Paul Gillaerts & Philip Shaw (eds)

The Map and the Landscape

Norms and Practices in Genre


1. Introduction

Ladies and Gentlemen

A well-known professor of rhetoric is invited to give a lecture at a dinner of the national naturists association Light and Life. He is received by the members of the Board, who are wearing no more than what nature has blessed them with. The Board suggests that he may want to freshen up before dinner. He goes to his room, realizing only when he starts to change that he will probably be expected to undress like his audience. Nervous and indecisive he paces the room until it is time to meet his audience at dinner. Finally, desperately, he strips and enters the dining room stark naked — only to realize that in his honour all the other guests have dressed in their finest evening wear.

In my talk about research into conformism as a factor in intercultural communication I would like to...

Those who know how many speakers struggle to squeeze the impressive content of their presentation into the limited time available (Blokzijl 2001), might frown at this choice of text design: an anecdote of over 120 words instead of a brief, no-nonsense opening. Has this stylistic device been used wisely or has a critical audience’s valuable time been wasted? Time and again, speakers are advised by speech advisors that the best way to introduce their presentation is to use an anecdote.

There are several definitions of the anecdote as a stylistic device. Most of these generally agree: it is a short story about a certain true or fictitious incident, with a vivid or amusing twist. The incident usually involves real people, often famous ones, and sometimes the speaker, but fictitious figures also occur. An anecdote may, but does...
not need to bear a moral, a necessity in both parable and fable. The origin of the word *anecdote* has been attributed to a text by Procopius of Caesaria, biographer of Emperor Justitianus I.¹

The anecdote, the short story, may be old, but is this stylistic device, whether or not with amusing or colourful qualities, really such a suitable introduction as some advisors claim? Is the anecdote an eligible technique to make the first couple of minutes of a speech effective?

This question is answered in the context of a larger research quest we conducted within the framework of a dissertation project concerning various opening strategies in speeches (Andeweg / De Jong 2004a). This article offers a sampling of the different kinds of research methods we combined in the dissertation, but now focused on one opening strategy. The combination of the various methods – consultation about the anecdote, use with two groups of speakers and the reception of this stylistic device (determined through experiments) – offers insight into the differences between advice and practice. In short, below we will answer these questions:

- What do classical authors like Cicero and Quintilian recommend with respect to the use of anecdotes in the introductions to speeches?
- What do modern, 21st-century Dutch experts expect of the anecdote in terms of effects?
- To what extent do ‘speaking professionals’ (Dutch engineers) and ‘professional speakers’ (speechwriters for Dutch members of government) apply this device?
- Do the results of the experiment confirm the expectations of the counsellors and/or account for the usage by practitioners?

2. Classical rhetorical advice on the use of the anecdote

For contemporary Europeans and Americans the ideas of the Greek and Roman rhetoricians form the foundation of opinions of what a speaker should do in problematic situations. Therefore, when analyzing a rhetorical opening technique, it is useful to find out what opinions on this matter existed. In our research we (re)read and analyzed in their contexts six major sources.²

Classical authors said little about the use of the anecdote as a way to start a speech. In the exordium – the usual introduction to a speech – the speaker was advised to concentrate on achieving three major goals. In this introduction the speaker was expected to attract the audience’s attention (iudicem attentum parare), evoke sympathy towards the speaker (benevolentum parare), and enable the audience to understand the rest of the presentation (docilem parare). The order in which these three goals were to be achieved was not determined. The technique to make the audience pay attention which the classical authors thought most important was emphasizing the importance of the matter for the audience. The advice that was given mainly concerned court appearances, but could also be used for speeches during a political meeting or a yearly memorial ceremony. It was only in a limited, specific kind of speech that the classical authors thought the detour of using a short story would be worth considering (the insinitatio). For example, a detour would be recommended for an audience which was tired from listening to several previous speakers. Quintilian states: “Again an opportune display of wit will often restore their flagging spirits and we may alleviate their boredom by the introduction of entertaining matter derived from any source that may be available” (Quintilian 4.1.49.).

Apart from the exordium, the classical authors saw a role for little stories in the narratio, the argumentatio and in the digressio. The narration, the account of events, which usually described the

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¹ In the work named *AvarGora* (written around 550 AD, often translated as *Unpublished Memoirs or Secret History*), which is a collection of rather naughty stories from the private life of the emperor and especially the empress at the Byzantine court. See www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/procop-anec.html for an unabridged edition of this text.

