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# A Systems Theoretical Perspective on Communication

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**Abstract** This essay asserts that it is impossible to understand any communicative utterance outside the context in which it is uttered. Within this context, I expound a conception of communication based on ideas in information theory and on Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, which provides a theoretical foundation for the context dependency of utterances. At the same time, I introduce readers to Luhmann's version of systems theory, which is becoming more and more influential in German literary theory. The view of communication expounded here implies that as all meaning is founded on difference, an utterance can acquire meaning only by differing from other utterances, that is, by negating other positions. Therefore, the context is always part of the utterance; it enters, so to speak, into the utterance. At issue here is a specific type of context, a specific axis of difference, correlated with the utterance in a particular way. I try to show exactly how this specific conceptualization of the relation between meaning and context, between communication and difference, is to be understood. First, I discuss the systems theoretical concept of communication and illustrate it with several examples taken largely from political and literary communication. Next, I address the way this concept of communication and difference diverges from (post)structuralist theories, to which it might seem to bear some resemblance. Finally, I examine the difficult question of the relationship between communicative utterances, contexts, and their place within social systems, focusing especially on Luhmann's conceptualization of the art system.

The first thing the pope asked on his arrival in Chicago was, "Where are the prostitutes in this city? I want to visit them first." A rather surprising question in view of his vow of chastity, one would think. However, the

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pope's conduct was by no means reprehensible, because he had come to Chicago specifically to discuss the problems of various marginal groups and to give these groups spiritual guidance.

This slightly irreverent start takes us right to the central argument of this article: that it is impossible to understand any communicative utterance outside the context in which it is uttered. Of course, in its general form this proposition is no more than a truism. What I propose to do in this article, then, is to expound a conception of communication based on ideas in information theory and on Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, which provides a theoretical foundation for the context dependency of utterances. Additionally, the article is meant to acquaint an English-speaking audience with Luhmann's version of systems theory, which is becoming more and more influential in German literary theory.<sup>1</sup>

The view of communication propounded here suggests that an utterance can acquire meaning only by differing from other utterances. All meaning is founded on difference. A communicative utterance builds up its meaning by negating other positions within its context. Therefore, the context is always part of the utterance; it enters, so to speak, into the utterance.

What is at issue here is a specific type of context, a specific axis of difference, correlated with the utterance in a specific way. It is the aim of this article to show exactly how this specific conceptualization of the relation between meaning and context, between communication and difference, is to be understood. First, I elaborate and discuss the systems theoretical concept of communication, illustrating it with several examples, most of them taken from political and literary communication (sections 1–3). Next, I discuss the way this concept of communication and difference differs from (post)structuralist theories, to which it might seem to bear some resemblance (section 4). Finally, I examine the difficult question of the relationship between communicative utterances, contexts, and their place within social systems. Special attention is paid to Luhmann's conceptualization of the art system (section 5).

### 1. Saddam Hussein and Other Problems

Before turning to communication theory, let us take a look at another, more serious example of context dependency. It concerns the talk on July 25, 1990, between Saddam Hussein and April Glaspie, U.S. ambassador to Iraq. During this meeting, the dispute between Iraq and Kuwait was discussed; Saddam Hussein defended his demands regarding Kuwait and made it clear that a conflict could not be ruled out if these demands

1. Along with a general trend toward the application of systems theoretical ideas in literary studies; see, to name only one example, Even-Zohar 1990.

were not met. But Saddam also said that he did not want war and hinted that a solution within an Arab framework was likely to be reached. Ambassador Glaspie left the meeting convinced that Saddam would not start a war. A week later, the Iraqi army invaded Kuwait.

After the outbreak of the war, Glaspie came in for a good deal of criticism for having failed both to notice Saddam's bellicose intentions and to make it clear that the United States would not accept an invasion of Kuwait. According to a transcript of the session, Glaspie had said, "We have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait,"<sup>2</sup> and it was on these words that the criticism focused. What was lacking in these critical remarks, however, was the context or setting in which this utterance was made;<sup>3</sup> and this context shows that it was aimed in a very specific direction. For what was thematized at that particular moment in the session was Saddam Hussein's suggestion *that the U.S. should support his legitimate claims and force Kuwait to pay Iraq* (Glaspie 1991).<sup>4</sup> Thus Glaspie's utterance was not meant to mean, "You can do whatever you like with Kuwait and its borders," but rather, "We are not going to help you against Kuwait."

