The style of political speeches: problems in existing methods

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1 Introduction

In January 2008, the Dutch mayor Ada Boerma of the small and unimportant village Maasdriel became known nationwide because of the inaugural address she delivered. She was accused of plagiarism: eleven long quotes about opinions, intentions and thank-you's were exactly copied from an inaugural speech by Thom de Graaf – former minister and now mayor of the city of Nijmegen: she copied not only *what* he said, but also *how* he said it. Even without an English translation it is clear that a detailed stylistic analysis is not necessary to observe the similarities between Boerma's en De Graaf's speech, as the following example can illustrate:

(1) 'De burgemeester drukt niet in zijn eentje een stempel op de gemeente. De politieke besluitvorming is in eerste en laatste instantie aan de raad en aan het college. (…) De burgemeester heeft natuurlijk eigen taken, maar is niet een eerste en niet een <u>vijfde</u> wethouder. Ik ambieer die rol ook niet.' (speech Ada Boerma, mayor of Maasdriel)

(2) 'De burgemeester drukt niet in zijn eentje een stempel op de gemeente. De politieke besluitvorming is in eerste en laatste instantie aan de raad en aan het college. (…) De burgemeester heeft natuurlijk eigen taken, maar is niet een eerste en niet een <u>zevende</u> wethouder. Ik ambieer die rol ook niet.' (speech Thom de Graaf, mayor of Nijmegen)

However, maybe De Graaf's speech *should* be analyzed in detail, because apparently his speech was so effectively formulated that Boerma didn't want to change it. Analyzing the style of speeches is the topic of my PhD project, which I started in September 2007. The project is part of a larger, interdisciplinary project, in which a group of researchers from linguistics, rhetoric and literary studies is working together on stylistic research of literary and non-literary texts. The purpose of this overall project is to re-introduce stylistics as a scientific discipline in the Netherlands.[1] As the non-literary PhD candidate in the research group, my focus is on stylistic analyses of political speeches.

In this paper, I would like to give an overview of the main traditions in which speeches are an important object of study, and the way style is analyzed within these approaches. More concretely, the role of style in Rhetorical Criticism and Critical Discourse

Analysis will be discussed. This will reveal some problematic aspects in the way style is analyzed in these approaches. Subsequently, a line of approach is sketched to overcome the described problems.

2 Style in Rhetorical Criticism

In the mainly American tradition of Rhetorical Criticism that roughly started at the beginning of the twentieth century, speeches have traditionally been an important object of study. Until the seventies, speeches were analyzed by means of the so-called 'Neo-Aristotelian', 'neo-classical' or 'traditional' method of criticism (Foss, 1996: 24), which stems from the work of Wichelns (1925). Rhetorical Criticism was put into practice on the basis of the five classical-rhetorical canons: by using invention, organization, elocution, memory and delivery, 'the rhetorical scholar was to determine the effect of a speech through assessment of the situation, the audience, the speaker's personality and public character, speech preparation, arrangement, style, ideas, motives, topics, proofs, judgment of human nature, and delivery'(Stewart, 2004: 407-408).

However, in practice this aim often turned out to be unrealistic: resources in archives and libraries essential for covering these topics were marginal available, and space limitations in journals and anthologies precluded in-depth analyses (Stewart 2004: 408). Furthermore, studies of public addresses were influenced by the ferment in literary theory over what criticism should be (Campbell, 2001: 504). As a result, public addresses were mostly analyzed from a historical or biographical perspective, and the relatively few studies of speeches which *were* also concerned with rhetorical effects of the language itself were far from systematic (see for instance Parrish & Hochmuth (1954)).

For good reasons, Donald Bryant sighed in 1957 that stylistic analyses of speeches were characterized by 'methodless impressionism' (1957: 106), and that there were barely any possibilities 'further to depress the repute of style or to relegate style to a more distant peripheral position than it has achieved in most professional rhetorical speculations' (Bryant, 1957: 103).

Partly due to Edwin Black's influential book *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* (1965), the traditional method of Rhetorical Criticism was put on the sidelines in the seventies, and replaced by new approaches and methods of analysis, like *cluster criticism, feminist criticism, metaphor criticism, generic criticism*, etc. (see Foss (1996) for an overview). Whereas the traditional method intended to analyze a speech from all angles, these more recent approaches are characterized by a more specific (and more manageable) perspective, in which scholars focus on one (or a few) phenomena, for instance how gender differences are expressed in someone's language use, or which metaphors a speaker uses to propagate a certain message. However, all these recent approaches in Rhetorical Criticism also show an important similarity to the traditional method: namely the attention that is given to style, or better said: the lack of such attention.

