

Surrounding Field (*los entornos*), Meaning and Multimodality: Possibilities of Eugenio Coseriu's Text Linguistics

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Abstract: In the conceptual apparatus of Eugenio Coseriu's text linguistics, the relationship between the theory of surrounding fields and the practice of text procedures when constructing meaning is well marked. This leads us to understand that the surrounding fields guide the entire text, giving *meaning* to it, which is objectified by the text procedures. Seen in these terms, the analyses of surrounding fields and text procedures work in conjunction in the hermeneutics of meaning. In this work we propose an analytical device in which surrounding fields and text procedures are utilized to interpret meaning in texts. Furthermore, we expanded the analytical scope of the verbal text for the multimodal text. In order to exemplify the device application, we analyzed a multimodal text: a Calvin and Hobbes comic strip by cartoonist Bill Watterson. This research, thus, aims to contribute to the implementation of the task of transmission, systematization and expansion of Eugenio Coseriu's work.

Keywords: Coserian linguistics, discourse, meaning, text linguistics, surrounding fields (*entornos*)

Introduction

In this work, we consider the text linguistics proposed by Eugenio Coseriu, which is based upon the perspective in which language is organized into three autonomous levels: 1) the universal level, or the level of speaking in general; 2) the historical level of

languages; and 3) the individual level of the text. The author situates text linguistics in the third level. According to Coseriu, this type of linguistics is, essentially, the linguistics of meaning, whose task consists in interpreting texts/discourses in search for meaning. The text/discourse is an act or a series of connected linguistic acts of a speaker in a certain situation, which ranges from the expression “good morning” to a novel, for instance¹.

According to Coseriu (2007: 246), this type of linguistics is still in “draft” stage, and, as a consequence, it requires expansion and further development. In our view, one of the questions being considered in such deep research are the surrounding fields and their relationship with text procedures that will shape an analytical framework of text linguistics as a textual commentary and explanation, in other words, a type of elucidation of text grammar. Therefore, it is necessary to reflect upon the relations that may be established between the surrounding fields and the practice of text procedures to explain how they can be utilized in favor of a heuristic analysis of meaning.

Thus, we aim to propose a design of an analytical framework which demonstrates systematically the relationship of cooperation established between the procedures and the surrounding fields in favor of the construction of meaning in a text. In this regard, the analytical framework considers, primarily, the recovery of the surrounding fields in the text and the identification of text procedures that enable to interpret meaning. Since this analytical framework aims to be an instrument of text interpretation, and as texts currently include other semiotic elements, other than the verbal ones, we see the relevance of incorporating multimodality within this framework.

¹ The terms *text* and *discourse* are term variants of the same concept: the content of the individual level of language.

As an exercise of empirical demonstration of how one can operate this framework, we analyzed a multimodal text: a Calvin and Hobbes comic strip by cartoonist Bill Watterson. The meaning of this text is, therefore, targeted by the text and imagistic procedures, guided by the conditions of the circumstances of the act of speaking: the surrounding fields.

Theoretical and analytical framework of text linguistics

In his famous article *Determinación y entorno. Dos problemas de una lingüística del hablar*, first published in 1955 (Coseriu, 1969), Eugenio Coseriu establishes the relevance of knowledge concerning the surrounding fields. In a subsequent work (2007), he also refers to other authors' works. According to him, although these authors have made further progress in the research on surrounding fields, their improvements are still insufficient:

Such attempts of classifying the surrounding fields related to the act of speaking are important, but still insufficient. If one wishes to examine accurately and fully understand how the signs operate in the text, it is necessary to establish further distinctions. In "Determinación y entorno", from a theoretical point of view, one can find the necessary instruments to accomplish such goal (cf Coseriu, 2007: 219; our translation).

Coseriu, therefore, presents his theory concerning surrounding fields as an essential tool that ought not to be ignored by those who aim to "fully understand how the signs operate in the text" (cf idem, our translation). Despite the fact that his studies point in that direction, Coseriu does not expand such discussion, being restricted to the presentation of a conceptual framework of surrounding fields, without providing a systematic explanation

that should direct us on how his *modus operandi* works in practice, in the task of constructing meaning of a text².

