Communication and Language in Niklas Luhmann's Systems-Theory

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Abstract: This article investigates the function and reality of language in Niklas Luhmann's systems theory. How can one interpret the systems-theoretical assumption that language is based on communication? Luhmann describes language as a dynamic media/form relationship, which is able to couple the social and psychological system. This structural coupling, which constructs consciousness and language as two autonomous systems, raises problems if one defines language from a cognitive point of view. This article discusses these problems and aims to develop assumptions and questions within the systems-theoretical approach.

Keywords: Niklas Luhmann – systems theory – language conception – communication – medium/form relation

Resumo: O presente artigo investiga a função e realidade da linguagem na teoria dos sistemas de Niklas Luhmann. Como se pode interpretar a suposição sistêmico-teórica de que a linguagem é baseada na comunicação? Luhmann descreve a linguagem como uma relação dinâmica entre meio e forma, a qual é capaz de ligar o sistema social e psicológico. Essa conexão estrutural, que constrói a consciência e a linguagem como dois sistemas autônomos, gera problemas quando se define a linguagem do ponto de vista cognitivo. Este artigo discute tais problemas e pretende desenvolver suposições e questões a partir da própria abordagem sistêmico-teórica.

Introduction

Although well known for his prolific scholarly productivity, Niklas Luhmann granted only rhapsodic asides to the topic of language. In quantitative terms alone, language would have to pervade at least some of his works (LUHMANN 1987: 209ff.; LUHMANN

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1994: 47ff.; LUHMANN 1997: 205ff.). But a review of Luhmann's comprehensive list of publications reveals that the topic of language is insufficiently explored.[2] This finding is also curious in a qualitative sense, given that language plays an important role in the constitution of communicative processes in systems-theory. Luhmann claims that "language must be changed to the more fundamental concept of communication" (LUHMANN 1994: 51).[3] With that, he decisively distinguishes his conception of language from traditional philosophical approaches to the same. For Luhmann, language is no longer attributed to the subject or consciousness, but rather belongs to communication. By no means, however, does this diminish the importance of language in systems-theory. On the contrary, language retains critical functions with regard to the differentiation of the psychic and communicative systems.

The goal of this article is to present and problematize the function and reality of language in Luhmann's systems-theory. How can one work with the systems-theoretical assumption that language must be thought as communication? What consequences and problems arise from the methodological separation of language and consciousness? To answer these questions, I will first explain Luhmann's conception of communication (Part 1) and then its relation to consciousness (Part 2). Luhmann describes language as a dynamic relation between medium and form, whereby social and psychic systems are structurally coupled (Part 3). This structural coupling, which speaks to the status of consciousness and language as two distinctly emerging systems, challenges the assumption that language develops cognitively. Part 4 elucidates these problems not from the perspective of another language-theoretical position, such as psychoanalysis, but rather in terms of systems-theory's own assumptions and questions.

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[2] Accordingly, there is little scholarship on Luhmann's conception of language. The work that addresses systems-theory from a linguistic perspective stems mostly from discourse analysis, which does not emphasize the question of linguistic cognition (SCHEFFER 2007;, KESSLER 2007). The debate about the use of systems-theory for literary studies, on the other hand, has grown more significant. See, for example, MÜLLER, FOHRMANN, THEISEN.

[3] "Sprache auf Kommunikation als Grundbegriff umstellen muss" (LUHMANN 1994: 51). Unless otherwise noted all translations from the German to the English were done by Mathew MILLER.

1. Communication and Consciousness

The *Historische Wörterbuch der Philosophie* [Historical Dictionary of Philosophy] sketches the history of the impact of the concept "communication" and shows that above all it is the etymological meaning of communication that is crucial for the traditional understanding of this category: "Since antiquity, the Latin word 'communicatio' has had a broad range of meanings within the radius of utterance, permission-granting, connection, exchange, circulation, association, and community" (STERNSCHULTE 1976: 893).[4] This conception points to an intersubjective transmission of messages within a community in which subjects interact with one another by communicating. But this is exactly the conception criticized by systems-theory: "The metaphor of transmission is unusable because it implies too much ontology" (LUHMANN 1995, 139).[5] For Luhmann, communication in the sense of transmission is a product of the "old European" philosophy of consciousness or subjectivity. This approach presents consciousness as something accessible to other subjects and the concept of communicative transmission suggests an open consciousness that is capable of making epistemological gains. But this is precisely the model of consciousness criticized by systems-theory (LUHMANN 1985; 1995; POTHAST 1987). Communication is no longer to be understood as a bridge between subjects. Rather, it is only structurally coupled with consciousness and is thereby bound to its own autopoietic processes. In this way, one can conceive of communication as an emergent reality, which is "desensualized" from subjects. While communication indeed depends on consciousness, it is not reducible to it.

