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## ON THE INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LINGUISTICS AND PHILOSOPHY IN EUGENIO COSERIU'S SCIENTIFIC THINKING

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### Abstract\*

This article aims to show how closely interrelated philosophy and linguistics are in Eugenio Coseriu's scientific thinking. It argues that Synchrony, Diachrony and History (SDH), one of the author's major works, cannot be conceived as a mere treatise on the problem of linguistic change, but needs to be recognised as a fundamental work for unravelling the epistemological principles that underpin the philosophical-scientific edifice of Coseriu's linguistic theory. Based on SDH, it will be shown how, in this work, Coseriu insists on the errors of the approach and method that the causalist perspective promotes, how he advocates for the differentiation between natural sciences and human sciences and the consequent

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\* This paper is based on the content of the third chapter of my book *La lingüística como ciencia humana. Una incursión desde la filosofía de la ciencia* [Linguistics as a human science: An incursion from the philosophy of science]. However, it is not merely a translation of that chapter, which had, in turn, the precedent of information already outlined in López Serena (2019b). I have thoroughly revised the entire text, introduced a large number of reformulations, deleted some passages, and updated the bibliographical references. All quotations are published in English here for the first time, some based on my adaptations in Spanish, and are shown with quotation marks when not indented. All references refer to the publications cited in their original languages. In its purpose of highlighting the importance of Eugenio Coseriu's contributions to the epistemological grounding of linguistic theorising and description, this paper coincides with the aims of López Serena (2021 and in press). I trust that the decision to offer non-Spanish-speaking readers the results of my approaches to the philosophical dimension of Eugenio Coseriu's linguistic thinking will contribute to the better dissemination of the valuable work of this indispensable author. The research on which this article is based belongs to the project I+D+i PID2021-123763NA-I00 *Hacia una diacronía de la oralidad/escrituralidad: variación concepcional, traducción y tradicionalidad discursiva en el español y otras lenguas románicas* (DiacOralEs) [Towards a diachrony of orality/literacy: conceptional variation, translation, and discursive traditionality in Spanish and other Romance languages], funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033.

application, in the latter, of a finalist perspective, and finally how he describes the epistemic activities involved in resorting to the original knowledge or intuition that the linguist has as a speaker of the language under study.

**Keywords:** Eugenio Coseriu’s scientific thinking, philosophy of linguistics, Sincronía, diacronía e historia (Synchrony, Diachrony and History), natural vs human sciences, causal vs finalist explanations, original knowledge, intuition.

## 1. Introduction

One of the rarely emphasised<sup>1</sup> idiosyncratic characteristics of Eugenio Coseriu’s scientific thinking is the nature of the intersection between philosophy and linguistics frequently presented in his work. For Coseriu, linguistics and philosophy are closely interrelated, to such an extent, in fact, that in *Sincronía, diacronía e historia* (Synchrony, Diachrony and History) – the work on which the reflections contained in the following pages are based – in stark contrast to those who contend that ‘with respect to philosophy, linguistics is autonomous’, he states that ‘such autonomy is impossible, and to claim it, in itself, is a contradiction in terms’ (Coseriu 1958/1988<sup>3</sup>:199). Coseriu further argues that:

many linguists, who yearn for **an autonomy that is in fact illegitimate**, regard philosophy, which is the very science of principles, with suspicion. Owing to this state [...] of regrettable isolation, old problems, which have long since been solved or eliminated as inconsistent by philosophy or by other human sciences, are still presented as ‘current’ in linguistics. (Coseriu 1958/1988<sup>3</sup>:217, n. 63; my bold)

In this regard, Coseriu’s own position is dramatically opposed to that of other linguists whom he describes as “yearning for an illegitimate autonomy” in relation to philosophy. In his linguistic works, he highlights what – for the moment – could be called, in his words, “problems of philosophy of language”, which, he indicates, “are specifically dealt with [...] in *Forma y sustancia* (*Form and Substance*), in *Logicismo y antilogicismo* (*Logicism and Antilogicism*), in ‘Determinación y entorno’

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<sup>1</sup> For some of the few exceptions in this respect cf. Agud (2003, 2021, 2023), López Serena (2009, 2019a, 2019b, 2021, 2022), Haßler (2015), Albrecht (2015), Bota (2008), Vilcu (2014), Rodríguez (2016), Trabant (2021).

(‘Determination and Environment’), and in *Sincronía, diacronía e historia* (*Synchrony, Diachrony and History*)...” (Coseriu 1968:50).

In fact, Coseriu exhibits an evident propensity to constantly base his linguistic theorising on aspects that, strictly speaking, do not belong to the theory of language or general linguistics,<sup>2</sup> but rather to the field of philosophy of language. Moreover, Coseriu’s inclination towards philosophy is also recurrently manifest in his concern for the scientific legitimacy of the discipline – a concern that is no longer the subject of philosophy of language, but philosophy of *linguistics* – and highlights his vindication that “as regards knowledge, *what matters is the scientific quality of the knowledge*, regardless of whether it leads to a yes or no” (Coseriu 1953/1977:262; my italics). As a consequence, the twosome formed by linguistics and philosophy, expressed in his work, does not actually constitute a binomial, but rather – as could not be otherwise, given Coseriu’s predilection for tripartite schemes – a trinomial. This trinomial or ‘trinity’ (if we echo Haßler’s 2015 proposal to name such tripartite schemes), which could be perfectly represented by a triangle (see Figure 1 below), is more inclined towards philosophy. As such, it is unsurprising that two of its vertices, philosophy of language and philosophy of linguistics, are, as their names suggest, philosophical in nature.

