

Entries in *The Encyclopedia of Semiotics* (P. Bouissac, Ed.). Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1998: Max Bense (pp. 72-74), Ernst Cassirer (pp. 108-110), Computer (pp. 136-138), Eugen Coseriu (pp. 148-150), Interface (pp. 319-321), Parallelism (pp. 465-467), Structure (pp. 601-603)

Eugen Coseriu

Building on an impressive work in the history of linguistics (1969, 1972) and language theory (1962), Eugen Coseriu (pronounced Co-sheer'-yoo) contributes to modern semiotics probably more than semioticians have acknowledged so far. From the outset, these contributions can be grouped as follows: improved understanding of semiotic notions from the past; innovative distinctions that improve upon structuralist dichotomies; original perspective in the conception of language as a system.

Born in Mihaileni (Bessarabia, Romania) and educated in Iasi, exposed to many cultures – after his doctoral work in language (Rome, 1944) and philosophy (Milan, 1949), he taught at the universities of Montevideo, Coimbra, Bonn, Frankfurt, Strassbourg, and Tübingen (Chair of Romance Philology since 1966) – Coseriu remained interested in how languages work throughout his academic career. By no accident, many of his articles focus on structural-semantic aspects related to Romance languages (Romanian, in particular). The experience of this inquiry was rewarding and, for those not aware of the complexity of his mother tongue, surprising.

Although relatively few in number, articles dealing with words in Romanian (as well as in some of the many languages in which he is fluent) are, after all, contributions to one of the most disputed aspects of linguistics, and by extension semiotics: the relation between words and the things they name. Coseriu is well aware of Kratylos' position (according to which there is a physical relation to be accounted for), but opts for a very nuanced theory of arbitrariness (cf. 1967) in which Hermogenes is understood within the Aristotelian conception of language. The notion of sign, as generalization of the word, is derived from a linguistic perspective that dominates his entire contribution to semiotics.

Other contributions to the history of semiotic ideas are in the area of understanding the model of language in the work of ancient philosophers, in particular revealing that this model is already triadic, or in his analysis of some of the major contributions to semiotic concepts (made by, among others, Christian Wolf under the influence of Leibniz, and Johann Heinrich Lambert), or of linguistic contributions of relevance to semiotics (Wilhelm von Humboldt's typology, 1973; Pierre-Nicholas Bonany, 1975). Scholars interested in Coseriu's work can expect more original distinctions in works currently under print, such as "*Mon Saussure*" *Antonino Pagliaro teorético del linguaggio* and *Antonio de Nebrija en la historia de la lingüística*.

Witness and participant to the post-Saussurian structuralist attempt at defining a language theory, Coseriu tested major hypotheses of anthropological and cultural nature in various linguistic contexts. Hjelmslev's sign theory underwent such a test (cf. 1962) and as a result, Coseriu advanced a more dynamic definition of the dichotomy Form-Substance. The same can be said in regard to his differentiation between the Saussurian *significant-signifié*, and even more to his better understanding and use of the dichotomy *synchronism-diachronism*. At this juncture, his critical contributions turn into an original perspective.

What in Hjelmslev's work was the complementary dichotomy between system and text, becomes in Coseriu's theoretic contributions a dynamic interplay between a revised notion of system and norm. System, in his conception, is more than the sum of all functional structures of language. It contains, in addition, all possible structures as these can result from the rules of a language. The potentiality thus introduced ensures its dynamics. Norm reflects precisely the fact that not all that is possible is actually realized. In many ways, Coseriu opens a perspective different from that of Chomsky's *competence-performance* dichotomy. Indeed, the norm is a collective instantiation of the system. The individual concrete realization of the norm is the word (*habla*) containing, above and beyond the norm, the expressive originality of speaking individuals (cf. 1952). Intent upon reconciling the synchronism-diachronism dichotomy, Coseriu advances in his model the hypothesis of language functioning synchronically, while constituted diachronically (cf. 1958). The result, a coherent structural semantics (very different from Greimas' structure semantics) is a sort of distillation of historic, methodic, and conceptual contributions.

This original model influenced quite a number of researchers in fields as diverse as the language of gestures (Giovanni Meo-Zilio's work admits this influence) and the semiotics of theater (Erika Fischer-Lichte distinguishes between theatrical code as system, norm, and speech, cf. 1983). It is more than likely that more semiotic contributions inspired by Coseriu's writings will be produced.

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