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# The universality of categories and meaning: a Coserian perspective

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**ABSTRACT**
Studies in linguistic typology have challenged the idea that languages can be analyzed in terms of a set of preestablished universal categories. Each language should instead be described "in its own terms," a view consistent with the 'old' structuralist paradigm in linguistics. The renewed orientation toward differences between languages raises two questions: (i) How do we identify the meanings which are assumed to be crosslinguistically comparable? (ii) What is the relationship between language-particular categories and comparative concepts commonly used in linguistic typology? To answer these questions, this article focuses on a number of distinctions advocated by Eugenio Coseriu (1921–2002). Coseriu distinguishes three levels of meaning (designation, "signifiés," and sense) and three types of universals (essential, empirical, and possible universals). Their relevance for linguistic typology is discussed with regard to the expression of possession and a particular diathesis in Japanese, viz. ukemi or "indirect passive." As well as relating language-particular categories and comparative concepts, Coseriu's approach offers a promising avenue to account for the ways language-specific meanings interact with extralinguistic knowledge and contents of discourse and texts, which are the object of translation.

> Theory means recognizing the universal in the particular, in the concrete. (Coseriu 2000, 111)

## 1. Introduction

In this article, I explore two questions that are important to "categorial particularism" in the study of languages. "Categorial particularism" refers to the view that each language should be described "in its own terms" rather than "in terms of a set of preestablished categories that are assumed to be universal"

(Haspelmath 2010, 664). I will consider the following two questions related to this position:

(1) How do we identify the meanings that are assumed to be crosslin-guistically commensurable and with which we find ourselves in the realm of general "substance" rather than language-specific meanings?

(2) What is the relationship between language-particular categories and comparative, so-called crosslinguistic concepts that are commonly used in linguistic typology?

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the main arguments put forward in current functional typology in support of the view that cross-linguistic comparison is based in semantics and that linguistic categories are language-particular. In Section 3, I present some ideas advanced by Eugenio Coseriu (1921–2002) that are useful to clarify the issues at hand. I focus on two series of distinctions found in several of his writings (e.g. Coseriu [1955] 1975, 1977, 1985, 1987, 1992, [1972] 2004, 2007) in order to differentiate between three levels of meaning and three types of universals. I proceed with discuss-ing two examples – the expression of possession (Section 4) and the ukemi construction in Japanese (Section 5) – against the backdrop of the claim that crosslinguistic comparison is possible because people "can understand each other across linguistic boundaries" (Haspelmath 2007, 119, 126–127) and that language-particular categories and crosslinguistic concepts are independent of one another (Dryer 1997; Haspelmath 2007, 2010). Section 6 concludes the article.

## 2. Background

With studies such as Dryer (1997), Croft (2003), Haspelmath (2007, 2010, 2012), Evans and Levinson (2009), a number of differences and similarities between the structuralist paradigm, which dominated much of twentieth-cen-tury linguistics, and current functional approaches in linguistic typology have gained renewed attention in the theory of linguistics. One of the central top-ics in the debate is the status of language-particular categories (occasionally written with a capital letter) and crosslinguistic concepts (written with lower case to indicate their role as comparative labels; Haspelmath 2010, 674). The universal validity of language-particular categories is called into question. Crosslinguistic concepts are said to be useful as universally applicable terms for conventional purposes only. As a consequence, discussions about assign-ments of some language-specific phenomenon to a crosslinguistic concept are much less important than has long been assumed. For example, Dryer (1997, 124–128) convincingly argues that detailed descriptions of grammatical rela-tions in Dyirbal are not dependent on the allegedly "universal," broadly defined concepts 'subject' and 'object.' As long as the language-specific descriptions

are accurate (cf. Dixon 1972, 1994), the question whether the grammatical relations in Dyirbal should be called 'subject' and 'object,' or whether the constituent in the absolutive is the 'subject' of the sentence, are not of a substantive but merely a terminological nature (Dryer 1997, 125; cf. Dryer 2006). The relevance of such questions is limited to providing conventional labels – most often inherited from the Greco-Latin grammatical tradition – for the isomorphism between grammatical categories and relations in different languages, e.g. between Dyirbal and a language such as English which possesses 'subject' and 'object' as language-particular categories (Dryer 1997, 133).

The particularist position contrasts with the universalist position of most generative linguists, who claim that Universal Grammar encompasses a set of innate categories, structures, and rules. They assume that all languages are to some extent identical; the diversity found across languages is reduced to a set of preestablished categories, structures, and rules. Conversely, categorial particularists consider language diversity to be the touchstone of the language sciences. What needs explanation is not diversity, which is acknowledged from the outset, but rather the observation that despite the diversity there is also isomorphism between languages. Rather than making languages similar in linguistic analysis, the goal is to observe to what extent fundamentally different languages are in fact similar (cf. Coseriu 1977, 333).

It would seem that the conclusion that each language has its own language-particular "categories" is unavoidable and true to the basic observation of language diversity. It has been pointed out that categorial particularism continues a line of research present in structuralist linguistics, in particular the earliest tradition inaugurated by Boas (1911) (Haspelmath 2007, 2010). The view that each language should be described in its own terms furthermore dovetails with the Saussurean standpoint that every "langue" is a unique system of linguistic signs which Saussure ([1916] 1968) defined as language-specific pairings of "signifiants" (forms) and "signifiés" (meanings). To Saussure, a "signifié" exists by virtue of being historically associated with a "signifiant," i.e. the linguistic sign is an indissoluble historical unit, the two sides of which can only be separated by a posterior act of analysis (Willems 2005). Accordingly, a distinction has to be made between the language-specific "signifié" of a linguistic sign and its use in discourse ("parole"). For instance, the Sanskrit plural and the Latin plural are similar but not identical because in Latin the plural contrasts with the singular, whereas in Sanskrit the plural contrasts with the singular and the dual. Hence, the Sanskrit and the Latin plural may both be used to designate the same state of affairs, but this is achieved on the basis of different underlying contrasts in the systems of grammatical "signifiés" of the two languages (Saussure [1916] 1968, 262).

