Interview with Prof. Dr. Johannes Kabatek

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«Coseriu taught us a way of thinking»

Prof. Dr. Johannes Kabatek, former Director of *Eugeniu Coşeriu* Archives and now chair of Romance linguistics at the University of Zürich, is one of the last generation coserian disciples. He was, after Brigitte Schlieben-Lange, the second successor of Coseriu's chair at the University of Tübingen. Johannes Kabatek is one of the most important promoters of the coserian integral linguistics and has further developed Coserian thinking. He is responsible for the publication of Coseriu's manuscripts at the Tübingen Archives.

Professor Johannes Kabatek, over the period of almost eight months I've spent at the University of Tübingen, I could notice the prolific activity of the Romanisches Seminar concerning the Coserian theories. I refer to the interest of the Professors and of the young researchers who work here, but also to the German and foreign invited speakers at the Oberseminar you organize here every week. It proves that Coseriu's work is carried on. Which fields of the Coserian linguistics are developing at Tübingen now, considering that, beyond the fields that Coseriu deepened[1], in some respects, he only set principles of approach?

Well, I think we have to distinguish several approaches and different degrees of knowledge, maybe. If you look at the whole panorama of linguists in Tübingen,

[1] The fields that Coseriu deepned are, among others: general linguistics, structural semantics, text linguistics, romance linguistics, philosophy of language, variationist linguistics, textual typology, translation theory, history of linguistics.

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you will find that most of them ignore completely Coseriu's theory and work. And then there are some people who, from time to time, open an article with a quotation by Coseriu, but they are not really coserians. So, it's just a kind of an authority they quote to give prestige to what they say afterwards. And then, there is a smaller group of people who are really within the Coseriu's heritage, who have really grown up with his thought. And this is a small group who should try to carry further the coserian ideas, because many of the issues discussed by other linguists could in fact find some clear observations and interesting thoughts in the published and unpublished work of Coseriu. I think it is not an easy situation we have generally in Germany, tendencies that go in other directions, like in recent times, experimental linguistics, have got grown pointless, and everybody thinks that the one who is doing experiments is already a linguist even if sometimes the linguistic facts under discussion are very simple. For example, you ask for the complexity of sentences by means of eye-tracking or fMRI studies and you find out that a complex sentence needs more effort to be understood than a simple word. This kind of knowledge is circular in some way because you already knew it before and it doesn't make any sense because there is no real progress. But many people think that this is the real progress. It's the old inferiority complex of human sciences when people think that we have to apply methods developed in natural sciences in humanities as well. And in fact this is very naive, because we should know that our object is simply different.

But still, Coseriu's linguistics in present today in Tübingen and not only here…

Going back to your question, I would like to mention several fields (developed on Coserian thinking). There are, on the one hand, very concrete editions and works done on Coseriu's own thought without any further development. For instance, the editions of his own texts, the work with the Archives, maybe we will talk about that later. And there is a second section where we have further developments of Coseriu's theory, like, first of all to mention, the notion of *discourse tradition*, which is very important in German linguistics of the last years. And it was based on very coserian thought. When Peter Koch first mentioned or first created or baptised this term[2], he referred to coserian thought. And it is a further development and it is important to go beyond or maybe to find out what the real potential of the coserian theory might be for other areas. So, we have the first thing which is the discovery of Coseriu himself, second would be the further development of the coserian thought and the third one would be just a very general notion of what I sometimes call in Spanish *linguistica linguistica* (we can say that in English, too, *linguistics linguistics*) which means an approach that departs from the function of a particular language and not from universality. As we know, in the history of linguistics there are always these two tendencies: particularism and universalism. And there is obviously a

[2] The term was introduced by Peter Koch in his unpublished Habilitation thesis and then first mentioned in a publication in the paper "Norm und Sprache", in *Energeia und Ergon. Studia in Honorem Eugenio Coseriu*, hrsg. v. Jörn Albrecht, Jens Lüdtke şi Harald Thun, Vol. II, Tübingen 1988, p. 327-354.

