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# Some Personal Reflections on Rhetoric and Interdisciplinary

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## **Some Personal Reflections on Rhetoric and Interdisciplinary**

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*Plenary speech for Rhetoric Society of America Institute, Penn State University  
June 26, 2009*

I come from a short line of academics who spend their careers vaulting back and forth across fences that divide academic disciplines from one another. For both me and my father, Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., rhetoric was on one side of the fence in question. For my father, the field on the other side was philosophy. For me, it is linguistics. Like my father, I seem to have found myself acting like a rhetorician for some purposes and, for some purposes, being considered as a rhetorician. I teach in a Rhetoric program where I am very gratified to be treated as the representative of a core area in rhetorical studies. I have placed Rhetoric PhD students in Rhetoric jobs all over the country. Some of them are in this room, and they are indistinguishable from the rest of you. Starting this afternoon, I'll be participating in my second Rhetoric Society Institute workshop. In high school I translated an article from French to English for *Philosophy and Rhetoric*. In graduate school I participated in an RSA Doctoral Honors Seminar and co-edited its Proceedings, and I've attended, presented, and organized sessions at several RSA and 4Cs conferences. With a rhetorician, I have co-edited a volume of essays by rhetoricians. The fact that I'm speaking on this occasion adds another entry on this small but growing resume as a rhetorician, and I'm delighted to be doing so.

Since we are at Penn State for this Institute – in fact, since we are just three blocks from where I first stepped on the path to academia, and about the same distance from my father's office -- I thought I would use this occasion to think aloud the ways in which people like me and my father fit into rhetorical studies. More generally, I thought I would reflect a bit about the ways in which rhetoric is interdisciplinary, and perhaps some ways it could be more interdisciplinary, or interdisciplinary in more challenging ways. In the process, I will announce two initiatives that I'm involved with which are meant to help link rhetoric with other disciplines, or keep such links operational.

I realize that what I'm trying to do here is rhetorically risky, since despite the ethos-building I've tried to do in the last few minutes, you could easily see me as an outsider, here to tell you what's wrong with your field. In fact, that's a point I'll return to later on, so I don't mind setting myself up for it now. I will just do my best and hope for your indulgence of me as you indulge in dessert.

That caveat pronounced, here are a few ideas and a few questions that come out of what I learned from observing my dad's career and in the course of my own. The pieces of this presentation are rather loosely connected, more like courses of a conversational meal than bites of an argumentative steak, but I don't think this is the occasion or the time of day for exhaustive or exhausting intellectual work. If you come away from this talk thinking that there is a lot more I could have or even should have said, that will be fine with me; if you come away from it thinking it was thought-provoking or even interesting, that is all I am aiming for.

We hear the word "interdisciplinary" all the time. University administrators love interdisciplinarity. They think it leads to creativity. Creativity is a good thing. They also, I suspect, think interdisciplinarity is a good way of making fewer resources go further. An "interdisciplinary" Humanities Center is cheaper than a separate research initiative in each humanities department. An "interdisciplinary" Linguistics Program requires fewer administrative staffpeople than a department would. This, to academic administrators, is an even better thing.

We non-administrators like interdisciplinarity, too, or at least many of us do. It's intellectually exciting to find that people in other fields are building on the same theoretical frameworks as you are, or that you can find ways of thinking about things in other fields that you can't find in your own. It's challenging to build bridges. Having started taking courses in Rhetoric during my PhD work in Linguistics and having used concepts from rhetoric to explain what I was finding in my dissertation research, I have always been able to characterize my work as interdisciplinary. This has usually worked to my advantage. I feel very lucky to be able to work with PhD students in rhetoric, showing them how to ground their work in the details of writing and talk and learning from them about the constitutive and persuasive power circulating in texts and orders of discourse I had never thought about before. I have more mixed feelings about the attempts I've made to show my fellow sociolinguistics and anthropologists what the rhetorical tradition can offer them. Such attempts have been frustrating, sometimes even fruitless. Still, they've been thought-provoking, and I'm temperamentally well suited to taking an ethnographic stance on such things, turning experiences like these into data for reflecting about the inner workings of disciplinary alliances. So I'm all for interdisciplinarity, and, together with my Carnegie Mellon colleagues, I recommend it to our graduate students in my own courses and when I organize our massively co-taught Research Seminar in Rhetoric.

