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PRAGMATICS OF COMMUNICATION AND NEO-SOPHISTS: MODELS OF THEATRICAL ORATORY

Abstract

The biographer Flavius Philostratus (II-III AD), in his work *Lives of the Sophists,* coins the expression "Second Sophistic" to depict new outlooks and new trends in Greek oratory, focusing mostly on the II century AD. The perspective of his narration is quite clear: the performative aspects of declamations and the behavioral elements of sophists. Contemporary studies about pragmatics of communication can provide us with lens with which to read these biographies. Histrionic and theatrical characters, such as Scopelian from Clazomenae and Polemo of Laodicea, with their dramatic performances and self-presentations, let us analyze the sequence of interactions during the "ritual game" between the public and the orators. The analogic communication is to a large extent entrusted to non-verbal traits, like gestures, glance, face expressions and deportment. To avoid a dysfunctional relation between the speaker and listeners/spectators, especially in a so-called 'face to face society', accurate knowledge of the rules of the 'social contact' is required.

Keywords: pragmatics, communication, Philostratus, rhetoric, second sophistic, body language, interaction, public, performance, oratory, sophist, behavior, character, biography, social, deportment, strategies, dramatic

The Second Sophistic: a cultural and social issue

Studies about performers need focus nowadays not only on what they say, but perhaps above all on how they say it, how they act and interact with their public.

It is remarkable, in my opinion, that the importance of theatrical aspects of performance is many times recognizable by audience and speakers in every moment of history, and in our contemporary environment it may sound familiar that the power of acts may be stronger than the power of words.

Indeed, in our society it is quite a common habit to give prominent importance to the very first image and rely so much on what it is seen.

Professional orators have very human tools to affirm their competences, to show their cultural level and to advertise themselves, like actual actors.

In his *Lives of the Sophists*, Flavius Philostratus, a chronicler living between II and III AD, portrays singular, sometimes eccentric characters who are true masters of eloquence, under every aspect.

With the definition "Second Sophistic", Philostratus describes a new trend in Greek oratory, focused more on historical topics than on philosophy, as he says,[1] additionally, he also presents new appearance on professional speakers from the IV BC to his days.

Even if the criteria for his selection are not really clear (many orators are not even mentioned),[2] we can notice a *leitmotiv*: the interest in rhetoric and performative aspects of their declamation, such as oratorical skills, theatricality of speeches and familiarity with public interaction and improvisation. Everybody who is fluent and splendid in his speaking and, above all, in extemporizing deserves to be considered a 'sophist', although not every sophist was very skilled in the above.[3]

[1] *VS* 480.
[2] ESHLEMAN 2008, 397.
[3] WHITMARSH 2005, 25.

Relating to the implied 'first Sophistic', we observe changes that are not only a matter of content, but especially a matter of context. Orators belonging to the so-called 'Circle of Sophists', are not merely speakers who perform with particular and charming eloquence, but rather a group of intellectuals that shared a cultural, social and political mindset.[4]

Philostratus' biographies focus mostly on characters who flourished as provincial *élite* in the Greek-Roman world, but the main purpose was defining their own identity as purely Greek.[5] They were well placed in the fabric of society and tightly rooted in the classical past. They were '*pepaideumenoi*', educated men, experts on *paideia*, teachers in rhetoric schools and basically spokespersons of the provincial upper class.[6] They were cultural travelers[7] and they represented an ideological heritage and a traditional culture in a new context,[8] indeed their social aim was to build a productive dialogue with the main power: the Empire.

Hence, they often were not just orators, but also very famous and popular politicians, ambassadors and officials, such as Polemo and Scopelian, successful diplomats for Smyrna and other Asiatic cities, or as Philagrus, a teacher of rhetoric in Rome.

So, sophists and cities indeed had an osmotic relationship: they benefited each other and enjoyed mutual prestige.[9]

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[4] SWAIN 1991, 149.

[5] SIDEBOTTOM 2009, 95–99; WHITMARSH 2001, 116.