Thus, it seems reasonable for us to pose the following question: how are we to apply this theoretical framework in order to operationalize text interpretation?

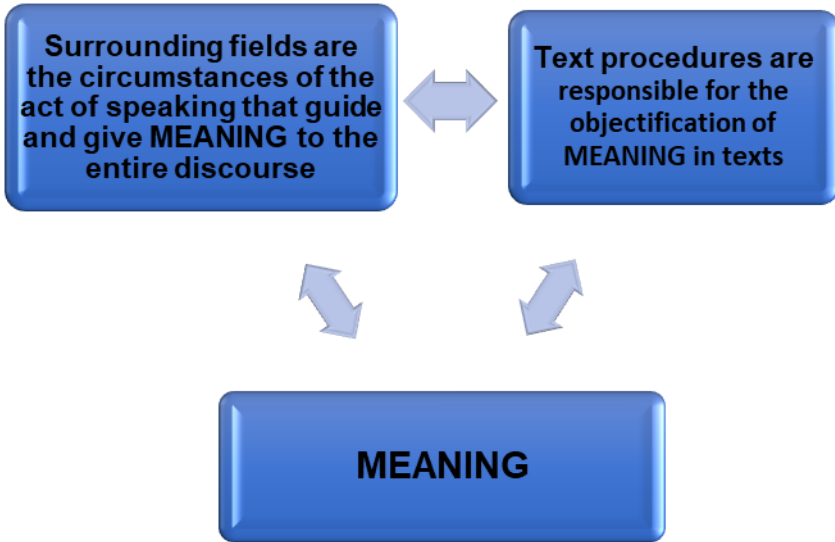
We maintain that the text linguistics postulated by Coseriu (1981; 2007) provides sufficient elements for us to reflect on the idea that surrounding fields are determining factors in the emergence of meaning; therefore, we aim to detail how participant they are, in conjunction with text procedures, in the construction of each text's own content.

We shall start from Coserian postulates: a) surrounding fields are the circumstances caused by the act of speaking which guide and give meaning to the entire discourse (cf Coseriu, 1969; my translation); and b) text procedures are descriptive elements in text interpretation, which are responsible for the objectification of meaning of a text (cf Coseriu, 2007).

As we observe these postulates, we can notice that, despite the fact that Coseriu has presented them in an isolated and independent way in his works, it is possible for us to establish a converging relationship between them, which, at a certain moment, both direct their own role to the construction of meaning. The figure below better illustrates this argument:

² Kabatek (2018) points out that, although Coseriu has presented, in *Determinación y entorno*, a theory of nominal determination and the concept of surrounding fields, a systematic study of scope and limitations of such work is still missing today.

FIGURE 1 – Relationship between the concepts of *surrounding fields* and *text procedures*



Source: Authors

In summary, one can say that, if we keep the Coserian thesis that surrounding fields guide and give meaning to the entire text and *this meaning* is objectified by text procedures, this leads us to think that surrounding fields and text procedures work collaboratively in order to perform the central task of the Coserian text linguistics: text interpretation.

Coseriu (2007) resumes previous works concerning surrounding fields and presents an extremely detailed and systematic framework. In addressing such an issue, he states that texts can only mean and be interpreted beyond what he says, beyond language materiality, thanks to the complementary non-

verbal expressive activities, which are mainly the circumstances of the act of speaking, or the surrounding fields. Coseriu (1969; 2007) proposes the existence of four surrounding fields: *situation*, *region*, *context*, and *universe of speech*.

Situation are “the circumstances and the relationships of place and time that are produced by the very act of speaking” (cf Coseriu, 2007: 220; our translation). The *region* is defined based on space “whose limits in which a sign works in certain systems of signification” (cf idem: 214; our translation). The region surrounding field is subdivided into “zone”, “sphere”, and “vicinity”.