Anno 2008, Donald Bryant's observations still apply. For instance, a systematic literature survey of the period 1920-1990 by Neil Leroux (1990) produced a rough yield of sixty articles on style, an average of less than one essay per year (Leroux, 1990: 2). According to Leroux these articles are 'consequently superficial', (…) 'missing a level of critical discourse which shows how rhetoric works' (Leroux, 1990: 20). He summarizes the role of style in Rhetorical Criticism as follows:

'Rhetorical criticism (…) has taken on many agenda's – for example, neo-Aristotelian criticism, movement studies, dramatistic criticism, genre criticism. All have been attempts to apply, reconstruct, or improve on a long tradition. What is striking about this body of critical literature is that none of it takes very seriously one of the paramount concerns of that tradition – namely, style. Indeed a survey of some periodical literature in communication journals shows that *there persists a fundamental neglect of style in both the theory and the practice of criticism.* While various theoretical and critical practices represented in this body of literature suggest that style is a frustratingly amorphous creature, eluding easy definition, most of the material does not venture much beyond theory and is, for the critic, consequently inadequate. It falls short of a level of analysis that would reveal *how* discourse works. As a result, such criticism often fails to provide a useful critical approach to reading a discursive text.' (Leroux, 2002: 18; first italicization mine; second original)

Within Rhetorical Criticism, analyses of speeches provide no systematic insight into stylistic means used by a speaker. In addition, the relatively few stylistic observations made are mostly of a descriptive and not of an elucidatory nature. For instance, Weidhorn (1987) investigates Churchill's 'artistry in the manipulation of language', by illuminating a few aspects of Churchill's language use, like humor and metaphors. Whereas Weidhorn observes that Churchill regularly depicted Germany as a tiger or a crocodile during the Second World War, it is striking that he practically nowhere elaborates the question what the rhetorical *effect* could be of this description. The same applies to studies like Ryan (1988), who aims at describing a complete picture of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's speech making (including style), Moberg (2002), who takes a close look at a series of Japanese inaugural speeches, and Benson (2004), who analyses two specific speeches by Roosevelt in detail. Like many others, the stylistic observations in the studies mentioned are only incidental, hardly theoretical, and more descriptive than explanatory.

   The number of studies of public addresses which focus on rhetorical effects of the language used, are outnumbered by studies that focus on the question which linguistic means are characteristic for the speaker in question (cf. Stewart 2004; Lucas 1988). In these studies, the emphasis is on distinguishing linguistic features of a speaker, and not so much that on the rhetorical effects of language use as such (e.g. Hart 1984; Hart & Childers (2004, 2005); Suzuki & Kaguera (2008)).

3 Style in Critical Discourse Analysis
In Europe, for roughly the last twenty-five years speeches have for an important part been analyzed within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Characteristic for CDA is the basic assumption that language use is ideologically driven: language use implicitly and explicitly reflects and maintains power relations, social inequality, injustice and suppression. The purpose of CDA is to analyze how social inequalities are expressed in language use, to generate consciousness, and to make it possible to change the observed situation: CDA often has clear social, economical or political motives (Wodak, 2006: 4-5; Van Leeuwen, 2006: 290; 293; Wodak & De Cillia, 2006: 713-714).

Just like in the tradition of Rhetorical Criticism, CDA is characterized by an enormous diversity in both objects of study and methodology. Within this heterogeneity however,

most attention is paid to political and journalistic texts (Van Leeuwen, 2006: 291). In CDA journals, analyses of speeches appear on a regular basis, and in these analyses also stylistic observations are made.

Characteristic for most of these analyses is a focus on revealing how a speaker uses certain strategies[2] to communicate his message, and which linguistic means are used to achieve these strategies. Most studies of public addresses in CDA are characterized by a 'top-down' approach, i.e. the strategies occupy centre stage, and to highlight these strategies linguistic means are analyzed which are relevant for the strategy, and which support the analysis of the strategy in question.

However, problematic in this line of approach is that many analyses fail to clarify why on the linguistic level some linguistic means are analyzed, and others not: from a reader's perspective, it often looks as if a selective choice of linguistic elements is made which support the author's interpretation (cf. van Rees, 2005: 96).

To illustrate my point, I would like to discuss Maria Cheng's (2006) analysis of two inaugurals by the Taiwanese president Chen-Shui-bian. Her analysis is representative for the way the style of public addresses is often analyzed within a CDA-framework. In her article '*Constructing a new political spectacle*: *tactics of Chen Shui-bian's 2000 and 2004 Inaugural Speeches*', Maria Cheng analyzes how President Chen Shui-bian uses so called 'language rhetoric' as a powerful tool 'to defuse dangerously tense relations with China and ease fears of such strife, to repair crucial relations with the US government, and to gain public support in the country' (Cheng, 2006: 584). As Cheng explains, the president had to satisfy these different groups, because for China, Taiwan is one of its provinces, while Chen Shui-bian and his government wanted Taiwan to be an independent country; America was worried about the stability of the region; and, maybe most importantly, in Taiwan the president had to try to 'unite' the people and win their support, because he was elected twice only with a very tight majority.

