Eugenio Coseriu and the Hermeneutical Principle of Trust

Cristinel MUNTEANU*

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1. The aim of my article is to present Coseriu's (explicit or implicit) conception regarding the interpretation of texts or discourses, be they artistic or non-artistic. Thus, I intend to highlight here a principle – *the principle of trust* – which characterizes (or guides) the whole of Coseriu's activity as a hermeneut/interpreter, irrespective of the type of text or discourse which the reputed linguist might have dealt with. However, since Coseriu's ideas concerning the hermeneutics of literary works are better known nowadays, mention must be made that I will mainly focus on the issue of interpreting non-artistic texts/discourses, and only in the last part of this article will I discuss the principle of trust in relation to literary texts.

2. In an article dedicated to linguistic policy and deontology of language, written as a dialogue (in Plato's manner), Coseriu also touches upon the problem of understanding, namely the way in which the others' speech should be perceived:

> As to what the other's reception of speech is concerned, the general ethical norm is that of generosity and tolerance, that is of (temporary) cancellation of negative alterity in favour of the interlocutor. This norm is applied to the level of speech in general and to that of "discourse", as well as to the level of language (the other's language, of course). At the level of speech in general and of that of discourse, the norm of tolerance involves, in any case, presupposing that the "other" speaks "with meaning", that he wants to transmit something to us. Thus, we will not decide that he does not say anything, that he "talks nonsense", before trying to understand what he actually says. At the level of language, the same norm demands our indulgence as regards the knowledge of language by the "others"; for example, concerning the knowledge of common or exemplary language by the speakers of a dialect, or the knowledge of the national language by foreigners. We will neither require the speakers of a dialect or of a geographical variant to speak the common or exemplary language, nor will we ask foreigners to master our language, in order for us to be willing to listen to them or to try to understand them (Coşeriu 1997: 83–84; my translation).

However, Coseriu does not forget to warn us that such mistakes "are tolerated, but not adopted: you are tolerant with the others, but not with yourself and with your own manner of speaking" (*ibid*.: 84).

* "Constantin Brâncoveanu" University of Piteşti, Romania.

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2.1. As noticed from the above quoted fragment, Coseriu envisages a general ethical norm, valid for all the levels of language, a norm "of generosity and tolerance". If we leave apart what belongs to the historical level (that of historical language in its diversity), namely the problem of correctness (in Coseriu's sense) and of "exemplariness", then we will find exactly what we are looking for: a norm regarding the reception of discourses, according to which we have to presuppose "that the «other» speaks «with meaning», that he wants to transmit something to us"; thus, a norm according to which we should suppress, at first ("before trying to understand what he actually says"), the urge of deciding that our interlocutor "does not say anything, that he «talks nonsense»".

2.2. In a course about linguistic competence (*Sprachkompetenz. Grundzüge der Theorie des Sprechens*, 1988), Coseriu names the respective norm "the principle of trust" (in Spanish: "el principio de la confianza"[1]), pleading for the same quest for coherence and meaning:

> En la interpretación de lo dicho se aplica, por tanto, el principio de la confianza. Sólo "en segunda instancia", i.e. tras preguntar sin éxito o fracasar una interpretación con sentido, se retira la confianza (Coseriu 1992a: 113).

Still, where does this "insistence" of man to find less obvious meanings derive from? I believe that John Dewey (who judges things from an extended hermeneutical perspective, since he is also interested in the "significations" of the natural world) offers us a good answer: "As intelligent beings, we presume the existence of meaning, and its absence is an anomaly." (Dewey 1933/1989: 225; *cf*. Munteanu 2014c and 2015; *cf*. also Urban 1939: 120-121).

2.3. Because I have referred, so far, to a "dialogical" ethics, one might think that any representative (or "fan") of linguistic pragmatics would immediately object and say that, in fact, this is what H.P. Grice named the *principle of cooperation*. (Some even call it, quite adequately, "presumption of cooperation".) Consequently, Eugenio Coseriu would not bring anything new compared to the afore mentioned principle and to the four "conversational maxims" (of quantity, quality, relation and of modality/manner) which derive from it. As a matter of fact, the things are the following: (1) one could not say that E. Coseriu would bring (or not) something "new" in this issue, simply because his theory is previous to that of Grice, and (2) the theory of normativity/correctness (concerning the "deontology of language"), as elaborated by Coseriu starting with the '50s, is more complex, including Grice's rules.

