

Rhetorical situations in everyday discourse

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1.

Whatever else rhetoric has involved, it has always been understood as situated discourse. Its specificity to circumstances, available audiences, and cultural norms has distinguished a rhetorical understanding of human communication from others. In current times, the ancient recognition of rhetoric's situatedness was given fresh and theoretically significant expression by Lloyd Bitzer's landmark essay, "The Rhetorical Situation".¹ Appearing as the lead article in volume 1, number 1 of *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, it inaugurated a new chapter in the history of rhetoric and its revived dialogue with philosophy. Bitzer's essay has received considerable scholarly attention² and its place as one of the most important papers of 20th-century rhetorical theory stands secure. Most of the scholarly commentary has enriched our understanding of rhetoric as situated, even in those cases where its historical importance seems to escape the immediacy of the circumstances in which it was uttered, such as Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" or Sir Winston Churchill's "Blood, Sweat, and Tears Speech", by focusing on its defining terms: exigence, audience, and constraints. In this paper we hope to continue the article's tradition of bringing fresh insight by considering situatedness in the context of everyday discourse and the implications this has for rhetorical agency. Our starting point is an observation Bitzer makes in passing: the reference to Bronislaw Malinowski's study of Trobriand Islanders.

At the beginning of the article, Bitzer points to the famous essay by Malinowski³ that appeared as a supplement to Ogden and Richards' *The Meaning of Meaning*, citing the passage in which Malinowski describes exchanges among the men in the fishing canoe — commands, technical expressions and explanations that serve to harmonise behavior among the fishermen. Bitzer considers the Trobrianders' use of language to be

¹ Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation", *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 1 (1968): 1-14.

² See Barbara Biesecker, "Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation from Within the Thematic of Difference", *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 22 (1989): 100-30; Scott Consigny, "Rhetoric and its Situations", *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 7 (1974): 175-86; John H. Patton, "Causation and Creativity in Rhetorical situations: Distinctions and Implications", *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 65 (1979): 36-54; Richard E. Vatz, "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation", *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 6 (1973): 154-62 for a sample. See also Lloyd Bitzer, "Functional Communication: A Situational Perspective", in *Rhetoric in Transition*, ed. E. E. White (University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981): 21-38.

³ Bronislaw Malinowski, "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages", in C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, 8th ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1946): 196-236.

illustrative of a particular discourse that “comes into existence because of some specific condition or situation that invites utterance”.⁴ Malinowski’s “statements about primitive language and the ‘context of situation’ provide for us a preliminary model of rhetorical situation”.⁵ Finally, after drawing attention to the situation as “dictating” the sorts of observations, verbal and physical responses, and constrained utterance of the fishermen, he concludes:

“Traditional theories of rhetoric have dealt, of course, not with the sorts of primitive utterances described by Malinowski ... but with larger units of speech, which come more readily under the guidance of artistic principle and method. The difference between oratory and primitive utterance, however, is not a difference in function; the clear instances of rhetorical discourse and the fishermen’s utterances are similarly functional and similarly situational”.⁶

In this context, Bitzer suggests we regard rhetorical situations as similar in kind:

“Let us regard rhetorical situation as a natural context of persons, events relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance; this invited utterance participates naturally in the situation, is in many instances necessary to the completion of the situational activity, and by means of its participation with the situation obtains its meaning and its rhetorical character”.⁷

Bitzer’s reference to Malinowski’s account of Trobriander language and the islanders’ performative uses of words suggests other thinkers in the 1930s who started to see language use in non-formal terms. The turmoil following WW I and during the Great Depression exposed the inability of rhetoric’s theoretical orthodoxy to offer a satisfactory account for social influence, which is basic to a rhetorical view of language. The work of I. A. Richards⁸ and his collaboration with C. K. Ogden⁹ that develop an account of meaning as contextual and organic, Kenneth Burke’s¹⁰ development of a dramatic perspective in which the forms of symbol using patterns are considered enactments of social joining, and M. M. Bakhtin’s theory of the

⁴ Bitzer, *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 4.

⁵ Bitzer, *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 4-5.

⁶ Bitzer, *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 5.

⁷ Bitzer, *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 6.

⁸ I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936, reprinted 1965).

⁹ Ogden, *The Meaning of Meaning*.

¹⁰ Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 2nd ed. (Los Altos, California: Hermes Press, 1953); *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Change*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); *Attitudes Toward History*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

inherent critique emergent from the clash of centripetal and centrifugal forces in language use add up to a paradigm shift in what counts as rhetorical.¹¹ Prior to that time, rhetoric was understood as an art of producing an effective speech or essay. Doubtless the chaos of the 1930s encouraged a more linguistically and sociologically sensitive turn that focused on the relationship between language and the circumstances contributing to that decade's social discord. Discord situates meaning in a consideration of how human symbolic practices influence social practices and how rhetorical performance is itself a social practice.