The actual components of communication are selections. This means that communication always entails a momentary choice of observations: "Communication

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4 "Das lateinische Wort 'communicatio' hat seit der Antike ein weites Bedeutungsfeld im Umkreis von Mitteilung, Gewährung, Verbindung, Austausch, Verkehr, Umgang, Gemeinschaft" (STERNSCHULTE 1976: 893).

5 "Die Übertragungsmetapher ist unbrauchbar, weil zu viel Ontologie impliziert" (LUHMANN 1987: 193).

is the processing of selection" (LUHMANN 1995: 140).[6] By linking communication with observation, the former comes to be regarded as a complex undertaking insofar as social systems, or rather the communications thereof, can mutually observe one another. Observing is no longer the exclusive performance of a psychic system, but an abstract procedure. By means of its capacity for observation, communication can be considered as a process full of events, in which momentary decisions are made about what is being communicated. The unmarked communications are always already inherent within this process. In this way, one can always understand communication as a unity of difference.

It is not without reason that Luhmann makes an ironic allusion to the original fall of man in the following passage about communication: "Once embroiled in communication, one can never return to the paradise of innocent souls" (LUHMANN 1995: 150).[7] Communication does indeed appear to possess diabolical characteristics. Imagine the following situation: the devil observes God. In so doing, he is observing something that does not allow itself to be observed, because God constitutes the presupposition of the distinguishableness of the devil himself, and to that extent is unobservable. If, in spite of this, the devil observes God, he generates a difference and comes to observe the unity of a difference in place of an unmarked unity. Communication can also, like the devil, mark the unity of a difference. The decision as to which side of an observation should be marked is left to the "laws" of contingency, which does not mean that communication takes place in a purely arbitrary or chaotic manner. Contingency rather implies that the possible and the real are respectively thematized in the drawing of a distinction: "Something is contingent insofar as it is neither necessary nor impossible; it is just what it is (or was or will be), though it could also be otherwise" (LUHMANN 1995: 106).[8]

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[6] "Kommunikation ist Prozessieren von Selektion" (LUHMANN 1987: 194).

[7] "Einmal in Kommunikation verstrickt, kommt man nie wieder in das Paradies der einfachen Seelen zurück" (LUHMANN 1987: 207).

[8] "Kontingent ist etwas, was weder notwendig noch unmöglich ist; was also so wie es ist (war, sein wird), sein kann, aber auch anders möglich ist" (LUHMANN 1987: 152).

What does communication cull from this contingent-selective process? Luhmann mentions three elements that can both be selected and select at the same time: "Every communication differentiates and synthesizes its own components, namely information, utterance, and understanding" (LUHMANN 1994: 24).[9] Information, utterance, and understanding are the components of communication and, according to Luhmann, these elements must simultaneously differentiate and synthesize themselves. One can only speak of communication when all three of these elements interact at the same time. The kind of interaction in question here must be thought of in terms of the theory of observation, in which information, utterance, and understanding are themselves able to make distinctions. Information is thus not a function of consciousness, by which it is generated through psychic or cognitive processes. Rather, information is always the product of an observing system's own operations. It is created through communication itself and is never simply given as part of the system's environment: "By information we mean an *event that selects system states*" (LUHMANN 1995: 67, emphasis there).[10] Information must therefore be designated as a distinction, which informs about a difference. But of what does information consist then? It is neither a component of a signifying system (as in semiotics), nor is it a psychic impulse of consciousness. Luhmann does not further explain the exact characteristics or "substance" of information, because he is more interested in how things function as opposed to what they are. The point here is thus to clarify how information functions and, according to Luhmann, information functions as a difference that generates a difference. It is an observation, which marks a distinction, whereby the unmarked side of the distinction is likewise given.

Utterance constitutes the second element of communication and it is the way in which information is "conveyed." Utterance is also a selection that can proceed one way or the other. The third component of communication, understanding, must likewise be regarded as a difference and one can only speak of a communication when

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[9] "Jede Kommunikation differenziert und synthetisiert ihre eigenen Komponenten, nämlich Information, Mitteilung und Verstehen" (LUHMANN 1994: 24).

