



The circle of life: Rhetoric of identification in Steve Jobs' Stanford speech



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ABSTRACT

We sought to understand from a rhetorical perspective the sources of the runaway popularity of Steve Jobs' Stanford commencement speech. Our analysis shows the rhetorical sophistication of this speech in terms of mutually reinforcing use of established dynamics, canons, and devices of rhetoric. We find however that these aspects of classical rhetoric are imbued with and reinforced by Burkeian identification processes that permeate the speech. We contend that an important aspect of leaders' rhetorical competence, and an enabler for constructing evocative, impactful rhetoric is the skillful employment of processes of identification.

1. Introduction

Verbal communication is the cornerstone of managerial work. Mintzberg's (1971: 100) studies have shown that “managers spend a surprisingly large amount of time in horizontal and lateral communication”. The linguistic turn in social science research (Deetz, 2003) has also shown that communication is not only functional, but socially constructs meaning through the framing, labeling and typifications it provides (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Heracleous, 2011). Scholars have noted that one of the main roles of leaders is to shape social reality for others through skillful use of language (Smircich & Morgan, 1982), often accomplished through their rhetorical competence (Hartog & Verburg, 1997; Shamir, Arthur, & House, 1994). Leaders, via their rhetoric, shape and reinforce shared values, promote a common organizational identity, and frame issues in particular ways as relevant to various stakeholders in order to build legitimacy (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005) or accomplish change (Mueller, Sillince, Harvey, & Howorth, 2003).

Studies of organizational leaders have used concepts from classical rhetoric to understand how leaders can influence and inspire followers (Conger, 1991) or adjust their rhetoric to different audiences while keeping certain themes constant (Heracleous & Klaering, 2014). Despite studies of organizational leaders' rhetorical competence however (Conger & Kanungo, 1987; Hartog & Verburg, 1997), there are still gaps in our knowledge of how leaders employ rhetoric in particular situations (Conger, 1991, 1999; Heracleous & Klaering, 2014).

In our own project we were interested in whether classical rhetoric can explain a leader's exceptional rhetorical performance, or whether there are related aspects that we have not yet appreciated. This is the initial question that oriented our research of Apple Inc.'s former CEO

Steve Jobs' influential Stanford commencement speech (Stanford University, 2005). As our research progressed, we noticed that Jobs' speech employs multi-dimensional processes of identification; not simply as a rhetorical strategy but as a structuring force that permeates the entire speech. We therefore decided to focus our study on the role of rhetorical identification within a broader classical rhetorical analysis.

In this paper we therefore analyze the employment of rhetoric by Jobs, an influential technology leader (Harvey, 2001; Sharma & Grant, 2011), in his Stanford commencement speech. This speech was uploaded on Stanford's YouTube channel in March 2008 and by April 2017 has been viewed over 26 million times. On TED's website it has been viewed over 8.5 million times. There several million additional views elsewhere on the internet, and many years later the appeal of the speech remains undiminished (Gallo, 2015). The internet has enabled Jobs' audience to be global, far beyond the Stanford students that witnessed it. When we refer to the “audience” in our analysis, we mean both the primary audience at the Stanford commencement ceremony, as well as the secondary audience that has watched the speech online. Given Jobs' overall reputation as a legendary Silicon Valley entrepreneur (Isaacson, 2012), understanding what makes this speech special can help to shed light not just on Jobs' remarkable rhetorical ability, but also on the fundamental link between leadership and rhetorical competence.

2. Leadership, rhetorical competence and identification

2.1. Leadership and rhetorical competence

Leaders shape reality for others by “framing experience in a way

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that provides a viable basis for action” (Smircich & Morgan, 1982: 258). Effective leaders can simplify ambiguous, complex messages into discrete, relevant meanings that can provide a substantive and memorable point of reference to the audience; often through the use of storytelling, framing, and metaphor (Conger, 1991; Heracleous & Klaering, 2014; Sharma & Grant, 2011). Through the use of rhetoric, leaders can mobilize meaning, articulate and define what has previously remained implicit, and elaborate, confront or consolidate existing wisdom (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996; Peters, 1978; Pandy, 1976).

Central strands of leadership theory recognise the importance of leaders' rhetorical competence. Charismatic leadership theories (Conger & Kanungo, 1987, 1998; House, 1977) as well as related transformational leadership theories (Bass, 1996; Bass & Avolio, 1994) for example acknowledge the abilities of charismatic leaders to influence followers through their oratorical skills (Hartog & Verburg, 1997; House & Shamir, 1993; Shamir et al., 1994; Willner, 1984). Authentic leaders (George, Sims, McLean, & Mayer, 2007; Shamir & Eilam, 2005) reflect on their own life stories, draw meanings and values, and communicate these to others as the basis of their leadership effectiveness and authenticity. Effective leaders are adept at framing and delivering a vision to followers (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999).

Steve Jobs is often viewed in both the academic literature (Emrich, Brower, Feldman, & Garland, 2001; Heracleous & Klaering, 2014; Sharma & Grant, 2011) as well as popular media, as a legendary leader with “effective rhetorical skills and powers of persuasion” (Gallo, 2015; Harvey, 2001: 254). He is seen as a highly admired leader (Marques, 2013) who possesses the power to “bend reality” for those around him (Isaacson, 2012: 97).

