provides a good model of “enargeia”. The excerpt describes a scene at a lavish dinner party:

“It seemed to me that I saw some people enter, others leave, others stagger because they were drunk, others yawn from yesterday’s drinking. The floor was dirty and muddy with wine, covered with withering garlands and fishbones.”

So far, so good; but the question remains: what is the essence of “enargeia”? Traditionally, scholars have explained “enargeia” in relation to what is called the “pictorial account”. As the term indicates, the pictorial account has to do with pictures, that is, with mental images. So, according to this, “enargeia” means a detailed description of visual elements in a text. The idea behind is that many details in a description trigger a vivid imagination in the minds of an audience.

For example, in a prosecution speech, the prosecutor would need to describe a capital crime in many gory details in order to activate the judges’ imagination about how gruesome the killing must have been. And indeed, we can find descriptions of visual elements in the excerpt from Cicero’s speech, such as the drunken guests and the dirty floor.

Now, popular belief has it that when we see something, our brain produces a mental representation of the vision. And so, it is believed that the more detailed a descrip-

tion is, the better our imagination gets. However, modern cognitive science has found that the human brain actually works a bit differently. Cognitive science suggests that seeing is not a matter of reproducing images in the brain, but that seeing is a matter of acting and of exploring the environment.

Or, in the words of the American philosopher Alva Noë: “Perception is not something that happens to us, or in us. It is something we do.”

This approach is called the “enactivist account”. Enactivism is a cognitive theory that argues that human cognition is essentially the product of a dynamic, interactive process: a process between an acting person and the environment. The enactivist account thus conceives vision and imagination as a dynamic process between the observer and the environment.

This theory, in turn, ties in with the theory of distributed cognition. Distributed cognition basically says that cognition is not solely a matter of the brain, but that cognition arises as an interactive complex distributed between the brain, the body and the environment.

Now, the Dutch classicist Luuk Huitink has recently argued that “enargeia” should be seen exactly along those lines: “Enargeia” has not so much to do with pictures / with mental images, but with enactivism!

If we return once more to the excerpt from Cicero’s speech, we can see that its enactivist nature is indeed striking: the speaker says that it only seemed to him that he saw all these things; so, the accuracy of the description is clearly not in the centre. What is in the centre is the way the speaker re-enacts the bodily experience of moving around in the party environment: that is the true “enargeia” / the true vividness of the passage! And, by re-enacting the bodily experience of moving around at the party, the speaker enables the audience to create the illusion of a similar experience in their brains.

So, to sum up: with “enargeia”, the ancient rhetoricians referred to a rhetorical technique that activates the imagination of the audience by triggering bodily experiences. This must have been very effective because seeing is a matter of acting and of exploring the environment. Surely, Quintilian and his peers knew nothing about brain research and cognition; but all the more is it astonishing how modern science has confirmed what the ancient rhetoricians already were sensitive to.