Context can be verbal or extraverbal. Extraverbal context consists of other subtypes: physical (“pertaining to things visible to the speaker or things to which the sign is immediately inherent”), empirical (“pertaining to objects and circumstances which are known to the interlocutors at a specific time and place”), and natural (“which means the whole world which is known to us as verbal context”) (cf. idem: 224; our translation). Such contexts equally compose the encyclopedic knowledge and are defined according to the subject.

Finally, the *universes of speech* compose “the universal system of meanings to which a speech (or an utterance) belongs and from which its validity and meaning are derived” (cf idem: 221; our translation). The texts represent not only different universes (religion, science, and mythology, etc.), but also their knowledge and value-based systems.

The text procedures of meaning construction, according to Coseriu (2007), are instruments responsible for objectifying meaning of a text. According to this Coserian perspective, the path that leads to hermeneutics of meaning necessarily involves the particular and unique identification of each text.

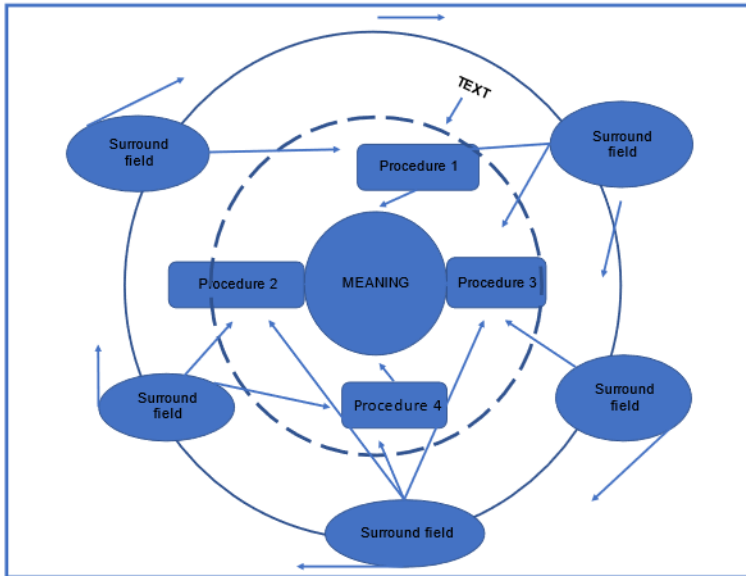
Thus, we may say that text procedures function as a type of master key in the process of meaning construction, since the way in which the particular content of a text is composed depends on the specific combination of procedures presented in each text.

Therefore, in Coserian terms, one cannot promote further investigation regarding meaning construction in any way isolated or independent from the investigation of the procedures which may be present in the text, for it is these procedures which support meaning being objectified, thus also providing the key to its interpretation (Moreira, 2019; Pinheiro, 2019).

As we validate the link between surrounding fields and text procedures, we can conclude that the path that leads to hermeneutics of meaning involves the identification of the text procedures which objectify the meaning and the recognition of the surrounding fields which guide it.

Following this thread, we will attempt to explain how these Coserian constructs can be mobilized in favor of a heuristic analysis of meaning in the text, through a proposal of systematization of the performance of both surrounding fields and text procedures. The framework below (Figure 2) summarizes this proposal in which each element of the theory of the Coserian text linguistics is inserted and properly placed.

FIGURE 2– Analytical framework for text linguistics



Source: Authors

Let us begin with the circle which is found exactly at the center of the framework. It portrays meaning and has been intentionally placed at the center for it represents the central core of Coseriu's text linguistics. This role of axis assigned to meaning was clearly established by the author, since Coseriu himself presents, in a recurring way, text linguistics as a type of linguistics of meaning.

As the elements closer to the central axis, we have the text procedures⁴, which are seen orbiting around with arrows pointing to the direction of meaning, doing justice to the postulate that meaning is objectified by text procedures (cf Coseriu, 2007).

The circle assigned to illustrate the axis represents a type of layer located between the circle of meaning and the circumstances of the act of speaking. It is situated in the most external part of the figure based on the Coseriu's warning that surrounding fields are not the text itself, but the circumstances of the act of speaking that guide such text.