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<sup>2</sup> On the differentiation between linguistic theory and general linguistics, see Section 3, Figures 2 and 3, below.

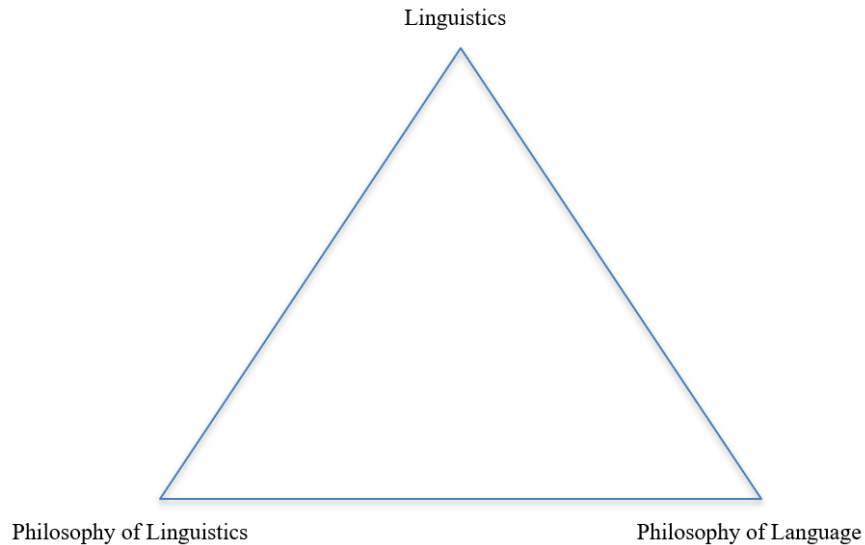


Figure 1. Linguistics and Philosophy in Eugenio Coseriu's thinking

Thus, when analysing the interrelationship between linguistics and philosophy in Coseriu's scientific work, there are three areas that cannot be ignored: linguistics, philosophy of language, and philosophy of linguistics. As far as the latter two are concerned, philosophy of language and philosophy of linguistics, it is important to underline that their interests and objects of analysis are by no means coincidental. Owing to this, in contrast to the frequent and sometimes indistinct use of the labels *philosophy of language*, *linguistic philosophy*, and *philosophy of linguistics*, I insist on using a differentiated approach:

- (i) *philosophy of language* to refer to the branch of philosophy that deals with the relationship between language, knowledge, and reality, in relation to the nature of meaning, and asks, for example, whether or not it is possible to differentiate clearly between the three domains (language, knowledge, and reality), as well as inquiring into the nature of language itself.
- (ii) *linguistic philosophy* to denote the philosophical trend which, inspired by Wittgenstein's philosophy, gave rise to the renowned linguistic focus in Anglophone philosophy.

- (iii) And lastly, *philosophy of linguistics* to allude to any metatheoretical, epistemological – or, if you will, methodological – reflection whose object of analysis is the tenets of linguistics as a scientific discipline.

Moreover, I firmly believe that by defending this differentiation, my stance is categorically consistent with Coseriu's commitment to precise and rigorous categorisations. In fact, in line with Coseriu's thinking, together with the close relationship observed between linguistics and philosophy, it is no coincidence that the second clearest and most general constant of Coseriu's contribution to the three fields mentioned (linguistics, philosophy of language, and philosophy of linguistics) is his obsession with differentiation. For example, in the field of linguistics, he differentiates those aspects that concern the *system* from those that concern the *norm* (see Coseriu 1952)<sup>3</sup>, or the *universal*, *historical*, and *actual* level of language (Coseriu 1956-57, 1988, 1990, 2007), and, in correlation, *elocutionary*, *idiomatic*, and *discursive knowledge*, and the concepts of *designation*, *meaning*, and *sense*, and *congruence*, *correctness*, and *appropriateness* (sets of three which Haßler 2015 referred to as the Coseriu trinities). And in the sphere of interrelations between linguistics and philosophy, he differentiates between language theory and general linguistics, on the one hand, and philosophy of language and linguistics, on the other. Nevertheless, as seen above, he does not consider them autonomous disciplines.

However, having just defended the differentiation theory above, according to Coseriu, it is more difficult to clearly differentiate between philosophy of language and philosophy of linguistics than it appears. Nevertheless, there is at least one article in which Coseriu seems firmly committed to clarifying his stance. In a work published in Italian, in relation to differentiating between generic interdisciplinarity and specific interdisciplinarity, Coseriu states that the former (generic interdisciplinarity) can be established between any discipline and philosophy in two different forms: as a philosophy of the object of the

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<sup>3</sup> With regard to Coseriu's concept of norm, of particular interest are: Koch (1988), Méndez García de Paredes (1999), López Serena (2015), Kabatek (2020), and Willems (2022), among others.

discipline – specifically, as ontological reflection, characteristic of *philosophy of language* – and as *philosophy of science* or epistemology:

L'interdisciplinarietà genérica è quella che si riscontra fra ogni disciplina e la filosofia, quest'ultima sotto due forme diverse: come filosofia dell'oggetto della disciplina in questione e come filosofia della scienza (epistemologia) (Coseriu 1980:44).<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Aims and structure of this paper

