

PAPER

ACROTHESIS AS A STYLISTIC FIGURE OF CONTRAST

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Abstract

Acrothesis, derived from the Greek akrothesis meaning "placement at the extremity," represents a sophisticated rhetorical device that operates through strategic juxtaposition of opposing or contrasting elements at critical structural points within discourse. This article examines acrothesis as a figure of contrast, analyzing its function, historical development, and contemporary applications across literary and non-literary contexts. Through systematic analysis of classical and modern examples, this study demonstrates how acrothesis functions to heighten argumentative force, create memorable emphasis, and structure complex ideas through deliberate polarization. The findings suggest that acrothesis operates not merely as ornamental device but as a fundamental cognitive structure that shapes audience reception and interpretation. This investigation contributes to understanding how contrast-based figures function within broader systems of persuasive communication and stylistic construction.

Key words: acrothesis, rhetoric, stylistic figures, antithesis, contrast, discourse analysis

Introduction

The study of rhetorical figures has long occupied a central position in understanding how language achieves its persuasive and aesthetic effects (Fahnestock, 2011). Among the various figures of speech catalogued since classical antiquity, those operating through contrast have received particular attention for their cognitive impact and argumentative power (Cockcroft & Cockcroft,

2014). Acrothesis stands as one such figure, though it remains comparatively understudied in contemporary rhetorical scholarship compared to its more celebrated cousin, antithesis.

The term acrothesis itself appears infrequently in modern rhetorical handbooks, yet the phenomenon it describes pervades persuasive discourse across historical periods and cultural contexts. Lanham (1991) defines acrothesis as the placement of

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contrasting elements at structurally significant positions, particularly at the beginning or end of clauses, sentences, or larger discourse units. This positioning strategy amplifies the inherent tension between opposing concepts, transforming simple contrast into a dynamic tool for shaping reader or listener perception. Understanding acrothesis requires situating it within the broader taxonomy of rhetorical figures. Classical rhetoricians distinguished between figures of thought (*figurae sententiae*) and figures of speech (*figurae verborum*), with contrast-based figures typically falling into the former category due to their semantic rather than purely phonetic operations (Quintilian, trans. 2001). Modern cognitive rhetoric has further illuminated how such figures function not as mere decoration but as fundamental patterns of thought (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The theoretical foundation for analyzing acrothesis draws from multiple scholarly traditions. From classical rhetoric comes the understanding of *dispositio* or arrangement as crucial to persuasive effect (Cicero, trans. 2001). From cognitive linguistics emerges recognition that conceptual contrast serves as a basic organizing principle of human thought (Verhagen, 2005). From stylistics derives attention to how structural positioning creates emphasis and memorability (Leech & Short, 2007). Despite its historical pedigree and continued use, acrothesis has received minimal scholarly attention as a distinct rhetorical phenomenon. Most treatments subsume it under general discussions of antithesis or positional emphasis without examining its specific characteristics (Corbett & Connors, 1999). This gap in scholarship matters because understanding how position and contrast interact illuminates fundamental questions about how discourse achieves its effects. Furthermore, as Burke (1969) noted, contrast functions as a basic principle of form itself, suggesting that devices like acrothesis operate at the level of structural cognition rather than surface ornament.

Methods

This study employs rhetorical criticism as its primary methodology, combining close textual analysis with historical-comparative approaches to examine acrothesis across diverse discourse types.

The analytical framework integrates classical rhetorical theory with contemporary cognitive-linguistic perspectives to illuminate both the formal features and functional operations of this figure.

The corpus for analysis was constructed through purposive sampling designed to capture the range of acrothesis applications across historical periods and discourse contexts. Primary sources included classical rhetorical texts (Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian), literary works from multiple periods, political speeches, and contemporary media discourse. Selection criteria emphasized examples where contrasting elements appeared at structurally prominent positions—beginnings, endings, or marked transitional points. To ensure analytical reliability, candidate examples were evaluated against three criteria established from definitional literature: (1) presence of semantic opposition or contrast between elements, (2) strategic positioning at discourse boundaries or emphasis points, and (3) evident rhetorical function beyond simple statement of difference. Examples meeting all three criteria were included for detailed analysis. Analysis proceeded through multiple stages. Initial coding identified the formal structure of each example, noting the specific nature of contrast (binary opposition, scalar relationship, categorical difference) and the precise structural position of contrasting elements. Secondary analysis examined the rhetorical context and apparent intended effects, drawing on classical categories of persuasive appeal (*ethos*, *pathos*, *logos*) as adapted by modern scholars (Fahnestock, 2011).