In order to grasp the meaning of the ambassador's words, it is necessary to see what theme they were meant to contribute to. Or to put it more generally, the utterance can be correctly understood only by taking into account the background of other utterances against which it acquires its semantic profile. As R. G. Collingwood (1970 [1939]: 31) put it: "You cannot find out what a man means by simply studying his spoken or written statements, even though he has spoken or written with perfect command of language and perfectly truthful intention. In order to find out his meaning you must also know what the question was . . . to which the thing he has said or written was meant as an answer." One will therefore mistake the meaning of a word, a phrase, or a discussion if one neglects to consider what it is a reaction to. Meaning, Collingwood convincingly argues, belongs not to utterances in their own right, utterances by themselves, but only to utterances as the answers to questions strictly correlative to themselves. Thus the comprehension of an utterance implies the grasping of the question it was meant to answer. It is this "logic

2. The transcript was made by the Iraqis, and although the State Department (and Glaspie) claimed that it was incomplete, its authenticity has not been challenged.

3. This context is also conspicuously absent from works on the Gulf War. For example, Gresh and Vidal (1991: 200–201), after quoting Glaspie's phrase, speak of "cet apparent 'feu vert' américain" [this apparent American "green light"]. See also Bulloch and Morris 1991: 9–14; Darwish and Alexander 1991: 52, 62, 230–31, 267–73; and Miller and Mylroie 1990: 18–19. My account is based on these works, on Glaspie 1991, and on the newspaper article mentioned in note 4.

4. Despite her self-defense, criticism continued, and Glaspie retired early (*NRC Handelsblad*, April 26, 1991).

of question and answer,” as Collingwood terms it, that constitutes the basic principle according to which all texts function.<sup>5</sup>

It is surprising that this principle, which in itself seems logical enough, should be so widely neglected in the analysis of texts. This is especially true of text-immanent literary theories such as New Criticism and hermeneutics<sup>6</sup> but also of the study of the history of ideas, in which political or philosophical texts are usually treated as reactions to a few “perennial” problems. As a result, the different and temporally unique questions they were intended<sup>7</sup> to answer (and from the answering of which they derive their meanings) are overlooked. This principle of question and answer also goes unnoticed in many analyses of spoken speech, as in the Glaspie example. Even in a court of law, a suspect’s utterances before the police are normally construed as statements and treated without reference to the questions to which they are answers.<sup>8</sup> They are taken as meaningful *per se*. Consequently, nowhere does context enter into the story.

Now, one might object that what I was dealing with in the discussion between Glaspie and Saddam was not so much context as cotext. But such an objection does not hold, because in the approach advocated here, a distinction between context and cotext would be pointless. For I maintain that an utterance cannot be meaningful by itself; it needs a background, or foil, from which it can acquire semantic relief. So it is not simply a question of what else was said (cotext), or of the attending circumstances, or of a combination of the two. My argument is, rather, (1) that the crucial question is, what is the point of the utterance? (2) that this point can be grasped only via reference to the complex of other utterances to which this particular utterance is a reaction; and (3) that this is so because the set of utterances necessarily supports or carries the meaning of this particular utterance.

As in the Glaspie example, it is sometimes clear from the immediately surrounding conversation what constitutes the background to which a communicative utterance reacts and which allows this utterance to be situated. But this need not be so. Take, for example, a statement by the leader of the Dutch Liberals: “Personally I would very much like to see a coalition with the Christian Democrats.” Here the background (context) was a Liberal party conference a few days earlier, where it was explicitly agreed that a coalition with Labour should not be ruled out. Unfortu-

5. I use the word *text(ual)* to refer both to written and to spoken speech.

6. In Gadamer’s hermeneutics, the relation between question and answer is actually reversed. Whereas Collingwood views every text as the answer to a given, empirically discoverable question, Gadamer (1965 [1960]: 351–60) posits an ongoing dialectics between question and answer, to the effect that during different historical periods the text presents itself as answering different questions.

7. For the concept of intention see section 2.

8. This is so in the Netherlands, at least.

nately for the Liberals, this gave the impression that they were aiming at a Liberal-Labour government. Seen against this background, the utterance quoted was not meant to mean, “I will do my best to bring about a coalition with the Christian Democrats”; rather, it was aimed at keeping all options open. Here the foil is not provided by the immediately surrounding conversation (whatever else was said during the interview). It is, however, imperative that the background that allows the utterance to mean something be contemporaneous with it. The following theoretical exposé will show why this is so.

