"Identification" as a Key Term in Kenneth Burke's Rhetorical Theory

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In A Rhetoric of Motives (1969), Kenneth Burke selects "identification" as the key term to distinguish his rhetorical perspective from a tradition characterized by the term "persuasion." As he is careful to note, his focus on identification does not mean he dismisses the traditional focus on persuasion; his contribution is accessory to the traditional focus, and he uses both concepts in his own thinking. Burke sees that interactions in our contemporary world are, in some ways, "more complicated" than can be understood by viewing persuasion solely as the explicit, intentional acts which a rhetor directs to a specific, known audience. The following discussion offers a brief definition of some elements of Burke's concept of "identification" and describes several ways the term extends our traditional understanding of "persuasion."

Burke explains identification as a process that is fundamental to being human and to communicating. He contends that the need to identify arises out of division; humans are born and exist as biologically separate beings and therefore seek to identify, through communication, in order to overcome separateness. We are aware of this biological separation, and we recognize additional types of separation based on social class or position. We experience the ambiguity of being separate yet being identified with others at the same time: we are "both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another." (Burke, 1969, p. 21).

Burke assumes we not only experience separateness but are goaded by the spirit of order and hierarchy and feel guilty about the differences between ourselves and others (who occupy different positions in the social hierarchy) and about our inevitable failure to always support order, authority and hierarchy. As Burke asserts, "Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division." (Burke, 1969, p. 22). To overcome our division and our guilt, we look for ways in which our interests, attitudes, values, experiences, perceptions, and material properties are shared with others, or could appear to be shared. These instances of "overlap" make us "consubstantial" with others. We continually seek to be associated with certain individuals or groups (and not others), attain some position in the hierarchy of social relations, and relieve ourselves of the guilt we bear.

As Burke sees it, the human need to identify provides a rich resource for those interested in joining us or, more importantly, persuading us. Burke's human agent is separate and guilty, "goaded by a spirit of perfection," and in this uneasy state is thus "available" to the art of those who would attempt to wield influence for purposes of good or ill. A key part of Burke's mission in writing is that we understand the processes by which we build social cohesion through our use of language. His goal is that we learn to perceive at what points we are using and abusing language to cloud our vision, create confusion, or justify various and ever present inclinations toward conflict, war and destruction--or our
equally-present inclinations toward cooperation, peace and survival. Thus, Burke sees in processes such as identification, the working out of the daily mundane processes of social life, as well as the larger, significant choices that may lead to our corporate destruction or salvation.

Burke's concept of identification needs to be seen within the context of his understanding of language as symbolic action. Human beings are actors. Using language is one way of acting in the world, and for us to act by using language is our most defining characteristic. By our very nature, we are beings who respond to symbols, and are symbol-using and symbol-abusing. Humans act by using language that is purposeful and that conveys our attitudes. It is from this understanding that Burke draws his definition of rhetoric as "the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or induce actions in other human agents." (Burke, 1969, p. 41). Within this perspective, identification involves at least three types of processes or states: 1) the process of naming something (or someone) according to specific properties; 2) the process of associating with and dissassociating from others--suggesting that persons (and ideas or things) share, or do not share, important qualities in common; and 3) the product or end result of identifying--the state of being consubstantial with others. It is the associating process, whereby individuals persuade others, or themselves, that they share important qualities in common, that is the focus of the present discussion.

Burke describes the most obvious case of the associating type of persuasion in traditional terms, as a form of explicit design: "a speaker persuades an audience by the use of stylistic identifications; his act of persuasion may be for the purpose of causing the audience to identify itself with the speaker's interests..." (1969, p. 46). Burke's examples of deliberate attempts at identification include the politician who, when speaking to farmers says, "I was a farm boy myself," (1969, p. xiv) or the "baby kissing politician's ways of kissing women on their babies" (Burke, 1966, p. 302). Using Burke's perspective, Cheney (1983) has examined the ways organizations seek to establish such common ground directly with employees through newsletters. Cheney also looks at two types of identification strategies discussed by Burke which are less direct: identification by antithesis, whereby a speaker promotes identification with a listener by virtue of an "enemy" both speaker and listener have in common; and identification by an "assumed we" whereby a speaker uses references such as "we," in a way that is largely unnoticed but allows the speaker to group together parties who have little in common.

In this paper, several dimensions of Burke's understanding of identification by common ground are illustrated by reference to public response following the death of Princess Diana in August of 1997. At the time of her death, individuals in England, the U.S., and elsewhere were interviewed as part of a week of unprecedented television coverage. Many who shared memories of her, especially young women, commented in ways that suggested they identified with Princess Diana at various stages in her public life. However, many women and men were surprised at their own response of grief or concern, not having realized until her sudden death that they felt a significant connection to her. In part, their response suggests they identified with her in ways they had not realized (Quigley, 1998). By using Burke's perspective on identification, we can explore some of the less obvious ways that persons may have identified with Princess Diana, to
indicate potential avenues of analysis that could help explain her demonstrably wide appeal. Burke's perspective also allows us to consider that identification in contemporary society may occur through mass media and may involve large and diffuse audiences.