Meaning (or "substance") is obviously of particular importance in the discussion of how the language-specific and the universal level of languages are related. Functional typologists explicitly address the role of meaning as a

*tertium comparationis* in crosslinguistic research (Comrie 1989; Dryer 1997; Croft 2003; Haspelmath 2007; Evans and Levinson 2009 etc.). However, "meaning" is not a self-explanatory concept, nor is it clear how to compare meanings across languages. On the one hand, Haspelmath writes:

> […] experience shows that people can understand each other across linguistic boundaries with some efforts. Translation is generally possible, even if not always straightforward. Notice that for the purposes of typological comparison we do not need identity of strictly linguistic meanings. All we need is some level of meaning at which meanings must be commensurable. Thus, it is not necessary for both Polish and Igbo to have the same semantic category of "possession" in order to be able to compare possessive constructions in these two languages. All we need is the possibility to translate low-level notions like 'my father's house' into both languages. We can define the semantic relation between 'I' and 'father', and between 'father' and 'house' as "possessive". It seems that in almost all languages that have been described so far, the grammatical form of the equivalent of my father's house is used for a broader range of relations (e.g. also for 'my mother's bike', 'my sister's husband', 'my husband's hair', 'my daughter's teacher', or even 'my life's purpose', 'the planet's orbit', 'the guest's seat', etc.). Languages differ considerably in this regard, making comparison more complex, but as long as there is translatability of simple concepts, comparison should be possible. (Haspelmath 2007, 128)

On the other hand, Comrie (1989, 53) rejects the view that translatability provides "any close correlation with the existence of language universals." According to Comrie, the evaluation of translations "requires reference to extralinguistic knowledge and is largely independent of the structural properties of languages" (Comrie 1989, 60; cf. Comrie 1998). Given that there is no settled opinion on the issue at present, I argue in the next section that a number of conceptual distinctions are called for in order to turn the focus on language-particular categories and the "commensurable" level of meaning into a methodologically viable approach of the differences and similarities between languages. To this end, I draw on the work of Eugenio Coseriu.

## 3. Coseriu's layered model of linguistic competence

It is interesting to compare categorial particularism with the views on meaning and categories advocated by Coseriu in many of his writings, which often appeared in different versions, languages, and translations. Coseriu is widely recognized as one of the major last representatives of a submerged tradition informed by European and American structuralism (Willems 2003). Coseriu, to his credit, raises the shortcomings of this tradition but his professed goal is to overcome them while at the same time building on its achievements. Accordingly, he pays much more attention to variation, diachrony, functional explanations, and the philosophical underpinning of linguistics than classical structuralists. He subscribes on the one hand to the principle that "each language must be described from its own point of

Table 1. Coseriu's layered model of linguistic competence.

| Levels of language | Points of view | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Activity (*Energeia*) | Knowledge (*Dynamis*) | Product (*Ergon*) |
| Universal | Speaking in general | Elocutional knowledge | Totality of utterances |
| Historical | Concrete particular language | Idiomatic knowledge | (Abstracted particular language) |
| Individual | Discourse | Expressive knowledge | Text |

view" but claims on the other that one should not be led to "exaggerate the differences between languages while ignoring structural analogies both in function and in form" (Coseriu 1977, 317). So it seems that we find here a variant of the traditional view of "unity in diversity," i.e. that part of linguistic research is "simultaneously about the diversity and uniformity" of the universe of human languages (Seiler 1995, 299; cf. Plank 1997, 1; Croft 2003, 53, 86; Moravcsik 2007, 29).

An important part of Coseriu's views can be summarized in a grid (Table 1). The grid outlines a theoretical framework designed to conduct a comprehensive analysis of linguistic competence, broadly construed. Coseriu proffers a distinction between complementary perspectives on language, which he borrows from Aristotle and Humboldt, and levels of generality of language, ranging from the level of speaking understood as a universal activity over the so-called "idiomatic" level of particular languages to the individual level of utterances. Combining three perspectives with the orthogonal distinction between three levels of language gives rise to Table 1 (from Coseriu 1985, xxix and 2007, 75).

It is not possible to deal with all issues covered in this grid in the scope of this article. I will restrict myself to two aspects relating to the two main research questions and which figure prominently in the above table: the three kinds of knowledge, which in Coseriu's view account for different aspects of "meaning," and the universal level of "speaking in general" and its relationship with linguistic categories and concepts.

On the one hand, Coseriu (1977) is in full agreement with the position of categorial particularism that linguistic signs and structures are language-specific, in particular as far as their semantics is concerned. In this sense, Coseriu too continues the legacy of structuralism with its emphasis on the differences among individual "langues." Coseriu even goes so far as to maintain that each language should be regarded as constituting its own "type," i.e. as potentially having a unique structural "character" in the sense Humboldt accorded to this term (Coseriu 1972, 1983, 2002; compare Lehmann 1988 and Aschenberg 2001 for discussion). This may well be among the most radical conclusions one can draw from a particularist point of view. On the other hand, according to Coseriu (1977) linguists have to acknowledge the similarities among languages in a principled way. In order to establish similarities and differences,

he distinguishes between the aforementioned levels of meaning. This distinction seems particularly useful to clarify the object of typological research addressed in the first research question raised in Section 1. In Section 4, I first consider the three levels of meaning with regard to the concept of possession as a case in point. In Section 5, I turn to Coseriu's additional distinction between three types of universals.

## 4. Three levels of meaning: the expression of possession in language

As was pointed out above, it has been assumed that basic concepts such as possession can be compared across languages because the concept of possession is identifiable at the crosslinguistic level at which translation is possible (Haspelmath 2007, 128). By contrast, Comrie (1989) maintains that the existence of language universals does not hinge on translatability. From a Coserian perspective, there are three different kinds of semantic knowledge (the German term is "Erkenntnis"): *designation* (elocutional knowledge), *meaning* or "signifié" (idiomatic knowledge) and *sense* (expressive knowledge) (Coseriu 1977, 337–344, 1985, xxx–xxxiv). The translatability Haspelmath (2007) is referring to bears on the elocutional and the expressive levels, not the idiomatic level. However, we will see that languages are also commensurable at the level of idiomatic knowledge, albeit in a different sense.[1] With regard to the latter level, Comrie (1989, 60) is right to point out that language universals are "independent of questions of translatability." I now consider the three levels in more detail.