[10] "Als Information soll hier ein Ereignis bezeichnet werden, das Systemzustände auswählt" (LUHMANN 1987: 102).

the utterance's information is understood selectively. According to Luhmann, it is improbable that one understands the other at all, for "understanding always includes misunderstanding" (LUHMANN 1995:158).[11] This description of communication as a process of selection consisting in information, utterance, and understanding, a process that can generate itself, has decisive theoretical consequences. Communication is no longer conceived as an event of consciousness. Accordingly, people participating in a communicative process are black-boxed, or rendered opaque, with regard to one another. There is no longer any model of intersubjectivity—on the basis of which individual consciousnesses could be understood to become mutually transparent—operative within the process of communication. Psychic systems and communicative systems remain external to one another, but they nonetheless can, or rather, due to the relationship of mutual dependency between them, they must participate in communication. Yet the dependence in question here does not rest on a mutual openness. As an autopoietic system, the psychic system can only connect to its own operations. The elements thereof, its thoughts and ideas, can only refer to themselves. Thus one thought within the system can only connect to another thought within that same system and not immediately to the thought of another psychic system. In order to transport thoughts from one psychic system to another, one needs communication to occur between at least two psychic systems present to each other. The psychic systems constitute a kind of "fuel", in that they supply the communicative process with thought material that must be "transcribed" by communication.

2. Language and Structural Coupling

How is it that thoughts and ideas can be "transcribed" for the communicative process? It is here that language plays a decisive role due to its capacity for coupling the social and psychic systems. Again, the notion that language presents an element of consciousness or that it emerges from elements of the psychic system such as thoughts

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[11] "Verstehen immer auch Missverstehen" (LUHMANN 1987: 217)

is rejected by systems-theory. Language is no longer located within the domain of the psychic system, as a reality that can represent relations external to language. Rather, language fosters communication and is brought forth by communication itself. While the psychic systems participate in language, they no longer constitute its foundation. Language is thus no longer conceived here as a functional unity that makes possible and governs social life, thereby constituting a transcendental basis for knowledge. By defining language as communication, the former is "de-ontologized," which is to say that it no longer functions as a space in which truth comes to be articulated, but is rather a construct that optimizes communication. From this perspective, theoretical models of language that are hermeneutic, for example, and treat language as a means through which being and truth can be revealed, belong to "old European" thought. But systems-theory also regards the conceptions of language put forth by critical theory as outdated. In his *Ästhetische Theorie* (1993: 274 ff.) Theodor W. ADORNO develops a notion of a non-conceptual language that can free itself of domination is likewise a case in which language is not sufficiently de-ontologized: one can note that for Adorno, truth-claims are inherent to the non-communicative conception of language.[12]

There is no room in systems-theory for ontology. Language simply serves to improve the possibilities of communication. Language presents a medium that supports the interpenetration of social and psychic systems. The function of language consists primarily in expanding communicative possibilities: "The communicative system owes an extensive capacity for distinction along with a well-targeted connectivity to language. This is what makes the constitution of complexity possible in the communicative system" (LUHMANN 1993: 47).[13] Language can optimize the synthesis of information, utterance, and understanding in such a way as to enable communication to operate autopoietically. It can allow consciousness and the communicative system to interpenetrate one another, which means that language

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[12] This is discussed in PLUMPE's notes about Adorno's art and language conception (1993: 203-247, Bd. 2.)

[13] "Das Kommunikationssystem verdankt der Sprache hohe Unterscheidungsfähigkeit bei gezielter Anschlussfähigkeit, und das ermöglicht den Komplexitätsaufbau im Kommunikationssystem" (LUHMANN 1993: 47).

makes it possible for systems to draw selectively on the units of other systems in order to develop themselves. In this way, consciousness and communication relate to one another in open and closed ways at the same time. The mutual externality of one system to the other is the necessary and constitutive conditionality of each. The communicative system is based on a chain of communicative events, which must be continuously supplied with new elements. The innovative elements stemming from outside the system that are necessary for the self-preservation of the system cannot take shape without the system's referring to externals.

