

# President De Klerk and *ethos*: an alternative way of addressing the nation

Johann C de Wet

This article deals with State President De Klerk's historic opening address before Parliament on 2 February 1990. The focus is on the speaker's *ethos* as essentially conceptualised by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric*, and as it has evolved in modern public speaking in the oratory setting. The evaluation is an exercise in rhetorical criticism based on the artistic standard and neo-Aristotelian approach. Both verbal and non-verbal messages are considered. The author concludes that Mr De Klerk's display of *ethos* was credible insofar as he conveyed expertness (intelligence), trustworthiness and good will during the speech. In fact, given the principles of (Western) democratic politics, no South African State President or Prime Minister has ever reached out with so much apparent good will to the vast majority of South Africans.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It was not too long ago that the famous historian, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, reminded us once again in an article entitled *Democracy and leadership* that leadership, the ability to inspire and mobilise masses of people, requires creativity and that creativity in democratic statecraft has to meet five basic requirements. Schlesinger (1988:22) explains:

The first requirement on the list is observation, the ability to observe with accuracy things as they are in themselves, to know whether the things depicted be actually present. Next, *reflection*, which teaches the value of actions, images,



Dr Johann de Wet is a senior lecturer in Communication at the University of South Africa. This article is based on a paper that he read at the annual SACOMM conference in Pretoria on 6 September 1990

thoughts and feelings; and assists the sensibility in perceiving their connection with each other. Then *imagination*, to modify, to create and to associate; then *invention*; and finally judgment, to decide how and where, and in what degree...

It is essentially with the fourth requirement, namely invention, that one will be dealing with in this article. Invention is derived from the Latin *inventio*, which in public speaking terminology refers to the discovery and analysis of subject matter and proofs. In fact, *inventio* is one of the five canons of rhetoric as developed by the

Ancient Greeks and Romans. The others are “dispositio” or disposition (the structure and arrangement of discourse); “pronuntiatio” or delivery (voice, articulation and body movement); “elocutio” or style (appropriate use of language); and “memoria” or memory (usually referred to as a speaker’s retention and grasp of the content in some kind of sequential order) — see De Wet & Rensburg, (1989: 25).

More specifically, in dealing with “inventio” the focus will be on one of the artistic proofs which a speaker may display when he or she attempts to persuade others to his or her point of view, namely *ethos*. *Ethos* is concerned with the *credibility of the speaker*. The other two artistic proofs are *pathos* which relates to emotional or psychological appeals and *logos* which refers to rational appeals. Artistic proofs are created by the speaker in his or her speech.

While all three proofs often work together in persuasive oratory, *ethos* is singled out for treatment here. This is done since *ethos* is often overlooked, and because it is particularly important in a deliberative (political) assembly where matters pertaining to the unknown future are discussed constantly.

We all know that democratic leadership demands a certain credibility from the leader and that the very concept of leadership implies that individuals make a difference in politics. While leaders have been responsible for the most horrible political crimes and follies, they have also been instrumental in urging man on towards individual freedom and equality, and religious and racial tolerance. For the proverbial better or worse, then, leaders make a difference.

Questions related to the credibility of the political or deliberative speaker are not new. Aristotle, the great Greek philosopher, addressed the question of *ethos* more than 2000 years ago. In fact, to consider the *ethos* of a speaker is part and parcel of a neo-Aristotelian approach to rhetorical criticism. But first a word on the concept of rhetorical criticism.

## 2. RHETORICAL CRITICISM

Rhetorical criticism is derived from the words rhetoric and criticism. *Rhetoric* was defined by Aristotle (1984: 24) as “the faculty (ability) of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion”. Today rhetoric is often conceptualised as the art of speaking *persuasively* (that is, achieving something predetermined and directional with recipients), while *criticism* demands a standard to separate it from mere comment. More specifically, what separates a critic from a commentator is simply the fact that a critic expresses judgements based on some standard of comparison, whereas a commentator either reports observations or renders opinions.

Therefore, when we attempt to describe and evaluate — by means of functional standards — communicators’ efforts to persuade recipients, we engage in *rhetorical criticism* (De Wet & Rensburg, 1989: 17).