## 2. What Is Communication, and What Difference Does It Make?

Recent developments in information theory and systems theory, as represented chiefly by the work of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, both support the thesis outlined above and make it more specific. The best point at which to break into Luhmann’s theory of communication is his concept of *Sinn*.<sup>9</sup> *Sinn*, “meaning,” as the way human experiencing and acting are organized, allows human beings and social systems to create and structure their world.<sup>10</sup>

Ordinary understanding usually links meaning with an objectively existing world in which there are entities that, by fulfilling certain functions or serving certain purposes, seem to be meaningful by themselves. Luhmann takes a different stance. His starting point is the abundance of possible experiences and actions (see Luhmann 1971a). In order for something to be actually done or experienced, this surplus of possibilities, this complexity, must be reduced by meaningful methods of selection (*sinnhafte Selektionsverfahren*). This, however, does not imply that the possibilities that are not realized are eliminated. On the contrary, meaning works in such a way as to preserve the possibilities that have, for the moment, been excluded, that is, to preserve them in the form of a horizon of possible alternatives (*Horizont von Möglichkeitsanzeigen*). So each selected possibility might have been different; selection is always contingent. (I use the word *contingent* in the sense of something being neither impossible nor necessary, but coincidental; it is used not aleatorically but in the sense that a different possibility might have been realized.) To put it differently, each selection constitutes its own horizon. Meaningful selections are selections from a set of possibilities that is constituted as

9. The following account is based on Bateson 1985 [1972]; Hoogveen and Würzner 1986; Luhmann 1971a, 1971b, 1984, 1986a, 1986b, 1987, 1990; Ruesch and Bateson 1985 [1951]: 191–241; and Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson 1967. See also de Berg 1991, 1992, 1993. Here I will discuss the concept of communication only; in section 5 Luhmann’s systems theory will be envisaged as a whole.

10. The translation of *Sinn* by “meaning” and of *sinnhaft* by “meaningful” is problematic, but I do not know a better one. *Sinn* as used here has in any case nothing to do with “sense,” as distinct from “reference” (as in the Fregean tradition).

such by these very selections. Thus, a selection is meaningful only against a background (horizon) of other, excluded possibilities, a background that has no existence per se (ontologically) but originates in the process of selection itself. A selection's meaning is based on its difference from the specific other possibilities it excludes.

Communication is conceptualized by Luhmann as the processing of selections, differences. All communications consist of three selections: information (*Information*), the way it is put (*Mitteilung*), and understanding (*Verstehen*). Unfortunately, Luhmann does not explain his model of communication very clearly, but I think it can best be interpreted in the following way.<sup>11</sup> Information is the content of communication; it is equivalent to what Gregory Bateson (1985 [1972]) has called the report aspect, the data of communication (see also Ruesch and Bateson 1985 [1951]: 191–241). It comes about by selection; the speaker differentiates something in the world around him from something else. *Mitteilung*, the selected way of putting it, is equivalent to Bateson's command aspect; it refers to the kind of message the utterance is to be taken as "and, therefore, ultimately to the *relationship* between the communicants" (Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson 1967: 52). In other words, it bears upon the question of why the utterance is worth uttering. It is essential to realize that Luhmann conceptualizes these two aspects of the communication as selections. Thus, the report aspect or *Information* does not exist outside, or prior to, the communication (it is not a fixed entity "out there," which is then communicated); nor can it be reduced to the traditional philosophical concept of "propositional content," because it does not exist *ex positivo*.<sup>12</sup>

Every communicative utterance has the two aspects I have mentioned. But a communicative utterance does not in itself constitute communication. For communication to take place, a third element is needed: understanding. Both *Information* and *Mitteilung* require meaningful (*sinnhafte*) comprehension, which means above all that the difference between *Information* and *Mitteilung* should be grasped. Communication emerges when the information content and the reason why the utterance has been uttered are distinguished, told apart. Communication requires that the difference be apprehended between what the utterance is about and what its speaker has intended to communicate by uttering the utterance, that is, what sort of message he wants his message to be.

In summary, then, all communication is the processing of selection. But this selection is not a choosing from a determinate stock of fixed entities. The selection actualized in communication constitutes its own

11. The best exposition is Luhmann 1986a; his theory of communication is also expounded in Luhmann 1984: 191–241 and Luhmann 1987.

12. I will come back to this point in my critique of Derrida's critical engagement with Austin's theory (section 4).

horizon. The information is not an objective entity “out there”; it is, literally, not something that goes without saying. A special decision is needed to express it, to put it into words (*Mitteilung*). Communication constitutes the content it chooses as a selection, something distinct from something else. Thus a communicative utterance selects something from its context, that is, from the context actualized during and by this very selection; in doing so, it excludes or negates other possibilities that are also part of this context. So it is solely by way of selection that an utterance becomes meaningful, and it is solely by taking into account the excluded possibilities that the utterance can be correctly understood. The underlying principle of all communication, then, is negation.

