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Rhetorical skills and inclusion in the context of contemporary social challenges

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Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The aim of this study is to present the potential threats posed by modern communication technologies. The communication environment surrounding an individual influences the structure of their neural network. Intensive immersion in content offered by today's cyberspace tends to detach users of digital media from the limits of the body, physical space, and temporal constraints. Prolonged exposure to virtual worlds may result in the loss of the ability to attain awareness of one's authentic "self." The proliferation of non-verbal interactions risks undermining the ability to actively use language; as a result, the critical function of human consciousness may be weakened. In this context, what challenges does contemporary education face?

Research methods: The author draws on selected critical commentaries on education by renowned scholars in the humanities (Ortega y Gasset, Adorno, Liessmann, Wikforss) and, in a contemporary context, scrutinizes the impact of technological change on the development of rhetorical (speech) skills among university students. This analysis is conducted against the backdrop of constructivist reforms in education. The article was prepared as part of the research project VEGA 1/0142/24 *Jazyková inkluzívnosť: medzi integratívnou a reštriktívnou komunikáciou* [Linguistic Inclusiveness: Between Integrative and Restrictive Communication].

Process of argumentation: The article begins with an introduction that characterizes modern society as a "post-typographic culture" (Ong, 1982). It then identifies potential pitfalls associated with cyberspace and highlights the weakening of language skills resulting from the excessive

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passive consumption of virtual content. The decline in active language use poses a threat to the development of the individual's critical consciousness.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: For the full integration of individuals into society, that society must be composed of autonomous subjects. Therefore, within the educational process in today's post-typographic culture, it is necessary to strengthen the development of active speech practices and the autonomous consciousness of learners.

Conclusions and recommendations: As a safeguard against the potential decline of linguistic abilities in future generations, this article proposes the inclusion of rhetoric at all levels of education. Historically, rhetoric emerged in the public sphere of ancient democratic societies; however, over the past century, it has often been reduced to an instrument of propaganda serving totalitarian power structures. In the contemporary context, rhetoric must be adapted to new communication needs and media channels. In this regard, the German school of rhetoric associated with Saarbrücken proposes the concept of so-called *functional rhetoric* (Geissner, 1974).

Introduction

The society, or culture, in which we live in the first quarter of the twenty-first century is often described using terms such as *information*, *post-industrial*, *postmodern*, *post-digital*, or *transhuman*. Perhaps its most distinctive feature is the accelerated progress in communication technologies, as a result of which we now live in what has been termed a "post-typographic culture" (Ong, 1982 [2006]). In this context, one can speak of true globalization—or *planetization*, to use the term coined by the French philosopher Teilhard de Chardin. Indeed, events occurring in one part of the planet can now be shared almost instantaneously, both visually and audibly, with people in other regions of the world. Owing to advances in communication technologies and the growing number of orbiting satellites, people from different cultures and geographical areas are able to communicate with one another through a simple connection to the global communication network. As a result, communication technologies contribute to the realization of a form of global inclusion, integrating virtually every inhabitant of the planet—via cyberspace—into what is often described as a "global village" (McLuhan, 1962).

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Alongside the rapid technological development observed since the twentieth century, a number of philosophers (Ortega y Gasset, Adorno, Liessmann, Wikforss) have argued that technological progress does not automatically translate into spiritual or intellectual advancement. In addition to the risks that modern technologies pose for individual development, scholars have also drawn attention to their social impact on education, especially in the context of school reforms inspired by constructivist pedagogy.

Drawing on empirical research in pedagogy and education, Swedish philosopher and member of the Swedish Academy Åsa Wikforss has demonstrated how constructivist ideas have contributed to the decline of school systems in Sweden, the United Kingdom, and France. Referring to studies by researchers such as Schleicher, Linderoth, Hirsch, Christodoulou, and Gustafsson, Wikforss argues that, in the process of democratizing education, constructivist principles—combined with the weakening of the teacher's role as a mediator of knowledge—have had a negative impact on educational outcomes. In particular, they have undermined key goals of education, including the development of critical thinking, creativity, and communication skills.[1]

This article focuses specifically on the level of speech and communication abilities in the context of efforts toward linguistic inclusion.