Considering the proposition that what is effectively said is less than what is indicated and understood (cf Coseriu, 1969), we decided to ornate this circle of the circumstances with some surrounding fields equipped with arrows which point both inside and outside the text, since we understand that they function as co-optators of the aspects that are present in the scenario in which every act of speaking occurs and are able to influence its meaning.

Within this perspective, the arrows that point towards the core indicate the precise direction of the surrounding fields towards the center of the text. Inside the text, these surrounding fields act upon the postulate in such a way that it becomes greatly expanded and irreversible, as rightly observed by Coseriu. Once the surrounding fields act within the text, they also, necessarily, act within the text procedures.

On that basis, we understand that an analytical heuristic to interpret meaning must consider that the surrounding fields produce a type of centripetal force toward the text procedures, and it calibrates the direction of such descriptive instruments, in order

⁴ The presence of four procedures in the framework does not absolutely mean that we are suggesting that there is a fixed number of procedures in a text.

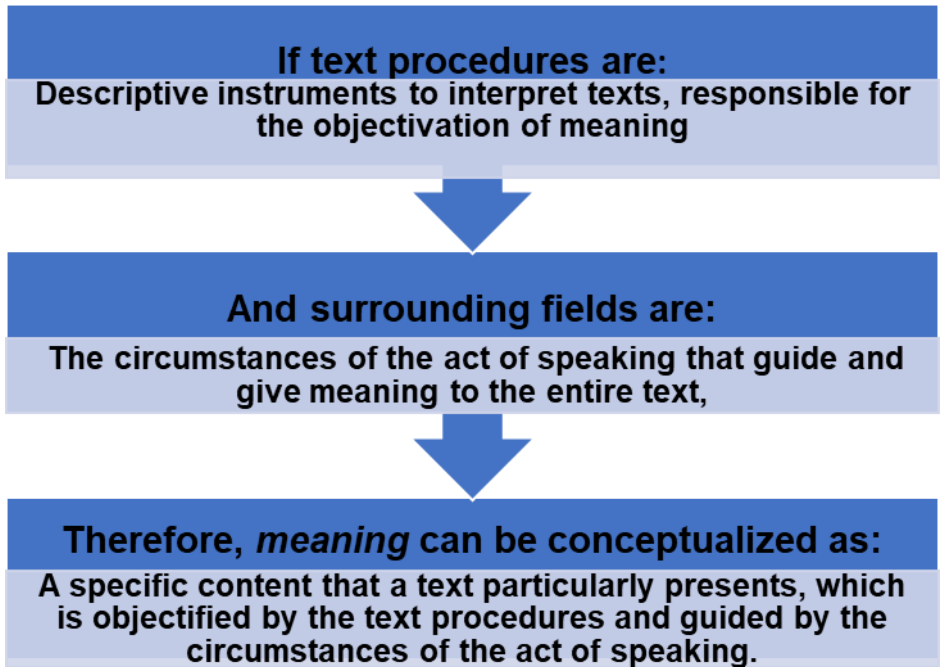
for them to be able to objectify meaning in accordance with the circumstances that permeate the text.

Ultimately, whenever we interpret the meaning of a text, the procedures which have been used in order for such interpretation to be established have functioned due to the unique combination of certain aspects present in the scenario of such act of speaking in which the text concerned is inserted.

In a schematic and purely illustrative way, it means that the presence of the X, Y, and Z surrounding fields is a precondition for the Z, W, and K procedures to exist in the text, objectifying the H meaning, and if any one of the variants which is attached to the procedures or the surrounding fields is changed, the H meaning will no longer exist (since it was formed from the particular arrangement between the X, Y, and Z surroundings fields and the Z, W, and K procedures) and a new meaning will be immediately composed, according to the instructions and objectifications coming from the new variants.

