

The Need And Paradoxes Of Integral Linguistics

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“Dear Mrs. Agud: in order to count the fingers of a hand you don’t need to begin with the theory of numbers”
(Coseriu to me, around 45 years ago)

Abstract: Coseriu’s idea of an “integral linguistics” needs a thorough reflection because it embraces two different and partly incompatible aims: to counteract the extreme fragmentation of modern linguistic research through philosophical reflection on the true nature of “language”, and to work out some coherent way of approaching linguistic research which avoids its being torn apart by the diversity of the objects constituted by linguists and linguistic schools. No new positive theory of the whole of language might overcome this disintegration. Coseriu’s efforts to enlarge the scope to include linguistic facts have to be submitted to a radical skeptical reflection on the possibility of such an overall positive theory, based on the real fact that factual speech is not the mere use of any virtual system, but an ongoing creation of sense by individuals, and also that linguistics is itself such “factual speech”: individual, historical, diffuse. Coseriu did not deliver any general theory of language, but the living example of a rich and widely comprehensive individual personality, approaching language from a critical attitude to inherited categories and methods.

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1. Is language a problem?

Is it a problem to be solved by scientific research? Is linguistics the science whose task is to “solve” the “problem of language”?

Problems only exist as far as individuals or groups of individuals *feel*, at a certain moment, that things are not as they ought to be, or that they do not understand something they would like to understand, and they identify, by means of their usual words (be they colloquial or already scientific), the domain of reality they suppose being at the origin of the identified dysfunctionality. The problem and the approach to its solution are thus *categorized* from the very beginning within the linguistic framework of a certain national or professional language *tradition*. Sciences arise in order to solve problems previously (pre-scientifically) identified as the origin of whatever practical or intellectual discomfort. They usually begin *describing* fragments of the problematic reality, *in accordance with their previous categorization*, and trying to retrace them to “causes”. The most popular belief is that problems are solved if science identifies their causes and makes it possible to manipulate them, thus leading to unproblematic states of things.

Something becomes a problem when *subjects* feel it as such. And in some domains what is a problem for the ones is just the solution for the others. A highly topical issue is, for example, if in modern societies the “state” is the problem or the solution. On occasion of a lecture of mine at the Konstanz University I was asked how I would “solve the problem” of the Latin construction of accusative plus infinitive. I answered that I had no problem at all with this construction. Many subjective appreciations, feelings, prejudices and decisions, as well as many cultural traditions, contribute to *constitute something as a problem* to be solved, and to found a science for it. Nothing is a problem “in itself”, even less a scientific problem. Human history is full of cases where

problems and solutions have been invented from pure cultural or even scientific prejudices without any true empirical basis.

Is linguistics, or can it be, the science which solves through the scientific method whatever problems language is supposed to cause? But what kind of problem, if any, would “language” be or cause?

And finally: what problem should “integral linguistics” be the solution for? Does it have to solve the problem represented by its contrary, the actual disintegration of linguistics?

None of these questions can be faced spontaneously. Every word involved in them is the result of a long history, mostly no longer conscious, and the critical linguist cannot rely on them as if they were the names of really existing things. The whole of theoretical and empirical linguistics consists in *narratives* built with words we feel entitled to use as we do because we belong to a tradition used to using them more or less in such way. Despite an apparent consensus on them, they remain “our” words, and they get their meanings, in each case, from the whole of the context within which each of us utters them. Often enough same words prove not to be understood the same way by others.

“Language” is one of such words. “Linguistics” is another. We cannot take for granted that there are *objective linguistic problems* and reliable *scientific means* of solving them. Modern linguistics, in its many variants, is the outcome of a long history of individuals, raised within diverse academic speaking traditions, which have faced presumed problems with the help of words believed to reflect the reality of language. These are traditions of *constituting “linguistic problems” within inherited ideologies*.