We thus decided to research Jobs' Stanford speech as a revelatory case (Yin, 2009) of leadership rhetorical competence. Our initial analysis of this speech indicated that Jobs employed an overall storytelling frame, emotional appeals, enthymemes, root metaphors and central themes in compelling ways. It gradually became clear however that classical rhetoric, although highly applicable, would perhaps not fully explain the immense popularity and evocativeness of the speech. The analysis indicated signs of a process of identification, a fundamental rhetorical feature in Burke's (1950, 1951) “new rhetoric.” Identification was a structural feature (Heracleous & Hendry, 2000), underlying and permeating Jobs' entire speech. Our research question was thus refined as: *What is the role of identification, in the context of classical rhetorical devices, in leaders' rhetorical competence?*

2.2. Enthymemes, stories and metaphor

An enthymeme is a rhetorical structure of argumentation that is partially expressed, since at least one of the premises remains an implicit, taken-for-granted assumption (Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson, & Jacobs, 1997). In other words an enthymeme is a truncated narrative argument, whereby the audience supplies the implicit, unstated premises. For example, if person A says “I'm going to the market”, and person B says “you'd better take an umbrella with you”, the implicit premises are “I think it's going to rain today” and “an umbrella can protect you from the rain”. These premises are not uttered by person A but are nevertheless understood and assumed by person B because of the two individuals' shared situational and cultural context, and *identification* of listener with rhetor (McAdon, 2003; Walton & Macagno, 2006). Enthymemes are thus contextually rather than universally true or false, as their rationality is context-specific (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996). This is as opposed to syllogisms in logic, whose evaluation criteria include universal truth. Enthymemes can be potent means of persuasion, as they actively engage the audience to complete the argument on the basis of pre-existing, shared cultural beliefs, whilst simultaneously offering interpretive flexibility (Heracleous & Barrett, 2001; Sillince, 1999).

Enthymemes are often expressed through storytelling. Stories are endemic to organizations, employed by actors in various, shifting forms to make sense of situations and pursue their aims (Boje, 1991). Stories can engage individuals at an emotional level, safeguard and transmit cultural values, and effectively develop leadership competencies (Ready, 2002). Similarly to enthymemes, stories do not depend on formal logic for their validity but on plausibility within the conditioned rationality of particular contexts; what Weick and Browning (1986), drawing from Fisher (1985), referred to as narrative rationality. Rhetorical examples offered in the form of personal stories or anecdotes can personalize a topic and make the oratory appear more topical to the audience, facilitating *identification* with the rhetor. By reflecting on personal life stories, leaders develop unique perspectives and values that support their authentic leadership (George et al., 2007; Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Stories are most compelling when they invoke meanings with “deep cultural roots, and as a result, elicit stronger emotions” (Conger, 1991: 41); a basic strategy of *identification* referred to as “common ground” by Cheney (1983).

Central themes are typically embedded within enthymemes and stories, and can be framed metaphorically. In classical rhetoric the aim of central themes is to contribute to persuasion (Aristotle, 1991) and inspiration (Cicero, 1942) whereas in Burke's “new rhetoric” the emphasis lies on *identification* between rhetor and audience (Burke, 1950, 1951). We purposefully refer to Burke's (1950, 1951) new rhetoric in order to situate our argument more concisely, since the broad distinctions between classical and new rhetoric have been the subject of ongoing debates (Lunsford & Ede, 1984; Thomas, 2007) that are beyond the scope of this paper.

We see metaphor as integral to thought and action (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a; Turnage, 2013), in accordance with a constructionist view (Black, 1979). Metaphors can “capture and illustrate an experience of reality by appealing simultaneously to the various senses of the listener” (Conger, 1991). Metaphors can express emotional messages that lie beyond conscious awareness (Srivastva & Barrett, 1988), and engage the audience's imagination, intellect and values through posing an invitation to make semantic leaps (Cornelissen, Kafouros, & Lock, 2005).

The locus of metaphor is not language per se, but rather the conceptualisation of one domain in terms of another (Lakoff, 1993). Metaphors can both sustain current ways of seeing, or re-frame situations by offering alternative source domains for interpreting a given target domain (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a; Turnage, 2013). The blending of ontological and epistemic correspondences between source and target domains (Lakoff, 1990) can lead to novel meanings which grant metaphors their potency in terms of sensemaking (Morgan, 1980, 1983).

2.3. Rhetorical identification

Despite Burke (1950) popularising the concept of identification as the key to persuasion, this idea derives from classical rhetoric (Day, 1960). Burke (1950) himself recognizes his debt to classical thought in how he defines rhetoric, in the voluminous space he allocates in his “rhetoric of motives” to classical terms, and in his discussion of the lineage of the concept of identification.

We already alluded above to the role of identification as a rhetorical function. For Burke, identification is the defining feature of his new rhetoric: “The key term for the old rhetoric was ‘persuasion’ and its stress was upon deliberate design. The key term for the ‘new’ rhetoric would be ‘identification,’ which can include a partially ‘unconscious’ factor in appeal” (Burke, 1951: 203). Burke (1950) explained that identification is based on a perceived similarity of interests or perspectives between actors that makes them “consubstantial” (pp. 20–21). In this he draws upon the concept of substance from “old philosophies” where it was seen as an act, with agents developing shared “sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them consubstantial” (p. 21).

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