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**An Overview of Theoretical Connections between the Rhetoric of Modernity and
Postmodernity**

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Abstract

This paper explores the thematic convergences and departures within the rhetoric of modernity and postmodernity. In doing so, it explores some of their key themes such as language and meaning, reality and truth, autonomy and human progress, and reason concerning the works of Jurgen Habermas, John Locke, Jacques Derrida, Ferdinand de Saussure, Immanuel Kant and Jean Francois Lyotard. This paper employs a methodology of comparative textual analysis of the aforementioned authors' selected texts and their themes in their historical/temporal positions within the discourse of the rhetoric of modernity and postmodernity. It fulfills two objectives: to explore what recurrent themes of modernity and postmodernity appear in the canonical theorists' works, and to assess how they simultaneously overlap and differ from each other. Stepping on this comparative analysis, this paper brings together the thematic and theoretical connections between the rhetoric of modernity and postmodernity to conclude that the similarities and differences in the rhetoric of modernity and postmodernity among the selected theorists can be revisited through a thematic lens rather than the historical-temporal paradigms.

Keywords: language and meaning, communicating truth, reason, autonomy and human progress

Introduction

The term ‘rhetoric’ is infused with layers of meanings ranging from persuasion to deception. In this paper, the author employs the term ‘rhetoric’ to refer to a set of discourses that offers certain perspectives to influence the audience of a discourse community. That being said, in the context of this study, one who engages in an act of persuading or convincing the audience by proposing an argument is a ‘rhetorician’. Stepping on this delimitation, the paper draws upon Aristotle’s definition that considers rhetoric as “an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (37). This ability of finding the ways of influencing and persuading the audience depends on several factors such as who (rhetor), whom (audience), when (context and occasion), why (exigence), and how (means). These key elements holistically constitute what is called rhetoric in the traditional sense, and discourse and dialogism in the modern sense (Bizzell and Herzberg 1183). Among the key constitutive elements of rhetoric, the power of language and meaning are instrumental for the rhetoricians to construe the significance of certain perspectives that the rhetoricians aim to establish in their discourse communities. Given this context, the paper explores what discourse has been promoted by the modernist rhetoricians such as John Locke, Ferdinand de Saussure, Immanuel Kant, Jurgen Habermas and postmodernists such as Jacques Derrida, and Jean Francois Lyotard and how their discourses overlap and clash from each other. To study this issue, the author is prompted by Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg’s approaches of anthologizing rhetorical tradition in a temporal framework which has been found lop-sided. This paper’s attempt to explore the theoretical overview brings a new perspective in studying, teaching, and learning rhetoric of modernity and postmodernity arguing that, for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding, we should also approach them through thematic lenses such as language and meaning, reality and truth, autonomy and human progress, and power of human rationality rather than through chronological paradigms.

Working Time Frames of Modernity and Postmodernity

The exploration of thematic intersections and deviations in the rhetoric of modernity and postmodernity requires defining operational time frames for both periods. While precise divisions between the modern and postmodern eras lack consensus, scholars of the field such as Leah S. Marcus, Marjorie Perloff, and John Carlos Rowe tacitly hold that the European Renaissance was the onset of modernity, while the 1960s was that of postmodernity. Despite these historical distinctions, it is not hard to recognize that the boundaries of such frames are essentially constructed phenomena. Canonical historians of rhetoric such as Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg argue that the historical timeframes used for anthologizing the rhetorical history of the modern and postmodern are “arbitrary conveniences” (1183). Building on this perspective, this paper takes the above-mentioned arbitrarily constructed temporal divisions of the modern and the postmodern to examine thematic overlaps and divergences in the rhetoric of modernity and postmodernity.

Theorists of modernist rhetoric such as John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and Jurgen Habermas identify defining characteristics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as progress, rationality, scientific investigation, empirical observation, logic, and democracy. These concepts, historically revolved around Europe, particularly during the Age of Reason and the Industrial Revolution, witnessed significant socio-economic transformations. Jurgen Habermas, one of the prominent figures in modernist rhetoric, outlined these ideas in his influential essay “Modernity: An Unfinished Project” in 1996. According to him, the project of human progress, a central tenet of modernity, originated in eighteenth-century Europe but remained incomplete due to the interventions of postmodernity (45).

