

# The Rules of Speech

*by Pierre Lascoumes*

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**Speech can mislead us just as it can convince us of the truth. Clément Viktorovitch's salutary book reviews the basic rules of rhetoric along with its pitfalls and persuasive resources.**

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About: Clément Viktorovitch, *Le pouvoir rhétorique, apprendre à convaincre et à décrypter les discours*, Seuil, 2021, 480 p., 22 €.

Clément Viktorovitch's book is a theoretical and pedagogical work that introduces the general public to the main contemporary reflections on the uses of rhetoric. On the one hand, it provides readers with the tools of democratic argumentation and debate; on the other, it invites them to recognize speech that is hollow, manipulative, or perverse.

Let us make clear from the outset that the book is not an addition to the highly fashionable "self-help literature," which offers tools for gaining power over oneself and others via the mastery of effective, seductive language. Nor should Viktorovitch be reduced to the media image he has cultivated through presenting analyses of the speeches of politicians on French television shows. He is indeed well-known for his mischievous ability to decipher political doublespeak while using, aptly and without pedantry, some of the concepts of rhetoric (metaphor, sophism, paralogism, prolepsis, etc.).<sup>1</sup> The downside of this media success is that some view him only as a quality entertainer, a sort of intellectual who engages in humorous news commentary.

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<sup>1</sup> On the Canal + program "*Clique*," he used small screen inserts that provided the technical definition of these terms.

The book is something else entirely. It is not a compilation of Viktorovitch's television commentaries, but a treatise in the true sense of the word, one that brings together the history of rhetoric, the debates surrounding it, and, above all, the contents of rhetorical thought. Viktorovitch, a disciple of the philosopher Bernard Manin, holds a doctorate in political science and teaches at Sciences Po Paris. Another, though less obvious, dimension of the book is its political scope. The latter is hinted at on the belly band: "Speech is a weapon." For the author, mastery of rhetoric is a prerequisite for the quality of democracy, that is, for democratic debate and the possibility of agreement. I will return to this point at the end of this review.

## The Ethics of Rhetoric

The book opens with a brief history of rhetoric that traces the evolution of the controversies to which this art gave rise from Plato and Aristotle to Descartes. It also draws on the precepts of Arthur Schopenhauer in *The Art of Always Being Right*. The author refutes the conception of rhetoric as a science of manipulation, a technique for imposing one's point of view on others. He recalls the three dimensions of rhetoric: *logos* (the elements the speaker proposes), *ethos* (the image the speaker conveys), and *pathos* (the emotions the speaker arouses) (pp. 45-46). Rhetoric cannot be reduced to eloquence, to the ability to speak in public. On the contrary, Viktorovitch defends an ethic of rhetoric as the art of convincing through the reasoned confrontation of different points of view. He quotes the words of Chaïm Perelman: "Rhetoric is the set of discursive procedures for eliciting or reinforcing the adherence of individuals to the propositions submitted to them" (p. 44). Rhetoric is thus considered as a set of dynamics that develop according to different states of conviction (p. 50 *ff.*):

- An important question is how to choose the right arguments. The author warns against the easy use of "common sense" and examples alone (pp. 56-67). He also stresses the importance of understanding disagreements (p. 75).
- The key is to develop a line of argument that combines rigor, efficacy, and coherence. An excellent example is the different ways of convincing people to give up meat consumption (pp. 86-87). The author describes three registers of argumentation. The first is the environmental register, which highlights the impact of meat consumption on CO2 emissions and climate change. Then comes the moral register, which is centered on animal

suffering on farms and during the killing process. The third register focuses on public health and the negative impact of excessive meat consumption on the human body. As the author makes clear, these three registers of argumentation are not directly cumulative. The use that can be made of one or the other depends on the audience and their preconceptions. In selecting or classifying arguments from this repertoire, the speaker is caught between his or her personal ethics and the quest for speech effectiveness. For instance, though weak and questionable, the public health argument can be deployed to raise awareness among people who are less sensitive to the environmental and moral arguments.

