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# Émile Benveniste and the Notion of Rhythm

- Recherches
- Le rythme dans les sciences et les arts contemporains
- Linguistique et théorie du langage



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It is time now to introduce the revolutionary work of Émile Benveniste (1902-1976), which is largely underestimated nowadays, especially in English speaking countries. Benveniste was of the same generation as Lefebvre, he crossed his path several times but he does not seem to have been politically engaged, although his sympathies seem clearly to have been towards the left. [1] After having excelled in Iranian micro-comparativism, Benveniste embarked in the 1930s in Indo-European macro-comparativism and, parallel to that, on a vast reflection on general linguistics. [2] He taught at the École Pratique des Hautes Études from 1927 to 1969 and, like Foucault and Barthes, at the Collège de France, from 1937 until 1969, when he suffered a stroke and had to retire.

His contribution is crucial for us at least for two reasons. First of all, we owe him the rediscovery of the Ancient concept of *rhuthmos* and the clarification of its difference with what the Moderns call "rhythm," but he also developed a theory of language which discreetly but resolutely broke with structuralism and opened an entirely new path for anthropology. With Benveniste, the whole question of rhythm was transformed in a way which both involved a broad critique of Platonism and motivated a revolutionary conception of language, thought precisely as a *rhuthmic* activity in which man can access subjectivity.

Unfortunately, as we will see, very few members of the Rhythmic Constellation properly recognized the importance of his work, and Benveniste has since been regularly regarded as a mere technician in comparative linguistics or a eulogist of an outdated Saussurian linguistics. Although many of his other books would be worth citing [3], I will concentrate here on the two volumes of his *Problèmes de linguistique générale - Problems in General Linguistics* published in 1966 and 1974 [4].

## The Rediscovery of the Notion of *Rhuthmos*

Strikingly, Benveniste started his famous article on "The Notion of 'Rhythm' in its Linguistic Expression" [5] (1966/1971, pp. 281-288) by noting the importance rhythm had acquired as a tool for human sciences, since the middle of the 19th century and especially in the first half of the 20th century. During the last two decades, an extensive work has been carried out that has documented in detail this expansion and its philosophical bases. We now know better what he was referring to and, probably, aiming at (see Rabinbach, 1990; Golston, 1996, 2008; Baxmann & Gruss, 2009; Hanse, 2010; Michon, 2016, 2018b). But, Benveniste probably also stressed here the importance of rhythm to characterize and distinguish "human behavior," that is to say, its anthropological dimension as opposed to any naturalistic reduction to the so-called "natural rhythms" which are only projections, "into things and events," of human-made rhythms (Bourassa, 1992).

The notion of "rhythm" is one of the ideas that affect a large portion of human activities. Perhaps it even serves to distinguish types of human behavior, individual and collective, inasmuch as we are aware of durations and the repetitions that govern them, and also when, beyond the human sphere, we project a rhythm into things and events. ("The Notion of 'Rhythm' in its Linguistic Expression," 1951/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 281)

Benveniste thus proposed to go back to the Greek origin of this notion, which had become, he emphasized, the condition in "modern Western thought" of "this vast unification of man and nature through a consideration of 'time,' intervals and similar returns" (p. 327). Although Benveniste did not elaborate further his argument, these very few words accurately emphasized the naturalization of man that was presupposed by the recent expansion of the theme of rhythm.

In its oldest known uses, the word rhythm  $\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}$  - *rhuthmós* (or  $\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}$  [*rhusmós*] in Ionian) did not have the sense of binary measure of movement, of principle of cadenced and proportioned movement, which it has today. Never, in particular, was it used, as it has been often argued since the Belgian linguist Emile Boisacq (1865-1945), for the movement of waves. This interpretation was a clear case of imaginary projection by which "Man" thought to retrieve in Nature something that he himself had put there. The term came obviously from  $\acute{\alpha}\mu\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}$  [*rhein*] - to flow, however "the sea does not flow," Benveniste remarked bluntly (p. 328). "This whole interpretation rests on the wrong premises." In fact, the term did not "even mean 'rhythm,'" in the modern sense.

