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ATEG Conference
17 September 2010

Connecting Grammar Instruction to Rhetorical Tropes and Figures

I am primarily a writing teacher, so I generally approach the study of grammar from that angle. In writing instruction a perennial complaint about including the study of grammar in the classroom is that it is too dry, too boring, too detached from actual language use. Today, I want to discuss a possible method of integrating grammar instruction more prominently and perhaps more pertinently in the study of style in writing. After all, when we teach students grammar, it is ultimately a clear, correct—and, if possible, elegant—style of writing and speaking that we hope to develop in students. I am a firm believer that the teaching of writing cannot ignore the study of grammar and usage. But I believe also that we must keep refining our ways of teaching grammar so that students find it both interesting and important—so that they begin to see the grammar of English as the very material they are working with when they create print documents, electronic texts, and formal speeches. I will suggest that the study of rhetorical tropes and figures—I'm changing my title a little, substituting the word *figures* for *schemes* to be more consistent with the sources I'm drawing on—is a fruitful way of awakening this consciousness in students.

But before I get to the heart of my subject, I want to digress first to history to give a context and definitions for the terms I'll use and the arguments I'll make. I'd like to refer you to the first page of your handout, which lists and defines some of the terms. In ancient Greece and Rome, then for centuries in Europe and even the first century of European civilization in America, the study of grammar preceded the study of rhetoric; or, perhaps more accurately,

grammar study was the initial step in the study of rhetoric. Rhetoric, as you can see from the first column on the first page of your handout, was an art divided into five canons, of which style was the third. We know from the Roman teacher Quintilian, who lived in the first century A.D., that the study of style was founded on the study of grammar. He said this: “Those . . . are not to be heeded who deride this science [i.e., grammar] as trifling and empty; for unless [grammar] lays a sure foundation for the future orator, whatever superstructure you raise will surely fall. . . . Alone, of all departments of learning, it has in it more service than show” (29). So Roman school boys spent a good deal of time learning the parts of speech and parsing sentences, getting a conscious knowledge of the structure of Latin settled in their minds to help them when they began composing short written and spoken exercises. Correctness in using the grammar of Latin, also called “purity,” was the first virtue of style. The virtues of style are listed in the second column on the first page of your handout.

The whole aim in teaching style was to teach an overriding principle in rhetoric, and that is *decorum*. According to Gideon Burton, “Decorum invokes a range of social, linguistic, aesthetic, and ethical proprieties for both the creators and critics of speech or writing. Each of these must be balanced against each other strategically in order to be successful in understanding or creating discourse.” Without a knowledge of grammar, a writer or speaker would likely fall short in trying to use a style that meets the requirements for decorum, because he might do something simple such as make an error in subject-verb agreement or verb tense that would tend to undermine his credibility, his ethos.

When we look to bygone eras at the elaborate lists of things students learned when they studied style, it seems that style may well have been the canon of rhetoric that teachers dwelt on longest; it certainly was in the Renaissance, the period that gave us such great writers as

Shakespeare and Milton, whose knowledge of tropes and figures is on display everywhere in their writing. You can see the names and examples of all the tropes and figures on Gideon Burton's Web site, *Silva Rhetoricae*, for which I have given you the URL at the bottom of page one. The list of various tropes and figures available for use in crafting a style runs to dozens with Latin names, such as exclamatio and interrogatio, and scores more with Greek names such as antimetabole, polyptoton, and synecdoche. The tropes and figures were known as the ornaments, or sometimes the flowers, of style. Ornamentation, as you can see from the second column on the first page, was the fifth and final virtue of style. From its name, ornamentation might seem to be mere decoration, like little flowers made of icing on a cake. But it is not. Burton points out that the root of "ornament" is *ornare*, a Latin word meaning "to equip, fit out, or supply." To ornament does not mean to simply decorate your rhetoric with pretty frills, but involves using just the right tropes and figures to convey your meaning with greatest impact.

In the third column of the first page you can also see the levels of style—plain, middle, and grand—and you will note that they are distinguished in large part by the presence or absence of ornaments (e.g., the plain style is sparing in its use of tropes and figures) or by the kinds of ornaments (e.g., the middle style does not use the figures of appeal, but the grand style does). The grand style uses all of the ornaments the middle style does, but it adds to them the powerful figures of appeal: apostrophe, exclamation, and rhetorical question.