In order to avoid misunderstanding, I want to qualify the ideas presented above in two respects. First of all, intention as used here should not be understood as an internal, psychological process, as the speaker’s state of mind. It has nothing to do with the subjective *mens auctoris* but bears on the question of what an utterance is aimed at, what its point is. One understands the intention of an utterance if, say, one can correctly identify it as a warning, or as a recommendation, or as an attack on a certain argument. And this understanding does not presuppose any congenial insight into the speaker’s mind or an in-depth psychological exploration of his mental state.<sup>13</sup> That there is nothing unusual in this antipsychological definition of intention is clear from the analogous conception in jurisdiction, where one can speak of the intention of a law even though it has different *auctores intellectuales* (with, of course, different mental states; see Drion 1990).

Second, something needs to be said about the relation between Luhmann’s triadic model of communication and J. L. Austin’s (1975 [1962]) speech-act theory. The many interpretations of Austin can be divided into two broad categories: those that consider the meaning of speech acts to be dependent on rules and conventions, and therefore view speech acts as classifiable, and those that consider meanings to be linked with nonrecurrent, nonformalizable, pragmatic contexts.<sup>14</sup>

13. An examination of the controversy surrounding the intentionalist conception of interpretation falls outside the scope of this essay. For an overview of the long and hot debate on intention in literary studies, triggered by Wimsatt and Beardsley’s (1946) essay on the intentional fallacy, see Danneberg and Müller 1983.

14. Cf. Fish (1989: 67): *How to Do Things with Words* “has given rise to two versions of speech-act theory, one committed to reabsorbing illocutionary force into a formal theory of the Chomsky type (here representative figures are John Ross, Jerrold Katz, and Jerrold Saddock) and the other committed to making illocutionary force a function of pragmatic—that is, unformalizable—circumstances (here one might cite the work of H. P. Grice and Mary Pratt). In a third version, represented at times by Searle and more recently by Kent Bach and Robert Harnisch, there is an attempt to reconcile the formal and the pragmatic, but this usually involves granting them an independence that the pragmatic view, if taken seriously, inherently destabilizes.”



With the first category Luhmann's model has little in common. This version of speech-act theory treats locution and illocution as relatively separate, independent entities. Its adherents maintain that every utterance has a fixed, delimited meaning, the locution, which in different contexts can assume different pragmatic roles (illocutionary functions), for example, as a warning, a threat, or a question. Which illocutionary function an utterance actually performs depends, it is argued, on the rules and conventions governing the social use of language that apply to the situation in which the utterance is uttered.

Seen from the perspective of systems theory, this conception is problematic in two ways. In the first place, it postulates the existence of non-pragmatic meanings; it assumes that every utterance has a context-free core of meaning, which can then be put to different uses. Moreover, by defining illocutionary force as the result of formalizable circumstances, this speech-act theory eliminates the pragmatic nature of the illocution as well. But it is precisely the pragmatic dimension of utterances that is at the heart of Luhmann's theory of communication. Indeed, according to Luhmann, language as a meaningful entity exists only as communication. Meaning, Luhmann maintains, cannot be accounted for by referring to rules, conventions, or other entities that precede the communicative act, but results from the process of communication. There are no context-free meanings; every utterance becomes meaningful only through a contingent difference, that is, a differential foil constituted during and by the communicative process itself. Thus, there is no *Information* outside communication, and, equally, there is no *Mitteilung* outside communication.

In other words, the version of speech-act theory I have been discussing asserts that the locution contains the meaning; it views meaning as independent of illocutionary force. Luhmann, by contrast, holds that although *Information* and *Mitteilung* can and should be distinguished, they cannot be isolated. Meaning is not contained in *Information* and does not exist independently of *Mitteilung*, but both *Information* and *Mitteilung* are constitutive of meaning. The meaning of an utterance can be understood only if the difference between *Information* and *Mitteilung* is grasped. And it is only through identifying the negated communicative possibilities, and so establishing what is the specific differential foil of the utterance concerned, that the difference between what the utterance is about (*Information*) and what sort of utterance it is meant to be (*Mitteilung*) can be apprehended (*Verstehen*).

There is another variety of speech-act theory that is much closer to Luhmann's ideas. It is based on a genuinely pragmatist interpretation of Austin's work and has found its most convincing expression in Fish's (1980c) "Normal Circumstances . . . and Other Special Cases." Its proponents do not reduce illocutionary force to something added to an

alleged contextless basic meaning. The meaning of a sign, they maintain, is not a combination of a fixed semantic core and a situationally determined emphasis or specification; it is determined by the pragmatic intention involved. And there can never not be a pragmatic intention, since utterances exist not in the abstract but only in concrete situations. This pragmatic intention, or illocutionary force, does not precede the actual utterances—it is not an “intention to do something”—nor is it determined by social or linguistic conventions; it should be conceived of as the “intention in doing something,” which is given only in and through the utterance. Therefore, as Fish (1980b: 88) puts it:

The string of words “I will come” may, in different circumstances, be a promise, a threat, a warning, a prediction; but it will always be one of these, and it will never be just a meaning unattached to a situation. . . . The various illocutionary lives led by “I will come” are not different handlings of the same meaning, they are different meanings. In speech-act theory, there is only one semantic level, not two; detached from its illocutionary force, a sentence is just a series of noises. Illocutionary force *is* meaning.