There is a contradiction of meaning between  $\acute{\alpha}\mu\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}$  and  $\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}$ , and we cannot extricate ourselves from the difficulty by imagining and this is a pure invention that  $\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}$  could have described the movement of the waves. What is more,  $\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}$  in its most ancient uses never refers to flowing water, and it does not even mean "rhythm." This whole interpretation rests on the wrong premises. ("The Notion of 'Rhythm' in its Linguistic Expression," 1951/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 282)

The word  $\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}$  - *rhuthmós* was commonly used "as early as the 7th century" (p. 330) and until the 4th century in Greek lyric and tragic poetry, as well as in prose. Then it became a technical term with the ancient Ionian philosophers, especially the creators of atomism, Leucippus (5th cent. BC) and Democritus (ca. 460-ca. 370 BC).

It is in the vocabulary of the ancient Ionian philosophy that we may apprehend the specific value [*valeur*] of  $\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}$  [*rhuthmós*], and most particularly among the creators of atomism, Leucippus and Democritus. These philosophers made  $\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}$ , ( $\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}$  [*rhusmós*]), into a technical term, one of the key words of their teaching. ("The Notion of 'Rhythm' in its Linguistic Expression," 1951/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 282)

In atomism,  $\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}$  - *rhuthmós* meant "form" understood "as the distinctive form, the characteristic arrangement of the parts in a whole."

There is no variation, no ambiguity in the meaning that Democritus assigns to  $\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}$ , and this is always "form," understood as the distinctive form, the characteristic arrangement of the parts in a whole. This point being established, there is no difficulty in confirming it by the total number of ancient examples. ("The Notion of 'Rhythm' in its Linguistic Expression," 1951/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 283)

From all its identified uses, Benveniste concluded that  $\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}$  - *rhuthmós* meant, with no exception, "distinctive form, proportioned figure, arrangement, disposition." Related verbs as  $\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}$ ,  $\mu\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}$ ,  $\mu\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}$  - *rhusmô*, *metarrusmô*, *metarrusmízô* meant identically "to shape" or "to transform, physically or morally sth./sb."

We must limit ourselves here to this almost exhaustive list of examples. The citations suffice amply to establish: (1) that  $\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}, \acute{\iota}\acute{\iota}$  never meant "rhythm" from the earliest use down to the Attic period; (2) that it was never applied to the regular movement of the waves: (3) that its constant meaning is "distinctive form, proportioned figure, arrangement, disposition" in conditions of use that are otherwise extremely varied. Similarly the derivatives or compounds, nominal or verbal, of  $\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}, \acute{\iota}\acute{\iota}$  never refer to anything but the notion of "form." Such was the exclusive meaning of  $\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}, \acute{\iota}\acute{\iota}$  in all types of writings down to the period at which we halted our citations [5th c. BC]. ("The Notion of 'Rhythm' in its Linguistic Expression," 1951/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 285)

However, Benveniste noted that there were in ancient Greek several other terms meaning "form" such as  $\text{ἔϛαἶμα}$ ,  $\text{ἔϛαἶμα}$ ,  $\text{μορφή}$ , - *Skhêma, morphê, eîdos* and that *rhuthmós* should in some way have differed from them. To show that, he switched from his survey of lexical uses to morphology and etymology, a move that allowed him to introduce a revolutionary idea: the term-ending  $\text{-(th)mys}$  does not indicate "the accomplishment of the notion, but the particular modality of its accomplishment as it presented to the eyes."

Having established this meaning, we can and must determine it precisely. There are other expressions in Greek for "form."  $\text{ἔϛαἶμα}$ ,  $\text{ἔϛαἶμα}$ ,  $\text{μορφή}$ , [*Skhêma, morphê, eîdos*], etc. among which  $\text{ῥυθμός}$  [*rhuthmós*] must be distinguished in some way, better than our [first] translation can indicate. The very structure of the word  $\text{ῥυθμός}$  should be investigated. We can now profitably return to etymology [...] The formation in  $\text{-(th)mys}$  [*-(th)mys*] deserves attention for the special sense it confers upon "abstract" words. It indicates not the accomplishment of the notion, but the particular modality of its accomplishment as it presented to the eyes. For example,  $\text{ἰρρήσις}$  [*îrkhêsis*] is the act of dancing,  $\text{ὄρκηθμις}$  [*orkhêthmîs*] the particular dance seen as it takes place. [...]  $\text{ἄσῆσις}$  [*stâsis*] is the state of being in some position [*le fait de se tenir*],  $\text{ἄσῆσις}$  [*stathmîs*] the position assumed [*la manière de se tenir*], whence the balancing of a scale, a stance, etc. ("The Notion of 'Rhythm' in its Linguistic Expression," 1951/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 285)

