

Original scientific paper

RHETORICAL ANALYSIS IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION CLASSES: GENDER-BASED DIFFERENCES IN STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE SPEAKER

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Abstract. *The paper points out the benefits of rhetorical analysis and rhetorical criticism in developing business communication skills. At Zagreb School of Economics and Management, both the American and the European approaches to business communication have been combined, with LSP courses taught in the first year and business communication and rhetoric courses taught in the second year. An experiment was conducted on a sample of 99 students, including 57 female and 42 male participants, who were asked to assess the teenage activist Greta Thunberg and her speech at the UN Climate Action Summit in 2019. The research focused on the role of gender in perception of quality, the attractiveness of the speech, the use of ethos, pathos and logos, persuasiveness and the influence potential. The results showed that male students gave lower grades to Greta and her speech, unlike the female students, who would also be more willing to change their behavior as a result of listening to Greta's speech. Nevertheless, these differences were statistically significant only for a limited number of questions. The potential gender bias should be addressed in the rhetoric and business communication course design. Exposing students to a diverse set of speakers increases their critical thinking skills, ensuring higher objectivity and bias-free assessment of speakers including their peers.*

Key words: *business communication, rhetorical analysis, rhetorical criticism, gender bias, student assessment*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since its foundation in 2002, Zagreb School of Economics and Management (ZSEM) has had a different approach to language and communication studies compared to long-established Croatian business and economics faculties. This approach could be described as a mixture between the American and the European tradition in business communication teaching and research as outlined in Mautner and Rainer (2017) and Bargiela-Chiappini (2009). The European business discourse research and teaching stem from applied linguistics methodologies, focusing on text analysis, LSP phraseology and terminology, and enhancing basic language skills in business-related contexts, including languages other than English (Nickerson and Planten, 2009). Courses offered by Croatian faculties reflect that approach both in the names of the courses (Business English, Business German) and the type of

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textbooks (e.g. English for Business Studies by Ian Mackenzie). On the other hand, American universities have been teaching business communication, as a sub-discipline of business administration, since the beginning of the 20th century, focusing on teaching business communication skills to native speakers. Initially, the discipline heavily relied on rhetoric only to become increasingly interdisciplinary, drawing from methodologies and theories in closely related disciplines such as organizational behavior, management, marketing, cultural studies, literary analysis, and so on (Andrews, 2009).

At ZSEM, in the first year, students take English for Economist and Business English courses, where mandatory literature includes textbooks such as English for Business Studies (Ian Mackenzie, Cambridge University Press) and Market Leader (Cotton, Falvey and Kent, Pearson). In the second year, there are mandatory Rhetoric and Business Communication courses. Mandatory literature for the latter includes Business Communication Today by Bovée and Thill (Pearson), which starts with primary concepts such as the basic communication model and continues with effective communication, intercultural skills, communication planning, communication media, types of business messages, business reports and presentations, employment correspondence and so on. The Rhetoric course covers topics such as audience profiling, speech composition, argumentation, listening, fallacies, debate, speech performance, etc. Mandatory literature for the course is *The Art of Public Speaking* by Stephen Lucas (McGraw-Hill Education).

The research presented in this paper stands at the intersection of the courses mentioned above, relying on the knowledge and skills that students acquire therein such as critical listening, context analysis, message structuring, argumentation, and public performance. A sample of ZSEM students were asked to listen and assess a speech of the teenage activist Greta Thunberg at the UN's Climate Action Summit in 2019. Since one of the aspects the rhetorical analysis focuses on is the gender-based difference in the perception of speakers, which is further explained in the Literature Review section of this paper, we wanted to find out whether such differences exist in our sample. Our research confirmed the existence of such a difference; therefore, in the final section of our paper we discuss the implications this might have on the content of communication courses.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The first part of the following section provides an overview of the role of rhetoric and public speaking in business communication. Audience analysis and rhetorical criticism can be valuable tools in teaching communication skills: rhetorical criticism enhances students' listening and critical-thinking skills, while a good analysis of the audience is a prerequisite for proper preparation of the speech including rhetorical devices and communication channels. The second part of this section focuses on possible gender-based differences in the perception of speakers. As the presented literature suggests, female and male listeners may perceive and evaluate speakers differently depending on their gender, which may have implications on the content of rhetoric and business communication courses so that students become aware and know how to avoid this bias.