2.3.1. During his Montevideo stay (a highly intense, challenging, as well as a fruitful period for Coseriu), more exactly between 1956 and 1957, the Romanian scholar wrote a masterpiece which, unfortunately, will remain a manuscript: *El problema de la corrección idiomática*. Even so, Coseriu presented, in a condensed form, in various lectures and conferences, his conception about normativity. If he had advanced and published these ideas in English (and not only in Spanish, German or Romanian), his theory would have certainly been more widespread.

[1]I consulted the Spanish version of the respective book: Eugenio Coseriu, *Competencia lingüística. Elementos de la teoría del hablar* (Madrid, Editorial Gredos, 1992).

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2.3.2. In fact, Coseriu himself, presenting, in Romanian, the core of the respective conception, emphasized his primacy in this field, as well:

> On the other hand, it was observed that there are other norms of language as well, and Grice, an American scholar, established some norms of speech, both for the speaker and the listener, which pleased me, since I myself [...] developed a much more complex theory about normativity, starting with 1957, before the latest developments, which, in fact, were only partial (Coşeriu 1994: 164; my translation)[2].

2.3.3. Since the aim of my paper is different, I will not insist on the Coserian theory regarding normativity *in genere* (see Munteanu 2012b). I must mention two things: (1) Coseriu's conception is so well built and so comprehensive due to the fact that, among others, it harmoniously fructifies and includes his forerunners' contributions, mainly those from philosophy and ancient rhetoric; (2) within the epistemological frame of reference outlined by Coseriu (taking into consideration the three levels of language: universal, historical and individual), the principle of cooperation and the conversational maxims theorized by Grice are mainly grouped at the universal level (that of speech in general), which thus shows the limits of Grice's vision as compared to Coseriu's[3].

2.4. In the studies on hermeneutics, a principle similar to the one applied by Coseriu is mentioned, a principle that is known under many names: *principle of charity*, *hermeneutical fairness*, *principle of equity* (in Latin: *aequitas hermeneutica*)[4], etc. It seems that the last term is also the oldest.

2.4.1. Thus, Georg Friedrich Meier, the author of the first Hermeneutics written in German (*Versuch einer allgemeinen Auslegungskunst* – 1757), observes that there are frequent "dishonest interpretations". For this reason, he proposes the concept of "*hermeneutische Billigkeit*". This is actually the very *principle of equity* (as a kind of hermeneutical fairness) "which emphasizes the necessity that the interpreter must approach the object of his interpretation with good intentions" (Râmbu 2010: 480).

2.4.2. I think the idea in itself is much older, even if it is not necessarily linked to hermeneutics, but rather to the way in which some words should be understood in certain contexts. For instance, in Antiquity, the rhetor Quintilian, discussing about *ambiguity* (in Latin: *amphibolia*), states the following:

> In cases of ambiguity the only questions which confront us will be, sometimes, which of the two interpretations is most natural, and always which interpretation is most equitable, and what was the intention of the person who wrote or uttered the

[2]A similar remark is found in a conference held in Spanish by Coseriu: "En los últimos años se ha advertido la existencia de estas normas en círculos en donde no ocurría esto: en los Estados Unidos, Paul Grice ha descubierto ciertas normas intrínsecas de la comunicación, aunque sin relacionarlas con el conjuncto de las demás normas que implica esta compleja actividad..." (Coseriu & Loureda 2006: 114). Manuel Casado Velarde draws attention on another Coserian quotation (*ibid*.: 115), in which Grice's maxims are related to Coseriu's norm of "congruence", specific to the universal level of language (Casado-Velarde 2014: 74).

[3]Cf. also Casado-Velarde 2014: 74–76, where Sperber and Wilson's *principle of pertinence/relevance* is also referred to.

[4] With reference to modern philosophy, Casado Velarde (2014: 70) briefly mentions the *principle of charity* and the *principle of equity*.

