

Scientific Journal of Applied Social and Clinical Science

UNDERSTANDING RHETORIC WITH PEIRCEAN SEMIOTIC CONCEPTS¹

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1. Work presented at the GP Semiotics of Communication, XXI Meeting of Communication Research Groups, an event that is part of the 44th Brazilian Congress of Communication Sciences.

Abstract: This article starts from a conception of rhetoric as a process of “identification” and not the way in which it is traditionally defined, giving relevance to “persuasion”, taking into consideration, the semiotic studies of Charles Sanders Peirce. The text presents historical references and characteristics that give relevance to the science of rhetoric, which has existed since Greek antiquity, as a way of combating violence through the argumentation of ideas. It brings some contributions from Peirce with his semiotics and pragmatist philosophy, presenting the paths linked to “speculative grammar”, through which semiotic concepts contribute to the reflection of “common rhetoric”, as is the case of communicative texts.

Keywords: semiotics; rhetoric; history of rhetoric; argumentation; speculative rhetoric.

INTRODUCTION

One way to reflect on the production of journalistic texts is by taking into consideration, the long tradition of rhetoric, which goes back at least as far as what has come down to us through the work of authors who lived before the Christian era. In Ancient Greece, Aristotle problematized how a speaker can make his arguments understood in order to convince the audience, in a probabilistic sense aimed at persuasion. Peircean semiotics – the science of signs – has a logical character, aimed at understanding thought, but it focuses on rhetoric precisely because it deals with signs, which are also the means for expressing that thought. It is through the actions of signs that we give meaning to our experience and understanding of the world, so that we can share it and develop it together with other beings. The semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) offers conceptual instruments to renew rhetoric, as well as having a different perspective in relation to

2. In the text “Rhetoric defined as a process of identification in a semiotic approach” (HERMES, 2021), the author of this article develops a reflection on semiotic issues related to historical, sociological and anthropological aspects.

rhetoric.

It is always important to emphasize that, for Peirce’s semiotics, in his synechistic conception of continuity, there is no anthropocentric character when it comes to the production of meanings. The actions of signs or semiosis occur between all types of beings. In relation to rhetoric, however, as it involves communicative intentionality, we can speak of a human specificity. This is configured as an action to be evaluated in the ethical order, taking into consideration, the predisposition in relation to other human beings.

The author Vincent Colapietro (2007) recognized, in his article: *Peirce’s Rhetorical Turn*, that there was a turn towards rhetoric in the semiotic reflections of Charles Sanders Peirce in his most recent intellectual production. In his comments, Alessandro Topa (2019) described this analysis of Peirce’s work as innovative. Although Peirce’s main concern is scientific thought, this referential author recognized that there is a rhetorical bias even in science, associated with a better understanding of the human being as a being in communication, a being in semiosis, with purposes, within a perspective in that knowledge is aimed at in a constant relationship with all other beings, as is typical of its synechistic understanding of sign actions.

According to Colapietro’s (2007) interpretation, for Peirce, rhetorical questions do not occur primarily as an act of persuasion, as one generally tends to objectively summarize the purpose of rhetoric, but rather as an act of identification. One can understand in this position a concern of an ethical nature, which, at the same time, indirectly reflects the emerging “spirit of the time”, in which the issue of “culture” gains increasingly more relevance in all humanistic reflection.² Furthermore,

this contributes to understanding how Peirce locates rhetoric in relation to scientific development, his greatest concern.

Semiotically, according to Peircean theory, this act of identification occurs through semiosis that meet when two minds understand certain signs as capable of producing similar or close interpretants. It can also occur when there is a common purpose. In the search for knowledge, the scientist must be able to find the proper signs for a given phenomenon to be understood by their peers or a broader community.

Through his thinking, the scientist establishes a semiotic relationship with the phenomenon itself, having a scientific concern, but which is processed rhetorically in a way that critically adjusts to his previous experiences and that of the scientific community.

The semiotic concept of “collateral experience” corresponds to how minds produce interpretants based on their own semiotic trajectory. The scientist’s difference is that he seeks to be aware of how semiosis affects him, and, at the same time, how he is capable of producing semiosis through experience or accumulated knowledge. Likewise, rhetorically, he must be concerned with adjusting the signs to disseminate the results of his research in a way that is understood by his peers and a broader community.

