

Integral Linguistics from a Cognitive Semiotics perspective: Metaphor between semiotic and pre-semiotic experience

Abstract

In recent years, Eugenio Coseriu's linguistic theory has been increasingly re-evaluated within contemporary debates, particularly for its ambition to offer a unified and coherent framework for understanding *human linguisticity*. This paper examines the theoretical tension between Coseriu's perspective and cognitive-semantic approaches, which often isolate cognitive mechanisms from their intrinsic semiotic and linguistic grounding. A paradigmatic case is Conceptual Metaphor Theory and its subsequent developments, here taken as a litmus test to highlight the divergence between two ultimately irreconcilable conceptions of language. Convinced of the need to recover a philosophically consistent conception of language that transcends the limitations of mainstream Cognitive Linguistics and Cognitive Semantics, I will propose a new look on the dialogue already underway between Coseriu's theory of language and Cognitive Semiotics – both sharing critical motives toward the dominant cognitive paradigm. The aim is not to portray Coseriu as a forerunner of Cognitive Semiotics –nor, even less, to formulate a “Coserian Cognitive Semiotics” – but rather to explore how Coseriu's Integral Linguistics might enrich this emerging field, showing that a dialogue with Coseriu can illuminate key theoretical issues and provide fertile ground for rethinking language (and semiosis) as a philosophical object in its own right.

Keywords

Conceptual Metaphor, Integral Linguistics, Cognitive Linguistics, Cognitive Semiotics

Abstract

Negli ultimi anni, la teoria linguistica di Eugenio Coseriu ha suscitato un rinnovato e crescente interesse, soprattutto per la sua ambizione di offrire un quadro unitario e coerente della linguisticità umana. Questo contributo si propone di esaminare la tensione teorica tra la prospettiva coseriana e gli approcci della linguistica e della semantica cognitiva, i quali tendono a isolare i meccanismi cognitivi dal loro intrinseco radicamento semiotico e linguistico. Un

caso paradigmatico è rappresentato dalla Conceptual Metaphor Theory e dai suoi sviluppi successivi, qui assunti come banco di prova per evidenziare la divergenza fra due concezioni del linguaggio, in ultima analisi, inconciliabili. Nel tentativo di recuperare una concezione filosoficamente coerente, l'articolo si propone di ridiscutere la concezione coseriana del linguaggio e, in particolare, della metafora, alla luce di un dialogo già avviato nell'ambito della Semiotica cognitiva. Entrambe le prospettive condividono, infatti, una posizione critica nei confronti del paradigma cognitivo, sia nella versione classica sia in quella embodied. L'obiettivo non è presentare Coseriu come un precursore della Semiotica cognitiva – né, tanto meno, formulare una “Semiotica cognitiva coseriana” – bensì esplorare in che modo la linguistica integrale di Coseriu possa contribuire ad arricchire questo campo di ricerca, riaprendo questioni teoriche che consentono di ripensare il linguaggio (e la semiosi) come oggetto filosofico a pieno titolo.

Keywords

Metafora concettuale, Linguistica Integrale, Linguistica Cognitiva, Semiotica Cognitiva

1. Introduction

In recent years, much work has been devoted to framing Eugenio Coseriu's linguistic theory within contemporary debates, revealing both its vast scope and its ambition to provide a unified and coherent theoretical ground capable of holding together the various dimensions of *human linguisticity*. Over the past few years, the language barrier – that limitation on the circulation of Coseriu's thought, owing to the fact that most of his work remained inaccessible to the Anglophone world – has been partially overcome through the publication of significant volumes and essays (e.g. Willems / Munteanu 2021; Kabatek 2023) exploring the valuable insights Coseriu offered to both the philosophy of language and linguistics over the second half of the twentieth century.

Nonetheless, if the language barrier poses an objective obstacle to a wider reception of his work, the principal limitation to understanding and potentially revitalizing Coseriu's conception of language lies in more strictly theoretical and epistemological reasons (cf. Agud 2021; cf. also Albrecht 2015; Vilcu 2015). Indeed, Eugenio Coseriu is something of an alien figure, envisioning a radically different conception of language than the one presupposed by most contemporary linguistic theories, whether inspired by Chomskyan linguistics or the Embodied Cognition paradigm. His conception, deeply rooted in dialogue with ancient, modern, and contemporary philosophy, as well as with Saussurean linguistics and

Structuralism, draws indeed on a complex theoretical background, reconstructed and reinterpreted in an original way, without adhering to any school or following a single master (cf. Kabatek / Murguía 1997: 76).

Any attempt to consider Coseriu a “cognitive linguist” must confront a theoretical and epistemological divide: the question only makes sense if we first understand what he means by “language”. For this reason, in Section 2.1, I give a brief review of Coseriu’s conception of language and the perspective of Integral Linguistics. For scholars familiar with his work, this first section may appear superfluous or didactic; nevertheless, it is necessary to clarify certain basic notions, which are never entirely neutral within the semiotic and semantic traditions. On this basis, it will become clear why, in the final part of the paper, I propose a further reflection on “sign”, “linguistic sign”, and “meaning”. Readers already well acquainted with Coseriu’s linguistics may safely consider skipping this section.

Crucially, if the adjective “cognitive” does not stand for a specific school – such as Cognitive Linguistics, Cognitive Grammar, or Cognitive Semantics – but identifies the very nature of language as a means of knowledge, then Coseriu’s theory can indeed be considered “cognitive” (cf. Diodato 2021, 2022), insofar as, for him, language constitutes one of the specific and absolutely primary dimensions of human nature.¹ However, in this sense, all theories that recognize language as a cognitive (not merely communicative) instrument are “cognitive”. It is not enough, in fact, to ascribe to language the status of a distinctive feature of human nature, as both Descartes and Chomsky do. Paradoxically, from a Coserian perspective, the “non-cognitive” theories would be precisely those that call themselves “cognitive” while failing to recognize the “absolute priority” of language in shaping human cognition (cf. Coseriu 1990/2000: 41).

A simple way – though with some oversimplifications, which I will later attempt to address more precisely (see *infra*, § 2.2) – to illustrate the theoretical movements just mentioned is to begin with the role that language plays in relation to nature and culture.

As is well known, first-generation cognitivism, drawing on a revised form of Cartesianism tailored to the need to reject Behaviorism (Chomsky 1966), tends to affirm the

¹ According to the principle of the “Absolute priority of language” (Coseriu, 2001: 79), “L’homme est le seul être qui travaille et qui parle, dans le sens propre de ces termes. Par le travail, l’homme se construit constamment un monde approprié à son être physique. Par le langage, il se construit un monde approprié à son être spirituel: un monde pensable (le monde de l’expérience sensible est bien représentable, mais il n’est pas pensable)”. The English translation is provided by Kabatek (2023: 25): “Human beings are the only existing beings that work and speak in the proper sense of these terms. Through work, human beings constantly create a world which is adequate for their physical existence whereas through language, an appropriate world for spiritual existence is created: a thinkable world (the world of sensual experience, even if representable, is not thinkable)”.

primacy of nature. As a result, given that the only legitimate sciences are the natural ones, linguistics, and cultural sciences in general, must be modelled on the *sciences of nature*. The position of the Embodied Mind paradigm is more blurred but equally controversial, since, in seeking to challenge and defeat both Descartes and Chomsky, it aims to mitigate the emphasis on (innate) biological structures by promoting, at least ostensibly, the “dissolution” of the nature/culture dichotomy (e.g., Lakoff / Johnson 1980; Varela / Thompson / Rosch 1991). Yet, this ambition remains often theoretically ambiguous, as it increasingly overshadows the anthropological dimension of cognitive activity, once again reducing cognition from something embodied to something merely *embrained*. In contrast to such perspectives, Coseriu aligns with the “culturalism” of structural linguistics and semiotics, situating the sciences of language within the broader domain of the *cultural sciences* (cf. Kabatek / Murguia 1997: 167; Borcilă 2021) and conceiving language as the faculty that *transforms nature into culture* (cf. also Eco 1976).

In the following, I evaluate certain aspects of the ‘great divide’ between Coseriu’s linguistics (§ 2.1) and cognitive approaches (§ 2.2.), before proceeding to support a more sustained dialogue between Coseriu’s theory of language and Cognitive Semiotics (§ 3) – already pursued in several works by Zlatev and, earlier and quite independently, within the Romanian Coserian school (cf. Faur 2013).