Expressive knowledge involves the sense of utterances and texts, it is the level on which the conveying of discursive contents is to be situated. This level is crucial to translation because the object of translations are not languages and their categories but specific texts and sentences expressed in a source language that are to be transferred into another language (cf. Coseriu 1978 for extensive discussion). Coseriu illustrates this level with the translation of stock expressions and phrases. For example, the expressive knowledge which is conveyed when using It. *Mi dispiace* cannot normally be rendered by *I dislike it* in English or *Es missfällt mir* in German. One has to say *I am sorry* and *Entschuldigung* or *Ich entschuldige mich* or something in that vein (Coseriu 1985, xxxiv). This shows that language-specific meanings (idiomatic knowledge) are not the object but the instruments of translation, they are used to express a similar or functionally comparable message in another language. This not only means that translatability is not, as is often thought, about the possibility of translating "languages" (although difficulties in translation may arise from, e.g. metalinguistic features of

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[1]"Idiomatic" should not be confused with "idiom" in its more standard usage of a formally and semantically fixed expression. In Coseriu's model, the "idiomatic level" encompasses everything related to the structural, grammatical, and semantic character of a specific language, which also includes knowledge of diachronic phenomena, dialect variation, and register variation (Coseriu 2007, 133).

expressions such as puns), but also that one may have to give up the immediately equivalent reference of an expression in favor of an adequate discursive content (compare *dispiacere* and *entschuldigen* in the above example). Another example of Coseriu's is when people greet each other in the morning. On that particular occasion, *Good morning* and *Bonjour* have the same expressive function, although *morning* and *jour* (`day') differ in meaning. These few examples suffice to show that expressive knowledge is a potentially universal semantic layer, yet it does not pertain to the encoded meanings of the languages themselves but to what people convey by using language in discourse. Expressive knowledge is therefore among the semantic levels at which crosslinguistic comparison is possible, yet it is not the level at which language-specific meanings are commensurable. This squares with the well-known structuralist thesis that, in Roman Jakobson's (1959, 234–236) famous words, "all cognitive experience and its classification is conveyable in any existing language" and that languages "differ essentially in what they *must* convey and not in what they *may* convey" (cf. also Seiler 1995, 316–320).

Elocutional knowledge comprises the general, extralinguistic, and hence non-language-specific knowledge of the world, including "logical" principles of thought (Coseriu [1955] 1975, 280–284, 2007, 89–132). This is the level at which we know, e.g. that *He boiled the piano* is in some way deviant (Coseriu 1985, xxx), not because of some language-specific constraint but because the thought expressed in the sentence does not conform to what we know about pianos and boiling, no matter in what language it is expressed (and perhaps with sufficient context it could be made acceptable). Elocutional knowledge is furthermore related to the aforementioned level of expressive knowledge, as discourse is normally about what happens "in the world" as we know it, including the world of thoughts, fantasy, and emotions.

The concept of "possession" would count, first of all, as an elocutional concept in Coseriu's classificatory system. It may be assumed that all speakers can conceptualize the relationship of possession (Seiler 1995, 276). However, the way this relationship is, in Seiler's terminology, "linguistically encoded," differs across languages, to the extent that it may not be coded at all (cf. Nichols and Bickel 2013). From a Coserian perspective, this entails that there are two steps to consider in the analysis. The first step consists in determining whether the concept is formally coded. If so, then in a second step the idiomatic knowledge that corresponds to the concept has to be identified. I consider these steps in turn.

It first has to be established whether the elocutional concept of possession is formally coded (in particular lexically or grammatically). If this is not the case, then the concept is designated – or "referred at" – without being properly "signified" by means of formal coding. To use a term of Levinson's (2000, 25) "three-leveled theory" of meaning, which happens to have many similarities with Coseriu's model of semantic knowledge: if there is no formal coding, possession is not a lexical or grammatical category but either a plausible inference or, more

likely, a default reading, i.e. a Generalized Conversational Implicature (GCI). From a Coserian perspective, it is necessary to keep these possibilities apart when we apply the term "universal." If possession is considered a universal, then it is universal in an altogether different sense according to whether the concept is coded or left to inference, even if the inference is highly conventionalized as is the case with GCIs. Only in the latter case is the concept conversationally defeasible, whereas it is not if it is coded, because then it is expressed whenever the corresponding form is realized. In Coseriu's terminology, this means that in different languages there may be differences in idiomatic knowledge corresponding to the universal elocutional concept of possession. For example, Newmeyer (1998, 347) remarks that, in English, "possession" is not the language-specific meaning of either the genitive construction or the *of*-construction because neither construction is confined to this particular function, compare:

(1)   a.   The table's leg – the leg of the table
      b.   Tuesday's lecture, Rome's destruction – a piece of cake, the destruction of Rome

Yet with the appropriate lexical material, e.g. *table* and *leg*, both constructions can be used to designate possession. This entails that with either construction the possessive relationship has to be inferred in English, and it is arguably a GCI with combinations such as (1a). Nevertheless, because the constructions do not themselves encode ("signify" as idiomatic knowledge) the possessive relationship, this relationship remains an elocutional concept in (1a). Moreover, to the extent that it is designated through the more general language-specific meanings of the genitive construction and the *of*-construction, the elocutional concept is part of the expressive knowledge of the discourses in which noun phrases such as *the table's leg* and *the leg of the table* occur. The conclusion that universal elocutional knowledge can be conveyed without being coded in the linguistic construction, also holds for an utterance such as (2) in French. It encodes 'he raised the arm' but it is normally used to designate 'he raised *his* arm' (Seiler 1995, 281; cf. McCawley 1978):

(2)   Il a levé le bras

I now turn to the second step of the analysis which involves the level of idiomatic knowledge at which a concept such as possession is formally coded. The coding can differ in degree of specificity. For example, in German the use of the verb *gehören* without a preposition and with a dative object is limited to express a particular kind of possession, viz. a relationship of ownership, hence alienable possession (Coseriu 1977, 343). You can say (3a), but not normally (3b–c):