Taking into consideration, the phenomenological categories identified by Peirce³, the process of identification inherent to rhetoric is linked to Secondness, which consists of the production of semiosis in relations of otherness in a given context. It occurs in the relationships between one and the other, and the existence of both actually occurs in this relationship in a certain space

and time. The recognition of the other as part of the same context of life and production of meaning consists of the first stage of the process of rhetorical identification that can be understood semiotically.

HISTORICAL ASPECTS OF RHETORIC

According to Nicola Abbagnano (2000), rhetoric is considered an invention of the sophists in Ancient Greece (5th century BC), with Gorgias de Leontinos being one of its founders. The author summarizes the main historical aspects relating to the development of rhetoric. According to him, in the Dialogue: *Górgias*, the philosopher Plato emphasizes that the sophists were not committed to proving their arguments or rational convictions. Your skills would lie in your ability to speak about any topic persuasively. For Plato, when pedagogical or educational, in conversations guided by reasoning, rhetoric would be playing the role of philosophy itself. This way, one can recognize the impossibility of an ethical rhetoric other than in a philosophical way, but one can also understand, in a questioning way, a rhetorical dimension in philosophy itself and in the sciences, which Peircean semiotics allows us to consider.

Aristotle, according to Abbagnano (2000), established a link with dialectics for the understanding of rhetoric, which is behind his work that has come down to us, which is the oldest and most cited reference on rhetoric. In the Aristotelian perspective, in a conception specific to dialectics, in contrast to premises of a probabilistic nature, the means of persuasion are taken into consideration, to convince about a point of view. There are ways to take into consideration, arguments capable of persuading and rules for their strategic

3. “Peirce’s universal [phenomenological] categories are three: firstness, secondness and thirdness. Firstness is that which is independent of something else. Secondness is that which is relative to something else. Thirdness is what is mediated between two others. In Peirce’s opinion, all conceptions at the most fundamental level can be reduced to these three” (HOUSER, 1992, page: XXX).

use. Its conceptions, combined with the exercise of philosophy, were relevant at least until the Renaissance, when the perspective of rationalism little by little put it into crisis. "Rationalist dogmatism initiated by Descartes and massively adopted in the 19th century was the greatest cause of the decline of rhetoric" (ABBAGNANO, 2000, p.857). It is also worth highlighting, to get an idea of its historical importance, that, according to Philippe Breton (2003), until the end of the 19th century, rhetoric was the center of all teaching.

With the abandonment of rationalist dogmatism and the recognition of the probabilistic aspect of human knowledge, new rhetoric emerged in the 20th century, having as its main reference: *``O Tratado da Argumentação``*, by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1996), whose first edition is from 1958. The authors introduce their work by stating that, for three centuries, "the study of the means of proof used to obtain adherence was completely neglected by logicians and knowledge theorists". According to them, the "field of argumentation is that of the credible, the plausible, the probable, to the extent that the latter escapes the certainties of calculation" (PERELMAN and OLBRECHTS-TYTECA, 1996, p.1).

The New Rhetoric focuses mainly on argumentation. The word "argumentation" takes into consideration, the relationship with the other, that is, the listener. And, in this sense, we can verify that the conception that rhetoric focuses on identification processes is something very present in the approaches of authors specialized in rhetorical issues, as can also be observed in the work of Kenneth Burke (1969).

The author Philippe Breton (2003) records that, even in Greek Antiquity, in the 5th century BC, there was a transition of rhetorical speeches from the judicial context to the

political domain. It can be observed that, to this day, the role of the politician is confused with that of the speaker. Besides, within the scope of politics, it can be seen that manipulation is the most obscure part of rhetorical methods. In the identification process, considering a given audience, what is said is not always what is really thought. According to Breton (2003), in the first rhetoric, the oldest, the speaker is more a man of power than a man of ethics and opinion.

An essential point of the argumentation strategy - which is in line with the idea of rhetoric as a form of identification - is the search for a prior agreement with the audience, in order to also establish an identification with the defended point of view. According to Breton (2003), seen as a communication situation, the good use of argumentation then implies a break with classical rhetoric, characterized as the expression of power.

