

On the Question of Reduction in (Poetic) Language

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In his short story *Funes the Memorious*, Jorge Luis Borges tells us about Ireneo Funes, a young man from Uruguay, who suffered a bad head injury from falling off his horse. After regaining consciousness, he found that he gained the amazing talent of perceiving and remembering absolutely everything. Funes remembered everything he read and not only this. In his typical style, Borges describes how Funes also remembered “the shapes of the clouds in the south at dawn on the 30th of April of 1882, and he could compare them in his recollection with the marbled grain in the design of a leather-bound book which he had seen only once, and with the lines in the spray which an oar raised in the Rio Negro on the eve of the battle of the Quebracho.”¹ Funes’ extreme perceptiveness and unlimited memory made him incapable of any generalization. Even a simple thing like understanding what a dog is became impossible: “It was not only difficult for him to understand that the generic term dog embraced so many unlike specimens of differing sizes and different forms; he was disturbed by the fact that a dog at three-fourteen (seen in profile) should have the same name as the dog at three fifteen (seen from the front). In a way, Funes’ fantastic “gift” deprived him of his humanity, and ultimately, as Borges notes, “he was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract. In the overly replete world of Funes there were nothing but details, almost contiguous details.”²

If Funes is to be taught anything, how should teaching him be constructed? What would his education look like? In his paper, David

Lewin offers us a clear and thoughtful answer to these questions that addresses, of course, not only Funes' hypothetical education but an irreducible aspect of education and teaching in general. For Lewin, education is "productively and intrinsically reductive." He offers the useful concept of pedagogical reduction, defined as an intentional move undertaken by an educator in which facts or pieces of knowledge are selected, simplified and generalized in order to help students learn (pedagogical reductions are also the outcomes of such a process. The textbook is created through reduction and is in itself one). Contrary to some claims of progressive educators, Lewin convincingly asserts that pedagogical reduction is unavoidable as it is "intrinsic to the educational process." The teacher, faced with the challenge of mediating complex ideas to children must choose certain facts, episodes or concepts that are exemplary of said ideas and that could be understood by the students. Some reduction of the amount and of the complexity of possible knowledge is necessary. Lewin further complicates this picture by trying to see what makes a reduction appropriate – that is, which reductions can indeed lead to better learning. He highlights the fact that a "good" reduction is actually an expansion, in which the detail learned is expanded towards a general principle. Lewin also warns us that reductions might be reified, and wrongfully conceived as truths themselves, instead of the pedagogical tools which they are. As a sort of immunity to this reification, he suggests the logic of poetic, metaphorical and religious discourse, in which poetic language, by pointing to that which is beyond direct literal expression and by trying "to say the unsayable," energizes the educational process and draws together the particular and the universal.

In my brief two comments, I wish to shed more light on the relation between pedagogical reduction and poetic language. My first comment addresses what I believe to be a pedagogical reduction taken by Lewin himself. In order to explain the general principle of pedagogical

ical reduction, history teaching is taken by Lewin as the most effective example. Indeed, the history teacher (or the textbook) has no choice but to pick certain events and present them simply enough so that they could be understood. Wishing to teach the principles of democracy, for example, the teacher will choose to discuss ancient Athens or the revolutions of late 18th century. Only after these reduced objects have been learned, the teacher can, and should, point to the limits of his reductions and complicate the historical picture drawn before the students. In a way, history teaching is paradigmatic to Lewin's argument about the necessity of reductions in education. However, not all disciplines and subject matters require reductions in the same way. Addressing the question of reduction from the point of view of language education, to take another example, would suggest something quite different. When learning a language, reductions are not very useful. In fact, the most effective way to learn a new language is to be immersed in it with as less mediations and simplifications as possible. Sure, some reductions in the teaching of language are important. The language teacher will reduce a grammatical principle into a set of examples aligned from the simplest to the more complex, and when teaching basic literacy some letters will be chosen over others. However, I believe we would not be in the wrong to say that most grammatical rules, certainly the more important ones, are not learned through reduction but through unmediated immersion in the language. And also the teaching of literacy does require certain reductions at first, very quickly they are cast aside in favor of a less reductive approach to texts. The necessity of pedagogical rehearsal, which Lewin, following Mollenhauer, sees as close to reduction, is also questioned in language education. Speaking, listening, reading or writing in a second language in the classroom is simply not that different from doing it in real life. It is perhaps less effective for learning.

My goal in bringing up the question of reduction in language

education is not to undermine Lewin's argument. On the contrary, like Lewin, I believe that it is exactly the poetic aspects of language education that make it less in need of reduction or at least require a reduction of a more subtle kind than other disciplines. I will soon say more about it.

My second comment concerns the power embedded in reduction, specifically in the practice that Lewin refers to as the "give and take of reductions" – point to the limits of the textbook, raise questions about the validity of what has just been learned, offer new approaches to knowledge, and in in general "the teacher must know how and when to complicate the pedagogical reduction." While certainly necessary, this complication by the teacher is not free from its own problematics, which in my view is best articulated by Jacques Rancière in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.³ Rancière claims that explication leads to a stultifying education as it does not enlarge students' ability to understand (the text or the world) but rather reinforces their intellectual incapacity and their dependence on the mediation or reduction done by the teacher (or the textbook). Once reduction is enacted by the teacher, it must later be replaced with another, more complex one, and the inequality between teacher and student, the same one that education was supposed to reduce or eliminate, is in fact perpetuated. Hierarchy in understanding is solidified.

Without getting in detail into Rancière's suggested alternative, I would like to conclude with the role he attributes to the poetic, found also in Lewin's argument as a necessary complication of and addition to the pedagogical reduction. For Rancière, "the impossibility of our saying the truth, even when we feel it, makes us speak as poets, makes us tell the story of our mind's adventures and verify that they are understood by other adventurers, makes us communicate our feelings and see them shared by other feeling beings." In a way, then, language is always poetic. Speaking, and we can add – teaching, is not about a direct representation

or reduction of truth as much as it is about telling a story. The storyteller does not advance from one reduction to the next but acknowledges the listeners' equal ability to understand him. The poetic teacher views his students as "a community of storytellers and translators." Of course, we are not talking here only about works of fiction, but of a penetration of the poetic into all kinds of disciplines and kinds of knowledge. The teacher, in constructing knowledge in poetic narratives in addition to necessary reductions, will indeed provide the energy, in Lewin's terms, to draw the particular and the universal together.

Finally, I wish to return briefly to poor Funes and his inability to think. In an attempt to make sense of the overwhelming amount of details he perceived, Funes devised several original sorting and numerating systems. Lacking any ability to generalize, these systems are both amusing and tragic. Perhaps an appropriate education for Funes would be one that seeks to understand the world not only through reductions but through stories. As Lewin concludes, perhaps then, through the poetic the mystery of learning and of seeing the universal in the particular can happen.

1 Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* (New York: Grove Press, 1962), 107.

2 *Ibid.*, 115.

3 Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).