Re-Inventing Rhetorical Figures: Celebrating the Past, Building the Future

Randy Harris
Linguistics, Rhetoric, and Communication Design
Department of English
University of Waterloo
The study of figure has been sidetracked from these issues since the Greeks, with the surprising and humbling result that the study of figure, one of the oldest bodies of knowledge in the human sciences, remains in our age still in its infancy.

—Mark Turner
“Figure” (1998: 83)

1. Introduction

If you haven’t read the epigram yet, please do so; I’ll meet you at the next paragraph. (If you have read it, proceed directly to the next paragraph.)

The issues Mark Turner refers to here, in an overlooked gem of modern rhetorical and linguistic theory, are issues of neurocognition. Rhetorical figures are neurocognitively motivated linguistic pairings of form and function. The examples can be spooled out endlessly, but let’s take one, among the seemingly most trivial, rhyme. Its form is proximal syllable repetition in separate words, as here:

1. An apple a day keeps the doctor away. (doxa)
2. Birds of a feather flock together. (doxa)
3. If it doesn’t fit, you must acquit. (Cochrane and Scheck 1995)

Its function is conceptual amalgamation, which falls under the general notion Kenneth Burke called “formal assent” (1969:58). That is, when people hear expressions with rhyming terms, they amalgamate the concepts associated with those words. They judge such expressions to be truer and more accurate than corresponding non-rhyming expressions.

That the form of rhyme is neurocognitively motivated scarcely requires argument: rhyme is a staple of proverbs, heuristics, slogans, jingles, and other speech genres effecting salience, recall, propagation and aesthetic pleasure. It is a sublexical repetition, and repetition is the very substance of neurological activity (firing patterns repeat or we couldn’t even call them patterns) and a staple of cognition (if we want to remember some minor fact, we repeat it over to ourselves, lighting up the same neural pathways over and over till a trace of that fact is burned into our memories).

As for the amalgamative function of rhyme, I recognize that it may be counter-intuitive. After all, rhyming is frequently a way of trivializing some action or concept. A gang-bang is a particularly vicious sort of assault, but the term makes it seem almost playful, but part of that effect is by making it seem like the two parts of the term belong together. (Another part, I should think, is the close proximity of the rhyming components, which makes the word sound like infantile babbling.) More to the point, the effect has ample empirical support. Cognitive scientists call it the “rhyme as reason effect.” One paper on this effect has the brilliant title, “Birds of a feather flock conjointly” (McGlone & Tofighbakhsh 2000).

There are some notable but partial exceptions to the neglect Turner laments. Jeanne Fahnestock (1999) has championed the paired form-function conception of figures (see also Tindale 2004; Harris 2013), but with little neurocognitive interest (though, see her 2005 paper). Lakoff and Johnson (1980), and a hoard of cognitive linguists in their wake, have
championed the neurocognitive conception of figures, but for only a tiny slice of the figures, all of them tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche), and largely with a contemptuous ignorance of the rhetorical tradition or the rich programme of other figures.

Turner’s neurocognitive suggestions and Fahnestock’s functional research underwrite a project we have developed at the University of Waterloo with the not-especially-elegant blended label of RhetFig. This project has increasingly implicated computational modelling, and I would like to report on some of the important shifts in our thinking about figuration to which this project has led us. In short, the project brings the neurocognitive (fairly new) together with the form/function pairing conception of figures (old, but recently resurrected), along with a side order of computational modelling (newish).

Based on considerations arising from this project, I am advocating an ‘atomized’ and ‘itemized’ approach to rhetorical figures which recognizes figural collocations in ways that seem to have been almost completely ignored in the long history of figures. Although it emerged from close analyses of canonical instances of figures, it follows a Logic of Figures, more than a Logic of the Example.

2. Figural conspiracies

Let’s take the famous Alexandre Dumas colligation:

4. all for one, one for all
   (tous pour un, un pour tous—Dumas 1849:129, et passim).

