

Reviews / Comptes Rendus / Besprechungen

Geschichte der Sprachphilosophie. By Eugenio Coseriu. Vol. I: *Von Heraklit bis Rousseau*, xxv + 414 pp.; Vol. II: *Von Herder bis Humboldt*, xiv + 468 pp. Ed. by Jörn Albrecht. Tübingen: Narr–Francke–Attempto Verlag, 2015. Vol. I: ISBN 978-3-8233-6896-0. €39.99. Vol. II: ISBN 978-3-8233-6953-0. €39.99 (HB).

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These two volumes are edited versions of lectures on the history of the philosophy of language that were delivered by the distinguished historian of the philosophy of language Eugenio Coseriu (1921–2002). Volume I, which covers the period from Heraclitus to Rousseau, constitutes a lightly revised edition of a volume that has already been printed twice before (the last time in 2003). Volume II, which covers the relatively short span from Herder to Wilhelm von Humboldt, appears for the first time.

Coseriu's goal was to give a history of the philosophy of language — which he distinguishes from “general linguistics” and “theory of language” as being concerned with “the essence of language as such” (I: 12–13). The editor points out that although Coseriu only got as far as Humboldt, he intended to continue his history up to the present, while also holding the achievements of the intervening period in relatively low esteem (II: 459–460).

These two volumes are an extremely valuable contribution to their subject. They cover a wide range of philosophers of language from antiquity up to Humboldt, not only describing the main positions that each of them held in clear, engaging, and illuminating ways, but also providing helpful critical assessment of them along the way and (especially in the chapter on Humboldt) some of the author's own reflections on the philosophy of language.

The editorial work of Jörn Albrecht is to be warmly commended both for its devotion to making Coseriu's work available and for its scrupulousness. The introduction by Jürgen Trabant, another former Coseriu student (I: xvii–xxv) is also very useful, providing an account of how the work came into existence, a description of some of its central theses (for example, that the philosophy of language only achieved independence from other areas of inquiry such as epistemology relatively late in history), an explanation of the polemical context in which the work was written (in particular, against Chomsky's views), remarks on some features of the work that surprised Trabant on re-reading it (for example, Coseriu's interpretation

of Aristotle), and criticism of its regrettable omission of a treatment of Anglophone linguistic philosophy.

The contents of the two volumes are as follows: Volume I begins with a very general chapter on philosophy and science followed by a chapter that addresses the question of what philosophy of language is. It then turns to chapters on Indian philosophy of language; Heraclitus; Plato; Aristotle; the Stoics; Augustine; the philosophy of language of the Middle Ages; Juan Luis Vives and the Renaissance; Descartes and the idea of a universal language; Locke; Leibniz (who is also treated in the chapter on Descartes); the question of continuity and discontinuity in the history of the philosophy of language; Great Britain in the 18th century (Berkeley, Hume, George Harris, Adam Smith, and others); Vico in Italy; Germany in the 18th century (Wolff, Lambert, Meiner, and others); and France in the 18th century (Condillac, Diderot, and Rousseau). It ends with a short prospective on the contents of the next volume.

Volume II contains, after a short introduction by the editor, chapters on the German-speaking countries between the late Enlightenment and German Romanticism, Herder, Hamann, Fichte, Friedrich Schlegel, August Wilhelm Schlegel, Schleiermacher, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Hegel, and Humboldt.

Coseriu's treatment of the figures he covers is generally very helpful. Highlights, in my estimation, are the chapters on Aristotle, Augustine, Juan Luis Vives, John Locke, Great Britain in the 18th century, Vico, France in the 18th century, Herder, August Wilhelm Schlegel, Schleiermacher, Hegel, and Humboldt (the last three of whom Coseriu presents as a sort of apogee in the philosophy of language).

The volumes also contain a number of serious omissions and weaknesses, however. The fact, already mentioned, that Coseriu's coverage ends with Humboldt – so that it excludes, for example, Gottlob Frege (1848–1925), Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), Willard V.O. Quine (1908–2000), and Donald Davidson (1917–2003) in the analytic tradition, as well as Heidegger and Gadamer in the continental tradition – constitutes a major omission (as Trabant aptly laments in his introduction [I: xxiv–xxv]). Nor does one get the sense from the editor's explanation of this omission (II: 459–460) that it was merely due to Coseriu's untimely death; rather, Coseriu seems to have held virtually all post-Humboldtian philosophy of language in relatively low esteem. If so, then this is something for which he is to be criticized, especially where Frege and Wittgenstein are concerned.