Comparative analysis then explored relationships between acrothesis and related figures, particularly antithesis, enantiosis, and *distinctio*. This phase employed feature analysis to specify what distinguishes acrothesis from adjacent phenomena in the rhetorical taxonomy. Following Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) cognitive approach, analysis also considered how positional contrast might reflect or activate fundamental cognitive structures. Moving to limitations of the study, several limitations constrain this study. First, the relative paucity of prior scholarship specifically addressing acrothesis meant that analysis

sometimes required extrapolation from treatments of related figures. Second, distinguishing acrothesis from general antithesis proved challenging in borderline cases, reflecting genuine taxonomic ambiguity in rhetorical systems. Third, claims about cognitive effects, while theoretically grounded, remain inferential absent empirical testing with audiences. These limitations suggest directions for future research while not invalidating the present analytical findings.

Results

Analysis of the corpus revealed several distinctive patterns in how acrothesis operates as a figure of contrast. The findings are organized according to formal features, functional operations, and contextual variations. Acrothesis consistently manifests through three structural features. First, contrasting elements occupy positions of maximal emphasis—beginnings (anaphoric position), endings (cataphoric position), or both. Second, the contrast typically operates at a conceptual rather than merely lexical level, juxtaposing ideas, values, or conditions rather than simple word opposites. Third, the figure frequently incorporates parallelism or isocolon, though this remains a tendency rather than a definitional requirement. Classical examples demonstrate these features clearly. Cicero's *Pro Milone* contains numerous instances where contrasting judgments or conditions appear at sentence boundaries: "The brave consider all tortures more tolerable than treachery, all forms of death preferable to disgrace" (trans. 2001, p. 89). Here the positional emphasis on "more tolerable" versus "preferable" at clause endings amplifies the semantic opposition between physical suffering and moral degradation.

Contemporary political discourse reveals similar structural patterns. Analysis of presidential rhetoric identified recurring use of acrothesis to frame policy alternatives: "We can continue down the path of division, or we can choose the harder road of unity" (sample constructed from common patterns). The sentence-initial "division" and sentence-final "unity" occupy maximum emphasis positions while the contrast structures the entire argumentative frame.

Acrothesis achieves several rhetorical effects through its distinctive combination of contrast and position. Most fundamentally, it creates cognitive salience by marking contrasts at points where attention naturally focuses. As Leech and Short (2007) observe, beginnings and endings function as "strong positions" in any discourse structure, carrying disproportionate weight in comprehension and memory. Placing contrasting elements at these positions leverages this structural emphasis. The figure also serves framing functions, establishing interpretive parameters for what follows or summarizing what preceded. When contrasts appear at discourse openings, they often present alternatives between which the audience must choose, activating what Burke (1969) describes as "terministic screens"—the frameworks through which subsequent content will be understood. Terminal contrasts, conversely, often function to crystallize the essential opposition the entire discourse has developed. Beyond these structural-cognitive effects, acrothesis contributes to argumentative force by sharpening distinctions that might otherwise remain vague. The positional emphasis makes lukewarm or qualified contrasts impossible; the figure demands clarity and commitment. This characteristic makes acrothesis particularly prevalent in epideictic rhetoric, where sharp moral distinctions serve ceremonial purposes (Fahnestock, 2011). Comparison with antithesis proved essential for understanding acrothesis's distinctive character. While both figures operate through contrast, antithesis functions primarily through parallelism of structure: "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country" (Kennedy, 1961). The contrast here emerges from syntactic symmetry rather than strategic positioning alone. Acrothesis, by contrast, emphasizes position over parallelism. The contrasting elements may appear in parallel structures, but this remains incidental to the figure's essential operation. What matters is their placement at emphasis points. This distinction suggests that acrothesis operates more at the level of disposition (arrangement) than at the level of elocution (style), though the categories inevitably overlap. The relationship with *distinctio*, a figure that clarifies meaning through contrast, also merits

attention. *Distinctio* typically presents alternatives to forestall misunderstanding: "I mean love—not infatuation, but genuine love" (Corbett Connors, 1999, p. 403). While this involves contrast, it lacks the strategic positioning that characterizes *acrothesis*. The figures may combine, but they serve different primary functions.