In this relationship of dependence, language plays an important role due to its ability to present units of both consciousness and communication in such a way that both systems can refer to these in their own ways. But this is not an exchange that takes place between the two systems. They remain respectively unchanged. A key term for understanding this relationship is the word "captivate." Language has the capacity to captivate consciousness and communication. It is not that language is thereby considered an internal element of the system, but rather a medium through which these systems can be connected. Language constitutes a "juncture" (LUHMANN 1994: 47)[14] between consciousness and communication that serves as a catalyst for each system to use the operations of the other for its own development. Language can captivate consciousness in such a way as to totally absorb the latter: "And in the same way, linguistic communication can captivate the consciousness participating in it in such a way as to allow communication to move freely without having to repeatedly reassure itself of whether people are paying attention and taking note of what is being said" (LUHMANN 1994: 47).[15] Luhmann refers to reading as an example of this: "Whoever reads is practically inhibited thereby and simply has to stop reading whenever he becomes tired. While speaking or listening, writing or reading, one's

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[14] "Nahtstelle" (LUHMANN 1994: 47)

[15] "Und ebenso kann die sprachliche Kommunikation das teilnehmende Bewusstsein derart fesseln, dass die Kommunikation sich frei bewegen kann, ohne sich ständig thematisch zu vergewissern, ob die Leute noch aufpassen und sich merken, was gesagt wird" (LUHMANN 1994: 47).

own thoeght is to a large extent disengaged, otherwise one loses track" (LUHMANN 1994: 49).[16]

In reading a book, one is (ideally) so absorbed therein that he/she blocks out his/her own thoughts, which would otherwise interfere with the participation in the communicative process of reading. Consciousness is then so preoccupied with language that one's thoughts and ideas are fixated only on the communicative event. The elements of communication – information, utterance, and understanding – must be synthesized to facilitate further connecting communications. The thoughts of readers play no determining role here, because consciousness, which selects one way or the other, is not deciding about communication. Communication itself is deciding. Nonetheless, consciousness plays a necessary role in the communicative process, which would not be possible at all without it.

Consciousness's constitutive share in communication arises from perception. Perception is a "special competency of consciousness" (LUHMANN 2000: 17)[17] and is a non-communicative event of consciousness. Without perception, nothing can be conveyed as having been perceived, which implies that communication depends on perception. Language can stimulate and irritate consciousness, by making "conspicuous objects of perception" (LUHMANN 1993: 48)[18] available. The objects of perception that can irritate consciousness are words that meet special criteria: "They may not present any similarity to other perceivable objects (sounds, images, etc.); for that would cause them to continually seep back into the world of perception and disappear therein" (LUHMANN 1994: 48).[19] Words must be specifically constituted so as to not be reduced back into the world of perception. This also means that their characteristics must be constantly preserved so that they are always utilizable. Only

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[16] "Wer überhaupt liest, ist dadurch praktisch blockiert und muss, wenn er müde wird, eben aufhören zu lesen. Beim Reden wie beim Zuhören, beim Schreiben wie beim Lesen ist das eigene Denken weitgehend ausgeschaltet, sonst verliert man den Faden" (LUHMANN 1994: 49).

[17] "Spezialkompetenz des Bewusstseins" (LUHMANN 1997: 17)

[18] "auffällige Wahrnehmungsgegenstände" (LUHMANN 1993: 48)

[19] "Sie dürfen keinerlei Ähnlichkeit mit sonst wahrnehmbaren Gegenständen (Geräuschen, Bildern etc.) aufweisen; denn das würde bewirken, dass sie ständig in die Wahrnehmungswelt wieder einsickern und verloren gehen" (LUHMANN 1994: 48).

through the regularities implied by words is it possible for consciousness to irritate communication in such a way that generates communication that is more complex and more differentiated than is possible through gestures, for example. Only once these preconditions are met can one understand how linguistic communication can attract the attention of consciousness: "Consciousness can therefore hardly withdraw itself from a communication in progress. At most, it can, while listening, entertain extravagances or attempt to irritate [communication] with its own contributions" (LUHMANN 1994: 48).[20]

Words must meet further criteria: "The perceivable artefacts of language must not only captivate, they must also trigger imagination in controllable ways" (LUHMANN 1994: 49).[21] Here, Luhmann is developing suggestions from psycholinguistics to substantiate his thesis about language's forms: words are based on prototypes that have settled within consciousness over the course of evolution. Every word can trigger an association on the basis of which the imagination circles around an identical semantic field and words are thereby stamped with "typicality" and distinguish themselves through characteristics. Hence, for systems-theory, language serves as a catalyst for consciousness to process certain thoughts or ideas according to the regularities which govern language-use.

On the other hand, language can also captivate communication. As mentioned above, language can optimize communication by allowing it to draw on an extensive capacity for making distinctions.

