

Wilbur Marshall Urban's Philosophical Influence on Eugenio Coseriu's Integral Linguistics

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Abstract: In 1939 the American philosopher W.M. Urban published a massive treatise on language philosophy entitled *Language and Reality*. In the '50s, during his stay in Uruguay, as a professor of linguistics at the University of Montevideo, Eugenio Coseriu read attentively this work and retained some elements (evocative functions, universe of discourse, elliptical character of language, etc.), taking them over in his integral linguistics. In this article, I aim at identifying these concepts (essential for Coseriu's linguistic theory), relating them to the original contexts of W.M. Urban's treatise.

Keywords: W.M. Urban; E. Coseriu; philosophy of language; evocative functions; universe of discourse

1. The integral linguistics theorized and developed by Eugenio Coseriu also represents a remarkable synthesis obtained as a result of selecting certain concepts and essential distinctions found in the work of some great philosophers and linguists. Taking into account the principle of tradition, these concepts and distinctions were included by Coseriu in his linguistic theory – a very coherent and unitary one – only if they were in accordance with the reality of language.

From the American philosopher W.M. Urban – after having read thoroughly *Language and Reality*, his 1939 treatise – Coseriu borrowed some important notions (and terminological phrases): «*evocative functions*», «*universe of discourse*» and «*elliptical character of language*». Apart from these, other (possible) influences (coming from Urban to Coseriu), regarding the interpretation of certain language or

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discourse facts, could be added, even though these influences may only be confirmative, not formative.

2. According to Coseriu, the human language is structured on three levels: *universal* (of speech in general), *historical* (of a certain historical language) and *individual* (of texts or discourses). Coseriu's theoretical contributions deal with all these three levels. Thus, in the case of the individual level, *i.e.* of the concrete acts of communication, the Romanian scholar developed a text linguistics (*Textlinguistik*, 1980) seen as a hermeneutics of sense. While commenting on the semiotic model of Karl Bühler and the relations which the linguistic sign establishes with various factors, Coseriu introduces the «evocative functions» (theorized by W.M. Urban) in the architecture of his textual linguistics: “There are also other relations; we can observe that there are a lot of sign relations which are all real relations. Where should we place these relations in Bühler's model? Undoubtedly, somewhere around *representation*. I have used numerous times the word *evocation*, and we can say that around *representation* there is bunch of evocative functions; so, we deal – according to a formula used by Marshall Wilbur Urban, an American philosopher – *with that rich ambiguity of the word which can exactly denote something, without ignoring, at the same time, other denotations*. That is, there is a denotation and, at the same time, others are suggested. In other words, there is this possibility of evocation.” (Coseriu, 1994, p. 153; my emphasis and my translation)¹.

2.1. Even though Coseriu does not indicate precisely (in his Romanian conference titled *Poetic Language*) the place from which he extracted such an idea (with the exception of the name of the aforementioned American philosopher), we find the following in Urban's *Language and Reality*: “The fact that a sign can intend one thing without ceasing to intend another, that, indeed, the very condition of its being an *expressive* sign for the second is that it is also a sign for the first, is precisely what makes language an instrument of knowing. This «accumulated intension» of words is the fruitful source of ambiguity, but it is also the source of that analogous prediction, through which alone the symbolic power of language comes into being.” (Urban, 1939, pp. 112-113). Similarly, Urban resumes the same idea as follows: “It

¹ Or, as Coseriu puts it in his *Textlinguistik* (in its Spanish version): „La evocación contribuye notablemente a la riqueza del lenguaje; con ella surge esa plurivocidad que no siempre debería enjuiciarse negativamente, como «vaguedad», sino que habría que valorarla también positivamente, como un enriquecimiento: el teórico del lenguaje Wilbur Marshall Urban ha puesto de relieve con particular énfasis esta riqueza basada en la función evocativa del lenguaje, es decir, en la posibilidad de referirse con ayuda del lenguaje a algo sin hablar en realidad de ello. El sentido surge entonces, como combinación de las funciones bühlerianas (representación, expresión y apelación) y la evocación.” (Coseriu, 2007, p. 233).

is to be remembered, however, that words signify new objects *not* by losing but by conserving their former meanings or references. The fact that a sign may intend one thing without ceasing to intend another is precisely the condition of its being an *expressive* sign at all, and that which makes language an instrument of knowledge and communication.” (Urban, 1939, p. 173).