(3)   a.   Das Haus gehört dem Lehrer ('The teacher possesses the house')
      b.   *Die Hände gehören dem Körper

    c.   \*Die Finger gehören der Hand

If you want to use *gehören* in contexts (3b–c), you have to add the preposition *zu*, or else you should choose a general verb such as *haben*: *Die Hände gehören zum Körper* ('The body has hands'), *Die Hand hat Finger* ('The hand has fingers'). By contrast, in French the verb *appartenir* is not subject to such a constraint, its general language-specific meaning 'possession by (inter)dependence' leaves underspecified the alienable/inalienable distinction. As a consequence, *appartenir* can be used to designate all of the aforementioned relationships:

(4)    a.   La maison appartient au professeur
        b.   Les mains appartiennent au corps
        c.   Les doigts appartiennent à la main d'un homme

Thus, languages may code possession in a general sense, code one or more particular subtypes of possession, or possibly a combination of both. Before jumping to conclusions about the universal status of the concept, we therefore need to determine whether we intend to say something about the concept as it is idiomatically coded or elocutionally inferred.

The distinction between alienable and inalienable possession is a very common one in anthropological research and it has received a lot of attention in typology as well. One of the findings reported by Seiler (1995) and Bickel and Nichols (2013) is that there are many languages, in particular in the Americas, in which alienable and inalienable possession are coded differently, and body-part nouns figure consistently among the possessed nouns which are either obligatorily or optionally inflected for possession. Furthermore, if a language possesses a subclass of non-possessible nouns, this subclass almost always includes names of animals (Bickel and Nichols 2013). So although there are considerable crosslinguistic differences, there also emerge certain similarities, in particular with regard to the designation of body parts, which obviously are not purely coincidental. Such similarities are particularly interesting to typological research (cf. Shibatani 1994). They point to general tendencies at the idiomatic levels of encoded concepts with respect to specific areas of human experience in different languages. A straightforward language-external explanation is that reference to body parts is so fundamental to human beings that it is not surprising that languages tend to code the possession of inalienable body parts at least partly differently from alienable things or properties (cf. Dryer 1997, 134). But even if such an external motivation is granted, it remains necessary to determine for each language whether this subtype of possession, just like the subtype ownership and possibly more, is coded differently at the language-specific idiomatic level compared to other possessive relationships.

Interestingly, similar strong crosslinguistic tendencies at the idiomatic level can be observed if we look at the combination of nouns referring to alienable and inalienable relationships (e.g. 'house', 'hair', 'father') with verbs that differ

**Table 2.** Implicational restrictions in the combinations of verbs and nouns designating "possession" (Seiler 1995).

|          | Vater | Sohn | Kopf | Haar | Intelligenz | Hose | Haus |
|----------|-------|------|------|------|-------------|------|------|
| haben    | –     | +    | +    | +    | +           | +    | +    |
| besitzen | –     | –    | ?    | +    | +           | +    | +    |
| gehören  | –     | –    | –    | –    | –           | +    | +    |

in the more or less specific way they code possessive relationships. Seiler (1995, 292) adduces the following table which shows the scalar ordering of distributional constraints with *haben*, *besitzen*, and *gehören* in German (Table 2).[2]

Of course, it remains to be seen how general such distributional constraints are across languages.

In conclusion to this section, we observe that elocutional knowledge (designation and general principles of thought) and expressive knowledge (discursive contents) are the two levels where similarities of concepts across utterances in different languages are most easily found. In Table 1, the term "universal" is used to refer to elocutional knowledge primarily because it is the knowledge that constitutes a general ontological stratum of languages understood as cultural artifacts of human beings. Expressive knowledge, too, can lay claim to universality insofar as the contents conveyed in discourse and texts are to a large extent not language-specific. Hence, being the levels that are first and foremost involved in translation, elocutional and expressive knowledge are the prime candidates for crosslinguistic comparison in the sense intended by Haspelmath (2007, 128). Yet the idiomatic level of language-specific meanings also appears to be amenable to crosslinguistic analysis in which there is room for universal tendencies. This raises the question how similarities at the idiomatic level can be accommodated in the analysis and how crosslinguistic concepts relate to language-particular categories, with regard to both the lexicon and syntax (cf. Haspelmath 2007, 2010 and Newmeyer 2010). I consider this question in more detail in the next section.

## 5. Language-particular categories and comparative concepts

### 5.1 Three types of universals

To account for universals at the language-specific level of idiomatic knowledge, Coseriu introduces a distinction which crosscuts the three-leveled differentiation between kinds of knowledge discussed above. Coseriu assumes that there are three main types of universals. He is not entirely explicit about

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[2]The constraints Seiler assumes for *Vater* appear to be too strong. Although a sentence such as *X hat einen Sohn* is more likely to occur than *X hat einen Vater* for reasons related to elocutional knowledge, the latter does not violate any conditions imposed by the verb's valency; compare examples such as *"Elisa sagt, jeder hat einen Vater"* and *Damit ist der erste Wunsch von Tochter Susan schon erfüllt: Sie hat einen Vater* (examples extracted from the German Referenzkorpus, Mannheim; http://www1.ids-mannheim.de/kl/projekte/korpora/).

the sources of this distinction, but it is clear that he draws on a wide range of publications by other scholars, including W. von Humboldt, G. von der Gabelentz, and E. Sapir, as well as several chapters in *Universals of Language* (1963) edited by J. Greenberg. Coseriu first considers the well-known distinction between properties of language that are "universal by definition," which Coseriu calls *essential universals*, and properties of language that are observed in many presently known languages, so-called *empirical universals*. This difference figures prominently in Greenberg's seminal 1963 paper as well. But whereas Greenberg and functional typologists nowadays consider universals that are definitional of "languagehood" to be tautological and rather uninteresting (Evans and Levinson 2009, 436–437), Coseriu insists that they are not trivial but worthy of detailed examination. They are founded in a shared "idea of language" which according to Coseriu (1977, 325, 344) underlies all activity of speaking. Moreover, besides reaffirming the distinction between essential and empirical universals, Coseriu stresses the importance of yet another type of universal, so-called *possible universals*.