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time of universalism when people think that languages are just examples of universal language, which is somewhat true, but this is not the whole story, because, as we know, languages are very different, and pure universalism ignores many different aspects of the inner linguistic organization or the *inner form*, to evoke a humboldtian term here. It is completely foolish to think that with some general categories we can really manage to explain what individual languages do in their completeness. Universalists easily ignore the sistematicity of the *system*. There are oppositions within the linguistic system; there is a systematicity which, however, is not everything. There are many more aspects, and this is a very basic assumption of the Coserian theory: we must depart from the spoken word and look at the language not from the point of view of the system, but from the point of view of the production, of the *enérgeia*, from the real dialogic and spoken activity of the speaker. So this is, maybe, much more important than the rest. I'm not orthodox in the sense that we must look at Coseriu as a kind of a saint who said everything. He has seen so many things that are still very interesting for our times, but I think the fundamental contribution is to see what language really is and how language really has to be considered. And there is a fundamental criticism of contemporary linguistics from this point of view. We have so many philosophers of language or some linguists who see this, too, like Esa Itkonen or others who try to defend another view on language than the generally accepted one in present times. Another point would be that this is a particular linguistic phenomenon: we can see that the contemporary linguistics is going into certain directions, but there are other disciplines, very close to linguistics, where this is not completely the case. If we take a look at the philosophy of language we can find out that there are tendencies, even in the American tradition, that are completely going into other directions. For example, there is a philosopher of language from the University of Chicago, Michael Neil Forster, recently appointed as a Humboldt Professor of the University of Bonn, who is defending the idea that we have to consider language from inside, from the point of view of the particular language and not from a universalist view. And he discovered, and it was in fact Herder, the philosopher of language, who clearly said this, and the period between Herder and Humboldt is the one in the history of the philosophy of language when the importance of this linguistic view on linguistics was really discovered. And he defends that it was one of the major contributions in the history of the philosophy of language and this is still very important and may be the central view. He even, in his book on Herder, starts saying that Coseriu was the only person who really found out that this was the case. So, we may be hopeful that philosophers of language, rather than linguists, will help us rediscover the importance of this general, fundamental thought. Coseriu's importance is not only due to this or that concrete fact; it is not text linguistics, is not pragmatics, it's not just one of his many contributions to concrete aspects, it is above all the fundamental, essential view of what language is. And all the other things are consequences of this fundamental view. I think that is something we have to promote and to save with the help of the people who see this in a similar way. You were asking about Tübingen and the Oberseminar where, of

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course, the coserian thinking is present, but I think the most important thing is to keep in mind that we have here a kind of an essential thought on language and this is what we want to defend. And it goes far beyond Coseriu. It is Aristotle, it is Humboldt, it is Coseriu, it is language.

You have already anticipated my next question which concerns the Coseriu Archives. I would like to ask you about the present state of affairs of the Archives today. I mean you have managed to do a lot of work here since you inaugurated it in 2005[3]. What projects are in progress now and what plans do you have for the next years?

The question sounds more positive than the reality. The Archives are in a difficult situation. They have been in a difficult situation since I came here in Tübingen in 2004 and we started to work to the Archives more or less in 2005. It was the former President of our University, Rector Eberhard Schaich, who helped to install the Archives because he was conscious of the Coserian heritage and he knew that all the manuscripts and books and all the materials should be elaborated. And when I was appointed here in 2004 he asked me to take charge of all this and this was of course something I did with great pleasure, but from the moment I started to work here the support stopped in some way. It was even difficult to install the Archives, we had to fight for a small room, and then we had to move to another place. An Archive is always a problematic thing, because the present day and the actual things are always more important than the past. Because an Archive is a long term institution, it is not something spectacular. We have now here five chairs of media sciences and they need rooms, they need money and all these things. So, when I say that the Archives are really important, people don't really understand this because they don't see this long term importance. It was difficult because we didn't have any funding, we didn't have any support by the institutions. Then the President changed and the new Rector was not that much interested in the Archives. So, we did almost all by our own with an enormous help of Dr. Meisterfeld who is dedicating a tremendous part of his life to Coseriu. He accompanied him during the last years of his life, so he has a very close relationship with him and with his work and he appreciates his work very much. He is the heart of the Archives, but he is not getting paid for this. We also have some students who collaborate or we have sometimes people from outside who come with grants and do some work in the Archives, but, it is very marginal. It is not what we would really like to do. But we don't have money, we don't have funding, we try to get funding from other institutions, but our proposals were rejected more than once. Maybe it is not in the current fashion of science to do archives work, and then there are linguists who rejected this because they had other opinions. There were people who even told me "you could get any project, just don't mention Coseriu".

