

Classical Rhetoric and Cognition IV: *History and Oratory*

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 *history and oratory*. – History and oratory are two different things. In antiquity, historiography (“the writing of history”) was an independent literary genre, as was oratory.

When we talk about ancient historiography, we think of names like the Greeks Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon and the Romans Sallust, Caesar and Tacitus. (There are of course many more; I’ve just mentioned some of the most important).

In turn, when we think of ancient oratory, what comes to our mind are the “Ten Attic Orators” from classical Athens, with names such as Demosthenes, Lysias, etc., and, of course, Cicero, the famous Roman orator and lawyer.

But what do historiography and oratory have in common? There are two answers to this question, depending on the angle from which we look at it. One thing is how and why ancient historiographers used speeches in their historical writings; another thing is how and why ancient orators used historical examples in their speeches.

Let’s begin with the first point: in In ancient historiography, it was common practice to quote speeches of historical persons from the past. The probably most famous example is Pericles’ Funeral Oration in Thucydides’ “History of the Peloponnesian War”, a speech that was held at the end of the first year of the war.

In his famous “method chapter”, Thucydides states that the speeches he quotes are not presented word by word as they originally were spoken, but only approximately, and he further explains that the whole point of inserting speeches into a historical work was to convey the main ideas of those speeches, not their precise wording.

Now, much could be said about the function of such speeches, but from a cognitive perspective, the main point is this: speeches in historiography make the presentation of the historical material more vivid, more graphic, more tangible.

Ancient rhetorical theory has a term for this: “*Enargeia*”: “vividness”! With this, the ancient rhetoricians referred to a technique that activates the imagination of the

audience by triggering bodily experiences; “enargeia” creates the illusion of experiencing what is being described.

So, when ancient historiographers used speeches in their historical accounts, they did so not only for the sake of credibility, but also to enable their readers to re-experience what a historical person from the past once had said, almost as if the readers were present.

(I have produced an extra video on “enargeia”, in case you’re interested to know more about this concept. But back to history and oratory!) What about the other point: the use of historical examples in speeches?

When we read speeches by ancient orators, we cannot help noticing that they very often refer to historical incidents from their own past. An example comes from Demosthenes’ famous “First Philippic”, a speech in which Demosthenes warns the Athenians against king Philip of Macedonia and his efforts at military expansion. Demosthenes tells the Athenians that they must get prepared for war against Philip as they did previously on other occasions:

“You must present to Philip’s mind the consideration that you may strike out as you did at Euboea, and before that at Haliartus, and quite recently at Thermopylae.”

The function of such historical examples is normally explained as paradigmatic. This means that such references serve as examples for illustration.

In addition, there is also a cognitive aspect involved. It has been argued that there are two points that are important for an orator to make effective use of a historical example, namely, recency and salience.

Cognitive science has demonstrated that a historical analogy or comparison has a high cognitive appeal when the reference is concerned with an event that the audience perceives as familiar. Familiarity with a historical event is achieved when a historical event is conceived as either recent or salient.

When a historical event lies a short period back in time, the audience will remember it vividly, and it will therefore accept analogies or predictions based on that event as credible. In contrast, a historical incident may lie back longer in time, but it may be part of the collective memory of an audience, like for example the Second World War is still part of our collective memory although it happened more than seventy years ago: this is what the term “salience” refers to.

And indeed, in the example from Demosthenes’ “First Philippic”, we can find both cases: two of the events mentioned had happened just a few years before the “First

Philippic” was held (so, they were recent), whereas one lay back thirty-five years, but was prominent in the collective memory of the Athenians (and thus was salient).

In summary, we can state that both the use of speeches in ancient historiography and the use of historical examples in ancient oratory can be explained and better understood by reference to certain cognitive factors. Neither Thucydides nor Demosthenes were brain researchers, of course – but they had a pretty good grasp of the techniques that were most appealing and most effective and that would make their arguments more vivid and more convincing.

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