Maria Cheng illustrates the strategies used by the Taiwanese president by discussing several linguistic means. For instance, she illustrates how the Taiwanese president satisfies different groups by strategically making use of the vague meaning of the word *we*: she illustrates how this word refers to different groups of people (to the people in Taiwan, but for instance also to the coalition of China and Taiwan, and to the international community), in that way creating a feeling of inclusion and togetherness with the several different audiences that had to be satisfied.

Another example of which Cheng analyzes are the so called 'key tokens of reference', the most frequently used words in Chen Shui-bian's two addresses, which, according to CDA, reflect the speaker's ideologies. Frequently used words are for instance *Taiwan, we/our,* and *democracy/democratic*. The fact that the Taiwanese president most of the times refers to his country as *Taiwan* is not a coincidence: it reflects his ambition to become independent of China. Another option the president has, 'Republic of China', is only used incidentally.

A final example is Cheng's discussion of classical rhetorical figures. She gives examples of parallelism, anaphora and antithesis, all means that add 'balance', 'rhythm' and 'clarity' to the speeches, and impart 'grace' and 'power' to the president's message (Cheng, 2006: 602-604).

The described examples are meant to illustrate what kind of linguistic means Maria Cheng analyzes. Although the observations made are interesting and convincingly demonstrated, her analysis seems in a certain sense not to be systematic. From a reader perspective, it looks as if a selective choice of linguistic elements has been made to support the author's interpretation: it is difficult to determine if there are other relevant stylistic devices which support the author's reading, or, perhaps more importantly, indications to the contrary, which would *refute* her interpretation. Are there, for example, no other classical rhetorical figures which are also relevant to discuss?

In other words, Cheng's selection of the stylistic means that she analyses seems to be done on an ad hoc basis. In this sense Cheng's analysis is representative for the way style is often analyzed within the framework of CDA: in many analyses a reliable apparatus for investigating style in a systematic way is lacking. This is especially noticeable given the fact that there are a few checklists with linguistic means, developed within a Critical Discourse Analysis framework, which could serve as a more or less systematic starting point for stylistic analyses (in particular Fairclough (1992) and Fowler & Kress (1979)). Strikingly, it turns out that these checklists are barely utilized in practice.

4 Another line of approach
So far, I have argued that analyses that describe how stylistic features contribute to the persuasiveness of a certain speech, are often unsatisfactory. Analyses are superficial (Rhetorical Criticism) or unsystematic (Critical Discourse Analysis). In the rest of this paper, I would like to give a sketch of a line of approach that could overcome the described problems, and I will pay special attention to the question whether it is possible to apply this approach to the analysis of classical rhetorical figures in speeches.

As a solution to the problems mentioned, I propose to analyze the style of speeches in a more systematic way by using a *checklist* with linguistic means that are potentially interesting to investigate. As stated earlier, within the framework of CDA there are a few of such checklists, but as yet the most extensive one is the checklist provided by Leech & Short's (2007 [1981]) monumental book *Style in Fiction*. Their checklist will function as a starting point, and will be expanded and adapted where necessary.
   In addition, cognitive linguistics will be the theoretical framework for my project. Cognitive linguistic theory is a fruitful framework for stylistic analysis. For instance, in literary stylistics schema theory is used for research into reader's comprehension of texts, or the concept of figure and ground to account for readers' response to foregrounding (see Verdonk (2006) and the references mentioned there). In the analysis of non-literary texts (and more in particular: in the analysis of speeches), cognitive linguistics has been applied too, to describe how speakers construe their message. See for example Paul Chilton's *Analysing Political Discourse* (2004) in which parts of speeches by Clinton, Bush and Bin Laden (among others) are analyzed with the help of cognitive linguistic insights, or Todd Oakley's (2005) article on the rhetorical effects of force dynamics in the preamble to Bush's national security report and Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address. Publications like these suggest that a cognitive linguistic perspective is a fertile framework in analyzing the style of speeches.

In particular, an important question in my project will be whether this cognitive linguistic framework is helpful in analyzing how classical rhetorical figures contribute to the persuasiveness of a speech. The point is that most analyses of speeches pay quite a lot of attention to classical rhetorical figures, but these figures are often analyzed in purely subjective terms: it is for instance impressionistically stated that 'in speech X, figure Y gives 'grace' or 'power' to the message of the speaker'. A research question in my project is whether these kinds of observations can be made more intersubjectively. To illustrate my point, I would like to elaborate briefly on Arie Verhagen's book *Constructions of Intersubjectivity* (2005), which is an important part of my theoretical framework. Verhagen, drawing on some fundamental ideas from the French linguists Anscombre and Ducrot, argues that linguistic elements induce a hearer to draw a certain conclusion, when the situation itself does not necessarily have to be seen by everyone as supporting such a conclusion.