From what has been discussed so far, it would seem clear that Coseriu's work is built on the basis of two fundamental concerns or 'obsessions'. On the one hand, the indissoluble union, in his approach to language, between the linguistic dimension and the philosophical dimension of theorisation, and, on the other, his obstinacy for differentiation. In relation to both the former and the latter, the aim of this paper is manifold. To begin with (Section 3.1), I analyse whether Coseriu's evident fixation on differentiation was reflected in his philosophical-linguistic considerations with the same intensity as it was in his purely linguistic work or linguistics per se. Next (Section 3.2), I analyse to what extent Coseriu's obsession with differentiation stemmed – or did not stem – from his contact with philosophy. And lastly (Section 3.3), it seems pertinent to examine which aspects of Coseriu's linguistic thinking, argumentation procedures, categorisations, and essential concepts of his linguistic theorising had their origin in questions of a philosophical nature, especially with regard to philosophy of linguistics. For the last objective, I primarily use *Sincronía, diacronía e historia* (Section 4), one of the publications that Coseriu highlights as one of the main works in which he addresses questions of philosophy of language and which, to my knowledge, was first addressed in an epistemological analysis in López Serena (2019b). In this regard, I aim to show to what extent *Sincronía, diacronía e historia* is not, as the subtitle of this monograph states, a mere treatise on the problem of linguistic change, but a fundamental work for unravelling the

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<sup>4</sup> Generic interdisciplinarity can be found between any discipline and philosophy, the latter in two different forms: as a philosophy of the object of the discipline in question and as a philosophy of science (epistemology).

epistemological principles that underpin the philosophical-scientific edifice of Coseriu's linguistic theory in its entirety.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. The philosophical roots of Coserian linguistics

Attesting to Coseriu's eagerness to differentiate, which is exceptionally characteristic of his linguistic and philosophical works, is not particularly difficult. One only has to open the first pages of his *Geschichte der Sprachphilosophie...*<sup>6</sup> where, in the introductory chapter at the head of the original edition of the first volume – a chapter that Albrecht unfortunately removed in his 2003 edition – Coseriu denounces the confused state of affairs<sup>7</sup> and the state of abandonment or neglect<sup>8</sup> in which, at the time of his writing, the philosophy of language was, in his opinion, mired:

Die Forschungslage im Bereich der Sprachphilosophie erweist sich bei einer näheren Betrachtung als *verworren* und *hilflos*. (Coseriu 1969:1; my italics)<sup>9</sup>

#### 3.1 Coseriu's scientific distinctions

As a result, and in view of his passion for *cognitio clara et distincta*, the need naturally arose to provide students with a general conceptual framework from which to define philosophy of language as a distinct discipline. As could not be otherwise, the conceptual framework comprised

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<sup>5</sup> This is also suggested by the fact that it is the only work by Coseriu that is echoed by Esa Itkonen, one of the most eminent contemporary linguistics philosophers (see e.g. Itkonen 2011, 2013-14).

<sup>6</sup> I refer to *Geschichte der Sprachphilosophie von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* (History of the Philosophy of Language from Antiquity to the Present Day), which was published in German by Rudolf Windisch and Gunter Narr in 1969 and 1972, respectively, based on the edited notes taken in two homonymous courses that Coseriu had taught in the winter semesters of 1968/69 and 1970/71 at the University of Tübingen. A version in Spanish has not been published (see Coseriu 1969, 2003). For an English review of Coseriu's History of the Philosophy of Language, see Forster (2017).

<sup>7</sup> The adjective *verworren* used by Coseriu equates to 'chaotic', 'confused', 'disorderly', 'muddled'.

<sup>8</sup> The word he uses in German, which I emphasise, as the participle *verworren*, referred to in the previous footnote and italicised in the following quotation, is *hilflos*.

<sup>9</sup> On closer examination, the research situation in the field of philosophy of language proves to be confused and neglected.

a series of basic terminological-conceptual differentiations which Coseriu embodies in the diagrams reproduced in Figures 2 and 3 (below). Within linguistics, these concepts facilitate the differentiation between (i) the linguistics of languages or text as historical disciplines, (ii) general linguistics, and (iii) the theory of language – the latter, according to Coseriu, is intimately related to the philosophy of language and (iv) the philosophy of language itself:

1. Historical science (*eine Wissenschaft als Geschichte*)
2. General science (*eine Wissenschaft vom Allgemeinen*)
3. Philosophical science (*eine Wissenschaft im Sinne der Philosophie*)

Figure 2. The three categories of science according to Coseriu (1969:12)

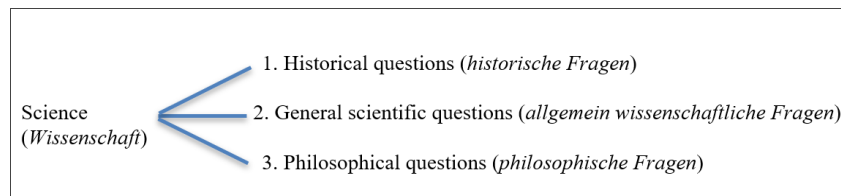


Figure 3. The three categories of scientific questions according to Coseriu (1969:13)

Although a detailed analysis of these differentiations would divert us from the objectives formulated in Section 2, we should not overlook the fact that Coseriu considers historical knowledge as a specific type of scientific knowledge. He defines it as a type of science that deals with individual objects by considering their uniqueness and not that they belong to a certain class. He also specifies that this type of historical science (including the linguistics of languages and text linguistics) is not only interested in the development of a historical individual (i.e. the diachronic aspect) but also in the description of the historical individual at a certain point in time (synchronic). I would like to highlight this point because I believe it is important to emphasise how the notion of the historical (which, in the first chapter of Coseriu's *Geschichte der Sprachphilosophie*, is suggested as having a propaedeutic function), from the perspective of the philosophy of linguistics, is perfectly coherent – or, rather, absolutely identical – to the notion of the historical that is proposed in *Sincronía, diacronía e historia*:



A language, in the ordinary sense of the term (Spanish language, French language, etc.), is by its very nature a ‘historical object’. [In note] **A historical object ‘by its [very] nature’ is an absolutely individuated object**, within its species, as such and no other [...]; in other words, an object which has a proper name (Cosériu 1958/1988<sup>3</sup>:20 & 20, n. 27; my bold).

