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The metadefinition of the aphorism and the public communication

Cosmin-Constantin Baias^{a*}, Department of Communication and Foreign Languages, Faculty of Communication Sciences, University Politehnica Timișoara, 2 Petre Ramneanțu (Oltul), Timișoara, 300596, Romania.

Irina Mihaela Pop^b, Department of Political Sciences and Communication Sciences, Faculty of IRISPSC, University of Oradea, 1 Universitații, Oradea, 410087, Romania.

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Abstract

In a high tech digital age when things happen too fast, and people have less and less time, the aphoristic communication can be an alternative to be taken into account together with the traditional manners of communication. Our work aims to treat the rhetorical problem of the aphorism definition and of the aphoristic gender. The approach we propose has a meta-theoretical and meta-methodological character; we define the aphoristic style through the rhetorical analysis. The meta-definitions of the aphorism namely the aphoristic definitions about what is an aphorism provide us with a number of interpretative points. Features such as; simplicity, unpredictability, concreteness, credibility are fundamental not only for the aphoristic communication, but also for the contemporary public communication. Paradoxically, to understand what are the basic characteristics of the aphorism means to understand and learn to communicate in public. We assume that the times we live in require the mastering of the creative aphoristic communication skills. Therefore, our students should be taught and trained in and through the aphorisms.

Keywords: Aphorism, rhetorical theory ,public communication, communication skills, problematology.

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Cosmin-Constantin Baias**, Department of Communication and Foreign Languages , Faculty of Communication Sciences, University Politehnica Timișoara, 2 Petre Ramneanțu (Oltul), Timișoara, 300596, Romania
E-mail address: popirinamihaela@gmail.com / Tel.: +2-123-322-12

1. Introduction

Time is not patient with us, or we are not patient with it. Everything around is moving fast. The high tech digital age governs our society, our life. Any time we talk on smart phones, we answer the e-mails, we login on Facebook accounts or we post something on Tweeter walls the tech equipments reflect our image, they are our daily mirrors. Technology is the medium, through which we communicate, but the communication is also our content if we were to remember the famous words of Marshall McLuhan; the medium is the message.

Today technology becomes much supplier, we talk more and more about nanotechnology. Under the empire of technical development every device is becoming smaller and smaller trying to obey to the minimalist principle. Everybody can notice the dramatic changes of the technological design, if we think for example of the big “bricks” mobile phones fifteen or twenty years ago and our slim, elegant smart phones today. We have to learn something from our digital devices, not only from their creators.

We should communicate in the spirit of our digital devices. Therefore, we propose to examine the aphoristic communication as an alternative for other classical forms and styles of the contemporary communication. First we approach the definition of the aphorism, then the characteristics of an efficient public communication, and finally we will try to show the link between them and their pedagogical relevance.

2. The Aphorism Definition

In order to examine the aphoristic communication, first of all, we should ask “What is an aphorism?” Many specialists (Angel-Lara, 2013; Geary, 2005; Morson, 2004;) remarked the difficulty of defining the aphorism because it is related but also different from other concepts such as; the dictum, the *penséé*, the saying, the cliché and the epigram. In their classical collection, Auden and Kronenberger (vii-viii, 1981), remark the fact; “Aphorisms are essentially an aristocratic genre of writing. The aphorist does not argue or explain, he asserts; and implicitly in his assertion is a conviction that he is wiser or more intelligent than his readers. For this reason the aphorist who adopts a folk style with «democratic» diction and grammar is a cowardly and insufferable hypocrite.”

In order to keep the investigation in the aphorism spirit, we use other authors who have used the aphorism to define the aphorism. More exactly we shall try to offer a metadefinition of the aphorism, namely an aphoristic definition of the aphorism. According to the French poet Paul Eluard, the elegant speech and the aphoristic language remind us that: “there’s always a pearl in your mouth” (Geary, 2007). Etymologically the aphorism is a definition and according to Samuel Butler (Geary, 2007) “a definition is enclosing of a wilderness of idea within a wall of words”.