It is the *artistic standard* (coupled to the neo-Aristotelian approach) that will apply in the evaluation of State President De Klerk’s display of *ethos* in his opening address.

### 2.1 The artistic standard

The artistic standard for speech criticism sets as its goal the ideal performance of the art. After all, political speech-making is first and foremost an art. It is an art insofar as we are dealing with the capability of doing something (persuading recipients which, of course, also requires thought) and because probabilities are involved — we cannot predict with certainty that if the persuader employs certain techniques the effects will be so and so (cf. De Wet, 1988).

As Cathcart (1988:30) notes, in “using this (artistic) standard, the critic attempts to ascertain the highest achievement possible in any rhetorical (persuasive) situation and then judges the speech accordingly”. Therefore, the critic is concerned with how well the communicator applied

the principles of effective rhetorical discourse — in other words, in this case, how well or artistically (creatively) *ethos* as an available means of persuasion was employed by State President De Klerk. Note that in using this standard one does *not* make judgements about the speaker as a person, but instead as a speaker.

The artistic standard per se will not enable critics to make specific evaluations of rhetorical discourse. It is the critic's application of an *approach* to rhetorical criticism which will account for particular interpretations and evaluations made.

## 2.2 The neo-Aristotelian approach and *ethos*

The neo-Aristotelian approach to rhetorical criticism is based on Aristotle's work, *Rhetoric* (see the Aristotle, 1984 reference), which is today still generally considered the most important single work in the literature of persuasive oratory (Littlejohn 1978: 159; Pearce & Foss, 1990: 5).

In the neo-Aristotelian approach it is assumed *inter alia* that when the selection of proofs in discourse is constructed in ways which fit the demands of the communicator, recipients and (social) circumstance, people are persuaded because they react to the so-called "logic" of each proof (Cathcart, 1988: 84).

While critics using this approach rightly consider the interaction among communicator (speaker), message, recipients (audience) and circumstance in public discourse, they tend to concentrate on the *communicator*, insofar as the interaction is always viewed through the communicator's eyes. Also in this approach it is assumed that the communicator has carefully prepared his or her message (De Wet & Rensburg, 1989: 25-26; 30).

For Aristotle, *ethos* was an artistic proof consisting of a complicated quality of *credibility* that was derived from a speaker's *seeming* expertness, trustworthiness and good will towards the audience (cf. Arnhart, 1981: 34-48).

Modern speech communication scientists have devoted much time to exploring the dimensions of *ethos*. On the whole Aristotle's conclusion has been confirmed: it is important for political speakers to improve on their reputations for intelligence (expertness) and trustworthiness during speaking, and that they need to give evidence of good will (the beginning of friendship) toward recipients or of identification with them.

How does one build into a deliberative speech evidence of expertness, trustworthiness and good will towards recipients? With regard to *expertness*, your material and your treatment of it must show that you know your subject well and can treat it accurately but appropriately to the situation that you are in. *Trustworthiness* is attributed to a speaker when recipients think a speaker knows what he or she is talking about and shares and respects values that recipients prize. Also, recipients seem to trust speakers who know more than they do and who understand better than they do. *Good will* is a quality attributed to a person. We feel good will in someone when we think we perceive goodness in him or her. To operationalise good will in the public speaking context, one can say that a feeling of good will is conveyed when there is a feeling of undeveloped friendship between a speaker and recipients. In other words, in treating the material on hand, the speaker should show recipients that he or she is at least a possible friend to them and their interests. (cf. Wilson & Arnold, 1983: 124-131).

A speaker's reputation which he brings with him to the speech-making occasion also influences his credibility, although *ethos* essentially refers to what happens *during* the speech-making process. Moreover, critics should consider how the language and development of the message reflect good taste, common sense and sincerity — factors which contribute to the credibility of the communicator. While the critic focuses on the verbal aspects of presentation, non-verbal

aspects are considered insofar as they complement (or contradict) verbal messages that display *ethos* (cf. Larson, 1989: 58-59).

Let us now turn specifically to an evaluation of the State President's display of *ethos* in his speech. The sources for the complete text were *Hansard* (1990) and an own video recording (1990).