As Burton notes, the tropes and figures attend to "the sound and rhythms of words in their oral and aural dimensions" to produce "delight or admiration in the audience"; as a result, they may jeopardize clarity, the hazard being that the figures and tropes one uses can draw so much attention to themselves or be so overdone so that they distract a listener or reader from the main thread of the discourse. But they can also *enhance* a speaker or writer's point and deliver it

more forcefully to the audience. Like most other things, ornamentation is a double-edged sword, so the study of the ornaments of rhetoric must, of course, take this into account.

The point I want to make is that studying the tropes and figures along with their possible contributions to crafting a written style can be a fruitful path to helping students see the usefulness of consciously understanding the grammar of the language they so readily speak. But I'm going to digress again to tell you how I came to this realization. For the past ten years, I have been teaching a course on the history of civilization using the development and teaching of rhetoric as the thread we trace through the first 1500 years of Western society. The focus in the second course, 1500 to the present, is on examining some famous uses of rhetoric in documents that helped increase the scope of human rights and freedom. We spend a couple of days in each course learning about style in rhetoric, and I have always marveled that students are so interested in knowing the various tropes and figures, despite their difficult names. I require my students to learn about 30, including familiar ones such as metaphor and simile, but also more challenging ones such as anadiplosis and zeugma. The students don't seem to mind memorizing the names and characteristics of each; in fact, it seems to be an intriguing challenge. What's more, they demonstrate that they have truly learned the names and functions of these tropes and figures by continuing to identify them as we encounter them in subsequent texts.

I found a similar level of interest in learning and using tropes and figures when I began teaching another course about three years ago, one in which I focus on helping students improve their writing style. In this course I also do a fair amount of reviewing grammatical terms and concepts to lay a foundation for discussing usage and the elements of a clear and effective style. In the course I have tried to pair various concepts and names in grammar as much as possible with the functions of the various tropes and figures. I have found this to be a successful strategy

in teaching or reinforcing grammatical concepts and constructions—and even to some extent punctuation. While many students are somewhat bored or even put off by the usual grammatical terminology, they are more interested in the rather difficult names and particularly the uses of the tropes and schemes. I assign students to create or to find examples of the various tropes and figures we study, and I then use the students' examples to teach with. I have been delighted to see how many of them find instances of the tropes and figures in the songs they listen to and in other contemporary discourse, as well as in the literature they are studying in other courses.

Now I want to illustrate some ways of approaching the study of grammar (and even some punctuation marks) through the study of style and to suggest some reasons why this approach may be effective. If you will turn to the second page of the handout, I will use my remaining minutes to describe a few examples of what I have done.

I like to start with the figures of appeal. Students are usually surprised to learn that there is such a thing as the grand style, but after we look at a few examples together, they agree that there are very grand and moving passages from literature, from public speeches, and from holy writ and that these passages really do have the features of high style, particularly the figures of appeal. Interrogatio, which students already know as rhetorical question, and exclamatio, which is almost like the familiar word exclamation, are both easy to use in a discussion as one of the three main types of sentences: declarative, interrogative, and exclamatory. It is a simple matter to discuss how exclamations may be less than a sentence, as simple as a word or phrase. It takes a bit longer to discuss ways of making questions. I have found students are fascinated by the distinctions among types of questions, and particularly to learn the names intonation question and tag question. From there it is a short step to illustrate that rhetorical questions exemplify all the question types, and they can be found in just about any kind of discourse, not just grand

passages. Of course, teaching these figures also gives an opportune moment to teach the use of the question mark and exclamation point as well, if such instruction is needed.

The figure of appeal called apostrophe is often new to students. They tend to know the word apostrophe only in reference to a little mark of punctuation they're often not sure how to use. I find students do know the term *personification*, however, so it isn't hard to build on that understanding to teach them that apostrophe is addressing an absent being or an inanimate thing as if it were present. Inanimate things thus addressed are of course personified, treated as if they had ears and eyes. Then it's easy to teach them that the inanimate or absent being so addressed is called in grammar a noun of address and is set off by a comma if it comes at the beginning or end of a sentence, or by two commas if it is in the middle.