As a matter of fact, only a few cultures in world’s history have *felt* language as a problem or as a set or source of problems and have developed more or less scientific strategies to “solve” it. The “grammatical solution” (the habit of describing national

tongues by means of grammars) was only invented by Indo-Iranians and Greeks, and later on continued by Arabs and others. Other cultures have not bothered to write grammars, but some have made lists of vocabularies or glossaries, which is a solution to another kind of linguistic problem. In the Indian tradition language was intensively reflected on within diverse cultural frameworks, but mostly as part of religious and philosophical systems, and this resulted in diverse ways of facing theoretically its nature and its role, from the extremely formalistic grammar of Pāṇini and his followers to the highly speculative treatise *Vākyapadīya* of Bhartṛhari. Outside the western academic disciplines bound to language, many people in different cultures, also within our own one, have reflected on their speaking and developed diverse insights into what we call “language” without feeling committed to take into account grammar or linguistics. Concerning yourself with “language” does not necessarily lead you to any kind of linguistics.

Since Kant we have or should have learned that *no theoretical approach to anything can be legitimated by comparison to “reality itself”*. Linguistics neither. Every systematic approach to solve problems about grasping reality can only be justified by a *prescientific, pragmatic justification* of the specific *goal* determining both the identification of something as a problem and the selection of the method to solve it, be it scientific or not.

We Westerners have inherited the habit of believing in the real existence of something “called language” and of turning this supposed “thing” into an object of cognitive approach through grammar or through its expansion into diverse kinds of linguistics. Our usual way of imagining *language as an object* is still strongly influenced by the grammatical ideology.

Besides this inherited attitude there have been in history various attempts to focus on speaking differently, which implies

to question the dominance of the grammatical ideology and its many presuppositions and implications. Maybe its widest and most systematic sceptical revision is Fritz Mauthners "*Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*" (1903).

The grammatical ideology implies that speaking is just "using" a previously existing code consisting of single pieces (words) and rules to combine them into full utterances. It also implies that this part of speaking is in some sense its real "essence", and that other elements or moments of speaking are "accidental". The highly systematic character of the grammatical component of speaking also suggests that "language", this *noun* which *resumes* the fact of speaking *sub specie substantiae*, is some kind of system with *own features and borders*, and that it can be "defined" by identifying those borders and the domains they separate it from. Within the grammatical tradition, language was supposed to variously limit with thinking or ideas, with the articulatory anatomy and physiology, with the acoustics of sounds, with the individuality of speaking subjects and their personal and social circumstances, etc. Specific research has been done for each of these neighbouring domains, and occasionally parts of them have been more or less incorporated to the notion of language itself. What language *is* in each case depends, therefore, on where *you* locate its borders to its conceptual neighbours. There is no "language in itself".

And establishing frontiers to the concept of language depends in each case on the kind of problem *you perceive* in or with language and on the kind of solution you bear in mind. The history of linguistics is the history of *how* successive generations of grammarians have felt *what* kinds of problems and how they have reacted through strict or expanded grammatical work. This history coins in each case the meanings of the linguist's words, as far as they are or become conscious, which is not always the case.

2. Linguistic pluralism

In the course of Western cultural history, the very first grammatical approach was already a pluralistic one. Aristotle had made the first purely linguistic classification of the parts of the Greek language in the framework of his overall systematic treatment of the tragedy and its components. He recovered an older tradition, documented in Plato and the sophists, of opposing names (*onómata*) to what is said about them (*rhémata*), and he completed this dichotomy into a first system of five members. By then the interest of reflecting about language already had at least *two different origins and goals*: the rhetoric education of citizens for public, political and judicial activity, which was eminently a *practical* goal, and the encyclopaedic goal of making a taxonomy of everything observable, which was eminently *theoretical*. Soon a third need gave a new impulse to grammar: the *philological* activity around the edition of classical literature.

Despite these diverse goals and interests, grammarians mostly converged in their terminology and method, and therefore a tradition arose which soon passed to Rome and was resumed by Roman grammarians. The terms of grammar had largely become disconnected from their metaphorical origins and were already *felt* as scientific terminology. The words of linguists were eventually felt as the “correct” names of really existing things, and *sermo* was presupposed as a well determined, true domain of human *reality*.

Although Coseriu repeatedly asserted that we all know *what language is*, in fact, we only *presuppose* to know it, just like, when speaking and uttering words or terms, we presuppose to know what we are speaking about. This is not always confirmed. And surely there is *no real thing* whose correct designation is “language”. This noun, the quite late romance nominalization of

the *feeling of knowing* about the true or essential nature of our speaking, has deluded nearly all theoreticians both of grammar and of what had to become the “philosophy of language”. Only few sceptical thinkers pointed to this delusion, and they never became really influential.