2.1. Rhetoric and Business Communication

Business discourse can be considered a "social action that takes place in different contexts as a means of completing a set of work-based tasks" (Bargiela-Chiappini,

Nickerson, and Planken, 2013 in Ilie, Nickerson, and Planken, 2019: 4). Therefore, teaching business communication should be focused on helping students to use oral and written communication effectively in their workplace (Ilie, Nickerson, and Planken, 2019). The context of the workplace is very important for business communication teaching, as well as the notion of the audience (which, in its broadest sense, includes both internal and external audiences). That is why rhetoric is an important element of most business communication courses, with context and audience being studied in detail within the field of rhetoric. Zanolà (2016) gives an overview of public speaking content in business communication manuals from the beginning of the twentieth century and concludes that the majority have devoted more pages to rhetoric than to business writing, which underlines the importance of public speaking skills in a business context. On the other hand, Lee (2019: 3) points out how “numerous studies address rhetorical theory and practice in business communication, but relatively few works focus on rhetorical criticism”. The author proposes that rhetorical criticism be incorporated in business communication courses through analysis of public speeches of business leaders. “Integrating rhetorical criticism into business communication expands and strengthens its research efforts and enlarges the pedagogical domain” (Lee, 2019: 7). Furthermore, rhetorical criticism can be incorporated through listening and critical thinking exercises by analyzing speeches and learning more about good and fallacious arguments. This is important since the current job market rewards people who are capable of communicating clearly and effectively (Ortiz, Region-Sebest, and MacDermott, 2016). Research also shows that listening skills are among the most understudied and untrained ones but are very important in the workplace (Sullivan, 2011).

Zanolà (2016) points out that business communication and public speaking courses should be adapted to the audience (i.e. business students) especially when choosing examples of speeches for analysis, her suggestion being to use examples from the business context. Crosling and Ward (2002) emphasize that both informal and formal contexts of oral communication are important for the future workplace - in other words, it is not enough to teach students only formal oral forms such as presentations. Based on the above, it can be concluded that there is room for improvement in teaching public speaking whether it is taught separately or as a part of business communication courses. Students should be introduced to different oral forms used in the business context while relying on rhetorical analysis and criticism.

2.2. Gender-based differences in perception of speakers

Bias in the perception and evaluation of the speaker is very important - both in the higher education context but also in the business world. Yet, not a lot of research has been done on how, on the one hand, the gender of the speaker influences evaluation scores, and how the evaluator's/listener's gender influences the perception of the speaker on the other. The reason for that may be that it is especially difficult to exclude all the different variables that may influence the perception or the evaluation results, such as the content, cultural background, experience of the listeners, etc. One complex variable is definitely the gender itself. Namely, when analyzing gender differences, one has to be careful and not look at gender as just biological sex, but rather as a social construct (Wodak and Benke, 1998). Nevertheless, some research has been done on gender differences in the evaluation of speakers, mostly with student-student evaluations, or student-professor evaluations, as such data is widely available due to the evaluation requirements in the higher-education system. The following literature overview shows that results presented in the examined

studies are not coherent, even though there are several similar conclusions about gender bias in speaker perception.

