

Bertsolaritza in the School Curriculum

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Introduction: [Orality and the School](#)¹

The institutions that traditionally have shouldered the burden of passing on the ethical and aesthetic standards of the individuals in a community appear to be in a permanent state of crisis in the so-called developed societies. The family, and the social networks closest to the individual, are breaking down, and these networks do not seem able to perform the function that was almost exclusively theirs up until recent times.²

And so it happens that this job of transmission is increasingly being handed over to the two most universal and important institutions that developed societies have at their disposal: the media and, above all, the educational system. Many teachers say they feel crushed by the increasing responsibility that developed societies are delegating to the school system. Another outcome is that the school, as an institution, is very far from being a prestigious establishment. The young, as Simone aptly puts it (2001), perceive school as something outside of the real world. On the other hand, the patently obvious authority crisis is causing increasingly serious and frequent problems that do not seem easy to resolve.

Many varied factors are responsible for the present situation. This article cannot possibly provide an adequate forum for discussing the complexities of the situation, so I shall confine myself to mentioning just one of the factors that, as I see it, discredit today's educational system and make it inefficient in developed societies. The factor to which I refer is related not so much to the actual educational content delivered as to the way in which that knowledge is transmitted. Generally speaking, the school is still anchored in the primacy of the written word—although that primacy is, of course, a matter of degree.

If I only touch on the two major school systems from which the Basque Country takes its benchmark, it is a demonstrable fact that the French system pays far more attention to orality than the Spanish one. Given that the Basque educational system does not enjoy full autonomy, the situation of orality in schools in the Basque Iberian Peninsula (that is, in the Basque Autonomous Community and Navarre) is far more precarious than on the Basque European Continent (in Iparralde, in French territory).

¹ For photographs associated with this article, click on link.

² See, for example, Barham 2006.

The precarious situation of orality in the school system manifests itself in two major ways. Where content is concerned, the various expressions of Basque orality appear only, even in the best of cases, as mere exotic anecdotes devoid of relevance. When Basque pupils finish their compulsory education at the age of 16—even those who have been taught through the medium of Euskara (the native term for the Basque language)—they are far more familiar with the figure of Don Quixote than with that of Fernando Amezketarra or Maixu Juan. Naturally, it is not a case of condemning familiarity with Quixote (an essential figure whatever way you look at it) but instead of feeling troubled that the Basque community's own literary figures aren't better known.

The second aspect of the neglect of orality in schools relates to the methods of transmitting knowledge: namely, the fact that the written word is still usurping the prime position. Let's not beat about the bush: the typical pupil in our educational system is often ignorant. Meanwhile, the experts all point out that the ability to communicate effectively is, without a doubt, the most sought-after and valued skill in today's so-called "Information Society."

Things being as they are, one should not lose sight of the fact that the general aim of the Western educational system is none other than to prepare its "customers" as well as possible for playing their role in the society to which they belong. From that point of view, it seems clear that our school system is very far from being a suitable instrument for the accomplishment of its main purpose. In light of this fact, a complete integration into the school system of that conglomerate that J. M. Foley calls the "ecology of oral traditions" (2002:188-218) would not only be an act of justice for the Basque cultural heritage, but would also contribute, to some extent, to easing some of the problems that currently beset our educational system.

For the integration of orality into the school system to be really complete, however, and not a mere cosmetic job, one needs to have a broad and deep understanding of the phenomenon, both in its historical aspect and in its projection toward the future. The importance of theoretical research thus comes to the fore once more, because only by understanding the phenomenon of orality in all its complexity will we be able to work it more fully into the school curriculum. The proposal that follows is just a first approximation of the essential integration of orality and curriculum—in this case, centered specifically on *bertsolaritza* and commissioned by the Federation of Ikastolas.³

Importance of the Subject

To analyze in depth the importance that improvised verse might have in the context of the Basque curriculum, we should start by taking a look at this subject from several different perspectives. Multiple viewpoints are more likely to ensure that we will be able to establish the basic minimum level of knowledge that anyone living in the Basque Country should be required to have—especially anyone who has completed compulsory schooling. Of course, this minimum level

³ See Garzia 2004.

of knowledge does not refer only to content, but also includes the verbal strategies to be mastered, including improvised verse.