According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, the "idea of adherence and spirits to which a speech is addressed is essential in all ancient theories of rhetoric" It is "in function of an audience that any argument develops" (PERELMAN and OLBRECHTS-TYTECA, 1996, p.6).

Frequent terms that appear in texts on rhetoric are "speaker" and "audience", presupposing a face-to-face, face-to-face relationship, which also considers a process of identification and a physical context of reception, typical of oratory. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1996), however, choose to allocate issues in this field, such as elocution and mnemotechnics, to dramatic approaches. The main aspect they retain from traditional rhetoric is the idea of "audience". "Every speech is addressed to an audience, and it is very common to forget that the same thing happens with the written text. [...] [T]he material absence of readers can lead the writer to believe that he is alone in the world..."

(PERELMAN and OLBRECHTS-TYTECA, 1996, p.7). The authors emphasize that the text is always conditioned on who it intends to address.

The authors of New Rhetoric understand that each speaker creates an image of themselves based on their conception of the audience “that they seek to win over to their opinions”. Each “culture, each individual has its own conception of the universal audience, and the study of these variations would be very instructive, as it would make us know what men consider, throughout history, real, true and objectively valid” (PERELMAN and OLBRECHTS- TYTECA, 1996, p.37).

Breton(2003)explains that an argumentative text always involves the defense of an opinion, which is an essential characteristic of both argumentation and rhetoric. This aspect refers to the problematizations made around objectivity, and the differences between information and opinion in the field of journalism (TRAQUINA, 2004). It is currently considered that even informative text is permeated by bias, taking into consideration, the selection activity carried out in the reporting process. The difference in the argumentative text would be in the explicit and intentional intention of defending a point of view. However, one of the most important points of rhetorical action is the framing or initial reframing of the argument, which consists of sharing a common vision of reality in order to convince one of a point of view.

In the field of science, according to Breton (2003), demonstrations are required and rhetoric does not correspond to the universal validity relative to mathematical definitions, for example. For this author, argumentation will never be universal – unlike the demonstration of a mathematical theorem. According to Breton, scientific results are imposed and do not involve opinion. And argumentation cannot produce new

knowledge. The author, however, recognizes that a contradiction is the fact that the sciences are put into discussion, and, with this, opens a gap for Peirce’s contribution through the notions of fallibilism as a characteristic of any type of knowledge and abduction as a form of reasoning.

Breton (2003) recognizes that the history of rhetoric is permeated by procedures that aim to “please” or “emote”, which correspond to forms of sentimental identification. There are situations in which seduction is dominant and in others where argumentation predominates. The author also emphasizes that there are often no pure situations, which also leads to hybrid speeches between argumentative and emotional content.

Contrary to what we can observe in Peirce, Breton establishes the distinction that rhetoric aims to produce conviction around opinions, while science deals with statements capable of being demonstrated. This positivist perspective can be contrasted with Peirce’s fallibilist understanding of science, which also allows other approaches to rhetoric.

The context of reception can be problematized by the definitions of “social reality” and “social identity” made within the scope of sociology from a constructivist perspective (GIDDENS, 2012). From a rhetorical point of view, according to Breton (2003), what counts is not people, but that their ideas are shared, which can be assumed in a broad context, understood in sociology as “social reality”.

But, in order to defend an opinion, which may aim to change a point of view, the argument is often aimed at a particular audience. In any case, the intersection between mental universes is always taken into consideration.

WAYS TO AVOID VIOLENCE

According to Philippe Breton (2003), “argumentation” corresponds to a human action that aims to convince, which is very present in everyday life. This author’s work is focused on describing the means of argumentation, which aim to “trigger reasoning in a communication situation” (BRETON, 2003, p.7). This way of acting corresponds to a renunciation of violence, highlighting the shared social bond.

It must be considered that there are forms of violence disguised as arguments, which constitute questionable rhetoric, as occurs with repetitive advertising or the massive dissemination of messages through social networks in order to coerce many people. Breton (2003) emphasizes the argumentative aspect as the most ethical character of rhetoric, although this science, according to this author, does not focus on purely logical reasoning, but which has the capacity to convince subjects capable of establishing their own judgments independently.