Given that empirical universals, including implicational universals, are familiar notions, I will not further dwell on this type here. We are also familiar with essential universals, which according to Coseriu (1977, 319–324) include some of Hockett's "design features" (semanticity, intersubjectivity, historicity, creativity, learnability of language, the duality of patterning). However, Coseriu also assumes the existence of essential universals that are "categories" and which are claimed to be rationally necessary. A number of examples stand out (Coseriu 1977, 321–322) because they demonstrate the influence of a kind of "thinking in contrasts" which is typical of the structuralist tradition.

Although it is not necessary for a language to have personal pronouns as an autonomous language-particular category, every language must be "capable of distinguishing in some manner the persons of a dialogue from non-persons," according to Coseriu (1977, 321). He does not further substantiate this claim and no examples are provided that prove that the contrast he refers to is found on the idiomatic levels of all known languages (which it should if it is to count as an essential universal in the Coserian framework) and not on the elocutional and expressive level (cf. Section 3.2). The two other essential universals highlighted by Coseriu are also contrastive pairs rather than single, self-contained concepts. One is the long-established contrast between 'theme' and 'rheme' (or 'topic' and 'comment'), understood in functional terms as the distinction between positing something and asserting some information about it (Coseriu 1977, 321; Greenberg 1963, 74). Coseriu insists that this contrast is not identical to the one between 'subject' and 'predicate' which are language-particular categories whose delimitation requires the establishment of both functional and formal, morphosyntactic properties. Recall that if such properties are not found in a specific language (e.g. in Dyirbal, Dryer 1997), then the language does not possess a Subject (with capital letter), even though it can be useful to use the

term 'subject' (with lower case) for reasons of language comparison. Another categorial pair considered to be universally valid is 'substantive function' and 'verbal function' (Coseriu 1977, 322). This functional pair again refers to semantic functions. As a consequence, "parts of speech" have to be distinguished from "word classes" which are lexical classes that normally instantiate parts of speech functions. Hence, the verbal function may be designated by, e.g. an adjective.[3] However, it is interesting to notice that there appear to be strong statistical tendencies for major parts of speech functions to be expressed by different classes of forms in the lexicon (cf. Coseriu [[, 1972] 2004 for discussion).

I now turn to possible universals. Universality should also be conceived of as possibility, according to Coseriu. He writes:

> all linguistic categories, even a category observed in a single language, and even hypothetical categories which are not in contradiction with the notion of language, are universal in the sense that they constitute universal possibilities of language – they could occur in other languages which we do not know today or they could be adopted for some conceivable linguistic system. (Coseriu 1977, 318)

Possible universals are understood "independent of a given language" (Coseriu 1977, 319). Of course, Coseriu acknowledges that although any fact of language (a category, property, function or formal process) present in one language could occur in any other language, there are implicational constraints that determine and constrain co-occurrence. This is evident from the kind of implicational universals discussed by J. Greenberg and his followers. But these are constraints on co-occurring facts of language, no evidence against universal possibility. It is therefore not possible to specify an upper limit to the number of possible universals in language beforehand. What has to be regarded as potentially universal in language is only limited by the – itself unbounded – creativity human beings display in shaping languages. Language, Coseriu (2000, 109) maintains, is an "activity that is free in the philosophical sense of the word – that is, an activity whose object is endless, i.e. infinite." But this is just as well, for the notion of possible universal applies to all levels of language, from phonetics and phonology over morphology, lexicon, word formation and syntax to parts of speech and types of "texts" (Coseriu 1987, 148–152). Obviously, all these levels are characterized by general and specific categories, properties, functions and formal processes, and the scope of a possible universal varies accordingly.

In the next section, I elaborate on the claim that possible universals are to be understood independent of a given language by drawing on Coseriu's case study of a particular diathesis in Japanese (Coseriu [1979] 1987).

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[3]Compare Dixon (2004) and the recent discussion triggered by Chung (2012) about the alleged universality of noun, verb, and adjective; see also Croft (2003, 183–188), Haspelmath (2012), and Rijkhoff and van Lier (2013).

## 5.2. Diathesis in Japanese revisited: ukemi

Coseriu ([1979] 1987) intends to show that Japanese has an original language-particular construction called "ukemi" which is fundamentally different from the passive in European languages but at the same time a potentially universal diathesis like active, passive, antipassive etc. Coseriu's account runs counter to mainstream – in particular generative, but increasingly also functional – accounts of Japanese grammar which are arguably among the most striking examples of "categorial universalism" to be found in post-war linguistics. Kuno (1973), Kuroda (1979), Shibatani (1977, 1985, 1988), Wierzbicka (1988), Kinsui (1997), Toyota (2011), Iwasaki (2013), among others, all indiscriminately apply standard grammatical concepts of the European linguistic tradition ('subject,' 'object,' 'case,' '(in)transitive verb,' 'active,' 'passive,' and so on) to the grammar of Japanese. By contrast, Coseriu goes to great lengths to argue that Japanese sentences cannot be properly analyzed by transposing such concepts from European languages to Japanese.[4] He forcefully argues in favor of the view that Japanese syntax should be described from a language-specific point of view. Coseriu's account is based on lesser known contrastive studies by Shoko Kishitani (mainly published in the 70s and 80s and collected in Kishitani 1985), but also – without however duly acknowledging this – on the structuralist studies by Bloch (1946a, 1946b). I will only give a sketch of the account here; readers are referred to Coseriu ([1979] 1987) and Kishitani (1985) for more detailed discussions.