It is my opinion that this procedure will also provide us with a more exact idea of the cultural significance of the subject that concerns us here. In what follows, I will treat the central aspects of the topic at hand.

Improvised Verse as our Literary Heritage

The view from literary heritage is perhaps the most obvious perspective on Basque oral traditions and also probably the only one that current curricula bear in mind (albeit problematically). As Koldo Mitxelena has observed, written Basque literature (or “highbrow,” as it is also called) well into the twentieth century is limited, anachronistic, and almost always a response to aims that are not strictly literary. On the other hand, Basque oral literature is at least as rich and varied as any other tradition.

In the context of Basque oral literature, Basque verse definitely holds a prestigious place, both in its improvised form and its non-improvised or written form (*bertso-paperak*). Spanish speakers feel and express a logical admiration for the verse forms in which most Spanish poetry has been written (romance, ten-verse poems, sonnets, and so on). In the Basque Country, Basque also has its favorite stanza patterns, and it seems reasonable for us to learn and appreciate them properly: the *kopla zaharra*, the major and minor *zortziko*, the stanza found in the ballad known as “Iparragirre’s,” the nine-rhyme stanza (*betroiarena*), and so on. If Basque poets have preferred these models it is undoubtedly because they allow them to express—with greater ease, precision, and power—what they wish to express in each case. It is of course well known that each language has its own internal dynamic, and that each language favors certain stanza patterns over others. Thus knowledge of the stanza patterns that Basque seems to favor should form part of the minimum required knowledge that we are trying to define.

Improvised Basque verse, however, deserves special mention. Experts say that improvisation is a universal phenomenon, in the sense that it was a practice that existed in all cultures and all languages. Nevertheless, at the present time, oral improvisation appears to have disappeared nearly everywhere, perhaps due to the predominance of written culture since the Enlightenment. In this sense, it can be said that the fact that mass literacy in Basque occurred so late may have allowed for the survival of oral improvisation among us, confirming the saying that “every cloud has a silver lining.”

I have just claimed that oral improvisation has disappeared almost everywhere; this is a claim that needs to be qualified, because oral improvisation may be more alive than one might first think. During the last few years, Basque scholars have had the opportunity to learn about improvised forms of expression from other countries, and as our research has advanced the world map of oral improvisation has become more comprehensive, to such an extent that it seems that there really is no corner of the globe in which we cannot find some trace of oral improvisation. Many of these traces are marginal; Basque improvised verse, on the other hand, has not only survived but is one of the mainstays of modern Basque culture. Today Basque verse is, above all, improvised verse, and it is undeniable that it holds a great deal of prestige in modern Basque

society. It is not just part of our heritage; it is also one of the most successful popular cultural activities in our society at the present time.

In any case, this initial perspective on improvised verse as literary heritage has shown us that Basque improvisational verse has enormous value as part of our cultural heritage. And it is not just a Basque heritage, of course, but the intangible cultural heritage of the whole world, as UNESCO itself has recently acknowledged.⁴

Basque Improvised Verse as a Means of Communication

Those who know nothing of Basque improvised verse cannot claim to know our own reality properly, because Basque verse is not just a subgenre of oral literature but also a means of communication—or, if you prefer, a means of communicating with each other. At many important historical moments, for example, it was the only medium the Basque-speaking community had. Official Basque history is written, with a few rare exceptions, in Spanish or French, whereas the popular version of historical events has been generally narrated and sung in Basque, almost always in the form of *bertsos* (“verses”). Getting to know these verses is also vital from this point of view, since otherwise it is impossible to acquire a complete vision of important events. The burning of Mondragon, the Carlist wars, the great wars of the twentieth century, the Spanish civil war—none of these events can be fully understood, in a Basque context, without turning to the relevant verses. However, Basque verse not only deals with great historical events; it also reflects the day-to-day life of our ancestors, methods of production, fiestas, religion, and so forth. These are social realities that can be only partially understood if we completely ignore Basque verse.

