

Motives and Habits: Some Thoughts on What Linguists Can Gain from Rhetoric and Composition

Amy J. Devitt

University of Kansas

I study writing. That is how I defined my expertise after completing my Ph.D. in 1982 in English Language and Literature at the University of Michigan. I had been trained in what were then called English language studies and composition (along with a traditional literary period), and for me the different areas were different approaches to understanding the same topic: writing. My first full-time position used my training in all three fields, and I continue to teach courses in both the English language and composition to this day. As I worked to publish my research in journals and with publishers specializing in both fields, I discovered, of course, that the two approaches were diverging more all the time, especially as composition developed more distinct disciplinary status (and more distinct disciplinary names, as “composition” developed into “composition studies,” and then to variations of “composition and rhetoric,” and more recently also “writing studies” – terminological multiplicity that represents different emphases. The field is most commonly now called “rhetoric and composition,” the term I will use from here on.). To this day, English linguistics influences my work in rhetoric and composition, and rhetoric and composition influences my work in English linguistics. In spite of often disparate methodologies, theories, and journals, English linguistics and rhetoric and composition continue to overlap substantially in their objects of study and, I believe,

combine well to open up fuller understandings of writing and, more broadly, language in use.

Of course, the two fields do differ substantially, in their methodologies, theoretical groundings, and definitions of their objects of study. As a field, rhetoric and composition aims to understand how, what, when, where, and why people compose, with increasingly expansive understandings of what “compose” means, from traditional academic essays to various forms of social media. To illustrate, a recent (June 2015) issue of the major journal published by the field’s professional organization, *College Composition and Communication*, includes four distinct articles: one study tracks local community organizers as they compose a book by residents for police, recording their attempt to speak up in the face of power differentials; another examines a corpus of student papers to discover the sources of basic writing students’ difficulties with complex readings; a third reports case studies of writers as they use their literacy knowledge and strategies to shift from writing print-based essays to composing digital stories; and a fourth conducts a historical study of rhetorical eloquence and expertise to suggest a rhetorical strategy for writing program administrators. This journal issue illustrates as well the multiple methodologies available to scholars in rhetoric and composition. Scholars in the field might be trained in quantitative or qualitative methods and do corpus analysis or ethnographic research, or in textual interpretation or historical research and do rhetorical criticism, or a mixture of these and whatever other methods prove useful for whatever they are trying to investigate. From its interdisciplinary origins, research in rhetoric and composition might be grounded in social sciences or the

humanities, and its theories come from philosophy, sociology, psychology, education, linguistics, or, of course, rhetoric. So it is a big and baggy field—too baggy for some scholars in rhetoric and composition who prefer tighter methodologies or narrower research questions, just right for others who prefer to study big questions through whatever means necessary.

Perhaps because of my background in both English linguistics and rhetoric and composition, I see the benefits of both tightness and bagginess in research. My training in quantitative methodologies that are commonly used in linguistics makes me appreciate the clarity of precise research questions and the building of knowledge that can result from shared methods. My desire from rhetoric and composition to understand all the components of writing—including how and why it is produced as well as what is produced—leads me to messier mixtures of methodologies and to questions whose answers must draw from a wide range of theories and disciplines. To investigate the complex motives and habits underlying people's language use, I have found perspectives from rhetoric and composition useful.

One such complex and necessarily messy question is the influence of context on language use, a question with a long history of research in rhetoric and composition that can augment linguistic conceptions of speech situations. Purpose and audience have always shaped linguistic forms and meaning, as Aristotle and other rhetoricians have explained over the past two millennia. Of course, linguists have long known this fact, too, and contextual elements are becoming ever more central in some approaches. Context-sensitive interpretations of linguistic data have