### 3. THE STATE PRESIDENT AND ETHOS

At the outset one should recognise the need for *ethos* in the opening address. *Ethos* was brought into play because: (a) the State President was relatively new in office; (b) new political developments are introduced; and (c) the audience was of diverse political persuasion.

Also, the question of rhetorical constraints on the speaker should be clarified. One cannot appreciate Mr De Klerk's display of *ethos* without considering the position he found himself in. After all, one always recognises, or should recognise, that communication takes place within circumstances and that circumstances influence communication.

What then were the rhetorical constraints on the State President? Three come to mind immediately. Firstly, in attempting to persuade the "whole" South African nation, he must have realised that he could essentially only speak on behalf of the majority of whites. In other words, up to this point his credibility among the black majority had not been established, except for the fact that he was the most powerful person in South Africa. Secondly, he had to bear the reaction of the international community to his address in mind. There was generally a reformist mood in the nation and to contemplate a step backward might well have invited backlash from abroad as experienced after State President Botha's infamous Rubicon speech at the National Party's Natal Provincial Congress in Durban in August 1985. Remember that economic sanctions have deeply hurt the South African state. Thirdly and most importantly,

the National Party had fought the September 1989 election for members of the House of Assembly under the banner of new and dynamic leadership under Mr F.W. de Klerk. The opening address in question would be a good test to see whether the promise of dynamic leadership could be fulfilled.

Obviously the whole purpose or intent of Mr De Klerk's overall message must also be considered. It should be clear that he sought to persuade the audience, the whole South African nation (with the exception, arguably, of those citizens who still believed firmly in the *apartheid* ideology), that the time was ripe for South Africa to move urgently towards a new, democratic constitutional dispensation through Government negotiation with all widely recognised black leaders inside South Africa and those in exile.

Generally speaking, the State President attempted to enhance his credibility among the majority of South Africans by adopting a *democratic approach* to critical issues in his speech. *Without being guided by the approach which Mr De Klerk adopts, one cannot really make (relatively) objective judgments on the merits of his rhetorical performance.*

In the opening address the underlying principles of the concept of (Western) democracy, namely freedom (or the right to choose) and equality (as it relates to political equality, equality before the law and equality of opportunity), are confirmed. South Africans may henceforth actively participate in any political party of their choosing as long as they do so *responsibly* (without resorting to (physical) violence). Eventually everyone will have the vote, and equality of opportunity in a future South African democracy.

Also, for example, the State President explicitly states that his decisions (*inter alia* the unbanning of the African National Congress) and views can be justified from a security and political point of view. The political point of view revolves around the yearning for democracy in South Africa, and the security point of

view establishes the notion that change will not be allowed to place the security of the people in jeopardy — again, in other words, that the exercise of freedom should be coupled with responsibility.

Mr De Klerk conveys *expertise or intelligence* in his speech when dealing with critical issues related to South Africa's foreign relations, human rights, the death penalty, socio-economic development, economy and future negotiations. *He appears to know the subject matters well and he deals appropriately with them.* Witness, for example, these statements:-

*On foreign affairs:* "The year 1989 will go down in history as the year in which Stalinist Communism expired. These developments will entail unpredictable consequences for Europe, but they will also be of decisive importance to Africa. The indications are that the countries of Eastern and Central Europe will receive greater attention, while this will decline in the case of Africa."

*On human rights:* "The Government accepts the principle of the recognition and protection of the fundamental individual rights which form the constitutional basis of most Western democracies. We acknowledge, too, that the most practical way of protecting those rights is vested in a declaration of rights justifiable by an independent judiciary. "However, it is clear that a system for the protection of the rights of individuals, minorities and national entities has to form a well-rounded and balanced whole. South Africa has its own national composition, and our constitutional dispensation has to take this into account. The formal recognition of individual rights does not mean that the problems of a heterogeneous population will simply disappear. Any new constitution which disregards this reality will be inappropriate and even harmful."