Students tend to already know metaphor, though they often confuse it with simile. The trope of metaphor gives a perfect opportunity to teach how two nouns can be connected with the verb "to be," making a sentence with a subject complement, specifically a predicate noun, as in "I am a rock." The ways in which "I" resemble a "rock" can then be discussed to show how the equation of "I" with "rock" is not literal but asks the audience to use imagination to interpret the sentence. We discuss how this sentence offers a picture and makes an impression on a reader or listener that a sentence such as "I am strong" or "I am firm" does not. Metaphors that work by negation such as "No man is an island" or "Love's not Time's fool" offer an opportunity to show how either the subject or the verb can be negated, and that despite the negation, the metaphorical quality remains. The audience has to decide how if no man is an island, what he is instead. Or if love is not Time's fool, what it is instead.

The trope of simile also gives an opportunity to show how two rather disparate nouns can be linked by the be-verb along with connectors such as *like, as, as . . . as, as if*, and possibly

others. Simile may be one of the harder tropes to spot because it isn't always as straightforward as "She is like a mule" or "He is as strong as an ox." Like metaphor, simile gives an opportunity to discuss the linking of rather disparate nouns on the basis of some similarity. It can also lead into a discussion of the many functions of the word *like*, particularly its prepositional function, and how *as* may differ from *like*. A fine point of usage could be taught in connection with simile, if desired, i.e., that typically *like* is followed by a noun alone, while *as* introduces a clause or a phrase that could be expanded to a clause.

While teaching metaphor and simile, I find it useful to bring up two other ways nouns can be used figuratively, in metonymy and synecdoche. Students get confused about the difference between these two, and it may not be worth insisting on a sharp demarcation because if you've ever studied these to any extent, you know that so-called experts confuse them too. Metonymy is a trope in which a commonly associated feature of something is used to name or designate the thing itself. For example, the executive branch of the US government is associated with the White House. So it's not uncommon to hear a news reporter say, "The White House announced today" to mean that the President or his advisors announced something. Synecdoche is a trope that uses a part to stand for a whole, or a whole to stand for a part. So the familiar "all hands on deck" means, of course, that all sailors, not just their hands, should come to the deck of the ship. Or to use a whole for a part, "Spain won the World Cup this year" means that a small group of in Spain, the national soccer team, triumphed. There is no particular fine point of grammar associated with these two tropes, but they can be integrated into a study of nouns and their uses to demonstrate how the naming function of language is endlessly productive and intriguing, and how much scope there is for writers to be inventive and come up with fresh expressions.

The difference between abstract and concrete nouns can be taught in connection with the figure syllepsis, a construction in which a word is used to modify or govern two or more other words which have different senses but are otherwise parallel in number or gender. For example, “The levees were broken and so were the promises” uses *broken* in relation to both *levees*, a concrete noun standing for something that can be physically broken, and *promises*, an abstract noun standing for something “broken” by bad faith rather than floods. The concept of direct object can be explained in connection with this figure.

Coordinating conjunctions, those humble little function words that are indispensable to speech and writing, can be used repeatedly in the figure polysyndeton for long, drawn-out emphasis, maybe even finger-wagging emphasis, as you can see in the example from Maya Angelou. The absence of coordinating conjunctions in the figure asyndeton can likewise add emphasis and sometimes a feeling of urgency. I think asyndeton also often contributes to a nice rhythm in the style. In connection with these two figures, it’s fairly easy to teach students the six coordinating conjunctions and how they can be used to join words, phrases, and clauses. And it is a good time to have a quick lesson on how to use or not use commas with these conjunctions.

Polyptoton, a figure of repetition, works by using a root word in two or more forms in the same sentence, as in “Choosey mothers choose Jif.” This figure offers an opportunity to discuss morphemes that create nouns from verbs, adjectives from nouns, adverbs from verbs, and so on. It also offers the chance to discuss words that undergo functional shift without adding a morpheme, which in turn offers an opportunity to discuss how you can tell whether the word “love” in a given sentence is a noun or a verb. Likewise, the figure antimetabole sometimes gives occasion to discuss functional shift, but not always, since many words used in antimetabole keep their function when transposed. I find antimetabole surprisingly prevalent in contemporary

discourse, so it presents an opportunity for students to listen and watch for it in daily life and to try to coin their own examples.