[3] Details about the inauguration of *Eugeniu Coseriu* Archives can be found in Johannes Kabatek's interview with Eugenia Bojoga, published in "Contrafort" No. 11-12/ 2005 (http://www.contrafort.md/old/2005/133-134/928.html).

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There is still a kind of an opposition within German intellectual world. So, what we did: we tried to recover some of the most important manuscripts. Reinhard Meisterfeld prepared the first edition of *Geschichte der romanischen Sprachwissenschaft* and several other volumes were also published. A very important collection on *Vulgar Latin* was published by Hansbert Bertsch, and several works were translated. We have recent Croatian, French, Spanish, Italian translations of very central works. What it was really a success was *Textlinguistik* in Spanish, and the Romanian[4] and the Portuguese translation are being prepared currently. We generally have contacts and we try to observe the translations and somehow try to control the terminology just to guarantee the coherence of the whole linguistic conception, because we know that problems with terminology can destroy completely the linguistic thought. So, the most important work was some publications and some editions of the manuscripts. Then we started with the online journal *Energeia*, which is working for four years, and we started digitalizing Coseriu's work. We have now digitalized the complete published work and we have maybe digitalized some 20% of the manuscripts. It should be mentioned that there are more than 1000 manuscripts, so it is really a lot of work and we try to digitalize them in order to make them accessible online, at least with password access to a platform where Coseriu's work can be available. Because I know about the danger of our small room we still have and that we are always struggling against our dean now who is in a difficult situation because there are several projects with funding and they need space and room and there are these Archives, I'm occupying the room already for a long time. So, what I think will be the future is to have it in a digital platform which will make unnecessary to keep having a concrete, physical room. Of course, I don't give it up, but I know about the danger and I want to prevent the situation when we won't have any access to the material. I would like, in longer terms, to digitalize all and then to pass the manuscripts to the University Archives, so that it will be in a good and safe place for long term conservation.

But you did a lot here in spite of the hard situation you had to face.

Yes, the problem is... it's all a question of time, it's not only money, is also time. I don't really have too much time to dedicate to the Archives. I should do my own things, we have so many students here, we have so many projects and things to organize, it's really difficult to find more time. Every time I look to Coseriu's manuscripts or I go down to the cellar and I see the books, I say that it should be done, maybe as a full time job and not only by myself. Many people should dedicate their life to do this, to save that, to publish and to present it online, but time is simply limited. Anyway we were happy to have some help. The Humboldt foundation helped us a lot with grants: Óscar Loureda came to Tübingen and spent here almost two years. He prepared editions and different publications, and then Christophe Gérard was another Humboldt grant student, who not only organized

[4] In the meantime the Romanian edition appeared at "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" Publishing House in 2013, in Eugen Munteanu's and Roxana Prisăcaru's translation.

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or co-organized one of Coseriu's Congresses in Aix-en-Provence, but he also published some manuscripts, and now as a Professor at the University of Strasbourg he is still working on coserian tradition. And this is important for France, too, because there is a small group of linguists and philosophers of language who are interested in this. So, France is another country where the interest in Coseriu is really considerable. And we can observe this tendency in other countries, too, in England, in the United States…

I think in Spain, too...

In Spain obviously! But in Spain there is the continuity of the Coserian tradition, whereas in other countries Coseriu is currently being discovered by younger people and sometimes by others who are not connected immediately to any school or to continuous tradition. Of course we knew that for all the time. I don't really fear about Coseriu's future or about the future of the coserian thought. Sometimes people say "now you have installed Coseriu's Archives and you should do this very fast because people will forget it and you have to publish whatever you can still within a short term in order to have something actual and close to the present day discussions". And I always say I don't see that this is really a problem. I even think that publishing part of Coseriu's work in the 20's, 30's, 40's of this century will not make his work less actual, because there is a classic fundamental thought. He is already a classic so it will not be a question of participating in the present day discussion; it will be more a classical collected works where you can find many interesting thoughts and a very coherent building of thought and architecture that allows to further develop many aspects, so I don't feel like having to do this within five years or something. Of course, it would be interesting to see what happens. For example we will have to publish all the work written on philosophy of language between, especially the part on the time between Herder and Humboldt. For example, we published the first volume of the well-known *Geschichte der Sprachphilosophie*, and here we have the Romanian edition of *Istoria filosofiei limbajului de la începuturi până la Rousseau*[5], that has also been translated in different other languages. But it ends with Rousseau and it is when the most interesting period starts. And we don't have the same book for the period between Herder and Humboldt. We have articles and manuscripts here. Michel N. Forster, the Professor from Chicago mentioned above, didn't know about them and when I sent him the whole manuscript he was so impressed that he told me "this must be published, you must do something about that". But, of course, we cannot publish it the way it is. We have to prepare it, we have to correct it and we have to comment the work. So this is a lot of work! Anyway it would be interesting to have it on the table today because it would make an important contribution to linguistic thought and to the philosophy of language. But it can also be done it within about 10 years.