[6] ANDERSON, 1989; KORENJAK 2000, 58; SCHMITZ 1997, 156–159; WHITMARSH 2005.

[7] ANDERSON 1993, 28: they are also defined "cultural ambassadors"; SIRAGO 1989, 42–43.

[8] SCHMITZ 1997, 63 ff.

[9] The spectacular outlook of Polemo provides good reputation for Smyrna and vice versa: *VS* 532.

Pragmatics of communication: tools of interaction

But how did they succeed in their declamations and generally why were their performances so successful?

Pragmatics of communication offers today comprehensive tools to study behavioural effects of communication[10] and the strategies of orators and the public. So, Philostratus' work about changes, mechanisms, and expedients in oratorical strategies can have widespread appeal in our contemporary society.

The reciprocal influences between speaker and listener are continuous, simultaneous and often conscious. This makes clear what Goffman calls the 'social contact',[11] whose typical expression is the 'face-to-face' society. Thus, it is obvious that the social circumstances of public declamation are anything but a static situation.

Living in a 'face-to-face' society, like Sophists did, requires handling expressive and communicative qualities of all non-verbal traits, and above all, the body language. Indeed, in order to use correctly that form of communication, called 'analogic', it is important to know the semantic value of the 'relationship aspect', besides the 'content aspect'.[12]

Intentionally controlling and modifying the body's communicative potential is crucial for those who are to speak in public. It is necessary to modulate the signal according to the context, in order to gather positive feedback and create good synchronization with the audience.

As a matter of fact, the 'social contact' is composed of a set of rituals of identification and it is based on rules, expectations and 'narrative pacts'. Participants put in place a continuous sequence of interactions, called by Watzlawick 'punctuation'.[13] It is composed by the first item of input, labelled 'stimulus' and by the second item called 'reinforcement', between them there is

[10] WATZLAWICK, HELMICK BEAVIN, JACKSON 1967, 22 ff.
[11] GOFFMAN 1971, 70 ff.
[12] WATZLAWICK, HELMICK BEAVIN, JACKSON 1967, 51 ff.
[13] WATZLAWICK, HELMICK BEAVIN, JACKSON 1967, 54 ff.

what the subject does: the 'response'. In a long chain of interactions, the three elements actually overlap. In a continuous sequence, a certain item contributed by one of the interlocutors can follow the previous item (being thus a response or a reinforcement) or it can be followed by another item (being thus the first stimulus). It is impossible to separate reacting to and the provoking the interlocutor's behavior.

Clearly, punctuation organizes and manages interactions into a definite cultural set-up and educational background. Individual behaviour becomes conventional and full of signs that dramatically convey information about the psychology of the subject.

However, in order to decode acts and events, according to the purposes of all the participants in the interchange, an analysis of the 'social frame' is required. This is part of the so-called 'primary framework',[14] a scheme which allows understanding the reality, and it provides a deeper understanding of the player's role.

Being a sophist: a matter of outlook and deportment

Referring on a so configured stage-craft situation, Philostratus defines sophist's career as a "narcissistic and vainglorious profession".[15] Actually, he is a chronicler of histrionic performers, who show off their dramatic gestures and voice, luxurious looks and theatrical acting to convey a specific message.

Philostratus probably belongs to the Second Sophistic and he underlines his narrative authority with the use of the first person and emotional interventions.[16]

He depicts accurately how beard, hair, clothes, spatial behavior and certain deportment are the perfect *specimen* just to identify an orator as 'sophist', especially in contrast to the figure

[14] GOFFMAN 1974, 21 ff.

[15] *VS* 616.