² Aristotle’s *Rhetorica*, *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*, *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (both of unknown authorship), Cicero’s *De inventione*, *De Oratore*, and *De Partitione Oratoris*, and Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria*. 

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background of a court case in a perspective that was favourable for the speaker, could contain a little story. In the argumentation, according to Aristotle, the speaker would use entmethmen for his argumentation. Another form of argumentation he finds acceptable is paradeigma, usually a historical story (or fable or simile) which can be used as an argument to accept or refuse a proposal (Aristotle 1393a 25-1394a 18). In the digression or elaboration, according to Hermagoras, a speaker could use an exemplum to make an emotional appeal to the audience (pathos) or to get a laugh (delectare) just before the end of the speech (peroratio).

In other words, the paradeigma and exemplum, which we can consider the ancestors of the anecdote, could be used in several places in the speech and had different functions, ranging from argumentation (probare) to entertainment (delectare). In the introduction its main functions were drawing attention and entertainment.

3. Modern advice on the use of the anecdote

Over the last couple of centuries, oral pleading has lost its value in the Netherlands; the judicial process is mostly administrative and takes place in writing. The Dutch legal system does not have a jury system. Lawyers will usually read their pleas out loud. Only in some cases – like the so-called summary proceedings – does the speech appear to have retained some of its value (Broekers-Knol / Van Klink 2000). It is significant that in the 20th century hardly any handbooks on oral presentations for young lawyers appeared. Handbooks for non-professional speakers, however, abound. What, according to modern experts, can be accomplished with an anecdote? While at the beginning of the 20th century only a few books appeared each decade, a survey of handbooks concerning the preparation and delivery of oral presentations shows a production of no less than 79 handbooks published in the last decade of the century. Altogether 139 books appeared in the Netherlands in the last century and we made a selection of these. We presented the complete list to a group of ten experts in the field and asked them to score each book on prominence for its period (maximum of two points per book). This resulted in a ranked list of 20th century manuals. Based on this list we selected the 42 books which received a minimum of three selection points. We made several arrangements to ensure a reliable analysis of the advice in the books; for example, we used a specially designed form for the analysis, we made sure that all analyses were performed by two reviewers/judges and we made sure that the results were easy to check by adding every bit of advice to the study as a quotation (Andeweg / De Jong 2004a: 90-98, 85-227).

Even though modern authors no longer dealt with or named the classical functions in the same way, the recommendations of a vast majority of the handbooks could be classified as (variations of) the classical rhetorical triad "attentum, benevolum et docilem parare". In 20th century Holland some new, non-classical functions are attributed to the introduction. More than a quarter of the authors mention the function of establishing contact. Often it is difficult to distinguish this function from the function of benevolum parare (ab iudicum persona, flattery, praise and emphasizing common ground). It is remarkable that this contact metaphor in the Dutch handbooks has acquired considerable popularity, as it also has in German handbooks (Bremerich-Vos 1991).

How do the 20th century authors regard the anecdote as an opening technique? The anecdote, "a short, witty and complete narrative" (Edens 1979: 88), turns out to be the opening technique most often recommended to draw attention to the speech (67% of the 42 books in our corpus). Many of the authors turn out to find the

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3. Ever since Hermagoras of Temnos it was possible for the digressio to take on the form of a funny mythological or historical story (Cicero, De Inventione 1.79; Quintilian 4.3).

4. Both terms have known a rich development in meaning outside elocution. "[...] in Rome collections of examples appeared, usually ordered by subject, e.g. Cornelius Nepos. In the 7th century sermons for monks were larded with illustrative stories, mainly biblical. In the 12th century these stories were also used in sermons for laymen. The sources gradually also included non-religious stories, e.g. the Gesta Romanorum and classical love stories. By the end of the Middle Ages, the examples became more and more comical, so that they were banned by the Reformation" (Van Gorp et al., 134).
anecdote a good way to start a speech and do not consider it a waste of time. Attention getters like challenging statement (55%), quote (48%), question (48%), presenting something humorous (45%) and referring to topical events (45%) are recommended less often. The anecdote can perform different functions in an introduction:

- drawing and focusing attention because “many listeners will relate to the story” (Edens 1979: 17);
- making the audience feel sympathetic towards the subject because an anecdote will make the listeners identify with the subject (Pereboom 1989);
- making contact: an anecdote will enable good contact between the speaker and his audience (Van Eijk 1986);
- stimulating memory. “[anecdotes] will be remembered better by the audience, also in connection with the actual subject of the speech” (Krusche 1986: 112).