[5] The Romanian edition appeared at Humanitas Publishing House in 2011, in Eugen Munteanu's and Mădălina Ungureanu's translation.

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I don't fear about it, I think it is somehow timeless. In fact, Jörn Albrecht is currently preparing an edition, and we hope it will be finished soon.

We all are aware about the need of studying Coseriu's linguistics in Romania and about the need to publish his works in our country. Some important books are already translated and we know that Professor E. Munteanu from the University of Iaşi is now working on the Romanian version of *Textlinguistik*. And, for sure, there are some other projects at the University of Cluj, as well. Do you have any collaboration with the Romanian universities to translate and publish Coseriu's works?

I am, of course, in contact with people who work on Coseriu's books in different universities in Romania. But I don't think the activities in Romania depend on the Archives. We are not really trying to sell his work and to tell people in Romania you should translate this or that, it's always the other way round. Some researchers have already come to Tübingen. Tübingen is, I always like to say and repeat this, an open house. This is also a nice occasion that you are spending your research visit here and you can go the Archives and see what there is. Maybe you find an interesting manuscript here and you say "I would like to translate that, I would like to do something about that" and you, of course, have open access to all the things that are there. I wouldn't say that everybody has, our previous condition is that you have to know something about Coseriu's work, and you have to do this, as Coseriu always said: "everything has its inner norm", so you have to do it somehow perfectly. Of course, we cannot reach the perfection we would like to, but we know what the basic idea is when we have seen many bad editions. Coseriu himself got very angry once, for example, when in an article *Sinn* or *sense* was completely mixed up with the fregeian term of *sense* which is totally different and he was really angry about the editor. And this happens frequently mostly in translations, when these misunderstandings are published. It's somehow a pity in the case of a work that is so coherent; it gives you an impression of lack of coherence in a work that is completely coherent. So this has to be avoided, but anyway there are still interesting things to do, as I've already told you one of the most important projects is *Geschichte der Sprachphilosophie*. And for many years I've planned and I still remember that at the Congress in Aix-en-Provence I proposed the publication of the large manuscript on *Proper names* and it is still not published. I've managed to publish the first part of the manuscript online on Coseriu's homepage, but I haven't managed to publish the rest. The rest is much more difficult because it was not finished by Coseriu. There are some notes and they should be elaborated and this is, of course, a lot of work and it cannot be done so easily.

Is it also the case with *El problema de la corrección idiomática?*

Yes, this is a very particular case because José Polo in Madrid is currently preparing the edition of *Corrección idiomática*, he has the manuscripts in Madrid, but I have not seen too much progress in the last years. He published some notes written

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by Coseriu, generally in a very unreadable way. So I'm not very hopeful that this edition of *Corrección idiomática* will really be published within the next years[6]. But it would be, of course, an interesting and important project.

What do you think about the impact of the *integral linguistics* over the world? How is it compared to other tendencies in linguistics nowadays?

I think that the term *integral linguistics* is not very well known. The country where it is really best known is Romania obviously, because there were some publications, some projects in this matter and it is a generally accepted term there. In Germany and in other countries it didn't have really any success. Of course, the idea that is behind it, that coserian linguistics is a kind of an integral building, is present in different schools, but not the term itself. I don't think that there are any people in Germany who claim themselves to be *integralists*. There are people who maybe say that they are coserians. I sometimes I ask myself "am I coserian, or what am I?" I don't feel I am a coserian, somehow it's so close to myself, it has become a kind of an essence of my own thinking, I cannot really separate it from me. It is not something I adhere to, it's not really a choice, it is within me. And I think it happens to people who interiorize the coserian thought so strongly that they cannot get rid of this. Once, when we were talking about faith and religion, Coseriu told us that being a catholic for him it was not something like a choice; it was just natural, because he always felt that. Some people said that he was not a religious person... This is not a question; it is just part of life.