The traps of cyberspace

Owing to the many possibilities offered by communication technologies, people today are becoming increasingly immersed in virtual worlds. It is not only that we are able to communicate with people at a distance; we also spend ever more time surfing the internet. In other words, cyberspace is gradually absorbing us. This is hardly surprising: *homo sapiens* is also *homo ludens*—human beings enjoy play, entertainment, and

[1] The expert review of Wikforss's work in Slovakia was written by analytical philosopher T. Sedová (2022).

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diversion. It can be said that today's cyberspace provides what was once the domain of *belles-lettres* and later of radio, television, and cinema—and much more besides. Cyberspace enables the global circulation of an endless amount of fiction and is not limited to verbal production; as it also offers a combination of auditory, visual, and spatial stimuli.

With regard to their impact on people—and on the human mind—these new possibilities represent a truly formidable challenge. As noted by the Italian philosopher Cristiana Senigaglia, the multiplication and intensification of the consumption of such fictive projections leads to a separation of individuals from the boundaries of their own bodies, physical space, and time rules. Individuals stay immersed in virtual worlds for extended periods, where they are unable to develop a stable sense of self. As a result, they are not only exposed to the risk of manipulation but also lose the opportunity to achieve awareness of their authentic "self." A preoccupation with purely fictive worlds prevents them from developing a sense of concrete action and responsibility. Consequently, they also lose their orientation toward others, to the detriment of the notion of the "you." An absent or insufficient relationship with other beings—combined with the dissolution of the boundaries of one's own body—leads to complications in the formation of individual subjectivity. In other words, the subject ("me") becomes an object ("it") (Senigaglia, 2011).

Language and the subject

In the process of self-awareness and the formation of the individual as an autonomous subject, interaction with others plays a crucial role, with language functioning as the dominant medium of communication. The acquisition of language requires sufficient time and specific conditions for each individual and, although it is genetically conditioned, it must take place in early childhood. It is worth noting that the period of linguistic intellectualization also begins relatively early, around the age of four.

Nevertheless, the above-mentioned advances in communication technologies are increasingly intruding upon the traditional role of language

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in shaping individuals from an early age. They lead to an ever more aggressive reduction of natural language use during the developmental period in which an individual's critical consciousness should be formed through language itself. The growing and often unreflective introduction of such technologies into educational processes is gradually contributing to a decline in the active use of language. For example, typing on computer keyboards is replacing the practice of manual text transcription, during which memory centers in the brain are activated. Oral assessment, which requires students to retell and verbally process learned material, has also nearly disappeared from many classrooms. Instead, it is frequently replaced by written tests or other tasks that rely on computer input. The result is a steadily widening gap between the passive and active use of the mother tongue—a phenomenon I can attest to not only from personal experience, but also from the experiences of other university lecturers.[2]

Passive language use means that an individual understands words but does not actively use a large portion of their vocabulary. Such people are able to read, but often cannot fully convey or share the meaning of what they have read. If the gap between active and passive vocabulary becomes too wide, individuals are unable to express abstract feelings or thoughts—or, put differently, their own view of the world. As a consequence, the critical function of the consciousness is weakened. People may understand instructions, but they are unable to discuss them or defend their position. Their situation resembles that of migrants who are insufficiently familiar with the local language and therefore remain in a passive communicative mode. Their inability to articulate their thoughts excludes them from full participation in discussion. Unlike a person who experiences themselves as a subject and is able to express

[2] The Swedish professor Åsa Maria Wikforss reports a similar experience in Chapter 5 ("Knowledge and School") of her book *Alternativa fakta – Om kunskapen och dess fiender* (2017). Reflecting on her reading of university students' final papers, she notes that she must spend increasing amounts of time on basic language corrections. It is not merely a matter of improving style—she often has to finish sentences for the students because their writing is so poor that the meaning is difficult to understand. According to Wikforss, this problem concerns not only language but also the students' thinking itself (Wikforss, 2021, pp. 143-177).

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that subjectivity, the linguistically restricted individual tends to leave decisions about their fate in the hands of someone—or something—else.

It is evident that an active vocabulary can develop only through active language use. The suppression of active vocabulary development in one's primary language (mother tongue) leads to the suppression of intellectual development—and thus also hinders the development of an autonomous personality. There can be no future for a nation made up of individuals who command their mother tongue more passively than actively, as such individuals struggle with abstract thinking and with formulating visions of the future. If, in addition—as is the case in many countries today—there is strong pressure to learn foreign languages at an early stage of intellectual development, this may accelerate the decline of the linguistic community in question.