Once the ontological reality of something called “language” had become a common presupposition, scientists began to enlarge their perspectives on it and “discovered” (properly speaking: “constituted”) new linguistic elements, components and moments, which step by step gave rise to as many new branches of the presumed “science of language”. Even grammar, in the strict sense of the word, was revisited from new angles, and new diverse ways of making grammar appeared in the academic market. At present, the academic concern with “language” is split into a wide pluralism of theoretical approaches, research methods, descriptive models, explanation frameworks and true new objects of research. Linguistics seems to have *disintegrated*.

Although this should have shaken the original confidence about the reality of one clear common object of all kinds of approaches, the belief in a real thing called “language” did not collapse. It simply got out of focus. Linguistic pluralism seems to have finished with the *humanistic interest of understanding the true nature of speaking and its role in humanity as such*. The diverse “sciences” of language hardly communicate with each other, and the work of linguists largely relies on the faith in established or newly arisen traditions and on the belief in the ontological reality of the meanings of their words.

3. Coseriu’s critical approach

The naïve confidence in the objective existence of “language” and “linguistic problems” consolidated the presupposition that we really know about language “in itself”, and that our linguistic

concepts are mere names of real parts of speaking. There are at least two different kinds of delusion in this.

The first one is ignoring that all words, included those of linguists, are parts of the *behaviour* of a highly complex *organism*. This behaviour has diversely developed within living communities, is learned by each individual as part of its socialization, and, among other things, has developed what we call “history”. This is not only the factual development of events in time, but, above all, what we call the “consciousness” of our own development, both phylogenetic and ontogenetic. We human beings experience our life in time as an individual movement from one personal state to the next, and we are *aware* of our capability of guiding this flow according to one-self’s ideas, representations, goals and interests. *The speaking species we are builds its own life horizon through its inherited patterns of speaking behaviour and through own individual modulations of such patterns.* Our objects are the outcome of complex, only partially conscious processes of categorizing reality. *They are our products* (this indisputable truth has been discredited by calling it “idealism”, which thus became some sort of insult). Their perception is guided in each case by the individual modulation of inherited and learned speaking patterns, triggered by largely unconscious emotions and interests. Although we are used to speaking and communicating *as if* our shared designations corresponded to also shared “concepts”, each individual speaks his own language and knows or inhabits his own reality. His words are the inherited names of social conventions. And, of course, this applies also to our linguistic vocabulary and concepts.

The second delusion concerns the more concrete work of grammarians and linguists, and it is the very usual *confusion between the linguistic object and our methods of approaching it* within academic life. Even though produced by us, our linguistic

objects get some kind of supra-individual consistency because of the shared history of their constitution and their written fixation, and this allows us more or less to make a difference between them and our actual methods of researching about them. When, for instance, Chomsky presented his first version of Generative Grammar, he broadly used the same terms as the traditional grammar, but he attributed to his own terms like “deep and surface structure” the same ontological consistency he did for “noun” or “verb”. Almost nobody would object to the latter, but most non-generativists reacted to the former as to pure inventions without empirical basis.

Coseriu burst into European structuralism in the fifties with a serious discussion of many ideas about language which had become of common use, and he criticised them by retracing them to formerly unnoticed *metaphysical prejudices*. Singularly he objected to the search for the “causes” of linguistic change, showing that it was based on the naïve presumption that such changes have to be the *effect* of certain *causes*. Instead, he presented the whole of language as a free activity guided by expressive goals and needs, not by causes.

Later on, Coseriu criticised many other confusions of objects and methods as well as the diverse perspectives on the objects and the different levels of the object’s conceptualization. Uncovering such confusions led him to propose *new distinctions* within the linguistic object. He began with the distinction among system, norm and speech. According to his own idea that our objects are the result of our perspectives on them, he proposed *diverse linguistics for diverse linguistic objects*. Linguistics of the system cannot be the same kind of science as linguistics of the norms or of speech. Coseriu thus seemed to have contributed to the disintegration of linguistics into diverse academic disciplines. But in his view *language remained in any case something real and*

unitary. The distinctions within it are our work. Language in itself is a complex but unitary process with many aspects we have to face distinctively.

Thus, Coseriu lastly considered the current disintegration of linguistics into many quite unrelated sciences as a relevant *problem*, and he tried to solve it through a *theoretical project of re-integrating all of them into some overall perspective*. He called this “integral linguistics”. He eventually interpreted his own linguistic production as steps towards this integral linguistics.

