

# Coseriu 100, 50, 20 – What Numbers Count (for) in a Life in Science

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1. Eugenio Coseriu (1921-2002) emerged in full force on the international scene in 1958 with a work that was to set the blueprint for the purport and overarching themes of his life-long scientific endeavors: *Sincronía, diacronía e historia. El problema del cambio lingüístico*. Katsuhiko Tanaka, one of the co-translators of the first Japanese edition (1981), himself a reputed linguist, points out in his explanatory study that this book is to be viewed not merely as a work in the field of linguistics, but rather as “an efficient weapon that enables one to deepen one’s own reflection on the fundamental issues of man, language, society and culture” (Tanaka 1981: 243<sup>1</sup>). Tanaka and the other co-translator, Takashi Kamei, who was the first to propose the idea that Coseriu needs to be considered “a linguist of/for the 21<sup>st</sup> century”, converge in assessing the Coserian paradigm as a theoretical outlook truly ahead of its time, whose genuine reception and full development can only be effected under the aegis of a future century.

Anniversaries and commemorations inevitably prompt us to assess the lives of people in terms of numbers: not the mere quantitative gauges proffered in the guise of ‘absolute’ objectivity, but the numbers that we endow with symbolic values, in the hope that trends, paths and meanings higher than the individuals concerned will thus emerge. Fully aware that such an enterprise is

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<sup>1</sup> All the translations from the Japanese originals are mine – E.T.-M.

nothing more than an exercise in rhetoric, let us indulge for a moment in this game of numbers, applied to the destiny of one Eugenio Coseriu, linguist by profession and *profession de foi*, born on July 27, 1921 in Mihăileni, Bessarabia (Romania), and deceased on September 7, 2002 in Tübingen, Germany.

In keeping with the fondness for threefold configurations found in Coseriu's own epistemic outlook, the following numerical triad comes to mind: 100 – 20 – 50:

- 100 years from Coseriu's birth (marked in many countries around the world by conferences and publications<sup>2</sup>, such the one we now bring to the reader's attention);
- 20 years since Coseriu's death (strictly speaking, 19, but the reader will forgive the rounding up for the sake of stylistic effect);
- 50 years after Coseriu's death prophesized by Takashi Kamei as necessary for a full understanding of the true scope and far-reaching implications that Coseriu's theoretical outlook has for the entire field of the humanities.

Let us explain the last member of this numerical triad. Just before 1981, elaborating his "Translator's notes" to the Japanese edition, Takashi Kamei ventures the following prediction:

Coseriu might be a Copernicus for the linguistics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century [...] Nevertheless, Coseriu's authentic evaluation will have to come from future generations; it is obvious that it does not lie within our powers today. If we were to name a few linguists who are representative for the 20<sup>th</sup> century –

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<sup>2</sup> A constantly updated map of such scientific events has been created by Johannes Kabatek and his team from the University of Zürich, and can be found at the link <https://coseriu100.info/map-coseriu100/>

although this also depends on personal preferences – then I would have to say that Coseriu, who will only reach the age of 60 in 1981 (unlike Jakobson, already much older, or Benveniste or Kuryłowicz, already passed away) is *not* a linguist representative for the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such is the extent to which 20<sup>th</sup>-century linguistics is ‘a-historical’ (*ahistorisch*)! [...] If we ask ourselves *who* pondered truly in depth, from a philosophical and historical perspective, on the grounding principles of the inextricable relation between *language* and the *human being*, then would not today’s mainstream linguistics appear as one in which these foundations are not sought for by *anyone at all*?! To this very day Schleicher’s ghost still haunts every corner of the world. *Linguistica in absentia hominis*! Albeit in a different way from Schuchardt’s destiny, Coseriu may also appear to be a kind of marginalized heretic. Considering that it took almost half a century after Saussure’s death for his status as an unflinching Olympus of linguistics to be established, then it may be that only the 21<sup>st</sup> century will see the day when Coseriu will be genuinely revered by all, as a giant, bright star surpassing Saussure, brought forth by our times. (Kamei 1981: 247-248; emphasis in the original)

Read in its full context, it becomes evident that Kamei’s prediction, later abridged in numerous European publications through the formula “Coseriu as a linguist *for* the 21<sup>st</sup> century”, is not intended as an encomiastic ode glossing on how much the scientific world has gained from the advent of Coseriu’s theory. Rather, it has the ring of a stark warning as to how much the scientific world stands to lose *if* Coseriu’s theory fails to be properly understood, re-valued and then assigned the place it deserves on the productive scene of linguistic research, both now and in the decades to come.

