

On Eugenio Coseriu's Theory of Word Formation

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Abstract: Between 1965 and 1982 Eugenio Coseriu published a series of investigations on word formation processes. In a functional perspective, he developed an innovative proposal, which moved away from traditional models and was not adequately taken into account in lexicological studies, neither in those of his time nor in those of later years. In this contribution, I intend to resume the fundamental aspects of this model, which maintains its validity and originality: in Coseriu's theory of word formation the three levels of the system, the norm and the usage interact strictly, so that both the reasons of the system and the creativity of the speakers are adequately taken into account¹.

Keywords: *word formation*, lexical semantics, system, norm, functionalism

1. Meaning and designation

Coseriu characterises his theory as a content-oriented theory of word formation (*inhaltliche Wortbildungslehre*, see Coseriu 1977). To understand what his meant by “content-oriented” and what the term *content* is taken to denote, it is necessary here to consider the distinction between meaning (*signifié, Bedeutung*) and designation (*Bezeichnung*): meaning is conceived as “le contenu donné exclusivement par la langue en tant que système de fonctions distinctives et oppositives” (Coseriu 1982: 3). Designation, on the other hand, is understood as “le rapport entre

¹ In this contribution I reconsider, with some additions and changes, the results of a research presented at the Fourth International Conference on Eugenio Coseriu's scientific legacy, organised by Vincenzo Orioles and Raffaella Bombi in Udine in 2013.

les signes et la réalité extralinguistique nommée par ceux-ci” (*ibidem*).

According to Coseriu, word formation should be considered from the point of view of meaning (*signifié*, *Bedeutung*), not from the point of view of designation (*Bezeichnung*). In fact, the system and the norm differ in their configuration and in the role that is assigned to them within his general theory. In the system Coseriu includes the processes that form so-called secondary lexemes from other lexemes (primary or secondary). The possible processes that are established by the system are then applied according to the norm, which includes socially instituted designations:

Ainsi, on interprétera normalement l’allemand *Strassenhändler* comme ‘marchand ambulant, camelot’, parce qu’on ne connaît pas de gens ‘qui vendent et achètent des rues’ (interprétation possible du point de vue du système de la langue allemande) [...] Et, dans un milieu plus restreint, par exemple, dans le langage familier, on interprétera *Wecker* comme ‘veille (montre)’ plutôt que comme ‘personne qui réveille’ (Coseriu 1966: 189).

Here Coseriu agrees with Otto Jespersen, who said that compounds express relations between notions, but do not specify the exact type of relation: “*home life*, life at home, *home letters*, letters from home, *home journey*, journey (to) home [...]” (Jespersen 1924: 310). Grammatical relations are established by the system; in compounds the content of these relations is generic. It is then up to the norm to indicate how they are applied, according to the historically developed language tendencies. In this regard, it should be kept in mind that Coseriu subscribes to a fundamental principle of structuralism, the primacy of *signifié* over designation:

Die Bezeichnung kann zwar als weitere und zusätzliche Bestimmung von Wortbildungsverfahren berücksichtigt werden, nicht aber vor der Bedeutung und als primäre (definitorische) Bestimmung (Coseriu 1977: 49).

2. Coseriu's criticism of some traditional theories

In the usual models of word formation two problematic points are pointed out by Coseriu: the former consists in the tendency to mix elements of the expression together with elements of the content; the latter is the absence of a distinction (or an imprecise distinction) between meaning (*Bedeutung*) and designation (*Bezeichnung*). In his opinion some inadequacies follow from these two elements.

The first criticism is directed primarily at German lexicology, in which two general kinds of theories can be distinguished (Weydt & Hentschel 1989: 23): one establishes the two types of composition and derivation, and the derivation is differentiated into derivation with prefixes and with suffixes; the other distinguishes composition, derivation, and prefixation.

Coseriu says that in both such kinds theories a "material" criterion, i.e. emphasis on the role of affixes (which are elements of the expression), appears together with a semantic criterion, which considers the number of lexemes involved in the formation.

He states that in this way only two basic types can be recognised: composition and derivation. But then it would be difficult to distinguish between the type represented by lexemes such as Fr. *vielliot* and the type that includes a lexeme such as Fr. noun *beauté*; nor is it possible to explain the semantic affinity between lexemes such as Fr. *chasseur*, *vendeur* and compound nouns.