This being the case, the idea established in Cosériu’s book on the theory of linguistic change that differentiations are clearly inspired by epistemology seems to gain strength (see Sections 3.3 and 4 below).

### 3.2 The philosophical roots of Cosériu’s distinctions

The coincidence that I have highlighted above helps to clarify to what extent the concepts and categories with which Cosériu approaches the problem of linguistic change come not from linguistics but from philosophy (in this case from the philosophy of linguistics, which is responsible for differentiating types of scientific knowledge). This approach to the definition of historical objects is far from exhausted in *Sincronía, diacronía e historia*, but it is shown with absolute clarity in the differentiation that Cosériu establishes between the:

three different problems of language change, which are often confused with each other: *a) the rational problem of change* (why do languages change, i.e. why are they not immutable?);<sup>10</sup> *b) the general problem of change*, which, as will be seen, is not a ‘causal’ problem, but a ‘conditional’ one (under what conditions does language change tend to occur?),<sup>11</sup> and *c) the historical problem of such a determined change*.<sup>12</sup> (Cosériu 1958/1988<sup>3</sup>:65-66; my bold)

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<sup>10</sup> Note that this is a philosophical question concerning the theory of language, which for Cosériu, as we have already seen, cannot be autonomous from philosophy.

<sup>11</sup> This is therefore a problem of general linguistics.

<sup>12</sup> A question that naturally concerns historical linguistics.

a)	Theory of language (and philosophy)	<i>Rational</i> problem of change: theoretical problem of language mutability	Why do languages change? Why are they not immutable?
b)	Universal linguistics	<i>General</i> problem of change	Under what conditions do language changes usually occur?
c)	Historical linguistics	<i>Historical</i> problem relating to a determined change	What led to the future Romance languages?

Figure 4. The three problems of linguistic change in relation to the three types of science established by Coseriu

The three types of problems regarding linguistic change are correlated with three different types of scientific questions – as can be seen more clearly in Figure 4, above – and thus with three different types of sciences. Rather than focusing on the boundary between historical and universal linguistics, or that between historical linguistics and the theory of language, Coseriu was primarily concerned with avoiding confusion between the *rational* perspective – pertaining to philosophy and the theory of language – and the *general* perspective, pertaining to general linguistics:

Indeed, the second problem is a problem of what is known as ‘general linguistics’; and, since there is no ‘general linguistics per se, except as a generalisation of the results of historical linguistics, this problem is a generalisation of certain aspects of the problems of the third type [...]; equally, the solution is a generalisation of several solutions of historically concrete problems and, in turn, an accumulation of what is known about historical facts, it offers hypotheses for the solution of new concrete problems. In contrast, the first problem is the theoretical problem of the *mutability of languages*; and, as a theoretical problem, it certainly depends on knowledge of the ‘facts’, for every theory is a theory of experience (i.e. of the real), but its solution is by no means a mere generalisation of several partial solutions. (Coseriu 1958/1988<sup>3</sup>:66)

However, in relation to the third objective of this study (see Section 2 above), what is interesting with respect to the symbiosis between philosophy and linguistics in Coseriu’s work is that the *raison d’être* of the

differentiation between the rational problem of the mutability of linguistic change and the general problem of linguistic change is due, once again, to an epistemological conviction. In fact, for Coseriu, the theoretical problem of the *mutability of languages* is

- (1) a pre-existing problem, and its solution depends on the correct approach to problems of type *b* and *c*. The approach taken, as is necessarily the case in human sciences, “is based on the *original knowledge* about language, i.e. on the knowledge, prior to all science, that man has of himself”. (Coseriu 1958/1988<sup>3</sup>:66; my italics)<sup>13</sup>

In this regard, it would be safe to say that for Coseriu the mistake of confusing this theoretical problem with a problem of universal linguistics derives from what he identifies as a fundamental confusion: that between human sciences and natural sciences (see López Serena 2019a: Chapters 1 and 2):

- (2) “One of the errors that most afflict linguistics” – and which also “stems” from considering languages as *things* and “from the confusion between human sciences and natural sciences” – is the desire to reduce theoretical (rational) problems to merely *general problems*”. (Coseriu 1958/1988<sup>3</sup>:66-67; my italics)<sup>14</sup>

Along with the differentiation between the rational problem and the general problem of linguistic change, based on his epistemological convictions, Coseriu established another differentiation between the theory of language and general linguistics, which can be found in the ‘Preliminary Note’ to the Spanish edition of the *Lecciones de lingüística general* (see Coseriu 1981) and, as is common knowledge, establishes a differentiation between the theory of language and general linguistics:

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<sup>13</sup> Given that we will return to this quotation later, in order to facilitate its location, and despite the fact that its length did not require it, the text has been indented as in the previous chapter and, unlike the treatment given to other literal passages reproduced previously, it is identified with the number (1). Hereinafter, the same procedure will be followed when a paragraph following a given quotation should be referred back to.

