

# John Locke cautions rhetoricians against the use of *empty words*

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## Abstract

While John Locke presents a novel concept coined “empty words,” he minimally describes it in his essay “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding” originally published in 1689, then re-printed in books like “The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical times to the Present” by Bizzell and Herzberg. In addition, he daringly challenges the definition of rhetoric and its relationship to the use of *empty words*. This essay attempts to define and explores the existence of empty words in the various definitions of rhetoric proposed by the following great philosophers: Aristotle, Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, Francis Bacon, Longinus, Marcus Fabius Quintilianus (Quintilian), and of course John Locke.

*Keywords:* rhetoric, rhetorician, oratory, orator, empty words

## Introduction

*“He that hath names without ideas, wants meaning in his words, and speaks only empty sounds. He that hath complex ideas without names for them, wants liberty and dispatch in his expressions, and is necessitated to use periphrases. He that uses his words loosely and unsteadily will either be not minded or not understood. He that applies his names to ideas different from their common use, wants propriety in his language, and speaks gibberish. And he*

*that hath the ideas of substances disagreeing with the real existence of things, so far wants the materials of true knowledge in his understanding, and hath instead thereof chimeras.” – John Locke, 1689*

At the end of his essay “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding” which discusses the philosophy behind human knowledge, understanding and expression through logic, language and religion, John Locke cautions rhetoricians about the dangers of empty words, or words without thought, and the way both inexperienced and advanced rhetoricians abuse words. However, before beginning to understand Locke’s argument about empty words and their relationship to linguistic expression, terms like rhetoric, oratory, and empty words should be defined according to Locke and other philosophers that he challenged. Only then can a justly discussion and criticism be warranted about Locke’s ideas about the defining concepts and the purpose of rhetoric, and whether Locke himself used empty words when finishing his essay.

When applying the many principles presented by philosophers over millennia and distinguishing in which form of rhetoric those principles are applicable, oratory simply refers to public speaking, or presenting a speech, and discourse refers to argumentation between two or more rhetoricians. What advice, or insight, a rhetorician should chose to apply in his oration or discourse is up to the rhetorician himself. Let us focus, however, on the use of empty words.

Locke defines empty words as those which lack ideas or thought, and those which are spoken loosely and unsteadily. He states that “[h]e that hath names without ideas, wants meaning in his words, and speaks only empty sound,” and then continues “[h]e that uses his words loosely and unsteadily will either be not minded or not understood” (826). Here Locke candidly states that empty words, those which lack ideas, have no meaning and therefore cannot bear significance in rhetoric, and even words that have some ideas or thoughts behind them are not sufficient in good rhetoric, be it oratory or discourse.

According to Locke, and other philosophers (extensively referenced later) who discuss the purpose of rhetoric, words should not be used loosely but instead chosen with great care by those who regard their oratory or discourse important. Definitions of rhetoric brought forth by Boethius (formally known as Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius) and Aristotle state that an orator who speaks with empty words can neither persuade nor lead the audience to decisions, and thereby will fail to achieve Boethius's ideas of oration which are "to have spoken well and to persuade," as well as Aristotle's ideas of persuasive speech which "lead to decision [making]" (219, 491). Aristotle defines rhetoric "as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion," and he further states that rhetoric "is not concerned with any special or definite class of subjects" but mainly the modes of persuasion (181). To determine whether an orator can persuade his audience without thought, or with the use of empty words, the modes of persuasion should be further explored.

According to Aristotle, there are three modes of persuasion: the first being "the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; [and] the third [depends] on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself" (181). Aristotle argues for the division between rhetoric and poetry, believing that rhetoric should be "based on knowledge [that is] specific to one's subject" and that "highly emotional language [such as poetry] should be used only "ironically,"" because it is the emotional language that is more apt to be spoken without thought (176, 177).

Although the acts of learning facts about a topic in itself requires thought, presenting those facts without thought does not achieve Aristotle's purpose for rhetoric, or the three modes of persuasion. But if you are still not convinced, consider synthesizing a list of individual facts into a coherent speech that will surely persuade your audience into making a decision.

*Three facts about the Sun:*

1. The Sun is a big star.
2. The Sun radiates light and solar wind.
3. Sunspots on the Sun occasionally produce solar flares.