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> words" (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, VII, 14–15; transl. by H.E. Butler; see Quintilian 1922).

As seen, not only the idea of "hermeneutische Billigkeit" or *aequitas hermeneutica* might be remarked in Quintilian's comments, but also an etymological relation: the Roman rhetor uses the very Latin term *aequius* 'equitable' (i.e. N/Acc/V neuter sing. of *aequior*, comparative of *aequus* 'equal')[5].

3. Let us refer now to *the principle of trust*, which has, as said before, a larger applicability. The same norm of understanding forces us not only to be tolerant with the discourse of those who express obscurely or who are grammatically wrong, but also to strive to understand, when needed, the texts which belong to some domains or universes of discourse which we are not familiar with. Thus, if one really wants to understand a theory (Hjelmslev's glossematics, for instance), one has to find oneself on its field, to understand it from inside, to learn the terminology used by its author. Coseriu would call this attitude *antidogmatism* (since it requires you not to reject a theory from the very beginning, totally, on account of the fact that it is "nonsense"), including it among the five principles which a researcher should consider in his activity[6].

3.1. What is more, according to the same scholar, the great thinkers' texts, even when they seem to contain some contradictions, have to be interpreted as coherent. Here is an example:

> En nuestra opinión, aquí, como en otros casos, la "contradicción"o la "coherencia" entre los enunciados de Saussure depende de la interpretación [...]. Pero creemos que siempre hay que tratar de interpretar un texto en el sentido de la coherencia (Coseriu 1954/1967: 197–198)[7].

It is true that, judged from the professional deontology point of view, this attitude starts from the *principle of antidogmatism*: „Éste es el principio que me ha quiado en mis estudios hermenéuticos y criticos sobre varios lingüistas y sobre varios orientaciones de la lingüística actual." (Coseriu 1993: 32). Manuel Casado Velarde (2012) has very well observed that it is this attitude or principle (which I dealt with in Munteanu 2011 and Munteanu 2014d) that Coseriu talks later about, mentioning the basal criterion of "previous trust", which justifies, once more, placing the general activity of Coseriu as an interpreter under the same "principle of trust":

[5]In the original version: "Amphiboliae autem omnis erit in his quaestio; aliquando, uter sit secundum naturam magis sermo, semper, utrum sit aequius, utrum is, qui scripsit ac dixit, voluerit" (Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, VII, 14–15; see http://www.perseus.tufts.edu).

[6] These principles are the following: the principle of objectivity, the principle of humanism, the principle of tradition, the principle of antidogmatism and the principle of public utility/responsibility.

[7] Thus, in this study from 1954 (*Forma y sustancia en los sonidos del lenguaje*), more than three decades before explicitly stating the "principle of trust", Coseriu would implicitly apply the same rule exposed in his course *Sprachkompetenz*, which is the following:"Cuando a primera vista la expresión no es coherente, se busca una coherencia. Y esto se hace, porque se supone que el hablar, por así decir, tiene que ser coherente y porque en esto aspecto se tiene confianza en los otros" (Coseriu 1992a: 113). David Hume, in his essay *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* [1748], would notice (in Sect. III, 18) that, with reference to coherence, we are confronted with an universal principle which characterizes all types of discourse, irrespective of the language used (see Hume 2007: 19).

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> Ya de algunos de los profesores que tuve en la Universidad de Iaşi, en Rumanía, y, sobre todo, de mis grandes maestros italianos (en particular: de Antonio Banfi, Antonino Pagliaro y Giovanni Maver), he aprendido el fundamental criterio de la "confianza previa", o sea, he aprendido a no comenzar nunca por negar o rechazar como "falsas" concepciones y tesis formuladas por científicos y pensadores de prestigio y a buscar, en cambio, en cada una de ellas, su núcleo de verdad [...]. La confirmación más clara del criterio de la confianza previa la encontré en la tesis de B. Croce de que "ningún error es sólo error" (Coseriu 1999: 34–35).