Besides the vast differences in philosophical foundations, theoretical framework and methodological point of focus between Coseriu's linguistics and many of its contemporary (rival) trends, alluded to by Kamei in the fragment quoted above, there is one more factor that places Coseriu's bid for wider recognition on a waiting list stretching into the next decades. The overpowering impact of Coseriu's genius on the people he interacted with directly, at congresses and on other professional occasions, sometimes perceived as confrontational and intimidating by the concerned parties, might sway the balance of how his work is perceived and evaluated. Aware of how crucial such contingent personal issues may become in the reality of *academia*, Kamei and other Japanese interpreters emphasize that Coseriu's genuine reception can only be expected when personal resentments and ideological biases will have faded away or become irrelevant<sup>3</sup>.

Regarded from this angle, it is undeniable that a more detached, and in this sense *objective*, assessment of Coseriu's work is bound to come long after the death of the man, and the deaths of those directly touched, in one way or another, by his powerful personality. In this we feel compelled to concur with Kamei's '50-year' time span.

There is, however, another side of the matter: science (and scholarship in general), besides being a search for "truth(s)" in its own right, validated precisely via a process of gradual but certain impersonalization, is at the same time a profession, a vocation, and a way of life. From this second viewpoint, the historical individual can become a role model for contemporary and future generations of scholars, and a personal story can morph into a biography relevant as an indelible part of the history of the

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<sup>3</sup> Numerous such testimonies and relevant bibliographical sources are analyzed in Tămăianu-Morita (2002, esp. Ch. 4 and 5).

respective scientific discipline(s). A truthful history of ideas is necessarily intertwined with the personal stories of the men and women who entertained those ideas, who engendered them, fought for them, lived through them, and sometimes – in ages past – died because of them. Perhaps honoring the 100<sup>th</sup> year from Coseriu’s birth and the 20<sup>th</sup> from his death is also a good occasion to assert that placing Coseriu’s personal destiny in such a framework would be important: not for the purpose of issuing value judgments, which, as Kamei sensibly warned, are not ours to make, but for the higher aim of reaching better comprehension.

2. It is with such considerations in mind that I borrowed part of the title of these introductory remarks from a famous scientist who might be situated at the very opposite pole from Coseriu in every respect: Richard Dawkins, with his biography *Brief Candle in the Dark. My Life in Science* (2013), who in turn borrows part of his title from another world-renowned scholar, Carl Sagan (*The Demon-Haunted World. Science as a Candle in the Dark*, 1996).

Let me sketch a few facets of the contrast between the two, just to make my point clear:

- Dawkins is firmly rooted in the natural sciences and upholds a worldview that extrapolates a radical form of deterministic causality from the realm of the natural to the realm of the social and the cultural; Coseriu resolutely defends the specificity of the cultural and the need for a different standard of “scientificity” in the case of humane sciences.
- Dawkins became famous outside his home discipline, evolutionary biology; Coseriu never really entered even the mainstream of his home discipline, linguistics, during the course of his life in the 20<sup>th</sup>

century.

- Dawkins was careful enough to record (or reconstruct and re-interpret) his personal life-path in retrospect, in the form of a best-selling autobiography; Coseriu merely sketched his far more spectacular life-path in dialogues designed and recorded by his disciples and colleagues, out of which the volume entitled “*Die Sachen sagen, wie sie sind...*”. *Eugenio Coseriu im Gespräch* (Kabatek & Murguía 1997) stands out in terms of comprehensiveness and exquisite logical articulation.
- Dawkins had a head start in his personal life and in his academic career, owing to birth and family background; Coseriu built himself from scratch, by the mere power of his prodigious intellect and magnetic personality.

And the list can go on.

However, both Dawkins and Coseriu firmly believed in their own scientific outlook and, in a sense, albeit to different degrees, subordinated their personal lives to science as the pursuit of “truth” as each of them defined it, drawing on long traditions of predecessors in their respective fields, and never losing sight of the philosophical foundations which nurtured those traditions. The felicitous formula “a life in science” is therefore appropriate to describe both scholars, and I hope our colleagues from the natural sciences will look kindly upon my recycling it here.

What kind of theoretical edifice was Coseriu striving to design and build, starting from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and continuing at an unrelenting pace up until the very last weeks before his death?

In a nutshell: Coseriu's project of an "integral linguistics" embraces the systematic study of all the forms and aspects of language as a cultural activity, i.e. as a free, purpose-oriented, infinite activity of meaning creation on a dimension of alterity – creation for and with the other –, as epitomized in what he defined as the three "primary essential universals of language": semanticity, alterity, creativity. Coseriu's work lays out the map of a vast territory to be explored: a grand design where the universal level of speaking in general, the historical level of particular languages and the individual level of discourse are all included in a coherent conceptual construction.