2.2. In order to better understand the place of the «evocative functions» in this discussion, we ought to present the whole context in which they appear in the American philosopher’s work. Thus, dealing – in a special section – with “the primary meaning functions of language”, Urban states that: “Expression is the fundamental *differentia* of linguistic meanings.” (Urban, 1939, p. 136). This statement constitutes, in fact, the very core of his conception from the above mentioned treatise. Regarding the linguistic meaning, Urban distinguishes three meaning functions: “Within this general notion of linguistic meaning, three types of expression, or three meaning functions, may be distinguished. We may describe them as *indicative* expression, as *emotive* expression, and as *representative* or *symbolic* expression. These three meaning functions are present in some form wherever there is language and belong to the notion of language.” (Urban, 1939, p. 136; my emphasis)¹.

2.3. At the same time, Urban remarks that this “threefold conception of the meaning functions” is largely accepted, but that a dual conception of meaning functions also became popular in some circles: “According to this view, language has two functions, the emotive or evocative and the indicative or denotative. The symbolic element in language is then identified with the indicative and denotative and all expressive elements lumped with the emotive.” (Urban, 1939, p. 137; also *cf.* p. 68). However, Urban criticizes such a vision, stating that the evocative function and the emotive function should not be overlapped: “The chief source of the errors of the dual theory is the confusion or the identification of the evocative with the emotive functions of language. It is true that we may speak of words evoking feelings or emotions, but they evoke other meanings than these. The evocation of intuitive, as distinct from emotive meaning, is one of the functions of language with which we shall be chiefly concerned.” (Urban, 1939, p. 137).

¹ Urban had also made some references to “the meaning functions of language” somewhere else (see Urban, 1939, p. 68, where he mentions the representation function, next to other two functions: (1) indicative and (2) emotive or evocative).

3. By *universe of discourse*, Coseriu means (in his study *Determinación y entorno*, from 1955) “el sistema universal de significaciones al que pertenece un discurso (o un enunciado) y que determina su validez y su sentido. La literatura, la mitología, las ciencias, la matemática, el universo empírico, en cuanto «temas» o «mundos de referencia» del hablar, constituyen «universos de discurso».” (Coseriu, 1967, p. 318).

3.1. More than 40 years later, Coseriu approaches the concept «universe of discourse» again (in an Italian conference, *Orationis fundamenta. La preghiera come testo*, from 2000). He eventually distinguishes only four universes of discourse, according to the four fundamental types of human knowledge: a) the *universe of common experience* – whose objectivity is given by the current experience; b) the *universe of science (and of the scientifically established technique)* – whose objectivity is always set during scientific research; c) the *universe of imagination (and, consequently, of art)* – whose objectivity is given by the very world created through imagination; and d) the *universe of faith* – whose objectivity is, actually, the objectivity of the world specific to faith (Coseriu & Loureda, 2006, pp. 72-79).

3.2. Mention must be made that E. Coseriu indicated W.M. Urban as one of the philosophers that treated extensively the notion «universe of discourse». What is more, the fact that since 1939 Urban accepted only four universes of this kind, is quite interesting: “In other words, there are different universes of discourse – let us say the poetic, the scientific, the religious, and perhaps the metaphysical – and these universes have different symbolic forms.” (Urban, 1939, p. 454).

These different symbolic forms “symbolize reality in different ways”. Broadly speaking, they coincide almost totally with the one identified by Coseriu six decades later¹.