As a foundational rhetorician of modernity, Habermas rejects the idea of convergence between the goals of modernity and postmodernity. Instead, he firmly aligns himself with modernity, asserting that its objective is to enhance the betterment of human life. He argues: “The project of modernity as it was formulated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century consists in the relentless development of the objectivating sciences, of the universalistic foundations of morality and law, and of autonomous art, all in accord with their own immanent logic” (45). Habermas, here, argues that the project of modernity, entailing science, law, and art, faced disruption with the emergence of postmodernism. He further contends that the goals of modernity and postmodernity are fundamentally different, and asserts that the project of modernity aimed to establish harmony between life, art, and society.

Habermas’ Rhetorical Theory of Communication and Modernity

Habermas’ rhetorical theory of communication and modernity is rooted in his works such as *Toward a Rational Society* and *The Theory of Communicative Action*, where he articulates his perspectives on communication and its role in addressing the challenges of modernity. These works serve as his response to social issues such as political corruption, criminality, and class hierarchy, which he identifies as fundamental problems in modernity. Habermas’ central argument revolves around whether individuals in modern society can effectively confront these pervasive problems. As a staunch advocate of enlightenment rationality, he contends that the critical rationality inherent in human beings serves as the tool to combat control, domination, and exploitation. He defines ‘critical rationality’ as the capacity of individuals for “the unflinching examination of our most cherished and comforting assumptions” (Dreyfus and Rabinow 110). According to Habermas, harnessing the rational power of human beings is crucial in the pursuit of a just society. Furthermore, he posits that critical rationality acts as a potent weapon against inequalities, contributing to the construction of a rational and equitable society. In this way, he envisions communication, grounded in critical rationality, as a transformative force capable of addressing the core challenges associated with modernity.

Habermas envisions a rational society as one characterized by inclusive communication, where individuals actively engage in decision-making processes on political and economic matters by exercising reason. In this envisioned society, people can

argue, participate in discussions, and express their views through argumentative discourse. Habermas emphasizes the importance of such argumentative power of rhetoric in shaping this communicative discourse, a concept he terms ‘communicative action.’ He also places a profound faith in communicative action, believing that individuals can resist ideological domination through open and fair argumentation, ultimately making conditions of freedom and emancipation. In this context, he identifies three crucial communicative conditions. Firstly, a speaker communicates a truth that the audience receives as a legitimate truth claim. Secondly, the audience acknowledges that the speaker has an intention or motive behind making that truth claim. Thirdly, the speaker conveys the truth claim or message by taking into account the audience’s worldview. Meeting these three conditions ensures that the conversation between participants is fair, open, and equitable. In essence, Habermas sees communicative action as a powerful means to foster a society where discourse is characterized by fairness, openness, and mutual understanding. James A. Herrick succinctly synthesizes these ideas of Habermas in the following statements:

First, a truth claim is shared by speaker and hearer, that is, a speaker makes a claim that both speaker and listener understand in a similar fashion. Second, the hearer understands and accepts the speaker’s intention. That is, beneath the truth claim, the competent listener understands the operation of a motive. Habermas reflects a traditionally rhetorical orientation with attention to the underlying motives that animate human communication. As a third element in communication competence, the speaker adapts to the hearer’s worldview. Habermas’ ‘intersubjective’ orientation is again evident; his goal is communication that is ‘mutual’ and ‘uncoerced.’ (222)

Thus, Habermas takes the three conditions- sharing of truth claim, audience’s understanding of the speaker’s motives, and communicative competence of the speaker and the listener- as both an ideal for successful communication and a prerequisite for communicative competence, particularly in matters of public concern. In that sense, Habermas’ rhetoric requires harmony and cooperation between the speaker and their audience.

Locke and Derrida on Language and Meaning

The source of Habermas’ primary concern for achieving freedom and emancipation through critical rationality can be traced back to the late seventeenth-century rhetorician John Locke. Within the context of modernist rhetoric, John Locke’s works hold significant theoretical attention, particularly with themes concerning language and meaning, as well as his political principle of the division of power.