Oral history is currently in vogue around the globe. It finally seems that the most seasoned historians are ready to acknowledge that oral sources are a vital tool, without which historical chronicles would always lack something. There have been undeniable methodological advances connected with the analysis and treatment of oral documents. In the case of the Basques, however, the fact that many of these documents are written in verse seems to put scholars off, as if dealing with folkloric materials like these might prove less than “academic” enough. This is not because of a lack of models that combine a thoroughly academic approach with an appreciation of Basque oral poetry; consider the vast work of Father Antonio Zavala or of Jesus Maria Leizaola, among others. That is simply the way things are, and it is difficult to guess why Basque verses are not appreciated for the historical data they contain. It may be that, as in so many other cases, we tend to overrate what comes from somewhere else (in this case, anything that comes endorsed and approved by Spanish and French culture), and to think that a small local culture cannot produce anything significant.

⁴ There is an initiative in progress for UNESCO to declare Basque improvised poetry a part of the protected heritage of humanity.

Basque Verse: An Effective Model of Communication

Modern “developed” societies entertain a paradox with serious consequences. On the one hand, scholars agree that communication is the very core of our societies in the twenty-first century.⁵ The most commonly used terms (“information-based society,” “communication society,” and so on) all point in the same direction. What is paradoxical is that, given this situation, individuals’ ability to communicate is dramatically declining (regardless of the language being considered).

The most plausible of the various explanations for this phenomenon, in my opinion, comes from Gabrielle Simone. Simone claims that in the last decade of the twentieth century the convergence between telematics and new media has led to the beginning of a new era in human knowledge. The family and school, the two institutions that for centuries almost exclusively performed the task of transmitting knowledge, are demoted to a secondary role in this new era. The fact that schools still continue to treat written work as an absolute priority, when in the real world oral communication (together with images) is predominant, is certainly a peculiarity. In any case, this is one of many clear symptoms of the dysfunction from which our educational system is currently suffering.

All we need to do is to look back at the media that increasingly support our capacity to communicate to note the central role that orality plays in communication, and as a result in cognitive processes, in modern societies: telephone, cinema, radio, and television all function using the voice and the spoken word. As for the new internet-based means of communication that are emerging (chat lines, e-mail, virtual worlds, SMS on mobile phones, and so on), it is clear that they merely blur the boundaries between written and oral procedures. On chat lines, for example, and also in e-mail, the message is created (at least up to now) using writing, but they need to be structured orally for this discourse to be most effective. The day doesn’t seem far off when these new media will be completely oral, because the advances in voice-recognition programs suggest that these messages will soon be personally dictated into the computer.

Having reached this point, I would like to qualify the claim I have just made. I stated above that communication performs an essential core function in our “information society.” I would now like to add that this communication is increasingly oral and that everything points to its becoming even more oral in nature in the future. This trajectory means, among other things, that the capacity for oral communication is a prerequisite if we want to succeed in today’s society.

Note that I have used “information” and “communication” here as if they were synonyms. Here is another of the prejudices (the first was the absolute supremacy of writing over oral communication) to which the Enlightenment gave rise—the fallacy of believing that communication is merely an exchange of information. In actual fact, leading researchers have long since abandoned this kind of reductive thinking. It is still odd that it was precisely specialists in analytical philosophy, led by Wittgenstein, who were the first to question the enlightened-reductionist viewpoint. Nowadays, there is not a single important figure in any of the many academic disciplines that deal with communication who dares to claim that language is

⁵ See, for example, Manuel Castells’ work.

essentially a mere conglomeration of norms and paradigms. Language, as all disciplines recognize, is a tool to create things. The purpose of each and every one of our language activities is none other than to produce an effect (including emotions in ourselves and others, creating new worlds for us to live in, and so on).

