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THE SPEAKER'S ETHOS

Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

1. come up with a basic definition of ethos;
2. identify the characteristics of ethos by integrating its traditional and contemporary concepts;
3. understand the dynamics of ethos or source credibility; and
4. reflect on the importance of source credibility in human communication.

INTRODUCTION

Young people, old people, practically everyone wants to make a good impression, right? An 18-year old rehearses his table manners before going out on a dinner date. A job seeker bears in mind the importance of speech, poise and grooming in clinching an interview. A professor primes his mind, heart, and spirit before taking on the first day of class. All these people want to communicate with one aim: to become credible, competent, trustworthy, and good before their respective listeners or audiences. In short, to communicate meaningfully and successfully.

In ancient Greece the concept of “ethos” was modeled in everyday life and in duties of citizenship. Discussed extensively by Aristotle in his book, *Ars Rhetorica*, the character or *ethos* of the speaker or communicator was the most potent means of convincing and influencing one’s listeners. *Ethos* surpassed logos and pathos in the factor of persuasiveness.

Briefly defined, the **3 factors of persuasion** are:

1. **Ethos** – the character of the speaker or the speaker’s credibility
2. **Logos** – the method of reasoning and argumentation employed by speaker
3. **Pathos** – the speaker’s use of emotional appeals

Aristotle said: “There are three things which inspire confidence in the speaker’s own character, namely, that which induced us to believe a thing apart from any proof of it: **good sense, good moral character, and goodwill.**” (Ryan, 1952).

DEFINING ETHOS

Ancient rhetoricians and writer-philosophers like Quintilian, Plato, Cicero, and Isocrates, including Aristotle himself, taught that the most effective of the three is ethos, or the character of the speaker. Quintilian, a Roman teacher-orator who wrote the 12-volume book “*Training of an Orator*,” defined this quality in “a good man speaking well.” He believed in and advocated the training of orators from infancy. Contemporary authors Gronbeck, McKerrow, Ehninger and Monroe (1994) define ethos as speaker credibility, or the degree to which an audience judges a communicator trustworthy, competent, sincere, attractive and dynamic. They concur with research findings “a speaker who can raise an audience’s estimation of his own trustworthiness, competency, sincerity, attractiveness, and dynamism will heighten the impact of the speech.” Author James McCroskey (1971) sees a communication source as having three possible process dimensions: 1) initial credibility, 2) produced credibility, and 3) terminal credibility. Today these persuasive forces residing in the speaker are generally referred to as **source credibility**. Take note of what these same writers have listed as practices affecting speaker credibility:

1. References to yourself and your experience (in moderation) tend to increase your perceived trustworthiness and competence. References to others (authorities) tend to increase your perceived trustworthiness and dynamism.
2. Using highly credible authorities (experts) to substantiate your claims increases your perceived fairness.
3. If you can demonstrate that you and your audience share common beliefs, attitudes, and values,

your overall credibility will increase.

4. Well-organized speeches are more credible than poorly organized speeches.

5. The more sincere you are, the better chance you have of changing your listeners' attitudes.

As it was with ancient Greece, so it is with modern times that we know for certain a speaker's impact rests upon his listeners. McCroskey defines ethos as "the receiver's impression of the message source." It is a source characteristic that is attributed to and conferred on him by the receiver-listener. The latter (listener) sits quietly to assess those qualities in the speaker that will culminate in a favorable or unfavorable judgment. Whereas the speaker brings with him certain qualities that he has acquired and honed as well as certain inadequacies, the listener looks at these qualities and comes to a conclusion of the former's worth.

Since ethos resides in the mind of the listener, therefore, it will vary in as many ways as there are listeners. Also, a listener's experience in a given communication situation is unique and personal to him. However unique and varied this perception may be, listeners or audiences generally prefer speakers who are sincere, honest, trustworthy, consistent, competent and knowledgeable.

Adopting McCroskey's idea, thus, ***ethos or source credibility is the listener's reception of the message source, which impression he processes at a given time or situation in order to assess the speaker's worth.*** Such a definition is similar to the one given by Andersen and Clavenger (1963) ***ethos is the image held of a communicator at a given time by the receiver.*** The overall credibility of the message source hinges on generally accepted personal traits like sincerity, goodwill, competence/knowledge, pleasantness, and trustworthiness.