As a key figure in liberalism, John Locke formulated a political philosophy advocating the division of power within state institutions: the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, as expounded in his *Two Treatises on Civil Government*. Locke’s rhetoric of limited representative government developed in the text is considered a substantial contribution to the Enlightenment’s promise of ‘human progress.’ His proposal

to impose limitations on the authority of state institutions aims to prevent potential tyranny, perceived as a major impediment to human progress. Locke's theory further influenced the implementation of limited representative government, a system designed to assist citizens in securing their basic rights and freedom. Regarding this, Charles Van Doren in his *A History of Knowledge* states that:

Locke, with his ringing words, had not abolished tyranny from the face of the earth. Tyranny still prospers, at the end of the twentieth century, and it may do so until the end of time. But his words had nevertheless made tyranny more difficult for tyrants, whose enemies now— and forever after—would be stronger for believing they had right on their side. (221)

Furthermore, Locke is credited with exerting a significant influence on republicanism, liberalism, and the drafting of *The Declaration of Independence*.

In a similar vein, Jacques Derrida, a key and foundational thinker of poststructuralism and postmodernism, engages in a critical examination to challenge any form of closed, hierarchical, and centralizing tendencies, whether within a text or a social context. Zlatan Filipovic, a critic influenced by Derrida, reviews Derrida's works and identifies him as profoundly skeptical toward any manifestation of tyranny, be it epistemological, ontological, political, or metaphysical. As a political philosopher, Derrida's perspective on the rhetoric of postmodernity involves the deconstruction of all forms of tyranny. Filipovic specifically emphasizes Derrida's theory of centerless and non-hierarchical socio-cultural and political structures. In amplifying Derrida's postmodernity, Filipovic states:

At the heart of Derrida's political thought that concerns itself with democracy, justice, ethics, and the other, one also finds literature that opens the space necessary for the contestability of the social practice that democracy endlessly calls for. Indeed, the very idea of literature is somehow inimical to the slackening of the discursive field that animates political life. (15)

However, John Locke and Jacques Derrida's perspectives towards language and meaning are overtly contradictory. Locke, in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, posits that language serves as a medium for expressing thoughts formulated through individual experiences. He takes words as signs of ideas and emphasizes that the relationship between words and ideas is not inherent but rather arbitrary. In addition, Locke questions the capacity of words to accurately capture the ideas of the mind, attributing this to the absence of a natural correspondence or connection between language and reality.

Locke's language theory is encapsulated in key sentences from his essay: "Words are sensible signs necessary for communication" (254); "words often secretly referred, first, to the ideas in other men's minds, secondly, to the reality of things" (255); "words by use readily excite ideas" (255); "Words often used without signification, their signification perfectly arbitrary" (256); "words are used for recording and communicating our thoughts" (260). These propositions imply that Locke's theory establishes a clear hierarchy, with

thought as primary and language as a mere tool for communication. This hierarchical perspective is explicitly evident in his dismissal of the figurative use of language, which he labels as ‘rhetoric,’ as articulated in the following statements:

It is evident how much men love to deceive and be deceived, since rhetoric, that powerful instrument of error and deceit, has its established professors, is publicly taught, and has always been had in great reputation: and, I doubt not, but it will be thought great boldness, if not brutality in me, to have said thus much against it. Eloquence, like the fair sex, has too prevailing beauties in it to suffer itself ever to be spoken against. And it is in vain to find fault with those arts of deceiving wherein men find pleasure to be deceived. (268)

As indicated in the aforementioned quote, Locke’s concept of rhetoric aligns with figurative language, which he deems as “perfect cheats” (268) in the process of constructing meaning. He underscores this linguistic aspect to contend that ‘Reality’ and ‘Truth’ in the world possess fixed qualities, a fixity he believes is compromised by the unreliable nature of words. Locke’s anti-rhetorical position is explicitly clear in his argument: “I cannot have ideas disagreeing to the existence of things. . . . But the mistake is commonly in my giving a wrong name to my conceptions” (268). Critics of Locke often characterize his stance as opposition to the rhetorical dimension of language. For instance, L. Brooks Hill accuses Locke of associating rhetoric with falsity and deception. He argues that “[Locke] identified with the work of figurists and verbal pretentiousness; with false erudition; with a deplorable scholastic educational system that accentuated verbal play, and with other obstacles to effective advancement of knowledge” (109).