Mind formatting

However, even for people who do not have difficulties with the active use of language, certain linguistic influences may still render them vulnerable to manipulation—often without their realizing it. In a televised interview, one of the most frequently cited scholars in the social sciences, Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells Oliván, stated that if politicians openly admitted that their power exists only in our minds, they would lose this power. If people are forced to think in ways that serve particular interests—or are compelled to resign themselves to their situation —power is exerted over them regardless of whether they like it or not. Power operates in people's minds.

Our minds are organized on the basis of communication networks; more precisely, the neural networks of the brain are shaped through the influence of the communication networks present in the surrounding environment. Those who control external communication also control people's brains (Castells Oliván, 2012).

If communication is understood as the exchange of information, then in the phase of communication control, it becomes the management of input information on the basis of which opinions are formed—and thus

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also the control of the exchange of views, experiences, and interpretations among people. This amounts to control over the way people perceive the world. Most people perceive events around them mainly through the mediation of language—through texts composed of sentences and words. Through verbal messages, therefore, it is possible to introduce into people's minds whatever those in power deem necessary to place at the center of public discourse; conversely, it is also possible to suppress issues that they do not wish to become subjects of public debate.

However, in considering the influence of language on people, it is not only the content but also the form of verbal interaction that matters. According to the findings of several scholars (Ong, 1958; McLuhan, 1962; Parry, 1971), patterns of thinking are determined by the form in which linguistic codes are used. For a very long period in human history, language existed exclusively in oral form. As the Chilean philosopher Rafael Echeverría explains, before the invention of the alphabet, people lived within a language of action, as language and action were so closely intertwined that speech itself had the power to bring certain things into being—either in reality or in the mind. In other words, these events would not have occurred had they not first been spoken aloud.

With the advent of writing, the language of action was transformed into a language of being (Echeverría, 2005, p. 15). Among other consequences, this shift contributed to the widespread belief that being is primary and that language merely provides a secondary description of it. This transformation led to a flourishing of systematic observation and description of the surrounding world and, consequently, to the development of abstract thinking and a vocabulary that had not been necessary in oral cultures. The gradual spread of writing across the world led to the emergence of an entirely new cultural formation: oral culture evolved into chirographic culture based on manual inscription through written texts. After several millennia, the invention of printing reinforced this historical turning point by enabling the wide dissemination of written texts and the stable preservation of knowledge in written form. In this way, humanity contributed to the development of general education, i.e., literacy. Over time, chirographic culture was gradually replaced by typographic culture.

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Today, we live in a linguistic culture that can be described as post-typographic. Over the past several decades, mass media have fostered the simultaneous proliferation of writing, images, and sound. The continuously growing volume of such production persists, circulates, and is preserved largely—sometimes exclusively—in electronic form. These contemporary communication possibilities significantly contribute to the creation of fictitious realities, or to their manipulation and reorientation toward desired angles.

Conditions for authentic social inclusion

In relation to Western discourse on the need for inclusion—a topic that is often dealt with in overly narrow contexts of linguistic behavior—an additional point must be made. If inclusion is to be achieved through language, it should first and foremost be understood as a search for "the optimization of social relations in the interest of promoting social equality, supported by acceptable and comprehensible language (not necessarily literary language)" (Orgoňová et al., 2023, p. 19). Inclusion, therefore, must be interpreted as a social phenomenon in the broadest sense—that is, as the negation of exclusion and marginalization.

It must be recognized that an indispensable condition of any form of inclusion is the autonomous subjectivity of the individual. If, due to inadequate influences from external communication networks, an individual's sense of self fails to develop—or if individuals do not attain a sufficient level of abstract language competence to activate their critical consciousness in interaction with others—there is little basis for regarding them as autonomous subjects. Such individuals are unable to participate fully in dialogue, that is, they are unable to formulate their own view of the world. As a result, they become particularly vulnerable to manipulation, demagoguery, suggestion, and similar influences exerted by their social environment.

Just as it is difficult to form a true community without its components being autonomous individuals—since, without them, one can at best

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create a group, a crowd, or a flock—so too is it impossible to achieve true inclusion if collective participation does not involve autonomous subjects. Without subjectivity, there can be no real inclusion, only the accumulation of objects that comply with the will or commands of others, without the capacity for constructive dialogue. In the absence of such dialogue among stakeholders, there can be no constructive human interaction aimed at improving collective life, in line with Aristotelian thought, which conceives of human beings as *homo politicus* by nature. If this reflection is extended to the philosophical and political level, one may conclude that without such interaction, there can be no oversight of public interests; consequently, democracy itself becomes inoperative.