Not every story can be used as an anecdote. The experts mention several conditions for the technique and its use. Anecdotes should:

- be relevant. The anecdote should fit the occasion. Janssen et al. (1989: 258) offer a good example:

  A suitable anecdote draws and focuses the attention. An anecdote that is not suitable will probably draw the attention, but fail to focus it. The audience is then misdirected. An example: Ladies and gentlemen. The famous chess player Jan Hein Donner was drawn into a serious polemic recently. In one of the national newspapers he had claimed that women can’t play chess. A few days later a letter appeared in the same newspaper, from a very angry lady who accused Donner of racism. “Because” — she said — “saying that women can’t play chess is the same sort of thing as saying that black people can’t play chess...” “Madam” — replied Donner — “you haven’t understood a word I said. It is only the black women who can’t play chess...” This anecdote can be used in a speech about Donner, women and sports, racism, communication, etcetera. But it is not suited for a speech on the political strategies in the Cuba crisis, drunk driving, and the consequences of fast food.

- be brief (Van Eijk 1986; Edens 1979).

Some aspects receive contradictory advice:

- Content of the story. According to some, the story should deal with well-known or famous people, like Nero, Wellington, Churchill and of course president Kennedy. Others claim that the story should deal with the speaker himself, or someone close to him. It is wise for the speaker not to play the hero in his own story (Edens 1987).

- Truthfulness of the story. Korswagen (1988: 103) is clear on this: “Anecdotes should be rendered truthfully, i.e. unchanged and unambiguously.” Edens (1979: 88) only thinks that the story should be credible “unlikely stories [...] are better left untold”. Other experts find other functions (liveliness, suspense) more important. Eckhardt / IJzermans for example, find a “fictitious account of the atmosphere in the Apollo-capsule in the last minutes before take-off” a useful ploy. According to Van der Spek (1995: 11) “It is better to steal a good idea than to launch a bad one” is a good rule of thumb in this case.

- Humorosity of the story. According to Hesp (1951: 71) anecdotes certainly don’t need to be funny: “Preferably not funny”. Edens (1979) and Janssen et al. (1989) however recommend humorous stories.

When we combine the experts’ opinions, the anecdote proves to be a versatile technique; a jack-of-all-trades that can be deployed in various situations. However, Van der Spek (1995) states that anecdotes are less suitable for formal speeches (award ceremonies) or unpleasant occasions (bad news speeches) and funeral orations. According to the experts, not every story can be used as an anecdote. There are two main conditions as to this technique and its use: brevity (the anecdote must be short) and relevance (the anecdote must suit the occasion).

Quite often there is a large discrepancy between advice on rhetoric and its practice. In order to clarify this issue we investigated two groups of speakers.

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5 Research suggests that anecdotes possess persuasive qualities especially in comparison with statistical evidence (Baezler / Burgoon 1994; Zillman / Brosius 2001).
4. Speaking professionals

The first group of speakers, Dutch engineers, was selected because they form a group of professionals, often in important social positions, for whom making speeches is important. Interestingly, there exists a widespread and negative prejudice about the poor communication skills of this group, who are often required to communicate complex knowledge and strategic choices to other interested parties by means of speeches. Weller and Stuiveling (1961: 207) even state:

Many engineers, through a deficiency in communicative skills [...] , are unable to express their thoughts correctly and therefore fail to make them valid.

What is the engineers' view of the introduction to a speech (which they usually call ‘presentation’)? And to what extent do they feel that an anecdote is a suitable strategy to start a presentation? In order to find this out, in collaboration with two institutes of engineers a large-scale and extensive survey (130 open and closed questions) was held among Dutch engineers (from an academic and polytechnic background). The sample, which was stratified according to age and education (N=4000) yielded an acceptable response of 25%.

The engineers in this survey make presentations relatively often, on average about once every two or three working weeks (mean: 16.6; median 10 per year). They think it is an important and pleasant thing to do. The respondents do not find it particularly hard. What they consider most important is determining the goal and structuring the speech. For them, the least important aspect of the preparation, even though it still scores 3.8 out of a possible 5, is making up an interesting start. At the same time they consider making up an interesting start the hardest task of all presentation tasks (3.48).