It is important to note that the lack of rhetoric and, especially of argumentation, is glaring in everyday social life. This can be seen daily in the reports of events on television news with news about the lack of dialogue and frightening violence, for example, with actions against indigenous communities, poor communities, women, against the LGBTQIA+ community, and, especially, the refusal of certain Brazilian political personalities clearly arguing about their ideas. The appeal to religion in the political sphere is also a questionable strategy, since religious values do not presuppose argumentation, but only establish identification through faith in the order of the sacred.

Breton (2003), like Peirce, seeks a definition of rhetoric more focused on its ethical aspects. He treats argumentation as a specific part of rhetorical actions, to which he gives more

relevance precisely because of its ethical qualification. However, it must be taken into consideration, that the action of convincing others or persuading can appeal exclusively to emotions, which does not correspond to argumentative action.

According to Breton (2003), rhetoric involves defending an opinion. It is focused on the act of convincing, it can be established through manipulation, propaganda, seduction and argumentation, a theoretical aspect that is in fact interesting to understand as a more ethical procedure. Argumentation would be a means to share opinions that can result in actions (BRETON, 2003, p.11), a definition that goes towards Peirce’s pragmatism.

IN LINE WITH PEIRCE’S DEFINITIONS AND REFLECTIONS

It is important to highlight that ethical and scientific issues go beyond rhetoric. Not every act of persuasion has an ethical character, and the consequences of an absence of an ethical character in rhetorical action have consequences that go beyond the processes of persuasion, identification or conviction. If rhetoric can be related to the logical and scientific sphere, as Peirce proposes, by elucidating them semiotically, he is not without special concerns of both a scientific and ethical nature.

The definitions of rhetoric presented lead us to realize how the inaugural text of pragmatism, “How to Make Clear as Our Ideas” (PEIRCE, 1993) is imbued with a rhetorical meaning, although there is no concern to explain the production of meanings as an action intentional in relation to modifying the behavior of other human beings, as is typical of rhetoric.

Within his fallibilist conception of knowledge, Peirce defines that the “essence of belief is the creation of a habit and different types of beliefs are distinguished by the

different types of action to which they give rise” (PEIRCE, 1993, p.56). The author emphasizes the importance of beliefs in relation to our behavior, way of acting or way of living, and recognizes that “the action of thought is excited by the incitement of doubt and ceases upon reaching belief; and, thus, arriving at belief is the sole function of thought” (PEIRCE, 1993, p.53). However, all established beliefs – which involve the emergence of habits – are subject to doubts, which stimulate the development of thought.

Semiotics and pragmatism, alongside the problematization of linguistic issues throughout the 20th century, contributed to greater awareness of how rhetorical actions guide our way of thinking and acting. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca recognize this aspect as one of the roles of rhetorical studies. “We are firmly convinced that the most solid beliefs are those that are not only admitted without proof, but also, very often, are not even made explicit” (PERELMAN and OLBRECHTS-TYTECA, 1996, p.8).

The authors also recognize, as defended by Peirce, that there is a need for logicians to complete the theory of demonstration of mathematical sciences with a theory of argumentation.⁴

Everything we know is established as mediations, that is, interpretants (resulting from the triadic relationship also with signs and objects), which can be considered beliefs. In returning to dynamic objects, what one wants to know better or about what one wants to be semiotically or rhetorically establish another point of view, one can produce new immediate objects (which are the aspect of the dynamic object that the sign brings to the production of beliefs). A new perspective on the object of knowledge, knowledge, or interest can produce new beliefs in a given audience. This can either have a merely persuasive

meaning, which can give rise to self-interested or even fictitious illusory conceptions, or it can also be imbued with a scientific spirit. The rich range of concepts from Peirce’s semiotics can help us think about a diversity of aspects of rhetoric, whether in its ethical practices or those that are questionable from an ethical point of view.