Looking through the rearview mirror of the rhetorical tradition as it was challenged and steered in a new direction during the early part of the 20th century, their enterprise reflects a fascination with extending rhetoric beyond the discourse found in formal texts, formal strategies of identification, and the production of speeches and essays. These thinkers urged greater attention be paid to less formal symbolic inducements. Their radically new ways of thinking about human symbolic activity beyond the podium implied examining discourse of the streets where micropractices of moment-by-moment interactions contribute not only to the organic character of a culture but become a significant source of rhetorically salient meaning and influence.

2.

From a perspective that positions human symbolic processes as the domain of rhetoric, it is hard to exclude the rhetoric of the everyday — a *vernacular rhetoric* of interaction within a discourse community that depends on local knowledge, concerns, meanings, modes of arguments, value schemes, logics, traditions, and the like shared among ordinary people who neither act in any official civic capacity nor have an elite status that provides entrée to established power. This is rhetoric rooted in lived experience. Our concern is with how this rhetoric is linked to the rhetorical situation.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines *vernacular* as referring to “domestic, native, indigenous”. It lists the primary meaning of *vernacular* as “of a language or dialect: That is naturally spoken by the people of a particular country or district: native, indigenous”. This sense of the vernacular points to the aboriginal language used by the people of a country or district. It emphasizes its character as the non-official language of the working class, peasants, certain ethnicities, and the marginalised — the indigenous general populous — that they use, along with other indigenous symbolic forms, in their everyday communicative exchanges. It is their symbolic resource for inventing the quotidian. Vernacular language, in this sense, is distinctive because it stands apart from official languages used for

¹¹ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

public transactions within power relations, as occurs in commerce, education, governance, law, and the professions.

Because it is the local language spoken and understood by those who are not among the power elite and who often lack the opportunity, even if they possess the skills, to speak on their own behalf in official forums, its very utterance performs a critique of power. Insisting on the distinction between the official and the vernacular allows us to give serious attention to the actual communication practices of the oppressed and the richly inventive ways in which they use rhetorical resources and rhetorical mechanisms to achieve their liberatory aims.¹²

The vernacular discourse of ordinary people is important because it has *pragmatic* value. It is essential to coordinating social action. More fundamentally, vernacular rhetoric is important for the salience it bears to its users' *identity* as a community, whether they are neighbors, a class, or any other significant grouping. And significantly, even though not the discourse of power and officialdom, it nonetheless adheres to the fundamental rhetorical demand for *propriety*. Neighbors, for instance, communicate a shared understanding of their neighborhood by how they maintain their property. Their neat lawns, colorful flowerbeds, trimmed shrubberies, and domiciles with well-maintained exteriors create a vernacular landscape that utters their shared identity as neighbors. It also expresses demands of propriety: good neighbors maintain their property; it is inappropriate not to do so.

In much the same way, vernacular exchanges more generally indicate bonds of affiliation; they speak a legible and intelligible rhetoric of shared values and solidarity. Adherence to the demands of propriety produces a surplus of symbolic value or symbolic capital that governs the community's life. In volume 2 of *The Practice of Everyday Life*,¹³ Michel de Certeau and his collaborators' study of a working class neighborhood in Lyon exemplifies the place of symbolic capital in the neighbors' construction of their self-understanding. How residents of the neighborhood presented themselves, spoke to one another, referenced shared exemplars of social knowledge, in short how they participated in the social field, allowed them entry to the community and freedom to circulate in its network of relationships without necessarily having mastered them all. They also reflect the vernacular as a domain of power.

Propriety within vernacular rhetoric often manifests in a discourse that implicitly critiques outsiders, usually official power. Bakhtin explains that this critique is accomplished through the capacity of language to question and interrogate the symbolic practices of the other. These

¹² See Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, "The Critique of Vernacular Discourse", *Communication Monographs* 62 (1993): 19-46.

¹³ Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life, vol. 2: Living and Cooking*, revised edition, ed. Luce Giard, trans. Timothy J. Tomasik (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

interrogations are responses to the moment-by-moment exigencies calling for expression that reflects their understanding of the problems confronting their group, their differences with those who are in power, and resistance — often in vernacular expression and practice — to those in power. References to class differences play out situationally through double meanings, innuendo, speaking by indirection, intonation, hack phrases, commonplace utterances, puns, parody, and other ways of dislocating conventional meaning to interrogate the outsider. By rubbing against the outsider's taken-for-granted meanings the vernacular opens a space for the emergence of other meanings hidden in the taken-for-granted.