Diachronic analysis revealed shifting patterns in *acrothesis* deployment. Classical rhetoric employed the figure extensively in judicial and deliberative contexts, where sharp distinctions between alternatives supported argumentative purposes. Medieval rhetoric, by contrast, showed decreased emphasis on contrast figures generally, perhaps reflecting theological preferences for unity and synthesis (Murphy, 1974). Modern political discourse has witnessed renewed emphasis on *acrothesis* and related contrast figures. Campaign rhetoric particularly favors stark oppositions positioned for maximum impact: characterizations of past versus future, fear versus hope, decline versus renewal typically appear at structurally prominent positions. This pattern may reflect contemporary media conditions favoring dramatic, memorable formulations (Hart Daughton, 2005). Literary applications of *acrothesis* show different evolutionary patterns. Renaissance rhetoric prized elaborate figures including complex contrast schemes (Lanham, 1991). Romantic and modernist aesthetics, valuing organic form over rhetorical artifice, generally reduced employment of obvious figures. Postmodern literature, however, has renewed interest in rhetorical devices as self-conscious stylistic choices, including ironic or exaggerated deployment of contrast (Lodge, 1977).

Discussion

The findings illuminate several dimensions of how *acrothesis* functions as a rhetorical device and what this reveals about discourse structure more broadly. Three themes merit extended discussion: the cognitive foundations of positional contrast, the relationship between form and function in rhetorical figures, and the continuing relevance of classical rhetorical categories. The effectiveness of *acrothesis* appears to rest on fundamental cognitive principles concerning attention, memory, and conceptual structure. Cognitive psychology

has established that primacy and recency effects significantly influence information processing and retention (Anderson, 2015). Items appearing first or last in sequences receive disproportionate attention and prove more memorable than medial items. *Acrothesis* exploits these effects by positioning contrasting elements precisely where cognitive attention naturally focuses. Moreover, contrast itself serves as a basic organizing principle of human cognition. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) demonstrated that conceptual metaphors often structure understanding through opposition: up/down, light/dark, inside/outside. When *acrothesis* positions contrasting concepts at emphasis points, it may activate these fundamental conceptual structures, giving the contrast enhanced cognitive resonance beyond its surface semantic content. This cognitive grounding suggests that *acrothesis* functions not as arbitrary ornament but as a structure aligned with how minds process information. Fahnestock (2011) makes a similar argument about rhetorical figures generally, proposing that they survive across cultures and periods because they map onto stable features of human cognition. *Acrothesis* exemplifies this principle: its persistence across diverse rhetorical traditions likely reflects its exploitation of universal attention and processing mechanisms. The analysis raises questions about the relationship between formal features and rhetorical functions. Classical rhetorical theory often treated figures as tools speakers could employ instrumentally to achieve predetermined effects (Cicero, trans. 2001). Contemporary rhetorical theory, influenced by Burke (1969) and others, emphasizes how forms shape rather than merely express meaning—how, in other words, stylistic choices constitute rather than simply convey arguments. *Acrothesis* illustrates this constitutive dimension of form. By positioning contrasts at emphasis points, the figure doesn't merely highlight pre-existing oppositions; it creates or intensifies them. When a speaker frames alternatives in *acrothetic* structure, the form itself makes those alternatives seem more starkly opposed, more mutually exclusive, more demanding of choice than they might otherwise appear. The boundary between expressing contrast and creating it becomes difficult to maintain. This

constitutive function carries ethical implications. If rhetorical figures like acrothesis don't merely express but actually shape thought, their use involves more than technical competence. The sharp distinctions acrothesis creates may clarify choices but may also falsely polarize options, foreclosing middle grounds or nuanced positions. Cockcroft and Cockcroft (2014) note this danger in contrast-based rhetoric generally: while such figures can illuminate genuine alternatives, they can also manufacture false dichotomies serving partisan purposes. A striking finding involves the continued utility of classical rhetorical categories for analyzing contemporary discourse. Despite radical changes in media, technology, and communicative contexts, figures identified and described two millennia ago remain readily identifiable in modern texts. Acrothesis appears in Twitter posts, advertising copy, and political debates just as it appeared in Cicero's speeches and Demosthenes' orations.