*On negotiation:* "Practically every leader agrees that negotiation is the key to reconciliation, peace and a new and just dispensation. However, numerous excuses for refusing to take part are ad-

vanced. Some of the reasons being advanced are valid. Others are merely part of a political chess game. And while the game of chess proceeds, valuable time is being lost."

Mr De Klerk's *trustworthiness* was also enhanced by the above statements insofar as he indicates that he, as State President, knows what he is talking about and that democrats will share and respect the values which he advocates. His declaration (in the conclusion) that he stands humble before the Almighty Lord complemented his trustworthiness, given the contention that the majority of South Africans are confessed Christians.

The President conveys *good will* towards the majority of South Africa's peoples by his announcement of the unbanning of the African National Congress, the South African Communist Party and Pan Africanist Congress; by his lifting of restrictions on 33 organisations, abolishing the media emergency regulations etcetera; and by his decision to release Mr Nelson Mandela unconditionally as soon as possible (and it happened on 11 February 1990). His good will was also shown in a number of statements, such as "rapid progress with the reform of our system of taxation" is a prerequisite, and "it is time to break out of the cycle of violence and break through to peace and reconciliation. The silent majority is yearning for this. The youth deserve it." Mr De Klerk most certainly showed the majority of citizens that he was at least a possible friend to them and their interests.

Throughout the opening address the State President comes across as a *sincere* person. His frequent use of personal pronouns ("I", "we" and "us") is appropriate. The "I" is used to confirm authority, while "we" and "us" function to make others (also the general public) feel involved in the great task ahead. He projects the image of a reasonable and democratic leader who is quite capable of leading the nation through major reforms. His verbal pronouncements create an identification with all democrats — real

and potential. For example, Mr De Klerk suggests that "hostile postures have to be replaced by co-operative ones; confrontation by contact; disengagement by engagement; slogans by deliberate debate" (the use of binary oppositions) followed by: "The season of violence is over (the use of the metaphor). The time for reconstruction and reconciliation has arrived."

The general development of the text also contributes to the credibility of the State President. His introduction emphasises that "only a negotiated understanding among the representative leaders of the entire population is able to ensure lasting peace" and he concludes his speech (having set the climate for negotiations with his "far-reaching decisions" to remove "the most important obstacles in the way of negotiation") with *inter alia* an appeal to the leaders of the people to turn South Africa "away from its present direction of conflict and confrontation". By his own admission, this very appeal was also made in his inaugural address in September 1989. Surely these ideas reflect good taste, sincerity and common sense. Allow me a brief word on the *common sense* aspect.

While a State President would be expected to speak in both official languages on such an occasion, his *common sense* comes through strongly in deciding when to speak in Afrikaans and when to do so in English.

Of particular significance is that he speaks in Afrikaans (to Afrikaners, especially white Afrikaners to whom the National Party traditionally owes its power base) when dealing with matters related to the protection of minorities in a future constitutional dispensation; when explaining that his decisions on the unbanning of the African National Congress etcetera can be justified from a security point of view; and when he refers back to what he promised during his inaugural address.

English is used when dealing with foreign relations; the unbanning of political organisations; the state of emergency in

the country; the imminent release of Mr Nelson Mandela; the call for all leaders who seek peace to work together; and the call for the international community "to re-evaluate its position and to adopt a positive attitude towards the dynamic evolution which is taking place in South Africa".

With regard to the President's *non-verbal communication* as it relates to ethos, one must remember that this was a very formal occasion in which Mr De Klerk basically stood (with little or no bodily movement) behind a lectern and read his speech. There is not too much to be said here. Striking, however, was his voice. In speed of utterance and variety it was quite even (but not boring) and came over calmly, even though he spoke in a serious manner — in fact, Mr De Klerk smiled only once and that was when a member of Parliament shouted "hear, hear!" in response to his announcement on the lifting of restrictions on *Die Blanke Bevrydingsbeweging van Suid-Afrika*.

His voice complemented his *ethos* in the sense that he seemed to be in full control of the situation, despite the fact that he was announcing "far-reaching" decisions. (He did interestingly enough drink more water than usual just before and at the time of announcing the unbanning of the ANC, PAC and SACP, but be that as it may.) On the whole and from a Western cultural point of view, one can safely conclude that he conveyed in a non-verbal way the feeling that one could trust him as a leader.