There are also other omissions and shortcomings. The coverage of ancient philosophy of language is weak. Whereas Heraclitus receives excessively generous and interpretively questionable coverage, Parmenides, who is even more important for the philosophy of language, hardly receives any attention at all (merely a few words at I: 38). The Sophists — e.g., Protagoras with his discipline of “correcting

words [*orthoepeia*]” and his hermeneutic approach (as represented, or parodied, in Plato’s dialogue *Protagoras*) — are largely neglected. And while Plato’s *Cratylus* and later dialogues receive considerable, insightful attention, his representation of Socrates’ demand for definitions of general terms and his theory of forms in the early and middle dialogues are disregarded.

A similar criticism applies to the treatment of the philosophy of language of the Middle Ages. In particular, the famous dispute between conceptualists, realists, and nominalists concerning the nature of the universals that language expresses is largely omitted in the short chapter 9 in Vol. I (“Die Sprachphilosophie des Mittelalters”).

There are several less obvious but equally important omissions as well. Coseriu overlooks the fact that Leibniz and Wolff already anticipated the doctrine of thought’s fundamental dependence on language that came to play such an important role in the philosophies of language of Herder, Hamann, Schleiermacher, Humboldt, and others. Leibniz anticipated it especially in his *Dialogue on the Connection between Things and Words* (1677), Wolff particularly in his *Empirical Psychology* (1732) and *Rational Psychology* (1734) – whose importance for the philosophy of language Coseriu evidently overlooked because he only considered Wolff’s earlier works (I: 318). This omission has important ‘knock-on’ effects as well. For example, Coseriu overlooks the fact that, when Condillac champions a strikingly similar doctrine in his *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* (1746), he explicitly attributes it to Wolff. And Coseriu also overlooks the fact that the Leibnizian-Wolffian version of the doctrine lies behind Herder’s subsequent commitment to such a doctrine. For Herder already developed this in the mid-1760s in *On Diligence in Several Learned Languages* (1764) and the *Fragments* (1767–1768), at a time when he was engaging intensively with several authors from the *Literaturbriefe* (1759–1765) (a journal on which the *Fragments* provides a kind of running commentary), who came from the Leibniz-Wolff school and who had already championed versions of the doctrine in that journal – in particular, Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), Georg Friedrich Meier (1718–1777), and Thomas Abbt (1738–1766) – as well as with another scion of the same school who had likewise already done so, namely, Johann Peter Süßmilch (1707–1767).

Coseriu also overlooks another crucially important doctrine that emerged in 17th- and 18th-century philosophy of language: a doctrine that meanings, or concepts, consist – not in the sorts of items that many other philosophers had proposed, such as objects referred to (Augustine), Platonic forms, or the subjective mental ‘ideas’ favored by the British Empiricists Locke, Hume and others, but instead – in *word-usages*. This doctrine is central to Herder’s philosophy of language, already emerging in his work as early as the *Fragments* (1767–1768). It was subsequently taken over from him by Hamann in his *Metacritique* (1784),

(not the other way round, as has often been implied). It also has important earlier and later histories that Coseriu likewise overlooks. In particular, such a doctrine can already be found in Spinoza's *Tractatus* (1670), whence it was subsequently taken over around the middle of the 18th century by the German hermeneuticians of the Bible Johann Jakob Wettstein (1693–1754) and Johann August Ernesti (1707–1781), from the latter of whom Herder then took it over in his turn (while also radicalizing it in a significant way). Moreover, after Herder and Hamann the doctrine went on to play a central role in Schleiermacher's position – including his important theory of translation, where it constitutes the foundation of his main strategy for overcoming the conceptual incommensurabilities that normally occur between a source text and a target language in translation: bending word-usages (and hence meanings) in the target language in order to make them reflect those in the source text more closely. (Coseriu's otherwise illuminating account of Schleiermacher's theory of translation overlooks this central strategy.) It also went on – together with the first doctrine, i.e., the doctrine concerning the dependence of thought on language – to form the core of the most important philosophy of language that was developed in the 20th century: that of the later Wittgenstein.