3.2. It is also true that – given our previous knowledge – some scholars may receive more trust from us. Here is another example:

> I mean, that, if we come across an error in Aristotle's work, then we should say that it is probably not an error, perhaps we are the ones that did not understand it, and try to see what Aristotle really meant. If we find an error at Bertrand Russell, then it is more likely to be an error and an arbitrary decision made by Bertrand Russell. (...) Aristotle himself can be wrong, but he is rarely wrong, much less as compared to the others (Coşeriu 2004: 122, my translation).

The fact that Coseriu would think and work in this way is proved by his numerous analyses of some difficult paragraphs from the Ancients. One of Coseriu's exemplary interpretations is that regarding the distinction between "designation" and "signification" which – despite the lack of some adequate terms – Aristotle was fully aware of. Thus, one should consult the brief but excellent study*το ἕν σημαίνειν. Bedeutung und Bezeichnung bei Aristoteles* (see Coseriu 1979/2004: 63–71).

4. My aim here is not to resume things which I have dealt with *in extenso* in other papers (see Munteanu 2014a and 2014b). I will only draw attention to some aspects which, to my mind, imply for Coseriu (seen as a researcher, a professor/teacher, but also as a speaker) the same principle of trusting the other, irrespective of the fact that he is either a sender or a receiver.

4.1. As a linguist, Coseriu was always interested in the "science" and in the reasons of the speakers, frequently expressing his belief that language works through and for speakers, not through and for linguists. Accordingly, Coseriu was sure that the speaker is always right, only that we have to establish from what point of view he is right (*cf*. Coşeriu 1994: 164). The speaker is right when he uses or creates language, but he may be wrong when he tries to give "scientific" explanations to language facts (when he turns into a "naive linguist"). However, such a belief proves admitting the same "principio de la confianza".

4.2. One could state that Coseriu would manifest a similar attitude in his communication with his disciples, considering that there is an intrinsic norm, based on respecting the other: you have to offer the student the same possibilities as you, as a teacher, have, that is the same faculty of understanding (*cf*. Coşeriu 1992b). We assume that the principle works here the same way it does in conversation or in texts interpretation, meaning that some students can later betray our confidence. It is thus important for the teacher to start, in such relationships, from such a "presumption".

4.3. The concept of "alterity" (which, in Coseriu's work, has a totally different meaning from the "alterity" found in the current studies on imagology), seen either in a restricted meaning or in a broad sense, derives, in fact, from the same idea. On the one hand, *the alterity strictly linguistic* (which represents one of the universals of

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language) requires the speaker to use the language resources in such a way and make his speech in such a manner in order to be understood by the others (*cf. supra,* **2**). Even when we are not, in fact, understood by our interlocutors, we strive to do it and assume the others understand what we say (because we also trust their possibilities of understanding). On the other hand, alterity, in a broader sense, would be, according to Coseriu, *the fundamental alterity of man* (*cf.* Terentius' maxim, *Homo sum: humani nihil a me alienum puto*), which allows us to undertake the personality or the way of thinking of the others. Only in this way are we capable to interpret, for instance, the texts of Ancient scholars or to understand (by re-enactingthem) the actions or the historical events which still affect the present[8].

4.4. With regard to the analysis of philosophical or scientific texts which raise interpretation problems, Coseriu would apply Giovanni Gentile's (a famous Italian pedagogue and philosopher) principle, according to which one can understand more from a difficult text, which forces learning to progress than from a simple text, in which there are things we already know[9]. Similarly, as Benedetto Croce, another of Coseriu's masters, would state (with reference to Hegel's *Encyclopedia*), "la difficulté, pour les hommes qui pensent, est plus une cause d'attirance que de répulsion" (B. Croce, *apud* Tullio de Mauro, in Saussure 1995: XV). One can easily notice from these observations the "obstinacy" of the human being in finding meanings, the conviction that the works of the great thinkers (whose value we greatly appreciate) conceal more light than we can find at first sight. In Coseriu's case, *Geschichte der Sprachphilosophie (The History of the Philosophy of Language*) proves to be the place/framework of an extraordinary hermeneutical exercise whose cultural benefits are obvious.