*Challenge 1: Present the facts without thought and persuade your audience to make a decision.*

The Sun is a big star. It radiates light and solar wind and occasionally its sunspots produce solar flares.

*What decision is called to be made?*

*Challenge 2: From the facts about the Sun, determine whether the following speech required thought and whether it calls for decision making.*

The Sun is a big star that should be appreciated most over any other star in the solar system because of its characteristics that are essential for life on Earth. The Sun radiates light and solar wind, and it has sunspots that occasionally produce solar flares. The sole source of light and heat, which are the fundamental units of life, on Earth is derived from the Sun. Therefore, without the Sun life would not be possible on Earth.

Does the first challenge accomplish Aristotle's definition of persuasion, and does it lead the audience towards decision making? The challenge presents learned facts, and although this follows Aristotle's guidelines for the use of rhetoric, it does not accomplish its' main goal which is to lead to a decision. Therefore, it can be thought that the response in the first challenge is presented without thought, or with empty words. The response in the second challenge, on the other hand, is, for one, much longer and it synthesizes the facts in a way that is cohesive and that creates a relationship between facts 1, 2, and 3. For instance, fact 1 is presented when stating that "[t]he Sun is a big star," and then quickly followed by an explanation as to why this fact is significant and why it deserves to be regarded as such by linking the words "should be appreciated...because". Surely it is now more clear that only stating facts does not persuade an audience to make a decision; the oration is, therefore, insignificant. It is simply an impossible task, according to Aristotle's definition of rhetoric, to deliver a persuasive speech without thought, or with empty words, even if factual statements are presented.

It is evident then, that Locke poses a legitimate caution for rhetoricians when he speaks of empty words; however Locke fails to analyze in great detail all the drawbacks of empty words, and more importantly the benefits of their use. Aristotle states that "we must know some, if not all, of the facts about the subject on which we are to speak and argue" and that "[a] speech has two parts...[first is to] state [the] case, and [second is to] prove it," both of which require much thought before speaking (225, 240). However, Aristotle also says that "[t]he purpose [of oratory or an argument] is to discredit the prosecutor" (228). Now two questions arise that challenge the drawbacks of empty words: one, whether an orator can still speak well with empty words, and two, whether the use of empty words can prove beneficial when discrediting an opponent.

There has been a debate between classical rhetoricians as to whether rhetoric can be learned or whether it is a natural skill. Quintilian (or Marcus Fabius Quintilianus), for instance, states that many speakers “make it their boast that they speak from impulse, and merely exert their natural powers...but barbarians and slaves do the same; and, if this be sufficient, there is no art at all in [rhetoric]” (381). Therefore there must be some form of instruction in oratory since rhetoric cannot always be relied on natural skill, but certainly those who have natural skill could make better rhetoricians. Persons who are born skillful in rhetoric can surely arrange a cluster of thoughtless words and present an oration that will attract much awe. This is not to say that the oration will be great, but it is certainly possible that it will be *sufficient* for a lay audience. And in the case of discrediting an opponent, a good orator can use empty words to his benefit. That is, he can speak in riddles to corner his opponent into contradicting himself and thereby discrediting his own argument. These words, however, only appear empty to an audience or the opponent, for they require much wit and in fact great thought that is produced in a very short period of time. This, then, is intended for skilled rhetoricians.

According to Quintilian, *skill* in rhetoric comes from three parts: (1) art, (2) artist, and (3) work, and it is that oratory has “the power of persuading” (385). The *art* component of rhetoric refers to “the knowledge how to speak well,” the *artist* is the orator “whose business is to speak well,” and the *work* is “good speaking” (385). Rhetoric has a direct correlation to oratory in Quintilian’s work in that the *art* of rhetoric is not the composition of speech but the knowledge and mastery of its delivery. Contrasting to Aristotle, who believes that the art of rhetoric is persuasion, Quintilian provides a more practical approach as opposed to a theoretical one, and it is in the doing (the speaking) does he acknowledge Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric.