Our students being Carnegie Mellon students, however, they like to hold our feet to the intellectual fire. They have even had the gall to ask what, in fact, interdisciplinarity, exactly, is. Several years ago in the Research Seminar we read an article by Alan Gross that was recommended by Andreea Ritivoi. In the article, Gross uses the Hermagorean concept of stasis, in particular the fourth stasis, jurisdiction, to talk about the multidisciplinary spaces that are required in order for Kuhnian paradigm shifts to occur. Shared jurisdiction struck us as a good

metaphor for one kind of interdisciplinarity, the kind Gross describes. But we were led to think about other things that interdisciplinarity can mean and be. What came out of our discussion is a preliminary, heuristic list of possibilities, which I have charted here. This list is not meant to be exhaustive, because the inquiry it represents is ongoing. My method is ethnographic: Rather than starting with a theory-based definition of “discipline” or “interdisciplinary,” I am interested in what terms like these mean to academics, and my data come from many years of participant observation of academics using these terms and related ones. [TABLE]

Let me talk briefly about each of the possibilities represented on this table.

**First, disciplinarity is sometimes seen** as a shared set of texts, such as the canonical works of British and American literature that traditionally defined the discipline of English. In American linguistics up to the 1960s, languages were our texts. Anthropologists studied cultures. Rhetoricians studied influential orators and speeches.

As canons like these have rusted in the postmodern era, we have started to read more widely. Studying literature rhetoric now requires reading things that weren't written by the authors of the traditional canon (though the process of canonization has by no means ended). Knowing the history of rhetoric or contemporary rhetorical theory means having read texts by scholars whom most academics would not identify as rhetoricians: people like Bourdieu (who was a linguist), Ricoeur (who was a philosopher), and Habermas (a sociologist). Not all linguists study languages any more, either. Some of us question the idea that there even are such things as languages. Now many of us study discourse, ideologies about language, varieties like Tex-Mex or Singapore English that would once have seemed like bastardized mixtures.

The practice of reading things that are not part of one's canonical object of study is sometimes referred to as interdisciplinarity. Rhetoricians who read Habermas, Ricoeur, Bourdieu are doing interdisciplinary work in this sense, as are people in Cultural Studies who read things written by historians, or linguists who read things by anthropologists and geographers. This kind of interdisciplinarity is often one-way. Sociolinguists now read work by geographers, but geographers aren't reading sociolinguistics. American rhetoricians read work by French philosophers, but French philosophers probably don't read as much work by American rhetoricians. As we make use of work from other disciplines, we sometimes tag it as ours. (Here I am thinking of the way people tag pictures or texts on the Internet to give others an additional way to find them. The same digital object can have multiple tags.) Sometimes we inadvertently lead graduate students to think that Pierre Bourdieu would have identified himself as a rhetorician or that Antonio Gramsci was doing cultural studies. The people whose work we appropriate in this way don't tend to object, if they're even aware of their appropriation, since it does not require them to re-label or realign themselves. Acquiring an extra disciplinary tag may mean more readers, more citations, more invitations, perhaps.

This is the easiest form of “interdisciplinarity.” The stakes are low. The only risk in reading outside your field is that you may not have as much time to keep up inside it. Typically, nobody in your field objects to the practice, although they may dismiss imported texts if they think they duplicate domestic ones. The people you bring into your field through this practice typically don’t mind, either. Because it is so easy to claim interdisciplinarity in this sense, academic administrators and readers of grant and fellowship proposals sometimes suspect that it isn’t the real thing. Proposal-writers who claim to be doing interdisciplinary work by virtue of the fact that they have multidisciplinary reading lists sometimes find their proposals rejected.