5. One must also mention the fact that the process of interpretation, according to Coseriu, is a creative one: the interpreter gets partially identified with the interpreted author, but, at the same time (due to the fact that he has another conscience), dissociates from him, having the possibility of going beyond what is interpreted, that is trying to understand (as R.G. Collingwood would say) the respective author better than he understood himself. What is more, we should add that Coseriu does not present us a "recipe" in order to grasp the meaning of the others' texts or discourses. He offers us some instruments of analysis, some means to investigate meaning and, at the same time, he offers us some exemplary practical demonstrations. Based on our intelligence and skill, we can get to the meaning more easily or, on the contrary, harder.

6. Here are some remarks regarding the principle of trust in relation to the hermeneutics of literary texts. Starting with the Italian version of his course on textual linguistics delivered at Tübingen (*Textlinguistik. Eine Einführung*, first

[8] For a presentation of this type of hermeneutics, see Munteanu 2013.

[9] R.G. Collingwood, an important British philosopher (highly appreciated by Coseriu), who was strongly influenced by Croce and Gentile, would state the same thing referring to the difficult "situations" the historian deals with: "In this sense, knowledge advances by proceeding not 'from the known to the unknown', but from the 'unknown' to the 'known'. Obscure subjects, by forcing us to think harder and more systematically, sharpen our wits and thus enable us to dispel the fog of prejudice and superstition in which our minds are often wrapped when we think about what is familiar to us." (Collingwood 2013: 86).

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published in 1980), the syntagma *the hermeneutics of meaning* was inserted in Coseriu's book title (see Eugenio Coseriu, *Linguistica del testo. Introduzione a una ermeneutica del senso* [1997]), a phrase which was later used by other translators/editors (for the Spanish and Romanian editions, for example)[10]. This course is based, almost exclusively, on literary texts (those of artistic literature). Can we then also speak of a "text hermeneutics" in the case of non-literary texts and discourses? Of course we can. It is known why Coseriu considers poetical language so important: because it represents the basis for all linguistic possibilities/virtualities, that is the place where the full functionality of language in general is achieved. If you want to found solid text linguistics, then the literary text is the real touchstone. As regards the other types of texts, Coseriu explicitly affirms, even in *Textlinguistik*, that his theory can also be used in their analysis.

7. We might also wonder if the principle of trust works in the case of artistic texts reception. I have no doubt about it. In his *Textlinguistik* (but also with other occasions) Coseriu not only demonstrated the autonomy of sense (as a special type of linguistic content, different from signification and designation)[11], but also proved, by means of examples, as well, how sense is formed in a literary work. It is not the existence of sense as such in the discourse of literature that we should be interested in at this point. Certainly, the literary work *in genere* is a carrier of sense (or senses, more or less obvious). The application of the principle of trust is a must when we come across texts that, at first sight, seem absurd or illogical[12].

7.1. That is why, unlike Karl Vossler, another famous linguist, Coseriu could not catalogue as illogical or absurd the following of Goethe's lines (extracted from *Faust*): "Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie, / Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum." ("Grey, my dear friend, is any theory. Green is however, the golden tree of life."). On the contrary, they were logical and served the Romanian linguist well whenever he intended to show how the norms of congruence are suspended at the

[10] It is true that a short, but very dense in ideas conference, delivered by Coseriu in Spain, in 1995, is titled precisely: *La lingüística del texto como hermenéutica del sentido* (see its text reproduced in Coseriu & Loureda 2006: 57–60). First of all, one should notice the following details which might have contributed to Coseriu's decision to use the term *hermeneutics* in the title of his famous book: (1) on the one hand, such a proposal could have come from Donatella di Cesare, the translator of the course *Textlinguistik* in Italian. She was a disciple not only of Coseriu, but also, later, of Gadamer, the latter having, as known, a huge role in spreading this term and in arousing interest in the research on hermeneutics; (2) on the other hand, Coseriu himself (a colleague of Gadamer at Heidelberg Academy) would generally share the German philosopher's conception on language. Since Coseriu had made a compromise by adopting, for instance, the more "popular" term *competence* (see *Sprachkompetenz*, 1988), launched by Chomsky, for what he had previously named *saber* (*lingüístico*), we should not be surprised by Coseriu's taking over such an adequate term as *hermeneutics*.