In this context, Derrida formulates his theory of language by refraining from blame to language for its perceived inadequacy in encapsulating truth. This perspective of Derrida stands out as a sharp contrast with Locke’s approach. Unlike Locke, Derrida’s objective is to accentuate the fluidity and playfulness inherent in language, mirroring the nature of ‘reality’ and ‘truth.’ In his essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourses of Human Sciences”, Derrida challenges the structuralist theory of language and meaning. Although Locke’s ideas are not directly referenced in the essay, Derrida’s engagement with Ferdinand de Saussure allows us to deduce his critique of modernist notions regarding language-meaning relationships.

In this analysis, the author considers Saussure as representative of modernist linguists, given the substantial influence of his *Course in General Linguistics* published in 1916, on subsequent language theories. Similar to Locke, Saussure contends that the relationship between a word and external reality is not natural but rather arbitrary, established through repeated use. Locke argues, for instance, that “words, by long and familiar use, come to excite in men certain ideas so constantly and readily that they are apt to suppose a natural connection between them. But that they signify only men’s peculiar ideas, and that by a perfect arbitrary imposition . . .” (255). Correspondingly, Saussure shares the notion that “Not only are the two domains [words and ideas/external reality] that

are linked by the linguistic fact shapeless and confused, but the choice of a given slice of sound to name a given idea is completely arbitrary” (721). In the following section, the paper elucidates how Derrida critiques these ideas of Locke and Saussure, shaping postmodernist rhetoric to illustrate postmodern rhetoric of fluidity, plurality, and uncertainty inherent in language and its relationship to meaning, truth, and reality.

Derrida identifies an inherent contradiction in the logic of modernist theorists, particularly concerning the concept of ‘arbitrariness’ of a word and its meaning. He contends that this arbitrariness, discussed by earlier theorists, serves as the fundamental source of uncertainty and plurality within the linguistic system. According to Derrida, the relationship between a sign and the signified or referent is not natural, leading to the possibility that a word, at any given time, may fail to convey its intended meaning. Expanding on this notion, he suggests that the language system does not primarily refer to meaning but, instead, it refers recursively to other words. Consequently, what emerges is a circular system where words point to other words, creating what Derrida describes as a ‘chain of signifiers without signifieds’:

This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse-provided we can agree on this word- that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely. (1118)

In this context, Derrida’s concept of the absence of a ‘central signified,’ an original or transcendental signified, serves as the root cause of meaning uncertainty within the language system. The lack of a fixed signified opens up a realm of infinite possibilities and meanings within the system. Derrida draws connections between his ideas and what he terms as “the Nietzschean critique of metaphysics” (1118), “the Freudian critique of self-presence” (1118), and “the Heideggerean deconstruction of metaphysics” (1118). He views these critiques as fundamentally poststructuralist and postmodernist, contending that their theories collectively contribute to questioning and unsettling the epistemological and ontological foundations of Western metaphysics. It is also noteworthy that, despite historically belonging to the modernist era, Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Freud (1856-1939) exemplify as thinkers whose ideas bridge the division between modernist and postmodernist rhetoric. This historical perspective reinforces the notion that the boundaries between modernist and postmodernist discourses are both fluid and interconnected.

A notable distinction between Locke and Derrida emerges in their philosophical orientations, where Locke is guided by the notion of a singular and fixed ‘Truth’ (with a capital ‘T’, denoting an absolute), whereas Derrida is driven by considerations of ‘truths,’ and at times, the absence of any singular truth. Locke’s entire theoretical argument in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* revolves around his fascination with ‘primary idea’ and ‘secondary idea,’ which can be interpreted as Locke’s ‘essential Truth.’ So,

Derrida's theory of language and meaning is preoccupied with critiquing the inadequacy of language for failing to accurately represent the primary and secondary ideas.

