

# ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Argumentation: Problems Of Style And The Contribution Of Kenneth Burke



In the fourth ISSA Conference in 1998, George Ziegelmüller and Donn Parson proposed a perspective on what constituted linguistically sound arguments. It included provisions that (1) it conforms to the traditional field invariant standards of inductive and deductive argument, (2) is based upon data appropriate to the audience and field, and (3) is expressed in language that enhances the evocative and ethical force of argument. What was missing was the development of the third characteristic of linguistically sound arguments: the problem of language.

There has always been some division between logos and lexis. From the time of Aristotle, whose view of argument validity is determined by the underlying notion of mathematical validity, to Stephen Toulmin, who chose to substitute the jurisprudential model for the mathematical model, logos was still the dominant approach to argument. One of the arguments Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca make is that formal systems of logic, which are dependent on mathematical reasoning, seem unrelated to rational evidence. They therefore propose a new look at argumentation – a new rhetoric (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 3-9).

The problems of language in argument are susceptible to numerous approaches, but the approach of Kenneth Burke may be an effective one in discerning “language that enhances the evocative and ethical force of argument.” He suggests that key to understand the concept of lexis is the examination of tropes, and that examination be broader than in their typical literary context. In *The Grammar of Motives* essay, “Four Master Tropes,” Burke explores four “literal” or “realistic” applications of these tropes, as their substitutions:

For metaphor we could substitute perspective;

For metonymy we could substitute reduction;

For synecdoche we could substitute representation;

For irony we could substitute dialectic (Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 503).

None of the approaches to these tropes at first glance seem terribly revolutionary.

Metaphor, for Burke, becomes “a device for seeing something *in terms of* something else. It brings out the thisness of that, or the thatness of a this” (Burke, GM 503).

In his discussion of irony, he attempts to separate Romantic irony, in which the relation of superior of inferior is always present, to “true irony” which reverses the situation. “True irony, however, irony that really does justify the attitude of ‘humility,’ is not ‘superior’ to the enemy...True irony, humble irony, is based upon a sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy, as one needs him, is indebted to him, is not merely outside him as an observer but contains him within, being consubstantial with him” (Burke, GM 514). We shall later discuss how argument and the use of tropes in argument can create consubstantiality.

### 1. Metaphor

Our initial focus on tropes was on the metaphor, which (we then thought) was the trope of tropes for Burke. This was in part because metaphor had feet in both the literary and logical tradition, starting with Aristotle. Two problems arise. The first is that Aristotle wrote of the metaphor in both the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*. In the *Poetics* he states that “Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species to genus or from species to species, or on grounds of analogy.” (*Poetics*, 1457b6-9). Paul Ricoeur makes the observation that in both works, “Metaphor is placed under the same rubric of lexis.” Whether the metaphor performs the same function in poetics as in rhetoric is more complex, as Ricoeur argues:

The duality of rhetoric and poetics reflects a duality in the use of speech as well as the situations of speaking.

We said that rhetoric originally was oratorical technique; its aim and that of oratory are identical, to know how to persuade.

Now this function, however far reaching does not cover all the uses of speech.

Poetics – the art of composing poems, principally tragic poems – as far as its function and its situation of speaking are concerned, does

not depend on rhetoric, the art of defense, of deliberation, of blame and of praise (Ricoeur, 12).

Metaphor was the “foundational trope” for Burke (Tell, 37) from the time of *Permanence and Change* (1937) when he “developed at some length the relationship between metaphor and perspective” (Burke, GM 504). When in this work he discusses Bergson’s “planned incongruity” and its resulting “Perspective by Incongruity,” the metaphor as a naming process thrived. (The very creation of “perspective” by incongruity indicates its metaphorical nature.) His discussion of “Word Magic” and the creation of the scapegoat in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941) continued the tradition. Burke’s shortened discussion of the metaphor in *Grammar of Motives* (1945) should not confuse us, since he had discussed the metaphor in prior works. He goes so far as to consider all language development through metaphor: “Language develops by metaphorical extension, in borrowing words from the realm of the corporeal, visible, tangible and applying them by analogy to the realm of the incorporeal, invisible, intangible; then in the course of time, the original corporeal reference is forgotten, and only the incorporeal, metaphorical extension survives” (Burke, GM 506). Since perspective became a key term for Burke and was produced by metaphor, it is easy to see why it could be considered his “foundational trope.”