According to him, the tendency to consider content and expression together also leads to the fact that formations with

prefixes are often counted among compositions and the term “verbal composition” is used for cases such as Fr. *prévoir* and *parvenir* (Coseriu 1982: 4) or Germ. *hinfallen* and Sp. *contener* (Coseriu 1977: 49). This choice is justified by recalling the similarity of prefixes to prepositions, which exist as autonomous “words” of the language (Coseriu 1982: 4). However, he notes that such “compounds” do not differ in semantic structure from other words, which are considered “derived” words. Moreover,

on a naturellement des difficultés dans le cas des prefixes qui n’existent pas en tant que mots autonomes: une formation telle que *revenir* doit-elle être attribuée à la dérivation ou à la composition? (Coseriu 1982: 4)

We said that Coseriu indicates a second critical point: the failure to distinguish between meaning (*Bedeutung*, *signifié*) and designation (*Bezeichnung*). This point emerges particularly in the treatment of so-called exocentric compounds. It should be immediately noted that, for Coseriu, compounds are only endocentric. In his view, the property of being exocentric does not regard meaning (*Bedeutung*), but designation (*Bezeichnung*), more precisely it concerns the denomination, i.e., how something is named. In fact, a compound is understood as exocentric due to the knowledge about the world and because the corresponding use is institutionalised in the norm. The exocentric compound emerges in an antonomastic designation - which is not a *signifié*, but a use of a *signifié*. Usually, such an antonomastic designation is the prevailing use (*désignation figée*). However, a non-exocentric usage is always possible: for example, the German compound *Goldhaar* is usually employed in the sense of ‘blond-haired person’ (exocentric usage), but it can also apply as ‘blond hair’ (non-exocentric usage). Let us also consider a compound such as

Germ. *Goldwaage* ‘gold scales’: it corresponds usually to *Waage für Gold* (‘scales for weighing gold’), but it can also stand for *Waage aus Gold* (‘scales made of gold’). The different interpretations are attempts to specify the semantically generic link between the “determinans” *Gold* and the “determinatum” *Waage*. According to Coseriu, with similar analyses the designation (*Bezeichnung*) is given priority over the *signifié* (*Bedeutung*). As a consequence, the functional unity of the compound is overlooked and destroyed, since different interpretations are made to correspond to different compounds: there will be two homonyms and *Goldwaage* will be recorded twice in the dictionary.

Coseriu observes that Charles Bally had also overlooked the difference between *Bedeutung* and *Bezeichnung*, and this can be understood from the pages of *Linguistique générale et linguistique française* devoted to the distinction between the functional and the semantic transposition (*transposition fonctionnelle* and *transposition sémantique*. Bally says that the former takes place exclusively in grammar, while the latter also concerns the lexicon, “par le fait que les signes changent de signification (généralement par emploi figure) en même temps que de catégorie” (Bally 1944: 116). Examples cited by Bally include the cases of *chaleur tropicale* and *végétation tropicale*: when it designates something that is ‘proper to the tropics’, *tropical* is the outcome of a functional transposition; if it stands for ‘analogous to that found in the tropics’ it is the result of a semantic transposition. Coseriu (1982: 7) does not share this view: he maintains that there is only one process of transposition, which can have different interpretations. But transposition is constituted in the system and regards the *signifié*, while interpretation occurs at the level of the norm and is concerned with the designation. He concludes that

there is only one lexematic value, and this can have multiple uses that are established in the norm.

3. A functional typology

In Coseriu's perspective, word formation can be understood adequately only if a semantic perspective is adopted, i.e. if the functional types are taken into account and not the aspects he calls "material". The latter are processes such as prefixation and suffixation, which take their name from the elements that are added to a lexical base. There is a many-to-many relationship between the functional and the material types: several material types can fit into one functional type, and several functional types can be manifested in one material type.