These definitions can be organized according to some general features. Firstly the credibility of these assertions is due to the fact that they are conceived by a well-known author unlike the sayings or proverbs whose author is anonymous. As locus or arguments of the authority each aphorism is personal as far as the aphorism is defined by the character and personality of the author who uttered or wrote it. The author's *ethos* is correlated to the historical, social and cultural context he lived in.

Secondly what is typical for the aphoristic communication is a certain simplicity. This simplicity can be rendered in a short, brief, compact, laconic way. The aphorisms are the concise wording of thoughts. What distinguishes the aphorism from the other authors’ works and from the other valued literary genres such as; the novel, short story, essay and drama or poetry is the concision of the form. An aphorism is a complete essentiality or crystallization of a cognitive content. Comparing with the dicta or maxims which indicate how we have to behave, the aphorisms discuss the fundamentals of our behavior. Next we selected some metadefinitions which emphasize the simplicity and concision of the aphorism; the Austrian journalist Karl Kraus considers that the aphorism appears when; “a thought becomes an abbreviated essay” (Geary, 2007); for Alfred Corn “aphorisms are fictions; otherwise they

would be no more striking than the morning paper. In fact, the best aphorisms are poems or novels in capsule form” (Geary, 2007); while for the contemporary Serbian writer Aleksandar Baljak, member of the Belgrade Aphoristic Circle, “the aphorism is a dribbling of the spirit within a limited space” (Geary, 2007); Julien de Valckenaere says that “the shortest aphorism that makes you think the longest is the best” (Geary, 2007), and the well-known Renaissance thinker Erasmus of Rotterdam considers that “we should treat [aphorisms] not as food but as condiments, not to sufficiency but for delight” (Geary, 2007). Consequently from the rhetorical point of view the *logos* or the aphoristic language is characterized by the simplicity and concision of the form.

Thirdly, the aphorisms surprise and amaze us. An aphorism is something unpredictable. It causes a certain shock when it is heard or read, because it violates the rules, the natural course of our reference to reality. Aphorisms make us see things and words differently. The aphoristic definitions give another meaning to our words, and they also indicate another meaning of walk, a meaning that most of the time is new to our thoughts. The unpredictability and the originality of the form and content are visible through some metadefinitions; Joseph Joubert believes that “an aphorism genuine *bons mots* surprise those from whose lips they fall, no less than they do those who listen to them” (Gross, 1987, 364); for Stanislaw Jerzy Lec, one of the most important Polish writers of the genre of the twentieth century in Europe, considers that “an apt aphorism half kills, half immortalizes” (Geary, 2007); for the Finn Markku Envall; “an aphorism does not have to be the whole truth, but it is good if it contains a piece of it” (Geary, 2007); the American critic and essayist Logan Pearsall Smith says; “Aphorisms are salted and not sugared almonds at Reason’s feast” (Geary, 2007); the Austrian female writer of Check origin Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach believes that; “an aphorism is the last link in a long chain of thought” (Geary, 2007). Hence rhetorically speaking the *logos* or the message of the aphorisms is characterized by a paradoxical, unpredictable content, by an original idea which contradicts the common opinion.

