Comments on C. Munteanu’s article and on replies of G. Hammarström and C. Munteanu

My comment will not deal with the issue of the classification of sciences in general or linguistics in particular. It will be about one aspect, perhaps marginal, highlighted by C. Munteanu, “the importance of philosophy to linguistics” (§ 2), to which G. Hammarström doesn’t make explicit reference in his comment, but for me this aspect is implicitly present. Hammarström’s reference to the explanation of the adoption of a linguistic change (what justifies, in turn, Coseriu’s quote in the last response of Munteanu).

The question of philosophy arises in this article on “the real object of linguistics” as an appeal to “take philosophy seriously” (p. 12). What may this appeal mean? And where really lies “the importance of philosophy to linguistics”? Indeed, there is an elucidation of the scientific nature of linguistics: like any science, needs to clarify the specificity of its object. An excessive Cartesianism, which claimed the unity of knowledge and method, runs the risk of homogenizing the realities to be studied by subjecting to a fully rational mold, but totally abstract or empty. To do justice to certain realities such as those under study in the humanities or cultural sciences, requires accepting the idea of diversification of science by their respective objects: an originally Aristotelian idea that M. adopted from Coseriu. For linguistics, the specificity of the object cannot be clarified by identifying a particular area of real things, pointing to a certain place in the world where these realities are found and in front of us as the object of our science. In any case, it seems that the object of linguistics is “real”, as perhaps expresses ironically M. in the title. Natural science itself can thereby determine its own purpose. The objects of cultural sciences are entities which are not facts or things of the world recognizable by another way, things that we could show as existing independently of our science. This happens with history, unable to identify historical facts beyond the story that makes them intelligible, or psychology, which can only explain human behaviour and its regularities making operational its theoretical constructs.

Due to the reason of having a specific object which has not been given, sciences like linguistics, which deal with cultural object, are very close to philosophy. But it is not clear that this proximity resides exactly where M. finds it: in the philosophical backgrounds of the idea of the cultural object and in the founding role of sciences that philosophy is supposed to have. Indeed, philosophy has to be characterized in comparison to science, mainly in comparison to natural science, by not treating about given realities or things in the world. Philosophy finds its object nowhere in the world, so it has to start searching it. Aristotle, for whom philosophy was zetoumene episteme, already knew this. Philosophy is not only limited to represent its object, but also has to build it in a speculative way, as an object-problem. This speculative construction of the object is, partly, what cultural sciences are forced to achieve.

It is true, as pointed out by M., that cultural objects and, particularly, language as one of them, are characterized by their formal aspect. It is also true that tracing the philosophical backgrounds of the concept of form may clarify the specificity of the object of linguistics and of cultural objects in general. In this quest, M. refers, departing from Coseriu, to Aristotle of course, but also to Cassirer, to Collingwood and to Dewey. But precisely Coseriu himself
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points, along the formal aspect, the dynamic element, which cannot be cleared without referring to other Coseriu essential philosophical influence. To quote him: “Elle [la langue] n’est pas –comme on l’admet parfois– un objet naturel, pour lequel on peut distinguer entre l’être et le devenir, mais elle est un objet culturel, à savoir une production culturelle, de sorte que le devenir appartient à son être. Plus encore: L’être de la langue est, dans un sens originaire, devenir.” (“Du primat de l’histoire”, trans. S. Verleyen, in *Energeia*, 2, 2010: 71).

Language is a spiritual entity, an entity defined by opened and autotelic activity, and understood by Coseriu in terms of speculative philosophy (Humboldt, Hegel). Spiritual activity is also characterized by self-reference or self-affection through their utterances or products, because spirit is, as stated in the clear formula in the preface of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, “the reflection in otherness within itself” (*die Reflexion im Anderssein in sich selbst*). Cultural objects, insofar as they are spiritual entities, are with themselves when they are out of themselves, when they are alienated or externalized in particular instances, such is the case of the artworks, in which the spirit understands and apprehends itself as otherness.

Therefore, precisely cultural objects are not given, and more than a factuality way, what characterizes them is a mode of historical production. It could be said that a cultural object is not a *factum* but a *fictum*, something made, somewhat a fiction. This aspect is probably highlighted by Coseriu when he says that the characteristic being of language is being-creation: “la langue est (ontologiquement) creation” (“Du primat...”, p. 71). Cultural objects are always effects and, according to the fact that they are not given realities, one could say that they are *des effets sans cause* (Derrida), that they are accomplishments or productions of an infinite activity (Coseriu, in “El hombre y su lenguaje”, p. 21, calls it “...[actividad] cuyo objeto es necesariamente infinito”). Certainly, as M. points out, the character of cultural objects allows to explain them in terms closer to final causality than to efficient causality, typical of naturalistic explanations. But beyond that, philosophy discovers to what extent the explanation of cultural objects ceases to be at all causal explanation, it stops being an explanation from the earlier cause that produces them, and it arises as an *eventual* explanation, from the specific mode in which it befalls or occurs, being always a happening with no-presuppositions. Philosophy opens up the possibility of analyzing their reality in terms of ontological genesis, such as the process of development or actualization of that which has no cause. This is where the importance of philosophy to linguistic and cultural studies lies in general.

At this point, the Coseriu’s philosophical radicalness is probably greater than M. is willing to grant him (perhaps because this radicalness leads to philosophical queries which spill over, and even call into question, linguistics itself). Reading Coseriu:

Étant donné que la langue est une activité créatrice, le changement linguistique ne peut pas non plus seulement être compris de façon «rétrospective», en se rapportant à la langue qui lui est antérieure et comme quelque chose qui se produit en elle et avec elle. Au contraire, le changement linguistique doit être en même temps et en premier lieu compris de façon «prospective». Et, dans ce sens, il ne signifie pas remplacement dans une langue déjà donnée, mais création de langue, objectivation historique de ce qui a été créé dans l’activité de parler, c’est-à-dire langue par excellence saisie au moment de son devenir. Comme dans toute autre tradition, le changement en soi n’est pas non plus ici la transformation de quelque chose de déjà donné, mais naissance d’un morceau de tradition, et cela peu importe si ce qui est nouvellement créé remplace ou non une autre partie plus ancienne de cette tradition. (...) Et le véritable problème du changement linguistique n’est pas celui du pourquoi du
Philosophy shows that there is nothing mysterious about this kind of event and that it is distinctive of cultural objects and, in particular, of language. It is how the transcendental facts happen, facts that configure the world, such as language; modes of infinity which, once they are being projected or executed in material externalisations, allow for the auto-reference or auto-affection that we call world. The quasi-cause designating the idea of a prompt (Hammarström), linked to the occurrence of linguistic change itself, seems also to be linked to this mode of transcendental happening of the world’s limits: imprint, effectuation, emergence out of nothing. The “adopted” change is, as a cultural fact, the occurrence of what has no presupposition: language as ultimate presupposition that only presupposes itself. If the object of linguistics must incorporate this dimension of infinity and incompleteness, of problematic opening, it seems that philosophy is called to the task to think it. A philosophy, however, which rather than establishing or to setting up a strong fundament for linguistics, will stress on the lack of such a fundament. Certainly, an important reason to take it seriously.