We all recognize 4 as an instance of antimetabole, a rhetorical figure which goes under a variety of synonyms and partial synonyms, most prominently chiasmus. But handbooks of figures rarely if ever go further than this. It is an antimetabole. Period. You get thousands of hits if you search for 4 in combination with chiasmus or antimetabole, always showing up as an exemplum of the form--reverse lexical repetition.

Try searching for 4 Boolean-hitched to mesodiplosis, though. Zero hits. With parison, you get one hit, but only because the Dumas expression shows up in an industrial-plastics pamphlet (Rommelag Engineering) where it appears to signal their dedication to precision, and there happens to be a homonym of parison in industrial plastics, where it means ‘a rounded mass of glass or plastic’). With anadiplosis, epanalepsis and isocolon you can do quite a bit better, again in the thousands of hits, but only through happenstance. When you follow up on those hits, the co-occurrences are all coincidental, like finding Harris and Kerr and Frosch living on the same street. Anadiplosis, epanalepsis and isocolon are on the same sites or in the same books as rhetorical figures in lists with other rhetorical figures, and the Dumas phrase is there in a completely distinct capacity, to support the definition of antimetabole or

---

1 This definition is condensed from the Oxford English Dictionary’s "Glass-blowing. A rounded mass of glass formed by rolling immediately after removal from the furnace. Now also applied to industrial plastics.” Here’s a typical usage: "[e]very BFS process begins with the extrusion of a sterile polymer parison directly within the system" (Rommelag Engineering n.p.).
chiasmus. So there is no genuine co-occurrence at all. *Mesodiplosis* and *parison* don't show up at all, because they have been woefully neglected by rhetoricians (though actually quite common). The other three do show up in the same vicinity as 4 (in the Google sense of *vicinity*), but only by accident. Yet all of them are present in the Dumas slogan. Here they are, itemized:

**Antimetabole** (reverse lexical repetition)
*all for one, one for all*

**Mesodiplosis** (medial lexical repetition)
*all for one, one for all*

**Anadiplosis** (lexical repetition directly across phrasal or clausal boundaries)
*all for one, one for all*

**Epanalepsis** (lexical repetition at the beginning and ending of a phrase or clause)
*all for one, one for all*

**Parison** (repetition of syntactic structure)
*all for one, one for all*

**Isocolon** (repetition of prosodic contour and/or syllable structure)
*all for one, one for all*

OK, now let's hear the 'same' proposition, reduced stylistically, as best we can, to the single figure, antimetabole:

---

2 There are some lies in this paragraph, but only to protect Google, as I remember it. Once upon a time, perhaps because the internet was younger and smaller, if you did a Boolean search on conjoined terms you only got hits when all of the terms appeared. I'm guessing here, but I think Google algorithms now throw many highly non-synonymous terms, like *antimetabole* and *mesodiplosis*, into some kind of interchangeable basket (what the hell? they're just a couple of weird names in some archaic humanities discipline). Whatever the reason, you actually get thousands of hits for *mesodiplosis* + "all for one." Ditto with *parison* + "all for one." If you bother to look at the actual sites, however, *mesodiplosis* is nowhere to be found, and only the industrial-plastics use, in only one of the hits, can be found for *parison*. This genuinely distressing (to me) deterioration of Google's search functionality probably compromises another claim in this paragraph: namely, the 'thousands of hits' for *antimetabole* or *chiasmus* + "all for one." Those thousands of hits (at time of writing, 5,720 for *chiasmus*, 1,390 for *antimetabole*) may well include lots of bogus hits. But I give you that compromised claim in that compromised paragraph as is, because its spirit is true. If you follow up the latter hits you do in fact find the Dumas example illustrating a definition for *antimetabole* or *chiasmus*. The high co-occurrence is genuine.
Antimetabole without Mesodiplosis, Parison, Andiplosis, Epanalepsis, or Isocolon

5. all in the service of one, at the same time as one serves the interests and success of all, if you know what I mean.