4. The need for integrating linguistics

As Göran Sonesson has pointed out in different publications, linguistics may be integrated in two different ways. The first one is to include linguistics as part of wider disciplines like semiotics, anthropology, sociology, communication and information sciences, etc. The other one is to unite the diverse partial sciences about linguistic objects into one. Clearly, Coseriu’s alternative belongs to the latter.

Counteracting linguistic disintegration aims to *recover a wider and more complex apprehension of the “linguistic object”*, exceeding the narrow limits of the old grammar of sentences and incorporating to the conception of language many further aspects taken into account by successive alternative approaches as well as by philosophical reflections about it. Basically, as Coseriu pointed out, linguistics should integrate

- the scientific description and explanation of the linguistic systems of the single national tongues,
- the general consideration of language at the speculative (universal) level, and
- the treatment of factual speaking as such.

Being the latter the only “real” domain linguistics focusses on, the problem is to develop a method which allows to

understand *how the idiomatic systems, the general communicative competences and the concrete speaking strategies cooperate in factual speech*. First you ought to distinguish at least these three levels, and then you ought to reconstruct the way they interact within the *only ontologically real object of linguistics: factual speech*.

As a matter of fact, if you have identified and categorized “language” from the very beginning as something split into diverse components and levels, the way back to its presumed unity will *depend conceptually on the original splitting*. In order to grasp the full complexity of human speaking as a unitary process, without being conditioned by any one-sided analytical perspective on it, it is necessary to approach it *pre-scientifically* as such *unitary process in its entire complexity*.

This was the aim of Wilhelm von Humboldt, who developed a thorough speculative reflection on this complexity in order to assign grammar its real place and role within an overall and correct understanding of human speaking. Humboldt, unlike later linguists, tried to *begin with the utmost complexity in the pre-scientific apprehension of language*. This proved to be a gigantic task which took most of his linguistic activity in his later years.

This reflection had to be *speculative or philosophical* and based on a broad *experience* of the intended object. Humboldt studied a lot of philosophy, literature and languages in order to approach his goal with due competence. A contemporary effort to grasp, from the very beginning, the real complexity of language also has to be built on this *basis*, which comprises two domains: knowing personally as many different languages and literatures as possible, and being trained in philosophical reasoning. Both competences demand considerable personal time and effort and are never really completed. To all this now it has to be added at least some competence in neural sciences, since they are

discovering many relevant elements and processes inherent to the speaking activity which linguists can no longer ignore.

Coseriu, an extremely intelligent and consequent follower of Humboldt's reflections about language, is, as far as I know, the only influential linguist of the 20th century who bothered to master all these disciplines (neural sciences came later and he didn't get familiar with them) and became the example his supporters felt committed to follow. Thus, he was in a position which enabled him to keep attentive both to the analytical perspectives and results of modern linguistics and to the Humboldtian goal of grasping the reality of human speaking in its integral complexity. Coseriu always tried to design his own methods from this general perspective. The unavoidable reductionism of concrete linguistic investigations was for him no excuse to forget the real goal of linguistic research: *a good theoretical comprehension of language*. And this is a philosophical task. Therefore, philosophy has to guide the initial constitution of linguistic objects, the design of the research methods for it, and the reflection about the results in order to integrate them into a general consistent theory.

Without such philosophical reflection on language and linguistics a true integration of the diverse branches of science bound to language cannot take place. Since their respective results are conditioned by the initial reductions which have led to constitute object and method of each kind of research, these results cannot simply be added together in order to get a general "theory of everything". It cannot be presupposed that they are compatible with each other. If, for instance, you design a method of grammatical description without taking semantics into account, and after that you develop an own semantic theory, you will not be able to join them into a both formal and semantic description.

5. The paradoxes of “integral linguistics”

No integral linguistics can arise from disintegrated research methods and goals. A *coherent theory of language* has to take into account the diversity of scientific perspectives and objects as well as a general theoretic apprehension of the true nature of human “speaking”. If this is to be achieved within linguistics, as Coseriu unequivocally tried to do, then the integral perspective must be *present and operative from the beginning*. A philosophically correct understanding of the full complexity of human speaking has to lie at the basis of the scientific diversity of models and methods, since, as Coseriu stated, “philosophy is necessary because it is the science of principles”. Only a philosophical fundament can provide linguistic work with the intellectual tools needed to avoid a hopeless fragmentation.

