

On Cross-linguistic Equivalences

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It is, without doubt, interesting to *highlight* the values² that are inherent to a language by comparison with other languages. This practice can often reveal facts that would otherwise risk remaining unnoticed. But trying to *establish* (determine, identify) and *describe* those values by translating them into other languages can be dangerous.

1 This is an English translation of the text “Sobre equivalencias interidiomáticas”, which is a part of Coseriu 1977 and itself a translation of the author’s response (in French) to the Czech linguist Jan Šabršula in the context of the *Xe Congrès International de Linguistique et Philologie Romanes* (Strasbourg, 1962) (see Šabršula 1965). Despite the text’s notably short length, it provides a very enlightening insight into a subject that is of major importance to linguistics but about which many are not knowledgeable enough, even today. All footnotes are from the translator.

2 On the concept of linguistic value, see Saussure 2011, 111ff.

Thus, it is true that Romance “perfects” often correspond, in translation, to the perfective aspect of Slavic languages; however, the respective language values are radically different. Translation only shows us that the Romance “perfects” and the Slavic perfective aspect can designate the same real states of affairs: it allows us to establish a (partial) coincidence in *designation*³; but no *signification*⁴ coincidence can be deduced from the latter. It is very important to refrain from applying categories to a linguistic system that are alien to it. Indeed – unlike the Slavic perfective –, the indefinite preterite (*passé défini*) of Romance languages may very well designate “durative” actions: It. *caddi lungamente per quella china*, Sp. *estuve leyendo*, Port. *estive a estudar*, Fr. *je fus pendant longtemps ouvrier ébéniste*; and the imperfect may designate “global” and even “momentary” actions: It. *la polizia si recava al domicilio del colpevole e lo arrestava*; Rom. *Dară Manea ce făcea? Sabia 'n mînă apuca...*; Fr. *il prenait une voiture et, un quart d'heure après, il descendait au Palais X*; Sp. *el 3 de agosto, a las 8 de la mañana, establecíamos el contacto con el enemigo*; etc. On the other

3 Coseriu (1971, 486) defines designation as “the reference to extralinguistic reality or extralinguistic reality itself, be it facts or be it ideas (i.e. facts of the mind)”.

4 Coseriu (1971, 486) defines signification as “the linguistic content in a particular language”. Other English terms used by him to refer to the same phenomenon are *significance* (Coseriu 1967) and *meaning* (Coseriu 1985).

hand, in cases that are perfectly analogous to those that are adduced to support the functional similarity between the Romance “perfects” and the Slavic perfective, the equivalence is also far from being absolute. Speakers of Romance languages say, for instance, Sp. *escribí* (*he escrito*) *todo el día*, Port. *escrevi o dia inteiro*, It. *scrissi* (*ho scritto*) *tutto il giorno*, Rom. *am scris toată ziua*, etc., that is, the same way they say *escribí* (*he escrito*) *la carta*, etc., while Russian speakers say *ja napisal piśmo* (with the perfective), ‘I’ve written the letter’, but *ja pisal celyj den’* (with the imperfective), ‘I’ve been writing the entire day’. Spanish speakers say *leí* (*he leído*) *a Puškin* (and so do, *mutatis mutandis*, the speakers of other Romance languages); Russian speakers, in contrast, say *ja čital Puškina*, with the imperfective. All this is due to the fact that the specific temporal determination expressed by Romance “perfects” does not coincide with the perfectivity expressed by the Slavic verb. Slavic expresses the verbal action as considered *with its objective end* or *without its end*, while Romance languages express the action with limits that are defined in time or without limits; more strictly speaking, the action *outside its development* and *in its very development*.

References

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