## Critique of the Notion of *Metron*

In other words Benveniste did not develop this point but he made it quite obvious *rhuthmós* was a concept of form that was completely opposite to Plato's. A *rhuthmós* was not a "Form," an "Idea," an  $\text{εἶδος}$  - *eîdos*, but a shape "as it presents to the eyes" of the observer. Far from being outer-worldly, it belonged to the phenomenal world. Moreover, it was not fixed, immobile, and eternal; it had a life of its own. It did not "designate the accomplishment of [the] notion [of form] but the particular modality of its accomplishment." That is the reason why it was "appropriate for the *pattern* of a fluid element" and commonly denoted an "improvised, temporary, changeable form."

When Greek authors render  $\text{ῥυθμός}$  [*rhuthmós*] by  $\text{ἔϛαἶμα}$  [*skhêma*], when we ourselves translate it by "form," in both cases it is only an approximation. There is a difference between  $\text{ἔϛαἶμα}$  and  $\text{ῥυθμός}$ :  $\text{ἔϛαἶμα}$  [...] is defined as a fixed form, realized and viewed in some way as an object. On the other hand,  $\text{ῥυθμός}$ , according to the contexts in which it is given, designates the form in the instant that it is assumed by what is moving, mobile, fluid, the form of that which does not have organic consistency [:] it fits the *pattern* [in English] of a fluid element, a letter arbitrarily shaped, of a robe [*à un péplos*] which one arranges at one's will, of a particular state of character or mood. It is the form as improvised, momentary, changeable. ("The Notion of 'Rhythm' in its Linguistic Expression," 1951/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, pp. 285-286, my mod.)

Benveniste, still without referring directly to Platonic Forms, emphasized the philosophical significance of the term *rhuthmós*. It actually designated the most common concept of form in the Ionian school, i.e. before Plato imposed his own. In this sense, it still remained a very powerful tool against Idealism.

Now, ῥῆϊν [rheîn] is the essential predication of nature and things in the Ionian philosophy since Heraclitus, and Democritus thought that, since everything was produced from atoms, only a different arrangement of them produced the difference of forms and objects. We can now understand how ῥῆϊσ [rhuthmós], meaning literally "the particular manner of flowing," could have been the most proper term for describing "dispositions" or "configurations" without fixity or natural necessity and arising from an arrangement which is always subject to change. The choice of a derivative of ῥῆϊν [rheîn] for explaining this specific modality of the "form" of things is characteristic of the philosophy which inspired it; it is a representation of the universe in which the particular configurations of moving [du mouvant] are defined as ["flowings."] [fluements]. ("The Notion of 'Rhythm' in its Linguistic Expression," 1951/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 286, my mod.)

In short, before Plato, ῥυθμός - *rhuthmós* meant either "a temporary disposition of something flowing," or more deeply, according to its morphology, "a particular manner of flowing" or "a particular modality of accomplishment of a notion."

The "modern" sense of rhythm as measure, as binary order of movement, which according to Benveniste is still ours nowadays, emerged, for its part, in the 4th century BC with Plato (428/427 or 424/423 - 348/347 BC), who for the first time has associated the notion of ῥυθμός - *rhuthmós*, with that of μέτρον - *métron* in his description of music and dance. The ῥυθμός - *rhuthmós*, which was until then only an improvised, momentary and modifiable form, or better yet a manner of flowing, was now determined as measure and arithmetically regulated order, in brief as metric.

Here is the new sense of ῥυθμός: in Plato, "arrangement" (the original sense of the word) is constituted by an ordered sequence of slow and rapid movements, just as "harmony" results from the alternation of high and low. And it is the order in movement, the entire process of the harmonious arrangement of bodily attitudes combined with [a meter] [*un mètre*], which has since been called μέτρον. We may then speak of the "rhythm" of a dance, of a step, of a song, of a speech, of work, of everything which presupposes a continuous activity broken by meter into alternative intervals. The notion of rhythm is established. ("The Notion of 'Rhythm' in its Linguistic Expression," 1951/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 287, my mod.)

## ***Rhuthmos*** as a New Paradigm for the 21st Century

The reader will not mind if I reproduce here the conclusion of the first chapter in Volume 1. Thanks to Benveniste we know the followings.