Coseriu engaged very soon in the task of providing linguistic research with such a speculative basis. He did so through a well-known discussion of the theoretical presuppositions underlying the current search for the “causes” of linguistic change, and he inverted its terms: language is not something which unexpectedly changes, which would need a causal explanation. It is rather a free ongoing activity guided by expressive goals and which generates continually its own systematic patterns and remains free to alter them if needed. Language is always changing because this is its nature, and it does not belong to the realm of causes but to that of finality.

This conviction underlies the whole of his later pre-scientific speculations concerning the object and the method of linguistic research. It is also the basis of his own intent of progressing towards an integrated vision of language through a *methodical integration* of the diverse research varieties and objects.

As sensible as this goal may sound, it brings nonetheless some theoretical problems I would like to highlight here.

As already stated, we can no longer trust in the real existence of anything with determined features and borders called “language”, but we have to assume that beneath his denomination there is only a *diffuse feeling* of knowing about our speaking, as well as the *pretension* of consecrating this feeling as a reliable fact and an observable object. “Language” as a whole is far more the name of an illusion than that of a fact.

But *uncountable real and observable facts are actually involved in our speaking activity and in its results.*

In order to get a real basis for an integrative research of the diverse *problems* we identify in or around our speaking, we need to identify the whole of such *facts*, which range from the finest interactions among neurons, hormones and neurotransmitters up to the great literary works of the diverse cultures. And at the macroscopic behavioural level there are at least

- more or less canonized *speaking patterns* in human communities, serving as reference to socially acceptable speaking (national tongues and others).
- fine systematizations of our speaking patterns in order to *increase* their capability of expressing new complexities, but not always equally fine and differentiated;
- from slight to gross *simplification* strategies in the factual linguistic behaviour of individuals and groups;
- quite *fixed* pieces of verbal behaviour (words, syntagms, conventional utterances...), as well as fragments of speech which *divert* from them, willingly or unwillingly, and which often lead to a change in the original reference pieces.

Furthermore:

- The verbal elements interact with other bodily actions and attitudes, and such interactions can be highly standardized, but also very individual.

- People speak for very diverse reasons and goals, ranging from mere filling the shared time with small talk to extremely conscious and painful efforts to formulate and communicate ideas or knowledge, so that the “meaning load” of linguistic utterances may vary from a nearly complete void of content to the utmost complex contents.
- Although we tend to imagine that our words and utterances bear a determined semantic content which is actually transmitted from the speaker to the hearer, there is no such transmission at all: only audible and visual signals are produced and perceived. Their presumed “semantic” content cannot be the same between sender and receiver, since it is in each case the result of a complex individual neural processing which becomes “conscious” only in part, and the relation between the conscious and the unconscious cannot be established.
- Understanding is thus no reproduction by the hearer of the intended message of the speaker. The relation among individuals who communicate linguistically is extremely variable and it is no possible object of direct observation.

Language does not “exist”. It “*happens*”, and this fact involves a not determinable amount of processes which are partly observable and partly not. Grammar and linguistics have always constituted efforts to extract from this happening *observable constants which allow a systematic description*. They focussed at first on the *formal patterns of national tongues*, which gave rise to the so called “grammar”. Much later other patterns of observable linguistic behaviour were focussed on: the meaning of the verbal pieces in their standard form, other divergent meanings and patterns (linguistic variability), behavioural constants (bodily actions and attitudes, expressive strategies), “discourse” strategies, pragmatic constants... In such cases, the “object” had to be

filtered out in order to get *average* data allowing *generalizations*. Factual historical and individual speech in its real diversity thus had to remain out of focus, and *abstractions* from it *became the real “objects” of research*.

Against the unavoidable diversification of perspectives, objects and methods these efforts had to produce, Coseriu tried a *first* integration exploring the possibilities of extending the main analytic tools of structural phonology (privative opposition, commutation, etc.) to other linguistic levels, just like many other structuralists. But unlike them, he clearly stated that this line of investigation had to *let aside many also relevant aspects of speaking*.