What should a good introduction contain? Table 1 shows that a joke or anecdote is among the techniques used less often.6

6 In order to limit the number of categories, joke and anecdote – just like statement, quote or question attentum devices – have been combined for this research. The evaluation of the combination of both techniques is not necessarily equal to the evaluation of each separate one.
references to introductions with *benevolum* techniques: especially ethos enlarging techniques (22%).

In the context of this article however, the occurrence of *attentum* techniques is the most interesting. Only in 15.6% of the presentations do we find an *attentum* technique. Many *attentum* techniques are used rarely. The anecdote appeared to be used infrequently (we counted seven instances, which is a meagre .05% for the most often advised introduction technique in the 20th century).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of the topic</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Topical event</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>Anecdote</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>Example</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>Quote</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio-visual effects</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Question</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging statement</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>Something funny</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>Comparison and metaphor</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No <em>attentum</em> technique</td>
<td>84.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. *Attentum* techniques in 966 presentations descriptions.

It is remarkable that this most advised *attentum* technique (just like the joke – presenting something funny) is rarely used by engineers. It seems that even though engineers clearly appreciate a humorous presentation, as is proven elsewhere in the questionnaire, as speakers they make do with a Direct Approach and take it for granted that their audiences do not need to be seduced into listening attentively. This information-centred approach to communication confirms the cliché views of communicating engineers. Apparently, the modern advice on anecdotes is not based upon its usage by 'speaking professionals'. And what about the other group of speakers: the professional speakers?

5. Professional speakers

Next to the group of speaking professionals – engineers who need to make professional presentations on a regular basis – a second group was selected: the professional speakers; speakers for whom making speeches is one of the core professional skills and who make several speeches per week. Professional speakers par excellence are members of government: Ministers and Ministers of State. They may deliver the speeches, but it is an open secret that they don’t actually *make* them. This is usually done – with or without close consultation – by their speechwriters. After all, if the ministers were to actually make all these speeches themselves they wouldn’t get around to doing any actual governing any more.

What opinions do the speechwriters hold about the anecdote as an opening technique? We sent a questionnaire to all speechwriters in The Hague, the political capital of the Netherlands (N=29; response 72%). A focus group meeting (Krueger 1994) and an analysis of the speechwriters’ two most recent speeches completed the survey. In the questionnaire, modelled on the questionnaire for the engineers, they were asked about their opinions about aspects of their job as a speechwriter; many questions focused on the introduction. In the questionnaire specific questions were asked about the writers’ two most recent speeches.

Compared to the engineers, speechwriters found ‘attracting attention’ a much more important function of the introduction (4.2 on a five-points scale; see Figure 1).7

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7 The differences are more conceptual than statistically relevant. The differences between the way of sampling do not really permit a quantitative comparison.
A good introduction includes a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose statement</th>
<th>Overview</th>
<th>Provoking statement, quote or question</th>
<th>Information on speaker's background</th>
<th>Joke or anecdote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Engineers Speechwriters

Figure 1. Differences between engineers and speechwriters.

Figure 1 also shows that the speechwriters too attach low value to the joke/anecdote (2.9). This is remarkable, because in several publications by these same speechwriters (Groot / Broekmeulen et al. 1999: 17; Groen 2001) the anecdote is named as a powerful tool to attract attention. We suspect that the low score for the combination joke-anecdote in the questionnaire may be explained by the restraint that many speechwriters show with respect to the use of humour. They consider the use of jokes and humour a risky strategy, important but dangerous, because it can so easily go wrong.

During the focus group meeting the importance of the anecdote was confirmed. The necessity for the anecdote to be relevant was also discussed: can an attention technique i.e. an anecdote in the introduction be separate from the text that follows? In some cases the response was positive:

A speaker can only use a disconnected anecdote if it appears to emerge spontaneously. American managers do this often, and usually they get away with it.

Nevertheless, most people attending stated that they would not include a disconnected attention technique. They did not consider this as professional. The speechwriters also considered that the use of the anecdote is dependent on the occasion for the speech. An anecdote is considered acceptable in an occasional speech (in contrast to a policy speech). In formal international speeches, starting with an anecdote is not acceptable for reasons of ceremonial (thanking the chairperson, etc., is more important).