1. The term *rhuthmós* designated from the 7th to the 5th century BC the various temporary forms taken by the ever running Heraclitean world flow whether conceived as flow of atoms or not as they present themselves to the eyes of the observer.
2. The atomist philosophers transformed it, for the first time in Western history, into one of the most important tools used to explain nature on a materialist and pre-empiricist ground.
3. *Rhuthmós* commonly meant "temporary disposition of something flowing," but also, implicitly, due to its morphology, "particular way of flowing or of accomplishing an action."
4. It never denoted the order of a time sequence but either an ephemeral form of something due to change, an instantaneous time-stop, or, when it involved a duration, a form that was itself changing during its *per-formance*.
5. The sub-concepts measure, number, alternation, periodicity, and the idea that a *rhuthmós* should be known by looking for its essence, its Form, were introduced in the definition of rhythm only by Plato during the first half of the 4th century.
6. The Platonic conception of rhythm has obfuscated the previous one and made it very difficult to recover.
7. It has largely ruled over Western cultural history up to present and has been responsible for the tremendous



success of idealist and sometimes irrational rhythmic views equating man with nature for a detailed history of this spread see Michon (2018a, 2018b, 2019).

The concept of *rhuthmos* which I will transliterate from now on without its original accentuation to suggest that I will not talk about the ancient Greek *term* but about the *question* that Ionian philosophers were pointing at while using it has been of great help, in the previous volumes of this series, in deconstructing the Platonic domination over the history of rhythm, and by identifying, on the other hand, the resurgences and new developments of the non-Platonic perspectives. As a matter of fact, despite its general idealist Platonic undertone, the history of rhythm offers also a bunch of innovative propositions which are still of the greatest interest to us.

Now we can certainly go a step further. As we will see, Benveniste's contribution to the theory of *rhuthmos* announced, in embryonic form, certain features of the theory of language that he would develop in the 1950s and 1960s. Likewise, the concept of subjectivity involved in this theory of language was entirely consistent with a *rhuthmic* perspective. Taken together, the two theories set up a revolutionary conception of the *radical historicity of human beings*.

Benveniste's contribution could, therefore, help us to develop a new paradigm better suited to the needs of the 21st century. The structural and systemic paradigms, which flourished in the three decades following WW2, receded considerably in the late 1970s, at least in the humanities, and gave way to two new paradigms which then met with great success over the following decades: individual and difference. Now that this second couple faces increasing difficulties which seem to indicate that they have in turn exhausted their potential, perhaps the time has come for the rhythmic or, rather, the *rhuthmic* paradigm to irrigate science, art and philosophy. Such an achievement will only be possible, however, if we correctly assess Benveniste's position in the rhythmic constellation and if we are able to understand the difficulties his work rapidly encountered after a brief success in 1968 and in the following years.

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[1] In *Le Périple structural* (2008), Jean-Claude Milner suggests that Benveniste was close, at least for a certain period of time, to a group of young Marxist philosophers acting through the avant-garde literary journal *Philosophies* (1924-1925) (p. 121-125). In 1925, he signed a famous tract denouncing the French intervention against the Rif Republic in Morocco with Pierre Morhange, Norbert Guterman, Henri Lefebvre, and Georges Politzer. Milner mentions also Georges Friedmann but I could not find his name in the list published in *La Révolution surréaliste*, 15 octobre 1925, p. 32. However, he notes that, from 1925, Benveniste no longer made any public statements (p. 124).

[2] For an intellectual biography, remarkable in all respects, see Malkiel (1980).

[3] Such as the wonderful *Noms d'agent et noms d'action en indo-européen*, 1948 and the most remarkable *Le Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, 1969 - *Indo-European language and society*, 1973.

[4] The material of this chapter and the followings was first discussed in a seminar at Le Collège International de Philosophie in Paris in 1996-1997. Part of it has been published in Michon (2010) and (2018a). Apart from Barthes' (1977) and Meschonnic's comments (1982), which will be discussed below in Chapter 8 and in Volume 5, one of the earliest and best introduction to Benveniste's contribution is Bourassa (1992).

[5] The article dated back to 1951 and had been published in the rather notorious *Journal de psychologie normale et pathologique* edited by the psychologist Ignace Meyerson (1888-1983), without yet attracting much attention.