become well-accepted in pragmatics and discourse analysis and are visible in some areas of sociolinguistic research (for example, the consideration of style and style-shifting in the variationist tradition and, in particular, the vision of linguistic forms as part of larger semiotic systems in “third wave” variation studies described by Eckert). Theories of context have received considerable scholarly discussion in rhetoric and composition and might broaden understandings of rhetorical as well as social meaning. A theory of rhetorical context that I have found especially useful (and still prevalent) is Lloyd Bitzer’s (1968) elaboration of the rhetorical situation. He describes rhetorical situations as composed of three elements: exigences to which discourse can respond; audiences who can affect change; and constraints of other persons, objects, events or relations. While other rhetorical scholars have elaborated Bitzer’s original formulation in ways important to scholars in rhetoric and composition, his notion of rhetorical situation provides productive and productively baggy elements for linguistic analysis. Meaning results in significant ways from audiences’ interpretations of a speaker/writer’s response to an exigence (a more complex conception of purposes) within a setting of given constraints, which vary from one local situation to the next. This notion of rhetorical situations connects with concepts from linguists Roman Jakobson, John Searle, J. L. Austin, M.A.K. Halliday, Paul Grice, and others who have described the functions of language, the relationships between addresser and addressee, and various constraints on speech events or speech acts and more. What I find in rhetorical situation is a broader yet still analyzable delineation of the elements of any utterance, one that can apply to any particular linguistic event and the ways its

language forms make social and rhetorical meaning, without necessarily reducing that event to rules or pre-determined categories.

I'm sure that part of what keeps me enamored of rhetorical situation is the fact that it helped me explain my data at a time when linguistic explanations left me short. For my dissertation, I conducted a historical study of the shift from Scots-English to Anglo-English linguistic standards (anglicization) between 1520 and 1659, beginning before the political Union of Scotland and England (the results later published as Devitt *Standardizing* 1989). Basing my study on Scots texts, I counted instances of five linguistic features that have distinct realizations in the two varieties of English, such as the relative clause marker (spelled QUH- or WH-) the preterite inflection -IT or -ED, and the present participle -AND or -ING. I then ran statistical significance tests on the resulting data. Linguistic change was clearly underway, with each feature anglicizing at different times and with the data producing a neat S-curve over 150 years, demonstrating the diffusion of shifting linguistic standards over time. The most surprising result was that another variable in addition to time proved statistically significant. In selecting Scots texts for my corpus, I had ranged them across the variables of medium (print or manuscript), audience (public, individual, or self), and genre (including five genres, like religious treatises and official correspondence), thinking that in these three variables I was controlling for what was then known of context. In my results, medium and audience had no significant impact on whether writers used Scots-English or Anglo-English features. Genre, however, was significantly correlated, and produced its own neat S-curve across the five different genres included. Just as some linguistic

features anglicized more rapidly and more fully than others over 150 years, so too did genres. Religious treatises, for example, anglicized early and completely, while public records anglicized slowly and incompletely, retaining some Scots-English variants in all five features at the end of the study period in 1659. To explain the surprising significance of genre, I sought something that could distinguish genre from the other contextual variables of audience and medium. What I found was rhetorical situation. Each genre had its distinct combination of exigences, audiences, and constraints that helped make sense of why it would more quickly or more slowly adopt Anglo-English standards. Audience alone wasn't significant. Medium alone wasn't significant. Genre was significant because it enacted a complex intersection of contextual variables, captured in the rhetorical concept of rhetorical situation. That flexible set of elements enabled me to offer a possible explanation for my results—and led to my future focus on genre as a variable worth studying further.

Rhetorical conceptions of context thus have allowed me to offer complex and still testable explanations of how and why language varies, to add to other variables well-established in linguistics. My follow-up study ("Genre" 1989) of documents of American English from 1640 to 1810 confirmed genre as a significant textual variable. Nearly thirty years later, scholarship in rhetorical genre studies has developed complex theories to account for genre's impact, giving scholars in English linguistics another reason to attend to rhetoric and composition. Understandings of genre have gone far beyond simple traits of audiences and functions or pre-determined textual types, including complex intersections of ideological and

rhetorical constraints. In rhetorical genre studies, it is now apparent that language-users adapt their language to fulfill expectations of contextually specific genres, and, importantly for linguists, it is apparent that those user-constructed genres affect language-use unconsciously. Users' language choices shape genres, and genres shape users' language choices. Many scholars in applied linguistics have pursued this complex understanding of genre (John Swales, Ken Hyland, Ann Johns, among many others), especially for teaching English as a second language. Through my now-rhetorical genre-colored glasses, I can see how attending to rhetorical views of genre could also contribute to other areas of linguistic research—to work in corpus linguistics, through enriching the notion of which genres to include and how to define them; to work in historical linguistics, through recognizing differences of language features and language change across genres; to work in dialectology and sociolinguistics, through recognizing another variable to intersect with other regional and social variables; and even to work in English grammar, through adding another level of complication to the accounts of multiple grammars. Since linguistic scholarship in these areas is already so rich and well-developed, attending to some conceptions from rhetoric and composition may fine-tune established methodologies and theories and open new approaches to new linguistic discoveries. Imagine what currently unsuspected language variation might be discovered, for example, if every corpus included and categorized texts representing rhetorically based genres rather than (or in addition to) broad platforms like newspapers or magazines or broad purposes like academic or fiction.