The questionnaire and focus group both showed what the speechwriters generally think of the use of anecdotes. Their speeches reflect what it is they do. In order to get this into focus we gathered information in two different ways.

1. The speechwriters included their two last speeches with the answers to the questionnaire, and listed for each introduction what introduction techniques were used. In our analysis we included 21 received speeches: one for each writer who submitted any texts and choosing as many different speakers as possible.

2. We analyzed the introductions for introduction techniques ourselves by means of a rhetorical exordium model (Andeweg / De Jong 2003).

Table 3 shows an overview of the attention techniques that – according to the authors – were present in the introductions of the speeches and the techniques that were shown in the analysis to emerge in those same introductions.

The attention techniques anecdote and stressing the importance of the subject were found to be used rather infrequently (3 times, 14%). It is remarkable that the most often advised opening technique in the 20th century, the anecdote, appears relatively little in this corpus (5 times, 24%), which, by the way, is in contrast with their claim that they used it quite frequently. For the speechwriters the term anecdote turned out to be used for a large number of techniques, including apart from the real anecdote (short witty and finished story) also examples, comparisons and similes. Some speechwriters appear to use a more flexible definition of the anecdote technique than others.

In this model we used the borders of the introductions as they were indicated by the authors themselves. As a matter of fact, analysis of the speeches leads to different borders between introduction and the rest of the speech. For the number of anecdotes found, this variation has not made any difference.
Incidentally, even if we apply a less strict definition of the anecdote, the number is still lower than expected. The broader definition of the anecdote technique may be attributed to the background and education of the speechwriters. Although some of them have a background in linguistics and communication, most of them turn out to be specialists in the field of policy with an eloquent pen, rather than trained speechwriters. Further schooling might lead to not only more adequate use of terminology, but also to more deliberate use of the exordial potential.

Let us review what we have seen so far. For modern experts the anecdote is a very important attention technique. The speaking professionals (the engineers) don’t tend to concern themselves about that advice. They don’t find drawing attention to their speech a primary function of the introduction and compared to other techniques the anecdote is only a moderately important technique, even when the definition of anecdote is extended to include jokes.

For professional speakers and their speechwriters drawing attention is the most important function. They mention the anecdote as the technique used the most often to draw the attention. However, our analysis shows that in practice this technique lags behind when compared to other techniques such as the provocative statement, the question and the metaphor.

6. Experiment: effectiveness

Do the introduction techniques actually have the effect that the experts predict they will? In other words: does using an attention technique like the anecdote result in the audience being more attentive and captivated? And do they stay attentive until the end of the speech? Generally, ideas on the functions and techniques of introductions are based on what speakers and teachers of rhetoric have experienced. Socio-psychological research into the effects of the anecdote as an introduction technique is lacking. This section summarises the results of a number of experiments concerning several introduction techniques, naturally focusing on the anecdote. The experiments were described earlier in Andeweg / De Jong / Hoeken (1998) and, more extensively, in Andeweg / De Jong (2004a).

6.1 Right after the introduction

To get an idea of what the possible effects of the anecdote are, it is necessary to construct an introduction that uses an anecdote. The

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9 A large body of research can be found into the greater appreciation of concrete or lively formulations in general relative to more abstract ones, e.g. Sadoski / Goetz / Fritz (1993).
Introduction technique describes an event in such a way that it draws the attention of the audience and directs it at the subject (see Table 4, text originally in Dutch).