We have not completely reduced this expression to antimetabole, of course. There’s a polyptoton now (lexical-stem repetition, with varied morphology: service / serves), and periphrasis (expressing the same meaning with different words: in the service of / serves the interests and success of). I didn’t plant them. Honest. Since the point of the exercise was to hold meaning stable while removing five figures, periphrasis was inevitable, and since polyptoton holds some aspect of meaning stable (namely the meaning of the lexical stem), it’s a rather natural fit, too. If we managed to eliminate them, we would probably end up with synonymia (two or more different words with the same meaning). But that is how style works. You don’t eliminate it. You just trade one style for another style. And rhetorical figures are the atoms of style. You’re welcome to take a pencil and a piece of paper and try to wring all other figures besides antimetabole out of this expression, but my point is less about the inevitability of figures as the interdependence of figures.

The style of this abomination (let’s call it what it is), 5, might be termed bureaucratic. We have traded the crystalline elegance of Dumas for a clumsy lump of words, two of which repeat in reverse order. It’s ugly. We can all agree. But this exercise is not just about aesthetics, or ‘cognitive appeal.’ As Jeanne Fahnestock shows, antimetaboles frequently function to highlight reciprocal relationships (1999:11, 123-155). For the canonical Dumas instance, it’s a kind of reciprocal fealty. What Fahnestock does not tell us--but, cut her some slack, no one else has said much about this either, in 2000 years of figural research--is that instances like "all for one, one for all" are composites, conspiracies of figures, not the examples of single, isolated figures that they circulate as, handbook to handbook, website to website. The nature of these composites is one of the key areas of research for my RhetFig group.

The question I want to get at in this paper is how much of the reciprocal-obligation function of 4 is served by antimetabole alone, without those other figures? We can see a reciprocal obligation lurking in 5, but we have to dig to get it out. We wouldn’t want to say of 5, I don’t think, that it epitomizes reciprocal obligation. Certainly, in any case, I can’t imagine anyone would what to say it epitomizes reciprocal obligation as well as 4. That means the other figures are contributing something as well. Let’s see if we can figure out how much, and in what ways.

3. Mesodiplosis

Fahnestock’s own antimetabole examples, like most others in the literature, routinely include mesodiplosis, as in these three:

6. There is another obscure point, namely, whether the sounds which are produced under various states of the mind determine the shape of the mouth, or whether its shape is not determined by independent causes, and the sound thus modified. (Darwin 1892 [1872]:97; Fahnestock 1999:125)

7. Whatever draws or presses another is as much drawn or pressed by that other. If you press a stone with your finger, the finger is also pressed by the stone. [Si quis
Harris, Re-Inventing Rhetorical Figures  Page 6

lapidem digito premit, premitur et hujus digitus a lapide.] If a horse draws a stone tied to a rope, the horse (if I may say so) will be equally drawn back to the stone; for the distended rope, by the same endeavor to relax or unbend itself, will draw the horse as much towards the stone as it does the stone towards the horse [urgebit equum versus lapidem, ac lapidem versus equum], and will obstruct the progress of the one as much as it advances that of the other. (Newton, 1803 [1687]: 1.15; 1687: 13; Fahnestock 1999:142)

8. Hence the wire moves in opposite circles around each pole and/or the poles move in opposite circles round the wire. (Faraday 1932 [1822]:49; Fahnestock 1999:145)