In a similar vein, Saussure also assigns higher importance to 'the signified' in his theory of language and meaning. Both Locke and Saussure share a common emphasis on a singular, essential truth that underlies their respective theories. Derrida, however, diverges from this approach by exploring multiplicities of truths and questioning the very idea of a fixed, singular truth. Derrida argues:

Turned towards the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediacy is therefore the saddened, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play whose other side would be the Nietzschean *affirmation*, that is the joyous affirmation of a world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation. *This affirmation then determines the non-center otherwise than as loss of the center.* (1125)

In this quote, Derrida articulates his conception of truth, drawing on ideas established by predecessors such as Rousseau and Nietzsche. According to Derrida, the human world is saturated with signs, and these signs, in and of themselves, are insufficient to represent truths or the Truth. Instead, they serve as tools for interpretation, and individuals are free to engage in their own interpretations. Importantly, these interpretive processes are never-ending. With this argument, he positions himself as a foundational thinker and a trailblazer of poststructuralism and postmodernism, building upon the legacies of Freud, Nietzsche, and Heidegger.

Kant and Lyotard on Reason and Sublime

The rhetoric of modern-postmodern intersections and departures is further exemplified in the writings of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998). Kant, an Enlightenment and modernist rhetorician, underscores the significance of reason, viewing it as a tool to achieve freedom and independence. In his "What is Enlightenment?" Kant advocates for the courageous use of reason, proclaiming, "Sapere Aude! Have courage to use reason is the motto of enlightenment" (225). He further states that enlightenment is to be "free from self-incurred tutelage" (225), and he characterizes it as a transformative "movement" from immaturity to adulthood, defining immaturity as "the incapacity to use one's intelligence without the guidance of another" (225).

As seen in the discussions of Locke and Derrida above, the concepts of freedom and independence are the pivotal in Kant's rhetoric of enlightenment, identifying them as characteristics of modernity and modern society. However, this optimistic faith in human rationality is met with skepticism and interrogation in the realm of postmodernity, as elucidated in Lyotard's theory.

The intersection of modern and postmodern rhetoric is evident when examining Kant's *Critique of Judgment* alongside Lyotard's work, "The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge." Kant's development of the theory of the sublime revolves around the profound sense of joy or awe an individual experiences in response to the external world. This occurs when one encounters vast, boundless phenomena such as hurricanes, boundless seas, starry night skies, or volcanoes, evoking apprehension due to their immense scale. Kant characterizes the sublime experience as a failure of human reason, attributing it to the incomprehensibility of objects that defy calculation and measurement. The failure stems from the overwhelming vastness and boundlessness of these sublime objects. Kant elucidates the magnitude of the sublime-rendering object as:

But if we call anything, not only great, but absolutely great in every point of view (great beyond all comparison), i.e. sublime, we soon see that it is not permissible to seek for an adequate standard of this outside itself, but merely in itself. It is a magnitude which is like itself alone. It follows hence that the sublime is not to be sought in the things of nature, but only in our ideas; but in which of them it lies must be reserved for the 'Deduction'. (388)

Kant extends his argument by asserting that sublime experiences encompass a fusion of both pain and pleasure. In the presence of such a blend of emotions, the perceiver encounters difficulty articulating the precise nature of their feelings toward the object.

Kant delves into the nuances of this amalgamated experience of 'pain-pleasure,' elucidating it as:

The feeling of the sublime is therefore a feeling of *pain* arising from the want of accordance between the aesthetical estimation of magnitude formed by the imagination and the estimation of the same formed by the reason. There is at the same time a *pleasure* thus excited, arising from the correspondence with rational ideas of this vast judgment of the inadequacy of our greatest faculty of sense, in so far as it is a law for us to strive after these ideas. [emphasis added] (389)