Feldstein, Dohm, and Crown (2001) explored the correlation between gender and speech rate in the perception of competence and social attractiveness. Their results showed that the listeners' gender did not influence their perception of social attractiveness, but the speaker's gender did. Male and female listeners perceived the male speakers as more socially attractive than the female ones (Feldstein, Dohm, and Crown, 2001). Somewhat similar to this are the results by Langan et al. (2005). Their study showed that male listeners tended to grade male speakers a bit higher than female speakers, whereas female listeners did not show gender bias while grading the speakers. Since the goal of the study was to examine the validity of the peer assessment that is subject to potential gender bias, Langan et al. (2005) conclude that naive evaluators may be gender-biased, but the overall effect of the peer assessment is still a positive learning experience for those involved. In contrast, Sellnow and Treinen (2004) found no significant differences between the overall ratings of the male and the female speakers. They also conclude that "these results are encouraging in that student peer critiques apparently can function as equitable pedagogical tools, as long as students are properly inoculated" (Sellnow and Treinen, 2004: 294). However, they did find the difference in open-ended comments. While a majority of students reported that they had been persuaded to accept the position of the speakers they heard, a significantly greater majority was persuaded by the male speaker than by the female speaker. This is in line with the previous findings by Aries (1996) and Bradley (1981) about the gender bias in favor of the male speakers (Sellnow and Treinen, 2004: 294).

In addition, some recent studies, done on large amounts of data, show gender bias in the evaluation of lecturers by the students, with female lecturers being awarded statistically significant lower grades than the male ones (Fan, Shepherd, Slavich, Waters, Stone, Abel, et al., 2019; Friederike, Sauermann, and Zölitz, 2019), even when the content is the same (MacNell, Driscoll, and Hunt, 2015). Based on the above, it can be concluded that male speakers are often assessed as more socially attractive and more persuasive than female speakers.

In Zanola's opinion, "future research needs to address how social factors such as gender, age, etc. may influence the outcomes of studies conducted on public speaking" (Zanola, 2016: 334). Therefore, for this paper, gender bias in the perception of the speaker will be tested among students of the business communication and rhetoric courses at the Zagreb School of Economics and Management. The results may help further improvement of the peer evaluation of student presentations, but also better understanding of the students' perception of the speaker.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this part, we firstly present the research questions and hypotheses and then move on to the composition of the sample, which is quite specific due to the international orientation of ZSEM. Finally, we present the research methods and the procedure.

3.1. Research questions and hypotheses

The goal of this paper was to examine differences between male and female students regarding their ecological awareness, attitudes, and perception of the famous environmental

activist Greta Thunberg as a speaker at the UN summit. Taking into account the literature presented above, two research questions were posed:

1. To what extent do female and male students differ in their attitudes to Greta and her speech? Is this difference statistically significant?
2. For which questions are those differences more profound?

Based on these research questions, two hypotheses were proposed. The first hypothesis takes into consideration previous studies, especially the one by Langan et al. (2005), who found out that the male listeners were biased in favor of the male speakers. Our experiment involves only one female speaker, thus:

- H1: Male students will assign Greta and her speech lower grades on the Likert scale.
 H2: There will be a statistically significant difference between the female and male students regarding their attitudes towards Greta Thunberg.

3.2. Sample

The sample was made up of a total of 99 students; of which 57 were female and 42 male. The questionnaire was administered during the first-year English for Economists and second-year Business Communication and Rhetoric classes. Students studying in Croatian completed the questionnaire in the Croatian language, while students studying in English and international students completed the questionnaire in the English language (Table 1). At ZSEM, the economics and management study program is executed both in Croatian and English languages, which includes the above-mentioned courses.

Table 1 Gender distribution per language of the questionnaire

		Female	Male
Questionnaire in Croatian		17	18
Questionnaire in English	ZSEM students	26	18
	Exchange students	14	6
Total		57	42

Some of the international students were regular ZSEM students, while others were exchange students from all around the world. While the international ZSEM students were mostly first- and second-year students, the exchange students (20% of the sample) were second-, third-, fourth-, and even fifth-year students. Table 2 shows the distribution of students by gender and by academic year for both the Croatian- and English-language programs.

Table 2. Gender distribution per study year

		Female	Male
Study year	First	24	24
	Second	24	14
	Third	5	2
	Fourth	3	2
	Fifth	1	
Total		57	42

It is important to point out that second-year ZSEM students at the time of the survey had almost completed their Rhetoric course. They represent around 38% of our sample, where the approximation is due to the unknown number of the exchange students in the sample who have taken the Rhetoric course at ZSEM or their home institutions.