[16] Conceivably for imitating orality. SCHMITZ 2009, 52 ff: he is "a quite vigorous and assertive author".

of 'philosopher'.[17] Normally the nexus of symbols is strictly codified and the public recognition as a sophist is the crucial aspect. This is so important that the sophist Philagrus was really disappointed when a student of Herodes Atticus did not recognize him in Athens.[18] While in Smyrna, Marcus of Byzantium and Hippodromus the Thessalian were not recognized at first respectively by Polemo and by the sophist Megistias. Marcus was so slovenly and untidy in his outlook and boorish in his behaviour, that even his teacher Polemo could not identify him.[19] At first sight, Hippodromus too had been mistaken for someone else by Megistias, but when he announced he wanted to declaim, he asked for an exchange of garments, "for he was wearing a short mantle (*chlamys*), while Megistias wore a dress suitable for public speaking (*himation*)".[20] Megistias and Polemo, both of them physiognomists, were misled by the unusual *facies* of Hippodromus and Marcus, but when they finally declaimed, few words had been enough to complete the recognition of the great sophists.

Additionally, Philostratus narrates how the role of the clothes was decisive also for the bizarre conversion of Aristocles from Pergamon:[21] he started his career as a philosopher and then he turned into a perfect sophist.[22] He changed his behaviour and his taste for music and theatre, but above all he

[17] The rivalry has a long tradition. Some examples during the age of the Second Sophistic: Arr. *Epict. Dissert.* I, 27, 6; II, 20, 23. See also Plut. *De Alex. fort.* 328b; STANTON 1973, 350–358.

[18] *VS* 578–579.

[19] *VS* 529. Although his brows and his focused expression were typical of a proper sophist, Philostratus reports. See also Demosthenes' and Herodes' portraits: both have the same peculiarities referring to beard and hair, and the leaning down face and the furrowed eyebrows. About Herodes' statues: RICHTER 1965 III, 286–287; about Demosthenes' ones: RICHTER 1965 II, 215–223.

[20] *VS* 618–619.

[21] *VS* 567.

[22] Actually, a conversion "in reverse", as Anderson defines it, because a change from a plain lifestyle to an extravagant one is quite unusual (ANDERSON 1986, 67).

changed his unkempt and squalid dress and he began to wear fancy garb and luxurious clothes.[23]

Behavioural typologies thus certainly must be felt as peculiar and distinctive [24] of the two intellectual roles, philosopher and sophist, even if it is largely accepted that they are actually overlapping and entwined.[25] Certain functions are primarily a sophistic activity, such as giving public speeches,[26] but in general is widely a matter of symbolism, appearances and behaviour. The 'Circle of Sophists' is a sort of membership, based on the rules of self-identification and where dynamics of 'internal definition' and 'external categorization' define a matter of *belonging*, not only of *being*.[27]

Moreover, sophists' scenic display highlights the strong relationship between the verbal virtuosity and their dominant social position.[28] The performative aspects and their lifestyle are so strictly connected, that to a sophist, surprised as he bought sausages and sardines, Polemo said: "My good man, it simply is not possible to impersonate credibly the arrogance of Darius and Xerxes, if you eat that kind of food".[29]

For this reason, their face during the performance becomes a "social face", since it starts to send messages about the actual intentions of the speaker, about his personality and about what kind of relation he wants to build.[30]

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[23] Alexander from Tyrus too was lavish in his holding the chair of rhetoric in Athens (*VS* 587). A paradoxical and ironic list of what is right to wear for a sophist is described in Luc. *Rhet. Praec.* 20.

[24] CIVILETTI 2002, 434–435.

[25] They often share, among other aspects, the social and educational background and sometimes even the interest in oratory art. SIDEBOTTOM 2009, 73; BOWERSOCK 1969, 11 ff; ESHLEMAN 2012, 1; ANDERSON 1989, 118 ff.

[26] While philosopher usually had the task to comfort the distress, but also, like sophists, to educate the young, settle civil discord and so on: BOWERSOCK 1969, 11.

[27] ESHLEMAN 2012, 2.

[28] CIVILETTI 2002, 497; GLEASON 1995, 26 ff.

[29] *VS* 541.

[30] It sends a message about the message, realizing the so-called "metacommunication" (WATZLAWICK, HELMICK BEAVIN, JACKSON 1967, 39).