Finally, we propose a metadefinition; an aphorism is an apparent laconic assentation that hides a radical question that confuses the prejudices of thinking. What can we notice from these words? First, the authors are known. Secondly, the aphorism as definition seems to be a simple and concise statement. Thirdly, the aphorisms surprise us because they violate the natural course of the meanings of words and thoughts. As a matter of fact the aphorisms hide fundamental questions. Only apparently they are ultimate statements. In fact, they aim to question the fundamentals of reality without offering an answer or a solution. Therefore aphorisms are an ideal tool for problem solving. As a special expression that does not argue, does not describe or explain, the aphoristic communication is the one that expresses problematology. Not every aphorism or aphoristic definition is the expression of a response, but the formulation of a problem in a memorable manner. The aphorisms are not philosophical because they treat general things, without taking into consideration the individual cases. The aphorisms are not philosophical only to the extent that we understand them as problematic answers to radical questions. In other words the general or philosophical character of the aphorisms is given by the problematology of the aphorisms. Thus, a book of aphorisms is a book of deep questions, radical inquiries as it questions the usual meaning. Therefore according to Don Peterson “a book of aphorisms is a lexicon of disappointments” (Geary, 2007), as our habits and prejudices are subject to critical examination. How can the aphorisms help us to learn the principles of communication? Next we will try to answer to this question.

3. A model of communication

We have to confess that in the last fifteen years as students, teachers or spectators we listened in public or watched online around one thousand speeches yearly. An average of three presentations daily or a presentation for each meal of the day. We have already got some authority in the field of public communication. If we had to choose a single book that we consider to be the public communication top book written up to now, we would not hesitate to choose Chip and Dan Heath 's communication model proposed and their book: *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others*

Die (2007). Our ideas “stick”, namely they will be understood, memorized and they will have a lasting impact that will change either the opinions or the behaviors of the people who come in touch with them if we respect six principles when we express our ideas. Thus, the form and the content of the presentation should allow a simple, unpredictable, concrete, credible, and emotional communication and with stories (Heath & Heath, 2007, 16-18).

A simple communication means to speak briefly, memorably and profoundly. On the one hand, the essentially is to find the core idea, the fundamental content. On the other hand, the simplicity is to find the compact form, as in the case of the sayings or aphorisms. Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication – Leonardo da Vinci. The exigency is to reduce everything to the essence, to cut off everything that is irrelevant.

To communicate in an unexpected way is to create curiosity, rather than wonder. In other words, to create surprise is to catch attention and to maintain interest in order to use the audience’s lack of knowledge in your favor. The attention cannot be kept only through speaking, you have to keep an eye on the audience the great difficulty is to awaken the audience’s attention and to keep it.

A concrete communication uses concrete images instead of abstract ones, as in the case of fables. The people should be helped to understand and to use only concrete images and concepts. Therefore, one should present a concrete context, and not statistic data. Moreover, help the others to establish the common objectives in tangible terms, to transform the idea in something real. In practice, try to offer examples and discuss the study case, speak to the first person about something you have felt, thought or lived.

The presentation is credible if you help people to believe you. There are two modalities; the external credibility offered by the authority and antiauthority and the internal credibility. The credibility increases or decreases according to the relevant information presented or the material prepared (analogical or digital material, books or other electronic resources) and the modality in which the materials are interrelated. We recommend using convincing details, accessible statistics, relevant examples or illustration and valid argumentation, as well.

An emotional communication makes other people to resonate to the power of the association, to the appeal of their own good and their identity. Humor, high spirits and happiness are the “species” of an effective and emotional communication. We should determine the audience to see the world through our own sensibility by using the proper words.

Narrative communication uses stories in order to determine the audience to act. The stories can be used as stimulators that tell the others how to act. At the same time stories can also be fundamental sources of inspiration. We should take into account the three essential intrigues; the sting or the overcoming obstacles, the relationship or the cooperation, and the creativity or the inspiration of a new way of thinking.

In other words, the application of the six principles, without being a certain recipe, leads most of the times to an efficient and successful communication. If we exclude the first characteristic – the simplicity that is linked to the message source – then the communication framework proposed to sustain a convincing discourse through which an idea is got to make the audience to: 1. pay attention: unexpected; 2. understand and remember it: concrete; 3. agree/ believe: credible; 4. care: emotional; and 5. be able to act on it: story (Heath & Heath, 2007). All these characteristics might be learned and practiced through the aphoristic language.