A *second* integrative step was to analyse factual speech and to identify within it the main strategies of speakers to turn the abstract components of national languages into concrete utterances. In his article “Determinación y entorno” he discovered a whole set of such strategies already codified. He could show that in factual speech there are also systematic means of “using” the language system which should be integrated into the structural description of each language, besides the available abstract pieces (words and syntactic rules). Further research objects like deixis, discourse markers or referentiality have broadened our knowledge of the idiomatic codifications of such speaking strategies.

In his “Textlinguistik”, Coseriu tried a *further* integrative step, expanding this analytic activity to extant texts.

Texts are *frozen speech which has actually taken place* (in my terminology: “factual speech” as opposed to “virtual” or “abstract”, whence my term “linguistics of factuality” or “*lingüística de la facticidad*”). They are strictly individual products, they are not predictable, and they represent some kind of solidification of individual and historical expressive *decisions* of their authors which cannot be retraced to any previous system.

They are composed according to the systematic possibilities of each language, but their content is unique, and, as Coseriu insisted, *about unique things there cannot be any science*.

Texts are the result of combining into a unique product not only the available system of pieces and strategies of each language within certain circumstances (geographical, social, ideological, psychological...), but also the individual memories, motivations and representations of the author. Their content is no longer a “linguistic meaning”, but their unique “*sense*”. Understanding it is an *individual hermeneutical process* without precise profiles and borders, and this understanding may generate further texts or remain a purely subjective experience.

Texts, as further possible objects of a comprehensive linguistics, set the *limit* of this notion and bring the linguist to a zone where he can no longer determine the exact nature of his work *as a linguist*. With texts, the notion of “linguistics” loses its usual determination. Dealing with the structure and sense of single texts involves linguistic as well as philological, historical, social, psychological and other perspectives and methods. And it does not make sense to try to keep them separated. It is an *integral hermeneutic activity*. Translating texts is therefore an extremely complex activity which has to integrate in principle all these possible dimensions, and to react to the singularity and uniqueness of each text or even a part of it also in an individual manner.

Contemporary “corpus linguistics” is a new attempt to recover texts for systematic research, but a text as a token among many others is just not the same as a text in its full individuality. “Corpus” is a *cumulative* notion and allows the statistical processing of whatever elements or aspects of the gathered texts. In a way, corpus linguistics is the contrary of the individual hermeneutics of the sense of single factual speech. It is not easy to

integrate under one and the same concept these two ways of dealing with texts.

Coseriu tried to integrate the “text level” into his own linguistics, looking for identifiable strategies for building literary narratives, and this is also the way generally adopted for text linguistics. But he was aware that lastly the shared linguistic strategies are just another part of the hermeneutics of the unique sense of texts.

The mere addition of single descriptions and explanations of elements and levels does not lead to their *integration into a coherent theory*. The diversity of objects and methods cannot be reduced or retraced to any unity.

The only possible integration is the kind of *synthesis* the *individual* linguist may achieve within the whole of his personality throughout his life. Coseriu had a strong feeling of being the person who had achieved the coherent integration of the whole of his linguistic experience, but he himself had to accept that “linguistics” was no longer the appropriate designation of this whole, and that at least “hermeneutics” had to be added to the equation. Coseriu’s integral linguistics was Coseriu himself, the whole of his personality. As Hegel had stated much earlier, the “concept” in its largest and most comprehensive sense proves to be identical with the individual, atomic and impenetrable personality behind it in each case.

Linguistics relies, like every science, on the *reduction* of the real complexity to certain bunches of features delineating certain “objects”. When inventing the “phoneme”, linguistics did not discover the true nature of the speaking sounds, but it created an object which responded to the manner certain linguists wanted to turn speaking into something they could manage as “scientists”. This *made sense*, but did not reflect the real. All kinds of linguistics and grammar do create their own objects. They may be

more or less properly scientific, but they cannot grasp the integrity of what we call “speaking”; because we, the speaking animals, *cannot turn ourselves into our own objects without distorting our reality.*

Our speaking ability enables us to generate all possible objects, including “speaking” itself, but not to turn our own reality into “an object”. We categorize our speaking by means of our speaking tools, which are the historical and individual outcome of the whole of our linguistically mediated human experience. Our words and ideas are mostly those of our speaking community, and speaking communities are nations as well as cultures, scientific institutions, professional circles, religious communities, social layers, cities or villages... This variety of human contexts correlates with a variety of speaking patterns and norms which converge into what each one says in each case. Their possible unity is that of the individual, of his abilities, his memories and his decisions. *It is in the individual where “language” is something “integral”.* But *its unity is unique, historical and ever changing.* There can be no science of that. In this sense there can be no “integral linguistics”.