Let us explain the concept of ethos with examples. In the late sixties there was a brilliant senator in the Philippine scene. He would be besieged with speaking invitations by offices, campuses, and neighboring countries in the region. With his amazing grasp of history and international events plus an astute, analytic mind, then lawmaker Benigno Aquino was a much-sought-after speaker. We were students then who along with our neighbors from Ateneo and Maryknoll would jampack the Wilfrido Ma. Guerrero Theatre to listen to the man for hours. He had such a *high ethos*, one could say. Then a few years passed until he became an enemy of the Marcos administration. The martial law era found him guilty in proceedings of a military tribunal. He decided to go on a 40-day hunger strike and waged his political campaign from a prison cell. The electorate's response was tremendous because the people conferred upon him an even higher ethos than before his prisoner days. Until his destiny became manifest on that fateful day of August 21, 1983— death in the hands of assassins— the martial law regime considered him a threat. Benigno Aquino is long gone but his ethos remains very high indeed for he is considered a modern Filipino hero whose words "The Filipino is worth dying for!" will be remembered for a long time in the collective psyche of the Filipino nation.

If the above example deals with ethos that increases with time, what about ethos that changes in the opposite direction? Let us look at another historical figure. In the late fifties till about 1970, high ethos was conferred upon then Pres. Marcos by the Filipino populace because of his exemplary achievements as a UP student leader of his time and his track record of scholarship, soldiery, and service as a solon (oppositionist in Congress). But the same persona suffered from the people's very low perception of him during the historic EDSA revolution of 1986 due to his alleged tyrannical leadership, grave violations of human rights, and trail of graft and corruption in government for more than twenty years. Still today, there exists among our people a so – called "loyalist group" who despite the leader's questioned past defers to his memory. In this dynamic of ethos, you can see two kinds of ethos-pictures, namely: a *high ethos* conferred by one group, and, a very *low ethos* conferred

by another group. What differentiates these groups? Are there particular traits or qualities ranked higher or lower in a scale of ethos-related traits of a speaker-leader? Which group of raters or perceivers would give weight to certain characteristics more than others?

In the international scene, the US President, Bill Clinton, despite unsavory media mileage about his personal affairs enjoys high ethos as given him by admirers while he also suffered low ethos as conferred by other sectors of American society. But there was no general clamor for him to step down. Do leadership qualities subsume personal or private life characteristics? How are these perceived by different sectors of American society?

In an unpublished masteral thesis on the dimensions of ethos in the Philippine setting (Madrigal: 1992), the study looked into the perceptions of Filipino respondents of political figures prior to a presidential election. The results showed that there are three (3) major dimensions of ethos that are perceived by them, namely: “moral qualifications,” “intelligence,” and “expertise.” The other two are minor ones, namely: “message-related factor” and “delivery.”

In a related study by Nenita Osio-Santos (1996) on the “Patterns of Ethos: A Filipino Profile,” ranked highest among three in ethos was a senator who was perceived to be capable of transforming people’s lives to realize their dreams/potentials, an agent of change, and a problem-solving figure. If these characteristics were thought to reside in the speaker even before concrete proof of them came about, on what factors did the audience attribute high credibility to the source? Since we subscribe to the fact that ethos resides in the mind of the listener, what characteristics do Filipinos see in political candidates that make them “winnable?”

What about universals of ethos? Do people the world over cherish the same things in speakers? Leaders like India’s Mohandas Gandhi, the Philippines’ Ninoy Aquino, Israel’s Golda Meir, Egypt’s Anwar Sadat, American spiritual black leader, Martin Luther King; Calcutta’s Mother Teresa; and diplomats like our very own Carlos P. Romulo, the first secretary-general of the United Nations Council, to this day remain in our memory because of high credibility or ethos accorded them by peoples of the world.

Now that we have seen some real-life applications of ethos, let’s examine it further.

NATURE OF ETHOS

Ethos, thus, may be characterized as:

1. varying from individual to individual, from group to group
2. changing through time (fluctuations and progressions)
3. being personal and situational
4. being composite (determined by factors like context, previous reputation of the speaker, audience’s needs, priorities/expectations, rhetorical aspects of message at a given time)

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ETHICAL SPEAKER

ARISTOTLE

- **competence/intelligence**
- **trustworthiness (honesty)**

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • good character |
| GRONBECK, McKERROW et al | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • trustworthiness • competence • sincerity • attractiveness • dynamism |
| HOVLANO, JANIS & KELLY | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • competence on the subject • sincerity |
| LEMERT, BERLO, MERTZ(1969) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • trustworthiness • competence on the subject • pleasantness & liveliness |
| McCROSKEY(1966) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • thorough knowledge of subject • sincerity in communication |
| BAUDHIN & DAVIS (1972) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attractiveness (interesting personality) • honesty • knowledge of the subject • listeners' receptiveness to speaker |

When McCroskey (1974) examined earlier researches on ethos, he came up with a group of communal characteristics, namely: a) competence on the subject; b) honesty; and c) trust-worthiness as a result of honesty. Looking at the table above, can you think of your own list of what makes a speaker ethical? Would you weigh all characteristics equally?