Fallibilism occupies a central place in Peirce’s work. In the autobiographical text “*A Propósito do Autor*”, he recognizes that his ideas are brought together in this designation. He writes: “I always felt that my philosophy grew out of a contrite fallibilism, combined with a determined faith in the reality of knowledge, and an intense desire for investigation” (PEIRCE, 1993, p.47). Abbagnano (2020) highlights that the term was created by Peirce, “to indicate the attitude of the researcher who considers error possible at every moment of his research, and, therefore, seeks to improve his research and verification instruments” (ABBAGNANO, 2000, p.426-427). Fallibilism explains the development of knowledge through the continuous sequence of beliefs, habits and doubts.

Rhetoric can be understood as the communicative ingredient that is part of the process of developing knowledge, and can contribute to both its advancement and delay. But, in addition, if we take into consideration, abductive reasoning, defined by Peirce as responsible for the generation of new ideas, the probabilistic character, characteristic of rhetoric, can be considered an important contribution to the development of knowledge.

4. It is worth mentioning that, among the numerous references by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1996), the name of Charles Sanders Peirce is unfortunately missing.

THE “ORDINARY RHETORIC” AND “SPECULATIVE RHETORIC”

In the article: “*The general secret of rendering signs effective: on the Aristotelian roots of Peirce’s conception of rhetoric as dynamis, técnica and semeiotic form of the summum bonum*,” the author Alessandro Topa (2019) cites Peirce’s brief article (1998) “*Ideas, Stray or Stolen, about Scientific Writing*”, originally written in 1904, but which has been studied and interpreted by several researchers. The author focuses on Peirce’s different uses of the terms “universal art of rhetoric”, “common rhetoric” and “speculative rhetoric”. The first, according to Topa, corresponds to the potential of rhetoric, the second, to how rhetoric has been defined and practiced throughout history, and the third, as a definition of semiotic laws in normative sciences.

In the referenced text, Peirce defines speculative rhetoric in a pragmatist way, taking into consideration, that ideas correspond to the understanding of the world in which we live and our forms of action in this context of life: “the science of the essential conditions under which a sign can determine an interpretive sign of itself and everything it means, or can, as a sign, produce a physical result” (PEIRCE, 1998, p.326). Although with a pragmatist content, the intention is to elevate rhetoric to its more abstract and less instrumental character.

The “common rhetoric”, according to the interpretation of Topa (2019), taking into consideration, references by Gabriele Gava, would correspond to the uses of signs in different contexts, as occurs, among many others, in the journalistic and cinematographic spheres. It is part of a conception of communicative semiosis, in which events correspond to certain structures of semiotic relationships, which are studied in the speculative grammar defined by Peirce, as “a subdiscipline of normative logical semiotics” (TOPA, 2019, p.

414). The “concepts that reflect the necessary relations of this relationship (sign, object, interpretant) must be considered as necessary aspects specifiable for each performance of communicative semiosis” (TOPA, 2019, p. 414). There would necessarily be a means of communication, a media context and an interpretative system of signs.

Within Peirce’s philosophical architecture, according to Santaella (2003), there are three main parts, Phenomenology, Normative Sciences and Metaphysics. The normative sciences are Aesthetics, Ethics and Semiotics or Logic. The best-known part of Peirce’s philosophy is Semiotics or Logic, which is divided into Pure or Speculative Grammar, Critical Logic, and Pure or Speculative Rhetoric.

According to Nathan Houser, editor of the collection *The Essential Peirce*, speculative grammar is a branch of semiotics that investigates representations (signs and semiosis), and seeks to elaborate the necessary and sufficient conditions to represent and classify the different types of possible semiosis. Houser notes that speculative grammar is often presented as if it were all of Peirce’s semiotics, because different types of signs and trichotomies are described in it. The second branch of semiotics is “criticism”, which is the part of logic that studies the constituent parts of arguments and produces a classification of arguments, based on the assumption that every statement is true or false. In this field, according to Houser, the types of reasoning or logic studied and redefined by Peirce are important: abduction, induction and deduction. The third branch is speculative rhetoric. It is “the study of the necessary conditions for the transmission of meaning by signs from mind to mind, and from one mental state to another” (PEIRCE in HOUSER, 1992, p. XXXVIII).

