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Some key concepts of Critical Rhetoric A conversation with Raymie McKerrow¹

Interviewed: Raymie McKerrow

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This interview highlights the academic career of the Professor Emeritus Raymie McKerrow and some key concepts of Critical Rhetoric (CR) since its proposition until his most recent publications. The methodological steps of this interview were as follows: a first contact with the teacher to obtain his acceptance to carry out the interview and the constant emails exchange in order to elaborate questions and answers. In this dialogue, there was a chance to discuss the multidisciplinary outline of that rhetoric perspective and the importance of Foucault's theory of power for the formulation of the concepts of critique of freedom or domination, and the dialectic of control. Furthermore, it is possible to understand the appropriation done by CR to generate changes in the social relationships built in society. Finally, it is pointed up the significance of the author's work since he established the basis of a new rhetorical perspective in language science and in communication studies.

Keywords: Critical Rhetoric. Critique of domination. Critique of freedom. Dialectic of control.

Alguns conceitos-chave da Retórica Crítica: uma entrevista com Raymie McKerrow

Nesta entrevista, são destacadas a trajetória acadêmica do professor emérito Raymie McKerrow e alguns conceitos-chaves na Retórica Crítica (RC), desde sua proposição até as publicações mais recentes. O percurso metodológico desta entrevista seguiu os seguintes passos: contato com o professor para obter a anuência em participar da entrevista e estabelecimento de trocas de correios eletrônicos a fim de articular perguntas e respostas. Nesse diálogo, houve a oportunidade de discutir o perfil multidisciplinar dessa vertente retórica e a importância da teoria de poder de Foucault para a formulação dos conceitos de crítica da dominação ou da liberdade e a dialética do controle. Também é possível compreender a apropriação realizada pela RC para gerar mudanças nas relações sociais constituídas em sociedade. Finalmente, ressalta-se a relevância do trabalho do autor, uma vez que ele estabeleceu as bases de uma nova perspectiva retórica nas ciências da linguagem e nos estudos da comunicação.

Palavras-chave: Retórica Crítica. Crítica da dominação. Crítica da liberdade. Dialética do controle.

Algunos conceptos clave en retórica crítica: una entrevista con Raymie McKerrow

En esta entrevista son destacadas la trayectoria académica del profesor emérito Raymie McKerrow y algunos conceptos-chaves en Retórica Crítica (RC), desde su proposición hasta sus publicaciones más recientes. El recorrido metodológico de esta entrevista siguió los siguientes pasos: contacto con el profesor para obtener el consentimiento de participar de la entrevista y el establecimiento de intercambios de correos electrónicos con el fin de articular preguntas y respuestas. En ese diálogo, hubo la oportunidad de discutir el perfil multidisciplinar de esa vertente retórica y la importancia de la teoría de poder de Foucault para la formulación de los conceptos de crítica de la dominación o de la libertad y la dialéctica del control. También es posible comprender la apropiación realizada por la RC para generar cambios en las relaciones sociales constituídas en sociedad. Finalmente, se resalta la relevancia del trabajo del autor, ya que él estableció las bases de una nueva perspectiva retórica en las ciencias del lenguaje y en los estudios de la comunicación.

Palabras claves: Retórica Crítica. Crítica de la dominación. Crítica de la libertad. Dialéctica del control.

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Presentation

Raymie McKerrow is a renowned American intellectual who has taught at several universities, including the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the University of Maine and the University of Ohio – where he retired from his academic career in 2017, after becoming professor emeritus –, in addition to working as a visiting professor at several other institutions of higher education in the United States and abroad. At the University of Ohio, he took on different academic roles and management positions, as well as being active on the Editorial Board of various journals, including *Communication Quarterly*, *Argumentation and Advocacy*, *Communication Studies*, *American Communication Journal*, *Communication Monographs*, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *Advances in the History of Rhetoric*, *Journal of Communication*.

He was author and co-author of more than 70 articles, editor and co-author of 18 books, among other scientific productions, along with receiving different awards and honors – such as the Lifetime Achievement Award promoted by the Division of Critical and Cultural Studies of the National Association of Communication, in November 2009 – confirming its representativeness in the international academic environment.