For me, connecting to the field of rhetoric and composition has also offered arenas for testing and applying the discoveries of English linguistics to textual production. That connection has a long history, with composition in its early days drawing heavily on knowledge about the English language in its study and teaching of writing, still prevalent at the time when I was gaining my training wheels. Composition scholars then researched syntactic complexity and designed research and pedagogical methods based in generative grammar; they studied style and revision using methods developed in cognitive linguistics; and they studied control of the written grapholect through linguistic notions of “error” and dialect variation. Those were days when it seemed reasonable to claim, as I did, to study writing, both its linguistic features and its process of production. As the interests of compositionists began to connect more substantially with the tradition of rhetoric (which encouraged, among other moves, deeper historical perspectives, humanistic methodologies, and greater attention to the contexts for writing and the art of discourse), the connection to linguistics weakened, though it was never fully lost. Recent focus in rhetoric and composition on translingual rhetoric and on ESL students in writing classes, as well as some return to quantitative methodologies, has renewed the interest somewhat. Those in English linguistics might renew the connection as well, incorporating the theories and applications of rhetoric and composition into linguistic research. Rhetoric and composition is, after all, about producing language (and reception and consumption, too, of course), and English linguistics studies the language that has been produced. The theoretically rich and research-tested claims about the English language belong in the venues that rhetoric

and composition study, and linguistic knowledge can move into those venues more easily with the help of linguistic scholars and teachers.

My linguistic research on standardization, for example, influences my response to variation in texts, whether first-year student papers or professional websites. Following such scholars as Joseph Williams in his “The Phenomenology of Error” (1981), I teach first-year writing students about distinctions among “errors” and their differing rhetorical impact on writers’ ethos and credibility. I teach graduate students who will teach first-year composition about the history of Standardized Edited American English and prescriptivism, about kinds of social prestige, and about the social impact of class dialects. Yet some students in both groups consistently and persistently insist that “proper grammar” is more logical as well as correct and that it rightly marks those who are educated. That persistent insistence, when linguistic knowledge is placed in rhetorical situations, indicates to me that something more is going on in how people use language, something that linguistics might fruitfully investigate further. Not that the insisters are right, of course, but that there remain insights into standardization and prescriptivism to be gained from investigating those topics rhetorically as well as linguistically. The same might be said about other topics in linguistics that might be furthered by examining them in rhetorical use. Linguistic studies of emoji or twitter-speak reach into fascinating new forms and uses of language. Rhetoric and composition examines how the social media in which such language occurs shape language-users’ identities in different ways. When I work with students on rhetorical flexibility in writing courses, I combine linguistic information about language forms with

rhetorical information about purposes, audiences, genres, and identities to give a fuller understanding of how and why they shift language and make different language choices.

Someone trained in linguistics, of course, is not prepared to step out as an expert in rhetoric and composition, nor *vice versa*, but the closeness of the fields and the partially shared objects of study might make connecting one to the other simpler than, say, moving from expertise in biology to expertise in writing. Rhetoric and composition also has long been interdisciplinary, with multiple acceptable methodologies and theoretical traditions, so there is room for scholars with diverse interests and quantitative empirical methods. As someone trained in both fields, I encourage my graduate students to take coursework in English linguistics as well as rhetoric and composition, and I would encourage students in English linguistics to take coursework in rhetoric and composition. Readers who would like to begin sampling work in rhetoric and composition might explore the readings in overview collections like Villanueva and Arola 2011 or Wardle and Downs 2014. I find that I understand the English language better when I also view it rhetorically, and I understand writing better when I also view it linguistically. Since disciplinary boundaries in universities are undergoing rapid changes and shifts, with previously disparate disciplines overlapping more all the time, openness to other disciplines—when choosing dissertation topics, research agendas, or types of positions—may make for more flexible and richer language scholars. Language in use is a complex subject deserving as many approaches as possible, and rhetoric and composition may provide some answers.

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