So in this version of speech-act theory, it is not just the use of the sentences that varies with differing pragmatic contexts, while their alleged basic meaning remains the same. A word, a sentence, or an utterance has no basic meaning but exists only in concrete situations, as an entity with a concrete pragmatic “direction.” An utterance is never not in a situation: it always has a specific illocutionary force. Thus, use *is* meaning, and another use *is* another meaning.

Clearly, there is a substantial area of agreement between this pragmatist reading of *How to Do Things with Words* and the systems theoretical conception of communication. Both consider meaning temporally unique, inseparably bound to a specific, unformalizable, pragmatic context. Both assert that for an utterance to be meaningful it must have a communicative content as well as a communicative direction, which, like the two sides of a sheet of paper, are necessarily different and yet cannot be separated. There is, however, an important divergence: Austin and his pragmatist followers neglect the selective nature of communication.<sup>15</sup> This is a fundamental point. It marks the difference between merely postulating that meaning depends on use and explaining why this is so. The pragmatist Austinians are unable to explain how use can constitute meaning. An individual consciousness cannot produce linguistic meaning (private languages do not exist), and intersubjective a priori's such as conventions are rejected by the pragmatists as possible explanations for meaning.

So what is left? This question cannot be answered within the framework of a theory of action (*Handlungstheorie*). It is precisely for this reason

15. This objection, of course, holds for the nonpragmatist reading of Austin as well.

that Luhmann departs from Austin and advocates not a theory of speech *acts* but a theory of *communication* based on the principle of selectivity. By taking as his fundamental point of reference not the acting individuals but the communicative process as a historically concrete selection, Luhmann can account for the occurrence of meaning without reverting to conventions or other nonpragmatic notions. The principle of selectivity—that is, the idea that each communication, through a negation of specific other communicative options, constitutes its own identity-creating difference—both supports and explains the pragmatist thesis that the meaning of an utterance is constituted by its use.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. Implications for the Study of Communication; or, Why Empty Expressions Are Not Empty

All this has important implications for the study of communication. Take the well-known conception of communication as a process of transmission according to rules. (This conception comes in several varieties, but for the sake of clarity I will stick to basics.) It presupposes an objectively existing and/or intersubjectively known determinate world, with physical and conceptual entities to which signs refer according to a set of conventions, a code. The code consists of a repertoire of signals and of rules for their use and is, though subject to change through time, basically fixed and stable. Correct understanding is a matter of decoding, that is, of correctly applying the code. However, in the light of the theoretical perspective presented above (sections 1–2), this idea will not hold. For it leaves out the fact that the semantic identity of a communicative utterance rests on the negation of temporally unique, contingent possibilities. *Sinn* is fundamentally unstable. Though communication would be impossible without some set of conventions, there can be no real stability and continuity. The meaning of a communicative utterance is not in its being the application of a code but in its being the historically concrete embodiment of a contingent selection.<sup>17</sup>

16. It is noteworthy that Austin considers the meaning of certain words to be dependent on contingent differences: “Next, ‘real’ is what we may call a *trouser-word*. It is usually thought, and I dare say usually rightly thought, that what one might call the affirmative use of a term is basic—that, to understand ‘*x*,’ we need to know what it is to be *x*, or to be an *x*, and that knowing this apprises us of what it is *not* to be *x*, not to be an *x*. But with ‘real’ . . . it is the *negative* use that wears the trousers. That is, a definite sense attaches to the assertion that something is real, a real such-and-such, only in the light of a specific way in which it might be, or might have been, *not* real. ‘A real duck’ differs from the simple ‘a duck’ only in that it is used to exclude various ways of being not a real duck—but a dummy, a toy, a picture, a decoy, &c.; and moreover I don’t know *just* how to take the assertion that it’s a real duck unless I know *just* what, on that particular occasion, the speaker has it in mind to exclude” (Austin 1979 [1962]: 70; see also 2–3, 15, 87–88, 180, 191–92, 284). From a systems theoretical point of view, all signs are “trouser-signs.”

17. Put simply, a communication can be in accordance with the prevailing (linguistic,

To illustrate this point, I want to explore the concept of the *Leerformel*, “empty expression,” as developed by the neopositivist Ernst Topitsch (1960).<sup>18</sup> According to Topitsch, such terms as *being*, *the absolute*, and *reason* (one could add *justice*, *freedom*, and so on) are no more than empty expressions that do not have a real cognitive or normative content. They are verbal façades that can be deployed ad libitum. Devoid of any intellectual meaning, they only evoke or stir feelings in the way a piece of music does and are therefore, Topitsch argues, compatible with any given moral and political position. They are no more than psychologically comforting props, self-affirmative eyewash, self-justifying tricks, and should be abandoned as being the atavistic remnants of a mythical, prescientific way of thinking.

