The term ‘the Second Sophistic’ is today widely used as a convenient label indicating ‘a cultural phenomenon in the Roman empire’, with its eminent feature being a kind of ‘Greek renaissance’. No one seems to argue against its validity as once U. von Wilamowitz did. As a consequence, few serious studies on the definition of the term itself were published in these several decades. However, ‘What is the exact meaning of the Second Sophistic’ still seems to remain an open question.

From the 19th century on - from E. Rohde to A. Boulanger - there was a well known history of controversy surrounding the term, in which another complicated problem, the Atticism / Asianism controversy, always played a dominant part. In short, whether the implication of ‘second’ was to be identified with the latter (as a result of Hellenistic diffusion), or with the former (as a renaissance of classical Greek), was the point in dispute. Neither explication, however, was convincing enough to render itself compatible with the description of Philostratus’ Lives of Sophists, in which literally unique definition of the word ‘the Second Sophistic’ can be found among the ancient authors.

Starting once again with the text of Philostratus, we find that the first or older sophistic is said to be ‘a philosophical rhetoric’. This terminology reminds us, to be sure, the description of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and such a reminiscence has usually been interpreted in relation to the Atticism. But the author also says ‘the ancient sophistic, propounding also philosophical themes, used to describe them diffusely and at length’. On the other hand, the main activity of his contemporary sophistic was known to be nearly identical with the performance of declamatio, whose themes were usually adapted from historical events, with definite person or time. Accordingly, the distinction of two sophistics may be explained in another way, sc. by the quality of their themes.

In the art of rhetoric after Hellenistic period, there was a prime theory concerning themes of speeches, i.e. the opposition between thesis (general themes without circumstances) and hypothesis (definite themes with circumstances). In such a context, philosophy in its narrower sense was always counted among the former, with declamatio being the latter. Philostratus, a rhetorical figure educated in the imperial period, was well acquainted with the distinction undoubtedly. In his definition of two sophistics, therefore, we have to recognize a reflection of this common knowledge of rhetoric.