Situatedness raises questions of relationship and how these relationships embody power. Rhetorical situations of the everyday, in which vernacular rhetoric plays a central role, are themselves characteristically constituted moment-by-moment as contestive sites in which groups bonded by relationships of class and identity vie for ownership of societal imperfections through competing definitions of the controlling exigence. That there was an international banking meltdown in the Fall of 2008 is a fact, whether to define it as problem of sustaining credit or protecting middle class savings and investments was, and perhaps remains, open to debate. That the debate was dominated by elite voices educated in the language of banking and finance eliminated considerable segments of national publics who suffered the consequences of actions by others who spoke these elite languages of power. The rowdy dissent in the United States that populated town hall meetings of Congressional representatives with their constituencies during the summer of 2009 were a manifestation of citizens engaged in the vernacular discourse of contesting the actions by those who represented them.

In addition to power, the situatedness of vernacular rhetoric draws attention to rhetorical agency. Most generally, rhetorical agency is manifest in a language that gives voice and performs action. Traditionally it has been associated with official rhetoric in the form of orations, essays, and the like, and frames agency in terms of the actor. Vernacular rhetoric calls attention to more structural features that surpass the specific agent and provide a discourse through which agency is constituted. Along lines set for by Karlyn Campbell,¹⁴ we may say that rhetorical agency viewed through vernacular rhetoric is *communal* in awakening consciousness of shared identity and participation in collectivity, involves each member of society as a *point of articulation* who invents his or her agential capacity moment-by-moment through everyday exchanges, is *multi-modal and performative* whereby agency is realized through the performance of these forms, is *emergent*, and is *mutable* and therefore subject to change.

¹⁴ Karlyn Campbell, "Agency: Promiscuous and Protean", *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 2 (2005): 1-19.

More fundamentally, however, vernacular rhetoric points to rhetorical agency as resting on a capacity not only to speak but also to be heard. Without capacity to speak a language that requires your expression be taken seriously, voice is relatively meaningless in terms of mediating change, of resolving the exigence that defines a situation as rhetorical. Seen from the vantage point of official discourse and the individual rhetor as engaged in a performance of rhetorical power, the rhetoric of the everyday displays weak agential force. It does not speak a language that commands attention in official public spheres. It is a weak sense of agency that exercises free speech as an act that is open to all as the endowment that accompanies citizenship in a free society. Moreover, its constitutive power is weak in that it minimally forms the rhetor as a speaking or rhetorical subject. One can be tolerated as a subject entitled to free speech yet totally disregarded.

Because vernacular rhetoric does not cast rhetorical agency in terms of the individual rhetor, it stresses structural conditions that underlie power. The voices of ordinary citizens are not usually found in official forums, and their role in public discourse is often limited because of structural constraints. The vernacular provides a language with which to speak of everyday experience and give it meaning. It keeps community alive through moment-by-moment expression that asserts membership and caring in a community capable of responding. Vernacular rhetoric reminds us that our communal lives constitute a mobile and uncertain rhetorical situation born of the social realities that face the need for its remedy by those who speak a common language. Rhetorical agency requires the union of these elements in a discursive act.

Vernacular rhetoric constitutes agency at ground level in that it forms the capacity of those who are not in power to critique power and to do so in a language that can be heard. Vernacular rhetoric highlights the collective character of agency by shifting attention from the privileged voice of the orator to the collective voice of the citizenry. Rhetoric insists on addressing another, whom Bitzer says has the capacity to mediate change, or in other words to act. The address is fitting to the exigence insofar as it addresses those who are capable of mediating change in a way that calls on them to intercede. Certainly this is the case in the moment-by-moment interactions that constitute the ongoing dialogue in which issues are framed, agency is defined and exercised, and contests to alter the human world are performed. Sometimes, as in the vernaculars of indigenous peoples, situational considerations magnify what has been naturalised through a rhetoric that clarifies the violence done to them. The controversies spurred by the plans of building hydroelectric power stations in Norwegian Sámi areas during the 1970's, illustrate our point.

3.

The indigenous Sami people inhabit Sámpi, which is the northern part of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. Samis have traditionally plied a variety of livelihoods, but are mostly known for their semi-nomadic reindeer

herding, which is legally reserved for Sami people in both Sweden and Norway. The population consists of 80,000-135,000 people of which 70-80 percent is found in Norway. During the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, Norwegian authorities enacted a process of Norwegisation. Schools were instructed not to use the Sámi language and the Samis were required to learn Norwegian. Forced relocation of Samis was carried out and they were neither awarded legal rights nor political or cultural recognition.