The dynamic diversity reflected in language varieties, the role of contexts and of all the circumstances of speech in the production and interpretation of meaning, the emphasis on taking poetic (literary) discourse as a privileged object for linguistic inquiry – since it is in it that all the sense-generating potentialities of language can be found in their full actualization –, these are just a few of the perspectives that place Coseriu at odds with some of his contemporary (20<sup>th</sup>-century) mainstream linguistic paradigms, and delineate a new path, whose success – or failure – is to be decided in the decades or centuries to come.

**3.** In the year 2021, which marks the centenary of Eugenio Coseriu's birth, the journal "Concordia Discors vs Discordia Concors: Researches into Comparative Literature, Contrastive Linguistics, Cross-Cultural and Translation Strategies" dedicates two issues (no. 15 and 16) to an exploration of Coseriu's legacy for the development of language studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and to a reappraisal of his life-long endeavors towards a systematic conceptual reconstruction of humane sciences in general. In keeping with the journal's profile, we invited contributions which adopt comparative and contrastive perspectives, aimed at

unraveling the interplay of language(s), discourse and culture.

The following open list of thematic areas and questions was initially offered for reflection and debate, in the spirit of anti-dogmatism<sup>4</sup> that constituted Coseriu's own guiding principle throughout his scholarly life:

- The philosophical foundations of Coseriu's "integral linguistics", with a view to addressing a broader and more radical question: Does linguistics (still) need philosophical foundations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
- Critical confrontations with competing (and arguably more successful – in a hypothetical box-office ranking of institutional endorsement –) theoretical trends from 20<sup>th</sup> century linguistics
- Phenomena pertaining to the reception of Coseriu's work in diverse linguistic-cultural spaces and periods of time (ranging between poles of acceptance / rejection, in-depth comprehension / partialization, creative development / servile imitation)
- The topicality of Coseriu's theoretical and methodological outlook for the contrastive study of languages and texts
- The challenges of building the "text linguistics as a hermeneutics of textual sense" envisaged by Coseriu, and delineating its interfaces with other disciplines of textuality and discourse (such as stylistics, poetics, semiotics, discourse analysis, text pragmatics)
- Possibilities and limitations of integral text linguistics as a framework for studying poetic (literary) texts
- Coseriu's contributions to translation theory and practice, in

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<sup>4</sup> Along with "objectivity", "humanism", "tradition" and "public utility", "anti-dogmatism" is one of the five "principles of linguistics as a cultural science" formulated by Coseriu (see esp. Coseriu 1992 and 1999).



particular his methodological dissociation between “rational” vs “empirical” limitations of translation.

Contributions proposed by scholars from Brasil, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Romania, Russia, Spain and the U.K.<sup>5</sup> were selected for the two issues, covering all the areas initially proposed, and bringing together voices young and old from all the continents directly or indirectly related to Coseriu’s destiny. The common denominator of these texts is the fact that they all put forward original, critical-innovative developments starting from Coseriu’s work: in-depth exegeses and comparative vistas, proposals of new connections with other theoretical models, applications in novel contexts to a wide variety of idiomatic and discursive material. In this sense, they embody *integral linguistics* as a project in the making, as a living and growing bundle of linguistic disciplines oriented to the future.

**4.** Back then to the question(s) implicit in the title of this opening statement:

(i) What do numbers count in a destiny such as Coseriu’s?

and

(ii) Do numbers count, after all, in and after a life such as Coseriu’s?

The contributions included in these two issues of “Concordia Discors vs Discordia Concors” attest both to the productivity and to the topicality of Coseriu’s theoretical and methodological framework. They also evince that Coseriu embodies an epistemic and a philosophical attitude – a way of understanding man,

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<sup>5</sup> The order is alphabetical.

language, culture, history, freedom and creativity – that is rich, coherent and malleable, utterly rewarding when properly understood and absorbed into one’s own scholarly designs.

This is perhaps the best homage we can pay to this great mind now, in the 100<sup>th</sup> year from his birth and (only) the 20<sup>th</sup> year from his death. With a little bit of luck, the younger contributors<sup>6</sup> to our journal will still be around 30 years on, around 2050, to see if Kamei’s tentative prophecy will have come to pass by then. These numbers – 100, 50, 20 – have no bearing at all on the intrinsic value of Coseriu’s work; they only set landmarks, and perhaps also time-bound goals, for us – Coseriu’s readers, interpreters, critics, followers and opponents alike.

Finally, what is perhaps most significant for those of us who might no longer be around in the 2050s to inspect the balance sheet of these (or other) numbers, is that Coseriu triumphed in the sphere of universally-relevant scientific contributions, against all the (historical) odds of his time and place of birth. No less than more visible names in both the natural and the humane sciences, perhaps even more than many, he also led a personal life filled with marvels, danger and adventure. We can only hope that Eugenio Coseriu’s “life in science”, with its great sacrifices and grand achievements, will continue to inspire and give sustenance to present and future generations of linguists, who all have to rise to the challenge of their own times.

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