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## Spoken Language vs. Written Language in John Dewey's Philosophy

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I aim at presenting John Dewey's conception regarding the importance of spoken language for the development and the regulation of human social behaviour. Even if the famous American philosopher also appreciates written language, he states that modern man, precisely because he resorts so frequently to writing, overlooks the essential nature of human communication. Consequently, to Dewey, just as to the ancients, the observation that *verba volant* is more important than the consideration that *scripta manent*.

**Keywords:** John Dewey; philosophy; human communication; spoken language; written language

1. John Dewey, a famous American thinker, was also a remarkable philosopher of language, who made clarifying statements regarding meaning and the essence of human communication in general (see Munteanu, 2019a). Among other things, he emphasized the primary importance of spoken language as compared to written language (the latter having a determinant role in the life of modern man). In other words, in his opinion, authentic communication is revealed in spoken language, in dialogue, and not in written language.

2. In fact, this change of perspective, partly refuted by Dewey, is also confirmed by the way in which a famous Latin phrase, *verba volant, scripta manent*, was reinterpreted. In this very context, in order to prepare the discussion about John Dewey's ideas, I think it is worth reminding how the meaning of the respective phrase was modified. In its current usage, with the focus on the importance of writing *versus* speaking, the aforementioned phrase would represent, according to some specialists, quite an old resemantisation. *Ab initio*, in the Ancient times, the spoken words must have been of greater importance<sup>2</sup>.

2.1. Alberto Manguel, the author of a famous book, *A History of Reading*, seduced by such a hypothesis, changes the order of the words from the Latin phrase, as well (rendering it as *scripta manent, verba volant*): "Written words, from the days of the first Sumerian tablets, were meant to be pronounced out loud, since the signs carried implicit, as if it were their soul, a particular sound. The classic phrase *scripta manent, verba volant* – which has come to mean, in our time, 'what is written remains, what is spoken

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<sup>2</sup> As a matter of fact, if we are to trust Plato's words (as stated in the dialogue *Phaedrus* and in *Letter 7*), writing was actually despised in those times, and was only useful for reminding (see Munteanu, 2020).

vanishes into air' – used to express the exact opposite; it was coined in praise of the word said out loud, which has wings and can fly, as compared to the silent word on the page, which is motionless, dead. Faced with a written text, the reader had a duty to lend voice to the silent letters, the *scripta*, and to allow them to become, in the delicate biblical distinction, *verba*, spoken words – spirit." (Manguel, 1996, p. 45).

**2.2.** In our cultural environment, Alexandru Călinescu was the specialist who supported this interpretation on various occasions, some years ago. For instance, in an article (entitled precisely *Verba volant?*), considering Andrei Cornea's book (*Scriere și oralitate în cultura antică* [*Writing and Orality in the Ancient Culture*]; see Cornea, 1988), as well, Al. Călinescu also indicates the Argentinian author Alberto Manguel as the one who proposed the respective interpretation (Munteanu, 2019b, p. 253). *Ab ovo*, things might have been that way. Later, the perspective changed (out of juridical reasons, perhaps), and the expression *verba volant, scripta manent* started circulating with its current meaning (Călinescu, 2004, p. 9).

**3.** This is also the idea which John Dewey supported much earlier, at least implicitly. In the book *How We Think*, published in 1910, the pragmatist philosopher shows the advantages of the spoken linguistic signs. Nevertheless, at the same time, he points out the benefits of writing (and of printing, as well): "Arbitrary linguistic signs are convenient and easy to manage. They are compact, portable, and delicate. As long as we live, we breathe; and modifications by the muscles of throat and mouth of the volume and quality of the air are simple, easy, and indefinitely controllable. Bodily postures and gestures of the hand and arm are also employed as signs, but they are coarse and unmanageable compared with modifications of breath to produce sounds. No wonder that oral speech has been selected as the main stuff of intentional intellectual signs. Sounds, while subtle, refined, and easily modifiable, are transitory. This defect is met by the system of written and printed words, appealing to the eye. *Littera scripta manet.*" (Dewey, 1997, pp. 172-173; Dewey, 1989, p. 303). In fact, it is obvious that Dewey, through the partially shortened and slightly grammatically modified Latin expression (since he uses the singular form: *littera scripta manet*), alludes precisely to the already mentioned phrase: *verba volant, scripta manent*.

**4.** Even if he no longer explicitly refers to the respective phrase, the American thinker continues to suggest it in the book *The Public and Its Problems* (from 1927) when praising "the winged words of conversation", underlining their importance and superiority as compared to written discourse, whose words are "fixed and frozen": "Signs and symbols, language, are the means of communication by which a fraternally shared experience is ushered in and sustained. But the winged words of conversation in immediate intercourse have a vital import lacking in the fixed and frozen words of written speech" (Dewey, 1954, p. 218).

**4.1.** All these are included by Dewey in a larger conception concerning the nature of society and the desirable way in which an authentic democracy should function: "In a word, that expansion and reënforcement of personal understanding and judgment by the cumulative and transmitted intellectual wealth of the community [...] can be fulfilled only in the relations of personal intercourse in the local community." (Dewey, 1954, p. 218).

**4.2.** The really efficient communication is manifested in dialogue, in conversation. Dewey pleads for this type of communication, also taking into consideration the manner in which sense organs are involved in the act of communication: "The connections of the ear with vital and out-going thought and

emotion are immensely closer and more varied than those of the eye. Vision is a spectator; hearing is a participator. Publication is partial and the public which results is partially informed and formed until the meanings it purveys pass from mouth to mouth.” (Dewey, 1954, pp. 218-219).

5. “Forgetting” or ignoring the character (originally) oral and immediate of language is an aspect which Dewey deplors in many circumstances (*cf.*, for instance, Dewey, 1958, pp. 173-179), but which he exemplarily presents in *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy* (an unfinished, posthumously published book): “The fact that definition of language as ‘expression or communication of *thought*’ sets forth a secondary and derived function of language and not its primary office supplies indirect confirmation of the view that the social interaction of which language is an inherent constituent is the observationally verifiable foundation of *meaning* and *understanding*. The statement, found in so many texts, that ‘language is communication of thought’, of ideas, etc. (or worse yet that it is the *means* of expressing it) sets forth the notion of writers whose pre-occupation is so much that of *written* discourse that they have forgotten that language is primarily *spoken*, and is addressed not to persons at a distance until the phone was invented – not persons remote in space and time (as is literature and ‘letters’) but to an immediate circle. When these ordinary and primary traits of speech are held in mind, it will be seen that the primary original and basic function of language is influencing and regulation of behavior of beings who are engaged in conjoint undertakings of friendly or hostile, cooperative or competitive quality.” (Dewey, 2012, p. 319).

5.1. Thus, the core of the Deweyan conception on language can already be found in a chapter from the series of lectures entitled *Experience and Nature* (from 1925). Here is a truly revelatory fragment excerpted from that chapter: “The heart of language is not ‘expression’ of something antecedent, much less expression of antecedent thought. It is communication; the establishment of cooperation in an activity in which the activity of each is modified and regulated by partnership” (Dewey, 1958, p. 179).

5.2. Consequently, once produced, the linguistic signification itself becomes objective thanks to intersubjectivity. This is clearly stated by Dewey in a paragraph of his 1938 treatise (*Logic. The Theory of Inquiry*), which Eugenio Coseriu (2004, p. 84) used to invoke: “But it [= language] has reference to some other person or persons with whom it institutes *communication* – the making of something common. Hence, to that extent its reference becomes general and ‘objective’” (Dewey, 1938, p. 46).

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