**Authors and texts that originated in another** discipline can come to be part of a discipline’s canon, and a discipline may label itself “interdisciplinary” as a result. This use of the term is represented on the second row of the chart. For an individual, interdisciplinarity in this sense means being part of the history of another discipline or having someone associated with another discipline be part of the history of yours. A philosopher like Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., a law professor like Chaim Perelman, or a literary critic like Kenneth Burke, a large chunk of whose audience turns out to consist of rhetoricians and whose work is covered in basic treatments of the rhetorical tradition, has done interdisciplinary work in this sense, and rhetoric is an interdisciplinary discipline by virtue of this. A rhetorician whose work formed part of the canon of another field would be interdisciplinary in this sense.

Rhetoric has always been interdisciplinary in this sense. Courses like the History of Rhetoric or Contemporary Rhetorical Theory, at least when I took them around 1980, were based on sets of canonical texts that included particular works by Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero or by Burke, Perelman, and Toulmin. I am not a historian of rhetoric, but I suspect that none of these people thought of themselves as rhetoricians. I am less sure about Kenneth Burke (maybe Jack Selzer can help me out here), but I am fairly sure that Chaim Perelman didn’t identify himself as a rhetorician (since rhetoric tends to be the study of figures of speech in Europe), and I am absolutely sure that Henry Johnstone did not self-identify as a rhetorician. He spent his career in Penn State’s Department of Philosophy, and when he did decide he needed to branch out, he got an MA and part of a PhD in Classics, learning to read Greek philosophical texts in Greek. When he founded a journal meant to link his discipline with rhetoric, he put “philosophy” first. Of course, Johnstone worked closely with his colleagues in what was then the Speech Department, particularly Carrol Arnold, but it was always as a philosopher.

This kind of interdisciplinarity poses some challenges that go beyond the possibility that a borrowed text may not be taken seriously. If so few of our canonical texts and so little of our disciplinary history were actually created by rhetoricians, what is rhetoric? Where are the boundaries? How do we justify ourselves as a cohesive academic interest group? What does it mean to have a PhD in Rhetoric? In the field at large, questions like these have come to the fore

in the past few years, and better minds than mine have grappled with them. At home at Carnegie Mellon, my colleagues and I tell new graduate students that we don't know, collectively, what rhetoric is, but we each know what we need rhetoric for, and what we expect of them is to figure out what they need it for. We tell them we will never ask them to define rhetoric, just to learn to use the tools we offer to address the problems they want to solve.

**Third, interdisciplinarity sometimes labels** a shared self-designation across academic units. Comparative Literature programs are a longstanding example. (I can remember hearing about Penn State's regular "Comp Lit Lunch" well before I knew what that meant.) At many universities, linguists from departments of English, foreign languages, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and natural language processing decide to collaborate, because they all have PhDs in linguistics and feel they have shared interests as a result. One such collaboration has led to the new interdepartmental major in Linguistics at Carnegie Mellon. Or, on a larger scale, rhetoricians from English and rhetoricians from Communications departments might form an alliance resulting in the RSA.

Forming alliances like these is not easy in an administrative sense. It's rare, in my experience, for everyone who says they're interested in participating to be equally interested in sharing the work of setting up meetings or planning joint events. Getting course scheduling for an interdisciplinary minor or major to work, when required courses are offered in four or five different departments, can be a nightmare. Getting the intellectual details to work can be tricky, too, when cracks in the supposedly shared interest start to show. When we were planning our linguistics major, things always got tense when the topic of "core" requirements came up. Some of us had never questioned the existence of a core of "real" linguistics and a periphery of hyphenated subfields like sociolinguistics, while others of us had made quite deliberate and personally consequential choices to work against the set of assumptions that the term "core" evokes. Cracks like these also tend to show when external review committees show up and ask tough questions about a program's mission. Still, it was not very hard to convince our fellow linguists that it would be nice if we had a linguistics program. For such a program to work, it really just needs to be interdepartmental, not interdisciplinary in an intellectual sense. With very minor adjustments in some cases, each of us can continue teaching the same things and doing research on the same topics as we were before we formed our program. Forming alliances like these, within universities, sometimes counts as "interdisciplinarity" for the purposes of university strategic plans. To the people involved, participating in an interdepartmental group like our Linguistics program doesn't feel like interdisciplinarity, though. It feels more like having a disciplinary home.