### Table 4. Introduction with anecdote.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>Signifying aspects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction 1: anecdote</strong></td>
<td>Standard start of story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good morning. A good friend of mine used to work in a large newly-built office block in The Hague; an office-garden. Unlike in the old building, he often suffered from headaches and colds. So he went to his boss, complaining: &quot;this building makes me ill!&quot; The manager said that everything would be O.K., just a start-up problem. But after three months my friend still wasn't feeling any better; so the quality of the air in the building was tested just to make sure. They measured how much fresh air each employee could breathe and it turned out that it met every possible requirement. However, other employees started getting complaints as well, so another company was asked to test the air again. This time they decided to test not the quantity of air, but the air itself. And this time it turned out that the air was being polluted by several sources in the installation. So there was more than enough air, but it wasn't exactly fresh. This story demonstrates that a proper diagnosis of the quality of the air in office buildings is a big problem.</td>
<td>Direct quote by character: &quot;this building makes me ill!&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fixed standard element</strong></td>
<td>“and it turned out”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the following 20 minutes I want to show you how in your daily practice you will be able to establish in a simple way just how sick the building is in which you and your colleagues spend the day. In my story I will address the following issues [points at screen]: One: what misunderstandings exist about the term Sick Building Syndrome? Two: What are the symptoms of the syndrome? I will not address every single characteristic; that would last until the evening. And finally three: how can we make a diagnosis. If time permits, I will address some possible remedies.</td>
<td>Chronological order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Finish:</strong> “So … not exactly fresh.” Conclusion and bridge to subject: “this story demonstrates that …”</td>
<td>Offers core business (propositio): “I want to show […] spend the day.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Announces main points (partitio):</strong></td>
<td>Announces main points (partitio): “One: what misunderstandings […] possible remedies.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For comparison we constructed two more introductions, one of which used a so-called “ethos” introduction, which focuses primarily at influencing the audience’s perception of the speaker favourably, especially his or her expertise in the subject. The other one was a so-called “your problem” introduction: the speaker promises to deal with or solve a problem of the audience. All introductions ended with an overview of the rest of the speech. This overview was a combination of the *docilem* techniques: purpose statement (thesis or viewpoint; propositio) and announcing the main points (partitio). Each introduction lasted about 1.45 minutes. A questionnaire was constructed as a measuring instrument for working out the possible effects. The questionnaire consisted of a series of statements and a five-point scale (from disagree completely to agree completely). The statements concerned the following factors: interest, credibility, accessibility (factors extracted by means of factor analysis: >.75) The subjects (N=278) watched a video of the introductions. The order in which the videos were shown was changed systematically. After each introduction the subjects were asked to complete a questionnaire.

A multivariate analysis showed significant effects for the evaluation of captivation $F(2,269)=45.41 \ p<.001$, credibility $F(2,272)=26.74 \ p<.001$ and comprehensibility $F(2,274)=31.48 \ p=.001$. The results were analyzed further by means of a t-test (see Figure 2).
The speaker who uses the anecdote technique is found significantly more captivating and understandable than when he uses an ethos technique, but less credible. Just as the textbooks predict, the anecdote makes the audience more attentive. It appears, apart from that, that the 'your problem' technique is more versatile. The listeners are just as captivated as when they hear an anecdote, but they are more convinced of the speaker's authority.

6.2 After the speech

Traditionally, the introduction is only a small part of the speech, on average about 10% of the whole. But just how important is this small part of the speech when we take the point of view of the audience? In order to answer this question we wrote a speech that could follow all three introductions that featured in the previous experiment. Three different presentations were developed by adding the body part of the presentation to the three different introductions. A fourth presentation was created by simply starting with the body part, skipping the introduction altogether. We named this presentation the Direct Approach. Apart from the questionnaire we mentioned before, we used a comprehension test (open questions). The test subjects (N=195) were split up into groups of approximately 48; each of the groups was shown a recording of a different presentation.

The test yielded a comprehension score (scoring of open questions by two independent assessors; Cohen’s kappa: .77). The multivariate analysis showed a general effect (F(15,514)=2.99 p<.001) of the type of introduction. Closer (univariate) analysis showed that the effect could partly be localized to the comprehension score: the direct approach scored lower than the presentation with the anecdote introduction (and the 'your problem' introduction). A multivariate analysis did not show any effect for the other factors: captivation, credibility and comprehensibility.

Summarizing: at the end of the introduction the anecdote was found to generate a great deal more attentiveness and the benevolum technique ('ethos') resulted in more credibility. At the end of the whole presentation (after 18 minutes) the effects of the differences between the introductions appear to have largely disappeared. They have been attenuated. However, at the end of the presentation some differences between the direct approach and the anecdote can still be seen. The subjects who attended the presentation with the direct approach remember less of the speech than the subjects who attended the presentation that started with an anecdote.