Kant, in this quote, highlights the incapacity of the 'faculty of sense' to fully grasp the enormity of the sublime-rendering object—a concept later embraced by Lyotard as emblematic of the failure inherent in Enlightenment promises of prosperity through human reason. This failure is intricately linked to representation, as human cognition proves inadequate when confronted with sublime experiences. The limitations extend to language, leaving both cognitive and linguistic faculties helpless. Kant's thoughts on the sublime resonate with the notion that all human experiences are inherently subjective and relative to individuals which is one of the key concepts aligning with the key tenets of postmodernism. Relating to this, Vivian explores various forms of social identities and subjectivities as foundational to postmodern culture, stating that "the expression and maintenance of different social identities, the ethical practices that make possible particular forms of subjectivity, have emerged as the defining political investments of the postmodern era" (236). In this sense, while Kant is rooted in modernist rhetoric, his theories

inadvertently laid the groundwork for postmodernism, revealing the interconnectedness and deviations between these two intellectual trends within his works.

So far, the above concepts of Kant have been synthesized to illustrate how he, as a modernist theorist, has left a lasting imprint on the postmodernist theories developed by Lyotard. Lyotard explicitly references Kant in delineating his version of postmodernity. In his seminal essay, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" Lyotard traces the influence of modernity in postmodernity, positing that postmodern itself is a part of the modern. He identifies Kant's notion of the unrepresentable sublime experience as a pivotal starting point for the emergence of postmodernity: "The postmodern would be that which, in the moderns puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself: that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable" (224). However, the divergence between Kant and Lyotard lies in their treatment of 'the unrepresentable.' Kant expresses lament and nostalgia for the transparent and communicable experience, while Lyotard readily accepts and celebrates it, designating it as 'a condition.' Lyotard also acknowledges "Nietzschean perspectivism . . . [and] the Kantian theme of the sublime" (272) as significant influences in the modernist theoretical trajectory toward the emergence of postmodern thought. Likewise, Lyotard establishes his stance on 'truth,' asserting that "postmodernism as incredulity towards metanarratives" (279). By metanarratives, Lyotard means modernists' tendencies of essentializing and totalizing descriptions about the social reality and human conditions.

Lyotard's postmodernism champions the embrace of little narratives over metanarratives. He critiques rhetorical-philosophical traditions that emphasize concepts like 'truth,' 'rules,' 'reality,' 'correctness,' 'unity,' 'communicability,' 'conformity,' and 'origin' as problematic due to their essentialist nature. Using Marxism as an example, Lyotard argues that its monolithic explanation of the world oversimplifies the complexities of human reality by reducing everything to the economic condition. Similarly, he critiques the grand narrative of Enlightenment, which equates reason with emancipation, for imposing a singular truth onto the diverse phenomena of the world. These reductionist tendencies within rhetorical-philosophical developments are identified as grand narratives by Lyotard.

Lyotard also singles out 'Realism' as another metanarrative, contending that the term is misleading because there is no objective reality in itself. He suggests that characterizing something as reality is deceptive and highlights the subjective nature of perceptions. He also rejects the Enlightenment's confidence in reason and prosperity, dismissing it as an idealistic presumption. According to him, "The objects and the thoughts which originate in scientific knowledge and the capitalist economy convey with them one of the rules which support their possibility: the rule that there is no reality unless testified by a consensus between partners over a certain knowledge and certain commitments" (271). This statement encapsulates Lyotard's postmodern perspective of the absence of a

singular Truth. Instead, what is perceived as truth is viewed as a ‘negotiation,’ ‘consensus,’ or ‘commitment’ among participants.

In the analysis above, a notable similarity and several differences emerge between Kant’s rhetoric of modernity and Lyotard’s rhetoric of postmodernity. Both Kant and Lyotard concur that experiences are subjective and that expressing them transparently and communicably through language poses a considerable challenge. Thematically, they agree that this difficulty gives rise to uncertainty and fluidity in speaker-audience relations, contending that the sublime experience is essentially ‘unrepresentable.’ This represents a shared thematic overlap in Kant’s and Lyotard’s rhetoric of the sublime.