This is Coseriu's reality (2007: 276), as he states that "the meaning emerges from the various relationships of the signs in a text" (our translation). That is to say that the meaning is not only objectified by a descriptive instrument (text procedures), but by the cooperation between text procedures and surrounding fields. This argument is summarized in the following flowchart (Figure 3):

FIGURE 3: Proposal to develop the concept of *meaning*



Source: Authors

The text linguistics in which this framework is outlined is, according to Coseriu (2007), a science of the individual level of the act of speaking whose primary function is to explain the meaning of each text, or the hermeneutics of meaning. The text is, therefore, conceived as a phenomenon from the individual level of language.

Coseriu's concept of language is limited to the articulate language; therefore, the concept of the text with which his proposal of text linguistics is operated is also limited to the verbal

text. However, considering the way how texts are produced, one can notice that they include other semiotic elements, besides the verbal ones. Both verbal and non-verbal text procedures can function in the process of constructing textual meaning, as they can also be utilized in the process of interpreting multimodal texts in which verbal and non-verbal elements are present. Cavalcante and Custódio Filho (2010), for instance, point out that it is necessary to consider multimodality in text studies:

We maintain that researchers must assume the entire complexity of the textual object and propose analyses which account for such multiplicity, considering that, although being non-verbal, the varied semiotic manifestations or the multiple processes involved in situations of interaction without the verbal one undergo a linguistic treatment of interpretation; this would be the most consistent decision with the panorama currently outlined in text studies (Cavalcante and Custódio Filho, 2010: 65; our translation).

In this regard, the necessity of an investigation that may consider all or a large part of the aspects which are inherent to the individual, dynamic, and multifaceted nature of the text essentially involves multimodality. If the non-verbal aspects also occur, amongst other factors, in order to construct the meaning of a text, its multimodal characteristic shall theoretically and methodologically outline its study.

Thus, to accept the extension of the text limits cannot be faced as a concession, but as a compromise to seriously discuss the challenges imposed by the uses, even if it is meant to recognize the (temporary) absence of theoretical apparatus to treat certain situations (Cavalcante and Custódio Filho, 2010: 65; our translation).

Bentes, Ramos, and Alves Filho (2010) also touch upon the question of multimodality and point out to the multimodal nature of texts as one of the essential “challenging” objects to understand the processes of textual constitution and use.

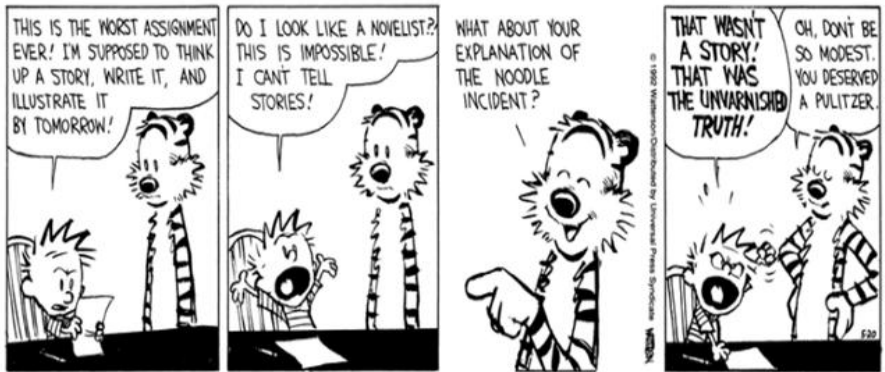
Therefore, in our view, the inclusion of multimodality within the scope of matters regarding Text Linguistics implies: - a necessary extension of the concept of a text, to incorporate non-verbal elements (images, color, etc.) into this text; - the use of analytical devices originated from the field of text studies, which enables us to work with such signs (Bentes, Ramos, and Alves Filho, 2010: 398; our translation).

We defend the idea that the analytical framework which we propose based on Coseriu’s text linguistics has enough space to contain non-verbal elements. A multimodal text (a cartoon, a comic strip, for instance) is constructed in the same circumstances of the act of speaking (the surrounding fields) as a verbal text. The text procedures that objectify the meaning may be verbal (given by language) or non-verbal (given by imagistic elements).