Far from seeking to portray Coseriu as a precursor of Cognitive Semiotics, or to invent a “Coserian Cognitive Semiotics” (as if there were not already enough “cognitive semiotics” in circulation!), the intention is to show – continuing the line of work already inaugurated – that, within a Cognitive Semiotic framework: (1) linguistics must be understood as *Integral Linguistics*, which is precisely what Coseriu did; and (2) Integral Linguistics should be further extended within semiotics – specifically, within Cognitive Semiotics – which is what Coseriu did not do (and probably would not have accepted at all) (cf. Sonesson 2021). I am aware that the aim is ambitious, as it seeks to revisit long-standing debates on key notions such as *language*, *sign*, and *semiotic/linguistic meaning*. As stated in the introduction, my objective, however, is to outline a path for dialogue that may prove fruitful both in critically revitalizing certain aspects of Coseriu’s thought and for refocusing attention on language as a highly specific and distinctive semiotic system.

2. The Great Divide: Integral Linguistics and Cognitive Linguistics

The profound theoretical divide between Coseriu's linguistics and cognitive approaches may, perhaps, account for the widespread aversion to the adjective "cognitive" among his students and scholars (e.g. Bota 2011; Di Cesare 2019). This is not the place to examine in detail the many, and often well-grounded, reasons for such reluctance, nor to indulge, as Zlatev cautions, in the nostalgic belief that "linguistics would not have been in its present fragmented state if, sometime half a century ago, it had followed the lead of thinkers such as Coseriu rather than Chomsky" (Zlatev 2011: 132).

It is worth noting, however, that at the heart of the 'great divide' between Coseriu and both Cognitive Linguistics and Cognitive Semantics – here epitomized by Conceptual Metaphor Theory (henceforth, CMT) – lies what many have identified as the latter's marked *philosophical inconsistency* (cf., among others, Rakova, 2002). This inconsistency is evident not only in the vague and unexamined usage of key concepts such as *language*, *meaning*, and *symbol* – notably, the notion of *sign* is mostly absent (cf. Diodato 2024b) – but also in the reductive tendency to flatten the history of philosophy into a simplistic opposition between an allegedly hegemonic "objectivism" and a marginalized "subjectivism".² In contrast to this "disturbing" framing, which effectively dismisses the entire tradition of Western thought on language and meaning (cf. Wierzbicka 1986), Coseriu's approach offers a radically different perspective. For him, the history of the philosophy of language is not a repository of errors to be overcome, but rather a continuous and critical dialogue aimed at illuminating the place of language within the broader context of human theoretical and practical activity (Di Cesare 2019: 15).

Another reason for this antithesis is the *linguistic indifferentism* of cognitive linguistic approaches, which leave no room for a *philosophy of languages* "in the plural" (cf. Formigari 2007), limiting themselves either to a nativist or universalist perspective or, in the case of embodied theories, to an ambiguous stance according to which historical-natural languages are supposed to exist, yet are ultimately reduced to mere emanations of underlying conceptual structures. This view amounts, in effect, to a conception of language as *nomenclature* – precisely the notion that Coseriu, building upon and extending Saussure, sought to overcome. In short, cognitive approaches neglect to recognize the *semiotic mediation* – a notion that lies

² It is well-known that in Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphor we live by* neither Aristotle nor Vico are mentioned; but it is also the case of Varela / Thompson / Rosch (1991: 172), who summarize the entire history of philosophy in the opposition between "the Scylla of cognition as the recovery of a pre-given outer world (realism) and the Charybdis of cognition as the projection of a pre-given inner world (idealism)".

at the heart of Coseriu's theory, is foundational to the broader European structuralist tradition, and receives renewed emphasis within Cognitive Semiotics.

2.1. From Structural Semantics to Integral Linguistics

Integral Linguistics certainly represents an alternative to Cognitive Linguistics and Cognitive Semantics, as Coseriu himself acknowledged in his scathing critique of prototype semantics (Coseriu 1990/2000; cf. Taylor 1999). There is, indeed, no possibility of reconciling the two conceptions of language (cf. Blank / Kock 1999; cf. also Willems 2011, Bota 2011) – one *semiotic*, which sees language as the *primary logos* (Coseriu 1975: 412) grounded in history, and the other subordinated to the centrality of a-semiotic and a-linguistic cognitive processes.

A key point is that, for Coseriu, there is no knowledge of the world that is not mediated by (linguistic) signs. In contrast, cognitivist approaches conceive of “categorization” as a process that takes place *prior to* language, or that interacts with it only at a later stage, i.e., once pre-conceptual and conceptual structures have already emerged from the largely unquestioned interplay between the (individual) body (brain) and environment. This is why Coseriu characterizes Cognitive Semantics – particularly in its prototype variant – as a *skeology*³ (Gr. σκεῦδος, ‘thing’), that is, a discipline concerned with interpreting and cataloguing “things” based on extralinguistic knowledge that speakers possess and activate in discourse (Coseriu 1990; cf. Kabatek 2023: 144–146). Conversely, Coseriu's theory seeks to address the *essence of language* by identifying its intrinsic properties and resisting any reduction to extrinsic definitions (cf. also Coseriu 1956/2007).

For Coseriu, language is an intentional activity (ἐνέργεια) that produces signs understood as units of world-representation. Following Pagliaro (1930; cf. Coseriu 1994), language must be examined in light of its three universals: *semanticity*, *creativity*, and *alterity*. As a mechanism of meaning creation, language is conceivable only *with* and *for* others. Consequently, its communicative function (*saying something to someone*) is not its primary definition; rather, language is the foundational form of *being-with-others*, the ground of human sociality itself⁴

³ As Faur (2013: 116–117) points out, Coseriu does not reject this type of semantics *per se*, provided it is not reduced to a mere *Sachsemantik* (a semantics of “things”), but instead becomes a *sachbezogene Semantik*, that is, a semantics of how things are given *in* and *through* language. This aligns with Wiesgerber's *inhaltbezogenen Grammatik*, that is, a content-related grammar (Weisgerber 1956–57, in Geckeler 1971).

⁴ Crucially, *alterity* here cannot be reduced to Wittgenstein's argument against private language (Wittgenstein 1953) – which Coseriu does not even address, given that he does not regard Wittgenstein as a philosopher of language. In the Humboldtian tradition, *alterity* is not a secondary feature but the very foundation of cognitive activity – that is, the creation of a shared world between *I and you*. By contrast, Wittgenstein's *language games*

(Cosieriu 2000/2007: 132). From alterity and creativity follows of *historicity*: language always appears *in the plural* (Cosieriu 1967/2007: 73), that is, in the form of concrete languages – semiotic systems anchored in specific historical communities (Cosieriu 2000/2007: 162). Finally, from semanticity and alterity arises *materiality*: in order to signify with and for others, meaning – which originates in consciousness – must be externalized in a sensible, material form.

Emanating from this conception of language, *Integral Linguistics* is a program that does not position itself in opposition to Structural Linguistics. As one of the principal contributors to the advancement of Structural Semantics, Cosieriu never disavows the structuralist framework. On the contrary, he acknowledges its enduring value while underscoring its partiality: Structural Linguistics – which also calls for further development⁵ – focuses exclusively on one level of linguistic analysis and, within that level, on a single dimension, namely the *functional language*.⁶ For this reason, the structural perspective must be “integrated” into a broader framework capable of accounting for the full complexity of language as a human activity. But, as we shall see, beyond Integral Linguistics, there remains space for further developing the relationship between linguistics and semiotics.

Indeed, Cosieriu (1992/2007) reflects on the distinction between *sign*, *symbol*⁷, and *word*, starting from Hjelmslev’s (1943) definition of language – always actualized in historical languages – as a semiotics to which all other semiotics can be referred, but which, as a whole, cannot be reduced to (i.e., translated into) any other semiotics. Determining the specificity of linguistic signs thus requires a more precise definition of “sign”, one capable of distinguishing between qualitatively different types of phenomena (which is also one of central concerns of Cognitive Semiotics).

are forms of social interaction that, Cosieriu believes, presuppose the prior existence of language (cf. Trabant 2021: 56).

