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Kenneth Burke (1950), Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), and Michel Foucault (1969) differ in the methods of analyzing the role language within rhetoric; however, all three theorists take a social constructivist approach to language and deviate from the unitary and linear approach of twentieth century language ideologies. It is through this departure of structuralism that impacted rhetorical theory of the nineteenth century. The purpose of this paper is to examine how Burke’s process of identification, Bakhtin’s use of utterances, and Foucault’s analysis on statements challenge classical rhetoric and view of discourse; thus, shift the theory and practice of rhetoric towards an epistemological approach where meaning is created when an audience, or a relationship with an audience, is defined. An epistemological approach involves a more reflective understanding of language and discourse; thus, emphasizing audience and context within the framework of rhetoric.

In *Rhetoric of Motives*, Kenneth Burke (1950) supplements Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric by emphasizing how identification is an integral component of persuasion due to the symbolic and social nature of language. Burke (1950) states “you persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his” (p. 55). For Burke (1950), the creation and understanding of symbols is innate within language, because humans intuitively respond to symbols (p. 33).

Burke uses Aristotle’s concepts of common places and topics in order to emphasize how there is an appeal to universal claims that can create commonality within discourse and groups; however, Burke adds that the speaker must be aware of the stylistic identifications used to create meaning (p. 55). Thus, Burke’s postmodernist concept of identification defines, contextualizes and creates the ideological, social, and physical construct(s) that are used to bridge the division and nurture a commonality between a speaker and his/her audience. In other words, Burke introduces a reflective and dialogic speaker and audience, and it through an active audience and an awareness of an internal audience that shapes the process of identification and emphasizes the symbolic and socio-contextual characteristics of language. Language is dynamic, social, and dependent on context, and his social constructivist approach positions language within rhetoric as a meaning-making practice. Thereby, Burke’s view of rhetoric supplements Aristotle’s approach by shifting theory and practice of rhetoric towards an epistemological approach where meaning is created when a speaker-audience relationship is established.

For both Burke (1950) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), rhetoric and language are reliant on the contextual ideological, social, and physical spaces between the speaker and his/her audience. Bakhtin (1986) criticizes the nineteenth century linguistic and structural theories by Saussure and others that ignore the dialogic nature of language and the use of speech and speech flow in linguistic theory (p. 71). Furthermore, Bakhtin’s (1981) critique of Saussurean linguistic ideologies led from shifting a scientific social linguistic approach of language to a

sociological stylistic approach and set him apart from his predecessors. Through a sociological lens, the ideological construct of terminology/language is theorized as not being linear/static and is symbolic due to its heterogeneous stylistic unities. For Bakhtin, an utterance is a stylistic unity that is shaped by both audience and context. Similar to Burke’s assessment of language being symbolic, the social-contextual formation of an utterance defines and establishes a speaker-audience relationship. Bakhtin (1986) views the verbal and written expression of utterances as equally complex because all words are language units, but not all words are units of communication/utterances (p. 67). In order for an utterance to be fully formed, it must challenge and be challenged by other utterances. He describes an utterance as being an uninterrupted chain of speech that is “… characterized primarily by a particular referentially semantic content” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 84). For Bakhtin, attention to context, audience, genre, and style then influences the compositional structure and intonation of utterances, how utterances are expressed, and how they are understood. In other words, rhetoric is shaped by utterances. Bakhtin (1981), states “rhetoric relies heavily on the vivid re-accentuating of the words it transmits (often to the point of distorting them completely) that is accomplished by the appropriate framing context” (p. 354). Furthermore, “a study of the utterance as a real unit of speech communion will also make it possible to understand more correctly the nature of language units (as a system): words and sentences” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 67). It is inferred that by analyzing language units as a system, then it aids in contextualizing identification and utterances. While Bahktin hints that identification starts with an utterance because a speaker-audience relationship is dependent on the continuous exchange of utterances, Foucault contextualizes the system that molds the identification process and the utterances themselves. This concept will be further examined by using Foucalt’s archeological analysis of a system.

Individually, the theorists address how the speaker rhetorically engages with the audience; however, Foucault differs from Burke and Bakhtin by emphasizing the role a system plays in shaping discourse, language, and the relationship between the speaker and his/her audience. He takes his analysis on context a step further than both Burke and Bakhtin by reasoning that a system not only shapes language, but also shapes how systems, discourse and discursive formations create and shape knowledge. Taking a postructuralist approach, Foucault (1972) aligns with both Burke and Bahktin and argues that the linear approach towards analyzing discourse and human consciousness needs to shift from “tracing a line,” or only providing a historical overview, to an archeological method that addresses the divisions, limits, and transformations of the foundations of knowledge. This shifts the classical rhetoric theory and practice of rhetoric towards an epistemological approach where meaning is created. Foucault (1972) claims discourse and discursive formations can be traced through an archeological analysis.

Foucault (1972) emphasizes an archeological analysis in order to understand how systems, such as institutions, disciplines, and discursive formations, influence the emergence and transformation of objects and statements. Systems are an integral part towards providing context and meaning to a statement, but there are discursive practices within the system that create both unity, discontinuity, and relations for statements. Foucault’s statements differ from utterances because statements are more of a function than a unit. For Foucault (1972), the transformations are what can create and rebuild new foundations of knowledge (epistemologies) (p. 5). Foucault posits that by looking at the epistemological acts that create discontinuities (threshold, rupture, break, mutation, and transformation) one is able to see the joint relationship between discourse and systems (Foucault, 1972, p. 5). Discourse, then, is both a statement and form of practice that procures an understanding of how knowledge is created, dispersed, and understood. While statements can provide a structure, statements change, or transform, depending on the system(s) it resides in.

Burke, Bahktin, and Foucault deviate from the linear and unitary perspective of language; thus, demonstrating how rhetoric is dependent on the contextual ideological, social, and physical spaces between the speaker and his/her audience. The shift from structuralism is significant to the field of rhetoric because it elevated the importance of language, discourse, audience, and context within meaning-making practices; thereby, situating rhetoric as a pathway towards creating epistemologies that socially and dialogically create knowledge. Rhetoric is then viewed as being dialogic and dependent on audience and context, thus, making the use of rhetoric more reflective. Additionally, the contributions from these theorists is important to the field of rhetoric and writing studies because they can be utilized to enhance pedagogical practices within the classroom. For Rhetoric and Writing Studies instructors in today’s composition classroom, the ability to identify with students helps contextualize the system in which the students live/work/interact. Furthermore, understanding how one can identity and use language within a system, such as a classroom, aids in enhancing pedagogical practices by being more aware of the literacies, skills, and language ideologies that students bring to the classroom. In addition, combining the contributions from the three theorists can lead to better communication practices between instructors and students in the composition classroom.

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