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Voice At The Test Of Schooling: Recitation, Rhythm, And Subjectivation

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Abstract

This article examines school recitation as a philosophical problem at the intersection of poetics, philosophy of language, and subjectivity. Drawing on Émile Benveniste's theory of enunciation and Henri Meschonnic's poetics of rhythm, it argues that traditional practices of recitation tend to reduce poetry to a formal utterance, thereby obscuring its enunciative and rhythmic dimensions. Through the analysis of classroom situations observed in Algerian primary education, the study shows how recitation often suppresses voice and prevents poetic experience as a process of subjectivation. The article proposes a reconceptualization of memorization as an enunciative practice, in which poetry becomes a lived experience rather than a reproduced text. By placing voice at the center of poetic practice, it defends an understanding of poetry as an event of language inseparable from rhythm and from the emergence of the speaking subject.

Keywords: voice; enunciation; rhythm; recitation; subjectivation; poetry

Introduction

Poetry at school is most often approached as an object to be transmitted rather than as an experience to be lived. This apparent obviousness conceals a deeper theoretical issue: it presupposes a conception of language as a stable entity, detachable from the subject who speaks it. Within school practices, recitation occupies a central yet paradoxical place. Intended to introduce pupils to poetry, it frequently reduces poetic language to a memorized verbal form, detached from voice, rhythm, and subjectivity. What is at stake here is not merely a pedagogical technique, but a conception of language itself.

As Wilhelm von Humboldt already emphasized, language is not a finished product (*ergon*), but an activity (*energeia*), an ongoing process inseparable from the subject who speaks. When poetry is reduced to recitation understood as formal memorization, this dynamic dimension of language is neutralized. The poem becomes an object to be reproduced rather than an event to be enacted. In such conditions, the act of speaking is dissociated from the experience of meaning, and the learner is positioned not as a subject of language, but as its executor.

This reduction is particularly visible in school recitation, where the emphasis is placed on accuracy, conformity, and fidelity to the text. The voice is expected to reproduce an already constituted meaning, rather than to produce meaning through its own rhythmic organization. Paul Valéry's remark that "a poem is not finished when it is written, but when it is read" takes on a decisive

importance here: reading—and even more so reciting—is not a secondary operation, but a constitutive moment of the poem's existence. To ignore this is to deny poetry its status as an event of language.

This article proposes to rethink school recitation from a philosophical perspective, drawing primarily on Émile Benveniste's theory of enunciation and Henri Meschonnic's poetics of rhythm. Benveniste's distinction between utterance and enunciation provides a decisive conceptual framework: language does not exist independently of its use; it comes into being through the act by which a speaker appropriates it. As Benveniste writes, "before enunciation, language is only the possibility of language; after enunciation, it is realized in an instance of discourse." Recitation, when reduced to repetition, maintains language at the level of possibility without allowing it to be actualized as discourse.

Meschonnic radicalizes this insight by placing rhythm at the center of linguistic and poetic experience. For him, rhythm is not a formal ornament added to meaning; it is the organization of meaning itself, the place where subjectivity is constituted in and through language. Rhythm is what makes a text become voice, and voice is inseparable from the emergence of a subject. From this perspective, the traditional school practice of recitation can be understood as a site where rhythm is systematically erased, replaced by metric counting, prosodic coding, or imposed intonation patterns. What disappears in this process is not only the poem's vitality, but the subject who could have come into being through it.

Rather than opposing pedagogy to philosophy, this study considers classroom situations as spaces where implicit theories of language are enacted. Every pedagogical gesture presupposes a conception of what language is and what it does. Observed practices in Algerian primary schools are therefore approached not as empirical data in the narrow sense, but as philosophical symptoms: they reveal how language is thought, handled, and constrained within institutional frameworks.

