

Gerald Posselt:

Katachrese. Rhetorik des Performativen

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Katachrese. Rhetorik des Performativen is a remarkable and ambitious book. It is remarkable, because it engages the reader in a quest for theoretical principles of language and does so by referring to and critically assessing subtle contemporary debates. It is ambitious, because it exploits the rhetorical trope of *katachresis* as the key to unlocking the principles of language. In doing this, the book to some extent ‘abuses’ what it convincingly sets out to describe, namely the impossibility of controlling language.

The study takes its point of departure in a *chiasmus*: its declared aim is to investigate, on the one hand, the rhetorical dimension of the concept of performance (“Performanz”) in language theories (in particular speech act theories), and, on the other, the question of performance in the rhetoric of language (in particular in the field of deconstruction theory). Indeed, as Posselt indicates, both areas have been at the center of what was called the ‘linguistic turn’ in the 1960s, and both of these dimensions of language have been thoroughly investigated on their own, but never in relation to each other. In order to do just this, Posselt offers an analysis of interdependencies between performance and figuration by way of an investigation of *katachresis* (Gr.; Lat. *abusio*; “improper use of words, application of a term to a thing which it does not properly denote; abuse of a trope or metaphor”, cf. *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 294), a trope of classical rhetoric.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I, entitled “Figuren des Performativen” (‘Figures of the performative’), containing three chapters (1. ‘Dimensions of catachrestic processes of signification’; 2. ‘Tropes and performativa’; 3. ‘Rhetoric as genealogy’), examines the dimensions of *katachresis* from a systematical point of view, as the common feature of language in general. Part II, entitled “Katachrestische Resignifikationen” (‘Catachrestic re-significations’), containing five chapters (1. ‘*Metaphora* – transference and translation’; 2. ‘*Katachresis* – misuse and patricide’; 3. ‘The monstrosity of the sign’; 4. ‘The necessary supplement’; 5. ‘The promise/mistake in speaking (“Versprechen”) of the catachresis’), deals with the historical dimensions of *katachresis*. This second part, which is a genealogy rather than a traditional history of the trope, is, as Posselt rightly points out, a necessary follow-up on the problems described in the first part.

The first part (pp. 17-95) starts with the central paradox of *katachresis*. As a rhetorical trope, *katachresis* belongs to the rhetorical system of classical antiquity and forms part of the figurative dimension of language; as such *katachresis* deviates from the normative use of language. But because *katachresis* is defined as abuse of other tropes (in particular of the *metaphor*), it ‘abuses’ the very system of rhetoric, from which it must therefore be excluded. And because we find *katachresis* defined traditionally also as an improper *metaphor*, it is a matter of logic that with respect to the production of literal or figurative meaning, *katachresis* always produces neither or always produces both. From this point, Posselt leads us to a more general assessment of *katachresis*, summarizing the general dimensions of the trope as follows: first, it is characterized by the opposing concepts of the proper and the improper, especially as regards ‘the meaning of adequate and inadequate, appropriate and inappropriate, original and

derivative' ("das Ursprüngliche und das Abgeleitete", p. 24); second, *katachresis* always describes a constitutional act of meaning/naming ("figurativer Benennungsakt", *ibid.*), through which something that was unnamed before will be given a name; and third, *katachresis* describes a strategy of 're-signification', since no act of naming can proceed without using prior significations.

These three dimensions inform the subsequent readings – of Derrida, Saussure, Austin, Searle, Benevise, de Man, Foucault, and Nietzsche – in the first part of the book. The sophisticated readings revolve around the double-bind of *katachresis* between proper/improper uses of language as defined by speech act theory, and proper/improper production of meaning as circumscribed by deconstruction theory. Although Posselt owes much of the inspiration for his own readings to Derrida and de Man, this part of his study is not simply an application of their readings of *katachresis* as response to proponents of speech act theories. Rather, Posselt demonstrates how deconstructivist positions can be extended by applying concepts from speech act theory. He shows, conversely, how the positions of speech act theories can be critically analyzed by focusing on their own rhetorical deficiencies.