Orator's pragmatics

The primary playground is indeed the face, the most expressive body part, able to send almost unequivocal messages. The eyebrows and above all the gaze accompany the speech and characterize it. As synchronization tools, they are used at strategic moments, gathering feedback and retroactions.

Actually, a kind of dramatic eloquence must have existed for a long time, if Dionysius of Halicarnassus (I BC) already complained about "an oratory unbearable for his theatrical shamelessness".[31]

And further back in the past, Demosthenes seems to have paid a famous actor, Neoptolemos, to be trained to control his breath.[32] Moreover, Quintilian, who probably already knew Theophrastus'treatise *perì hupokríseōs*[33] (lost today), narrates that Athenian orator used to practice in front of a large mirror, in order to rehearse and correct the gestures and to keep the coherence between the expression of the face and the content of the declamation.[34]

Even if in sophists' declamations the speaker and audience were not often very close, Philostratus dedicates many descriptions to the role of the tiniest parts of the face, adopted consciously as interactive signals.

Interested in physiognomics too, the biographer reports how Philagrus of Cilicia used to have knit brows and an active gaze,[35] relating these physical peculiarities to his behaviour. Indeed, he was famous for usually being frowned and ready to get angry, exhibiting such a fiery-tempered personality as a perfect accompaniment to his vehement eloquence.

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[31] Dion. Halic. *De antiq. Orat.* I 1–4.

[32] Ps.-Plut. *Vit. dec. or.* 844 f 3–5.

[33] Probably the formalization of the so-called *actio* and the different tasks of voice and body was already traced in it. FORTENBAUGH, HUBY, SHARPLES, GUTAS 1992, 559, fr. 712.

[34] Quint. *Inst.* XI 3, 67–68.

[35] *VS* 580–581.

On the contrary, Polemo of Laodicea, furthermore the author of a *Physiognomy*, was used to speaking with a relaxed and confident expression and at the end of a complicated fragment, he simply smiled. He was so skilled at dominating his intense voice and fluency of the speech that nobody could even notice how hard the endeavour was.[36]

On the same wavelength, Scopelian of Clazomenae considered 'intractable' those who used to speak with too much seriousness and with their eyes down; indeed, he was a wit, as Philostratus narrates, and he preferred to take on calm and smiling expression. Once he met a group of angry citizens during an assembly and his attitude was cheerful enough to conciliate and relax them.[37]

In this way, sending a signal of pacification, he realized an example of a so-called 'symmetrical interaction', opposed to the so-called "complementary interaction". The main goal of the first one is to minimize the differences between the players, through imitating and mirroring processes. On the contrary, the second type of interaction is composed by a leading part with a *one-up* role and a receiving part with a *one-down* role and the differences are totally maximized.[38]

Although public declamations were the perfect occasions for sophists to express their superior role and in this way, in my opinion, the context refers to a "complementary interaction" situation, the case of Scopelian shows that the possibility of a "symmetrical interaction" was not excluded.

Harmonization with the audience's emotions was the outcome of a careful observation of the audience and a correct punctuation, as previously said. The empathic and compelling power of his facial expression activated a system of

[36] *VS* 537.
[37] *VS* 519.
[38] WATZLAWICK, HELMICK BEAVIN, JACKSON 1967, 68–69. The 'superior' and the 'inferior' roles are not morally characterized, they just express the primary and the secondary role in a certain cultural set-up.

emotional synchronization, getting the public's feelings closer to the orator.[39]

But there's no theatrical performance without a theatrical self-presentation.