<sup>14</sup> To which he adds: In the case of linguistic change, this error consists in believing that the problem of the *mutability* of languages is solved by finding the ‘cause’, or all the alleged ‘causes’, of the many particular *changes* (Coseriu 1958/1988<sup>3</sup>: 66-67).

(3) strictly speaking, “*in accordance with my epistemological convictions*”, I should have called this book *Lecciones de teoría del lenguaje y lingüística general* (Lessons in Language Theory and General Linguistics) (Coseriu 1981:11; the non-binding italics are mine).

He then explains that he did not do so “for practical reasons and as a concession to tradition, as well as because the book also deals with other problems (in particular, the *theory* and historical *interpretation of linguistics* itself)” (Coseriu 1981:11; my italics).<sup>15</sup>

### 3.3 Coseriu’s philosophy of linguistics

As previously mentioned, one of my main hypotheses in relation to the interrelationship between linguistics and philosophy in Coseriu’s work is that the vindication of differentiation as an antidote to the confusion, disorder, and chaos that impede knowledge is indebted not to his approaches to the philosophy of language but to his incursions into the philosophy of linguistics. Regarding this aspect, I agree with Bota, who states that

la dimension déterminante du travail philosophique de Coseriu est d’ordre épistémologique, et sous-tend l’ensemble de sa conception. (Bota 2008:5)<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> That Coseriu attached great importance to the discussion of the epistemological foundations of the various linguistic trends and methodologies is also evident in his opposition to many of Chomsky’s postulates, or when, in his *Panorama de la lingüística iberoamericana* [Panorama of Ibero-American linguistics] (1940-1965) – first published in English under the title “General perspectives” (see Coseriu 1968) – he complained about the scant interest that Spanish-American and Brazilian linguistics had devoted to these questions.

<sup>16</sup> The full text of the excerpt from which this quotation is taken is as follows: “Coseriu n’a pas fait de la philosophie un objet en soi, il ne l’a jamais professée en qualité de philosophe, mais en qualité de “scientifique du langage”, lui accordant un *statut opérationnel*. Plus précisément, la philosophie a eu pour lui un rôle instrumental, à la fois dans la détermination du statut de l’*objet* de la science (le langage) et dans la détermination du statut de la *démarche scientifique* elle-même (la science du langage).

This is why I believe we must turn to Coseriu's philosophy of linguistics in search of the origin of some of the differentiations that will be of interest in what remains in this paper. In this regard, passages such as the one reproduced in (3) enable us to understand that Coseriu's solid commitment to differentiate comes from his epistemological convictions. In these brief statements of barely a line-and-a-half of text, it seems evident that Coseriu is alerting us to the role that his epistemological convictions play in his relentless delimitative activity, convictions that were the principal reason he was not satisfied with the title *Lecciones de lingüística general* and, therefore, the *raison d'être* for the differentiation between the theory of language (in German *Sprachtheorie*) – which concerns everything universal and necessary in language (e.g. Coseriu's universal semanticity, alterity, historicity, etc.) – and general linguistics (in German *Sprachwissenschaft*), which is responsible for the study of everything general in languages (see Figure 4 above).

However, what exactly are Coseriu's epistemological convictions? As argued in López Serena (2019a), Coseriu's phenomenological stance can be accommodated within the hermeneutic perspective of the philosophy of science, an approach that in contemporary linguistics is still current in the work of authors such as Finnish linguist Esa Itkonen, whose approaches are compared to those of Coseriu in López Serena (2009).<sup>17</sup> The distinguishing feature of hermeneutic epistemology is the need to

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Ce rôle est fondamental et permanent, dans la mesure où pour l'auteur il n'y a pas de science sans philosophie, même quand la science prétend s'en dégager complètement, même quand cette philosophie reste inconsciente ou n'est admise que partiellement. C'est pourquoi **la dimension déterminante du travail philosophique de Coseriu est d'ordre épistémologique, et sous-tend l'ensemble de sa conception**" (Bota, 2008: 5; my bold) [Coseriu did not make philosophy an object in itself, he never professed it as a philosopher, but as a 'scientist of language', and gave it an *operational status*. More precisely, philosophy played an instrumental role for him, both in determining the status of the *object* of science (language) and in determining the status of the *scientific process* itself (the science of language). This role is fundamental and permanent, insofar as for the author there is no science without philosophy, even when science claims to be completely free of it, even when philosophy remains unconscious or is only partially admitted. This is why **the determining dimension of Coseriu's philosophical work is epistemological and underlines the whole of his conception**].

<sup>17</sup> See now López Serena (in press).

sharply differentiate between human sciences and natural sciences, a differentiation which Coseriu often invokes.<sup>18</sup>

The philosophical-scientific differentiation between the two types of sciences by authors who defend the need to take this distinction into account is based on two fundamental rationales: the different nature of the object of study and the different types of knowledge that characterise the two sciences. In this regard, determining the specific nature of language as an object of study of human sciences proper is essential to understand Coseriu's philosophical-linguistic thinking. In fact, both in his work and in that of the hermeneutic philosophers of science, the answer to the question (i) what kind of object is language, also decides (ii) what kind of science is linguistics and (iii) what kind of explanation is considered legitimate in a kind of linguistics that is understood as part of human sciences.