Elucidation of the grammar of a text

In this section we aim to demonstrate the empirical scope of the theoretical and analytical framework of text linguistics, as we presented in the previous section, based on the commentary of an example of a multimodal text: a comic strip by Bill Watterson (Figure 4). We will begin with the presentation of the surrounding fields, then we will cover the text procedures to finally exhibit the meanings. We emphasize that the process of construction of meaning occurs simultaneously and symbiotically during the act of speaking. The demonstration of each separate stage is only a methodological necessity.

Figure 4: *Calvin and Hobbes* by Bill Watterson



Source: *Calvin and Hobbes* by Bill Watterson for May 20, 1992 - GoComics (last access on March 12, 2021)

We shall begin with the extraverbal context, that is, the group of all the circumstances of speech. Since we are working with a verbal-imagery text, the term should be adapted to extraverbal-imagery context. Bill Watterson's comic strips were first published in the newspaper, some of them were compiled in books later; nowadays, many of them are available on the internet. Therefore, the physical context of the strip of our analysis can be partially recovered: the strip's first publication is clear (May 20, 1992), but the places and variety of platforms are innumerable, for Bill Watterson's strips have been published in a variety of newspapers around the world. Likewise, the practical context, that is, the specific circumstance of the production and, mainly, the reception of the strip (the discourse context) cannot be completely recovered since it may be varied: a newspaper, a book, or an internet page can be accessed and read anywhere, anytime by anyone.

The number of states of things known by the readers of the strip, at any given moment and place, represent the empirical

context: it is a comic strip which contains a series of other strips and was published by Bill Watterson. Calvin and Hobbes' story can be an object already known by a number of readers, or merely a random strip to readers who may not be familiar with the characters' story. Such state of things is inserted in the totality of all possible empirical contexts, that is, the whole familiar empirical universe. One knows that there are newspapers, books, websites, and that such sources contain a specific type of story which is characterized by a verbal written text or illustration. This is the natural context.

The knowledge concerning Bill Watterson's comic strips as well as the specific information about Calvin (a six-year-old boy full of personality) and Hobbes (a wise and sarcastic tiger) represent a cultural tradition of a certain group of people. Such cultural tradition contains the cultural context of the strip. Finally, the historical context of the strip cannot be simply recovered, that is, the peculiar or universal facts which specified the production of the strip are not easily available. One is able to recover a particular circumstance through the verb-imagery context: the existence of the worldwide Pulitzer Prize, only granted to individuals whose works of excellence are present in the areas of Journalism, Literature, and Musical Composition. The Pulitzer is mentioned by Hobbes in the fourth and last frame.

It is important to point out that, according to Coseriu (2007), the non-linguistic circumstances which are noticed or known by the speakers who surround them are not entirely present in the written text, that is, the written language does not contain all the extraverbal contexts. In the same way, the images do not contain all contexts. Thus, the extraverbal-imagery context present in the strip, as we have just presented, was partially recovered, and, sometimes, based on the verb-imagery context.

The verbal or discourse context, according to Coseriu, is one of the possible relationships between a sign in a text and other signs in the same text. The extension which we made in this study to a multimodal text leads to an enhancement of this notion. Therefore, we started to consider the verb-imagery context in order to analyze not only the sign, but the image, as well. Thus, the verb-imagery context is the surrounding field of the strip we analyzed. The individual frames are arranged one next to the other, within a sequential logic, which forms a series of verb-imagery sequences. Each of these sequences is the verb-imagery context from both the previous and the following ones. In the first frame, for instance, the piece of information “this is the worst assignment ever!” and the image of the two characters have an immediate link with the piece of information “I’m supposed to think up a story, write it and illustrate it by tomorrow” and the images of the second frame. The immediate verb-imagery context is established in this relationship. In the fourth frame, in Calvin’s speech, the word “story” appears, recovering anaphorically the word “explanation”, used by Hobbes (whose image is absent) in the third frame. Therefore, the third frame constitutes the mediate verb-imagery context for the fourth frame. Both cases are also examples of positive verbal context. However, there is a data set accessed by allusion, insinuation, suggestion, and inference which constitutes the negative verb-imagery context, or the elements that are not explicitly mentioned or displayed but might be known to the reader. This is the negative verb-imagery context. In the third frame, for instance, there are no details, either verbal or imagistic, of the “explanation” of the “incident”, not even the image of Hobbes’ features filled with joy, although they can be imagined. In the list of such contexts, the idiomatic context should still be considered, that is, all the English speakers’ idiomatic knowledge.