In the Basque Country we have and enjoy a highly prestigious form of oral expression that transmits both emotion and tradition effectively and economically. As we have discussed, the capacity to communicate, especially orally, is vital in contemporary society. Thus it seems important to emphasize that Basque improvised verse has proven to be a highly effective tool for achieving just this goal, a tool from which our modern “information society,” in my opinion, could learn quite a bit.

Selection of content

Facts and concepts that one should know	Procedures that one should be able to carry out and skills one should acquire	Values and attitudes that should be adopted
<p><i>History of improvised Basque poetry</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Origins of Basque improvised verse: myth and anti-myth ▪ First documents: Old Charter of Vizcaya, Gorosabel, Iztueta ▪ <i>Bertso-papera</i> period; function, dissemination ▪ Predominance of improvised Basque verse: Basque verse in the twentieth century ▪ Oral improvisation in other cultures: past and present; similarities and differences with Basque improvised verse. ▪ Periods in the history of Basque improvised verse. Major Basque improvising poets. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use of relevant documents and references ▪ Managing oral documents: oral history 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Universal nature of the phenomenon of improvisation ▪ Appreciating the importance of Basque improvised verse ▪ Noting the very different nature of oral societies
<p><i>Genres of Basque improvised verse</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Basque improvised verse and literature: other genres of oral literature (<i>kopla zaharrak</i>, ballads, lullabies) ▪ Main stanza patterns in Basque verse: <i>kopla</i>, <i>zortziko</i>, <i>hamarreko</i>, <i>bereziak</i> ▪ Basque verse and journalistic-historical chronicles: wars, sport, <i>bertso-paperak</i> on various events ▪ Basque verse and rhetoric: subjects in modern Basque verse; approaches, etc. ▪ Verse anthologies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Distinguishing between the different genres of oral literature ▪ Knowing how to use the main stanzas ▪ Clarifying events using Basque verse (subjects dealt with in other subjects) ▪ Learning how to classify and codify the subjects in Basque verse (capacity for synthesis, documentation) ▪ Learning Basque verses by heart and singing them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Appreciating the artistic components of language ▪ Discovering the importance of Basque verse as a chronicle of events ▪ Appreciating the pleasure of singing
<p><i>Communicative strategies of Basque improvising poets</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Correct, pure, and suitable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying the resources found in Basque verse to other kinds of discourse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focusing attention on what is appropriate, not on what is correct • Internalizing the importance

<p>Basque</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Communicative purpose and the audience ▪ The verse: text, co-text, and situation ▪ Figures and tropes ▪ Non-verbal resources (tune, facial and body expression) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trying to build up suitable arguments around a specific theme • Forming a suitable discourse • Formulating the arguments you have chosen properly • From the written text to the written oral text • Learning how to manage non-verbal aspects properly: speed of diction, intonation, pauses, silences; always in order to try and achieve your rhetorical aim • From the written oral text to the improvisation 	<p>of your communicative aims and of the audience in each case</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introspection • Becoming aware of the importance of extra-textual aspects in oral communication • Overcoming your embarrassment about speaking in public, self-confidence
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References

- Barham 2006 Nick Barham. *Disconnected: Why Our Kids Are Turning Their Backs on Everything We Thought We Knew*. London: Random House.
- Foley 2002 John Miles Foley. *How to Read an Oral Poem*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. eCompanion at <http://oraltradition.org/hrop>.
- Garzia 2004 Joxerra Garzia. "Improvised Basque Verse." In *Basque Curriculum, Cultural Itinerary: The Experts' Proposal*. San Sebastian: Ikastolen Elkarte & Basque Government. pp: 231-39 (published simultaneously in Euskara, Spanish, French, and English editions, as well as on CD-rom).
- Simone 2001 Simone Raffaele. *La Tercera Fase: Formas De Saber Que Estamos Perdiendo*. Madrid: Taurus.