As second-order knowledge, and as philosophising applied to the field of linguistic theorising (see López Serena 2019a: Chapter 1), the philosophy of linguistics is a knowledge that approaches the study of both the theory of language and general linguistics from a higher level of abstraction than linguistics – and, consequently, the *raison d'être* for this differentiation can only be epistemological. Thus, the last two questions listed above belong to its field of action: (ii) what kind of science is linguistics and (iii) what kind of explanation is considered legitimate in the discipline – as well as related issues such as what kind of relationship is established between the subject and the object of research in linguistics and, consequently, what kind of epistemic activities linguists employ in the research process, given the simultaneous condition of being the subject and object of research.

That linguists are faced with this double condition of subject-object of research, from which they cannot escape, was obvious to Coseriu. This was already highlighted in the passage from *Sincronía, diacronía e historia* reproduced in (1), which states that the answer to rational or theoretical issues such as language mutability has to be based on the 'original knowledge' about language. This is also highlighted in the following two

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<sup>18</sup> Note, in this respect, the content of citation (2): **One of the errors that most afflict linguistics** – and which also **stems from** considering languages as 'things' and from **the confusion between human sciences and natural sciences** – is the desire to reduce theoretical (rational) problems to merely 'general' problems (Coseriu 1958/1988<sup>3</sup>: 66-67; my bold).

extracts from *Forma y sustancia en los sonidos del lenguaje* (Form and substance in the sounds of language) and “General perspectives”, respectively.

[T]he linguist cannot avoid the fact that he has experience of the symbolic value of linguistic signs, because he himself is a speaking individual: **the scientist cannot exclude himself as a speaker from his objective experience of linguistic facts.** (Coseriu 1954/1973:142; my bold)

[T]he DLM [Department of Linguistics of Montevideo] undertook to elaborate a linguistic theory **in accordance with the reality of language**, in its functioning as well as in its historical development, a task undertaken by Coseriu, who performed it simultaneously with his critical activity [omitted note]. The basic principles of this theory are that **the first condition of any linguistic theory is its adequacy to its object and that its basis must necessarily be the 'original knowledge', i.e. the knowledge which man possesses about himself as a speaker.** (Coseriu 1968:37; my bold)

In his defence of the type of knowledge specific to human sciences, in contrast to the natural sciences, I believe that the hermeneutic trend that should be ascribed to Coseriu confronts the methodological monism characteristic of positivist epistemology, which advocates the methodological unification of the sciences according to three fundamental hypotheses:

- (i) the (same) scientific method can be applied to all fields of knowledge for which one wishes to obtain fully justified knowledge;
- (ii) the unitary scientific method corresponds, ideally, to the paradigm of the physical sciences; and
- (iii) facts in any scientific field are to be the subject of deterministic or nomological-deductive causal explanations (Hempel & Oppenheim 1948), consisting in the reduction of individual facts to manifestations of universal laws.

However, Coseriu never uses the label methodological monism. Instead, he refers to the ‘principle of naturalism’:

**[I]n accordance with the principle of naturalism, languages are considered, more or less explicitly, as if they were natural objects or organisms**, endowed with their own ‘evolution’ [omitted note]. Consequently, we speak of the ‘life’ of languages and the ‘life’ of words, and of course these are often understood as *metaphors*, but metaphors also have their rationale and *reflect a certain ideology*.<sup>19</sup> So, too, we speak of ‘mother tongue’ and ‘daughter tongues’, of language ‘families’, and these metaphors become widespread and take root in everyday terminology outside linguistics.

**By the same token, linguistic facts are interpreted from the perspective of causality, and the question is asked, for example, what is the ‘cause’ of this or that linguistic change.** Thus, since ‘evolution’ is the basic problem, when it is observed in history that one moves from language state A to state B, the problem arises of the ‘causes’ which have determined this ‘evolution’. In other words, it is not the production of languages, i.e. linguistic creativity as such and its historical objectification (the so-called ‘change’) that is considered the primary fact, but, in each case, the state of language, which – *like natural objects* – without causes, should not change. As for the causes themselves, it is thought that they could be analogous to those found in the natural world, and there has even been talk of the influence of climate and geographical environment on languages, just as, in literary history, Hippolyte Taine sought to explain the development of literature by various determinations and influences, including those of the geographical environment (but, fortuitously, also those of the social environment). (Coseriu 1981:48-49; my bold)<sup>20</sup>

**The principle of naturalism means, in the first place and in a general sense, that all facts are reduced to the type of natural facts [...].** Consequently, all facts – also those belonging to the human sphere proper, such as art or language – are considered subject to the principles of causality and necessity that apply in the world of nature. In other words, **cultural facts are also considered as if they were natural facts that are due to ‘causes’ and governed by laws of necessity.** The methodological corollary of this is that natural science

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<sup>19</sup> On the danger of naturalistic metaphors in diachronic historical linguistics, see López Serena (2014).

<sup>20</sup> On the problem of causality in diachronic historical linguistics, see Hammarström (2013-14) and Winter-Froemel (2013-14).



is taken as the ideal model for all science and that ‘naturalistic’ approaches and methods are also applied to cultural facts. Therefore, what is sought are the causes of the facts and the laws of their ‘evolution’, a legality of a natural kind, a requirement that is satisfied when the laws that determine and regulate the facts and, in particular, the laws of their development, are discovered. Moreover, in accordance with the principle formulated by Auguste Comte, ‘*savoir pour prévoir afin de pourvoir*’ [prior knowledge in order to provide], it is believed that knowledge of the facts and generalisation would enable us to establish laws of a universal nature, which, in turn, would enable us to foresee future developments. Therefore, any science that is able to predict is considered to be properly so and to have reached its full maturity. (Coseriu 1981:40; my italics)