**A more challenging form** of interdisciplinary practice occurs when a scholars bring analytical tools from one discipline into another. This might involve using the methods of sociological social-network analysis to assemble a sample of speakers for sociolinguistic analysis and to

explain the similarities and differences among them. It might involve using methods of CDA and other kinds of discourse analysis to answer the kinds of questions rhetoricians ask. It might mean trying to use the rhetorical concept of *ethos* to describe the connection between personhood and linguistic stancetaking, for an audience of anthropologists. A rhetorician like David Kaufer who uses (and argues for the use of) methods of design to understand rhetorical processes, or one like Linda Flower who uses (and argues for the use of) methods of cognitive psychology is doing interdisciplinary work in this sense. Likewise, a rhetorician like Chris Neuwirth, who uses concepts from rhetoric to make arguments about human-computer interaction, is doing interdisciplinary work, as is a linguist like Ruth Amossy, who brings analytical tools from argumentation studies into linguistic discourse analysis.

This form of interdisciplinarity is challenging in several ways. First, it requires familiarity not just with texts but with interpretive or analytical practices from other disciplines. I can read work by philosophers and political scientists and use it as a jumping-off point for the kind of empirical work I do, but thinking like a philosopher or a political scientist is far more difficult. I was mystified by literary criticism in high school and college, and sometimes I still am: I don't understand the criteria by which one account of the meaning of a poem or a story is supposed to be better than another. The kind of work I learned to do in graduate school and college is empirical, qualitative, and systematic (by which I mean it is based on a clear heuristic or list of analytical steps). Even in my own research, I let a co-author do the counting and the statistical analysis of the quantitative findings, and although I am always impressed by the patterns that statistical tools can reveal, I never completely trust them. I also mistrust highly controlled experimentation, when it comes to human beings, because I have a strong bias towards validity – seeing things as they really happen, over reliability, or doing things in such a way as to be able to see the exactly same thing again if you do exactly the same thing again. And don't ask me what I mean by “really” here! When I read work that starts with a taken-for-granted theory and illustrates it with some text, or simply builds theory without reference to data, it drives me crazy. I want to see the text first, then build the theory. Intellectual biases of this sort towards certain methods of knowledge-building and against others are deeply ingrained, perhaps even hard-wired to some extent. I think I have always had an empirical bent, and have thus never really been able to understand the work of my father, who, as a philosopher, did not. Confronted with a set of assumptions about knowledge-building that are different from our own, we are mystified, distrustful, frustrated. It's very hard to learn to think in a way that allows you to learn to work in a completely new way.

A second reason for the difficulty of interdisciplinarity as shared method is that it may be seen in your home field as transgressive. Try presenting statistical findings about the realization of the Low Back Vowel across a representative sample of your research population to your colleagues in Literary and Cultural Studies. If you are lucky, they will be impressed, but they won't understand, or sometimes even be willing to try to understand, what kind of argument you are

making. In another scenario, people in your home field may think they already know what goes on in another and so be unable to listen to a more nuanced account of what you are bringing from it. This sort of non-comprehension has real consequences for people during tenure and promotion proceedings, and smart junior professors learn either to do the kind of work that their colleagues do or to translate what they do.