At this point, what can you say about the different elements (speaker's reputation, time, context, listener's needs and goals, etc.) interacting in the ethos process? Let's examine further the dynamics of ethos.

THE DYNAMICS OF ETHOS

In view of a continually changing speaker-listener situation, ethos may be classified into three levels:

1. Extrinsic or initial ethos, wherein the audience or listeners have previous knowledge of the

speaker's good character, competence, intelligence, and trustworthiness.

Example A: droves of college students in the late '60's would troop to listen to then Sen. Benigno Aquino speak on international and regional events, i.e. the Vietnam war, Kampuchea situation, because the senator's articulateness on world affairs preceded him

Example B: a speech of introduction delivered by a respectable person prepares the mind of listeners to accept the speaker who speaks to them the first time with a positive picture of his initial credibility

2. ***Intrinsic or transactional ethos***, wherein the speaker's words and actions are continually being assessed by his listeners; this credibility level may heighten or diminish the speaker's initial ethos

Example B: a rehabilitated DARE inmate gives his testimony on the evils of drug abuse; this affects his listeners favorably because his transformation is evident

Example B: an activist espousing a radical, unpopular stance may diminish his credibility because he punctuates his remarks with unwarranted conclusions and biased reasoning

3. ***Terminal ethos***, the level at which the listener perceives and assesses the speaker upon completion of the communication event; the point of reckoning for the listener as to the worthwhileness of the event

Example A: the former drug-user who gives a talk on the evils of drug abuse continues to speak with remorse, sincerity, and a crusading spirit; at talk's end, he gains the admiration of his audience

Example B: a manager who used to throw his weight around now pep talks his subordinates in a low, firm voice and is eager to see that they produce results in a team-enhancing manner

Example C: a professor known to be boring lectures in a political science class gets to "recover" his audience because he shows some rapport with students by trying humor and familiar examples

Terminal ethos is significant because like all impressions, this may be lasting or without impact. It may also precede a next communication event with the same speaker and with the same listeners. If the terminal credibility conferred on the speaker was favorable or high, chances are the listeners will be very receptive initially the next time and perhaps throughout. Otherwise, the opposite would be true. Even if a speaker had low initial ethos (as in the example above), he could still recover and gain high terminal credibility. Thus, if you reflect on the dynamism of ethos, you might want to start a self-improvement program to heighten your credibility as a speaker.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are three basic ethical considerations for the speaker with ethos:

First, the speaker must *display adequate knowledge* of the subject spoken about. Listeners appreciate the latest, the state-of-the-art, the novel, the far-from-common things and information. They want to learn from their speakers.

Second, the speaker must *be sincere* as he communicates (relates) to his listeners in order to gain their trust. He speaks with modesty, truth, and makes his listeners feel they are his equals.

Third, the speaker *must appear well groomed and personable, behaving with decorum*. Audiences, generally, have high expectations of persons who go on stage, mount a platform, and be for a few minutes the cynosure of all eyes.

LISTENER'S PART

However prepared or organized a speaker's message is or however sincere or dynamic a speaker is, if the listener refuses to do his part, ethos cannot reach a high degree. Listeners are varied in their moods, attitudes, and beliefs, and expectations. Sometimes they may be swayed by the winds of rumor and innuendo. Many times they may not be favorably predisposed to listen due to internal and external factors beyond the speaker's control. At times it is an exercise in diversion or passing the time. Other times it is to just satisfy one's curiosity.