The immediate situation surrounding field cannot be recovered, that is, it is not possible to specify the effective circumstances in which the act (be it linguistic or imagistic) was originated. At some point, somewhere, Bill Watterson created and illustrated a short dialogue between two characters to be seen and read by a non-specific audience. In this case, the situation is necessarily a mediate one and, for this reason, the effective circumstances are constructed by the reader of the strip: the story has its own here and now, not coincident with the here and now of the very act of writing and drawing.

The region surrounding field, or the space within whose limits the signs and the images of the strip work together, cannot be precisely defined. In terms of production, it is known that Bill Watterson was born in Washington, D.C. and raised in Ohio. In this case, we can establish a rather general isogloss line which covers the spoken English in the United States, which is part of the “zone”, a subdivision of the region surrounding field, next to “sphere” and “vicinity”. These two subtypes of the region surrounding field, in turn, can only be generically specified: it is known that the cartoonist’s linguistic and cultural horizon is the state of Ohio where he lived and studied.

Finally, the universe of speech surrounding field of the strip, or its reference system, is the world of artistic creation and journalism.

Let us turn now to the specification of the (verb-imagery) procedures mobilized in the strip which are relevant to interpret its meaning (the actual content), considering the surrounding fields we have just recovered. As Coseriu (2007) points out, there are levels of determination of meaning, that is, there are partial meanings in some parts of the text which articulate with one another to form the global meaning. In the case of the strip, we identified partial meanings which articulate with one another to

form the global meaning. The instruments for interpretation (the verb-imagery procedures) follow the same reasoning.

The first procedure shown as relevant are the images of the two characters. The boy, sitting at the table on which we can see a sheet of paper and a pencil, shows astonishment in both facial and body expressions in the first frame; indignation in the second frame; and anger in the fourth frame. In addition to the boy's facial and body expression in the fourth frame, the verbal expression is in bold. The boy is absent in the third frame; the tiger, or the second character, is the focus of attention here. In addition, we identified the use of the boy's exaggerated statements which distort the school assignment he must do: "the worst assignment ever!", "this is impossible!", "this was the unvarnished truth". Such (verb-imagery) procedures, together with the surrounding fields, aim to identify a partial meaning: Calvin is dissatisfied with his homework (which is to write a story).

Hobbes, the tiger, in the first frame, shows facial expression of attentive listening, which gradually configurates, frame by frame, curiosity, happiness, and determination. Additionally, we should consider his moderate statements based on real life observations: "explanation of the noodle incident", "you deserved a Pulitzer". Based on these procedures, we can identify the minimization of the situation with a different meaning.

The verbal expression in the fourth frame is marked by an encapsulating anaphora: "that" summarizes the previous information. It is a procedure from which a meaning emerges: there is an oppositional link between the facts narrated by Hobbes and Calvin's defensive stance.

This opposition established in the text can also be understood as a procedure, which leads to another meaning: Calvin's despair is nothing but dramatization, and does not deserve serious

consideration, since he is, in fact, a veteran in the art of creating stories. It is all a strategy to avoid his school assignment. This situation is modulated by humor.

Therefore, the articulation of such meanings leads to the global meaning of the text: it is a reflection about a conflict of opinions in a situation which incompatible versions collide. One point of view is the construction of a new reality, more comfortable and convenient to certain interests and conduct slip. It is the point of view of rebellion (Calvin). The other point of view is that of the ethical conscience (Hobbes). The articulation of both opposing points of view reaches an ironic climax.

According to the theoretical framework on which we based, this meaning was objectified by the text-imagery procedures which, in turn, were calibrated by the surroundings fields. Concerning the one-dimensional exposition imposed upon us by writing, it is not possible to demonstrate the precise relationship amongst procedures, surrounding fields, and meaning.