⁵ Integration proceeds in two directions: one internal to Saussurianism, aimed at the structural analysis of all dimensions of the *langue*, and one directed toward encompassing the dimensions of *langage* and discourse that Saussure would have excluded (Kabatek / Murguía 1997: 158; cf. also Cosieriu 1982). It should be recalled that, for Cosieriu (1980/2007: 268), Structuralism was not defeated by competing theories, such as Behaviorism or Generativism, but died of inanition, because it failed to come to terms with the limits of its own validity.

⁶ A historical language is not a monolithic synchronic system, but a “system of systems” (*diasystem*), which includes different systems of fields, each with its own synchronicity (cf. Kabatek 2023: 116). Since diatopic, diastratic, and diaphasic differences cannot be analyzed simultaneously, the structural method requires the abstraction of a *functional language*, that is, a syntopic, synstratic, and symphasic system of functional oppositions (cf. Kabatek 2023: 129).

⁷ For Cosieriu, as for Hegel and Saussure, the *symbol* must be distinguished from the sign; moreover, he adds, a symbol viewed from the perspective of language is a kind of encrypted discourse or text: the scales as a symbol of justice do not designate justice, but say something like “justice is/should be like a set of scales” (Cosieriu 1992/2007: 230).

On this matter, Coseriu (1992/2007) rightly argues that it is not true that “everything can be a sign”. Such claim would hold only in the case of *indices* – not in the Peircean sense, but in the Augustinian sense of *signa naturalia* – since anything can be connected to something else and thereby serve as the basis for inference. Indices are inferential phenomena, but they are not signs. Proper signs presuppose a *double intentionality*, namely a productive, open-ended intention from the sign’s creator, and a receptive intention from the interpreter. Even then, “everything can be a sign” only in the general sense that the material vehicle of the sign can be any perceptible entity (a sequence of sounds, an image, a light, or a flag). Among proper signs, the linguistic sign (*word*) occupies a privileged position, as it marks the *threshold* between the broader world of signs and that of language, that always comes first, conceived, in Hjelmslev’s sense, as the model for all semiotics (Coseriu 1992/2007: 224; cf. Trabandt 2021).

Integral Linguistics arises from the conviction of the primacy of language over other semiotic systems, and from the view that language operates on three interrelated levels – (1) the universal, that is, language in general, conceived as an activity oriented toward the extralinguistic world; (2) the historical, a particular language understood as a system of signs or norms (*values*) shared by a linguistic community; and (3) the individual, actual speech, that is, concrete discourse or text – examined through the three perspectives of *energeia*, *dynamis*, and *ergon*. On the basis of this tripartite model, Coseriu (1985) develops a comprehensive account of the *types of knowledge* presupposed by linguistic activity, emerging from his longstanding critique of Saussure’s vague opposition between *langue* and *parole* (Coseriu 1952; cf. Diodato 2022).

At the universal level, the activity of speaking *per se* refers to the general principles of speaking, prior to any distinction between different languages – something akin to Saussure’s *faculté du langage* (cf. Diodato 2020). However, since speaking always means speaking in a specific language, speakers necessarily possess *idiomatic knowledge*: a competence related to the conventional norms of a particular historical language. The product of this knowledge is an *abstract system* as that of a language codified in grammars and dictionaries. Yet linguistic activity also entails *elocutive knowledge*: the capacity to construct contextually appropriate discourses in specific communicative situations. Speaking, in this full sense, always entails *saying something even minimally new*; its product is thus the totality of individual enunciations.

Since the persistent ambiguity surrounding the term *meaning* (German: *Bedeutung*) continues to obscure crucial distinctions, Coseriu revisits Saussure’s notion of the linguistic sign and proposes a clarifying tripartition among *meaning*, *designation*, and *sense*.

Meaning (German: *Bedeutung*, French: *signifié*) is the *lexical or grammatical content* given in a particular language. As has been tirelessly emphasized by Coseriu himself, this aspect is crucial for understanding the distance from Cognitive Linguistics, which – even when employing the notion of *symbol* (e.g., Langacker 1991; Diodato 2024b) – fails to acknowledge any semiotic mediation and remains confined to an instrumental conception.

Designation (German: *Bezeichnung*) is the relationship between a linguistic sign *as a whole* (signifier + signified) and its reference to an extralinguistic object or concept (in a specific text). Here, the distance from logical-analytical or referential semantics becomes evident, since for Coseriu, designation is possible only insofar as it is mediated by signs. It is a “possibility” of language that derives from its primary nature as a meaning-making faculty. This marks the fundamental divide between language and other systems of signs: while other systems move from things, language always moves from meaning (Coseriu 1992/2007: 233).

Sense (German: *Sinn*) refers to the meaning of an entire text or discourse. While this could be identified as the properly “pragmatic” dimension⁸ – concerned, since Morris’s classical distinction, with the enunciative level – Coseriu does not view it as distinct or secondary to semantics, for language is, above all, *semantic*. From the standpoint of language as activity, pragmatics appears a perspective on language as a technique of incessant meaning creation (cf. Schrott 2021: 211). More importantly, *sense* is not conceived of as the mere addition of designation and meaning, nor as a simple contextual modulation of meaning, but as a specific semiotic level in which meaning and designation together express a higher-level content (Coseriu 1980/1997; Bota 2011: 317).

On the basis of this tripartite distinction, the types of content – *designation*, *meaning*, and *sense* – are correlated with distinct types of judgment. Accordingly, with respect to *designation*, a speech act may be judged as *congruent* or *incongruent*, depending on whether it corresponds to things and events. In relation to *meaning*, an act of speaking may be *correct* or *incorrect*, that is, in accordance with or in violation of the norms of the language system. Finally, in relation to *sense*, a speech act may be judged as *appropriate* or *inappropriate*, depending on its *entornos* (Coseriu 1997: 76).

To recapitulate, this brief and deliberately didactic outline of Coseriu’s approach is meant to clarify the main thematic lines of my argument, which address both the distance between

⁸For Coseriu, the so-called “pragmatic turn” is irrelevant, since “pragmatics was, in his view, only concerned with the universal level of speaking, and so there could be no language-specific or historical pragmatics” (Kabatek 2023: 80).

Coseriu and traditional cognitive approaches and the points of convergence with the theoretical orientation of Cognitive Semiotics. In fact, it is only within the framework of this comprehensive conception of language that metaphor can be examined as the *most illuminating* manifestation of the universals of language (see *supra*) – standing in sharp contrast to the purportedly brain-bound metaphoricity posited by cognitive linguists, which I will briefly address in the following section.

2.2. Metaphors in the head

It is generally agreed that CMT is “the most dominant theory within the large, diverse multidisciplinary world of metaphor research” and “primarily responsible for the incredible popularity of metaphor within many academic fields and among certain lay audiences” (Gibbs 2017: 5).

As has been observed (Danesi 1993, 1995; Gensini 2014–2015), *mutatis mutandis*, CMT reopens the philosophical debate between Descartes and Vico. Indeed, by challenging the long-standing tradition that reduces metaphor to a mere rhetorical ornament, theorists of CMT advance a critique of Cartesian–Chomskyan dualism, aiming to demonstrate the fundamentally *imaginative nature* of human cognition. In this light, the problem of metaphor not only justifies but also substantiates their central thesis of *experiential realism*, conceived as a “third way” beyond the alleged myths of “subjectivism” and “objectivism” (Lakoff / Johnson 1980). As a result, in its initial formulation, experiential realism emerges as an “ecological” theory: one that seeks to give an account of human cognition not through abstract, formal-logical, or disembodied models, but in terms that are analogical, motivated, and grounded in the workings of the body and brain.

So far so good, were it not that in CMT metaphor is defined as the outcome of a cognitive ability that allows to establish correspondences (*mappings, projections*) between two distinct entities, belonging to two different conceptual “domains”, namely a “source domain”, typically concrete, and a typically more abstract “target domain”. Conceptual production (that is, human knowledge) originates in concrete domains of experience, particularly those shaped by bodily, motor, physical, and perceptual abilities, which are (supposed to be) metaphorically structured, and in turn, *analogically, iconically* structure more abstract domains, which are either unknown or not yet conceptually organized. Within this initial framework, metaphor is understood first and foremost as a matter of *thought* (Lakoff / Johnson 1980): it plays a foundational role in the formation of *conceptual schemas* and only subsequently manifests at the levels of language, action, and, more broadly, everyday life.