[11] Within the general linguistic content (as opposed to its sound or graphic expression), Coseriu distinguishes: (1) *designation* (*denotation* or *reference*), which points to the extralinguistic reality; (2) *signification*, which is the content given exclusively through and by a certain historical language, and (3) *sense*, which represents the content of a concrete act of communication, of a text/discourse.

[12] For instance, Eugène Ionesco's playwriting is not "absurd literature" (as some wrongly consider it), but a "literature of absurd", which is totally different: characters act incoherently in the respective universe of discourse, while the author's discourse is perfectly coherent. For a *sui generis* approach of the topic of absurd, in accordance with Coseriu's conception (to which reference is made), see Ștefan Afloroaei's latest book (2013: 14–15 and 134–143).

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level of text by means of metaphor (see Coseriu 1992a: 141–147 and Coşeriu 1994: 45–46). What Goethe wrote is highly intelligible, since words such as "green", "tree", "golden" are not used in their primary meanings (see also Urban 1939: 147–148).

7.2. Some sentences, judged in themselves, are illogical, of course, such as H. Steinthal's famous example: *This round table is square*. However, nothing prevents us from exercising our mind in order to find some explanatory contexts, some in which such sentences make sense. Such contexts do not necessarily have to be imaginary (because in this case, as it happens in fairy tales, the logical norms are suspended by "extravagance", according to Coseriu). It often happens to us to say (or meet persons who say) serious things as ludic statements. If we take into consideration the "presumption of meaning" or "the principle of trust", *This round table is square* would mean, to Coseriu, (1) either the case when there are four chairs around a table, disposed as a square (that is representing the corners of a square), (2) or the case of a *round table* (that is a discussion meeting; *cf*. Fr. *table ronde*)at which all the four participants have contrary opinions (Coseriu 1992a: 141–143).

8. By way of concluding, I would like to add some remarks. Since both I and Professor Manuel Casado Velarde have dealt with various aspects of Coseriu's linguistic theory, it is more than a mere coincidence for both of us to have treated the issue of "principle of trust" at almost the same time individually (see Casado Velarde 2012 and 2014[13]; and see Munteanu 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2014d) starting from Coseriu's *Competencia lingüística* (Coseriu 1992a). I have already signalled in this article the common points of our approaches. As to what differences are concerned, one must notice the fact that Professor Casado Velarde has dealt in the above mentioned studies not only with the *principle of trust*, but also with the *principle of suspicion* in connection with some of Coseriu's ideas (in the nexus between logic and language). Thus, he refers to philosophers such as F. Bacon, F. Nietzsche, L. Wittgenstein, P. Ricoeur, J. Habermas *et alii*. In Munteanu 2014d, I treated exclusively the principle of trust, also invoking some philosophers who influenced Coseriu, such as J. Dewey, W.M. Urban, G. Gentile, B. Croce, R.G. Collingwood, etc. At the same time, unlike Casado Velarde, I studied this problem taking as a point of departure Coseriu's deontology of language, also discussing other aspects theorized by Coseriu, such as: alterity, the magister-disciple relationship, the sense of artistic texts (especially of the "absurd" ones), etc. Consequently, one can say that in this regard I and Casado Velarde do not repeat the same things, but we complete each other. And even when repeating them, we should take into account Coseriu's words, according to which "ninguna repetición es sólo repetición" (Coseriu 1977: 9).

[13] One should notice that Casado Velarde's article from 2014 represents, with some omissions, an English translation of his Spanish article from 2012.

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Abstract

My article aims at presenting a hermeneutical principle – *the principle of trust* – which guided Eugenio Coseriu in his activity as an interpreter of philosophical and scientific texts. In the studies of hermeneutics, such a principle can be found under different names: *the principle of charity*, *the principle of equity*, etc. What I want to demonstrate here is that, according to Coseriu's conception (based on a solid philosophy of language), the principle of trust goes beyond the sphere of hermeneutics proper, characterizing the whole human communication, thus being crucial for any normal act of concrete communication. Consequently, such a principle does not only belong to hermeneutics, but also to the very deontology of language.

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