Of everything I've written, the paper that was the hardest to place and required the most revision – to the point that I thought it would live in my filing drawer forever – was one in which I wanted to use the rhetorical idea of ethos to describe two different ways in which personhood and discourse can be ideologically connected, in a comparison of talk and writing by two American women. I was writing for linguistic anthropologists, who are a large part of my “home” reference group. To anthropologists, rhetoric is simply an account of one culture's ideology about language, and since is a dominant, Western account, it is to be mistrusted. Secondly, while anthropologists' accounts of the “others” they typically study can be very nuanced, the tendency is to think of “Western” culture as monolithic. Third, anthropologists almost always study groups, not individuals. To make things even worse, anthropologists already had the term “ethos,” which they used to mean something like *Volksgeist*, the spirit of a people, and this Romantic concept had been discredited. So, it was not easy to explain that (a) the Western rhetorical tradition provided not one but at least two ways of thinking about ethos, (b) these ways of imagining self in discourse actually circulate in the contemporary US, and (c) at least one of the two women had actually encountered the term ethos in the sense in which I was using it, so it would not make ethnographic sense to substitute another term. More generally, I had to convince people that (d) case studies of individuals have a role to play in sociolinguistics/linguistic anthropology, and (e) and most abstractly, that their analytical vocabulary didn't already include perfectly good ways of talking about what I was talking about. I'm not sure I really want to try something like this again, even as a tenured full professor.

As I've said, trying to duplicate the interpretive practices of another discipline may be seen in your own discipline as threatening. It may also be seen in the discipline from which you borrow as amateurish. As much as you read in another discipline and as long as you work with people from that discipline, it's unlikely you'll ever live in that discipline's intellectual world the way “natives” do. I've done a fair amount of writing about geographical theory and what it can bring to the study of language and place in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. Cultural and human geographers think of place as a human construct, which is fundamentally different from the demographic way in which place has usually been conceived of in sociolinguistics. This work has been taken up enthusiastically by my colleagues, even though it requires applying a new interpretive lens to something we thought we already saw clearly. This fall I will be presenting some of it at a workshop where there will be some geographers, and I'm already terrified. I know perfectly well that not even geographers have read everything geographers have to say, but what if I've missed the key sources? What if I've misinterpreted things? What



if I'm behind the times, which is pretty likely? Most importantly, what if the way I'm thinking about and working with place isn't quite the way they do?

**The final type** of interdisciplinarity on my chart involves asking, in addition to or instead of the questions posed in your discipline, those posed in another. This is the sort of work that is required for truly collaborative work across disciplines, work aimed at answering a shared set of questions about the same phenomenon. This kind of interdisciplinarity is difficult. We don't really know how to give people credit for it, for one thing, even though it requires a lot more work than any of the modes of interdisciplinarity I've talked about so far. As an advisor and teacher, I have been involved in projects where my contribution was interdisciplinary in this way, helping rhetoric students figure out how to use and argue for discourse analysis as a way of testing the rhetorical claims they want to make, claims which are not about language but about things like institutional rhetorics, civic participation, ethnicity and rhetorical situation, and so on. My colleague Chris Neuwirth uses ideas from rhetoric to address the sorts of questions that people in human-computer interaction ask. Chris's HCI students don't end up working in rhetoric programs, for the most part. My former rhetoric students don't teach in linguistics programs and don't often publish their work in linguistics journals, so I don't get much credit for them in my home field, and they are not going to carry on my work in my home field. Some of them have "crossed over" and co-authored with me on sociolinguistic topics, and they get less credit for this in rhetoric than they would if they were linguists.

I've also participated in topic-centered workshops and seminars at which people from different disciplines shared their work on, say, migration and identity or arts controversies. The goal that is stated in the grant proposals that support these workshops and in the material inviting us to join them is for us to end up working on new, interdisciplinary ways to address contemporary, compelling issues. But although the workshops are interesting, and they help us understand what our colleagues are interested in, they rarely seem to result in true collaboration. Just as often, I'm afraid, people's reactions are like that of the historian who dropped out of the migration and identity group, either unwilling or unable to cope with topics she found too large and methods she found too thin. "But, but, I'm a social historian!" seemed to her to say it all.