There’s a bit of lumpiness in these examples, as well; certainly none of them are as elegant as 4, and Fahnestock is mildly apologetic that the scientists she charts don’t seem to realize the full power of antimetabole; indeed, to actively avoid the "symmetry" that it provides (Fahnestock 1999:125). It might even be fair to say that some of these scientists have only stumbled into antitmetaboles by way of argumentative exigencies, with Darwin as the prime case here. She introduces the Darwin example (6) with a comment about readers (and rhetoricians) having to make do with "approximate" antimetaboles from some scientists, "rather than pure ones" (Fahnestock 1999:125). And she complains that Newton could have been clearer in 7. "Ideally," she says, "he should have used the active voice on both sides for a better epitome of the reciprocal, or simultaneous, causality expressed in the Third Law." She ascribes this reduction of clarity to mixing syntactic voices, which is certainly part of what is going on, and gives us a version with two active clauses, but notice that in doing so she performs a kind of mesodiplocic transformation of Newton’s phrasing and gives us "the finger presses the stone and the stone presses the finger" (Fahnestock 1999:125). She also expresses greater satisfaction with Newton’s later expression, "...will draw the horse as much towards the stone as it does the stone towards the horse," which prominently features antimetabole.

Lumpiness aside, 6-8 are antimetaboles still, satisfying the standard reverse-repetition definitions: 6 reverse-repeats sound and shape; 7, stone and finger, then horse and stone; 8, wire and pole. Equally, all are expressions of reciprocity; more specifically, of reciprocal causation (Fahnestock 1999:141-150). But, as we have seen, all of these examples also include mesodiplosis, and they do so in a way that is equally central for expressing reciprocal causality as the antimetaboles. Fahnestock is mostly right when she says that antimetabole epitomizes reciprocal causality (among other functions), but it would be more accurate to say that antimetabole plus mesodiplosis (and, more precisely, probably plus mesodiplosis of a transitive verb). Mesodiplosis is not necessary for reciprocal causality, any more than is antimetabole, but they both bring reciprocal relationships into sharper focus, and that focus is sharpest of all when they collocate.

4. Parison

Of 6-8, only 7 includes an iron-clad example of parison, and only in the original Latin (equum versus lapidem, ac lapidem versus equum; the structure [N [P [N]NP]PP]NP occurs on either side of the conjunction); 8 includes a slightly loosened parison (around each pole and round the wire are both [P […]NP]PP, but the constituent structure of the NP is slightly
different because the second one includes a quantifier. Darwin’s 6 avoids parison quite actively, but he is also trying to avoid a strict reciprocal-causation expression. If we were to transform it into a supposed purity of expression, we would get, at least on first pass, something like this:

9. Do the sounds determine the shape of the mouth or does the shape of the mouth determine the sounds?

Put that way, it is a rather pointless chicken and egg question. One shapes the mouth to make certain sounds, but those sounds can only be made if one shapes the mouth accordingly. But Darwin was far from pointless, and 9 does not epitomize Darwin’s position so much as distort it. What he wants to say is

10. Do the sounds determine the shape of the mouth or does something else additionally determine the shape of the mouth in some circumstances and thereby influence or modify the sounds?

He doesn’t want to know if the shape-sound determinism is shape to sound or sound to shape. He assumes both; or, rather, he knows the question is not one of causation so much as a question of mutual dependence. He is looking a bit further. He wants to know to what extent other factors participate in the shape-sound relation. His example is the wailing of an infant. He notes that a wide open mouth is necessary for the amplitude of the wailing and that the wailing in turn requires a wide open mouth. But the shape of a wailing-infant’s mouth, he says, also follows from the clenching shut of the eyes, which pushes the mouth into an “almost quadrangular shape” (Darwin 1892 [1872]:97).

Parison, though, is an important figure for the reciprocality functions with which antitmetabole correlates, in a way that Fahnstock gets at here:

The only distinguishing feature of the antitmetabole is that at least two terms from the first colon change their relative places in the second, appearing now in one order, now in reversed order. In the process of changing their syntactic position in relation to each other, these terms change their grammatical and conceptual relation as well. (Fahnstock 1999:123)

[Antimetabole is] built on parallel phrasing… [in which] the speaker or writer retains the same key terms but switches their relative positions in the paired units (Fahnstock 2011:233-234)

This account pretty much hardwires the important contributions of parison to reciprocality into antitmetabole. Most definitions of antitmetabole focus exclusively on reverse lexical repetition, with Richard Lanham’s definition as the prototype: “[antimetabole is] inverting the order of repeated words” (1991: 184). Fahnstock extends this definition to include syntactic parallelism with a swap of grammatical roles.

