WEAKENING OR STRENGTHENING?: A CASE OF ENANTIOSEMY IN PLATO’S GORGIAS

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ABSTRACT

The present chapter is grounded in the assumption that mitigation – and, within it, hedging operations – is ambivalent between weakening and strengthening functions. In a word, mitigation is a rhetorical phenomenon. As such, its study can benefit from the reflection on language use as it developed through the centuries in the field of rhetoric. Since rhetoric is viewed as the pragmatics of classical world, the chapter sets out to foreground some general connecting points between the two disciplines. The chapter presents an in-depth analysis of the use of the approximation marker “so to say,” in a passage taken from Plato’s dialogue Gorgias, which is also relevant in that it contains a definition of rhetoric. The contextualized analysis of the marker shows that it can be given two opposite interpretations: attenuating and reinforcing. In other words, the marker in question can be seen both as an approximator and an underscorer and illustrates a peculiar case of enantiosemy (Lepschy, 1981, 1982). The interpretation of the passage and the overall argumentative strategy followed by Plato to denigrate rhetoric radically changes according to the function assigned to this micro-stylistic choice, that is, weakening or strengthening. This kind of ambivalence can be described from a rhetorical viewpoint in terms of an antiphrastic tension, inherent in mitigation and, more in general, in stylistically modulated choices (Bally, 1970 [1909]) to which approximators belong.

1. Introduction

In the present chapter, I start from the assumption that pragmatics derives from classical rhetoric, rhetoric being the study of discourse and intentional communication aimed at specific purposes and implying the taking on of responsibility (cf. Hill and Irvine, 1993). Far from defining rhetoric as a “secondary grammar” opposed to the “primary grammar” of language (cf. Plett, 1985), this chapter calls for a comprehensive, integrated framework where rhetorical aspects are viewed as inherent in every linguistic level.

One of my starting assumptions in doing pragmatics is that pragmatics can be backed by other disciplines in the investigation of the multi-layered, multi-dimensional mechanisms of communication. The point is that this backing must be thought of not only synchronically but also diachronically. In particular, pragmatics should take rhetorical perspectives on language throughout the centuries into account and consider the stages of reflection on communication that rhetoric has gone through. One of the links between classical rhetoric and pragmatics is the fact that both disciplines do not deny the ambivalences that are part and parcel of communication. On the contrary, they both put them in the foreground. To substantiate the view of the deep-rooted link between rhetoric and pragmatics, one could choose between two main lines of reasoning: either the discussion of some general theoretical stances of both disciplines or the in-depth analysis of a paradigmatic case which shows their convergence. In the following sections, the latter has been preferred. Therefore, after some general remarks on the similarities between rhetoric and pragmatics, I concentrate on a very specific example, taken from an author whose thoughts shaped Western culture, namely Plato. The analysis of a single phenomenon in a passage from one of Plato’s dialogues allows me to illustrate how a discourse marker, apparently a mitigator, can be ambivalent in many subtle ways. I try to disentangle, from an integrated pragmatic perspective, the micro-paradox encapsulated by what seems to be an approximating marker that occurs in the definition of rhetoric given by Plato’s character Gorgias in the dialogue that bears his name and is a milestone in the history of (anti-) rhetoric.

2. Pragmatics as ἐμπειρία

Among the main similarities between rhetoric and pragmatics, it is worthwhile mentioning here what the two disciplines share ex negativo, that is, the fact that they have been the object of the

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1 The first linguist to draw a systematic connection between pragmatics and rhetoric was Leech (1981), who opposed the two disciplines to grammar and particularly judgments of grammatical acceptability: “Semantics is rule-governed [grammatical]; pragmatics is principle-constrained [rhetorical]” (ibid.: 415). See also Leech (1983). A discussion of the links between the two disciplines is Venier (2008).