The Japanese verb is inflected for tense, aspect, mood, honorific relationships, negation etc. but not for person and number. There is no agreement and the verbal constituent can in itself constitute a sentence (see Miller 1975; Kishitani 1985; Iwasaki 2013 for examples). According to Kishitani (1985) and Coseriu ([1979] 1987), Japanese sentences do not have a subject, a direct object or an indirect object in the common (i.e. European) understanding of these terms. Whereas in most current accounts the noun postpositions ("joshi") are analyzed as case markers, according to Coseriu ([1979] 1987, 103) they are means to encode and organize information structure (cf. already Bloch 1946b, 220). The inadequacy of terms such as 'nominative,' 'accusative,' 'dative' etc. is evident from the long and diverse lists of functions of the most frequent joshi (i.e. *ga, o, ni, de, to, no, kara, made, e*) provided by Miller (1975, 38–47), who, by the way, consistently avoids using the term "argument" in favor of "adjunct" with regard to Japanese sentences. For example, Miller lists more than a dozen functions of *ni*, only one of which corresponds to the prototypical use of the 'dative' in ditransitive sentences in European languages such as Latin and German. Hence, the current practice of identifying *ni* as a marker of the dative case is highly questionable, even as a comparative label. It amounts to

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[4]"Japanese" here stands for the standard variety of the language, which requires a certain amount of abstraction, in particular from social and dialectal variation. See Coseriu ([1952] 1975, [1958] 1974, § 2) for an extensive discussion of the ontological and analytical status of an "abstract language" in linguistic enquiry. Cf. also Coseriu (2007).

assigning a single function to a multifunctional postposition on the basis of a comparative perspective under exclusion of any serious language-specific perspective. Further evidence supporting the conclusion that *ni* is not 'dative,' *o* not 'accusative' and *ga* not 'nominative' comes from the observation that a content such as 'Taro can speak English' can be rendered in Japanese in various semantically similar sentences with, however, different information structures (cf. Iwasaki 2013, 168):

(5)   a.   Tarō      ga        eigo              o        hanas-e-ru
          Tarō                English                   speak-POTENTIAL-NONPAST
          'Tarō can speak English'

      b.   Tarō ga eigo ga hanas-e-ru
      c.   Tarō ni eigo ga hanas-e-ru

Note that any Japanese verb can be combined with a *ga*-constituent but not with an *o*- or a *ni*-constituent (Kishitani 1985, 221). If we also take into account the use of the particle *wa* (commonly classified as a topic marker, yet Miller (1975, 52) prefers to characterize its function as "out-focusing" and "subduing" as opposed to the "in-focusing" and "highlighting" function of yet another thematic particle, *mo*), then several other alternations can be added to (5).[5] For these reasons, I prefer not to gloss the noun postpositions in the remainder of this section, as 'nominative,' 'dative,' 'subject,' 'topic' etc. are bound to lead to confusion.

Particularly important for the purpose of the analysis is that Coseriu ([1979] 1987, 101–102) reiterates the radical particularist claim that all Japanese verbs have zero adicity. Bloch was the first to emphasize that "Japanese verbs are impersonal; they denote simply the occurrence of an action or the existence of a state, usually without reference to any actor" (Bloch 1946a, 98). This is so despite the fact that verbs are either "endo-active" (the verb's event structure points to itself) or "exo-active" (the verb's event structure points to something else) by virtue of their lexical semantics (cf. Lewin [1959] 1990, 118–122 and Kishitani 1985, 180, 198–199, 217–229 for discussion). This lexical contrast can be observed in many verb pairs, mostly with corresponding morphological alternation (Iwasaki 2013, 168–170), e.g.:

(6)   *aku* ("endo-active", ≈ intransitive 'open') – *akeru* ("exo-active", ≈ transitive 'open')
      *agaru* (≈ 'rise') – *ageru* (≈ 'raise')
      *tatamaru* (≈ 'be folded') – *tatamu* (≈ 'fold')
      *nokoru* (≈ 'remain, stay behind') – *nokosu* (≈ 'leave (behind)')

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[5]Compare: *Tarō wa eigo ga hanas-eru*, *Tarō wa eigo wa hanas-eru*, *Tarō wa eigo o hanas-eru*, *Tarō ni eigo wa hanas-eru*, all roughly translatable as 'Tarō can speak English' as well. By contrast, the following sentences are ungrammatical: *\*Tarō ga eigo ni hanas-eru*, *\*Tarō wa eigo ni hanas-eru*, *\*Tarō ni eigo ni hanas-eru*, and *\*Tarō ni eigo o hanas-eru*.

However, this contrast is not reflected as a difference between intransitive and transitive grammatical constructions (Coseriu [1979] 1987, 102). Moreover, Japanese is well known for the fact that a lot of information can be left unexpressed if it is recoverable from the situation or context (Bloch 1946a, 98; Miller 1975, 28, 1063; Coseriu [1979] 1987, 102; Bossong 1989, 36; Iwasaki 2013, 12).

The many differences between Japanese and European languages emerge when a strictly language-particular analysis is combined with a subsequent comparative analysis. A particularly revealing case in point is ukemi, to which I now turn. The lexical distinction between "endo-active" and "exo-active" crosscuts the possibility for a verb to occur in the ukemi construction (note that ukemi is not possible with all verbs, Kishitani 1985, 226). In modern textbooks, it is customary to distinguish two types of "passive" in Japanese: the original "indirect passive" (ukemi), which expresses reference to an affected person (so-called *ji*), and the "direct passive" (judō). The latter is also called "translational passive" (Miller 1975, 294; Kishitani 1985, 230) because it is, unlike ukemi, modeled after the passive construction in European languages and hence the result of language contact. However, in modern Japanese both constructions are fully standard. The differences between neutral diathesis, judō and ukemi are illustrated below; the voice for both ukemi and judō is *-(r)are-* (here glossed as PSS for the sake of exposition; number differences such as *kodomo* 'child/children' are disregarded in the glosses):

(7)  a.  neutral diathesis
         kodomo  ga  doa  o  ake-ru
         child        door    open-NONPAST
         'A/the child opens the door'

     b.  neutral diathesis
         Tarō  ga  kodomo  ni  jitensha  o  yar-u
         Tarō      child        bicycle      give-NONPAST
         'Taro gives a bicycle to the child'

     c.  neutral diathesis, elliptical
         doa  o  ake-ru
         door    open-NONPAST
         lit. 'Opens the door.' (The agent is recoverable.)

     d.  *judō*
         doa  ga  kodomo  ni  ake-rare-ta
         door     child        open-PSS-PAST
         'The door is/gets opened by a/the child'

e.  *judō*, elliptical
doa      ga      ake-rare-ta
door          open-PSS-PAST
'The door was/got opened.' (The agent does not need to be
recoverable.)

f.  *ukemi*
kodomo  ni      doa    o    ake-rare-ta
Child          door        open-PSS-PAST
'The door was/got opened by a/the child [*ji* – unexpressed – is
adversely affected]'

g.  *ukemi*, strongly elliptical
doa      o    ake-rare-ta
door          open-PSS-PAST
'The door was/got opened [*ji* is adversely affected, e.g. *ji* does not
want the door opened].' (The agent is recoverable.)