There are certainly cases of recognized antitmetaboloses that do not swap grammatical roles (or possibly do so in such a empty way as to be vacuous). For instance, in this passage from George Boole’s Investigation of the laws of thought:
11. Thus the expression "men and women" is, conventional meanings set aside, equivalent with the expression "women and men." Let $x$ represent "men," $y$, "women;" and let + stand for "and" and "or," then we have

$$x + y = y + x, \ldots$$

an equation which would equally hold true if $x$ and $y$ represented numbers, and + were the sign of arithmetical addition. (Boole 1854: 23)

(Notice, incidentally, the mesodiplosis of and in the one case, + in the other.)

Fahnestock does not want to eliminate examples like 11 from the category of antimetaboles (see 1999:133-135), but she may want to confine the parallelism or at least the swap of grammatical roles to antimetaboles which concern reciprocality. Cases like 11 express what we might call 'irrelevance of order'--effectively, a commutative principle for ordinary discourse.

5. Isocolon

Isocolon, not unlike rhyme, is a rather pure formal-assent figure, in the sense that it brings the form of two expressions into close alignment in order to pull the matter into such an alignment. It is no coincidence that Burke’s celebrated 'swinging along with antitheses’ passage in *Rhetoric of Motives* is full of isocola: We do this. / They do that. / We go here. / They go there. (Burke 1969 [1945]:58. See also Harris 2013b). That passage is also full parison, which is a frequent companion of isocolon. If you have parallel syntactic structures with the same syllable count, you get isocolon in the bargain—the two parallelisms, syntactic and prosodic, reinforcing each other.

Isocolon does not have the same role in the function of 4, however, as parison. When parison collaborates with antimetabole, in situations when the reversed terms are in different grammatical roles, the effect is to have the action or the state or the relation expressed those grammatical and conceptual roles reversed. Parison with antimetabole helps to epitomize reciprocity. Isocolon has the broader role of laying the two relevant clauses or phrases side-by-side, to highlight their similarities and put their differences (the relative order of the repeated words) into greater relief.

6. Anadiplosis and Epanalepsis

We have seen how mesodiplosis and parison especially work with antimetabole to epitomize reciprocity, and how isocolon (which often attends parison) has a chiefly formal-assent role and heightens the sense that the two cola of antimetaboles belong together. But anadiplosis and epanalepsis seem more to be a consequence of paring antimetabole down to its briefest expression. Among the briefest antimetaboles I know is this one:

12. Church, cult, cult, church—so we get bored somewhere else every Sunday.

(O’Donnell, and Moore 1998)

Eliminating all other words but the two reversed terms unavoidably gives us anadiplosis and epanalepsis. That does not mean they do not serve a function in the relevant instance. The figural meaning of "Church, cult, cult, church" is a six-of-one, half-dozen-of-the-other meaning closely related to irrelevance of order. The two terms are identified as conceptually interchangeable.
Anadiplosis primarily serves to focalize a word that has been a bit of a bystander in the previous phrase or clause; or, in Peacham’s terms, "to adde a certaine increase in the second member" (1593), as in this example

13. [I]t brought the scent of a perfume he knew well, and the touch of a kiss-a kiss that came from far away, slowly, slowly, until it rested on his lips. (Coelho 2014 [1988]:171)