## 2. Metaphor and Deviation

A theory of language and metaphor developed by Jean Cohen may be helpful in explaining the power of metaphor. He posits that there is a stratum of language which excludes figuration. As Paul Ricoeur comments in explaining Cohen’s approach, language “consists in choosing as point of reference not absolute degree zero, but a relative degree zero, i.e., that stratum of language usages that would be the least marked from the rhetorical point of view, and thus the least figurative. This language exists; it is the language of science” (Ricoeur, 139-40). Cohen considers the metaphor a violation: “Metaphorical meaning is an effect of the entire statement, but it is focused on one word, which can be called the metaphorical word. This is why one must say that metaphor is a semantic innovation that belongs at once to the predicative order (new pertinence) and the lexical order (paradigmatic deviation)” (Ricoeur, 156-157). The creation of metaphor is a disturbance; it is a deviation from degree zero. The reaction to the metaphor, the reduction of deviation from degree zero takes us to audience, and to the enthymeme, which we will explore for its ability to provide methods of understanding of all four tropes, and the reduction of deviation created by each.

## 3. Irony

In Burke's discussion of irony, the focus is on the irony-dialectic relationship. He illustrates the concept with a comparison to relativism; he argues that relativism sees everything "in but one set of terms" - "in relativism there is no irony." His discussion seeks to separate Romantic irony, in which the relation of superior to inferior is always present to "true irony" which reverses the situation. Burke develops a discussion of Falstaff as a "gloriously ironic conception" because it creates a sense of identification; Falstaff identifies himself with the victims. Rather than steal a purse, he would "join forces with the owner of the purse" (Burke, GM 515). The distinction is that he displays true irony, which is based on humility and kinship; it creates consubstantiality. When Burke takes as one part of the definition of humans that they are "Rotten with Perfection" he has not only created a metaphor but done so by joining it with irony. In *Permanence and Change* (1937) in which even the title embraces irony in its substitution of "and" for "or," he treats of "Perspective by Incongruity" whereby one takes the opposite view. "These are historical perspectives, which Spengler acquires by taking a word usually applied to one setting and transferring its use to another setting. It is a 'perspective by incongruity,' since he established it by violating the 'properties' of the word in its previous linkages" (Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 90). He would equate this incongruity with dialectical irony, and feature its humility. Perspective by incongruity links to Burke's comic frame which "should enable people to be observers of themselves, while acting" (Burke, ATH, 171). Irony becomes one of the chief devices for operating within the comic frame; as such, irony is an ultimate corrective.

#### *4. Metonymy and Synecdoche*

There is no clear cut distinction separating the master tropes, and for Burke this aids rather than impairs the understanding. He observes that "A reduction is a representation. If there is some kind of correspondence between what we call the act of perception and what we call the thing perceived, then either of these equivalents can be taken as 'representative' of the other. Thus as reduction (metonymy) overlaps upon metaphor (perspective) so likewise it overlaps upon synecdoche (representation)" (Burke, GM 507).

Burke presents a standard definition of synecdoche, with 'such meanings: part for the whole, whole for the part, container for the contained, sign for the thing signified, material for the thing made (which brings us nearer to metonymy), cause for effect, effect for cause, genus for species, species for genus, etc. All

such conversions imply an integral relationship, a relationship of convertibility, between the two terms”(Burke GM 507-8). In a series of letters between Burke and John Crowe Ransom, a dispute arose over whether the tropes operate differently when used by the scientist and the poet. Ransom’s insistence met Burke’s stubborn refusal to separate scientists and poets as users of the master tropes. One clear distinction occurs between metonymy and synecdoche in the exchange. Burke argued that “the lesson of metonymy is that language is always already metaphorical and thus poets and scientists can be placed in the same metaphoric bin” (Tell, 41). Metonymy, for Burke, becomes a strategy “to convey some incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible (Burke 506). When we speak of “the heart” to describe “the emotions,” we are engaging in a metonymic reduction. As such it is a device of “‘poetic realism’ – but its partner, ‘reduction,’ is a device of ‘scientific realism’” (Burke GM 506).

The overlap between terms is discussed with Burke’s observation that “a reduction is a representation” (Burke, GM 507). Tell comments that “if metonymy is the reduction from the immaterial experience of shame to the material experience of colored cheeks, synecdoche is the ‘conversion upwards’ by which the poet understands that the colored cheeks represent shame...It is synecdochic conversion upwards that ‘induces’ the audience to overcome the limitations of language. Metonymy limited language by restricting it to ‘metaphorical extension’; synecdoche overcomes this limitation by inducement” (Tell, 43). This may be a major reason that Burke argued to Ransom that synecdoche should be considered “Trope No. 1” (Tell, 43) in contrast to earlier positions in which the metaphor would have held that rank. Burke notes, however, that metonymy may be treated “as a special application of synecdoche” in part because “a reduction is a *representation*” (Burke, GM 509). Since synecdoche is the trope of representation, and since all reductions create representations, we might consider synecdoche the dominant trope for Burke.

