

Todd Oakley, *Rhetorical Minds: Meditations on the Cognitive Science of Persuasion*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2020; x + 318 pp., US\$149.00/ £110.00 (hbk).

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Rhetorical Minds is a most welcome monograph in that it covers a particularly broad and wide scope, while also going deep into core issues regarding what makes us human, how language evolved, and how human language and cognition need to be understood as inherently dialogic. The book views human beings as fundamentally social and symbolic creatures, endowed with the capacity to interact and coordinate with one another. It is argued that *Homo sapiens* should rather be called *Homo rhetoricus* and that language should be regarded as *linguaging*, a participatory activity involving constant joint attention and attunement to the other. The author's main thesis that "human beings are rhetorical beings" (p. 21), in the broad sense of the word, is grounded in the available literature in linguistics, semiotics, rhetoric, and cognitive science. This claim is also in line with the latest trend in Cognitive Linguistics and Cognitive Science of incorporating intersubjectivity as a key element in the study of language and thought, while also challenging long-standing theories of language and cognition.

The monograph comprises 10 chapters (plus an introduction and conclusion), organized in three parts. Part I, entitled 'Theoretical Prerequisites', presents the book's philosophical, scientific, and rhetorical basis. Chapter 1 constitutes an overview of the paradigm of meaning construction adopted as well as a summary of the most important models of human cognition to date. A case is made for a so-called 'second-person cognitive science', in which the human mind is amalgamated, shaped by other beings and the environment. Chapter 2 argues that unlike other animals, characterized by being

solely anchored in the here-and-now, humans can also use semiotic resources to access the world differently, and in various styles. Through rhetoric, we can extend presence in time and space for the sake of others. Chapter 3 demonstrates the need to understand the human mind not only as a storage for inner mental representations, but also as the creative and dynamic producer and processor of discourse in situated, embodied, and socially distributed situations of communication. As rhetorical beings, humans have complex minds able to represent what's missing so as to persuade or dissuade others.

Part II, called “The Evolution and Development of Homo Rhetoricus”, presents an account of human evolution according to which rhetorical practices are part and parcel of the human environment (Chapter 4). Behaviorally modern hominids typically develop in these niches, with four different forms of intersubjectivity (Chapter 5). It is from intersubjective interaction and coordination that languaging emerges (Chapter 6).

Part III, “Discourse and Social Ontology”, introduces a theory of language practices that is cognitively and sociologically plausible, illustrated with the analysis of different and diverse examples. Chapter 7 discusses linguistic and discursive phenomena, such as gesture accompanying language, which serves to exemplify a unifying approach to language as a social-cognitive process. Chapter 8 deals with a higher level of intersubjectivity, namely the third-person cognition necessary to function in institutions, by analyzing the peculiarities of modal verbs in official documents from the Supreme Court of the United States. Chapter 9 provides a deliberation on human concepts and an understanding of meaning construction as involving the thoughts, actions, and interactions of an individual with the environment. Chapter 10 addresses the role of emotions in rhetorical minds, by introducing a new theory of rhetorical appraisals, the *Amalgamated Appraisal Theory of Emotion* (ATE), which integrates the latest insights from emotion research, evolutionary psychology, and social constructionism.

Throughout the monograph, the author's points are illustrated with numerous examples from a variety of genres and registers, ranging from speeches by US Presidents or an elderly Clint Eastwood to the language of time of an Amazonian community and monkey alarm calls. Scholarly arguments from the classical Greeks and Romans are masterly integrated with the works of 20th century thinkers like Burke, Husserl, and

Gibson, as well as early and contemporary semioticians. Thought experiments are also elegantly combined with a discussion of the most recent experimental findings.

The monograph is very well written, with a clarity and wit that reveals a deep understanding of the matters at hand, making it both an informative and an unusually pleasant read. The book is made even more readable by its dialogic style and not too technical wording, with detailed explanations placed in notes at the end of each chapter. The many allusions to popular culture and politics make the book appealing to both scholars and general public. A few examples may however be lost to those unfamiliar with contemporary American popular and political culture. The book's numerous images and diagrams help elucidate theoretical reflections that might otherwise be rather obscure to newcomers in the field. Indeed, the occasional deliberations on Conceptual Integration Theory may be hard to follow for non-experts. Those readers strictly interested in language structure and use may also skip some sections on cognitive science, the psychology of emotions, or cultural inventions like money.

This book puts the persuasive function of language front and center, providing a deep reflection on the big picture that is empirically grounded and interdisciplinarily informed. By so doing, the case studies it discusses do not appear as so rare and the analyses so specific that they may not be generalizable enough or so generic and decontextualized that they may risk being discarded as just-so stories. In a time when linguistics, especially Cognitive Linguistics, embraces statistics, on occasion at the expense of deep theoretical reflection and the study of language as discourse practice in all its complexity, this book is an important and necessary contribution. I have no doubt that this timely, rich, and incisive monograph will inform and delight readers of *Discourse Studies*, as well as scholars, students, cognitive scientists, writers, and language enthusiasts alike, for years to come.