This seemingly innocuous (circular) definition – which reiterates traditional accounts of metaphor largely disregarded by proponents of CMT – has sparked a disproportionate number of comments, revisions, corrections, and additions, giving rise to the so-called “metaphor wars” (Gibbs 2017), which intersect with the broader “linguistic wars” between the two dominant cognitive paradigms (Allen Harris 1993). The resulting discussions have filled page after page, adding to the thousands already written on metaphor since antiquity (Eco / Paci 1983). This vast and ever-growing body of literature is virtually impossible to grasp in its entirety⁹, yet it attests both to the enduring appeal of metaphor across the history of ideas and, perhaps, to the difficulty – if not the impossibility, as Eco / Paci (1983) argue – of articulating *anything genuinely new* about a phenomenon so deeply embedded in human meaning-making practices.

Nonetheless, setting aside the specific critical points of this definition of metaphor, CMT raises concerns due to the underlying conception of language it assumes.

First, by virtue of the principle of non-autonomy, it is accurate to assert that CMT, along with embodied approaches more broadly, “provides a major alternative to classic modular views of language that see thought and language as separate architectural systems of the mind, with the body and mind occupying different realms of human experience” (Gibbs 2017: 5). As Gibbs emphasizes, this approach engages with the broader unity of human conceptual structures, bodily experience, and the communicative, even aesthetic, functions of language. Yet it is also true that language is predominantly treated from an instrumental and external perspective, for this approach focuses neither on *what language does* nor on *what language is*, but rather on how language reflects *what the brain/mind does*.

While rejecting the Chomskyan principle of autonomy and the modular view of language is commendable, asserting language’s non-autonomy and its presumed embodiment has the disadvantage of overlooking its fundamental cognitive function. This omission ultimately undermines the possibility of a *linguistic semantics* akin to that which Coseriu pursued for many decades – precisely grounded in the conviction that such structural analysis is not only possible but necessary, albeit partial.

Moreover, in rejecting the myth of “objectivism”, Lakoff and Johnson argue – again, commendably – that semantic production is not directly referential. Metaphorical concepts do not represent the world *as it is*; rather, the very conception of reality depends primarily on the

⁹ A useful overview that briefly summarizes this never-ending debate is provided by Gibbs, who ultimately concedes that, at best, “conceptual metaphor may be an essential ingredient in a comprehensive theory of metaphor, yet it clearly is not the only part of that story” (Gibbs 2017: 15).

characteristics of the organism that conceptualizes it and on the types of interaction it can have with its environment. However, if we take this principled claim seriously and analyze it in the terms set out by the two authors, we arrive at a rather paradoxical conclusion.

Given the independence of the conceptual level from the linguistic level and given that the conceptual level *determines* the linguistic one, it seems that there is no “literal meaning” at all – both conceived in denotative and truth-conditional terms or in linguistic terms.

In this regard, Bartlett / Ruangjaroon (2022) address the two interrelated claims of CMT, the Conceptual Claim (that is, abstract target domains are necessarily structured by more concrete source domains, leading to the formation of conceptual metaphors) and the Linguistic Claim (that is, conceptual metaphors are necessary for linguistic metaphors). For Lakoff / Johnson (1980), they notice, an expression such as “He tried to defend himself from your attacks” is not “poetic” or “figurative” but “literal”. While the “literal” nature of such expression prove that we think metaphorically, it ends in assuming that the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR is not really a metaphor. In fact, when we think or talk about arguments using war-like concepts, we are not “mapping” two different “domains” but are assuming that ARGUMENT IS (LITERALLY) WAR. Regarding the second claim, the authors observe that it is possible to talk about abstract domains using literal, non-metaphorical language (whatever definition of ‘literal’ is assumed, if this distinction collapses, there is ultimately no need for a theory of metaphor at all). Therefore, conceptual metaphors are neither *sufficient nor necessary* for linguistic metaphors, given the occurrence of metaphors that can be easily understood but are unlikely to result from cross-domain conceptual mappings. As the authors suggests, this calls for a clearer delimitation of the distinction between literal and non-literal meaning, which goes far beyond what has been done among CMT supporters (cf. Gibbs / Colston 2012), simply assuming the distinction is blurred (cf. Kövecses 2020).

Perhaps what appears to ground the notion of a “literal meaning” is the postulated existence of a “basic conceptual” or “neural” ground, governed by a system of bio-cognitive constraints that “motivate” the image-schemas upon which conceptual metaphors are elaborated – an assumption that, as I will show, opens other theoretical deadlocks.

Thus, while proponents of CMT (commendably) reject both the analytic and generative paradigms – within which metaphor remains a “scandal” (Eco / Paci 1983) – they fail to adequately account for the relation between the conceptual and linguistic claims, and, above all, for how metaphorical processes move beyond the individual mind to intersect with the historical and cultural dimensions of language use. As has been emphasized, even when cognitive scholars address the conundrum of the interplay between nature and culture and

advocate for their continuity – that is, reducing the mind to the body, namely to brain functioning – their notion of culture remains anchored in a communal and romantic conception (Leezenberg 2009: 146) as an unquestioned *set of shared values*. The origins, locus, development, and dynamics of these values remain unclear, such that achieving the right balance between nature/nurture, body and culture, continues to be an unresolved *desideratum* in CMT (cf. Zlatev / Jacobsson / Paju 2021). A similar oversimplification marks their understanding of the *body*, which also ought to be conceived as a semiotic construct (cf. Violi 2008: 55).

As has been widely observed, the situation becomes even more problematic with Neural Metaphor Theory (NMT) (Lakoff 2008, 2014), which reflects a broader trend across the human and social sciences, entailing an epistemological reorientation that increasingly positions the humanities as “provisional” or subordinate to the physical and biological sciences. Indeed, a form of *neuromania* (Legrenzi / Umiltà 2009; Tallis 2011) has taken hold in many strands of embodied cognitive linguistics.

In this context, Brandt’s (2020) insightful reflections prove useful for situating the debate within a more accurate philosophical lineage. As he argues, if classical cognitive science is “Cartesian”, then embodied cognition may be appropriately characterized as “Spinozan”. In fact, following Damasio (1994), it is commonly asserted that the “dualist” Descartes did not merely distinguish but *radically separated* mind and body, thereby inspiring the disembodied framework of Classical Cognitive Science. The “monist” Spinoza, by contrast, is said to have conceived the body as the mind and the mind as the body, notably influencing the Embodied Cognition research program, especially within analytic philosophy and philosophy of mind.

Without venturing into the complex philosophical discussions between Cartesian or Spinozan cognitive science, I follow Brandt in observing that a semiotic approach cannot be deemed “Spinozan” (monist) but should remain “Cartesian” (dualist).¹⁰

In NMT, rather than dealing with an *embodied mind*, we confront a body animated by mind (an *enminded body*) insofar as constructs such as *image-schemas* do not merely derive from motor programs but *are* motor programs themselves (cf. Gallese / Lakoff 2005). For our

¹⁰ “Monists believe that meaning is part of the material world, while dualists believe that it resides in immaterial contents of minds. In semantics, dualists therefore distinguish meaning and reference, whereas monists insist that meaning is reference, things referring to other things by themselves. Dualists understand meaning in terms of mental representations; monists are by contrast (often) ready to reject the notion of mental representations and “inner life” in general. Dualists are more prepared than monists to accept that meaning is shared by signs, because they accept that there are representations by which minds or people let some things “stand for” other things” (Brandt 2020: 17).

purposes, the key point is that what Brandt (2020: 23) terms the *enmindment of the body* remains largely inadequate for explaining metaphor, and Lakoff and Johnson's "Spinozan" theory of metaphor appears to address precisely the difficulty encountered by analytic referential theories.¹¹

Altogether, rather than resolving Cartesian dualism, the "Spinozan" approach relies on a form of monism that, aiming at naturalizing meaning, fails to clarify the relationship between mind and body, simply asserting that the mind *is* the physiological body/brain (cf. "we think with our brain"; Lakoff 2008). For developing a notion of embodiment understood as *the interaction between the (physiological and phenomenological) body and mind*, what is required, according to Brandt (2020: 16), is not so much Spinoza, the "father of analytic philosophy", but rather Descartes, the "father of phenomenology".¹² However, as I shall argue, another view suggests that for a proper theory of metaphor, what is needed is Vico, more so than either Descartes or Spinoza.