The credibility of a sophist is based on his self-presentation, the first interface the public deals with. The public could praise a sophist even before he had begun to perform, as it happened to Alexander from Seleucia, 'godlike' in his exterior and elegant, with a 'good style' (*euskhémōn*).[40]

So, the presentation of self not only consists of introducing a 'master of declamation', with his techniques and competences, but it is also a matter of presenting a real character, who stages his personality and his habits.[41]

A real disagreement and even a quarrel arose about Scopelian's self-presentation. He usually paid obsessive attention to personal grooming, treating his body with pitch and epilation,[42] and shattering the masculine code of *decorum*.[43]

Polemo must have been very theatrical too in his entrance on stage, when, sick with arthrosis, he was transported on a litter. Therefore, he usually travelled on a decorated Phrygian chariot, leading a crowd of slaves, horses and haunting dogs.[44] Even though this attitude attracted accusations and

[39] See also Eunap. *VS* XXIII, 3, 3–4.

[40] WHITMARSH 2005, 27–28. *VS* 572: during a diplomatic mission for the city of Seleucia, the emperor Antoninus said to him: "I give heed to you and I know you: you are the one who arranges his own hair, whitens his own teeth, brushes his own nails and always smells of perfume".

[41] WHITMARSH 2005, 32: "what *kind of* person the sophist is".

[42] It is remarkable the satiric recommendation of these 'effeminate' treatments in Luc. *Rhet. Praec.* 15–23.

[43] CIVILETTI 2002, 489: the denigration of the depilatory practice, perceived as an element of effeminacy, fits into a wide contrast between "two diametrically opposed typological and behavioral models". GLEASON 1995, 58–81: feminine and masculine "types" could not correspond to the anatomical sex and every deviation was noteworthy. Physiognomists, like Polemo, specialized in hitting men who did not look like men.

[44] *VS* 532. The same habit of arriving on a luxurious silver chariot is typical of Alexander from Tyrus (*VS* 587).

enemies, in a competitive face-to-face society, the display of an economic-cultural dominance can become a medium for self-advertisement.[45]

During the actual performance, body gestures and spatial behaviour come into play. They are the field of study regarding kinesics and proxemics. The first term refers to movements of the limbs, generally accidental but often well prepared, the second deals with the orientation of the body and the management of the interpersonal distance.

In order to provide pauses, digressions and pathos to the performance, gestures are synchronized with the parts of the speech: the shorter the phrase (like exclamation or *pointe*) the quicker the movement of a smaller part of the body (like fingers shown one after the other, giving a list or a count.).[46]

Scopelian and Polemo usually entrusted their whole body with the task of giving euphoria and emphasis to the performance. Polemo used to stamp like a Homeric horse,[47] as the biographer says, and literally jumped off the seat at the climax. Scopelian declaimed his opening speeches quietly from the chair, but when he stood up during the actual declamation, he seemed to be at the mercy of a Bacchic furor.[48] So, we can imagine how exaggerated he was, since someone accused him of being dythyrambic and uncontrolled. His theatrical magniloquence went with the histrionic acting of beating his thigh at some crucial passage, for arousing his audience and himself. A gesture like this, actually marked out as a bit too melodramatic,[49] was probably well prepared, in contrast to most of gestures of self-touching, typically unintentional.

Therefore, we can imagine the suspense in the air, when Polemo and Scopelian withdrew from the public for a short

[45] GLEASON 1995, 27–28.
[46] KENDON 1972, 200 ff.
[47] *VS* 536–537.
[48] *VS* 519–520.
[49] Referring to politicians: Plut. *Tib. Gr.* 2, 2; Plut. *Nic.* 8, 6; Quint. *Inst. Or.* XI, 3, 123; sarcastic tones, as usual, in Luc. *Rhet. Praec.* 19.

time (called by Philostratus *kairòs*, the right moment), to collect their thoughts and prepare his declamation on a theme just proposed by the public.[50] Or we can figure the surprise when Philagrus broke the regular interpersonal space and walked up to a yawning listener and slapped him.[51]

Consequently, we are able to understand Goffman's expression "no audience, no performance",[52] showing the public as the other side of the coin.[53]

Public's pragmatics: the case of Philagrus

Variously composed,[54] the audience is an active and judging interlocutor and every speaker must face its pragmatics and its acting. The linguistic and paralinguistic expressions (praises, tears, laughter), mimic and proxemics (applause, shaking clothes)[55] send feedback, which is able to influence and jeopardize the orator's feelings and the performance in general.[56] Therefore, the public of the Second Sophistic had a powerful interaction tool: indeed, it could suggest the subject of the *melétē*, the core of the speech.