> [Language] has the peculiar ability to practically compel a distinction between utterance and information, for whenever one uses language, one can […] not easily deny an intent to communicate; and at the same time,

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[20] "Das Bewusstsein kann sich deshalb einer laufenden Kommunikation kaum entziehen. Es kann sie allenfalls beim Zuhören mit einigen Extravaganzen umspielen oder mit eigenen Beiträgen zu reizen versuchen"(LUHMANN 1994: 48).

[21] "Die wahrnehmbaren Sprachartefakte müssen nicht nur faszinieren, sie müssen auch auf eine noch kontrollierbare Weise Imagination anregen können" (LUHMANN 1994: 49).

whatever one has spoken about can become the topic of further communication" (LUHMANN 1994: 47).[22]

Luhmann's formulation of "communicative intent" is problematic in that it recalls a model of speakers that is informed by an aesthetic of reception and based on intersubjectivity. But the decisive aspect here is the notion that language can render communication more precise. Communicative intent need not be understood in terms of intentionality, but rather as a selective event that fosters the communicative process. A linguistic expression is more complex and contains more information than, for example, a gesture. The function of language can be further concretized in terms of the metaphor of a magnet. Language can attract the attention of consciousness like a magnetic needle. This creates space for communication, which gains independence from consciousness at the other pole. The reverse of this is also the case: language can serve as a catalyst for communication in such a way as to grant consciousness more independence. Whenever language attracts the attention of consciousness, communication can gain more freedom, that is, it gains a potential of possibilities to increase or reduce its own possibilities. Freedom must be understood here in the context of the theory of observation: freedom, or rather independence, makes it possible for the psychic and social systems to carry on with their own selections in a more "undisturbed" manner. Whenever consciousness is captivated by communication, communication can determine its possibilities in its own way.

3. Language as a Relationship between Medium and Form

Although systems can distance themselves and achieve momentary independence from one another through language, social and psychic systems remain bound to one

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[22] "Sie [die Sprache] hat dafür die Eigentümlichkeit, eine Unterscheidung von Mitteilung und Information praktisch zu erzwingen, denn wenn man Sprache benutzt, kann man [...] eine kommunikative Absicht nicht gut leugnen; und zugleich kann es Gegenstand weiterer Kommunikationen werden, worüber man gesprochen hat" (LUHMANN 1994: 47).

another in a relationship of dependence. Language controls and governs this relationship by structurally coupling consciousness and communication with one another. How can language allow psychic and social systems to interpenetrate one another? Luhmann makes the following suggestion here: "One can prepare the way for an answer to this question with the help of distinguishing between medium and form" (LUHMANN 1994: 53).[23] The definition of language as a medium constitutes the precondition for the structural coupling of language and consciousness. The relationship between medium and form subverts traditional philosophical distinctions of substance and accidence: "The distinction [between medium and form] is meant to replace the distinction substance/accidence, or objects/properties" (LUHMANN 1994: 53)[24]. Luhmann presents a very open way of grasping what a medium can be: "Medium in this sense is every loosely coupled relation of elements that is disposed to being formed" (LUHMANN 1994: 53).[25] A medium does not embody a material substance, which can assume different forms, rather medium describes formed possibilities that make forms possible. To take a concrete example: air and light serve as media of perception. A medium is not to be conceived as an independent unity, but rather in relationship to form. Further, the relationship to form represents no closed or harmonic unity.[26] A medium must be grasped as a difference of the form: "In addition to that, while being bound by form, the medium must be preserved as a medium even as it is 'deformed' by the form" (LUHMANN 1994: 53).[27]

While a medium is a conglomeration of unformed and unordered elements, these elements can be identified. To that extent, every medium is simultaneously a

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[23] "Eine Antwort auf diese Frage kann mit Hilfe der Unterscheidung von Medium und Form vorbereitet werden" (LUHMANN 1994: 53).

[24] "Die Unterscheidung Medium/Form dient dazu, die Unterscheidung Substanz/Akzidenz oder Ding/Eigenschaft zu ersetzen" (LUHMANN 1994: 102).

[25] "Medium in diesem Sinne ist jeder lose gekoppelte Zusammenhang von Elementen, der für Formung verfügbar ist" (LUHMANN 1994: 53).

[26] For more on the relation between medium and form, see GUMBRECHT (1996).