Finally, Coseriu greatly underestimates Friedrich Schlegel's importance for the philosophy of language. While it is true that Schlegel held a number of rather speculative and dubious views in this area, especially concerning the origins of language, as Coseriu rightly points out, he also contributed far more to the subject than Coseriu recognizes. For example, Schlegel in *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians* (1808) introduced the insights that (inflected) languages are 'organisms' or 'systems' constituted by their grammars, that grammars vary from language to language in deep ways, so that a project of comparative grammar [*vergleichende Grammatik*] is required, and that in particular inflecting languages such as Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, and German are sharply different in character from non-inflecting, or 'isolating', languages such as Chinese. Schlegel thereby supplied the philosophical foundations for the stunning development of modern linguistics by Franz Bopp, August Wilhelm Schlegel, Jacob Grimm, and, a little later, Humboldt that immediately followed the work's publication under its inspiration. It is true that A. W. Schlegel's and Humboldt's revision of Friedrich Schlegel's two-fold division between types of language into a threefold division that also included 'agglutinating' languages, together with Humboldt's insistence that languages usually combine the three techniques in question rather than using only one of them, so that languages should only be classified in these terms in the sense of identifying which technique predominates within them, constituted important improvements on Friedrich Schlegel's position. But they were *refinements* of it rather than wholly new approaches, as Coseriu misleadingly tends to present them. Nor did Humboldt need to acquire his conception of the organicity of languages from

Lorenzo Hervás, as Coseriu suggests (II: 376–377). For that conception was already central to Friedrich Schlegel’s position (albeit in a version that restricted it to inflecting languages). Similarly, while Coseriu does rightly point out – under the heading of “rather marginal” [*eher marginale*] aspects of Schlegel’s philosophy of language – that Friedrich Schlegel contributed to hermeneutics the ideal, drawn from Kant and later passed on to Schleiermacher, of understanding an author better than he understood himself (p. 155), he disregards a very plausible case that has been made by Josef Körner (1928) and Hermann Patsch (1966) that Friedrich Schlegel was in fact the main source of a much broader range of ideas that later reappeared in Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics. Nor does Coseriu notice that (as I have recently argued in print, see Forster 2011) Friedrich Schlegel also contributed a set of important ideas in hermeneutics that go well *beyond* Schleiermacher’s contributions: in particular, ideas concerning genre, holistic meanings, unconscious meanings, the need to attribute confusion and inconsistency to texts on occasion, and the interpretation of non-linguistic art. These major underestimations of Friedrich Schlegel of course also lead Coseriu to corresponding overestimations of Humboldt and Schleiermacher (though this is a less serious weakness in his account).

Readers of this review who would like to pursue further these three important aspects of modern philosophy of language that Coseriu’s account overlooks — the origins of the doctrine of thought’s deep dependence on language in Leibniz and Wolff, as well as its subsequent history; the emergence of the doctrine that meanings or concepts consist in word-usages; and Friedrich Schlegel’s major contributions both to the philosophical foundations of linguistics and to hermeneutics — may want to consult my books *After Herder: Philosophy of Language in the German Tradition* (Forster 2010) and *German Philosophy of Language: From Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond* (Forster 2011), together with my essay “Herder’s Doctrine of Meaning as Use” (Forster 2015).

These criticisms of Coseriu’s project are by no means intended as grounds for dismissing it, however. On the contrary, it seems to me that, despite these omissions and other flaws, his project constitutes an invaluable and admirable attempt to tell the history of the philosophy of language. My criticisms are rather intended as indications of ways in which the account needs to be further developed and corrected.

The situation here indeed strikes me as similar to one that obtains in another area of the history of philosophy. Friedrich Meinecke in his famous book *Die Entstehung des Historismus* (1936) provided an excellent, albeit also very incomplete and in other ways flawed, account of historicism (for example, his account got no further than Goethe together with a short supplementary discussion of Leopold von Ranke, omitting the great burgeoning of historicism in 19th- and

20th-century philosophy and other human sciences, and it seriously underestimated the importance of the contributions that certain French thinkers, such as Montaigne, the early Montesquieu, and the early Voltaire, had already made to the development of historicism before it took off in the German tradition). But since then other treatments of the same subject have been written which can be used to supplement and correct Meinecke's account to a considerable extent (notably, Beiser 2012). So a good strategy for readers to use is to take Meinecke's book as their main source but then supplement and correct it by consulting these other treatments as well. A similar procedure can be recommended for scholars who are interested in the history of the philosophy of language: They might very well take Coseriu's two volumes as their main source, but then supplement and correct it by consulting other works in addition. Among the other works that should be consulted in this case would be — besides several excellent books written by Coseriu's own former students, such as Gipper & Schmitter (1985) and Trabant (2006) — in order of chronological relevance: the *Companions to Ancient Thought III: Language* (1994), edited by Stephen Everson; *Linguistic Content: New essays on the history of philosophy of language* (2015), edited by Margaret Cameron and Robert J. Stainton (which includes several articles on medieval philosophy of language); my own work on German philosophy of language, as mentioned above; Sluga (1980); and *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Analytic Philosophy* (2013), edited by Michael Beaney.

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