2.3. Metaphor in the Business of Human Affairs

Coseriu undoubtedly draws inspiration from Vico's theory of language, in which the mind-body dualism is not addressed in terms comparable to those of contemporary cognitive science, yet is nonetheless developed in an explicitly anti-Cartesian vein.¹³

Vico's thought is situated within what Simone (1995: VII) refers to as the "problem of Cratylus", that is, the attempt to answer the question of how language *represents* the world. In the broader intellectual trajectory that leads to the stark separation between scientific and philosophical knowledge, aimed at truth and pursued through reason (the Cartesian *ratio*, cf. Coseriu 2019: 318), and rhetorical knowledge, aimed at beauty, aesthetic in nature, and thus rooted in sensibility, Vico identifies in language and poetry two self-originated constitutive

¹¹ "The meaningfulness of metaphors in natural language was thought to perhaps be saved, analytically speaking, if it were shown that they have a logical, propositional format which is predicative (A IS B), yielding a logical inference, thereby assisting the mind in building a true idea out of the imagistic magma of imagination, that is, if it were shown that metaphor lets the mind connect a concrete and bodily source (B) to the abstract ideational target (A), establishing by inference from B to A a truth which would still indeed be "of the body," by B, since the body is a body of mind. This is mainly, but implicitly, what the Spinozan cognitive theory of conceptual metaphor, initiated by Lakoff and Johnson, have tried to do" (Brandt 2020: 23).

¹² Coherently, according to Brandt (2020: 11), "phenomenology (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty) remains, somewhat hesitantly, Cartesian, since it has to distinguish the reality of experience itself from the reality of what it is experience *of*".

¹³ Indeed, Coseriu (2019: 212) denies the very existence of a Cartesian philosophy of language or a "Cartesian linguistics", since in Descartes the interest in language appears merely as an indication of an expressive intention arising from reason.

principles. In doing so, he offers a new and original response to the Platonic question and transforms rhetorics into a philosophy of language (Pennisi 1987).

In the same vein, Coseriu sees Vico as the first genuine philosopher of language, for, unlike his predecessors, he made language central to philosophical reflection, treating it as an autonomous object (Coseriu 2019: 311, 324). As is well known, in Vico's works the relationship between language and knowledge is intertwined with the question of the origin of language. In *La Scienza Nuova*, Vico (1744) shows that language does not arise by convention, as maintained by the dominant Aristotelianism of his time, but rather from *necessity*. Out of the initial *inopia linguae*, and then through gestures, expressive resources would have gradually been refined, giving rise to the formation of languages. As a result, the first articulation of language is *poetic*: it emerges from the senses and passions¹⁴, which are *semiotized*, that is, transformed into signs, through the faculty of imagination (*fantasia*) (cf. Danesi 1993: 50 ff.).

The process of abstraction that produces signs is therefore driven by metaphor, which, in the primitive mind, is “the operation that gave unity to iconic or perceptual thinking by seeking out and making connections among iconic signs and models. It thus generated abstract thought by transforming percepts into concepts” (Danesi 1993: 53). For this reason, as Coseriu observes, it is misleading to describe this process as “abstraction,” since language does not arise from an analysis of reality nor from a “rational” organization of the world into classes or categories. Language does not capture the *essence of things*, as Cratylus would have it¹⁵, but rather constitutes the creative act through which these classes or categories are formed (Coseriu 1967/2007: 63, cf. Bota 2007: 33). In this regard, Eco/Paci (1983: 238) argues that Vico “seems to put in question the existence of a cultural network, of semantic fields and universes, and of a preestablished process of semiosis, which should precede (...) the production and interpretation of metaphors”.

In *La creación metafórica en el lenguaje*, Coseriu introduces the issue of metaphor by first examining various definitions of language. Notably, this paper dates back to 1956 – well

¹⁴ “Passions” here refer to the “warm”, emotive, affective aspects of semantic creation, which – within this line of thought and in Coseriu's view – are not separated from “cold, pure reason”. In this regard, Faur (2021: 321) proposes the idea of a convergence between the integralist theory of metaphor and Johnson's (2018) aesthetics of the embodied mind – an interesting suggestion that deserves further attention.

¹⁵ Granted that, for Vico, the linguistic sign is “natural” (iconic, motivated), unlike in Plato's *Cratylus*, this motivation does not stem from an analysis of things, but from the fact that things are, from the outset, given as signs (Coseriu, 2019: 328).

before the resurgence of “metaphor-mania” and prior to the *Vico Renaissance*¹⁶ in semiotics – but curiously, he does not make an explicit reference to Vico, who, however, is quite legible between the lines.

Along the Vico – Herder – (Humboldt) – Hegel line, poeticity, and consequently metaphoricity, is an essential universal feature of language, but not only in terms of its historical development, as Vico suggests through the well-known distinction between the ages of the gods, heroes, and men, each characterized by distinct languages evolving from imaginative and metaphorical origins to rational and conceptual forms. According to Coseriu (2019: 330), who follows Pagliaro’s interpretation (although he suspects it somewhat extends beyond Vico’s original text), it is impossible to separate an initial poetic-intuitive moment from a subsequent logical-rational one. Rather, language is always an act of creation, even when it operates within an already established system of signs in which the memory of the original poetic act has faded.

Setting aside the interpretative controversies surrounding Vico’s work, we can therefore ask, following Eco, whether metaphor is possible *before* or only *after* the establishment of language as a semiotic system (or more in general beyond *sign function*).¹⁷

As seen, this is a point that CMT overlooks, as it ties metaphor to pre-conceptual and pre-representational experiences. Instead, it should be recognized that “men know how to speak like heroes because they already know how to speak like men” (Eco / Paci 1983: 256). This is precisely Coseriu’s view: metaphor is a mean of “creation of cognitive contents of speaking with the aim of classifying reality” (Faur 2021: 317). For him, metaphor is a form of linguistic knowledge and, more specifically, a form of *knowledge through images*.

We are confronted with attempts to classify reality not through categories of reason, but through *images*, and with analogies established not on a strictly formal basis, between words, but poetically, between visions that must, at a given moment, have arisen from someone’s creative imagination [*fantasia*]. We are dealing with what, in a very broad sense, we call *metaphor*, understood here not as mere verbal transposition, or as an “abbreviated comparison”, but as a unified, spontaneous, and immediate expression (that is, with no intervening “as” or “like”) of a vision, of a poetic intuition (Coseriu 1956/2007: 134–135, my translation).

¹⁶ Regarding the *Vico Renaissance*, as Danesi (1993: 34) points out, cognitive research on metaphor is “Vichian” only in nature and purpose precisely because it rejects any semiotic mediation.

¹⁷ “What must be asked here is if those effects and properties – given that metaphors are the result of a selection of pertinent aspects – are not already cultural constructions. If metaphors require an underlying cultural framework, then the hieroglyphic language of the gods cannot be a merely primitive stage of human consciousness: It needs the presence of both the symbolic language of heroes and the epistolary language of men as its starting point” (Eco / Paci 1983: 239).

This capacity to link seemingly unrelated elements on the basis of what might be called *uncodified* or *non-conventional sudden similarities* tends to increase particularly when linguistic competence is less automatized – as in the case of children, of non-native speakers or ironic uses (Coseriu 1956/2007: 136). As Eco /Paci (1983: 234) states, “the best metaphors are those in which the cultural process, the dynamics itself of semiosis, shows through”.

Yet, the incidental, situated, nature of these acts of creation explains why not all metaphors become conventionalized within a language; thereby, conventional metaphors normally lose – though occasionally regain¹⁸ – their value as *images* (Coseriu 1956/2007: 142). Accordingly, etymology understood merely as the formal and external history of words proves inadequate to unravel the chain of meanings created metaphorically, since language cannot be regarded as a natural entity independent of its speakers. Rather, etymology – understood as the concrete history of words as signs – must proceed in relation to “linguistic sentiment”¹⁹ (Coseriu 1956/2007: 140), that is, the (situated, emotional, ideological...) *value* speakers attribute to words in the act of enunciation, a value that transcends historical motivations and challenges established norms.

