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Making messages memorable: the influence of rhetorical techniques on information retention

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Making messages memorable

The influence of rhetorical techniques on information retention

Ancient rhetoricians such as Cicero and Quintilian advised orators not to forget the *memoria* task and recommended strategies for remembering a speech. Instead of focusing on the speaker's memory, modern public-speaking textbooks recommend speakers to make their message memorable for the audience. Although many rhetorical techniques are said to influence the audience's information retention, their effect is sparsely studied.

This dissertation investigates how rhetorical techniques in speeches can enhance information retention by the audience. By connecting rhetorical theory, advice and practice to insights from memory psychology it comprehensively studies retention as a rhetorical function.

The thesis follows a three-way approach. First, eighty influential English-language and Dutch-language public-speaking textbooks were analysed to obtain an overview of modern retention advice. The findings show that frequently advised retention techniques are related to organisation, elaboration and visualisation of information, which are three encoding principles that contribute to long-term information storage. Authors prefer the conclusion of a speech for influencing retention.

Secondly, the study analysed how scholars, politicians and TED speakers use recommended organisation and elaboration techniques such as summaries and anecdotes in public-speaking practice. The results highlight discrepancies with textbook advice and show that speakers use technique variants depending on their public-speaking context.

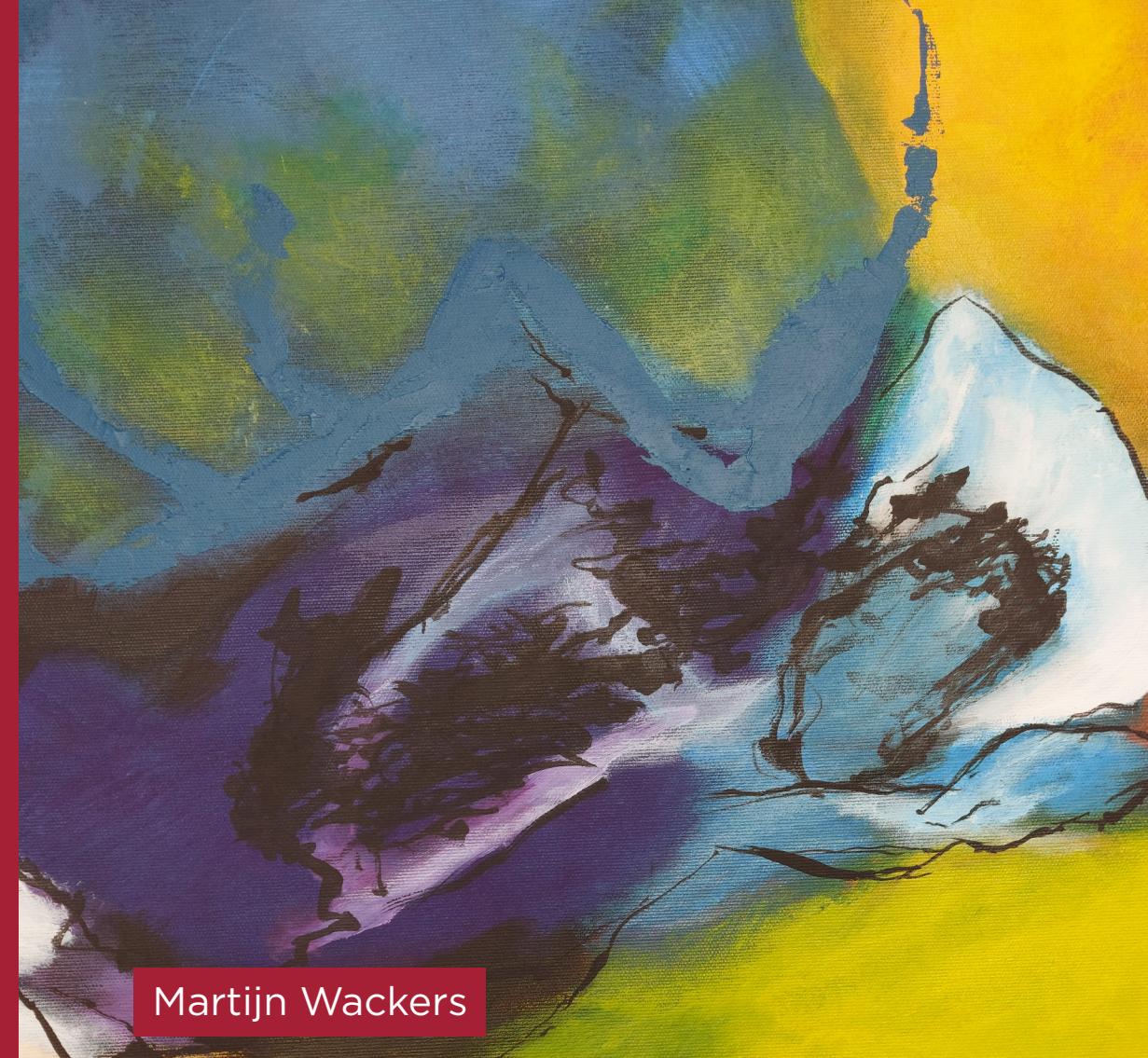
Thirdly, two experiments were performed into the retention effects of three organisation techniques applied in conclusions of informative presentations. Results show that announcing the conclusion and providing an informative summary can enhance information retention by the audience. This way, we are one step closer to knowing what makes messages memorable.

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