In this sense, the classroom becomes a privileged site for examining the tension between two conceptions of poetry. On the one hand, poetry is treated as a text to be mastered, memorized, and evaluated; on the other, it can be understood as an experience of language, involving voice, rhythm, and address. John Dewey's conception of art as experience resonates strongly here: an artwork exists fully only when it is experienced, when it engages perception, emotion, and action. Applied to poetry, this means that the poem exists not only on the page, but in the act of saying, hearing, and responding.

By placing voice at the center of poetic experience, this article argues that poetry cannot be reduced to an utterance to be reproduced. It is an event of language, inseparable from rhythm and from the subject who comes into being through speech. Recitation, when conceived as enunciative practice rather than mechanical repetition, can become a site of subjectivation, where the learner does not merely reproduce language but inhabits it.

Reconsidering recitation in this light allows us to envision a pedagogy that does not simply teach poetry as a cultural object, but enables subjects to *live* it. Such a shift does not require abandoning memorization, but rethinking it as a process of enunciation—what this article proposes to call

enunciative memorization. In this perspective, poetry at school ceases to be an exercise in conformity and becomes an experience through which language, voice, and subjectivity are mutually constituted.

1. Recitation and the wear of poetry

Claude Roy observes that prolonged use can wear out a text, depriving it of its force and transforming it into something lifeless. This remark resonates strongly with school practices of recitation. Learned by heart and repeated mechanically, poems are often stripped of what constitutes their poetic specificity: their capacity to transform the one who speaks them.

Yet a memorized poem can leave a lasting imprint on the learner's inner life. This imprint does not arise solely from lexical content, but from the manner in which words are spoken, heard, and embodied. In many classrooms, however, recitation functions primarily as an exercise in restitution, where formal accuracy prevails over linguistic experience.

Historical analyses of poetry teaching, particularly those by Marie-Claire and Serge Martin drawing on Ferdinand Buisson's foundational pedagogical texts, show that poetry instruction has long revolved around three practices: recitation, festive performance, and teacher-led reading. While these practices still exist, they often persist as fixed rituals, emptied of their poetic vitality.

In the Algerian educational context, recitation remains dominant, teacher reading has become rare, and poetry in a foreign language is marginal or subordinated to thematic imperatives. This situation reflects not only pedagogical constraints but also an implicit conception of language as a transferable object rather than as an activity of the subject.

2. From utterance to enunciation: A philosophical problem

At the core of this issue lies a fundamental confusion between utterance and enunciation. As Émile Benveniste demonstrated, enunciation is not the text produced but the act of producing language. It presupposes a speaker, a situation, and an address to another.

When pupils recite a poem without an addressee, without a real or symbolic interlocutor, they merely reproduce an utterance. Language remains at the level of potentiality and is not actualized as discourse. For Benveniste, it is enunciation that transforms language into experience.

This distinction is decisive for rethinking poetry teaching. To recite is not to speak. To speak is to assume a position as subject in language, to give voice to a discourse. Traditional school recitation often neutralizes this possibility by prioritizing correctness and repetition over address and engagement.

3. First classroom situation: recitation as repetition without address

An observed classroom session based on Maurice Carême's poem *For My Mother* illustrates this phenomenon. The teacher's pedagogical focus is exclusively formal: verses, stanzas, and rhymes. Meaning, address, and expressive dimension are absent from the instructional process.

Memorization is achieved through oral repetition, without genuine reading, even though the poem is displayed on the board. Pupils are asked to "repeat," not to say. The poem is fragmented and reduced to a sequence of linguistic units detached from their discursive force.

While such a practice may be effective in terms of memorization, it freezes learning. The poem ceases to function as an act of language and becomes a school object. There is utterance without enunciation.

4. Voice as the site of subjectivation

Henri Meschonnic's work provides a crucial theoretical framework for understanding this impasse. For Meschonnic, rhythm is not a formal arrangement but the very place where the subject of discourse comes into being. Rhythm is what makes a text become voice, and this voice is inseparable from subjectivation.