This way, the frequent semiotic analyzes of

communicative texts correspond to speculative grammar, tending to be close to discourse analysis in the context of communication. One of the semiotic differences in relation to discourse analysis, which corresponds to rhetoric, would also be the possibility of enabling the elaboration of semiosis with certain purposes or texts with the intention of convincing.

The author Alessandro Topa (2019) emphasizes that “common rhetoric” corresponds to specialized forms of rhetoric, but that they cannot be unified, the singular term corresponding only, in a generalized way, to the practical manifestations of the rhetorical tradition. According to Topa, Peirce approaches “common rhetoric” as a single manifestation, presupposing the lack of self-reflection inherent in all its manifestations. This way, speculative rhetoric, as in fact a unique science, becomes a contribution to a reflected rhetoric, beyond practical instruments.

Citing Gabriele Gava, Topa (2019) mentions that, for Peirce, rhetoric is related to the effectiveness of signs and their ability to give rise to processes of interpretation and other types of effects. In the case of Aristotelian rhetoric, rhetoric would be a practical science, the result of an investigation into how argumentation can occur or must be done in the best way. The measurement of two opposing tendencies “reaches others and, thus, aims at an intelligibility based on generality, while at the same time being radically individual, living in the flesh of the speaker” (TOPA, 2019, p.422). Rhetorical action is constituted, firstly, of the generality that we have in common shared by language. Next, this generality is applied in its specific relevance, relative to each thing in a specific context.

Although Topa (2019) does not mention the types of signs defined by Peirce, the

relationship established between legi-signs, which correspond to more generalized ideas, and sin-signs, which can be understood as the updating of these ideas, can be clearly seen. in specific contexts. Quali-signs can also be mentioned, relating to the potential of new ideas expressed in abductive reasoning.

The iconic and indexical aspects, which semiotic theory allows us to analyze, can also open perspectives for understanding emotional aspects related to rhetorical actions, although, according to Breton (2003), these aspects can escape argumentative processes and give way to ethically rhetorical manifestations. questionable. From a Peircean perspective, there is no way to ignore in scientific semiosis also these aspects related to the phenomenological categories of firstness and secondness, although subject to fallibilism.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Peirce’s speculative rhetoric has an essentially theoretical character and allows an approach between rhetoric and science, contrary to what Breton defines. Speculative grammar, defined by Peirce, allows approaches and contributions to rhetorical reflections that can be quite significant in the context of communication. In journalism, framing actions are the most significant and can be analyzed semiotically.

It must be taken into consideration, in the critical moment in which we live today, that there is a deliberate refusal in certain currents established on social networks to exercise the ethical obligation inherent to argumentative discourse as a way of fully exercising citizenship. Semiotics and rhetoric are permeated by the ethical character inherent to the human condition, characterized by the exercise of human freedom, but in a way that guarantees the conditions of this freedom.

The importance of studying rhetoric lies

in the fact that our conception of the world is linked to the way we share meanings and, from a Peircean perspective, to how we are convinced to maintain or modify certain beliefs, which also lead us to ways of thinking, and consequently, ways of acting.

On the one hand, semiotics obviously has a significant rhetorical perspective and the pragmatist character of Peirce's philosophy cannot do without reflections on rhetorical questions. On the other hand, rhetoric cannot ignore the contributions of Peircean semiotics, and a renewed rhetoric can be developed in this perspective.

The objective of rhetoric is to establish agreement around certain ideas in order to encourage collective action or action. Despite its proximity to logic, established mainly by its argumentative aspect, as highlighted by Breton (2003), rhetoric has as its intention above all the political character, which can be understood as the predisposition of a certain

community of human beings to act in a certain way. direction, based on a set of beliefs defined and cultivated in common agreement, through communicative acts.

Each subject is affected and affects others through rhetorical actions, convinced and predisposed to convince through communicative acts, which can be understood semiotically as sign actions. From the individual's point of view in relation to his audience, his probable readers or listeners, "identification" can be approached in a rhetorical approach.

Rhetoric can only have scientific relevance if thought of from an ethical perspective. And the recognition of its scientific value consists in highlighting the role that rhetorical actions have in relation not only to everyday actions, as is typical of "common rhetoric", but also in relation to knowledge itself, as demonstrated by Peirce through his conception of speculative rhetoric.

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