From this perspective, it could be argued that any “genetic” distinction between *primary* or *literal meaning* and *secondary* or *metaphorical (poetic) meaning* is fictitious, since metaphorical creation is a constant, free activity of the imagination (in this sense, Lakoff and Johnson are right in observing that we use what they call conceptual metaphors quite “literally”). The mechanism of lexical creation, common to all human communities, entails apprehending and designating phenomena and aspects of nature, human products and activities, and, of course, the human body – all *universally pertinent* elements that are more likely to become sources and targets of metaphor. It follows that, unsurprisingly, different individuals, in various parts of the world, have coined analogous metaphors²⁰ (Coseriu 1956/2007: 151).

¹⁸ Sonesson (2022: 257) notes that expressions such as “the foot of the mountain” do not “substitute” any “literal” expression. Therefore, so-called “dead metaphors” are not even metaphors in the weak sense, as they no longer function as signs *substituting* for other signs. Nevertheless, they can be revitalized – for instance, when the similarity between a mountain and the human body is once again foregrounded through expressions like *the beard of the mountain* or *the stockings of the mountain*, referring to a forest located near the summit or perhaps at the very base. In such cases, an *iconic ground* is reactivated and transformed into a genuine *iconic sign*.

¹⁹ Here the use of “linguistic sentiment” is consistent with the current notion of “linguistic feeling” (cf. Romand / Le Du 2023). In other works, however, Coseriu (e.g. 1957/1962: 252) prefers to distinguish the speaker’s sentiment (*sentimiento del hablante*) from the speaker’s knowledge (*saber del hablante*), since “sentiment” implies, to some extent, a kind of “psychological grammar”.

²⁰ This “human concordance”, as Humboldt would have said, also accounts for CMT’s interest in the so-called *primary metaphors* (cf. Grady 1997; Lakoff / Johnson 1999), which are presumed to be universal – even though it remains unclear whether they are innate. I suspect that such a line of research would prove unfruitful like the one on “semantic primes”.

As such, metaphorical creation belongs to the universal level of *speaking in general* (Faur 2013: 132) and operates across all levels of language. In fact, metaphors in current language use can only be understood as a *semiotic mechanism* aligned with the ongoing processes of *pertinentization* (Prieto 1975; De Mauro 1982; Diodato 2024a), relying on the speaker's ability to shift fluidly between the “openness” of the encyclopedia and the “closure” of codified sign systems.²¹

3. Bridging the Divide: Cognitive Semiotics

Although Cognitive Semiotics has been defined and redefined in various ways over the past decades²², the perspective I adopt aligns with that developed by the Lund School (Sonesson, 2006, 2010; Zlatev, 2015, 2022, 2025) – an approach, in certain respects, consonant with that of the Roman linguistic school (cf. De Palo / Gensini 2018; Diodato 2024a), which grew around the figure of Antonio Pagliaro and further developed by Tullio De Mauro (1965, 1982), who also pursued the ideal of an “integral linguistics” in ongoing dialogue with Ferdinand de Saussure.²³

A critical overview of the theoretical positions of these two schools, however, lies beyond the scope of the present work. Nor is it my intention to suggest any form of homogenization or assimilation between the two. I prefer deliberately setting these issues aside, despite their undeniable importance and the fact that they warrant further reflection, as they would take us too far afield from the specific aims of this paper. What is perhaps most striking and worth

²¹ In this regard, Eco / Paci argue (1983: 255): “The success of a metaphor is a function of the sociocultural format of the interpreting subjects’ encyclopedia. In this perspective, metaphors are produced solely on the basis of a rich cultural framework, on the basis, that is, of a universe of content that is already organized into networks of interpretants, which decide (semiotically) upon the identities and differences of properties”. On the notion of Encyclopedia, see Eco (1984).

²² Since Daddesio (1995), who first proposed the encounter between cognitive science and semiotics, considerable progress has been made. A concise definition of Cognitive Semiotics is provided by Zlatev (2015: 1043), as “a new interdisciplinary, or rather, transdisciplinary, field focused on the multifaceted phenomenon of meaning, integrating methods and theories developed within cognitive science with those developed in semiotics and the humanities, with the ultimate aim of providing new insights into the realm of human signification and its manifestation in cultural practices”. Zlatev emphasises that Cognitive Semiotics is not a subfield of either semiotics or cognitive science, but rather a discipline that draws upon and further develops contributions from several related areas. Consequently, many scholars whose work resonates with Cognitive Semiotics do not explicitly employ this label.

²³ De Mauro (2007: 15) reports that Coseriu acknowledged in him the pursuit of the same ideal of an integral linguistics. Indeed, De Mauro’s approach is more properly a “semantic semiotics” or an “integral semiotics” in which greater space is given to accounting for the relationship between language and other semiotic systems, and to exploring the issue of *human semioticity* as articulated between nature and culture. Unfortunately, the dissemination of De Mauro’s work has also been hindered by a “language barrier”, particularly within the Anglophone world.

underlining, however, is that although they are not advancing the same arguments, and they disagree on some important points, at least they speak the same language. My more limited objective, therefore, is to highlight the traces of a possible shared conception of semiosis and language, grounded in common foundational assumptions.

The first issue to address concerns the relationship between linguistics and semiotics (and then between them and cognitive sciences), which necessarily entails a critical inquiry into the very notion of the sign – its various types and, in particular, the need to (eventually) recognize the “special” status, so to speak, of the linguistic sign.

Indeed, as has long been lamented, one of the theoretical challenges in both structural semiotics and Peircean semiotics lies precisely in the difficulty of disentangling the reciprocal implication between “sign” and “meaning”; a deadlock that De Mauro (1965) aptly characterizes as the primary concern of Ferdinand de Saussure, and the most serious vicious circle in which traditional linguistic thought is entangled.

In the same vein as De Mauro (1965) and Sonesson (2010), the Italian philosopher Emilio Garroni (1977), in his examination of the epistemological implications of semiotics conceived as a “science of signs” addresses this very difficulty. He argues that the domain of semiotics necessarily extends beyond the dimension of the sign itself, insofar as any definition of meaning compels semiotics to *transcend itself* toward the non-semiotic. Any semiotic theory must confront this fundamental tension between *semiotic meaning* and *extra-semiotic* (or *pre-semiotic*) *meaning* – that is, between “something as a sign” and “something as *that* something”, which, for various reasons, *calls to be semiotized*.

Put differently, if a sign is “something that stands for something else”, then that “something else” (the content) must already be semantically identified as *pertinent* at the outset, before the sign itself can emerge. Intriguingly, Garroni’s epistemological concern led him to revisit the “question of the *a priori*”, with the important *caveat* that this does not entail a denial of history or experience. Rather, it consists in seeking – within history and experience – those *conditions of possibility* that can be interpreted as constitutive of the *innate intellectual equipment* of human beings.

The recognition of this *aporia* in distinguishing “sign” from “meaning” – which does not imply the adoption by the scholars mentioned of the same solutions – appears an essential step toward circumscribing the notion of the sign, which, as noted by Zlatev (2018: 11)

is often defined within the “science of signs” of semiotics either too broadly, making it more or less synonymous with meaning making as such, even on the level of bio-chemical processes (as in Peircian

biosemiotics), or too narrowly, constraining it to language, or at least to convention-based meaning making (in Saussurean semiotics).

That is why Cognitive Semiotics is conceived not (only) as a “science of signs”, but more broadly as the study of *meaning-making*. This epistemological stance, following the “conviction that language – its nature, evolution and development – cannot be understood outside the context of a more general approach, taking both meaning and mind seriously” (Zlatev, 2012: 7), entails both a *restriction* and an *expansion* of semiotics. It represents a restriction when considered in relation to biosemiotics, yet also an *extension*, when compared to Saussurean and Structural semiotics, which assumes the sign function as the *threshold* between the semiosic, the semiotic, and the non-semiotic (cf. Eco 1976). The challenge, then, becomes to distinguish meaning from the sign and to identify not a single but *different semiotic thresholds* that human signification processes traverse both phylogenetically and ontogenetically.