Questions of Sámi rights to land and water were brought to national attention when the Sámi together with environmentalists vehemently protested against plans to build power stations in regions they inhabited. They argued it would ruin the local natural environment and destroy the livelihood of the Sámi. Previous to these events Sámi rhetoric had very limited agential force within Norwegian publics. In the decade long rhetorical situation concerning the power stations, one could not have expected the Samis to exert rhetorical agency or to be heard.

This changed, we suggest, because the rhetorical situation merged with two more overriding circumstances, enabling a rhetoric drawing on the vernacular to gain agency. First, a general change in views occurred about nature and humans. Second, the visual media's ability to display the vernacular and the dramatic characteristics of the Samis and their case came into play. Before the controversy the rhetoric of the Sámi lacked power or agency. The vernacular Sámi discourse was detached from public deliberations; discourse of ecology and rights of indigenous people had limited appeal. However, with the environmentalism emergent at the beginning of the 70's, Sámi vernacular fused with the political discourse of the environmentalists and the new rhetoric of ecology. Samis, environmentalists and new radical groups shared common ground in their resistance of consumption and unlimited industrial growth. Emerging as a common voice, this leftist movement, known as "Populism", represented an alternative to modernisation and social democratic technocracy.

A telling encounter between the people and the technocracy of the authorities, the vernacular and the formal, occurred at a meeting in the village of Masi after the national parliament (*Stortinget*) in August 1970 planned to dam the village in order to build the Alta hydroelectric plant. Arriving at the local school, the chairman of the Standing Committee on Local Government, Kristoffer Rein, was met by demonstrating Samis with posters. On his way in, Hans G. Øvregård, the chairman of both the Kautokeino Social Democratic Party and the Sami organisation Samiid Særvii, approached him. In Sami, Øvregård read a resolution stating that damming would be a crime. "This is the most colorful experience of our journey", Rein responded, when Øvregård handed him the resolution.¹⁵

¹⁵ Magnar Mikkelsen, *Masi Norge* (Oslo: Cappelen, 1971): 135ff. Our descriptions of the events at the school also draws upon Magnar Mikkelsen, *Elva skal leve* (Oslo: Cappelen, 1980) and Anders Johansen and Jens E. Kjeldsen, *Virksomme ord* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2005): 597-606.

In the school gymnasium Rein gave the floor to head engineer Kåre Kummeneje. Dressed in a dark suit he gave a formal and technical briefing lasting for more than one hour. His briefing was not translated into Sámi and took more than 70 percent of the time at the meeting. The school must have appeared as a foreign country to the locals. Their language was Sámi, the meeting was in Norwegian. Two hundred people were squeezed together in a room with blazing lights, running tape recorders, rolling television cameras, and sound equipment swinging back and forth. The many pictures in print and television from the event must have given the impression that the people of Masi really had a chance to plead their cause. The truth is they hardly spoke for more than 10 minutes in total. Most of the Samis felt intimidated and only a few uttered their sentiments.

The Samis were unfamiliar with the formal rhetorical style that carried agency in bureaucratic and political situations. Their everyday language appeared not to satisfy norms of propriety in such circumstances. The philosopher, writer, farmer and activist Sigmund Kvaløy, who participated in several of the demonstrations and campaigns, wrote about the ordinary people:

“...living in remote places across the country, who have grown up in an environment ... that makes them inhibited when they are to plead their case. When they arrive in [the capital] Oslo to present their case, and have to go to the Ministry of Industry, they feel completely mute. ... That’s why we for half a year before the campaign deliberately practiced ourselves in argumentation and in the facts of the building of the power stations; and in taking the floor and stand up to speak in assemblies without manuscript”.¹⁶

The committed Samis improved their ability in formal rhetoric of presenting, writing texts, organising meetings and doing speeches. This contributed to the preservation of Masi in 1973. However, when the government in 1978 approved new plans to build a power station in Alta-Kautokeino, a vernacular infused rhetoric of agitation and demonstration made a bigger impact. A famous picture of the internationally renowned philosopher Arne Næss illustrates this. Næss could have used his training as a philosopher, logician and argumentation theorist to formally argue against the building of a hydroelectric power plant in Mardøla in 1970. Instead he sat down and chained himself to the mountain together with other activists. A press photo showing two police officers carrying the friendly smiling professor away became famous in Norway and was published around the world.