Coseriu does not deny the practical value of material descriptions, but he finds these descriptions theoretically inadequate, since they cannot account for the formation of words in the functional language, that is, in the system. First, a material perspective is required to identify all the processes for forming lexemes from other lexemes. But "[...] une telle étude ne pourrait pas correspondre exactement au domaine de la formation des mots" (Coseriu 1982: 7), since occasional formations (e.g., cases of univerbation such as the French words [*un*] *sauve-qui-peut*, *bonjour* or the Italian words *mantenere* < *manu tenere*, *merluzzo* < *maris lucius*) would be treated in the same way as the results of a formation process in the strict sense. Moreover, in his view a material point of view does not allow for some very productive formation processes, such as zero-suffix formations, conversions, and retroformations.

How should word formation be characterised according to Coseriu? First, it should be understood as the domain of secondary paradigmatic relations. These are relations, because they bind elements together; they are paradigmatic because they concern

relations *in absentia* (relations *in praesentia* correspond to syntagmatic relations); and they are secondary because there is no equivalence between the extremes of the relation, but rather one of them is obtained from the other by a process of formation. Coseriu states that word formation corresponds to what he calls a grammaticalisation of the primary lexicon (which can undergo further grammaticalisation). Here *grammaticalisation* is understood as the application of systematic processes of formation, by virtue of which lexical units undergo a determination of a “paragrammatical” nature and are subsequently returned to the lexicon (Coseriu 1982, Laca 1986; “grammatikähnlich” in Coseriu 1973: 52); this determination is paragrammatical insofar as it is regarded as analogous to the grammatical relations of syntax, even if it is not included in such grammatical relations.

The meaning of *paragrammatical* can be understood if we consider the role attributed to grammar. For Coseriu (1982), this is a “technique du discours”, a general *ars (Kunst)* that has a language-specific organisation (it is *einzelnsprachlich gestaltet*: Coseriu 1977: 78). Grammar works in a threefold perspective: 1) the “material” grammar describes the structure on the expression (e.g., the form and the arrangement of elements in the Italian word group *il mio libro* ‘my book’); 2) the “functional” grammar identifies the functions that delimit each paradigm (e.g. *mio* is in the attribute paradigm - as in the case of *il mio libro* - or in the predicate paradigm, as in the case of *il libro è mio*); 3) the “relational” grammar analyzes the relationships between paradigms that have similar functions (e.g., *Romae* vs. *in urbe Romā* for the locative function). Designation is not involved in the functional grammar nor in the material grammar. It may appear in the relational grammar, but only in part (this occurs when equivalent designations are looked for, e.g., in *Rome* and *the*

capital of Italy). It should also be noted that the grammatical functions are used at the stage of the norm with designation tasks.

The attributive function can be used - among other things - to identify an object by indicating a characteristic; such is, for example, the use of *Land* in the German word group *Haus auf dem Land* 'house in the country'; instead, in *Landhaus* 'country house' *Land* indicates a quality, but it has not necessarily an identifying function (a building that has the characteristics of a country house can also be in the center of a city). In the first case (*Haus auf dem Land*) the relation is grammatical and is attributive; in the second case it is paragrammatical and is para-attributive ("attributähnlich", see Lang 1987: 176).

To find the functional types of lexemes obtained with the processes of word formation, it is necessary to identify the changes brought about by the implicit grammaticalisation that is represented by word formation. For this purpose, two criteria are applied, which can be formulated by means of the following two questions: 1) does the implicit grammaticalisation concern only one or two basic units? 2) is the grammatical function actual or inactual?

According to the first criterion, if there are two units in the base, the functional type is the composition. Coseriu (1977) distinguishes two subtypes: one is called "lexematic composition", which corresponds to the traditional composition. It has two lexemes in the base, and one of these is the *determinatum*: e.g., *Wind* determines *Mühle* in the German compound *Windmühle* 'windmill'. The other is called "prolexematic composition": in it of the two elements of the base has the nature of a pronoun (and is also called a "prolexeme"). He considers examples that are mostly *nomina agentis* or *nomina instrumenti* formed by verbs with the use of suffixes: thus, the French noun *calculateur* results from the composition of 'generic noun

pronoun' (approximately 'someone or something') with the verb *calculer* (Coseriu 1982: 94); the German noun *Leser* comes from 'jemand oder etwas' + *lesen*, and *Wecker* is obtained from 'jemand oder etwas' + *wecken*. An argument in favour of the idea of prolexical composition is the absence of other realisations for the generic pronominal element 'jemand oder etwas' ("das als solches im Deutschen sonst nicht realisiert ist": Coseriu 1977: 55).