In my opinion, a quite different and more useful insight into the *Leerformel* can be gained by giving up the neopositivist yardstick of scientific language, allegedly crystal-clear in itself, in favor of Luhmann’s model of communication. For if one takes Luhmann’s stance that an expression acquires meaning through the negation of a context, then empty expressions appear not to be devoid of meaning at all but are words with which very specific matters can be expressed in actual discourse. If someone uses these expressions in a concrete communicative situation, he differentiates himself from other positions, and through this negation a meaning is constituted. So via this “crossing out” of claims and despite their emptiness, in specific situations *Leerformeln* make it possible to make clear specific friend-foe dichotomies, attack specific standpoints, and defend specific views, in short, to take specific stances. And a concrete communicative situation will always be there, as the use of language, the uttering of utterances, never takes place in a vacuum but is always necessarily bound up with concrete pragmatic intentions. Empty expressions are therefore never empty but are meaningful on every occasion of use (though the meanings are different in different communicative situations).

This insight is relevant to the study of literature, too. Take the term *realism*. *Realism* has been claimed by such diverse movements as classicism, German poetic realism, modernism, and expressionism (see Jakobson 1988 [1921]). But the elusiveness of the concept, its “unmanageable elasticity” (Grant 1970: 1), disappears as soon as one focuses on the use of the term in communicative situations, that is, when one takes into account the different, temporally unique, oppositions the concept has in different situations. Thus, when Alfred Döblin claims *realism* for his ex-

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social) conventions or not be in accordance with them, and the former by no means needs to be the case for a communication to be meaningful. This objection to the concept of code also applies to the literary code; see, to name only one example, Fokkema 1985.

18. I borrow this example from Hoogeveen and Würzner 1986.

pressionist works, this is not strange, nor does it indicate a vagueness in his use of the term. For the differential foil to expressionist realism was a type of literature that in the tradition of nineteenth-century poetic realism aimed at universal truth, historical laws, and objective knowledge, which Döblin rejected as fictions without any correlate in reality (see Prangel 1986).<sup>19</sup>

There is no way in which content analysis or recourse to a code could elucidate the meaning of a *Leerformel*, or indeed of any other communicative utterance. Even an explicit taking into account of the context as attending circumstances would be insufficient. For if one were to explain an utterance in terms of the context in which it was uttered, one would neglect the fact that the utterance must acquire meaning *within* this context, which is possible only if the utterance differentiates itself from other possibilities in the context. There can be no organic relationship between utterance and context, because the utterance must acquire its own profile within whatever circumstances it is part of. So every utterance is context-dependent, but this context should be conceptualized as the contextual possibilities the utterance negates, as differential context.

This danger of explaining utterances in terms of their contexts is greater in the analysis of communication from the past. One all too easily falls into the error of explaining communicative utterances as integral parts of a historical period, or even by reference to a *zeitgeist*. However, if one takes the view that communication constitutes, through its inherent difference, its own momentary horizon, then such an approach must be seen as literally missing the point. Defining negation as the underlying principle of communication implies that all communication is irreversibly transitory. It derives its meaning from a specific momentary contextual difference. Or, to put it differently, it derives its meaning from its negating possibilities from a horizon actualized only by and during the selective process that is communication. Therefore its meaning is not to be found by reference to the historical period or situation.

19. All this has relevance to the analysis of historical concepts like democracy as well. As Bourdieu (1992: 70) quite rightly says: "Historians often condemn themselves to anachronisms by making an ahistorical or dehistoricized use of the concepts they apply in thinking about societies of the past. . . . And the same holds true for [our thinking about] politics. We run the risk of making enormous historiographical errors when we, like so many historians today who pride themselves on their 'political philosophy' approach, fail to take into account the social genesis of the political field [*la genèse sociale du champ politique*] and of precisely those concepts political philosophy turns into perennial substances by treating them as if they were transhistorical; what I just said with regard to the words 'art' and 'artist' applies to terms like 'democracy' and 'public opinion' as well" (my translation). The systems theoretical concept of communication, which maintains that words become meaningful only via a specific, historically concrete, communicative difference can prevent historians from falling into this trap.