4. Eugenio Coseriu also refers to the *elliptical character of language* in a lecture (*Deontology and Ethics of Language*) delivered in Iași: “And, what is more, we deal with the *elliptical character of speech* in general, as long as information is given by context and situation. Somebody once said: «If A says *It is raining*, this expression is incomplete, since he should say *It is raining at half past two, in Iași, on the Copou Boulevard* etc. and *on the 26th of October 1993*». But somebody else could reply to him: «No, sir, I only say ‘It is raining’ and you understand very well that it is raining right here on the Copou Boulevard, at 2 p.m., on a certain date». Unless these facts

¹ Regarding the «universe of discourse», see, mainly, Urban, 1939, pp. 197-199; on the «common sense», which corresponds to Coseriu’s «universe of common experience», see Urban, 1939, p. 204.

weren't provided by the present situation, I would definitely specify each of the unknown facts, in order to offer you full information. [...] ...we know that we need not tell what is obvious and that this *elliptical character of language* is not actually elliptical, because the rest of the information is given either by the knowledge of things, or by the situation." (Coşeriu, 1994, p. 167; my translation).

Here are some contexts in which the terminological phrase under study is found in Urban's treatise: "The notion of linguistic context is simple enough. The ambiguities of a purely linguistic character may all be connected with the *elliptical character of language*. Single words, as we have seen, cannot be understood. [...] The *elliptical character of language* involves more than mere ellipticality of *language*." (Urban, 1939, p. 196). In conclusion: "Language is *elliptical*; there is much more understood than is expressed." (Urban, 1939, p. 234; my emphasis).

5. In the conference *Poetic Language*, Coseriu also brings into discussion the relations which linguistic signs establish with «the knowledge of things»: "Finally, there are relations with the knowledge of things. Karl Vossler, the well-known German linguist said that, for example, the word *Pferd* 'horse' does not have the same meaning for the chivalry officer, for the horse-racing gambler, for the farmer who works and ploughs with his horse, for a child of Vienna who probably only sees a horse in a Zoo, and for whom the horse is as exotic as an elephant. Definitely, he is not right, if we refer to the meaning of the word, since, in order to say this, we have to understand that *Pferd* means 'horse' for everybody. But it is all about what a horse is to each of them, according to our experience with these facts, with the horse in this case, and, therefore, what is the real relation with the object itself." (Coşeriu, 1994, p. 152; my translation).

5.1. I have not found yet in Karl Vossler's works the paragraph where this example is provided and commented on, although, following the suggestions from other Coserian studies, I have read some of Vossler's books (*cf.*, for instance, Vossler, 1932 and Vossler, 1943). Interesting enough, Urban (who had read Vossler) offers a similar example: "A horse is one thing to an Eskimo, who has never seen one, and another to a farmer, and another to a biologist, and another to a biologist who is also a philosopher." (Urban, 1939, p. 280)¹.

¹ When referring to the «inner speech form», Urban takes over explicitly another example from Vossler's book *The Spirit of Language in Civilization*: "To all Italians a *cavallo* is, as Vossler says, not only the quadruped which the Englishman calls *horse*, but it is also a *cavallo*, which to the Englishman it is not." (Urban, 1939, p. 239; see Vossler, 1932, p. 182).

5.2. What is more, Urban treats in the same manner other words as well, of an abstract nature, such as *love* and *marriage*: “Words such as *love* and *marriage* have no single unambiguous reference. *Marriage*, for instance, means one thing in the mouth of an anthropologist, another in the mouth of a jurist, and still another in the mouth of a priest. It is impossible to think meaningfully of the object in terms of this word without implied reference to the universe of discourse, or the speech community, in which the word is used.” (Urban 1939: 110; also *cf.* p. 199, for *marriage*).

5.3. In the previous fragment, in which the understanding of a certain word is also related to its corresponding universe of discourse, Coseriu could have found useful suggestions for the way in which technical and scientific terms should be defined. For instance, here it is what he declares, in his study *Structure lexicale et enseignement du vocabulaire* (from 1966): «En réalité, on connaît les ‘signifiés’ des terminologies dans la mesure où l’on connaît les sciences et les techniques auxquelles elles correspondent, et non pas dans la mesure où l’on connaît la langue: ils appartiennent à des ‘univers de discours’ déterminés et ne peuvent être définis que par rapport à ces univers de discours... » (Coseriu, 2001, p. 223).

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