From this perspective, punctuation cannot be reduced to graphic signs. It is a "graphy of time and voice," organizing breath, intensity, continuity, and rupture. When punctuation is treated merely as a code to be respected, rhythm is erased—and with it, the subject.

5. Second classroom situation: rhythm, punctuation, and control of voice

A second observed situation, based on Tristan Klingsor's poem *The Robin*, reveals how imposed prosodic coding leads to a normative reading. The teacher predefines pauses, intonation patterns, and melodic contours in order to evaluate pupils' performances.

Although this reading may appear expressive, it remains heteronomous. The pupil's voice is shaped externally rather than invented internally. The rhythm imposed is not the rhythm discovered by the subject but one prescribed by pedagogical authority.

Meschonnic warns against such reductions of punctuation to convention. In its broader sense, punctuation encompasses the rhythmic organization of discourse, inseparable from voice and subjectivity. When rhythm is imposed, subjectivation is silenced.

6. Toward enunciative memorization

From these observations emerges a central hypothesis: memorization can become a site of subjectivation if it is conceived as enunciative memorization. This shift requires not only pedagogical adjustment but theoretical reorientation.

Simple gestures—having pupils read to one another, establishing real address, comparing different readings without hierarchy, listening to variations in breath and intonation—restore poetry's experiential dimension. The poem is no longer merely learned; it is lived.

In this process, pupils do not simply memorize a text; they are traversed by it. It is this traversal that allows a voice to emerge and subjectivity to take shape.

Conclusion

Placing voice at the test of schooling means first accepting that poetry cannot be transmitted without remainder. There is always something in poetic language that resists appropriation through rules, explanations, or formal mastery. This remainder is not a failure of transmission but the very condition of poetic experience. To acknowledge it is to recognize that language is not merely a system of signs to be learned, but an activity of the subject, an ongoing process in which meaning, voice, and identity are co-constituted.

From the perspective opened by Benveniste, this remainder corresponds to the irreducible dimension of enunciation. Language does not exist independently of its use; it comes into being through the act by which a speaker assumes it. When school recitation is reduced to the reproduction of an utterance, it bypasses this act and leaves the learner outside the experience of language. What is transmitted, in such cases, is not poetry but its shell: a sequence of words detached from the instance of discourse that could give them life.

Meschonnic's poetics of rhythm allows us to push this critique further. Rhythm, understood as the organization of meaning in discourse, is inseparable from the emergence of a subject. To erase rhythm—by reducing it to metric regularity, imposed intonation, or prescriptive punctuation—is to erase the possibility for the learner to become a subject in and through language. What is at stake, therefore, is not simply the quality of poetic instruction, but the ethical and political dimension of language education itself: who is authorized to speak, in what voice, and under what conditions.

The classroom situations analyzed in this article show that the issue is not one of good or bad pedagogy, but of implicit theories of language. When recitation is treated as an exercise in conformity, it produces docile speakers rather than speaking subjects. Conversely, when it is rethought as an enunciative practice, it opens a space where pupils can experiment with language, test their voices, and encounter poetry as an event rather than as an object.

Such a reconfiguration does not imply abandoning memorization. On the contrary, it calls for rethinking memorization as an enunciative process—what has been described here as *enunciative memorization*. In this process, the poem is not stored as a fixed text but reactivated each time through voice, rhythm, and address. The learner does not simply remember the poem; they are transformed by it, even if only fleetingly.

In this sense, poetry at school can be understood in line with Dewey's conception of art as experience: an experience that engages the whole subject and that cannot be reduced to external evaluation criteria. To teach poetry, then, is not to ensure the correct reproduction of texts, but to create the conditions for encounters with language that matter.

Thus understood, poetry at school ceases to be an exercise in conformity and becomes what it should never have ceased to be: an experience of language, a way of *living poetry*. By placing voice, rhythm, and subjectivation at the center of educational practice, schooling can become not the place where poetry is tamed, but the space where it begins to speak again.

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