Only: this individual historical unity *is* the real integral language we seek when trying to integrate linguistics. And it still makes sense to try to achieve an overall comprehension of our speaking ability, or rather of our speaking nature. The goal of integral linguistics is a sound project, despite its real impossibility. This is the great paradox of “integral linguistics”.

A paradox, but not a contradiction. Integral linguistics being both necessary and impossible is certainly paradoxical, but only because of a fundamental confusion between levels and kinds of intellectual reflection.

6. Negative philosophy of language and integral linguistics

Coseriu had distinguished between the general or universal level of the human ability to speak and the concrete study of historical languages. But although he had stated that linguistics has to be guided by philosophical principles, he did not recognize the relevance of any extant philosophy of language for linguistics itself, and he refused to formulate the philosophy of language underlying his own reflections on methods and objects of research. Coseriu formulated some theoretical principles he considered to be true and relevant, but he did not develop any systematic philosophy of his own linguistics. And when I tried to do so, he teased me with the sentence I reproduced at the beginning of this article.

Unfortunately, it is too late to try to discuss this issue with him. So, I will be forced to a unilateral or monologic development of the connection between a certain philosophy of language and the theoretical project of integral linguistics. This will unavoidably lead to my own conception of “integral linguistics”.

The general theory of language supporting Coseriu’s ideas had something paradoxical in it. Coseriu loved distinctions and aimed at a unitary conception. His distinctions of levels and perspectives on linguistic phenomena were meant to prevent the usual confusions between levels of reflection, in order to “liberate” concrete structural descriptions without falling into the trap of taking their objects as real discrete parts of the linguistic reality. “*To distinguish is not the same as to divide*”. From his point of view, language has to be considered as an integral reality within which scientists may introduce distinctions in order to focus on concrete problems (of the linguist). But since every concrete investigation has to focus on some problem, and, thus, to look at the whole from this one-sided perspective, the mere

accumulation of concrete investigations cannot produce an integral comprehension of the whole.

Only a consistent systematic philosophy of language might provide such a unitary perspective on it. But, again, any philosophical system has to be designed with *concepts* which are the supposed *meanings* of words, words which, in turn, are pieces of the acquired habits of speaking of each individual. No conceptual building will ever be able to grasp any reality *beyond its words* and the complex of circumstances leading to their actual use (and understanding) in each case. If we conceive philosophy as a *science of positive principles*, we will never go beyond *philosophical ideologies rooted in speaking traditions*. There is no “real” soil below the speaking traditions and their conventions.

Does this mean that there is no spiritual or mental space where a sound, coherent integral theory of human language could be formulated and constructed?

No, what this means is that the metaphysical tradition of assigning reliable conceptual meanings to our words is just a linguistic delusion in itself. Sound *speculative work* has to *keep this in mind* and to take its own words as what they really are: as *usual signals within communities*, which serve individuals *in each case* as *abbreviations of bunches of impressions, emotions, experiences and mental processes* which *provoke* or *give rise* to further impressions, experiences, emotions and mental processes of other individuals. We refer to what matters to us, be it “reality” or something else, in the framework of our acquired habits of categorizing things within our historical language or languages. *Speculative thinking does not transcend this.*

The difference between *speculative* and *objectivistic* speaking can only consist in the former’s consequent *scepticism* about our way of constituting objects and perceiving reality. We have *to*

doubt about our words while using them and our scepticism always will *remain itself linguistic*.

No philosophy offers linguists a better *positive* understanding and categorization of human language, but it may show them not to trust the inherited categories through which we have become used to thinking and speaking about our speaking (and thinking) as we do. Good philosophy is the *ongoing criticism of whatever certainties about reality we rely on* when doing linguistics or whatever other, more or less scientific effort, to grasp reality and to control our material or cultural environment. Philosophy is, for instance, when Coseriu criticises the usual grammatical ideology of imagining our speaking as the mere use or application of a previous fixed code. This pre-scientific, speculative criticism allows us to understand linguistic change as inherent to human speaking, and this understanding, in turn, allows historical and comparative analyses that *make sense* within the tradition of exploring the evolution of languages and language. It keeps linguistic work *coherent with a critical understanding both of language in general and of the linguist's own language*.

