

Classical Rhetoric and Cognition I: *Mnemotechnics*

Hello and welcome to this video series about “Classical Rhetoric and Cognition”! My name is Silvio Bär, and I am a Professor of Ancient Greek at the University of Oslo. The goal of this video series is to explain traditional concepts of classical (Greek and Roman) rhetoric in light of modern cognitive science.

In this video, I am going to talk about *mnemotechnics*. – I will explain in a minute what “mnemotechnics” is, but first, I have a confession to make: I know that you probably think that I am speaking off the cuff here, that I am improvising my words; but actually I’m not! Actually, I’m reading each single word from a teleprompter. Modern technology allows me to read out what I’m saying, whilst giving the impression that I am speaking freely.

Two thousand years ago, in Greek and Roman antiquity, the ancient orators did, obviously, not have these technical means. Improvisation was out of the question because the audience expected flawlessly composed speeches, and reading from a script was equally out of the question because the audience also expected a perfect performance.

Therefore, ancient orators always had to learn their entire speeches by heart. So, we may wonder: how did the ancient orators manage to memorize their long and complex speeches? The answer is: they had a specific technique to achieve this end. This is what is called “mnemotechnics”: literally, “the art of memorizing”.

The Greek poet Simonides was regarded as the inventor of this technique. According to an ancient anecdote, Simonides was once a guest at a dinner party. At that party, a terrible accident happened: the roof in the dining hall fell down and killed everyone except for Simonides. Later, Simonides was asked to identify the dead bodies of the guests killed; and, astonishingly, he managed to do so because he could remember where each of the guests had been sitting at the table.

So, Simonides realized that in order to strengthen one’s memory, one simply needed to imagine specific mental places in one’s mind and then to stick one’s thoughts to these places in the form of images. That way, one could always remember the right order of thoughts because the thoughts were connected to the order of the images.

This anecdote was reported by the famous Roman orator Cicero in his work “About the Orator”. Apart from telling the anecdote, Cicero also said that he too used this

technique in order to learn his own speeches by heart. The technique was also described by Quintilian, an influential Roman professor of rhetoric, in his treatise “The Institutes of Oratory”, and also by the anonymous author of the widely-read, so-called “Rhetoric for Herennius”.

In the “Rhetoric for Herennius”, the advice is given that an orator should imagine a beautiful garden in order to memorize a speech: the orator should think of the different parts of the garden as the different sections of the speech: the archway leading into the garden corresponds to the introduction of the speech, a rose garden reminds of the first argument, a fruit tree stands for the second argument, etc.

A related technique that is also used today, and that stems from the ancient method just presented, is that of the “Memory Palace”. All items that need to be remembered are associated with specific locations in a large palace, and in order to access a specific piece of information, the corresponding location in the imaginary palace must be visited.

These and similar methods are called “Methods of loci”, that is, methods of location, methods of place.

The effectiveness of these methods has been confirmed by modern cognitive science through experiments since the early 1970s. Recent studies have demonstrated that a combination of spatial *and* temporal coding mechanisms is most effective. In a study from 2018, researchers from the University of California have shown that imagining an everyday activity like making a sandwich can serve as a highly effective mnemotechnic method. Interestingly, this comes very close to the ancient method from the “Rhetoric for Herennius”: for, a stroll in a beautiful garden follows the same principle of combining space *and* time.

So, to summarize, we can say that two thousand years ago, the ancient (Greek and Roman) orators were expected to deliver perfect speeches by heart. Therefore, they invented a mnemotechnic method that allowed them to memorize long and complex speeches. This method was gradually perfectionized, and it remained in use throughout late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Modern cognitive science has confirmed the effectiveness of the method. Today, we normally don’t need to memorize long speeches, but we may have to learn other things by heart, and the methods of the ancient orators can be used effectively to this end.