In Rhetoric of Motives, Kenneth Burke (1950) reasons that rhetoric’s function is achieved through identification. Using Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric being persuasive, Burke supplements Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric by stating that rhetoric is created when the lines between identification and division are blurred as an attempt to achieve unity -- such is the case of Aristotle’s claim of proving opposites (p. 25). When the beginning/ending of division and identification are blurred, it fosters a commonality for competition/cooperation/persuasion to occur between speaker and the audience (Burke, 1950, p. 21). This joined/separation between speaker and audience then leads the speaker to utilize rhetorical devices that are functional (used to create meaning and knowledge) rather than decorative when formulating an argument (Burke, 1950, p. 57). By situating rhetorical devices as functional, used to create meaning, rather than decorative to persuade, Burke takes a more “contemporary” approach to the classical texts. Burke does not provide an exhaustive list of the properties of identification, instead he traces elements/areas from ancient texts (Cicero, Aristotle, and Quintilian, mostly) and adds how ancient texts have utilized identification in the varying meanings and uses of rhetoric and rhetorical devises. Using Aristotle’s concepts of common places and topics, there is an appeal to universal claims that creates commonality within discourse and groups in which one can utilize rhetoric to appeal to the “… common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them consubstantial” (p. 21). In order for identification to be effective, then a consubstantiality will need to be shaped by an awareness of motives.

 Identification is comprised of consubstantiality and intrinsic and extrinsic motives. Burke claims consubstantiality is achieved when an individual is able to relate, yet differ, from the audience while using stylistic identifications to create meaning and “identify” with an audience (p. 55). Burke (1950) argues that motives create the ethical foundation of rhetoric by antithetically positioning opinion and truth as a dialectical pair, thus challenging the classical view of opinion and truth (p. 54). For Burke, “the kind of opinion with which rhetoric deals, in its role of inducement to action, is not opinion as contrasted with truth,” and needs to be looked as antithetically as a dialectal pair (p. 54). As a dialectical pair, the speaker is able to identify with what is perceived as opinion/truth with the audience through motive and contextualized identifiers and/or symbols. For Burke (1950), the creation and understanding of symbols is innate within language, because humans intuitively respond to symbols (p. 33). Situating language as symbolic then shifts rhetoric as being functional due to its ability to enact change and create meaning.

Burke’s postmodernist concept of identification supplements Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric by also including an internal audience, the self. This shift in including the self as part of the audience creates a more contemporary view of how symbolic nature of language influences the application of rhetoric. For both Burke and Bakhtin, language is shaped by context; context then becomes an integral component towards creating meaning and establishing a relationship with the audience.