### 5. *The Representative Anecdote*

The concept of the representative anecdote is a key to Burke, for it relates to the major tropes. He begins the section in the *Grammar of Motives* with the now famous observation that in selecting vocabularies of motives, we search for “faithful reflections of reality. To this end, they must develop vocabularies that are selections of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a deflection of reality” (Burke, GM 59). He develops

the anecdote with a comparison of dramatism and behaviorism. His complaint against behaviorism is that its anecdotes are not representative of the complexity of human motives. "A representative case of human motivation must have a strongly linguistic bias, whereas animal experimentation necessarily neglects this" (Burke, GM 59). Initially his discussion of the representative anecdote includes the relation between synecdoche and metonymy: "It is enough to observe that the issue arises as soon as one considers the relation between representation and reduction in the choice and development of a motivational calculus" (Burke, GM 60).

Burke's purpose is both to develop the representative anecdote and demonstrate how it is the appropriate form to encompass dramatism. But what must it include? It must be "supple and complex enough to be representative of the subject matter it is designed to calculate. It must have copes. Yet it must also possess simplicity, in that it is broadly a reduction of the subject matter" (Burke, GM 60). In this sense, then, it functions as a metonymy. Burke selects drama as his representative anecdote; he thinks it meets these requirements. Dramatism has another characteristic: it features "the realm of *action*" in comparison to "scientific reduction to sheer *motion*" The anecdote must also become a summation, "containing implicitly what the system that is developed from it contains explicitly" (Burke, GM 60).

Brian Crable suggests that the representative anecdote may in fact be the summing activity of all four master tropes. He argues that in any inquiry, "the inquiry's process of selection and reduction can result in either *reflection* or *deflection*. In the first case, the anecdote is a *representative* anecdote; in the latter, it is merely *informative* (Crable, 324). The problem, he asserts, is that deflection forces one to look "away from one's subject matter in hopes of seeing it more clearly-and it therefore leads to an inadequate, incomplete interpretation and observation of the subject at hand" (Crable, 325). He illustrates the deflective anecdote as a cookie cutter which creates special patterns but which leaves remaining dough to be discarded.

His position is that a representative anecdote combines all four tropes. "A representative anecdote goes further, however than an informative or deflective anecdote-incorporating not merely perspective and reduction, but also synecdoche and irony. A representative anecdote is characterized by all *four* major tropes" (Crable, 325).

## 6. Epistemic Functions of the Four Tropes

In an excellent article on the epistemic function of the four master tropes, Dave Tell explores seventeen exchanges between Burke and John Crowe Ransom, then editor of the *Partisan Review*. Part of the argument centered on Ransom's belief that "scientific knowledge" and "poetic knowledge" created incommensurable epistemologies and Burke's rejection of that position. In addition, Tell explores each of the tropes' epistemic functions. "At the very least, then, language for Burke is epistemic; it creates meaning. The lesson that knowledge is perspectival, the tutelage of metonymy is that language demands such perspectivism, and the exhortation of synecdoche and irony is that knowledge is inescapably rhetorical" (Tell, 37). One might then consider how these tropes function to create that meaning.

Knowledge is produced by the creation of tropes. The metaphor, for example, in Aristotle's writings "conveys learning and knowledge through the medium of the genus" (1410b13). This leaning is produced by understanding the substitution of one term for another. So in the relationship of terms, the metaphor becomes a deviation from that relationship. The metaphor, in the opinion of Paul Ricoeur, "destroys an order only to invent a new one" (Ricoeur, 334). Yet the invention must be recognized to create that knowledge, for each metaphor contains new information; it either redescribes or recreates a new reality. Creating this new reality is a joint project of the rhetor and audience. This process of metaphoric understanding is included in Lloyd Bitzer's definition of the enthymeme: "a syllogism based on probabilities, signs, and examples, whose function is rhetorical persuasion. Its successful construction is accomplished through the joint efforts of speaker and audience, and this is its essential character" (Bitzer, 409). While not all enthymemes are metaphors, all metaphors function enthymematically. For a metaphor to function as a comparison, or create perspective, the grounds on which the comparison is based must be "available" to audiences.

The effect of any of the master tropes occurs in relation to its audience. The creation of the metaphor, for example, is a joint effort of rhetor and audience; it may use the name of signs, probabilities and examples. It may then occur as part of an enthymeme and may be negotiated in the same way aspects of an enthymeme are negotiated. For a metaphor to function as a comparison, the grounds on which comparison is based must be available to the audience. While Richard Moran is focusing on the metaphor, his observations apply to all the

master tropes:

Such imaginative activity on the part of the audience contributes directly to the rhetorician's aim of persuasiveness....