It was this kind of civil disobedience that attracted national attention in the late 70’s. The so-called People’s movement campaigned with legal

¹⁶ Mikkelsen, *Masi Norge*, 99-100. Our translation from the Norwegian.

means: giving speeches and creating slide presentations, sending out information sheets. This kind of formal rhetoric complemented activist rhetoric such as the Sámi hunger strike outside the Parliament. Dressed in traditional costumes, demonstrators raised their Sámi tents and declared a hunger strike. Media attention was enormous. More people gathered; singing, handing out information and giving speeches. In spite of the effort, the building of the power station began in 1981. More than 1000 demonstrators tried to physically stop lorries and machinery by chaining themselves together. The authorities now transported 600 police officers to Alta. Using cutting torches they released the demonstrators and ended their fight against the power plant.

The following trials against demonstrators elucidate the encounter between the vernacular and the formal. Visually the Samis signaled difference through their traditional costumes; verbally by necessitating translations between Sami and Norwegian; a circumstance that clearly irritated the Attorney General, Andreas Cappelen, during his testimony.¹⁷

The efforts of the Samis and the environmentalists at first stopped the building of the power station in Alta-Kautokeino, although it eventually was built. In a sense, the rhetoric of the Sámi people and the environmentalists had failed; nonetheless this rhetoric earned the Sámi people much needed attention and sympathy. It gave them a hitherto unheard voice. One battle was lost, but an indigenous people won recognition and legal rights. This success was achieved rhetorically by taking possession of formal rhetorical capabilities and combining them with a vernacular infused rhetoric of agitation and demonstration.

The rhetoric of opposition in the 10-year controversy was not only performed through formal speeches and letters addressed directly at officials and state institutions, but also through discourse indirectly addressed at public opinion through symbolic actions, visual manifestations and organisational work. The demonstrations, the civil disobedience, and the hunger strike were a mode of vernacular infused rhetoric of indirection. The new attention to the conditions of the indigenous Sámi people, the lasting change in the Norwegian view on the Samis and the acknowledgement of legal rights for an indigenous group, can be properly understood only if we pay attention to both the formal and the vernacular aspects of the discourse. Furthermore, it only makes rhetorical sense if we understand it situationally, not only as discrete singular situations in Bitzer's traditional sense, but also as changed circumstances in currents of thoughts, institutional constraints

¹⁷ Edgeir Benum, *Overflod og fremtidsfrykt. Aschebongs Norges historie* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1988): 40. The events in the 10-year controversy are described in Mikkelsen (1971, 1980); Georg Parman, *Kampen om Alta* (Oslo: Dreyer, 1980); Kari Heitmann, *Alta-saken og Altaværingene: Sosial identitet og politisk konflikt* (Oslo: University of Oslo, 1984) and in Øystein Dalland, *Altakronike* (Karasjok: Davvi Girjo o.s., 1994).

and in communication technology. Without press photos and television the impact would have been limited.

Conclusion

The concept of the rhetorical situation has been understood and used as it pertains to the emergence and resolution of issues and controversies that play out as public problems addressed in official public spheres. Broadening the lens to include vernacular discourse as rhetorically situated has implications for both.

The rhetorical situation provides a ground for understanding vernacular discourse as rhetorical. It provides the conceptual base for considering its contextual constraints, its audiences, its rules of exclusion, and for providing added precision to an account of how moment-by-moment interactions contest for power.

The vernacular, in turn, throws light on the rhetorical situation as open to multiple and often competing interpretations based on relationships of groups and community. Beneath the surface of even mundane exchanges, there is always a contest over power to define the situation, control its issues, and frame its interplay with official rhetoric.

Bitzer's original formulation focuses on situatedness as rhetoric's ground, with the situation having a life cycle that emerges, matures, decays and dies. The vernacular opens to some relations as having careers that redefine contexts, such as an indigenous people corporally marking rhetorical situations with imperfections that are always in need of remedy by chaining themselves together to protest the seizure of their land. Sometimes, the exigence is to sustain the rhetorical situation, as in the case of indigenous peoples who attempt to define the rhetorical situation's career as an ongoing negotiation in order to avoid an alternative that often is their cultural, if not literal, extinction.

Finally, including vernacular rhetoric in considerations of rhetorical situations invites attention to the interaction between official and formal public arguments and vernacular exchanges they elicit and at times unwittingly encourage. Here, as above, questions of agency are always being raised and answered in everyday exchanges that engage the multiple reciprocities of time and context.

In these reflections, we have attempted to be true to the purpose of Bitzer's article as setting forth the conditions of possibility for rhetoric. Its nuanced and supple formulation allows extending its range to those exchanges that are not on the glory road to public acclaim, but are threads weaving through the tapestry of an active society. And by extension, although "The Rhetorical Situation" was not intended to provide a foundation for explaining how an active society functions, through the lens of vernacular rhetoric, at least, it contributes to that end.