Consider the following argument between two lawyers and how the argument is

perceived by the judge, the jury, and the lay audience. If a woman is fighting her ex-husband for full custody of their two-year old son, the husband's lawyer may ask the woman in court if she has had any previous abortions, and since she has, if she considered aborting her son when she first found out that she got pregnant. Now, various things will happen; the woman's lawyer would say "objection, not relevant to her competency as a mother," the judge may agree and tell the jury to disregard that question, but the jury cannot help but know this fact now. It is clear, in this example, that the husband's lawyer purposefully asked the woman about her previous history with terminating a pregnancy to taint the woman's perception to the judges. However, since the question was asked to be disregarded in court, the question was asked with empty words; not because the question lacked thought, but because it lacked meaning, or relevance in the case. The husband's lawyer, although indirectly because the question was asked to be disregarded, was skillful in persuading the audience, the jury and the judge included, to view the husband as a more competent parent.

The use of empty words, then, presents a question as to whether empty words actually exist for they are made to have meaning in one form or another, and to one group of members of an audience or another. Since Locke cautions against empty words, then we must analyze what he truly meant by this caution. For it is unlikely that he himself used empty words when he wrote about them, he pondered about them and then put his thoughts into writing; however, this is a speculation. Locke's meaning, or purpose, of empty words can be interpreted in many ways. One is a direct way when he states that orators who speak "only empty sounds" only want "meaning in [their] words," but a different way of interpretation is in their relative use between two orators. For instance, a man can tell a woman that he loves her without actually meaning what he says, but the woman will believe him and draw meaning out of those words. Similarly, a man can tell a woman that he loves her and mean it, but the woman, who does not feel the same way about him,

will find those words meaningless to her. Here, then, empty words are spoken in the first instance and then heard in the second. In both instances, however, decisions will be made, which makes the analysis of empty words a complex one. We shall consider the existence of empty words in poetry, a kind of abstract form of writing, next.

Although Longinus states that “grandeur, magnificence and urgency” are very productive concepts of visualization in discourse, words can only reach their zenith “if thoughts are weighty” (356, 351). Unlike Aristotle, Longinus argues that there is no division between rhetoric and poetry and that “only a person who possesses both [the mode of rhetoric dealing with persuasion and the mode dealing with emotion] can produce great writing (344). He reasons that sublimity is a powerful emotional tool in rhetoric that can persuade an audience and call its members to action. According to Longinus, there are two things that are required of rhetoric: “first, that it should explain what its subject is; second, and more important, that it should explain how and by what methods we can achieve it” and sublimity, which “is a kind of eminence or excellence of discourse,” is a tool that can achieve both (346, 347). If, then, emotion can lead to decision makings, does Aristotle contradict his argument of rhetorical persuasion when he criticizes that emotional language should only be used “ironically” (177)? For it is the nature to choose words for an emotional oratory very thoughtfully.

Boethius, much like Aristotle, holds that “rhetorical argument deals with specific instances [like hypothesis]...[that] are simply presented persuasively to the audience” (486). He examines the works of Aristotle and agrees with him that the orator’s duty is “to speak well” and his goals is “to have spoken well and to persuade,” which mainly deals with factual speech, much like the challenge about the Sun presented above, and not a emotional speech or one requiring imagination, for it is a greater challenge to create a single oration that is factual, emotional, and one that utilizes the art of imagination (491). This challenges Aristotle’s

definition of rhetoric and how that definition relates to empty words, because both Boethius and Francis Bacon argue that all forms of language can persuade an audience, move their will and lead to decisions.

Bacon states that “rhetoric links knowledge and social concerns” in that it “applies reason to the imagination to move the will” of an audience (738). He further adds that “[t]he duty and office of [r]hetoric is to apply [r]eason to [i]magination for the better moving of the will,” thus rhetoric encompasses the movement of the audience through persuasion as well as imagination as it is in poetry (743). Even Albert Einstein acknowledges that “[t]he true sign of intelligence is not knowledge but imagination,” which challenges Aristotle and his belief that emotional language is more apt to be spoken without thought.

In essence, empty words do not refer to words themselves but to the context in which they are used and towards what audience they are directed. Consider the following translation of Alexander Pushkin’s poem *The Dream*, translated by Yevgeny Bonver and edited by Dmitry Karshtedt.