“In Human Sciences, the delimitation of foundations, objects and methods is neither a simple nor a neutral task, and challenges are observed for professionals from other areas/fields [...]”² (Azevedo; Piris, 2023, p. 227). Despite this, the productivity of McKerrow’s work indicates that there are humanities theorists who manage to work very well in non-disciplinary fields.

The articulation between rhetoric and ideology, since the early 1980s, provided him an intellectual maturation built throughout the decade. Consequently, in 1989, in line with the ideological turn and the postulates of historical materialism, and in partnership with Michael Calvin McGee, Raymie E. McKerrow published the essay “Critical rhetoric: Theory and praxis”, where the eight principles that guide rhetoric as a critical practice³ were established. This work constituted a project that intended to carry out both a critique of domination, which intends to emancipate subjects from oppressive forces, and a critique of freedom, which builds a reflexivity based on praxis and analysis of the relations of power (McKerrow, 1991).

² In the original: “Em Ciências Humanas, a delimitação de fundamentos, objetos e métodos não é uma tarefa simples nem neutra, e são observados desafios pelos quais passam profissionais de outras áreas/campos [...]” (Azevedo; Piris, 2023, p. 227).

³ The eight principles of Critical Rhetoric, postulated by McKerrow in 1989, are: 1. *Ideologiekritik* [Ideological Criticism] is in fact not a method, but a practice; 2. The discourse of power is material; 3. Rhetoric constitutes *doxastic* rather than *epistemic* knowledge; 4. Naming is the central symbolic act of a nominalist rhetoric; 5. Influence is not causality; 6. Absence is as important as presence in understanding and evaluating symbolic action; 7. Fragments contain the potential for polysemic rather than monosemic; 8. Criticism is a *performance* (McKerrow, 1989).

In 2020, on the thirtieth publication anniversary of this text, a special issue was organized around research aligned with Critical Rhetoric (<https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/13951/2970>). The texts are accompanied by video interviews, conducted by Art Herbig (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmDEXow83GQ>). In this material, Mckerrow is explicitly in favor of freedom as a means to diversify, challenge and reimagine what we mean by erudition. He also explains that critical rhetoricians ask big questions more often than they find simple answers, but it is this complexity that has enabled the expansion of studies and research, especially in increasingly conflicting, controversial and complicated times, since critical rhetoricians continually challenge what we know about the past, present and future.

This esteemed thinker has stated that he owes his work ethic to his early years working on his parents' farm in Montana, and that an appreciation for classical rhetoric emerged during his undergraduate and graduate academic studies. While working on rhetorical history, he began his studies in argument theory, but this type of research did not last long. He also recalls that Douglas Ehninger was his main adviser at the beginning of his academic studies, in addition to teaching an important lesson that is still valid: it is always possible to show respect for someone else's work, taking it seriously enough to criticize its conclusions. Throughout his professional experience, McKerrow (2008) learned that it is possible to carry out quality research in any institution willing to give some time and support to the researcher. As a teacher, he declared that the new student groups provoked him a sense of wonder and enthusiasm, in addition to leaving him energized to carry out the activities.

The activities he carried out for more than 40 years contributed to the integration of different professionals, linked to criticism, to the Critical Rhetoric project. The diversity of thematic and objects of study have been a milestone in this area of studies and research, as well as the motivation to conduct an intellectual work related to current social problems, as highlighted by McKerrow throughout the following interview. These characteristics mark the productivity of this collective effort, undertaken by researchers located in different parts of the world.

Interview

EID&A: According to an autobiographical article published in 2008, in the *Review of Communication*, volume 8, we read that you were part of the debate's team since high school, after that you started a major in speech, and in the first couple of years of university it began your interest for classic rhetoric. However, what did really spark your interest in the field?