In 13, in its first occurrence, a kiss is subordinate to the touch, which in turn is part of the object of its clause, but the anadiplosis immediately makes it a subject and provides some specifying information. In the first clause, it has a kind of walk-on part. In the second, it is the star. In cahoots with several of our antimetaboles (certainly 4, 11, and 12, as well as 7 and 8 in somewhat different ways. The irrelevance of order depends on this focalizing function, in fact. We get an order with one term taking precedence (x, y; men, women; church, cult), then we get the other order when the second term is focalized by taking precedence (y, x; women, men; cult, church). The two orders cancel each other out. But the same kind of focalization is relevant for reciprocity as well. The finger pushes on the stone, but equally, the stone pushes on the finger. Epanalepsis might be seen equally in these circumstances to demote the relevant term in its second occurrence. And antimetaboles often have a kind of ‘circular’ feel to them, coming back round to where we started, which epanalepses represent iconically.

But the principal function of epanalepsis, as seen in isolation, is to isolate and promote some property of a crucial term in the expression, for instance in this common phrase:

14. Boys will be boys. (doxa)

This familiar cliché superficially looks like a tautology, and it certainly carries a sense of finality to it, but it serves, as most epanalepses seem to, to focalize a semantic property or two—in the case of 14, thoughtlessness, libidinosity, aggression, something of that sort, which is used to explain, or often excuse, the behaviour of men (rarely boys), frequently in the context of social behaviour with women. That’s why it had such a prominent surge of usage in the early days of the #metoo era.³ There is a quotient of this kind of property focalization in antimetaboles, like 4 and 12, that begin and end in the same word. This effect is less obvious in 4, which features the semantically lightweight all, though the notion of collectivity is certainly highlighted. But for 12 the formulaic nature of church activity is focalized, with any substance of religious belief left behind.

7. Conclusion

I have argued that an atomized and itemized account of figures allows us to look with more precision at the form-function correlations that rhetorical schemes exemplify. The Logic of the Example that has ruled the theory of figures for much of its long history has operated much like butterfly collecting. Beautiful or powerful or notably strategic samples of language

³ With all the provisos of footnote 2 earlier, I note that #metoo + "boys will be boys" returns 63,600, of which all the ones I sampled, up to the 25th page of results, were genuine collocations.
have been collected as exemplary of individual figures, they have been arrayed alongside largely minimalist definitions. The more insightful rhetoricians have also held such samples up as exemplary of certain rhetorical functions. But in neither case, the form or the function, has anyone appeared to notice that these pieces of language exemplified multiple figures simultaneously, and that the various figures participating in these samples contributed to both the appeal of the form and the meaning of the function. Curiously, in fact, the more layered these samples have been the purer the samples were said to be of a given figure. Here are two more instances, from a novel I was reading on the plane down:

15. Does it fill him with disgust, or make him want more of me, want me more? (Atwood, 2014 [1985]:209)

Most of you, and even me, even now, would probably want to say that 16 is a purer antimetabole than 15. But 15 is almost only an antimetabole. There’s also an epanaphora (want) there, some ploce (him), and so on, but all of them are 'outside' the antimetabole, incidental to it. With 16 we get parison, isocolon, and mesodiplosis, which are central to the antimetabole, along with anadiplosis and epanalepsis, which come along for the ride (but still throw in for gas).

What’s going on here in this superficial paradox—the more heavily figured instance is seen to be a purer example of one of those figures than the instance that includes only that figure—is that certain figures take precedence both cognitively and functionally over others. Reverse-lexical repetition does feel like it's pulling the most freight in 16, while in 15 it feels like little more than a kind of parlour trick, making us slow down and see the ways that desire can build in different ways, and there is even a hint of bidirectionality with respect to that desire. But the antimetabole is diffuse because it’s on it’s own.

8. Works cited


Harris, Randy Allen. 2013b. The rhetoric of science meets the science of rhetoric. Poroi 9.1, article 8.


Rommelag Engineering. n.d. Decision-making support from the inventors of blow-fill-seal technology. Waiblingen, Germany: Rommelag Kunststoff-Maschinen Vertriebsgesellschaft mbH