Accordingly, given that meaning is broader than the sign (cf. Sonesson, 2007, 2010), in unpacking the aforementioned *aporia*, it is helpful to consider meaning as the capacity for *pertinentization* (De Mauro 1982), which is a semiotic activity that does not necessarily reach the level of the sign function. Indeed, following Zlatev (2009, 2018) given a Subject (human or non-human, but not an artificial machine) situated in the World, the meaning of a particular phenomenon is the *Value* that this phenomenon holds for the Subject. If the phenomenon lies outside the Subject’s experiential world, or if it holds no value for the Subject, it will be meaningless to them. As enactivist linguistic perspectives would argue (cf. Di Paolo / Cuffari / De Jaegher 2018) – following the now classic work of Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991), which builds on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology – the relationship between Subject and World must be understood as bidirectional: in the one hand, the Subject constructs the World, but is also likewise co-constituted through the very process of world-construction (cf. Zlatev 2018).

Within this broader understanding of meaning, the sign remains a particular instance of meaning-making: as Sonesson argues, a sign: (a) consists of at least two parts – expression and content – and exists as a whole independently from what it represents (the referent); (b) these parts are *differentiated* from the perspective of the subjects engaged in the semiotic process, in the sense that one part “stands for” the other, and this differentiation is not the outcome of an individual psychic act but rests on the intersubjective nature of the process (*alterity*); (c) there is a double asymmetry between the two parts, since the expression is more directly experienced

(cf. *materiality*, in Coseriu's terms), while the content takes precedence over the expression (Sonesson, 2010: 24-25; cf. also Zlatev 2018) because it is precisely the content, being *pertinent* for the subject, that drives the need to attain a material expression.

In line with this necessity of defining meaning beyond the boundaries of the sign function, the Semiotic Hierarchy (Zlatev 2009), especially in its phenomenological formulation (Zlatev 2018), identifies five different types of semiosis: 1. Life, 2. Subjectivity, 3. Intersubjectivity, 4. Sign function, 5. Language.²⁴

For our purposes, it suffices to note that signs presuppose, as stated, an asymmetric relation –accessible to consciousness– between the expression and the intentional objects (whether existent or not), mediated by the content (*construal*). As in Coseriu's and in the structural semiotics framework, the *content* is not a pre-existing entity; it is not a “thing”, but an act that arises from reflective abstraction on perceptual and experiential schemas. On a sign level, contents, therefore, are not simply abstract entities stored in a mind conceived as a hard drive; they must be *semiotically instantiated*, since they emerge through conscious and culturally situated acts of signification, whether pre-verbal signs (placed at the fourth level of the hierarchy – sign function), or verbalized, lexicalized, and grammaticalized signs (proper to the fifth and highest level – language).

Cognitive semiotics thus acknowledges *semiotic mediation* as essential to human cognition but, in contrast to Coseriu, extends this mediation to all types of signs and, above all, regards signs as grounded in (though not determined by) pre-linguistic, perceptual, or broader experiential schemas²⁵.

In spite of these differences, Zlatev (2011: 132) has reinterpreted Coseriu's framework precisely to emphasize that Coseriu's matrix serves not merely as a taxonomy of levels of language analysis, but more importantly as a method for explicating the interrelations among these levels. Coseriu's expansion of the matrix to encompass “types of meaning” and “types of judgment” provides, in Zlatev's view, both a powerful tool for analyzing the relationship between language and consciousness – leaving no space for a supposed “cognitive unconscious” – and a profound reflection on the normative character of language (cf. also

²⁴ Regarding the objection that such a hierarchy can be assimilated to the *scala naturae*, Zlatev (2018: 5) clarifies that “the forms, or structures, that characterise each plane/level are to be understood in terms of subject-world interaction: they are neither in the mind nor in a mind-independent environment. And crucially, the relations between levels are conceived of in terms of a dynamic, two-way relationship where the lower level both provides the ground for the higher and is “sublimated” by it”.

²⁵ A detailed comparison between Coseriu's theory and Zlatev's cognitive semiotic approach is provided by Bota (2011).

Zlatev / Blomberg 2019). Here normativity is not understood in terms of a Chomskyan notion of creativity (which refers to the generativity of the system, not to the *fantasia* of speakers), but rather in relation to what is now commonly regarded as *linguistic feeling* (cf. Romand 2023: 25, Foolen, 2023: 283).

3.1. Metaphor between Sedimentation and Innovation

In an effort to bring an end to the so-called “metaphor wars”, Gibbs (2017) promote greater interdisciplinarity, as required by the different levels of analysis involved in metaphorical cognition. However, interdisciplinarity always demands attention from both an epistemological and methodological point of view. Indeed, how can disciplines and theoretical perspectives interact if they begin from radically different definitions of the object of their investigation? More broadly, how can levels of analysis be integrated without developing a unified framework that enables the various approaches to communicate with one another (cf. Faur 2021: 319)?

This line of reasoning may seem counterproductive, given that I am proposing to “combine” Integral Linguistics and Cognitive Semiotics. However, I believe that, in this case, there is room for a genuinely shared perspective, beginning with an agreement on fundamental notions (and, eventually, a clarification of the points of divergence), such as the definition of language and its “architecture” in relation to a broad human capacity of meaning-making.

Indeed, on the basis of the preceding discussion and the conviction that any interdisciplinary framework must rely upon a shared epistemological agreement, one might reasonably ask whether, in light of a Coserian conception of linguistic creativity and of a (phenomenological) cognitive semiotics²⁶, CMT can genuinely be regarded as a theory of metaphor. This doubt is raised by Sonesson in numerous works, where he argues that

the term metaphor is not an apt designation for the relation posited by these authors, since the very notion of metaphor is based on the idea of overstepping a rule or going against a regularity, whereas Lakoff and Johnson are, on the contrary, formulating the regularities of the Lifeworld” (Sonesson 2022: 247).

“No doubt – Sonesson continues – Lakoff and his collaborators have found a gold mine for unearthing the kind of similarities that are taken for granted in all human Lifeworlds, but in so doing, the sense of the metaphor as a discovery procedure has been lost”. On the one hand, Sonesson is interested in grounding the creativity of metaphors in a form of creativity “which

²⁶ The phenomenological matrix is shared by Integral Linguistics, whose phenomenological foundations are made explicit by Vîrban (2013).

may well have emerged, and which continues to exist, before and independently of language”; a creativity that “emerges with the newborn child exploring the world in a Piagetian / Vygotskian fashion, through perception and in reaction to the resulting percepts” (Sonesson 2022: 253). He refers to a type of creativity linked to the *freedom* with which human beings engage with the world, out of which *systems of relevancies* emerge (cf. also Sonesson 2018).

Building on De Mauro’s definition of creativity (1982), Sonesson emphasizes that he is thinking of a form of creativity that should not be interpreted in the distinct senses of Humboldt, Croce, Chomsky, or Vygotsky. Rather, it should be understood in the sense of *libre arbitre*: the freedom that enables the transformation of the human *Umwelt* into a *Lebenswelt*, relying on *alterity*, that is, the fundamentally social nature of humanity from the very beginning. Furthermore, Sonesson is interested in metaphor as an act of *semiotic creation* that revivifies the system of interpretation (*code*) disrupting established rules (that is, metaphor as a “discovery procedure”).

However, whether understood in a broad or narrow sense, he states that the entities described by CMT are not metaphors but merely “ordinary” iconic signs – that is, “a sign which substitutes for another sign, on the basis of a (usually remote) similarity between the contents of the two signs” (Sonesson 2022: 249).

In fact, CMT imposes constraints on the mapping between vehicle and tenor (e.g., via the invariance principle, cf. Lakoff / Turner 1992), failing to grasp the semiotic essence of metaphor. One of the controversial issue of CMT is precisely the question of the asymmetrical status of the *source domain* and the *target domain* (whatever “domain” means); it seems, in fact, that metaphorical mapping is unidirectional (from the source to the target), while metaphor can be better understood – in the frame of Coseriu’s Integral Linguistics – assuming that “both lexical items contribute actively to the emergence of the metaphorical entity, created on the basis of the ‘vision’ of the unitary aspect of the two different contents, which has been grasped and expressed within the semantic metaphorical act” (Faur 2021: 316). But the *analogical correspondence* CMT describes does not rest on already available semantic fields, rather from image-schemas instantiated in the brain and deposited in the cognitive unconscious.