Prolexical composition also makes it possible to explain the similarity of meaning between cases such as the German noun *Apfelbaum* and the French *pommier*. Coseriu rejects the traditional explanation, according to which Romance languages prefer derivation (they are supposed to be *derivationfreundlich*), while Germanic languages like composition (and are therefore considered *kompositionsfreundlich*). On the other hand, he observes that we are dealing with two very close types, "précisément deux types fondamentaux de composition" (Coseriu 1982: 15) which can coexist even in the same language, as the cases of the German words *Handelsmann* and *Händler*, *Lehrer* and *Lehrkraft* show.

If, on the other hand, only one unit is given, there are two other types of word formation, the modification (*Modifikation*) and the development (*Entwicklung*), which are distinguished by means of the second criterion.

A modification is characterised by an inactual function, which is so called because the basic lexemes do not enter the process with a syntactic function (i.e. they are taken as elements of a word class and not as constituents; they are *Redeteile* and not *Satzteile*). Typical modifications are obtained by prefixation: for example, the Italian adjective *inutile* 'useless' is obtained by applying the negation prefix to the adjective *utile* 'useful'; and in the Italian verb *prevedere* 'foresee' the prefix *pre-* modifies the verb *vedere*; but it is also possible to use suffixes, as *-ezza* in the Italian noun

fanciullezza ‘childhood’ (from *fanciullo* ‘child’). In German, the suffix *-in* can be used to form the noun *Königin* ‘queen’ from *König* ‘king’, or *-heit* forms *Menschheit* ‘humanity’ from *Mensch* (which corresponds to Lat. *homo* ‘human being’) (but the noun *Falschheit* ‘falsehood’, which results from the adjective *falsch*, is not a modification: it is a development, as we will see later). Evaluative suffixes such as the Italian *-etta* in *casetta* ‘little house’ (from *casa* ‘house’) are also used in modification.

On the other hand, in the type called development the function is actual, that is, it is analogous to the relations between the constituents of the sentence, such as subject or predicate. The actual function concerns lexemes taken in their behaviour as syntagms, so that the lexeme of the base enters the formation process with a syntactic function: for example, the Italian noun *bellezza* is developed from the adjective *bello* in the use of predicate; another example: the formation of the adjective *invernale* starts from the base (*d'*)*inverno* (from *giornata d'inverno* we obtain *giornata invernale*). In a first step, Coseriu distinguished two subtypes of development, conversion and transposition (Coseriu 1966: 214). He had taken up the concept of “tension” from Gustave Guillaume and considered conversion as a development “in tension I”, i.e. without “degradation”, i.e. semantic generalisation (e.g. in Italian from the adjective *vuoto* the noun *il vuoto* is obtained), while transposition constituted a development “in tension II”, i.e. with semantic degradation or generalisation (e.g. the German adjective *freundlich* ‘friendly, courteous’, from the noun *Freund* ‘friend’). The distinction was later abandoned, perhaps for general theoretical needs: Coseriu is interested in emphasising that word formation is explained by semantic needs within the functional language: “[...] il s’agit d’exprimer des fonctions plus génériques ou des fonctions

différentes de celles qui sont exprimées dans la grammaire de la langue respective” (Coseriu 1982: 16).

4. Concluding remarks. Semiotic and social instances in word formation

Coseriu pointed out that Bally’s analysis had dealt with cases of “semantic dilution” (“semantische Verdünnung”, in Coseriu 1977: 51; “déconcentration de la signification” in Coseriu 1982: 7). This property is considered essential for understanding the general function of the secondary paradigmatic structures of the lexicon. He assumes that word formation responds to the internal semiotic dynamics of the system, which emerge in the framework of a functional typology. The needs of functional language are not to be confused with the vague 'Benennungsbedürfnis', the 'need to name' new things and events in extralinguistic reality, which is often considered an external driver, a socio-cultural factor that accounts for the expansion of a language's lexicon. The functions expressed in the secondary lexicon can cope with the need, posed by the norm, to expand the designative domain. Thus, the autonomy of the functional language gives strength to the potential of language as a social institution.

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