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How to discover things with words?
John Wilkins: from *inventio* to invention

Abstract in English

My doctoral thesis explores the functions of rhetorical and dialectical devices in the argumentative style of John Wilkins (1614–1672). My study traces the development of his discursive techniques in scientific narratives, theological writings, and linguistic treatises, with the aim to examine how the interplay between cognitive and performative language enhanced early-modern practices of knowledge-making. I argue that the procedures of dialectical rhetoric, apart from being popular perlocutionary tools, were effective as heuristic instruments. Language was one of the important agents in the performing of science, and my study employs the concept of “performative knowing” as a key to Wilkins’s dialectical and scientific inventions. The idea of performative knowing straddles several constituents derived from the analytic philosophy and speech act theory. From this perspective, Wilkins’s undertakings appear as a coherent exercise in the art of making knowledge through persuasive communication. My thesis explores how Wilkins’s argumentative method departs from baroque rhetorical flair of *The Discovery of a World in the Moone* (1638), explores the capacity of rhetoric to impart scientific experience in *Mathematical Magick* (1648), copes with the challenges of the social and empirical quests of science in *Discourse on the Beauty of Providence* (1649) and *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion* (1675), and arrives at an elaboration of instruments for codification and formalization of knowledge in *An Essay towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language* (1668). Wilkins’s humanist scholarship and involvement in semiotic debates made him appreciate the heuristic potential of dialectical rhetoric, despite his criticism of the abuse of outdated figural language in scientific debates. Wilkins’s method benefited from the visualization of experience using the procedures of both rhetorical *inventio* and technical invention.