The selective nature of communication can be illustrated in yet another way if we take a look at the collections of literary texts from the past that are currently used at schools and universities. These anthologies usually contain not only literary texts but also a historical introduction, on the assumption that one cannot understand texts from the past without such contextual information. No doubt this argument has an element of truth in it, but it is flawed in one important respect: words, expressions, texts refer via contingent differences. Most anthologies presuppose a representational relation between language and reality, a stable connection between signifier and signified. From that point of view, one need only know the past, the historical setting, to know what texts from the past refer to. From a systems theoretical perspective, however, there is no fixed relation between signifier and signified. The same sign will have a different meaning when it involves a different communicative opposition. And since these oppositions are not given but contingent, that is, realized in and by the communicative act itself, the meaning of a sign can be determined only by finding out what specific, temporally unique difference it constitutes. Therefore, a historical contextualization of anthologized texts does not suffice to make these texts intelligible, because even in one and the same historical setting, identical words can mean quite different things.

Heine's (1979, 8/1; 1978, 11) reception of Goethe in *Die romantische Schule* (1835) and in *Ludwig Börne: Eine Denkschrift* (1840) may serve as an example.<sup>20</sup> On the face of it, these two works seem to differ considerably in their evaluation of Goethe. In the book focusing on the romantic school, Goethe is accused of aestheticism and a lack of political commitment and his work rejected as a thing of the past. Heine praises the beauty of Goethean works of art, but this beauty, he says, is purely aesthetic; it is cold, lifeless, sterile. Goethe's works, Heine (1979, 8/1: 155) writes contemptuously, are "created just by art"; they are like Greek statues, which for all their perfection seem separated by "their impassiveness and coldness . . . from the exciting and warm life of the present."<sup>21</sup> In *Ludwig Börne*, the evaluation is quite different. Here, Heine speaks in the highest terms of Goethe's creative work, which he holds up as an example of art as it should be. And Heine (1978, 11: 13) castigates Börne for his inability to appreciate Goethe's art: Börne "mistook the artistic form for spiritlessness; he resembled the child who, without understand-

20. Perhaps I should emphasize that Luhmann himself has never given analyses of literary works; he has only written in general terms about the art system as a whole (see section 5). Therefore the following attempt to bring the systems theoretical concept of communication to bear on the interpretation of individual literary works can be no more than a tentative first step.

21. "Bloss durch die Kunst entstanden"; "dass ihre Starrheit und Kälte sie von unserem jetzigen bewegt warmen Leben abscheidet."

ing the glowing sense of a Greek statue, only touches the marble forms and complains of the coldness.”<sup>22</sup>

All interpretations of Heine’s work assume that there is some kind of gulf here, a gulf attributable either to a presumed ambivalence in matters of aesthetics (a vacillation between autonomous and engaged art) or to a development in Heine’s thinking.<sup>23</sup> A reading that recognizes the differential quality of meaning, however, produces a different picture. Such a reading highlights the fact that *Die romantische Schule* and *Ludwig Börne* function in quite different communicative situations and are therefore tied to quite different communicative differences. *Die romantische Schule* acquires its semantic profile in and through a polemic with romanticism. It is not just that a substantial part of Heine’s literary history is an unfavorable discussion of the “romantic school”; rather, the book as a whole (including the parts about preromantic periods such as the Middle Ages, the Enlightenment, and the *Klassik* of Goethe and Schiller) is intended<sup>24</sup> to repudiate romanticism. What Heine criticizes romanticism for is its conservatism, its quietism, its indifference to the concrete sociopolitical issues of the day, its refusal to advance through writing the cause of liberalism. Seen against this differential foil, Heine’s low valuation of Goethe’s creative work is only logical. *Die romantische Schule* is directed against a disjunction of literature and political engagement, and, for Heine, Goethean art is politically impotent.

Turning to *Ludwig Börne*, we encounter rather different communicative conditions. As Heine’s letters make clear, the book on Börne is antithetically linked to a type of politically committed literature that cared for the political message only and had no interest in, or feel for, the demands of poetry.<sup>25</sup> It is this communicative contrast to *Tendenzdichtung* that throws the book into relief. The communicative thrust of *Ludwig Börne*, then, is to counter the neglect of the aesthetic dimension in literature. So what is at stake in this specific artistic discourse is the importance of artistic beauty, while the theme of the indispensability of political commitment, central to *Die romantische Schule*, is simply not at issue. Seen through this lens, Goethe’s art possesses exemplary quality.

22. “Die künstlerische Form hielt er für Gemüthlosigkeit; er glich dem Kinde, welches, ohne den glühenden Sinn einer griechischen Statue zu ahnen, nur die marmornen Formen betastet und über Kälte klagt.”

23. According to Jeffrey L. Sammons (1969: 265), in *Ludwig Börne* “Heine takes a stand with Goethe against Börne, although a few years earlier, in *Die Romantische Schule*, Heine was closer to the Young German view that Goethe’s presumed aesthetic indifference to real events was now obsolete” (see also Sammons 1979: 239). George F. Peters (1989: 48) claims that *Ludwig Börne* “modifies the position he [Heine] had taken a few years ago in *Die Romantische Schule*.”