h.  *ukemi*, full construction
Hanako      wa/ga      kodomo  ni      doa    o      ake-rare-ta
Hanako          child          door          open-PSS-PAST
'Hanako was adversely affected by a/the child's having opened the
door.' (Hanako = *ji*)

There are important differences in the uses of the postpositions *ga/
wa*, *o*, and *ni* in the three diatheses illustrated in (7) (I do not consider
other diatheses in Japanese such as causative and benefactive). Whereas
*ga* marks the agent and *o* the patient or theme in the neutral diathesis, *ga*
marks the patient/theme in the judō sentences. By contrast, the patient/
theme in the ukemi sentences is marked by *o* as in the neutral diathe-
sis. As for *ni*, it marks the recipient in the neutral diathesis (7b), but the
agent in the judō and ukemi sentences. (To complicate matters, *ni* can also
mark the recipient in judō sentences with particular verbs, as in *hon ga/
wa marii ni atae-rare-ta* 'the book was given to Mary,' but because this con-
struction has no bearing on the present analysis, I will not further discuss
it here.)

A major semantic difference between judō and ukemi lies in the different
ways the entities involved in the event structure expressed in the two construc-
tions are profiled. From a procedural perspective, the profiling in judō (7d) is
comparable to that of the English sentence, *doa* 'door' being the "promoted"

participant and *kodomo* 'child' the "demoted" one.[6] By contrast, the ukemi examples (7f–h) express reference to an affected person (*ji*) who is contrasted to any non-affected person (or *ta*) (Kishitani 1985, 78, 223; Coseriu [1979] 1987, 105). The affected *ji* – *Hanako* in (7h), a not explicitly mentioned person in (7f) and (7g) – is the "recipient" of what the verb or the rest of the clause designates (note that "recipient" is the original etymological meaning of *ukemi*, Kishitani 1985, 210). The affectedness relationship is usually identified as "adversity" in the literature (Kuno 1973, 24; Wierzbicka 1988, 261; Shibatani 1994, 464; Toyota 2011, 15, 34; Iwasaki 2013, 160), thus classifying ukemi along the lines of the well-known "adversative passive" construction which is considered typical of a number of Southeast Asian languages (Malchukov 1993; Prasithrathsint 2004). However, the affectedness can also be positive in the Japanese ukemi construction, depending on the semantics of the verb (Kishitani 1985, 213; Wierzbicka 1988, 268–270; Iwasaki 2013, 161). Given that adversity is the dominant reading in Japanese, it qualifies as a strong tendency in "normal language use" in the terminology of Coseriu ([1952] 1975), hence as a preferred "sense" (a GCI) rather than a "signifié" of the construction (cf. Section 4). The same holds for the typical "honorific" use of *-(r)are*-forms (cf. Kishitani 1985, 251, 272 and Iwasaki 2013, 321).[7]

Still from a procedural perspective, judō largely corresponds to the familiar picture of the European passive as a valency decreasing construction in which, e.g., the promoted *doa* 'door' in (7d–e) is most affected. In ukemi, the affectedness relationship is of a different nature: the construction can host an additional constituent designating the affected person *ji*. Shibatani (1994, 468) correctly qualifies this constituent as an "extra-thematic nominal" rather than in terms of a valency increasing construction (*pace* Iwasaki 2013, 158). It is often marked by the postposition *wa*, but *ga* is also possible, cf. (7h) (Kishitani 1985, 189; Toyota 2011, 12).

Whereas ukemi nowadays is simply qualified as a kind of passive (viz. "indirect passive"), Kishitani (1985, 186–187) doubts the possibility of defining a crosslinguistic concept that is able to accommodate both passive and ukemi, thus favoring a strict particularist viewpoint. Coseriu ([1979] 1987, 108–109) believes that a synthesis of both views is desirable. The Japanese ukemi and the passive typical of European languages are comparable and to some degree

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[6]Contrary to standard practice (e.g. Toyota 2011; Iwasaki 2013), I adopt this procedural perspective, which is still very common in the literature on diathesis in general, for expository purposes only, without implying that the judō and ukemi sentences are in any real sense "transformations" or "conversions" of a basic active sentence. I consider diatheses (*sensu latiore*, including active, passive, middle, judō, ukemi, causative, benefactive, applicative, antipassive, inverse, non-actor focus etc., cf. Kulikov 2011; Siewierska 2013) to be constructions in their own right, in line with the constructional view of grammar and linguistic knowledge. As Coseriu (1987) recognized, the procedural perspective is a metalinguistic one, which means that "promote" and "demote" are in the first place explanatory devices (even though they can refer to real processes even in "ordinary" language under certain circumstances).

[7]Shibatani (1994) is an illuminating analysis of adversity against the backdrop of crossconstructional similarities in several languages. For an altogether different analysis of ukemi in terms of a multiple polysemous construction, s. Wierzbicka (1988); compare also Toyota (2011).

similar insofar as the constructions partly overlap in their uses, even though their language-specific meanings are very different. In the terminology of Table 1: in the English passive, either the affectedness of the "promoted" direct object or of the "promoted" indirect object (as in the English indirect passive, *Mary was given the book*) is coded as idiomatic knowledge. By contrast, ukemi invariably encodes the affectedness of *ji*, who can be left unexpressed. The judō construction, on the other hand, is more similar to the European passive. In either case, to the extent that the linguistic encoding is different, the functions of the constructions are commensurable in discourse and texts, as devices of designation, i.e. at the level of expressive knowledge and elocutional knowledge, even though they are not at the level of idiomatic knowledge (Coseriu 1977, 118).