You feel that you belong to this...

Exactly, it's something you carry with yourself or you have inside yourself. And this is what happens to people who read a lot of Coseriu, like people who even didn't have any direct contact with Coseriu or who were not direct disciples. Let's think about Óscar Loureda, for example, or Araceli López in Seville, younger people who are strongly coserian, but they don't have to confess it. And this is a very interesting phenomenon. I once told Óscar Loureda that when he writes you can notice a certain style of writing that is very coserian. And I remember a really nice criticism that Coseriu did to me. When I finished my Master's thesis with him, he criticized that I hadn't used the terminology of an article he had published. It was on language contact and interference phenomena. And he had recommended this article to me, but I hadn't read it. I was quite ashamed when he said: "You should have read that and used that!" But in my thesis I used it and it was funny that I found out that it was exactly what I had said. So it was not really any difference between what he had observed and what I had observed myself. It was just a pure consequence of applying a certain way of

[6] In a review of José Polo's book, *Entorno del universo normativo de Eugenio Coseriu. Cuaderno de bitácora* (Editura Biblioteca Nueva din Madrid, 2012), Cristinel Munteanu (in "Limba Română", No. 3 - 4, XXII/2012; http://limbaromana.md/index.php?go=articole&n=1377) shows the stages and the difficulties which the publishing of Coseriu's manuscript implies.

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thinking to a particular problem. And this is one of the things we have to keep in mind: within coserian thinking we can find solutions for problems that are not resolved there, because it's a kind of a way of thinking. So, if you are working on advertising, and you don't find anything about that in coserian work, you might find a lot because you find the way. So, at the end, I was not really ashamed. I was even somehow proud of having discovered the same thing, even with a similar terminology. And afterwards I published this in several papers. When he talks about negative interference, I introduce a new terminology and further distinctions. It was already there in his article, and he said that this happens quite frequently that his disciples think in a similar way. And this happens generally in schools, there is a kind of common thinking.

It is like belonging to a family of thinking.

Yes, sure! And it still happens like this. A few days ago I was working on differential object marking in Spanish and I read, for example, one of Brenda Laca's articles on this matter. And what she did is completely what I would do, too. She said we have to, first, not look at the confusions, we have to look where the oppositions are, we have to look at the clear cases, try to find out what the function is, and the from the function, try to explain the difficult cases where it might be neutralized. So this is a traditional structuralist thinking, but it is obvious that she interiorized this coserian heritage, because she is one of his most brilliant disciples, maybe the most brilliant one. When she talks about the history of differential object marking she doesn't even mention Coseriu in the whole paper. It is because other people worked on that and the whole bibliography is enormous, but he is there, you can feel it, and you can even say how it works. And you recognize it and you say: "this is how it must be done".

We can also notice that even some «pragmatic» tendencies recognised the importance of Coseriu's Textlinguistics. Here I'm thinking of Jean-Michel Adam, for instance, who sustains that the Coserian theories cannot be ignored anymore and who also assimilated some of his ideas in his work. Do you think that Coseriu's linguistics can help the nowadays «pragmatic» tendencies?

Yes, of course! I think that the notion of pragmatics is important. It came from outside of linguistics and it entered or penetrated linguistics quite strongly, because it was necessary, it was necessary to introduce something beyond the pure systemic view on language. This is absolutely obvious. It was obvious in the 70's when pragmatics was somehow introduced in linguistics, and it showed the importance of so many aspects that were already there in the tradition of linguistics, but which were rediscovered because of a too orthodox separation of systemic linguistics and the system from the real, dialogical essence of speech. But, as it generally happens, it didn't happen in a clearly differentiated way. It was just a kind of a new notion that helped to put into one category very many different things.