However, despite this thematic convergence, they hugely differ in their perspectives, positions, and attitudes toward this condition. Kant’s rhetoric on enlightenment posits human reason as a potent tool to overcome obstacles, enabling individuals to embody modernity and enlightenment. For Kant, being modern is synonymous with autonomy, independent judgment, and the critical use of reason. In contrast, Lyotard’s postmodern rhetoric challenges the efficacy of human reason, rejecting the idea that society is inherently transparent. Lyotard contends that transcending “the gates of society” is difficult, if not nearly impossible (Vivian 236). Consequently, Lyotard’s postmodern rhetoric comes to emphasize an individual’s condition in society as relational, interdependent, and situational. So, Lyotard’s version of postmodern rhetoric is rooted in “ontological uncertainty and epistemological skepticism” (Snipp-Walmsley 407). Snipp-Walmsley further ascertains:

Scepticism, doubt, and paranoia are the tools of the trade for the postmodernist thinker who usually believes that agreement is always enforced, that truth is merely a coerced consensus, and everything is relative. Thus, we can move towards a more democratic mind-set only through a spirit of dissensus, a tolerance for difference, a move to the marginal, and through small, localized resistance. (408)

Based on Snipp-Walmsley’s assessment of postmodernity, we can ascertain that postmodern rhetoric aims to question the argumentative and epistemological grounds of ‘Truth’ or ‘consensus’ about human condition to advocate multiplicity of truths and dissensus because the society we inhabit are permeated with differing perspectives and ideas of the plurality of race, sex, gender, ethnicity, class, and nationalities. This theme has been the central focus in the present-day discourse of rhetoric and writing studies across the globe.

Conclusion

The analysis of the selected texts of Jurgen Habermas, John Locke, Jacques Derrida, Ferdinand de Saussure, Immanuel Kant and Jean Francois Lyotard inform us of the imperatives of thematic weaving. The analysis informs that Locke (1632-1704), Saussure (1857-1913), Derrida (1930-2004), Habermas (1929-) are from different historical-temporal periods, and their rhetoric carries the episteme of their periods. However, the historical-temporal rhetorical boundaries get erased when we review their

rhetoric from a thematic perspective. One of the themes that brings them together, even though with differing arguments, is their rhetoric on communication, language, and meaning. Habermas emphasizes the role of critical rationality and communicative action where open and fair rhetoric can mitigate ideological domination. Rooted in the Enlightenment rhetoric, Locke advocates for the division of power and views language as a tool for expressing fixed truths, despite acknowledging its arbitrary nature. Saussure, similarly, sees the relationship between words and reality as arbitrary but focuses on the structural aspects of language. Derrida critiques Habermas, Locke, and Saussure by highlighting the inherent instability and fluidity in language, arguing that words do not lead to coherent communication but to an endless play of signifiers. Thus, while revisiting the modernist and postmodernist rhetoric, thematic exploration makes the temporal and historical boundaries feeble, enabling us to understand the rhetoric alternatively but comprehensively.

Similarly, the analysis of the rhetoric of Kant (1724-1804) and Lyotard (1924-1998), despite the fact that they are from different historical-temporal periods, shows intersections and departures in their views on reason and the sublime, reflecting the transition from modern to postmodern rhetoric. Kant views reason as a pathway to freedom and enlightenment, arguing that human rationality can navigate and overcome the sublime's unrepresentable and incomprehensible phenomena. On the contrary, Lyotard, embracing postmodern rhetoric, critiques the Enlightenment's optimistic faith in reason, arguing that experiences and truths are inherently subjective and unrepresentable. Lyotard sees the sublime as a rhetoric of the unrepresentable and views the rhetoric of societal narratives as fragmented and situational rather than unified. While both rhetoricians acknowledge the challenges of expressing the rhetoric of the sublime, Kant seeks to transcend these limitations through reason, whereas Lyotard embraces the complexity and plurality of postmodern rhetoric, rejecting grand narratives in favor of localized, individual rhetoric. Thus, the analysis, again, informs us of the fact that the evolving dialogue between the historical-temporal and thematic reading of rhetoric. In sum, the analyses show the possibility of redrawing the boundaries of rhetorical traditions from the thematic and topic-based threads of discussions over historical-temporal delineations. Hence, the study has opened the avenues for thematic weaving of the history of rhetorical traditions from the West as well as the non-West.

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