ETHOS IN THE PHILIPPINE SETTING: COLLECTIVE, INDIVIDUAL

The classic definition of ETHOS remains a model to be followed or emulated by men and women in today's so-called modern world. The facts and trends of today's societies show the changing times and changing perceptions and values as to who and what makes a leader. Therefore, a leader may possess the kingly qualities enunciated by the classical orators like Cicero and Quintilian but it does not follow today, especially in the Philippine setting, that such qualities automatically make him a leader of people, such as the Philippine electorate. The time when Filipino statesmen looked up to by the citizens sat at the Philippine assembly/legislature is long gone. Good moral character and intelligence were the paramount traits of speakers who graced the halls of government then. They had facility of language, being fluent in their native tongue, and in English and Spanish, earning them the title of "orators." They were men who recognized their important mission of attaining sovereignty and independence. In the classic essence of *ethos*, lawmaking and policy-formulation.

In the Philippines today there exists erosion of ethos or credibility among speakers. We find political leaders speaking only to win votes and covet more power – their leadership consists in keeping their voters happy come election time or near election time. We find these leaders instrumentally motivated to spew out campaign promises to construct this facility and that, to build more schoolhouses, and to build roads that will last through dry season. We find such men not of a singly caste or mold, but men who desire to perpetuate their families in power. Credibility, it seems, has ceased to be functional.

If the EDSA Revolution, a bloodless overthrow of the Marcos "conjugal dictatorship," had all good points, it can attest to a singularly remarkable **ETHOS** of the Filipinos who gathered, kept vigil, prayed, and kept one another strong. This united stance against a corrupt government of corrupt leaders manifested the Filipinos' **COLLECTIVE ETHOS** – that fundamentally we are a people who

value qualities of *the good man speaking*, the leader who shows integrity, honesty, nobility of ideals, and selflessness. That we lack good men speaking is not true. But that we need to muster enough **INDIVIDUAL ETHOS** ourselves in order to elect good men into office.



CHAPTER SUMMARY

Ethos traditionally refers to those persuasive factors residing in the reputation and personality of the speaker. Today ethos is generally known as source credibility or the degree to which a speaker is adjudged competent/knowledgeable, pleasing, and trustworthy by his listeners. Because ethos partakes of a volatile and dynamic nature, a communication source can undergo three process dimensions, namely: initial or intrinsic ethos, starting credibility; transactional or extrinsic ethos (produced credibility), ethos derived as the communication event progresses; and terminal or ending ethos, credibility upon the completion of the communication event. Several researches have found that the most common characteristics of speakers with ethos are the following: competence, honesty, and trustworthiness as a result of honesty.

Since ethos or source credibility is a function of listener behavior and reception, it is important that successful communicators cultivate the generally appealing traits of sincerity, competence, honesty, dynamism, and pleasantness. Furthermore, since ethos is a changing dimension, speakers with originally low ethos can still improve in subsequent communication events while those with high ethos can work at sustaining their credibility. Finally, listener-responsibility comes into the picture too. A speaker/communicator can only achieve so much. Listeners seek certain rewards in communication situations, i.e., to satisfy their intellectual curiosity, to have fun/entertainment, to be convinced, and others. While it is understandable for them to have goals or purposes, they need to place themselves in a posture of readiness to listen — this is listener-accountability. Then the entire communication process or event can be said to be working properly because speaker-listener responsibilities are shared.

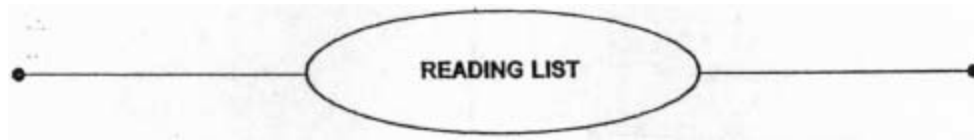


EXERCISES

1. Pick two personages in government, business, science, art, or show business and attribute to them characteristics of ethos that you perceive. Prepare a 3-minute talk for a live classroom audience. You may give examples of high and low ethos.
2. In your own voting locality, observe and gather what characteristics of ethos are given voters' consideration. Be sure to classify (just roughly) the types of voters. Analyze these characteristics in light of why you think they are important to the different types of voters. You may write a one-page paper or stage a short skit about it.
3. Conduct a 5-7 minute-interview on what personal characteristics of college boys appeal to college girls; after the males question the females, the latter take their turn. The class can tabulate the most popular characteristics and brainstorm on them.
4. Listen to two speeches, one that is taped, and the other on video. Analyze the characteristics of both.

speakers and compare their source credibility. Again compile the most likable traits found in both speakers.

5. What characteristics in a professor make him/her credible to students? Write off a list of ethical characteristics you expect from your teacher (s). Share what you wrote in class. You may also analyze what ethos traits of teachers helped you as students in the past. How?



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