A critique of the State President's display of ethos would be naïve if it were to simply glorify his artistry without realising that Government had very few non-violent options left — and that the most fruitful one was probably to engage in negotiations with credible black leaders. Also, as a very astute politician, Mr De Klerk omits, for example, to emphasise the problems of rising expectations and further power struggles that his call for negotiations would elicit.

While it probably would be foolish to expect perfection in political discourse, of more than passing interest is the fact that the President is quick to identify Chief Minister Buthelezi by name when he thanks all extra-Parliamentary leaders who "have always resisted violence" in the past — a point which Dr Buthelezi himself so proudly mentioned in a TV1 Network interview on 15 August 1990, two days after the frontrunner in the Black leadership stakes, Mr Mandela, had appeared on the same programme. The explicit reference to Chief Minister Buthelezi in the speech may well have led some people to ask whether there was some kind of hidden agenda attached to future political negotiations.

There may even be democrats who feel that the President did not leave a non-violent "back door" open, if future negotiations should fail, and that this adversely affected his *ethos* (especially with regard to his trustworthiness) in the speech. In other words, an argument could be that Mr De Klerk was too deterministic in his approach.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Given the nature of the subject matter, one cannot expect everyone to accept without question what the State President said. But that is not the point. In reflecting as a whole on the display of *ethos* in this historic speech within the framework of an artistic standard and neo-Aristotelian approach to rhetorical criticism, one must

conclude that President De Klerk did so convincingly.

As noted earlier (see section 3 above), he clearly adopted a democratic approach which, according to most mass media accounts, was acceptable to the majority of South Africans (see, for example, the excellent issue of *Leadership*, 1990). The President in effect argued persuasively that the values that underlie the promise of democratic political communication should be given a real chance in South Africa. Such communication would imply a process in which each participant relates to others in freedom and equality (in the sense of being on an equal subjective footing) with the aim of arriving at mutual understanding about messages that have been shaped for, or have consequences for, the functioning of the political system. The whole movement towards a democratic communication culture in South Africa definitely gained momentum through this speech.

The State President took advantage of the important occasion to show statesmanship. South Africans needed direction and Mr De Klerk provided it. And he did so by artistically displaying expertness, trustworthiness and good will (in the neo-Aristotelian sense). Never before has a South African State President or Prime Minister reached out with so much apparent good will to the vast majority of South Africa's people. President F.W. de Klerk's opening address was indeed an alternative way of addressing the South African nation.

---

#### REFERENCES

Aristotle. (1984). **The rhetoric and poetics of Aristotle**, introduced by Edward P.J. Corbett. New York: Random House.

Arnhart, L. (1981). **Aristotle on political reasoning. A commentary on the "Rhetoric"**. DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press.

Cathcart, R. (1988). **Post-communication.**

**Rhetorical analysis and evaluation.** Second Edition. New York: Macmillan.

De Wet, J.C. (1988&). **The art of persuasive communication.** Cape Town: Juta.

De Wet, J.C. & Rensburg, R.S. (1989). **Evaluation of public speaking.** Cape Town: Juta.

Larson, C.U. (1989). **Persuasion. Reception**

**and responsibility.** Fifth Edition. Belmont, California: Wadsworth. **Leadership, 9:** March 1990.

Littlejohn, S.W. (1978). **Theories of human communication.** Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill.

Pearce, W.B. & Foss, K.A. (1990). The historical context of communication as a science. In Dahnke, G.L. & Clatterbuck, G.W. (Eds.) **Human communication. Theory and research.** Belmont, California: Wadsworth.

Schlesinger, A.M. Jr. (1988). Democracy and leadership. **Dialogue, 1: 20-25.**

Wilson, J.F. & Arnold, C.C. (1983). **Public speaking as a liberal art.** Fifth Edition. Boston, Massachusetts: Allyn & Bacon.

**(Sources for the complete text of State President De Klerk's opening address in Parliament on 2 February 1990 were Hansard of the same date and an own video recording of the speech shown live on SABC-TV1.)**