As a matter of fact, the understanding of human speaking has not made great progress since Humboldt's critical revision of the inherited linguistic metaphysics. Modern linguistic theories as well as "cognitive sciences" and even neural sciences have hardly contributed to improve our self-understanding as speaking animals. Unlike them, sceptical thinkers like partly Nietzsche and more recently Josef Simon, have really contributed to approach human language more critically and to overcome many metaphysical prejudices still dominating linguistic work. And of course, there are a lot of truly intelligent linguists who again and again approach linguistic work with an open mind and refusing to be seduced by fashions within the academic world. But good linguistics is always the outcome of a *consistently critical attitude*

towards consecrated ideologies, and this in turn can only be achieved through *historical and comparative* study of both languages and linguistic achievements.

Coseriu was vehemently against theoretical scepticism, but, paradoxically enough, he adopted a *sustained critical attitude* towards established linguistics and produced thereby ideas that have positively improved our humanistic understanding of human speaking. The productivity of his critiques and new distinctions is due mainly to his broad experience with language, linguistics and literature and to his special ability to *integrate such experiences into coherent approaches to single problems*. He eventually called his work “integral linguistics”, but I believe he failed to understand the true sense of his own “integrity”.

According to my own understanding, his linguistics was not integral in the sense of “comprising the whole” of human speaking under the “right concepts”. No scientific approach to language could achieve such positive overall comprehension. And surely a mere addition of new ways of approaching further elements or aspects of speaking would not produce it either.

A linguistic research becomes part of “integral linguistics” when it proceeds focussing on its *object not as a real part of a rightly conceptualized “whole”, but as a historical product of the linguist’s experience and imagination within his widest possible perception of language*. Its singularity, and its constitution as an object, remain “integral” if the linguist remains aware that he works within a theoretical perspective which has a *negative* nature. It does not consist in a positive general theory of what language is, but in the *concrete and progressive negation of every such positive general theory or ideology*.

“Language” is a “limit notion”. It is not the name of something real, but the name of a *negative understanding horizon*. Integrating single research objects and methods into a general

perspective on language is not subsuming it into wider and more abstract notions, lastly leading to a general unitary theory. Quite the contrary: it means the *awareness that one's own object constitution is an individual, historical achievement* whose legitimacy does not depend on a correct apprehension of the whole, but on *understanding its impossibility*, which implies refusing any "definition" of language. The individual linguist's achievements get their legitimation from his own historical and comparative experience with linguistics and language, and they may convince others of making good sense, but they cannot pretend to be "ontologically true".

They remain "individual speech", and their understanding by others also remains individual hermeneutics. One linguist's "integral linguistics" cannot be the same as another's "integral linguistics", because each linguist builds his understanding horizon on the basis of his successive concrete negations of what he perceives in each case as wrong assumptions. I learned from Coseriu to look for the widest possible understanding horizon in each case, but I had to confront myself with experiences and legacies different from his'. And instead of introducing new conceptual distinctions into the methodical framework, I concentrated on the scepticism I was led to when trying to keep "integral".

Every linguistic text is as "factual speech" as every literary text or every text, turned or not into a research object. It is as individual, historical and unpredictable as all the rest. Understanding this is individual hermeneutics. I have called this orientation "linguistics of factuality".

Understanding Coseriu's integral linguistics is thus in each case a new individual effort to integrate into one's research activity the negative perspective of the limit notion of "language" *the way one has learned to do*, and to seek intellectual progress

through *ever new concrete negations* of theoretical concepts or systems believing in their immediate access to reality itself. Unlike Coseriu, in my view integral linguistics is (like Hegel said about his “Phenomenology of the Spirit”), “ein sich vollbringender Skeptizismus”: an ongoing, progressive scepticism. Further integral linguists will have to confront themselves with other contexts and will be forced to develop their own criticism with new words coming from their own singular experiences. And lastly, we will all learn about ourselves as speaking animals through our own processing of narratives both of integral linguists and of good writers.

This is the reason why I had to begin with the “theory of words” in order to say something that makes sense within this “integral” perspective, despite Coseriu’s teasing about the “theory of numbers”.

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