4. Communication aphoristic

If we summarize the last two sections, then we can imagine a triangle that identifies three characteristics of the aphorism itself and the effective communication, as well. The three angles of the triangle or the three important aspects of communication are; credibility, simplicity and unpredictability. Regarding the aphorisms the credibility refers to the authorial character which is

related to the ethos, as each aphorism must necessarily have a known author and a known context; the simplicity is the result of the minimalist and concise form of the aphoristic definitions; while the unpredictability is given by the original thought that astonishes either the reader or the listener because it violates the rule or the generally accepted rules of the meaning of words and the cognitive content, as well. It is what we have called problematological character of the aphorisms.

The problematological model of the discursivity, proposed by Michael Meyer (1986) offers us both a philosophical and methodological guide of analysis. The aphoristic communication is a problematological communication; "The aphorisms are problematological answers that do not suppress and solve the problem triggered by the question, but open it in a space of meaning, relationship and dialogue. The aphorism is not cumulative, but constructive. Aphoristic thinking ignores the old solutions of a problem, retaining the new alternative answers to the fundamental questions" (Baias, 2015).

If the explicit problematology can be considered the visible tip of the aphoristic iceberg, then what we have to determine is the less visible part of it. Once accepted the problematological triangle, (credibility/author – simplicity/concision – unpredictability/originality) it projects a possible triadic reaction in the receiver's mind. The projected problematology has in turn three characteristics. The concrete character is given by the simplicity of form thus the novelty of the thought and the unusual expression of the aphorism are projected in the receiver's mind as something memorable, something that can be easily remembered and used when the situation demands. The emotional character of the aphorism is given both by a certain poetic or metaphorical style of the expression and the receiver's projection when he translates and adapts the generality of the aphorism to his own experience or to a specific situation. The narrative character of the story is the less evident feature of the aphorism; once an aphorism has been designed into interpretation, after it has been stuck upon the receiver's memory and after it has been tested or confirmed emotionally by experience, the receiver is the one who adapts it to operate in a number of other similar experiences that can be told the other participants in the act of communication. Finally, we can offer a second projecting definition that is closely linked with pathos; the aphorism is a memorable speech translated through the interpreter's emotions and life stories.

5. Conclusions

Why should teachers use the aphorisms in the pedagogical act and why should we encourage our students to use the aphoristic communication? On the one hand, because the aphorism has an indubitable problematology rhetorically related to ethos and logos. Except the legitimacy provided by a personality and context in which the aphorism was conceived, and the essentialization of the form and the novelty of the content, we are concerned with questions. The aphorisms offer problematological answers that do not aim to solve the problem, in contrast to the scientific answers that do.

Problematological answers express a problem; they deepen it and show its depth. Problematological answers as aphoristic definitions have as mission to force us to discover the problematological difference; question - answer. Apparently the aphorism is an ultimate answer. In reality it is a beautiful expression of an ultimate or radical question. Take, for example, *The Devil's Dictionary* by Ambrose Bierce where we find the noun aphorism defined as "pre-digested wisdom" (Geary, 2007, 357). The answer is just "pre-digested wisdom" but the hidden question is; "What is the aphorism?" Offering this undiscovered meaning Ambrose Bierce attacks a certain unwritten law of the Western individualistic thinking according to which each of us should get the knowledge on his / her own. Since we grew up, we are mature, we no longer need to be fed or taught by others, even by wise teachers. Everyone should find his / her own way, his / her own philosophy of life. We note that the two words do not give a definition of the aphorism as the classic dictionary does but they question the bases, the fundamentals of the individualism, originality and education.

Finally, we assert that the aphorisms can be rightful and powerful tools not only to be used in introducing the public speeches in order to catch the attention either in the body of a presentation to strengthen the argumentative lines or in the end of the presentation so as the message becomes memorable. The aphorisms can also be used to stimulate the learning of the fundamental elements of a public communication and especially to train the critical thinking to recognize the questions and to offer problematological answers or alternatives for different problems.

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