Laboratory research, as always, does not easily allow for generalizations. It is difficult to see if the alternative introductions were realistic and representative for real-life introductions. Also, it is possible for example that a far less relevant anecdote would produce different scores.10

Another point is the operationalization of the technique; what were the active components? Of course there are many differences between the techniques. The speeches (because of the varied introductions) were different in length (the speech with the direct approach is almost a minute shorter) which gives the listeners less time to get used to the speaker, the subject and the context of the speech. Even though we have assumed that there is only one simple difference in technique between the alternatives, in fact there are many bigger and smaller differences in style which may well each affect the listeners in some way. Also, the rather uniform research subjects (students at a Dutch university of technology) and genre (speech at a symposium) limits the

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10 Another point is the operationalization of the technique; what were the active components? Of course there are many differences between the techniques. The speeches (because of the varied introductions) were different in length (the speech with the direct approach is almost a minute shorter) which gives the listeners less time to get used to the speaker, the subject and the context of the speech. Even though we have assumed that there is only one simple difference in technique between the alternatives, in fact there are many bigger and smaller differences in style which may well each affect the listeners in some way. Also, the rather uniform research subjects (students at a Dutch university of technology) and genre (speech at a symposium) limits the
6.3 The relevance of the anecdote

The analysis from the Dutch textbooks showed that not every story is suitable material for an anecdote. An important requirement for the story was that the content should be relevant to the rest of the presentation. Janssen et al. (1989: 258) state that a non-relevant anecdote could confuse the listener: “the audience is put on the wrong track”.

The classical authors, too, emphasize the importance of a relevant introduction in view of the vitium separatum. To what extent is this requirement of relevance crucial? Does the speaker who hastily takes an anecdote from a standard collection of stories run the risk of putting his listeners on the wrong track? And does the less relevant anecdote score less than the more appropriate anecdote from the previous experiments? In a limited additional experiment we have investigated whether an alternative anecdote shows different results from the original anecdote, when measured at the end of the presentation (see Table 5, text originally in Dutch).

possibilities of generalizing the data to other populations and circumstances. Therefore it is not impossible that this survey would generate different results in different cultures and genres.

11 For a discussion of this vitium see Andeweg / De Jong (2004b). Cicero and Quintilianus emphasize that an introduction should be relevant to the speech it precedes. They disagree with Aristotle, who states that the introduction in the case of an occasional speech could be unrelated to the rest of the speech (Aristotle, 3.14.4).

12 The question whether an anecdote is relevant or not can only be answered in the light of a complete speech, because, obviously, the rest of the speech determines the relevance of the beginning. This is why there was no point in measuring this right after the introduction.

Table 5. Anecdote (Non-relevant).

The new (non-relevant) alternative emphasizes the importance of a certain amount of self-knowledge when finding a new working environment. The story makes clear that working in close proximity to others may have its advantages, even if it sometimes noisy. It is only marginally connected to the rest of the speech. Both introductions share the subject working environment. They differ with respect to the nature of the problem, analysis and, especially, the conclusion, which in the case of the non-relevant anecdote does not connect with the subject matter of the body of the presentation. The constructions of both introductions have been made as similar as possible: the structures are comparable; some sentences are identical; the number of words in Dutch is the same.

The new non-relevant anecdote was recorded with the same speaker as in the previous experiments and edited into the Sick Building Syndrome speech. This new alternative was researched and analyzed in combination with the others. A multivariate analysis shows a comparable general effect for the type of introduction (F(20, 777)=2.50 p<.001). The post hoc tests show that no differences can be seen between the two anecdote alternatives. The speeches that start with a relevant or non-relevant anecdote are both seen as equally captivating and comprehensible. The speaker is also seen as equally credible in both cases. The listeners found both introductions equally successful. The differences in Comprehension score between the two
alternatives (in the expected direction) turns out to be comparatively the largest, but still not statistically significant (p=.030).13

The small scale of the investigation allows us to offer only tentative commentary on the data. Apart from that, the operationalization of the term relevant anecdote needs some attention. Perhaps our irrelevant anecdote was still too relevant for the presentation that followed it. Maybe the variable was designed too subtly. An introduction along the lines of John Cleese's famous quote "And now for something completely different", followed by the next speech or sketch would certainly have been more irrelevant. In this investigation we have allowed ourselves to be led by possible use of the results in our education practice. For this reason we have chosen to use less extreme examples of techniques, because they are more realistic and therefore more applicable.

In summary, what have we found? An introduction with less relevance turns out to have the same effect as the relevant alternative. This sounds counter-intuitive, but it is important to realize that the differences right after the introduction between other types, for example, the anecdote and the ethos introduction had also ebbed away by the end of the speech. The differences between the two alternatives in terms of comprehension seem to support what the experts have predicted, but are not statistically significant. In other words, we found no confirmation for the advice of, for instance, Janssen et al. (1989), that a non-relevant anecdote puts the audience on the wrong track. It remains possible however that a less relevant anecdote will result in greater differences. Further research into the robustness of the anecdote technique is necessary.