In this regard, Eco’s warning (Eco / Paci 1983: 256) proves prophetic: lamenting the “simplicity” of definitions of metaphor (as substitution, leap, condensed simile, analogy, etc.), he urges us not to confuse physical and physiological processes with semiotic ones, which are always considerably more intricate. Indeed, CMT stops at the “felicitousness” of natural processes (Eco / Paci 1983: 256): image-schemas, as Sonesson (2022: 252) notes, “are part of

our embodiment, of phenomenological givens, and thus prior to any other kind of meaning-making". Essentially, image-schemas are not signs, but at best "iconic grounds".

The "basic" experiences considered by Lakoff and Johnson pertain, at most, to *filtering* (Sonesson 2007: 106), that is, to the constraints imposed on semiosis by the biophysical and biocognitive conditions of sign-creating subjects (what De Mauro terms "material arbitrariness", cf. Diodato 2020). For this reason, Sonesson aptly criticizes proponents of CMT for neglecting and failing to justly account for the semiotic stage, displacing it to the end rather than recognizing it as fundamental to human experience itself. Semiotic systems – and foremost among them, language – are devices of pertinentization, free to articulate the *noetic field* into pertinent classes (expression/content) along the continuum between iconicity and arbitrariness, but they cannot act upon species-specific filters or constraints (cf. Diodato 2024a).

This brings to the uncritical use of the notion of "domain" in CMT and raises the question of whether it aligns more closely with the notion of a "semantic field" or a "rhizome".

Regrettably, Sonesson (2022: 265) somewhat equates rhizome with semantic field, suggesting that "like Eco's rhizome, Schütz's systems of relevancies and the semantic fields, Lakoff and Johnson's domains do not seem to sport any clear limits".

Yet, building on Coseriu's lexical semantics and extending it to semiotics, I propose a different definition of *semantic field*, not only at the level of *energeia*, but at the level of the *dynamis*, assuming that semantic fields are indeterminate in relation to knowledge of the world (*denotation*), while being sufficiently defined within each the semiotic system, on the *meaning* level. In fact, if one considers the domain as a *rhizome*, in Eco's sense, metaphor – understood as the establishment of correspondences between domains – becomes unintelligible.²⁷ Conversely, if we assume that metaphor establishes correspondences between *semantic fields* as I intend them, it appears more clearly that the enunciative act requires constant interaction between *energeia*, *ergon* and the actual semiotic system, which contain that system of values that allows the "domains" to be "frozen in place" enough to grasp the (eventually metaphorical) *sense* of the sign.

²⁷ Not by chance, even starting from the notion of prototype, the definition of Idealized Cognitive Model (Lakoff 1987), while openly contrasting with the so-called classical model of categorization, arrives at identifying a certain number of distinctive features which, although not understood as necessary and sufficient conditions, allow one category to be distinguished from another. Nothing new under the sun, if one considers that the semiotic-linguistic notion of pertinence has never regarded semantic traits as necessary and sufficient conditions, since they are relative to the contingent semiotic system and therefore conceived without any ontological determination (cf. Diodato 2024a). A case in point is precisely Coseriu's Structural Semantics.

Moreover, the encounter between Cognitive Semiotics and Coseriu's Integral Linguistics has culminated in the development of the Motivation / Sedimentation Model (MSM) (Devyllder / Zlatev 2020; Blomberg / Zlatev 2021), which, drawing on Coseriu's matrix, distinguishes three closely interconnected levels of meaning: (a) the *situated level*, (b) the *sedimented level*, and (c) the *embodied level*. While the first two levels broadly correspond to the individual and historical planes of Coseriu's framework, the third marks a fundamental point of divergence between the two approaches.

As previously noted, the divergence does not lie so much in Coseriu's alleged "disembodiment" of language – since he conceives of language as an instrument by which a concrete, flesh-and-blood subject accesses extralinguistic reality – but rather in his view that, without language, there would be not only no knowledge of the world, but no conception of the self or even of the body itself (at least insofar as such knowledge is made possible through language).

It is worth emphasizing, however, that MSM's emphasis on grounding semiosis in pre-linguistic experiential and cognitive schemas – clearly in contrast to Cognitive Linguistics and CMT – does not entail that such schemas are mechanically or unconsciously transposed into conventional linguistic structures. Rather, it points to pan-human motivations – that is, to the *a priori* or conditions of possibility previously evoked – that underlie the historical emergence and sedimentation of recurrent linguistic patterns across human languages and semiotic systems (Blomberg / Zlatev 2021: 43).

This point is further clarified in Zlatev / Jacobsson / Paju (2021): where it is detailed that the embodied level of meaning "consists of non-linguistic cognitive and experiential processes and structures, such as the body schema and body image (Gallagher 2005), cross-modal perceptual experience (Abram 1996), bodily mimesis (Donald 2001), and analogy-making (Itkonen 2005)". This level of meaning-making "ultimately underlies all sign processes in general, and language use in particular, serving as a *Fundierung* that grounds all meaning-making, but not in a reductionist manner" (*ibid.*, cf. also Zlatev 2018). For all these reasons bodily experiences are not taken as metaphors *per se* but rather considered to participate in a vast array of pan-human experiences that motivate the emergence of certain metaphors and, ultimately, their sedimentation.

As in Coseriu's framework, MSM implies a continuous and dynamic interaction between levels. For instance, relatively new metaphors will be predominantly "motivated" by the embodied level, which in this case functions as a kind of encyclopedic reservoir of potential knowledge (cf. also Violi 2015). On the other hand, metaphors from the sedimented level are

likely to be perceived as “less metaphorical” insofar as they rely on similarities and analogies that are already taken for granted. In either case, the interpretation of metaphors largely depends on the situated level. In concrete communicative acts, metaphor is produced and understood through the negotiation between *what is already known* (sedimented) and *what is yet to be known* (and which will likely be understood, since the sense of the metaphor, like that of any other speech act, may also not be grasped; cf. De Mauro 1982). Ultimately, like any enunciative act, metaphor requires a hermeneutic effort on the part of both speaker and hearer to make the leap from *meaning* to *sense*, as Coseriu would say.

4. Conclusion

If metaphor can be understood as a semiotic phenomenon and as an extreme instance of the physiological creativity of language – that is, as an expression of the permanent openness of languages to innovation (De Mauro 1982: 98) – then CMT ultimately fails to grasp its deeper nature. In a broader sense, we might say – metaphorically – that metaphor is the fundamental mode through which human beings relate to the world, with no claim to (genetic) “literalness”; and metaphorical, too, are the processes through which languages are formed and transformed, as they function as tools in the hands of speakers to meet their multiple and unpredictable needs to know and signify the world²⁸.

As I have attempted to show, the dialogue between Integral Linguistics and Cognitive Semiotics enables a reflection on the nature of semiosis, language, and metaphor, grounded in a shared view of language as not merely instrumental, but genuinely cognitive – and no less anthropological. Nevertheless, important differences remain, particularly regarding the status of the pre-semiotic or pre-linguistic experience. These differences open the way to further investigation – both *with* and *beyond* Coseriu – of the relationship between semiosis and language (that is, between semiotics and linguistics), especially in connection with perception, categorization, and conceptualization.

From the perspective of Cognitive Semiotics, Coseriu’s theory needs to be extended, at least to include the entire semiotic dimension (Sonesson 2021), but at the same time it must kept in mind Coseriu’s warning, namely not to lose sight of the object of study – which for him remains linguistic meaning in its three levels (designation, meaning, and sense), whereas for

²⁸ This intersect with the fundamental concept of “language change” (*cambio lingüístico*), another pillar of Coseriu’s conception of language (cf. Virban 2022).

Cognitive Semiotics it is meaning-making both *before and after* the emergence of the sign function.

In this regard, a step toward an integral semiotic perspective was taken by De Mauro (1982), who extensively analyzes the semiotic properties of non-linguistic systems and compares them with the linguistic one. His theory also demonstrates greater sensitivity to the interaction between the semiotic and the “pre-semiotic”, although the idea persists that the pre-semiotic cannot be “traced back” except through language. Metaphor, then, discloses the extent to which the pan-human experiences that “motivate” the sedimented and situated levels are recognized as such in virtue of a metaphorical sign (either sedimented or newly established at the time of enunciation by violating or bending the norms) that, ultimately, makes them “visible”.

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