How can such a potential development be countered? It is evident that new communication technologies are becoming an increasingly conventional element of everyday life. Therefore, their negative influence on human development must be balanced by strengthening individual autonomy—beginning in early childhood. An indispensable basis for this process is the reinforcement of mastery of the mother tongue, through which individuals develop their own capacity for reflection on the surrounding world—that is, their cognitive abilities. On the basis of these fundamental linguistic skills, dialectical and rhetorical competences must then be built, including, among other elements, the study of manipulation techniques (for defensive purposes against unwanted external "formatting" of our minds).

In practical terms, within pedagogical structures at various educational levels, this means a return to emphasizing oral expression and oral interaction through activities such as debating, rhetorical contests, declamation, and similar practices.

Renewal of teaching in the ancient tradition

To some extent, we can build on the experience of ancient rhetoric, whose decline is traditionally traced to the eighteenth century (Kraus, 1981). The gradual process of democratization—at least in Europe—

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holds some promise for a return to this tradition. Nevertheless, contemporary political discourse is no longer based primarily on the linguistic and logical foundations of social communication that characterized classical rhetoric.

In the context of fifth-century BCE Athenian democracy, rhetoric emerged in the public sphere and initially served predominantly political and legal purposes. In the twentieth century, however, it was reduced to an instrument of propaganda by totalitarian power structures. It was precisely in Germany—devastated by Nazi propaganda—that linguists, in the mid-twentieth century, laid the foundations for a new academic field focused on the analysis and cultivation of real, living spoken language: *Sprechwissenschaft und Sprecherziehung*, that is, speech science and speech training. After the traumas of the Second World War had subsided, Germany felt a need not only to revive public discourse, but also to promote education in rhetoric for civic and political purposes.

Nevertheless, according to one of the founders of this new academic discipline, Professor Helmut Geissner of Saarland University, under the conditions of contemporary language use, it is no longer possible to develop a form of rhetoric fully modeled on ancient norms and ideals. Only a partial system of classical rhetoric has survived in the history of European education, as the gradual elimination of its political function has reduced it largely to a literary concern. The so-called *new rhetoric*, as conceptualized by the German school, is described as *functional*. According to Geissner, as a university subject, it should comprise rhetorical systematics (the typology of talks and speeches), rhetorical analytics (the analysis of speeches), criticism, the methodology of language pedagogy, and the history of rhetoric—including theories of language, language pedagogy, speaker education, discourse, and responses to the discourse of other speakers. In this sense, Geissner defines functional rhetoric as a theory of situationally managed oral communication that leads to the development of mental or real action (Geissner, 1974).

Rhetoric, as a discipline concerned with the use of language in communication and developed in the context of pursuing specific personal

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goals, has provided a detailed account of methods for achieving the intended effects of a speech act. In contrast to more recent theories of argumentation, rhetoric is oriented not only denotatively—toward the content of the utterance—but also connotatively, toward its broader context, including extralinguistic factors. As such, it constitutes a set of principles that can serve equally well in the construction of effective discourse and in defending against potential verbal manipulation.

Conclusion

In this reflection, we have sought to highlight the potential dangers posed by modern communication technologies, particularly with regard to the formation of critical subjective awareness and the troubling developments observed in education within Western societies. In light of the declining communicative abilities of the younger generation, we argue for strengthening oral competencies at all levels of education through the reintroduction of rhetoric as a compulsory component of the curriculum. As an illustrative example, we refer to the Saarbrücken School of Speech Science (*Sprechwissenschaft*) in Germany, which represents an effort to restore rhetoric to university education. A functioning democracy presupposes not only dialogue, but dialogue that is rational, meaningful, and grounded in argumentation—dialogue that requires a high level of inferential and productive rhetorical skill from every individual.

These developed linguistic abilities are, of course, only a necessary instrument for achieving universal education, which is as vital for contemporary individuals as it was for the Renaissance *homo universalis*. This, however, requires an educational approach that does not deny the importance of theoretical knowledge or set it in opposition to practical skills; that does not pit factual knowledge against understanding, critical thinking, creativity, or the capacity for meaning-making; and, finally, that does not undermine the role of the teacher as a transmitter of knowledge. These represent only some of the negative consequences that constructivism has had for the educational process in the modern era.

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