For instance, Verhagen shows in his book what the argumentative effect is of scalar operators like *barely* and *almost* (Verhagen, 2005: 45-50). Suppose someone had to take a statistics course, and did not pass. In this case you can state (3):

(3) He almost passed his statistics course.

Compare this to example (4), in which a the candidate actually passed the exam:

(4) He barely passed his exam.

Sentence (4) describes a 'better' situation with respect to what is the case in the (conceived) world: the candidate passed the exam in the case of (4), and did not in the case of (3). However, the argumentative effect of the use of *barely*, is that the addressee will not feeling confident about coming exams of the candidate (given the impossibility of (5)), while *almost* suggests that he can be optimistic about these exams (6):

(5) He almost passed his statistics course. So there is hope.
(6) # He barely passed his exam. So there is hope.

In other words, scalar operators like *barely* and *almost* direct the hearer to draw a negative or positive conclusion about the situation described in a certain context, when the situation itself does not necessarily have to be seen as supporting such a conclusion. Since these rhetorical effects of the words correlate with their linguistic behavior, such as the possibility to occur in certain grammatical constructions, the rhetorical analysis has a firm linguistic basis.

Analogously the question can be asked: what is the argumentative effect of certain classical rhetorical figures of speech? As said, most stylistic analyses pay quite a lot of attention to classical rhetorical figures, but how figures of speech like *antithesis*, *gradatio*, a *rhetorical question* or *litotes* direct a hearer to draw certain conclusions, is barely analyzed – although the desire for such an approach is hardly new and shows up from time to time. For example, recently Antoine Braet seems to acknowledge the problem concerning the impressionistic nature by which classical rhetorical figures are often analyzed. In the Netherlands, Braet has been one of the few persons who tried to

develop a consistent method for rhetorical analysis. In his book *Retorische kritiek* he states: 'What we want to know, is how a certain figure of speech affects or can affect the audience' (Braet, 2007: 120). He tries to answer this question by relating a list of 49 classical rhetorical figures to Roman Jakobson's 'functions of language' which are linked to the different constitutive factors in a speech event (addresser, message, addressee, context, code). For example, Braet distinguishes figures that are primarily 'expressive' (*exclamation*, *hyperbole*, *anaphora* etc.), and function to foreground the opinion or emotion of the speaker. And figures that are primarily conative, function to appeal to the listeners of a speech (for instance: addressing someone directly (by using 'you'), apostrophe, or a rhetorical question.

   Unfortunately, Braet's classification of classical rhetorical figures is 'necessarily illustrative' (Braet, 2007: 123), that is: the mapping of the classical rhetorical figures to their main function in the communication process is far from comprehensive, and with that still unsatisfactory. Braet's classification offers no solution to the question how judgments about the rhetorical effect of a figure of speech can be made more *intersubjectively*.

   A problem in Braet's treatment, and more generally in the classical rhetorical tradition, is that classical rhetorical figures of speech are directly linked to a certain function – without shedding light on the question what the argumentative force is of the component linguistic units of such a figure. An important question in my PhD project will be precisely this: whether it is possible to reinterpret classical rhetorical figures of speech in terms of the argumentative effects of their component linguistic units (analogous to the linguistic underpinning that Verhagen (2007) provides for scalar operators like *barely* and *almost*).

5 Conclusion
The two dominant paradigms in which (political) speeches are an important object of study, are Rhetorical Criticism and Critical Discourse Analysis. In both paradigms the way in which style of public addresses has been analyzed is often problematic: analyses are superficial (Rhetorical Criticism) or unsystematic (Critical Discourse Analysis). Moreover, in both paradigms judgments about the function of classical rhetorical figures have been made in an impressionistic fashion.

The aim of my project is to contribute to studying style in a more systematic way, at least by starting to use a checklist to give analyses a less ad hoc basis. In applying cognitive linguistic theory in my analyses, an important question to answer will be how judgments about the use of classical rhetorical figures can be made more verifiable: can classical rhetorical figures of speech be reinterpreted in terms of the argumentative effects of their component linguistic units (based on cognitive linguistic insights)?

It is clear that there is still a lot to find out. Fortunately, I still have four years of research to go. On a next occasion I intend to present in more detail what a stylistic analysis according to the contours sketched today implies.

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Endnotes

[1] For more information about the project, visit the website: www.stylistics.leidenuniv.nl.
[2] These strategies often concern, among other things, issues of racism, right-wing populism, and dimensions of identity politics (cf. Wodak & De Cillia 2006: 713).