English Translation	Russian Translation
THE DREAM	СНОВИДЕНИЕ
Not long ago, in a charming dream,	Недавно, обольщен прелестным
I saw myself – a king with crown’s treasure;	сновиденьем,
I was in love with you, it seemed,	В венце сияющем, царем я зрел себя;
And heart was beating with a pleasure.	Мечталось, я любил тебя —
	И сердце билось наслаждением.
	Я страсть у ног твоих в восторгах
	изъяснял.

<p>I sang my passion's song by your enchanting knees.</p> <p>Why, dreams, you didn't prolong my happiness forever?</p> <p>But gods deprived me not of whole their favor:</p> <p>I only lost the kingdom of my dreams.</p>	<p>Мечты! ах! отчего вы счастья не продлили?</p> <p>Но боги не всего теперь меня лишили:</p> <p>Я только — царство потерял.</p>
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If we presume that Pushkin wrote the poem in Russian without thought, or used empty words, then it is impossible to presume the same for its translation in English, for at least two individuals collaborated to accomplish the task of translating the poem. Similarly, if this poem was read in Russian to an English speaking person, or simply included in this essay without the translation, it will be safe to assume that the poem, to a selected audience – one that is not Russian speaking, is either spoken or written with the use of empty words. This is precisely what Locke cautioned against; speaking or writing that has meaning to the rhetorician but not to the audience. If I simply included that poem without its translation in English I would be using empty words, for I would lack thought towards my audience, but since the translation is included and my audience (one that is English speaking) can read and understand the poem, I must refer back to Pushkin and determine whether he used empty words, since according to Aristotle *someone* must. Although the poem is a creative one, Pushkin does include factual information when he says “[n]ot long ago, in a charming dream,” the facts being the time and the occurrence of the dream. Also, even if he does not move his audience to make a decision, he does move the audience emotionally when he uses phrases like “I was in love with you” and “heart was beating with a pleasure,” or even when he pleads the gods for his broken heart when he “lost the

kingdom of [his] dreams”. Perhaps, however, this poem calls a specific audience to action, like the woman he may be writing about and to. In this instance, the general audience, you and I, are not aware of the extent of persuasion his poem has on the woman he loves. Aristotle, then, may be misguided when he implies that poetry, or emotional language, is likely to be spoken with empty words.

Although Locke attacks rhetoric “for increasing ambiguities through excessive ornamentation,” he cannot help himself but agree to the fundamental definition of rhetoric that it is the theory of persuasion and moving an audience to act, be it by factual or emotional information (815). From the time that Aristotle defined rhetoric, the definition of rhetoric, which has direct correlation to the use of empty words, has changed slightly and was altered by each philosopher. And while discussion can be made about the theoretical components and the practical uses of rhetoric, the fundamental definition of rhetoric is the persuasive use of writing or speech leading to decision making only through thoughtfully selected words. This slight evolution of the definition of rhetoric based on only the mentioned philosophers and its relationship to empty words is summarized in Figure 1.