[27] "Es muss außerdem in der Bindung durch Form als Medium erhalten bleiben, wenngleich es durch die Form gewissermaßen „deformiert" wird" (LUHMANN 1994: 53).

form. The medium can be formed through its "graininess" (LUHMANN: 1994, 53)[28] and "viscosity" (LUHMANN 1994: 53)[29], in that it can combine and relate the forms already inherent to itself anew. Traditionally, form is usually seen as an ordered relationship and a unity of elements. But the systems-theoretical concept of form is quite different from this. Form is always regarded here as a relationship with two sides: it is the unity of the difference between them. The one side of the form brings forth a temporary state of elements, which is created through a distinction. This actualization always remains linked to the side of the form that is not marked. No matter what is distinguished and marked, that which is not distinguished and marked is preserved on the other side of the given distinction. That which is distinguished only obtains meaning in relation to the other potentiality not actualized.

To what extent can one understand language as a medium in this way? Language is not a medium in terms of the "physical quality of its signs nor in the conscious states of its speakers and listeners, readers and writers" (LUHMANN 1994: 54).[30] As a medium, language is neither a conglomeration of signs or thoughts, which can be articulated as words and sentences, nor can it be understood as a signifying system. The medial aspects of language consist in the autopoiesis of communication, for which the structural coupling of communication and consciousness is the preconditon.

> [Language] has its basis far more in the following: that the numerous structurally determined systems of consciousness are operatively closed and thus operate with regard to one another only in accidental, occasional, and loosely coupled ways. The operatively necessary separation amidst possible congruence, primarily of perceiving, offers the possibility for constituting language as a medium and, in this medium, constituting self-generated forms, namely sentences. (LUHMANN 1994: 54)[31]

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[28] "Körnigkeit" (LUHMANN 1994: 53)

[29] "Viskosität" (LUHMANN 1994: 53)

[30] "physischen Eigenschaft ihrer Zeichen noch in den Bewusstseinszuständen der Hörer und Sprecher oder Leser und Schreiber" (LUHMANN 1994: 54).

[31] "Sie (die Sprache) hat ihre Grundlage vielmehr darin, dass eine Vielzahl von strukturdeterminierten Bewusstseinssystemen jeweils operativ geschlossen und daher im Verhältnis zueinander nur akzidentiell, nur okkasionell, nur lose gekoppelt operiert. Die operativ notwendige Trennung bei möglicher Kongruenz, vor allem des Wahrnehmens, bietet die Möglichkeit, Sprache als Medium zu

In reading this passage one must grow accustomed to Luhmann's paradoxical style of argumentation. The initial question concerns the extent to which language makes structural coupling possible. The answer that Luhmann provides is that the interpenetration of communication and consciousness is made possible through the structural coupling of communication and consciousness. While this argument sounds tautological—something is the case because it is the case—it is nonetheless argumentatively relevant in the context of systems-theory. Communication and consciousness presuppose themselves, even though they cannot presuppose themselves. To put it differently, the systems are what they are only because they are, in the sense of the theory of observation, different from that which they do not represent.

The medial aspects of language rest on the loose coupling of the systems of consciousness and communication. As a loosely coupled relation of elements, i.e. words, language can allow forms to be generated, that is, sentences to be formed. This does not only have a "binding effect" (LUHMANN 1994: 55)[32] on the psychic and communicative systems. It also allows the two systems to constitute themselves vis-à-vis one another. By means of providing for the structural coupling, language places the two systems in a constitutive relationship. Language contributes to the differentiation of the psychic and communicative systems by allowing boundaries to be established that are constitutive of the systems: "It is through language that the constitution of consciousness and the constitution of society are possible in the first place" (LUHMANN 1994: 47).[33] It is not that language marks a boundary between language and non-language, "but rather a multitude of systemic boundaries according

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konstituieren und in diesem Medium dann selbstgenerierte Formen, nämlich Sätze zu bilden" (LUHMANN 1994: 54).

[32] "Bindungseffekt" (LUHMANN 1994: 55)

[33] "Über Sprache wird Bewusstseinsbildung und Gesellschaftsbildung überhaupt erst möglich" (LUHMANN 1994: 47).

to whatever works for communication or consciousness respectively" (LUHMANN 1994: 51)[34]

For example, two taxis colliding into each other on the street can irritate a perceiving psychic system. The psychic system carries out a selective perception: it sees the accident. When, later, the psychic system tells another psychic system about the accident, the one gives the other selective information: "Two taxis collided into each other on the street." The other psychic system is irritated by the information uttered. It makes a claim on his consciousness. "Ideally," this consciousness understands that two taxis have collided. Only at this moment does communication take place upon the participation of consciousness in the medium of language. Language takes part in both systems and has served as a catalyst to each, without changing anything with regard to the difference between the two systems.