Up to that moment of the semester in the Rhetoric course, second-year ZSEM students have already analyzed several speeches both in the form of a video recording and text. These were speeches by contemporary speakers, politicians, business leaders, and actors, such as Jacinda Ardern, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, Elon Musk, Steve Jobs, and Leonardo DiCaprio as well as famous historical speeches by Socrates, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Winston Churchill, Emma Golden, Martin Luther King, etc. Students have learned about persuasion, rhetorical devices (ethos, pathos, and logos), and adaptation of the speech to the audience mostly in the Rhetoric course, but also in the Business Communication course.

3.3. Research methods

In December 2019, when the experiment was conducted, Greta Thunberg was already a well-known person among Croatian and international students studying at ZSEM. Since her first „School Strike for Climate“ in front of the Swedish parliament in August 2018, she managed to attract hundreds of thousands of students to organize and participate in climate strikes all around the world (School strike, n.d.). She held a dozen of speeches at the highest international fora (Cerovski, 2020), including the U.N.'s Climate Action Summit in New York City on September 23, 2019, which was assessed by ZSEM students. Both the topic of climate change, which affects (inter)national economic policies, and the contexts she appeared in as a speaker (U.N., European Parliament, World Economic Forum, etc.) make Greta Thunberg a legitimate case to be studied in the business communication courses.

The experiment was conducted during English for Economists, Rhetoric, and Business Communication classes. After the initial discussion about Greta Thunberg and school strikes for climate, students were shown the video of the above-mentioned speech, after which they filled out the questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered via Google Forms, in English or Croatian, depending on the language of instruction for a particular group of students. It was made up of 15 questions distributed across three different categories: demographic questions, attitudes towards environmental issues, and evaluation of Greta Thunberg's speech. While many of the questions were subjective and measured students' attitudes and perceptions, there were also questions where students had to show their knowledge of argumentation strategies, audience profiling, and presentation structuring. Most of the responses were measured against the Likert scale and there were also several yes/no questions.

3.4. Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel in order to check whether there is a statistically significant difference in the answers of female and male students. For the purpose of testing differences between the population mean, a t-test for unknown population variances was performed. An F-test was done to determine the equality of population variances. This is a t-test where population variances are unknown but are assumed to be equal. The F-test showed that there is no difference between population variances regarding all the questions from the survey. The t-test was used to test the differences between the responses of the male and female students for each question.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to examine if there is any gender bias among students in their assessment of Greta Thunberg and her speech and if there is any, in which questions it can be found. As many students have already gained speech analysis experience in their Rhetoric class, they weren't completely naive evaluators. The results of their answers to the survey are in the tables below.

Table 3 Student assessment against a 5-point Likert scale

Question	Female mean	Male mean	p-value
Assess your ecological awareness on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (fully)?	3.24	3.38	0.376
Assess the persuasiveness of Greta's message on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (completely)?	3.24	2.76	0.073
How did you like her speech on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (excellent)?	2.94	2.5	0.087
To what degree is her speech adapted to the audience on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (fully)?	3.38	3.14	0.342
To what degree was the speaker interesting on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (fully)?	3.45	2.83	0.014
To what degree was the speech emotional on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (fully)?	4.03	3.80	0.365
To what degree was the speech logical on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (fully)?	3.35	2.78	0.021

Table 4 Student assessment using yes/no questions

Question	Female		Male		p-value
	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Does Greta Thunberg have credibility as a speaker at the UN summit?	36.36%	63.64%	33.33%	66.67%	0.730
Was the speech supported by convincing arguments?	61.40%	38.60%	54.76%	45.24%	0.507
Would you change your behavior as a result of listening to her speech?	31.31%	68.69%	16.67%	83.33%	0.073

As can be seen from Tables 3 and 4 above, female students awarded Greta a higher average grade for each question in the survey in comparison to male students. The only difference is for the first question, where they were supposed to assess their ecological awareness. Male students on average assessed themselves as more ecologically aware than female ones in this study (3.38 vs. 3.24). In comparison to their female peers, it seems that male students are more critical of the female speaker but less critical of themselves. As can be seen from the data in Table 3, the average grade for all the questions rarely goes above 3 for male students, while it is closer to 3.5 for female students.