This persistence suggests either that fundamental features of persuasive communication remain constant across historical transformation, or that contemporary discourse unconsciously reproduces classical patterns through education and tradition. Probably both factors operate. As Verhagen (2005) argues, certain cognitive structures underlying language use remain stable even as specific linguistic forms evolve. Meanwhile, rhetorical education, however attenuated in contemporary curricula, continues to transmit classical patterns as models of effective expression. The continued relevance of classical categories does not imply that nothing has changed. Contemporary media conditions—particularly the premium on brevity and the competition for attention in saturated information environments—may actually intensify the value of devices like acrothesis that achieve maximum impact through structural efficiency. A well-positioned contrast can convey in seconds what might otherwise require extended elaboration, making such figures particularly well-suited to social media and other compressed formats (Hart Daughton, 2005).

This study's limitations suggest several productive directions for future research. Empirical investigation of how audiences actually process

acrothetic structures would test cognitive claims currently resting on theoretical inference. Comparative analysis across languages and cultures could illuminate whether the figure's effects depend on universal cognitive principles or culture-specific interpretive conventions. Extended historical study might reveal more precisely how changing media conditions influence the deployment and effectiveness of positional contrast. Additionally, the relationship between acrothesis and visual rhetoric merits investigation. In multimedia contexts, contrasting images positioned at emphatic points (beginnings of sequences, final frames, etc.) may function analogously to verbal acrothesis. Understanding how the principle of positional contrast operates across semiotic modes would enrich rhetorical theory while addressing contemporary communicative realities.

Conclusion

This investigation of acrothesis as a stylistic figure of contrast reveals a device both historically established and cognitively grounded, capable of creating powerful rhetorical effects through strategic positioning of opposing elements. The analysis demonstrates that acrothesis operates distinctively within the taxonomy of contrast-based figures, emphasizing structural position rather than syntactic parallelism as its primary mechanism. The findings support several conclusions about how acrothesis functions and why it matters. First, the figure exploits fundamental cognitive principles concerning attention and memory, positioning contrasts where they will receive maximum processing resources and achieve optimal retention. Second, acrothesis serves not merely expressive but constitutive functions, shaping how audiences understand alternatives rather than simply highlighting pre-existing distinctions. Third, the figure's persistence across diverse historical and cultural contexts suggests alignment with stable features of human communication and cognition. From a practical standpoint, understanding acrothesis enhances both critical and productive rhetorical competence. Critics gain a precise conceptual tool for analyzing how discourse achieves its effects through strategic arrangement. Communicators gain awareness of

how positional emphasis can amplify contrast for persuasive purposes. Both groups benefit from recognizing that rhetorical figures operate as cognitive structures with real effects rather than as superficial ornaments. The study also contributes to ongoing theoretical conversations about the relationship between classical and contemporary rhetoric. The continued relevance of figures like acrothesis suggests that fundamental dimensions of persuasive communication remain constant even amid dramatic technological and social change. At the same time, new media contexts create fresh opportunities for deploying classical devices in innovative ways. Burke (1969) observed that form creates appetite in the mind of the audience, an appetite the discourse then satisfies. Acrothesis exemplifies this principle: by positioning contrasts at emphasis points, it creates cognitive tension demanding resolution, shapes interpretive frames determining how that resolution occurs, and ultimately guides audiences toward preferred conclusions. Understanding this process illuminates not just a single figure but fundamental dynamics of how discourse moves minds. Future scholarship should continue excavating the rhetorical tradition for devices like acrothesis that remain understudied despite continued relevance. As contemporary communication grows ever more competitive and compressed, understanding how language achieves maximum impact through minimal means becomes increasingly valuable. Classical rhetoric, far from representing antiquarian interest, offers proven resources for navigating contemporary rhetorical challenges. Acrothesis stands as one such resource: ancient in origin, persistent in application, and potentially powerful in effect when wielded with awareness and skill.

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