As a medium, language embodies a "non-system" that generates systemic constructions. To what extent can one describe its reality in such terms? The reality of language no longer rests on a model of substance that inquires into the "essence," the "what" of the phenomenon. Systems-theory prohibits such an approach to questions about substance. Furthermore, language does not consist of a conglomeration of signs: "Nor do we follow the semiotic theory of language. Language is not a system of signs for non-linguistic relations of things" (LUHMANN 1994: 51).[35] With that, Luhmann criticizes the conception of linguistics in that he does not allow for words and sentences to be understood in terms of their use as signs that are constitutive of linguistic communication. Words and sentences can indeed function as signs, but they are not the material of linguistic communication. The reality of language rather consists in its use: "It is completely sufficient to state that language exists concretely in its use as language and by extension in its being observed as language by an

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[34] "sondern eine Vielheit von Systemgrenzen je nachdem, was kommunikativ und bewusstseinsmäßig gelingt" (LUHMANN 1994: 51).

[35] "Ebenso wenig folgen wir der semiotischen Sprachtheorie. Sprache ist kein System von Zeichen für aussersprachliche Sachverhalte" (LUHMANN 1994: 51).

observer" (LUHMANN 1994: 52).[36] Its reality thus consists in its being able to be observed and not in its function to represent something that is independent thereof. It is the capacity of language to distinguish which observation describes its reality and in this way it defers to consciousness. It is indeed possible that language irritates consciousness by making conspicuous claims on it, but language does not possess any conscious-like qualities. Systems-theory's separation of consciousness and language renders numerous other theories, which deal with the connections between the constitution of the subject, cognition, language and understanding, vulnerable to criticism.[37]

4. Problems and open questions about Luhmann's conception of language

Further reflection on Luhmann's separation of language and consciousness reveals problems with his argument: he describes perception as a function of the psychic system. By means of perception, consciousness can perceive things in its environment, whereby these appear to consciousness as immediately given. In fact, however, consciousness relies on the brain's own complexity, which construes an image of the external world for consciousness in its own way: "The brain represses, if you will, its own work in order to make the world appear as a world" (LUHMANN 2000: 6).[38] Perception is a procedure by which consciousness demarcates forms in respective media with the help of the brain's performance. For example, consciousness can translate the perceived taxi, referred to above, into the medium of language, whereby perception, as a function of consciousness, and language remain separate unities. How

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[36] "Es genügt vollauf, zu sagen, dass die Sprache in ihrer Benutzung als Sprache und sodann in ihrer Beobachtung von Sprache durch einen Beobachter konkret existiert" (LUHMANN 1994: 52).

[37] This would apply to psychoanalytic theories for example, such as Lacan's, which are based on the linguistic characteristics of consciousness.

[38] "Das Gehirn unterdrückt, wenn man so sagen darf, seine Eigenleistung, um Welt als Welt erscheinen zu lassen" (LUHMANN 1997: 15).

then does Luhmann, after having expounded on the matter in this way, arrive at the following assumption: "The extent to which perception is prestructured by language is equally well known" (LUHMANN 2000: 6).[39] How can he logically justify this statement, after having advanced the claim that language can only be coupled to consciousness, and by extension, to perception? If perception is linguistically pre-structured, is he not thereby suggesting that consciousness is language-like, or has a linguistic character? But this model Luhmann criticizes by defining language as a function of communication. If language can structure perception, then he is situating language within the cognitive apparatus of the human being. The word "structured" creates the impression that language cannot only connect to consciousness, but rather that language itself is a disposition of consciousness. Even if one reads "structures" in terms of structural coupling, ambiguities remain.

Structural coupling, according to Luhmann, describes a procedure in which systems can connect to non-systems and the environments of systems through a medium. If language and consciousness are respective environments of each other, to what extent can one environment structure the other? Language can indeed irritate consciousness, but it cannot change anything about the latter's structure. Is the claim about perception's being structured by language one of the paradoxes Luhmann builds into his argumentative procedure or is there a lack of precision in the separation of language and consciousness? At this point of Luhman's argumentation, a more precise explanation as to how to conceive of the relationship between pre-structuration and structuration is lacking. In my view, the lack of clarity here points to a more fundamental problem of systems-theory: this is the rigid separation of language and consciousness itself. If one follows Luhmann's argument about the difference between language and consciousness, language can in no way emerge within consciousness.