This analysis requires that similarities and differences between constructions in different languages are described as detailed as possible under a unifying heading (cf. Matthews 1997 and Haspelmath 2010, 681 for discussion; cf. also Haspelmath 2004). This may to some degree constitute a metalinguistic challenge. According to Coseriu (1987, 111–112), the ukemi construction encodes a relationship from the point of view of the event structure designated by the verb. Conversely, constructions such as the English and German passives encode a relationship from the point of view of the participant(s) involved in the verb's event structure. Whether such relatively simple contrastive characterizations are precise enough is a matter of debate and cannot be discussed here. However, it is important to stress that from a Coserian perspective one needs to pay attention to the isomorphism of the constructions discussed in this section across languages. What they share is that they code the profiling of an event, a state or an action with regard to one or more participants. Hence, despite the differences that emerge from language comparison, it is not an arbitrary choice to subsume the constructions under the heading "diathesis" in a general sense.[8] Crucially, this entails that diathesis is not only a comparative concept, nor a purely terminological semantic label, but a full-fledged category of language whose semantic and morphosyntactic definition can be provided on a more abstract level than that of language-specific form/meaning pairings. It is here that the relevance of possible universals becomes particularly apparent: it is possible that different form/meaning pairings such as passive and ukemi, which are to be situated at the idiomatic levels of different languages, share basic common properties even though they are language-particular. On this view, diathesis and its instantiations in different languages are to be considered possible universals, categories of language being both language-particular and potentially universal.

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[8]This might partly explain why Japanese speakers had apparently no problems integrating the originally un-Japanese "direct passive" typical of European languages such as English and Dutch into their diathesis system, apparently as an extension of the original ukemi (cf. Coseriu 1987, 112, 118 and Kishitani 1985, 230, *pace* Shibatani 1985, 842, who analyzes the "indirect passive" as an extension of the "direct passive"). Cf. also Kinsui (1997, 773) who makes a similar remark concerning the introduction of *niyotte* as a variant of *ni* in Japanese as a result of language contact with Dutch.

## 6. Concluding remarks

This article has discussed how Eugenio Coseriu's model of linguistic analysis can be brought to bear on identifying the levels of meaning at which languages are assumed to be comparable and on clarifying the relationship between language-particular categories and crosslinguistic concepts. It has been shown, first, that the outcome of crosslinguistic comparison depends on the level of meaning one is concerned with. Whereas "elocutional knowledge" is universal insofar as extralinguistic knowledge and general principles of thought are not language-specific, "expressive knowledge" is universal in a different sense: the content created in acts of discourse and texts is the object of interlingual translation. Conversely, "idiomatic knowledge" can only be potentially universal, to the extent that certain more or less strong tendencies are observed in particular areas of language-specific meanings, e.g. the converging ways in which possession is coded in different languages with regard to alienable and inalienable relations and the various ways diathesis is realized across languages.

Second, from a Coserian point of view the realm of universals is not exhausted by empirical and essential universals. Attention has to be paid to yet another type of universal: possible universals. Its main theoretical contribution is that this type of universal is helpful in understanding the relationship between language-particular categories and crosslinguistic concepts. Functional typologists rightly point out that the two questions "What are the grammatical relations and categories in a particular language?" and "What should we call them?" should not be confused (Dryer 1997, 124). However, this does not mean that only the first question is a substantive one and the second merely a matter of convenient labeling. Nor does it mean that language-particular categories and crosslinguistic concepts are independent of one another. The case study on diathesis in Section 5 has shown that there is a substantial difference between engaging in a "category-assignment controversy" (Dryer 1997, 1998; Haspelmath 2007, 2010) and applying a crosslinguistic concept for analytical purposes to a specific phenomenon encountered in one or more languages. In category-assignment controversies, the question is whether some observed phenomenon (a form/meaning pairing) is, e.g. a 'subject' or an 'object,' a 'verb,' 'adjective' or 'noun,' a 'case marker' etc. (Haspelmath 2007, 124). Such controversies are pointless to the extent that "no universally applicable necessary and sufficient criteria for defining a priori categories can be given" (2007, 125). Yet there are necessary and sufficient criteria for defining a language-particular category so that it can be consistently applied to that particular language, even though it is not universally applicable (cf. Dryer 1997, 132–135 who convincingly argues that grammatical categories cannot be coherently defined as crosslinguistic prototypes; for different views, see Shibatani 1985 and Comrie 1988, among others). If a category is viewed as a possible universal, using crosslinguistic concepts in the analysis of languages which do not possess the category does not necessarily

amount to fitting different phenomena into some preestablished mold of some popular category (Haspelmath 2007, 119). For example, although the European conception of passive obviously cannot accommodate the ukemi in Japanese (and many other diatheses in other languages), drawing on the concept of passive does not constitute an arbitrary choice in the crosslinguistic comparison. "Passive" is a possible universal that can be subsumed under the general concept of "diathesis" which is also a possible universal. "Diathesis," in turn, covers a wide range of constructions which share the property that they profile participants (regardless whether they are expressed or not) that are involved in the state, event or action designated by the verb. To be sure, diathesis is not rationally necessary, hence not an essential universal (nor a "Platonic concept," Dryer 1997, 133). Yet, many languages appear to have some kind of diathesis, i.e. at least two constructions between which speakers can choose in order to profile a state of affairs (and a particular language may have a number of such diatheses). Even if a language does not show any evidence of diathesis, it still counts as a possible universal.

Whereas category-assignment controversies wrongly assume that a single category exists in different languages in spite of substantial semantic and formal differences, drawing on the concept of possible universals has – even if unwittingly – an altogether different, "hermeneutic" purpose (cf. Coseriu 2000, 110). It contributes to fleshing out the idea, or perhaps the intuition, that there is "unity in diversity" in human languages. From a Coserian perspective, this entails that analyzing phenomena in lesser known languages in terms of concepts derived from well-studied languages – the common fallacy in typology, according to categorial particularism – is only one source of knowledge, albeit one that is prone to error if it is tapped for the wrong reasons. The other source is not language-specific: each fact found in a language, even if encountered in only one language for the time being, is a conceptual possibility of what H. Steinthal, drawing on W. von Humboldt, called the "idea of language" (Coseriu 1977, 325, 344), i.e. the dynamic, productive ability to produce and comprehend language which all human beings share. This brings us back to the model of linguistic competence presented in Table 1: the "idea of language" is the ability which enables speakers not simply to reproduce language as a historically inherited system (Ergon) but to create language anew (Energeia) on the basis of linguistic knowledge (Dynamis) gained while acquiring and using language.

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