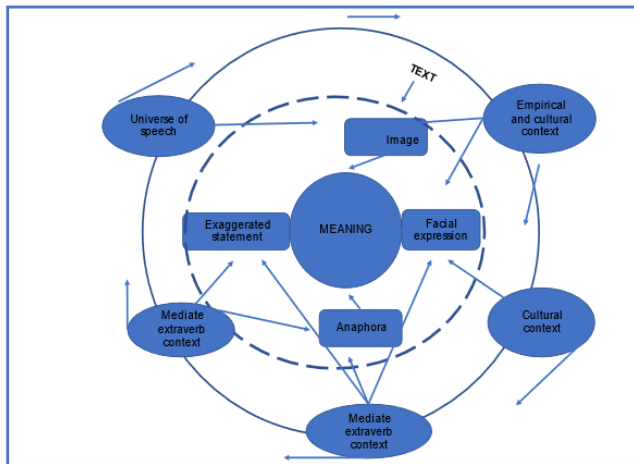
However, it is necessary to point out that each procedure was somehow more detailed in the framework of surrounding fields we presented, that is, the circumstances of production (partly from the receiving) of this particular strip. The opposition between “I can’t tell a story.” and “You deserved a Pulitzer.”, for instance, leads to the specific meanings of rebellion and ethical conscience, for it is considered in the extraverbal-imagery context of Calvin and Hobbes’ world. In a different text, more detailed in a different surrounding field, this same procedure would be mobilized to another meaning. This way, the images of a boy and a tiger are procedures which, only in this framework of surrounding fields, lead us to identify a Calvin and Hobbes story as the particular content of this strip. In a different framework of surrounding fields, the content would only be a boy and a tiger, and its content

(the producer’s intention) could be identified only with a question: “What does a dialogue between a boy and a tiger mean?”

Thus, if this framework of the surrounding fields of the strip were disregarded, and a framework of surrounding fields fairly limited were considered, for instance, a different meaning would be identified: a joke about a rebellious child who will not do his homework assignment. The small or scant recovery of the surrounding fields leads, therefore, to a meaning closer to the signification and designation.

The following framework (Figure 5) exemplifies, in a simplified way, the simultaneous and symbiotic action between certain surrounding fields and specific procedures in order to guide the meaning we identified in the comic strip.

Figure 5: Text procedures and surrounding fields



Source: Authors

It is our responsibility to highlight that, in the exercise which we have just analyzed, we only considered a few text procedures (the easiest ones to handle) and, therefore, the meanings that are articulated due to such procedures. Other procedures and meaning articulations may certainly be identified, which can also act in the identification of the global meaning of a text. To offer but one example of other possibilities of procedures and meanings, we mentioned the image of the tiger as a character which adopts human behavior. One may ask: what type of content (intention, attitude) does the speaker mean to present through this expression? This is, indeed, an imagistic procedure, whose meaning can only be identified in the framework of the surrounding fields of the comic strip.

Conclusion

In this work, we aimed to return to the text linguistics proposed by Eugenio Coseriu, bearing in mind its several development possibilities. Particularly, our interest, amongst the different tasks of such text linguistics, is in the effective investigation related to the description and interpretation of a certain text: its grammar. According to Coseriu, such proposal does not anticipate “the elaboration and a proceeding for the interpretation of a text of general validity”, that is, a proceeding that provides “the exact interpretation of any text upon its simple application scientifically correct”. What one expects, in fact, is “the elaboration of a catalogue of general possibilities available for the construction of meaning” (Coseriu, 2007: 247; our translation).

In this regard, we proposed an analytical framework based on what one can operate empirically with and the possibilities of the emergence of meaning. Based on this framework, we operated a short empirical demonstration: the analysis of the meaning of a comic strip by Bill Watterson. It is expected that this analytical

proposal should be valid and its scope tested with a great variety of examples in future works, and seen not as a comprehension technique, but as a type of “comprehension learning”. We believe that such “comprehension learning” is, to some extent, a contribution the dissemination, systematization, and extension of Eugenio Coseriu’s work.

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