Hyperbaton, another figure of transposition, offers a lot of opportunities to discuss grammatical concepts since practically any sentence element can be displaced from its normal position for poetic effect or emphasis. The subject and predicate can be inverted; the direct object may come first; a predicate adjective may precede the noun it modifies; and the verb may come last. This figure may even often offer an opportunity to teach pronoun case with personal pronouns as object pronouns are foregrounded and placed in first position, as in the line from the hymn “Beautiful Savior”: “Thee will I honor, praise, and give glory.” Students love this figure because they immediately recognize it as the way the character Yoda speaks in the Star Wars movies. It is not difficult for students to construct the normal word order from a sentence that uses hyperbaton and by so doing start to understand to what extent sentence elements are mobile in English.

Ellipsis, a figure of subtraction, offers an opportunity to discuss how the audience’s mind can often supply missing sentence elements. It offers an excellent opportunity to teach some fine points of punctuation that generally still apply. For example, the missing word is sometimes marked by a comma as in the example from Plato—“Wise men talk because they have something to say; fools, because they have to say something”—where the missing word “talk” is so indicated. Also, when an ellipsis is also an antithesis, as this one is, the boundary between the two clauses is usually marked by a semicolon. However, in the next example by Virginia Woolf, only a comma is used between the first full clause and the second elliptical one, suggesting this is not a rigid rule, and the semicolon and comma are sometimes interchangeable. Students usually know the word ellipsis from writing research papers in which they show omissions in quotations

by using three periods. Making a connection between that familiar meaning of ellipsis and the figurative one can expand their understanding of what ellipsis is and does.

The oxymoron offers an opportunity to teach the yoking of two words that seem contradictory, usually word pairs in which one is an adjective and the other a noun, or one is a verb and the other an adverb. But it might be two nouns as in “military intelligence” or even in a prepositional phrase such as “the sounds of silence.” Students enjoy this figure very much along with the figure of paronomasia, or pun, which like oxymoron, functions by making the audience do a double-take and pause to think about how words are combined. Since spelling, and particularly spelling differences between homophones is not a particular strength of today’s generation of youth, they sometimes don’t get puns at first. I find it helpful to explain what is meant by the words homonyms, homophones, and homographs to explain how puns work. Students then enjoy finding them, creating them, and explaining how they function grammatically.

Finally, the figure parenthesis is useful for teaching how the basic structure of a clause may be interrupted by inserting a list of words, a phrase, or even another clause, like an aside or a “by the way” comment that a writer or speaker deems important to bring up in the middle of a sentence. Students grasp this concept readily, and it can be quite enlightening for them to understand how these parenthetical elements need to be set off, usually by commas but also by dashes when the writer wants to emphasize the parenthesis. When we want to minimize the intrusion, we use the punctuation marks we call parentheses. A parenthesis could also be marked by brackets. I find students have typically not been taught how to use a dash or a pair of dashes, and it can add a lot to their stylistic repertoire to learn the concept of parenthesis and how to punctuate it.

These are only a few of the tropes and figures that add beauty and eloquence to a writing style. Obviously, I've chosen some that do pair up nicely with concepts in grammar and punctuation that are important to teach writers who want to truly understand their craft. For other tropes and figures, neat pairings don't spring as readily to mind. But every trope is made of words and every figure exhibits some interesting syntactic structure, so to look at the grammar involved in each trope and figure is a way to reinforce this important principle: *all* choices a writer or speaker makes in crafting a style rest ultimately in the grammar of the language and are enabled or hindered by the options the grammar affords. Giving students a conscious understanding of the language they already speak may open up possibilities for them to craft beautiful, powerful language that is a pleasure to read or to hear, language that lingers in the memory and in the heart. So with Quintilian I say, "Let no man, therefore, look down on the elements of grammar as small matters" for "to those entering the recesses, as it were, of this temple, there will appear much subtlety on points, which . . . may exercise even the deepest erudition and knowledge" (29).

Work Cited

Quintilian. *The Institutes of Oratory*. Book 1, Chapter 4. In *Quintilian on the Teaching of Speaking and Writing: Translations from Books One, Two, and Ten of the Institutio oratoria*. Ed. James J. Murphy. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.