Identification through form. According to Burke, "many purely formal patterns can awaken an attitude of collaborative expectancy in us." (Burke, 1969, p. 58). Once we grasp the trend of the form, it invites participation. This is the case with forms such as tropes and figures, and may also be the case with larger forms, such as story or myth. Identification with Princess Diana may have been greatly facilitated by a very familiar mythic form—the story of the obscure young girl who meets the prince and finds her life transformed. Numerous news reporters and many individuals interviewed at the time of Princess Diana's death referred to her "storybook" or "fairy tale" romance and wedding. Even though these individuals did not say they actually believed in such a story, some did reveal that they got caught up in the celebration at the time. It's possible these and other individuals, particularly young women, identified with the princess and the royal family and may have hoped, at some level, that a familiar and powerful story would turn out to be true. Burke would have us be on the lookout for such invitations to identify through familiar and attractive forms.

Identification as semi-conscious.

In processes "not wholly deliberate yet not unconscious," a speaker may use language and other symbols associated with wealth or class, or an audience member may identify with such nuances of wealth without being fully aware of doing so (Burke, 1969). Burke's perspective suggests that we consider the impact of messages we do not fully intend to send or do not consciously intend to heed. Such opportunities to identify semi-consciously might be expected to occur, especially when there exists "mystery" resulting from hierarchical estrangement, as would happen in relations between royalty and commoners. "Mystery arises at the point where different kinds of beings are in communication. There is strangeness but also the possibility of communion." (Burke, 1969, p. 115).

According to Burke, one contemporary term we might use to describe mystery is "glamour," and that certainly has been a term used often in association with Princess Diana. During the royal wedding, people might have identified through the presence of, for example, uniforms, insignia, the carriage, and the pageantry of the event. In later years, Princess Diana was often seen as having a glamorous, high society lifestyle. Without thinking too much about it, many may have identified with the princess at the time of the wedding and at other times, in part, through the symbols of wealth, class and glamour that added to a sense of estrangement and mystery, yet invited communion.

Identification through self-persuasion.

Burke suggests that an essential part of identification occurs through of self-persuasion; we promote social cohesion through our innumerable identifications, in part through persuading ourselves. In some cases, the process of persuasion is not complete until we act upon ourselves rhetorically (Burke, 1969). Burke's picture of the individual consciousness is one of a noisy and wrangling parliament, different factions of which may
ascend in importance at different times. Whichever faction is in charge at a given time may convince, through carefully chosen language (including purposefully vague, imprecise language), the other members who make up the complicated self, thereby "completing" a process of persuasion begun outside the individual. At the time of Princess Diana's death, reports indicated that she was frequently the target of criticism in the British press, yet ordinary people "kept faith" with her. In the face of both positive and negative news reports, those who kept faith may have rationalized their choice internally in ways that strengthened their identification with her.

Identification through the mundane and recurring.

While it is obviously beneficial for us to focus on one-time events, such as a particularly important or effective speech, we can also benefit from examining less important, recurring messages with which we might identify. In our media-saturated environment, we are repeatedly exposed to messages that are not just mundane but are sometimes irritating and obnoxious. As Burke states, "And often we must think of rhetoric not in terms of some one particular address but as a general body of identifications that owe their convincingness much more to trivial repetition and dull daily reinforcement than to exceptional rhetorical skill." (Burke, 1969, p. 26). He would not have us ignore or dismiss such dull and omnipresent fare. In their shock at Princess Diana's death, some individuals remarked that she had become like a member of their family in that she was a daily presence, appearing through newspapers and television. It is possible that people, particularly the British, identified with her in numerous small ways, as she became part of the fabric of routine daily life.

Identification through representation.

An additional way we identify is by sharing vicariously in the role of leader or spokesperson (Burke, 1973). Many people interviewed about Princess Diana have said they felt connected to her in her various roles as young bride, mother, socialite, single mother, and crusader. As she "grew" in her role, even though she did so awkwardly at times, many who followed her activities felt she represented them and their country. In describing her continuing work for charities and various causes after her divorce, she was frequently described as an "ambassador of good will." This was the case whether she was visiting a foreign country or visiting an AIDS hospice in her own country. These were places ordinary people didn't go and she was seen as going in their stead. Those identifying with her as a type of leader might also have felt they shared in her transformations--from shy young girl to glamorous socialite, from decorative royal to committed crusader. She was able to change her identity and others may have felt, in identifying with her, they could also. The possibility of transformation is an interesting prospect, and for many would present an attractive invitation to identification. Thus, Princess Diana may have represented others through her highly visible lifestyle and work as well as through her ability to transform herself.

Obviously, Burke's perspective on identification is much broader than the several dimensions discussed here. However, these dimensions offer a brief look at the
possibilities for exploring identification as other than a direct and deliberate strategy used by a rhetor to persuade an audience. Burke encourages us to look at processes that are semi-conscious, less than obvious, mundane, and representative, processes that invite us to collaborate in identification and transformation. Burke’s understanding leads us to ask an expanded set of questions when trying to explain events such as the overwhelming public response to Princess Diana’s death. While reference to processes of identification may not explain all aspects of the appeal of a public figure, it is surely one important avenue to explore. For such an exploration, Burke has provided additional tools that can help us understand persuasion as a complicated and rich phenomenon.

References