Posselt finds that in Nietzsche both positions coincide *avant la lettre*: the proper/improper use of language indicates an inherent problem of language as rhetoric as well as an act of performance, which assumes authority as a constitutional act.

By systematically questioning the catachretical dimension of language, Posselt turns this approach on itself. He demands that everything he has said so far should also be turned on the 'historical' trope *katachresis* in order to avoid methodological essentialism which would endanger rhetoric as being a meta-language.

In the second part of the book (pp. 99-235), Posselt critically investigates the history of *katachresis*. Beginning with the lost origin of the trope (i.e. its lost written records, because the term does not occur in, e.g., Aristotle's writings), which has its roots in ancient Greek philosophy and in rhetoric and poetics, Posselt shows how it surfaced again in Roman rhetoric (e.g., Cicero, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Quintilian). Subsequently it gained significance in the philosophy of language in the seventeenth century (Locke, Vico). It was at this point, in the discussions of French theoreticians like César Chesneau, sieur Du Marsais or Dumarsais (1676-1756), and Pierre Fontanier (1768-1844), that the trope was for the first time considered a part of the rhetorical system.

Posselt offers a very thorough account of the etymology of the word *katachresis* and the semantic field to which it is related. Furthermore, he introduces the trope in the wider theoretical context of the traditional terminology (in the relevant texts of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, Philo of Alexandria, Porphyrius, and others) against which his interpretation of *katachresis* is directed. With each stage of this historical investigation, Posselt discusses the epistemological problems that the trope generates by definition. Moreover he points out how these problems reflect and produce the authority of proper/improper use of language. One example that recurs in these texts on *katachresis* is that of the 'parricide', the 'killing of the father'. As Posselt points out, in its original Greek context, 'parricide' referred to the killing of relatives in general; it is only in its Latin adaptation that the word came to denote the killing of the father. The *katachresis* of the parricide also binds together the concluding chapter of the book, in which Posselt scrutinizes the works of Butler, Lacan, and Spivak, and revisits Austin.

As was the case with the readings in the first part of the book, it is difficult to summarize the readings and critical investigations of the second part. The strength of the study, however, lies in the lucidity of Posselt's interpretations of text passages which always generate theoretical questions about language in general.

Katachrese. Rhetorik des Performativen reveals Gerald Posselt's erudition and knowledge about the trope and offers interesting insights into the theoretical debate about language. It is written in a clear and precise style that allows readers with limited knowledge of the history of rhetoric to gain tremendous insight into the kind of systematic problems that rhetoricians have faced over time. Furthermore, the book is a fine introduction to the fields of philosophical and literary deconstruction.

However, Posselt's emphasis is clear from the beginning: it is the writings of Derrida and de Man that guide his readings of earlier writers on the subject rather than *vice versa*. Consequently, the book is at times almost too assertive about how these readings came to paper. As Posselt explains (pp. 198 and 200), it was Pierre Fontanier who, in 1817, located *katachresis* as a trope between the literal and the figurative levels: at the basis of the rhetorical system, but also excluded by this system. It was Derrida, referring to Fontanier, who defined *katachresis* as a "positional/positing" ("setzendes") sign where there was no sign before (pp. 66-68). And, finally, it was Paul de Man who identified the constitutive force of language ("die setzende Macht der Sprache"), referring to the question of performance in general and the *katachresis* in particular (p. 68). These ideas come dangerously close to the project which the book claims as its own. Clearly, the 'ideas' that bind Posselt's project together have already been spelled out by others. Consequently, he can do no more than re-interpret and extend their texts. Nevertheless, this is where I find that Posselt's book delivers on its most daring promise: by offering his own interpretations as catachrestic re-significations (p.12). Such re-significations obviously cannot be controlled by the reader because the theoretical make-up of the trope *katachresis* does not allow for it: that would inevitably lead to 'abuse'. Posselt avoids this risk and offers the reader a book that deserves to be read, to be used, and to be abused.

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