Raymie McKerrow: I was attending a small college in Billings Montana after High School-then called Eastern Montana College. I continued my participation in forensics (participated in extemporaneous speaking and original oratory contests at various area institutions). As EMC⁴ did not have a speech major, I transferred to Southern Illinois University and continued in forensics as well as graduated with a communication degree (also married my bride of almost 58 years before heading to SIU-we were 20 and 19!). That led to getting a Master's degree at Colorado State (my best friend was also going to be attending there, which is what led us there) and then moving on to get a doctorate at Iowa – I was familiar with the research done by a major professor there, and wanted to work with him.

EID&A: In the autobiographical article we just mentioned, you indicated that the concept of Critical Rhetoric came up during several discussions you had with Michael Calvin McGee. Considering this and the enormous relevance that this researcher has in the field, we would like to know more about your relationship with the scholar. How did you get in touch for the first time? How did you start talking about rhetoric? What made you think of the need of funding a new discipline within rhetoric?

Raymie McKerrow: McGee and I met when he came for a semester to teach at the University of Wisconsin, where I was also on the faculty at the time. In essence, two farm kids went out for a beer and bonded over a conversation that outlined our similar backgrounds and interests. That conversation became the basis for a continued friendship, until his untimely passing. I have said publicly, many times, that I would not have become the scholar I am now without his influence – we first discussed ideas that became the basis for the CR essay in the early 80's.

⁴ EMC is the abbreviation of Eastern Montana College.

EID&A: We are aware that Critical Rhetoric was developed in the context of the ideological shift of pragmatics studies in the decade of 1980. We also understand that this type of rhetoric aims to perform a reflexive action upon a historic and cultural context in which the discourse is produced, and it also seeks to discuss the domination and freedom dimensions in discursive practices. Nevertheless, it would be our honor to hear from your own words what is the definition and objectives of Critical Rhetoric.

Raymie McKerrow: As I indicate in an Encyclopedia essay, when using either a critique of domination or freedom, the goal of the critic or *rhêtôr* is a commitment to change. “Whether the critique establishes a social judgment about ‘what to do’ as a result of the analysis, it must nonetheless serve to identify the possibilities of future action available to the participants” (McKERROW, 1989, p. 92).

As Ono and Sloop have argued, the critique of freedom carries with it a goal of specific change in the individual moment of advocacy. Once matters have been altered, and relationships have been constructed along new lines, the commitment returns to ask if this is the best option available. The practice of critical rhetoric works from inquiry rather than from a specific method or means of analysis (McKERROW, 2001, p. 642).

Thus, CR is an open-ended approach to assessing a given context; it focuses attention on repressive power (domination) and power as productive (freedom), with these seen as “two sides of the same coin” (ONO; SLOOP, 1992, p. 50).

EID&A: To our knowledge, Critical Rhetoric incorporates theories funded in other fields such as the feminist theory or Foucault’s theory, among many others, but how these multidisciplinary ideas contribute to theorizing this type of rhetoric?

Raymie McKerrow: The use of these as theoretical frames for the analysis of CR’s components was critical. Foucault, in particular, was central to the analysis of power. My use of feminism grew over time, as I began to teach undergrad and grad courses in Feminist Rhetoric. The ‘principles of praxis’ in the 89 essay form the basis for critical practice.

EID&A: In 1989, Critical Rhetoric was introduced to rhetorical studies with your essay, nevertheless, it has been a little bit over 30 years since its earliest formulation, and now there are new developments such as Participatory Critical Rhetoric (PCR) with authors like Middleton *et al* (2015). What do you think about that proposition? What changes would you add to it? If any.

Raymie McKerrow: Actually, I would not make any changes in the work done on PCR; a major principle I hold to is that I don't "own" CR. What people do with it, how they extend or apply it, is their business. I may not agree with what they've done, but I am not going to challenge their application of the concept. That is my approach, in this instance, to PCR.

EID&A: In the next few questions, we would like to discuss the inaugural article in Critical Rhetoric entitled Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis due to its significance importance for the field. So, allow us to go back in time for a while. In this first article, you said that "a person cannot escape from the influence of dominant actors", and then you cited Giddens (1979, p. 149) to affirm that the only possibility is to participate in the "dialectic of control". In this context, how would you describe this dialectic in your own words?