13 The sample utilized may not be large enough to show the effect of average length (d=.50) (power=.72; for power calculations, see Buchner / Erfelder / Faul 2001).

7. Discussion and conclusions

The anecdote is a timeless attentum technique. We perceive the anecdote as a short, witty and complete story that is presented in a lively and appealing way. Even though the classical authors did certainly know the anecdote, they did not explicitly recommend it for the ordinary introduction. But a short funny story was advised for use as an insinuatio technique to wake up a tired audience and get them to pay attention.

Modern advisors are very positive about the anecdote. Among 20th century experts as well as among the speechwriters in the survey, the anecdote is the most often mentioned introduction technique. Undoubtedly, this has to do with the versatility of this technique. According to the experts, an anecdote not only draws the attention of the listeners, but also helps the speaker to make contact with the audience and to establish a positive attitude of the audience towards the speech. Finally an anecdote may help the audience to understand the subject matter better.

It is not particularly clear whether engineers find the anecdote a good way to start a presentation. The older engineers consider an anecdote more important than their younger colleagues. But both groups seldom use the anecdote as a gambit. The speechwriters, however, regard the anecdote as the most important attentum technique, even if they use it relatively rarely – less than they say they do. This is caused in part by the somewhat loose definition of the anecdote that is used by some of the speechwriters. Analysis of their texts shows that they include examples, comparisons and similes in their definition.

Experiments have shown that audiences appreciate an anecdote in the introduction of a speech as interesting; definitely more interesting than a passage about the speaker's qualities. The use of the anecdote seems to support the advice of the modern experts. The speaker is well advised to keep his audience interested even after the introduction; at the end of the speech the effects of the introduction will have all but ebbed away.
Does the speaker who uses a poorly-chosen anecdote from a list of possibilities run the risk of putting his listeners on the wrong track? The experts state than not every story can be used as an anecdote. Apart from a requirement like brevity, most experts claim that an anecdote should be relevant to the rest of the presentation. Clearly, a non-relevant anecdote may draw the attention, but it will then fail to channel that attention to the subject at hand and will then put the listeners on the wrong path. And references to the vitium separatum show that the classical authors, too, stressed the importance of a relevant introduction. In our small-scale experiment a less-relevant introduction however, scores the same result as a relevant one: equally interesting, understandable, credible and successful. Our research seems to suggest that it does not pay to be too choosy when selecting a story.

We should make another remark about the versatility of the research methods we used. Approaching the anecdote as a stylistic device in the introduction from several angles on the one hand enabled us to make a variegated description of the subject matter and, on the other hand allowed the, sometimes inherent, methodological peculiarities of the study of every aspect to compensate each other somewhat. The ideas about anecdotes we described among 20th century experts have been given a historical background which made it possible to clarify the contemporary aspect of those ideas. The opinions of the speakers themselves give a clearer picture of the usability of this stylistic device. The added analyses of the factual use by the speechwriters diminish the distance between theory and practice. Finally, the experiments confirm the effectiveness of the anecdote as a stylistic device in the introduction and temper its influence on the whole presentation.

Does our work offer ready-made advice for the speaker, speechwriter or specialist? Can we make the step from our partly historical, partly descriptive and partly experimental research to the prescription of a recommendation? Patricia Wright (1987) once used a metaphor of a navigation map for sailors in a presentation on document design. Let us use this same metaphor to explain our problem as follows. Drawing a navigation map is made possible by research. Sometimes it shows detail to the square millimetre, sometimes only sketches. The mapmaker is not a consultant, he does not bear responsibility for the route the sailor takes. The sailor does not have the same goals as the mapmaker. He decides on his route, taking wind and weather into account, using his own experience, the quality of the boat and the information on the map to guide him to where he wants to go. This metaphor helps us differentiate between tasks and goals. Our study describes a number of beacons and currents, some essential, some less important. In this way the study offers arguments for part of the design choices that are important for the first couple of minutes of a speech. It is, in the end, the speaker himself who will have to start speaking. A versatile technique like the anecdote can be an excellent start of a speech.

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