However, the statistical analysis showed that the difference between the male and female students is statistically significant only for two questions: how interesting the

speaker was ($p=0.014$) and how logical the speech was ($p=0.021$). The difference was marginally significant for three questions: assessment of Greta's persuasiveness (0.073), of how they liked the speech (0.087), and whether they would change their behavior as a result of her speech ($p=0.073$).

Furthermore, the questions in which male and female students show statistically significant differences are particularly interesting. The questions regarding the speech and the speaker can be divided into two groups: one group of questions concerns rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, and logos) and adaptation of the speech to the audience, while the other group questions their attitude to the speech and the speaker (whether they liked it, whether it was interesting, whether they would change their behavior because of it). Most ZSEM students of the second year involved in the survey learned about rhetorical appeals in detail in the Rhetoric class and had to analyze other speeches applying the knowledge they had about them. The same cannot be said about the first-year ZSEM students, and some exchange students participating in this study, which makes this sample limited. If all participants in the study were second-year ZSEM students, it could be expected that their answers to questions involving the knowledge of rhetoric would show no statistically significant difference. Nevertheless, female students across our sample found Greta and her speech more logical as well as more persuasive than male ones and this difference was statistically significant. In addition, female students awarded Greta on average higher grades for credibility (ethos), logic (logos) and emotion (pathos), and, consequently, found her more persuasive.

The other set of questions, regarding their attitudes towards the speaker and the speech, also manifested some significant differences between the two groups. Female students found the speech more interesting than male ones, they liked it more and would change their behavior as an effect of it. This again may be due to gender bias, since the speaker and female listeners are of the same gender. Also, these questions aren't directly connected with the rhetorical knowledge or analysis, but more with the preference of the listener and the effect the speech and the speaker have on him or her.

Previous studies by Sellnow and Treinen (2004) and Langan et al. (2005) showed that there seems to be a bias in favor of the male speakers. Since in our study there was no male speaker to compare with, we can only infer that there is a negative bias by male students towards the female speaker. These results need to be interpreted with caution since the sample of the listeners and especially of the speaker(s) is limited.

In conclusion, we can say that the first hypothesis was supported, and the second one was only partially supported. Male students did assign Greta and her speech on average lower grades compared to their female peers, but the difference in assessment was statistically significant only for a limited number of questions.

This conclusion, however, cannot be generalized, as both the speech and the sample were quite peculiar. Greta Thunberg was an atypical speaker: a teenage activist who gave a very emotional speech at an international political forum. On the other hand, our sample of listeners was made up of students from different study years, which means they did not have the same knowledge base. Furthermore, a fifth of our sample were exchange students, whose background and cultural experience differs from that of the Croatian students and as such may affect their attitude and perception of a teenage activist and her speech (see Rajh and Biočina, 2021).

5. CONCLUSION

Despite its limitations, the study resulted in ideas for innovation of the communication courses curricula. Historically, great orators were men, which is reflected in the traditional rhetoric courses. The ZSEM rhetoric course already contains examples of strong female speakers, such as the prime minister of New Zealand Jacinda Ardern, but it needs to include more women, especially female business leaders, to achieve a better gender balance. Since there is a general trend in the society to embrace diversity as well as to increase the number of women in managerial positions in the business world, it is only logical to expose students to as many different speakers as possible. It was already pointed out that rhetorical criticism exercises sharpen students' listening and critical thinking skills. Therefore, it could be expected that, once they have acquired rhetorical knowledge from good examples, their assessment of various speakers, including their peers, would be more objective and free of different types of bias.

Finally, in the globalized business world, it is important to speak English as a global *lingua franca*, but it is even more important to be able to influence and persuade the increasingly diversified audience. In order to achieve this, students should receive solid and more politically correct rhetorical and business communication knowledge and exercise their public speaking and presentation skills for various contexts throughout their university education.

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