Raymie McKerrow: With respect to the "dialectic" – I've copied below some additional text from the CR essay – what is intended here is to suggest that 'dialectic of control' implies a conversation between dominant and dominated – between 'superior' and person perceived as 'inferior' in some fashion, and with respect to a given situation. 'Dominance' does not have to be universal across all parts of any relationship or issue. It may be that the dialectic of control goes through multiple changes over time between individuals. What I wrote doesn't actually get at this as well as it might – the phrase 'in terms of the classes...' does appear to make this a permanent relationship between people – it may be in some situations, and it may be variable in others. A key term in what is excerpted below is "interpellated" – that is to say we are all subjected to and by the dominant ideology or set of values that permeate society. There are, of course, variations in how influential some values or ideological positions are – hence differences of opinion exist.

"[...] Nevertheless, the impetus to so function, and the possibility of change, is muted by the fact that the subject already is interpellated with the dominant ideology. Actions oriented toward change will tend to be conducive to power maintenance rather than to its removal.

The locus of the "dialectic of control" can be found in discourse which articulates between class and people. The dominant and the dominated both have recourse to a rhetoric which addresses the people in terms of the classes to which they belong." (McKERROW, 1989, p. 94)

EID&A: In the Critical Rhetoric introductory article you talked about skepticism and anarchism in Foucault's theory of power, but we would like to know how do you think those two concepts relate to power in the perspective of Critical Rhetoric.

Raymie McKerrow: The key terms in this issue are “permanent criticism” and “privilege” – first, every change in social relations likely alters the power that exists between people. Some people retain privilege, or gain new privilege, but others lose in some way. The key question becomes: are we better or worse off for the change either as a totality of society, or as individuals involved in a dialectical discussion that invokes power differences that exist in that particular relation? With respect to anarchy – the phrase “freedom without a point” applies – what it suggests is that anarchy has no goal or purpose other than obtaining freedom – what then? What happens after freedom is obtained?

EID&A: In the initial article of the field, you said that “Discourse is the tactical dimension of the operation of power in its manifold relations at all levels of society, within and between its institutions, groups and individuals” (McKERROW, 1989, p. 98). Regarding this definition of discourse and power within it, would you mind explaining what did you mean with the idea of discourse being “the tactical dimension of the operation of power”?

Raymie McKerrow: “Tactical dimension” suggests a process whereby discourse is used in a strategic manner to obtain some goal. How does change occur? What I meant by the phrase above (as I consider it now!) is that a primary, if not THE primary way in which power relations manifest and are opened to alteration, is via discourse. “Tactics” implies pre-planning – thought ahead of time re. how to manage a situation.

EID&A: As a final conclusion for this interview, and regarding the article “Research in Rhetoric” Revisited (2015), where you cited David Zarefsky (2004) by saying that one significant question is whether rhetoric “can be applied to any subject, or whether every subject can be reduced to a rhetorical construction”, we would like to ask you your thoughts about it since this mentioned article was published 8 years ago. Do you still agree with Schiappa's conclusion (2001), and if so, would you mind explaining it.

Raymie McKerrow: I've included Schiappa's comment below – I still do agree with Schiappa's conclusion.

To define a term broadly does not necessarily make the term meaningless or useless. What is significant about the rhetorical turn is not that “everything is rhetoric,” but that a rhetorical perspective and vocabulary potentially can be used to understand and describe a wide range of phenomena. (SCHIAPPA, p. 268, 2001)

As the article suggests, this issue involved the “Big-Little” conversation that was a dominant topic at that time. The key concept here is “everything is rhetoric.” As I noted in the essay, that is not the case. Rather, as noted below, a rhetorical perspective is a valuable tool to use in understanding and/or altering a specific power relationship, or obtaining some other goal. My example was “death” is not, in and of itself, “rhetorical.” It assumes that characteristic in the way we respond to its occurrence, and how we use ‘death’ as a means to convey some thoughts about, for instance, the current Russian/Ukrainian situation.

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