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Why can the coserian thought be very important for the contemporary thought? It is because he had distinguished several levels much before pragmatics. If you look at this three distinctions: *universal, historical* and *individual,* and to the sketch about what the universal level really is, in this fascinating paper entitled *Determinación y entorno*[7], which is only a chapter on the larger manuscript on the *Proper name,* you can see that it is a very influential paper. But even though it is generally quoted, the reception usually does not go much further than a mention. It is nice to say that there is something important about this already in the 50's, but now we have pragmatics! Maybe the most important ideas are a clear separation of levels. But nowadays there is a complete confusion within pragmatics because generally there is no clear distinction between universal pragmatics and historical realizations of pragmatic phenomena in different languages. Like in the case of *speech acts*, where we should distinguish between acts as universal phenomena and how languages shape these acts. For example, it should be taken into account that a certain language has distinctions for questions in a grammatical form, like syntactic means or prosodic means or not. This is something that is not universal. Not all the languages do distinguish questions in the same form, like French can do with syntactic inversion, or prosodically. Of course, to ask question is something universal, but how a certain language does it is a phenomenon of that particular language or grammar. Another very important differentiation is between pragmatics and the question of tradition. Cultural tradition is generally studied as a matter of pragmatics. For example, cultural traditions like politeness forms are either linguistically determined, or not. But we will always have to make a clear-cut distinction between the universal level (that of pragmatics), where we find, for example, politeness as a universal phenomenon, the historical level of the particular language, where certain grammatical forms might exist in order to express politeness, and the level of traditions, of texts that are traditionally uttered or not. This is only an example, but you can see that the distinction of levels is absolutely fundamental for knowing what you do. Coseriu himself used to start his criticism in his articles with the idea that "the first thing we have to do is to distinguish; to know means to distinguish". It means that knowledge can be really achieved if we make clear distinctions and if we are conscious of what we are really doing. He always criticized people who only observe phenomena and do not clearly localize the phenomenon they are investigating within a theoretical building.

This is the core of well based research...

Exactly, and this is way he is absolutely up to date. This is not only the case of pragmatics, maybe. It's about the way of thinking. This is not like with an experiment or an empirical approach which is already giving me a result, you first have to know what you are doing, what you are looking for and how you do it.

[7] "Determinación y entorno. Dos problemas de una lingüística del hablar", in: *Romanistisches Jahrbuch*, VII Band/1955 – 1956, p. 29-54.

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You have already talked about the fact that Coseriu had a certain way of thinking which can be a model. I would like to ask you about the importance of Coseriu's model for the young generation of researchers today. When I say model, I take into account two aspects: one of them is the necessity of knowing coserian linguistic theories, and the other one is following Coseriu's model of working and thinking, too.

I think the latter aspect is the most important one. I always recommend to students and people to read Coseriu. Of course, we were privileged because we were in direct contact to him and this was an enormous privilege. This is why I always say that I was lucky. It was not my merit, it was just a pure coincidence that I came to Tübingen, and he was here. But it is still possible to achieve such a level just by reading. When Brigitte Schlieben-Lange had a theoretical difficulty concerning linguistics, she always thought "maybe Coseriu wrote something about that" and she used to ask him "don't you have something on this matter?" For instance, Coseriu talked about this anecdotic moment, that once she had told him "I'm thinking about proper names, I'm so confused about the things that are written and I don't know why, because referential semantics is trying to explain what a proper name is and it's not possible to do it referentially, because you cannot distinguish a unique entity like the Sun, the Moon from the proper name if you do it referentially...". And he answered her: "Yes, I have a manuscript, the first chapters are 200 pages, take this". And she read that and said: "it was so clear, it was a kind of an illumination; this is exactly what I would have liked to say". This is what happens with well written texts. I remember that when I was a child someone recommended Hermann Hesse to me. I started reading and I said "this is exactly how I would write a novel". Of course, this was very naive, because I would have never been able to do it, but I was conscious about how good things should be done. And that's the nice thing about reading Coseriu.

Would you, please, give some advice to the young researchers who have to fight against time and against tendencies that sometimes follow quantitative rather than qualitative reasons?

The advice is: read Coseriu, but not in a slavery way and not thinking that you have to copy everything. Read it in order to become yourself a free thinker. You should not just say "this is the system, I will just apply this or that, or I will copy something because he has already said everything". He said many things and also taught us a way of thinking. If you are able to find out how this way of thinking works, you will be able to go on, to do your own work from this interiorized knowledge as a starting point. And this is possible only by means of reading.

Thank you very much for your amiability to offer me this interview.

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