You would think that having a chance to get together with colleagues from four or five different departments, to talk about a topic that fascinated all of us, over excellent wine and cheese, would have led to some really ground-breaking collaborative work. It didn't. The reasons for this have been subject to rhetorical scrutiny, in fact. In a 2005 article in *Philosophy and Rhetoric* entitled "Rhetoricians Identified", Christine Isager and Sine Norholm just describe what happened to cognitive scientist Steve Fuller's invitation to rhetoric to participate in a new, interdisciplinary configuration of Science and Technology Studies. Fuller's invitation, in an article in *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, in his book *Philosophy, Rhetoric, and the End of Knowledge*, and elsewhere, was originally hailed by rhetoricians reviewing Fuller's work. Ultimately, though, Fuller's attempt

failed. His invitation was not taken up. Isager and Just explain this with reference to Burkean identification. They suggest that people like Fuller, perceivable as outsiders, who attempt to suggest interdisciplinary alliances, need to do three things successfully. First, they must successfully appeal to partisanship, evoking common opponents. Second, in Isager and Just's words, they must "[present] the speaker's cause as one the audience already adheres to and [give] the 'signs' of consubstantiality by deference to the audience's opinions". Third, they need to be collegial in the most difficult way, using "argumentative patterns and procedures, tropes and figures that invite audience participation." All in all, a large rhetorical order.

True interdisciplinary collaboration, in which people work on problems that are not necessarily those of their own discipline, in ways that are not necessarily familiar, requires the sharing of jurisdiction that Alan Gross talks about. It requires a kind of intellectual and rhetorical openness that rhetoricians actually ought to be very good at, given our history of boundary-crossing. Nobody can have the last word on what is interesting about the phenomenon in question or about how to study it. We would need new ways of evaluating publication outlets, since this kind of work would not fit well into the array of disciplinary journals that tends to constitute the top tier. The whole thing would be difficult. Yet, as Gross points out, it is this sort of collaboration that can result in real, paradigm-shifting change. I've heard it suggested that universities be reconfigured as groups of people from different backgrounds working together to solve problems, rather than, as now, groups of people united by disciplinarity. I am not sure how that could work, and I know it would be very hard to make it work. Still, it appeals to me, as someone who has spent much of a career dealing with interdisciplinarity in its other guises. I can imagine working on a project about culture and governance, for example – about whether and how democracy can be globalized. I can imagine a project about changing conceptions and uses of place in the context of globalization, or a project about how to make people aware of the importance of infrastructure, the topic of a fascinating issue of the *New York Times Magazine* two weeks ago. Rhetoricians, linguists, and philosophers could work together, along with others, on any of these topics, or others.

Before I end, I have two announcements to make, both having to do with interdisciplinarity. First, I would like to announce the beginning of work on what will eventually be the Henry W. Johnstone Digital Archive. Much of Johnstone's work is now out of print or difficult to find. As Johnstone's literary executor, I want to try to remedy this. At this point, all I've managed to do is to digitize most of Johnstone's published work. The next step will be to find the best site for a permanent online archive. I will be talking to people at the Carnegie Mellon University library, and I would welcome other suggestions. If anyone here has done anything like this, I hope you'll be willing to share some tips with me.

Second, Christopher Eisenhart and I are going to be doing a workshop, starting very shortly, on Discourse Analysis for Rhetorical Studies. We'd like to end up with some sort of network where

rhetoricians who use discourse analysis and discourse analysts who use rhetoric could share our work, ask for advice, make announcements, and so on. Obviously we'll be asking the participants in our workshop to join. If there is anyone else who is interested in being part of such a network, please let me know sometime during this weekend, or email me after the Institute.

Thank you for listening.