Luhmann does not undertake any attempt to examine the cognitive conditions through which language may originate: "We presuppose language as given"

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[39] "Ebenso ist bekannt, wie stark Wahrnehmung durch Sprache vorstrukturiert wird" (LUHMANN 1997: 15).

(LUHMANN 2000: 16).[40] To this point, he adds a footnote: "We are not investigating, in Kantian fashion, the conditions of possibility for language, nor are we conducting a Darwinian inquiry into the evolution of language" (LUHMANN 2000: 323).[41] In his writings, Luhmann works purposefully on perception, consciousness and communication, with an emphasis on reconstructing the relation between the subject and society.

Yet, because language is subject to cognitive evolution, an account of which is crucial to understanding the phenomenon of language, the omission of questions as to the conditions of language's origination remains problematic. In his discussion of language, Luhmann only refers to the question of social evolution. But an analysis of language cannot do without an explanation of its cognitive evolution. It is not a matter of returning to questions that are caught up in the philosophy of the subject, but rather the need to connect an analysis of language to cognitive processes. What disadvantages would systems-theory incur by treating language in conjunction with cognitive evolution? Luhmann primarily focuses on the phenomenon of social evolution with regard to language, whereby his view of society's development departs significantly from traditional models of evolution. In systems-theory, evolution is understood to presuppose itself in that the development of autopoietic systems rests on their self-selective decoupling from their environments. With that, Luhmann distances himself from mutation as a basic principle of evolutionary theory. The basis for evolution no longer consists in unexpected events, since only contingent events occur within the environment of a system. In systems-theory, evolution depends on whether a system allows itself to be irritated by an event to such an extent that the system is structurally transformed.

> The theory of evolution deploys a specific distinction, namely, the distinction
> between variety, selection, and restabilization. This line of questioning does

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[40] "Das Entstandensein von Sprache setzen wir voraus" (LUHMANN 1997: 31).

[41] "Wir fragen also nicht im Stile Kants nach den Bedingungen ihrer Möglichkeit; und auch nicht im Stile Darwins nach ihrer Evolution" (LUHMANN 1997: 31).

not focus on a process, nor does it attempt to explain in a historical or causal manner why things happen the way they do (LUHMANN 2000: 211).[42]

Evolution is an event in which autopoietic systems perceive events in their environments that appear arbitrary and new. Luhmann describes this moment as variation. Variations can serve as catalysts for the system to transform itself structurally or rather to make so-called selections, which prove or do not prove capable of stabilizing themselves. Evolution does not thereby describe a development that is teleologically driven. On the contrary, it proceeds erratically. Why does systems-theory not attempt to address the phenomenon of the cognitive development of language according to its own concept of evolution? Instead, language is treated only as an epiphenomenon of the evolution of society, without addressing its evolution in the context of its cognitive capacities and the question of consciousness. The role of language in society and its social evolution is only important to Luhmann with regard to the development of the media technologies of modern society. Written language presents an increase in the complexity of language, because it is supported by optic and acoustic perception, which can lead to a further differentiation of communication. Written language can also facilitate writing and reading which likewise optimize the possibilities of communication. Written language also increases the possibilities of linguistic communication by making communication possible in the absence of communicative partners. In printed language, above all, in the form of books, the possibilities of communication are significantly improved. Through the societal development of print media, communication gains more freedom from spatial, temporal and also social conditions.

But to what extent does language, in addition to its role in the evolutionary processes of society, participate in the evolution of consciousness and the cognitive

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[42] "Die Evolutionstheorie benutzt eine spezifische Art von Unterscheidung, nämlich die Unterscheidung von Variation, Selektion und Restabilisierung. Die Fragestellung zielt nicht auf einen Prozess, sie versucht erst recht nicht, geschichtlich oder gar kausal zu erklären, weshalb es so gekommen ist, wie es gekommen ist" (LUHMANN 1997: 345).

system? How, from a systems-theoretical view, does language emerge? Again, the point here is not to reintroduce a line of questioning from the philosophy of the subject, but rather to develop a stronger account of the cognitive dimensions of language. In systems-theory, language has the character of a technical invention. What disadvantages would systems-theory incur by situating language and the conditions of its origination more within the realm of cognition? By reformulating the question of language in terms of communication, Luhmann creates a restricted view of language. The danger here is that he overemphasizes the category of the social in analogy to the tradition that placed consciousness at the center of social life. The concept of communication in systems-theory threatens to work against its own polycentric demand by allowing communication to take the place of the center. There is a self-observation missing here, in lieu of which the theory's tendency to overdetermining the category of the social is accentuated.

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