- Another essential dimension is mastery of counter-argumentation. The author adapts some of Schopenhauer's "stratagems,"<sup>2</sup> in particular the modes of refutation *ad rem* (refuting the substance of an argument), *ad hominem* (refuting a type of argument), and *ad personam* (attacking the credibility of the interlocutor) (pp. 88-120).
- The author takes apart classic defense tactics such as manipulation, denial, reinterpretation, and relativization. (pp. 107-115).

## The Patience of the Gardener

Chapter 3 is devoted to the proper ways of structuring arguments. It outlines methods for constructing speech and ensuring its validity (pp. 117-166). Chapter 4 focuses on language and its games: implicitness, denotation, the recourse to negative forms, preterition, the choice of verbs, the use of the passive voice, modeling (pp. 167-226).

Chapter 5 importantly addresses the delicate issue of the mobilization of emotions through speech (pp. 227-296). Reason is not self-sufficient; *homo economicus*, who seeks to satisfy his preferences as best he can by weighing up cost and benefits, is an inadequate model. Taking irrationality into account is equally important, as it

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<sup>2</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Art of Always Being Right: Thirty Eight Ways to Win When You Are Defeated*, London, Gibson Square Books, 2004.

introduces complexity. The author refers to a body of contemporary literature that has demonstrated the importance of emotions in reasoning and knowledge processes. Effective argumentation combines rationality and recourse to emotion: “In every calculation, there is an emotional component [...] the expression and perception of emotions are undoubtedly an integral part of the functioning of the reasoning faculty” (p. 233). The author also analyzes how emotions can become a tool of manipulation (pp. 238-257). Chapter 6 examines the deceptively less important issue of the speaker’s projected image, or *ethos*. This factor, which contributes significantly to the production of conviction, is a prerequisite for speech and prepares the framework for its reception. It involves the more or less coherent assemblage of elements such as sincerity, coherence, and congruence. An analysis of Donald Trump’s speeches shows how this perverse rhetorician gained credibility and adherence through the skillful mobilization of emotion, *ethos*, competence, and seduction (pp. 323-325). Ultimately, *ethos* is a compromise that actors achieve through internal negotiations between the above elements.

Chapter 7 focuses on the mastery of debate, whether it is a question of convincing an interlocutor or defeating an adversary. It provides a number of tools for recognizing deception, which misleads interlocutors and dupes listeners, namely: reducing situations to oppositions, maintaining vagueness, using contradictory arguments, resorting to *pathos*. It also analyzes the abuse of logic, the use of fraudulent reasoning, and the recourse to artifice. Viktorovitch discusses the means to master debates and the use of the principles of competition: attack, defense, outbursts, and the art of answering questions. He does not claim to allow one truth or “the” truth to emerge, but he does aim to make deliberative discussion as coherent and productive as possible (pp. 377-434).

The book concludes with a lesson in humility, reminding us that mastery of the intricacies of rhetoric is no guarantee of absolute power. There are as many failures as successes, and the main effect of insistence is to increase resistance. Rarely does rhetoric magically change minds and reasoning. However, it does sow seeds that may grow and produce effects over time, without it being possible to explain why. As the author nicely puts it, “the patience of the gardener” prevails here over “the impatience of the alchemist.”

This book is easily accessible for non-specialists, despite the large number of concepts and in-depth analyses it contains. The simple style and the recourse to “case

studies” and “moments of deciphering” make it easy to follow. The 10-page glossary (pp. 459-470) in the appendix is also extremely useful.

In conclusion, this treatise should be complemented with a second book, which would present the author’s activist attempts to put his rhetoric-based, critical approach into practice. For several years Viktorovitch ran a popular education project, *Aequivox*, organizing courses, verbal jousts, and conferences, before coordinating the *Libre Parleurs* eloquence competition for high school students in Montreuil. These open-air laboratories in working-class neighborhoods have clearly and decisively enhanced an approach that could have been purely academic.

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