#### **4. A philosophical-scientific approach to *Sincronía, diacronía e historia***

Without losing sight of the aim of analysing which aspects of Coseriu’s linguistic thinking have their origin in questions of a philosophical nature, I believe it is important to highlight how the two previous assertions, which come from *Lecciones de lingüística general*, coincide exactly with the criticisms Coseriu makes of naturalism in *Sincronía, diacronía e historia*, the work that probably constitutes his most complete epistemological treatise. Thus, in relation to the confusion between the rational question and the general question about linguistic change discussed earlier, Coseriu states that the reason why both are presented in seemingly identical terms:

is due [...] in part to general terminological deficiencies in human sciences, which so often adopt the vocabulary and expressions of natural sciences. And, above all, it is due to the identification or confusion between the two problems, which, in turn, is rooted in the same **naturalistic attitude towards language**. (Coseriu 1958/1988<sup>3</sup>:111; my bold)

According to Coseriu, this same naturalistic attitude can be detected in Saussure’s “Durkheimian sociology”, a doctrine, in his opinion, impregnated “with the Schleicherian conception of languages as “natural organisms””; hence, he states that “Saussure’s sociolinguistic conception appears in many cases as a translation in sociological terms of Schleicher’s naturalistic conception” (Coseriu 1958/1988<sup>3</sup>:42). The same naturalistic

conception was also the basis of the two fundamental flaws that Coseriu denounces in his review of how structuralism approached the problem of linguistic change:

[T]he way structuralism has approached the problem involves **two fundamental flaws that reveal the full weight of its naturalistic tradition. First, the confusion between the general empirical problem of change and the rational problem of the mutability of languages**: the belief that the various partial explanations could contribute to solving the problem of ‘why languages change’, which is impossible, since, as we have seen, it is a problem of a different order and of a different nature. **Second, the error of believing that the positivist problem of ‘causes’ is still being posed, whereas in reality the problem of the general conditions and modalities of change**, i.e. a problem of generalised and formalised history, is being posed. (Coseriu 1958/1988<sup>3</sup>:211; my bold)

The extent to which the error of approaching the problem of linguistic change in causal terms – an error that transcends the boundaries of structuralism – is inherited from the reviled principle of naturalism is made even clearer by the following passage:

Cultural and functional explanations of change are by no means “causal”. The very idea of “causality” in so-called language “evolution” is a residue of the old conception of languages as “natural organisms”, as well as of the positivist dream of discovering the supposed “laws” of language (or of languages) and of transforming linguistics into a “science of laws” analogous to the physical sciences. (Coseriu 1958/1988<sup>3</sup>:178)

However, as previously highlighted, in contrast to methodological monism, or the principle of naturalism, which is characteristic of a positivist philosophy of science, Coseriu’s anti-positivism gives rise to the principle of *culture*, or,

(4) more precisely, **the differentiation between natural objects and cultural objects** and, consequently, between the *natural sciences and the cultural sciences*. In other words, **natural sciences are no longer accepted as the model for science in general**, but it is understood that

sciences, precisely in order to be considered as such, must be different, **ACCORDING TO THE NATURE OF THEIR OBJECT.** (Coseriu 1981:67-68; original italics; my bold)

Due to the different nature of the object of study of natural sciences and human sciences and the different relationship that the subject of research establishes with these objects, for advocates of hermeneutics, the type of explanation used in one or the other must also, necessarily, be dissimilar. In relation to the manifestly unequal nature of the objects of study in human sciences, as opposed to natural sciences, it should be highlighted that while human phenomena have an eminently normative (social) nature – whose rules it is perfectly possible to violate – natural laws are necessities. Hence, counterexamples are not conceived as violations of the rules but refutations of the laws. Therefore, opposition is based on (i) the universal character of natural phenomena – subject to laws of “causality” and “necessity” and therefore susceptible to “prediction” – as opposed to the human historical condition, where “freedom” or free will to abide by or violate the rules and “finalist”, not causalist, “explanations” prevail. In turn, the “different relationship between the subject and object” of research in the two types of science are independent in natural sciences and coincide in human sciences, where humans are both the subject and object of research. Consequently, the procedure (“epistemic activities”) required to attain knowledge in the natural sciences, which is usually that of *observation*, is not necessarily relevant in the case of the human sciences, which often rely on *intuition*. In summary, the three oppositions mentioned above would give rise to Figure 5:

	<b>NATURAL SCIENCES</b>	<b>HUMAN SCIENCES</b>
NATURE OF THE OBJECT OF STUDY	natural objects, universal in nature	human objects of a historic-normative (social) nature, endowed with free will
TYPE OF LAWS/RULES THEY ARE SUBJECT TO	universal laws of causality-necessity, which facilitate prediction	historical norms or rules that can be violated
SUBJECT-OBJECT RESEARCH RELATIONSHIP	independent	coincident
CHARACTERISTIC TYPES OF EXPLANATIONS	causalist	finalist
PROTOTYPICAL EPISTEMIC ACTIVITIES	observation	intuition

Figure 5. The opposition between natural and human sciences

In relation to the intimate relationship, which, according to Coseriu, exists between philosophy and linguistics, it is important to highlight how the entire exposition and argumentation with which Coseriu constructs his theory of linguistic change are structured in accordance with the three fundamental differentiations stated above. Thus, for example, with regard to the need to make a clear differentiation between human sciences and natural sciences, in addition to Coseriu's statement in (4), he also states:

