Comment on Emma Tămâianu-Morita’s paper

Both Tămâianu-Morita’s own viewpoints and her many comments on quotations of Coseriu’s viewpoints are interesting reading. I agree with most of them and will only comment on some:

I do not think Coseriu’s definition of text linguistics as a linguistics of sense (p. 2) is appropriate. In the common understanding of sense, words and syntactic constructions have sense. The sense is thus mainly confined to the sentence. Aspects of text linguistics stretch typically over longer segments than a sentence. I believe that four viewpoints are important for the understanding of what characterises this kind of linguistics: genre, topic, aim and circumstances or context of situation (see Fundamentals of Synchronic Linguistics. München: Lincom Europa 2012, p. 36–37).

The speaker’s knowledge is discussed and clearly distinguished from the linguist’s “description/ explanation of this knowledge (with the different models that can be constructed about it)” (p. 7). I am in favour of a simple kind of linguistics where I believe that the linguist should try to get a clear understanding of the speaker’s knowledge, which is similar to his own, and describe it as closely as possible. Consequently I do not see that there is any fundamental difference between the descriptions of the two kinds of knowledge. I have shown in my comment on Winter-Froemel’s paper that I have little sympathy for the complexities of many linguistic orientations. Tămâianu-Morita’s detailed discussion of the two kinds of knowledge (p. 7–12) is worth considering.

In relation to speech, expressions such as the following are used: simple lexical creation (p. 21), creation of meaning (p. 23) and creative activity (p. 27). It would be preferable not to use create and its derivatives for an activity such as speech but only for creating lasting and important things such as facts of language, a poem, a piece of visual art or a new technique. There are many words which can be used for speech activities. For instance one speaks, says, uses or utters a word. Only the innovator who gets a new word accepted in the language has created something. Other languages have the same problem. In Spanish crear and in Portuguese criar and the derivatives of these two verbs are also sometimes used in a questionable way. Speaking and playing chess are both examples of rule governed activities. During these la langue and the rules of chess do not change. Saussure’s well known comparison between chess and language has a misleading point because one of the things he says is “un état du jeu correspond bien à un état de la langue”, which is given a strange motivation. The states during the play change continuously through the moves of the players but la langue like the rules of chess is something created which does not change while being used.

It is said (p. 27) that “neuronal connections” and control “through the most sophisticated neuro-chemical command system” are “a totally different object of study” from language. I would rather say that these processes have something to do with language but the present knowledge of them cannot be used in linguistics. They will perhaps one day be known in such a way that one can see how they produce, cause, utterances. Until that day we will have to believe that both the creation and the use of language belong to the world of free will, a circumstance which is so convincingly described by Eugenio Coseriu. I have made comments on his ideas and on my meetings with him in Memories of a linguist 1940–2010 (München: Lincom Europa 2012, p. 69–72).