But the crucial advantage here is not simply the surplus value obtained by having others work for you, but rather the miraculous fact

That shifting the imaginative labor onto the audience makes the ideas thereby produced infinitely more valuable rhetorically

than they would be as products of the explicit assertions of the speaker (Moran, 396).

Moran's description of the use of metaphor and its value to the rhetor are strikingly similar to Bitzer's description of the possibilities of the enthymeme. "It is because the implications of the imaginative activity of the audience themselves that the ideas elicited will borrow some of the probative value of their personal discoveries, rather than be subjected to the skepticism accorded to someone else's testimony" (Moran, 396). Thus an audience gains pleasure from completing a rhetor's enthymeme; it may gain both pleasure and knowledge from understanding a rhetor's metaphor. Hence one can "double their pleasure" by understanding that tropes function enthymematically. While there is always the possibility that the enthymeme may not be completed, or the audience gain pleasure, when successful it increases the audience estimate of the rhetor: they praise the rhetoric by praising themselves.

A similar concept of the function of tropes is formulated by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca in *The New Rhetoric* (1969) in their concept of "presence" in argument. They see presence as an "essential factor to argumentation" because "through verbal magic alone," a rhetor can "enhance the value of some of the elements of which one has actually been made conscious" (Perelman-Olbrechts-Tyteca, 116-7). Presence becomes the quality arguments possess to varying degrees, endowment them with a sense of immediacy, of importance, even of urgency. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca suggest the key is the imagination, with a nod to Bacon. One way to talk about presence is to say it is the clothing on the argument, and their suggestion of available strategies to create presence include the metaphor, synecdoche and amplification. Clearly the creation of presence by trope is an exercise in "verbal magic." The statement could have come from Kenneth Burke.

Jean Cohen's writings demonstrate how metaphors create deviation from a



“relative degree zero, i.e. that stratum of language usages that would be the least marked from the rhetorical point of view, and thus the least figurative” (Ricoeur, 140). Referring to the poet, Cohen observes “The poet plays upon the message in order to change the language. Should he not also write: the poet changes the language to play upon the message?” (Ricoeur, 154). Would Burke’s rhetor act any differently, creating the metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony to play upon the message? The act of reduction of deviation is one method for creating consubstantiality between rhetor and audience. Ricoeur extends the position: “If all language, all symbolism consists in ‘remarking reality,’ there is no place in language where this work is more plainly and fully demonstrated. It is when symbolism breaks through its acquired limits and conquers new territory that we understand the breadth of its ordinary scope” (Ricoeur, 237). While Ricoeur limits his focus to metaphor, my argument is that tropes, especially Burke’s master tropes, are the way that, enthymematically, arguers recreate or remake reality. For that reason, both Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s notion of presence and Burke’s dominant notion of master tropes and how they “escape literature” to cover all means of symbolic acts, give import to these symbols in arguments.

In *Kenneth Burke and the Conversation after Philosophy*, Timothy Crusius makes the claim concerning tropes in Burke’s writings: “For Burke all language use, including the philosophical and the scientific, is dependent upon tropes” (Crusius, 56). Part of Burke’s argument with Ransom was over the nature (or existence) of scientific tropes. Burke believed that even scientific discourses “are dependent on ‘root metaphors,’ analogies that inform entire movements in philosophy and what Kuhn calls paradigms in science” (Crusius, 60-1). So a rhetor may engage in a dialectic: “you tell me your metaphor and I’ll tell you mine.” There is always the possibility of the dialectic of dueling metaphors. “Show us, Burke suggests, what your metaphor can do – how much it can account for. We’ll put our metaphors to collective testing and critique. And we will find in the process that, relative to a given interest, some metaphors are in fact better than others” (Crusius, 63).

Similar dialectical testing can occur with metonymy and synecdoche. And since there is an overlapping, and there is no clear line between the tropes, the possibility of such testing is always present. Since dialectic is the substitution for irony, the ironic possibilities of tropes always linger. To the extent the representative anecdote is the combination of tropes, the trope of tropes, the trope sufficient for Burke to encompass dramatism, it functions as the method of

consubstantiality. "The anecdote prompts the audience not only to induce knowledge from a reduction, but also to see further reductions from which they might induce further knowledge" (Tell, 47).

In sum, the tropes in Kenneth Burke are epistemic; their creation is enthymematic; the reduction of their deviation is a method of consubstantiality. There will not necessarily be agreement. As Crusius observes, "Nor does Burke's conversation end in agreement.... Our goal may be to prevail or to reach consensus, but we rarely do, and even when we do, agreement is almost always short lived. That is why the conversation is unending." (Crusius, 56). So we may enter or exit the conversation on Burke. With our tropes. If Burke's reading of history is as argument, our reading of Burke, our conversation with Burke, will be about argument, tropologically presented, of course.

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