**To all causalist attitudes and the confusions they imply, we must oppose the differentiation – clearly established since Kant – between the ‘world of necessity’ and the ‘world of freedom’.** Equally, to the declared or undeclared attempts of the old and new positivism to reduce all science to physical science, **we must oppose the fundamental diversity between natural and cultural facts** and, therefore, between physical and human sciences. This does not imply any disdain for the physical sciences which, naturally, are the only ones suited to *their* object. However, it does imply understanding that their postulates and methods (except for what concerns material description) are not applicable to cultural objects, since in the latter what is exact, what is positive, what is actually given and verified, are freedom and intentionality, invention, creation and free adoption, motivated only finalistically. **In natural phenomena it is undoubtedly appropriate to look for an external necessity, or causality; in cultural phenomena, on the other hand, it is appropriate to look for an internal necessity, or finality.** (Coseriu 1958/1988<sup>3</sup>:193-194; original italics; my bold)

The following statement is also of interest with regard to the rejection of causal explanations and the possibility of prediction in human sciences:

Fundamentally, the perplexity in the face of linguistic change and the tendency to consider it as a spurious phenomenon, caused by ‘external factors’, are due to the fact that we start from abstract – and therefore static – language, separated from speaking and considered as a thing made, as *ergon*, without even asking ourselves what languages really are and how they exist and what ‘change’ in a language really means. Hence, the posing of the problem of change in causal terms, since changes in “things” detached from the intentionality of every subject are attributed, specifically, to “causes”.

However, language does not belong to the *causal order* but to the *final order* (Coseriu 1958/1988<sup>3</sup>:29; original italics).

As observed from earlier statements, Coseriu's differentiation between human sciences and natural sciences is not only important as an epistemological differentiation, separate from his linguistics, but is also fundamental precisely because it determines the way in which questions of language theory and universal linguistics are approached. Moreover, apart from the differentiation between causality versus finality, as previously highlighted, for Coseriu the specificity of human sciences also resides in the close link between the subject and the object of research. Lastly, as regards the epistemic activities specific to human sciences, which Coseriu occasionally refers to<sup>21</sup> as original knowledge, eidetic reduction, intuition, or grasping the obvious, I believe the following passages, again from Coseriu's linguistic work, *Sincronía, diacronía e historia*, may be of interest:

[I]n linguistics, as in all human sciences, the foundation must be, and is, the "**original knowledge**" that man has about himself. (Coseriu 1958/1988<sup>3</sup>:182; my bold)

[I]n human sciences, that which is presented to the conscience as **evidence**, far from being dismissed as 'sans portée', must be taken as the basis for research. (Coseriu 1958/1988<sup>3</sup>:41; my bold)

[W]ith regard to cultural objects, **eidetic knowledge** is necessarily primary (prior to empirical study) since it is constitutive of the objects as such. (Coseriu 1958/1988<sup>3</sup>:191; my bold)

[T]here is no room for hypotheses in human sciences with regard to the universal. The place of hypotheses in the physical sciences is taken in human sciences **by the natural knowledge that man possesses about his activities and the objects that he himself has created**. (Coseriu 1958/1988<sup>3</sup>:191; my bold)

Purpose, as 'subjective causality', can only be known (*recognised*) subjectively, by means of an **internal experience**, since it is not an externally verifiable fact. Therefore, the problem to be posed in each particular case is not: 'why [by what empirically objective circumstances] did such a change occur?', but: 'for what [purpose] would I, having at my disposal such and such a given system and

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<sup>21</sup> As in quotation (1) above.

being in such and such historical circumstances, change A into B, abandon element C or create element D?’<sup>22</sup> [In note: [...] This is not only the case with changes, but with all linguistic facts, which can only be understood as such by means of an inner reinterpretation [...]]. Moreover: not only must this be done, but it can be said that, in reality, and under any causalist terminology, it is done and has been done in every case in which the problem of a particular change has been meaningfully and essentially correctly posed. (Coseriu 1958/1988<sup>3</sup>:205-206 and 206, n. 45; my bold)

## 5. Conclusions

I believe that in light of this collection of selected quotations, it is impossible to harbour even the slightest doubt about the fact, which for me of course is obvious, that *Sincronía, diacronía e historia* – a book on linguistic theorising, and more specifically, on theorising about linguistic change – cannot be fully understood unless one is aware that, from the onset, the essential confusion that Coseriu aims to challenge concerns the philosophy of linguistics: the discipline that is specifically responsible for assessing the appropriateness or inappropriateness of applying causalist approaches to certain objects of research. In fact, as seen above, Coseriu turns to epistemological reflections time and again in his most important work on linguistic change. He either insists on the error of approach and method that the causalist perspective promotes or advocates the differentiation between natural sciences and human sciences and the consequent application, in the latter, of a finalist perspective, or describes the epistemic activities of resorting to the original knowledge or intuition that the linguist has as a speaker of the language under study.

This leads me to venture two reflections. The first focuses on the question of to what extent it is possible to truly understand Coseriu without recognising the epistemological foundations on which his linguistic theorising unfailingly rests. The second is a consequence of the first. Once the need to become familiar with Coseriu’s epistemological convictions has been established as a *sine qua non* condition to truly understand his linguistic thinking, to what extent is it possible for contemporary linguistics to vindicate the unquestionable value of his proposals, at a time when the

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<sup>22</sup> For an application of this type of finalist analysis to the epistemological examination of the explanatory procedures characteristic of the theory of grammaticalisation, see Chapters 6 and 7 in López Serena (2019a).

discipline does not seem excessively interested in its own epistemological foundations? And lastly, are those of us who insist on highlighting the relevance and excellence of his approach to the study of language condemned to preach in the wilderness?

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