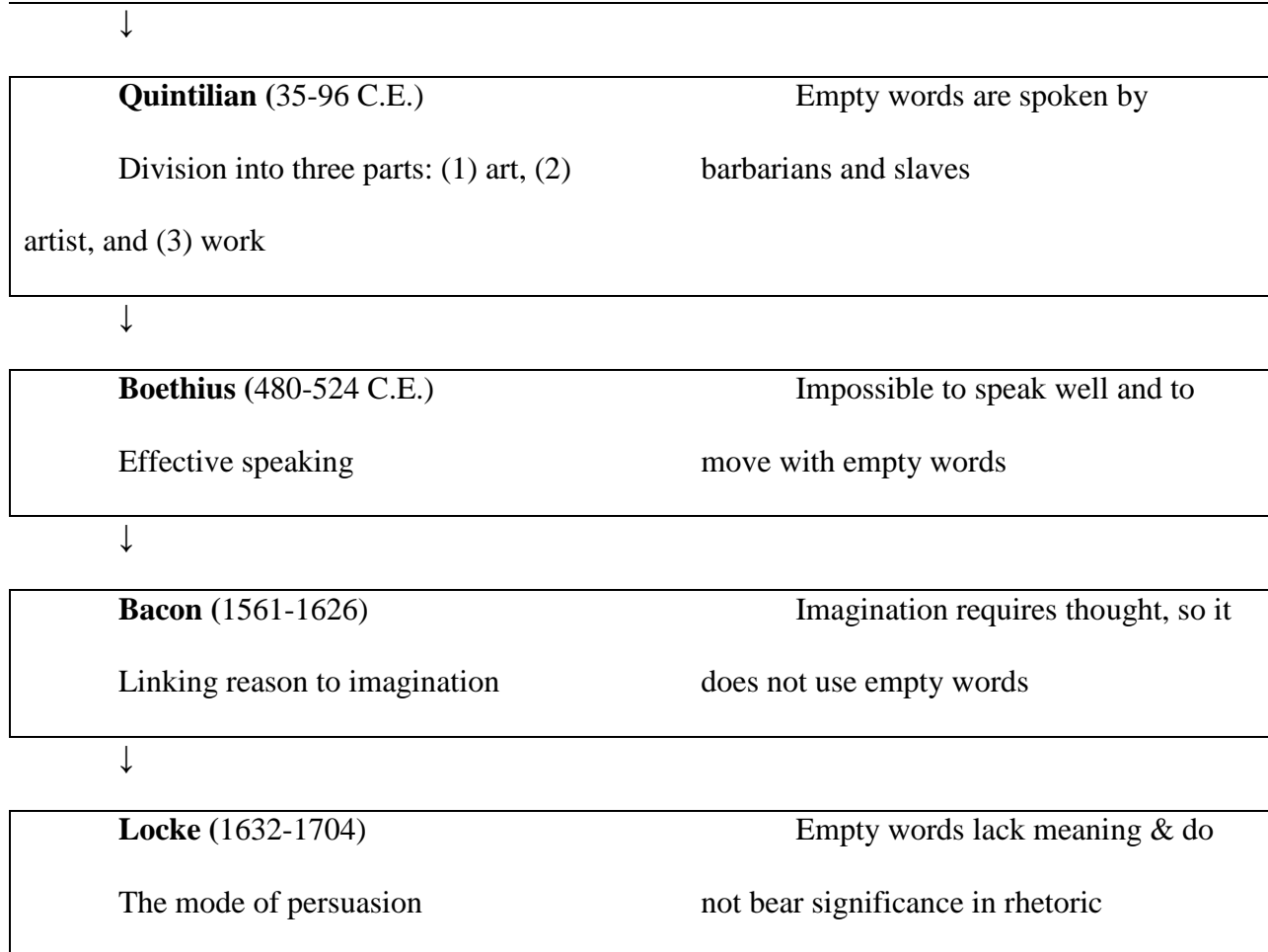
**Definition of Rhetoric according to ...**

**... and its relationship to Empty Words**

<p><b>Aristotle</b> (384-322 B.C.E.)</p> <p>The mode of persuasion</p>	<p>Impossible to deliver a persuasive speech with empty words</p>
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<p><b>Longinus</b> (50 C.E.)</p> <p>Sublimity/ connecting poetry with prose writing</p>	<p>Empty words lack emotion and therefore cannot lead to decision making</p>
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**Figure 1** The evolution of the definition of rhetoric from Aristotle to Locke and its relationship to empty words

While Locke poses a legitimate caution against empty words, a rhetorician must first define what empty words truly are and identify them in his speech, for empty words in of themselves do not exist, but they do virtually lurk in rhetoric. The term “empty words” has been presented throughout this essay and defined in various ways. For instance, although a speech can be said with factual information and thereby apparently follow Aristotle’s guidelines for rhetoric, the speech is spoken with empty words if no relationship between the facts is created; since much thought is required for this. The other two forms of spoken empty words are when the audience does not perceive the speech as it was intended by the orator, and when the audience interprets it in an unintended by-the-rhetorician’s-way. Rhetoricians, then, should take great care

when composing oratory that utilizes at least some insight of rhetoric by the great philosophers. More importantly, the oration should be very thoughtfully composed and appropriately directed towards the intended audience. When Locke cautioned against empty words, he meant, I think, that an orator must be mindful of his audience and deliver a speech that is purposeful, even if it does not persuade *every* member of the audience.

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