The analysis of the fail of Philagrus[57] during his declamation in Athens lets us discover every detail of this interaction ritual and leads us to conclusions.

Philagrus started with an assessment error. He underestimated his listeners, well prepared students of Herodes Atticus,

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[50] About Polemo: *VS* 536; about Scopelian: *VS* 519.

[51] *VS* 578.

[52] GOFFMAN 1974, 25.

[53] WHITMARSH 2005, 24–25.

[54] KORENJAK 2000, 41 ff.

[55] It is quite a common expression of appreciation: emperor Caracalla acclaimed Heliodorus shaking the hem of his mantel (*chlamys*; *VS* 626). See also Eunap. *VS* IX, 2, 19: a proconsul shook the edge of his purple toga for giving enthusiastic approval to the popular orator Prohaeresius.

[56] Philostratus narrates an example of claque as anti-sabotage strategies: Aelius Aristides wanted his friends to be present and he wanted his audience to be allowed to shout and applaud (*VS* 583). KORENJAK 2000, 124 ff.

[57] *VS* 579.

and made them ill-disposed, arguing with one of them the day before, in the city.

But the starting point of a good performance is the achieving the audience's goodwill, as Herodes himself said to Philagrus in a letter. Then, in his opening speech, Philagrus mixed the classic praise of the city with a lament for his dead wife in Ionia. The outcome of this wrong frame analysis was disconnected, unusual and even childish. The public ended up getting annoyed, finding the speaker's choice dysfunctional to the expectations.

But the critical moment came when the rhetorician, with an embarrassing *gaffe*, passed a speech off as extempore. But malicious spectators of Philagrushad set a trap.

On purpose they asked for a theme that Philagrus already declaimed in the past, knowing he was not able to perform extempore twice about the same topic. When the naïve orator pretended to improvise, the public, having a paper of that speech, started to read it out loud simultaneously, laughing and mocking him. The public became orator and as a matter of fact, the speaker and listeners displayed a paradoxical and dysfunctional 'symmetrical interaction'.

So, the relation became an aggressive and agonal 'face engagement', and for the sophist, the image of self ended up being dishonored.

As regards damage caused by a *gaffe* like this, the only forgiveness allowed comes from the other interlocutor.[58] But Philagrus was not forgiven by his audience and although some day later he declaimed and succeeded elsewhere, in Athens he lost his (social) face, his reputation was definitely compromised, and he could not perform there anymore.

[58] GOFFMAN 1967, 31–34.

Conclusion

A performance is clearly organized as a dialogical interchange, made of a *summa* of dialectic and rhetorical strategies and an aware practice of pragmatics. Both the orator and the audience establish an 'expressive order' and the ability to interpret signs, to receive inputs and send feedback must be well educated and refined. So, the unstable borders between behaviour and communication are due to a stable relationship among the sign, the intention and the signified.

Making references to pragmatics of communication as regards sophists' performances undoubtedly helps to depict a more accurate socio-cultural background: kinesics, proxemics, punctuation, frame analysis are effective tools to study how an orator is trained, how he used to stand on the stage and what kind of expectations and taste the public had. But they are also necessary means to understand how several rhetorical strategies were born and developed: the mechanism behind the act.

Treating public declamations as an instrument of success means addressing a crucial question on how our society works. Studying communication implies studying behaviours and thus predicting the structure of the interaction and potentially controlling it. An aware public is so able to seize nonverbal messages coming from the orator, to interpret his intentions and above all, to react.

The players in this ritual game expose their face, but with the higher aim to build a new interaction balance, like in a non-zero-sum game, because the success for the performer is the success for the public as well.

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