24. In the apychological sense as defined in section 2.

25. For a more detailed discussion of *Die romantische Schule* and *Ludwig Börne* see de Berg 1995.

In this way, a theoretical perspective that takes into account the differential anchorage of meaning can shed new light on the alleged discontinuity of Heine's reception of Goethe. This can be shown by an analysis of individual words, too. For example, Heine's pejorative use of the word *art* in *Die romantische Schule* contrasts sharply with the positive apostrophization of *art* in *Ludwig Börne*. Bringing in the respective communicative differences, however, makes this apparent contradiction disappear, for it shows that we are dealing with two different meanings of *art*. In the book on Börne, *art* acquires its semantic profile through a difference with non-art, *Tendenzliteratur*, and thus comes to denote something (aesthetically) valuable. In *Die romantische Schule*, *art* has as its oppositional concept engagement, which makes *art* denote something useless, noncommittal.

A reading of the two works solely against the sociopolitical and economic background of the historical period in which they were written inevitably leads to misinterpretations. All prevailing interpretations, seeing that there are no social, economic, or other changes that could account for the apparent shift in Heine's evaluation of Goethe, are forced to postulate either inconsistency on Heine's part or some development in his thinking. This interpretive strategy rests on the presupposition that utterances made under identical or comparable historical circumstances should point, so to speak, in the same direction. Actually, some contradictions may not be contradictions at all but may seem so only because the words or sentences in question have taken on other meanings as a result of a change in the communicative foil.

Semantic change, then, is not simply a historical, diachronic process. Rather, every time the communicative difference of a word changes, its meaning changes. Literary interpretation, therefore, should focus not so much on the historical setting of texts as on their communicative differences within this historical context.

#### 4. Nothing but a Footnote to (Post)structuralism?

At this point, at least a rough indication must be given regarding the relationship between the model of communication delineated above and structuralist positions. After all, Saussure (1960 [1916]: 166) asserted that "in language there are only differences *without positive terms*" (my translation). However, the communication theory propounded here is not a variant of the structuralist position that the meaning of the sign is dependent on its differential relationship with other signs. According to structuralism, signs have meaning because they are part of an overall system, and it is this general system that structuralism is interested in; an individual communicative utterance is always viewed from the angle of its production and is conditioned by a covering language system. This structuralist emphasis on *langue* as opposed to *parole* has far-reaching consequences. It entails a static and ahistorical concept of difference,



whereas the systems theoretical concept of difference is dynamic and brings the very temporal uniqueness of communicative utterances to the fore. According to Luhmann (1984: 191–241), there is no covering system of given differential relationships; there are only differential events. Only in communicative situations are differences constituted; differences are always historically contingent, in that the same sign can have a different difference (opposition), and hence a different meaning, in different situations.

Moreover, structuralism neglects the pragmatic intention (in the psychological sense as defined in section 2) with which every communicative utterance is necessarily bound up, and so it eliminates the selective nature of communication. *Eo ipso*, it eliminates the very prop that supports all that is meaningful in the communicative utterance. Structuralists may manage without content (message, or whatever), but the elements of their structures must be, on however abstract a level, meaningful. And since, as Luhmann makes clear, meaningfulness resides in ephemeral, contingent contextual differences, the structuralist's postulated constituent units and their relationships cannot be studied outside a pragmatic situation. Even if, as structuralism claims, concrete communications were surface manifestations of a comprehensive underlying system of contrastively related units, what counts as contrastive relationships would still be related to the possibilities negated by these concrete communications. Thus, there is no way of identifying structures without taking into account the differential context of communication.

Let me illustrate this argument. In one of his essays, which are strongly influenced by Greimas, Eric Landowski (1989: 176) tries to show that in the last twenty years political communication as manifested in election campaigns has undergone an important change in narrative or semiotic grammar “*du point de vue de la définition et de la gestion actantielle des rapports entre acteurs sociaux.*” Landowski substantiates this shift in the *mise en scène* of the relations between social actors by reference to, among other things, election placards, notably a 1965 de Gaulle poster and a Jacques Chirac poster from 1986; he points to the change in the distance between the depicted politician and the depicted electorate, and to the changing relationship between politician and background. The details of Landowski's analysis need not concern us here; what is important is that he deals with these posters without making reference to the different political themes discussed in 1965 and 1986. But it is only by having a specific position in the respective political debates that the posters are meaningful at all. More precisely, their identity derives from their difference from other contemporary political stances, especially other contemporary election posters.

Landowski (*ibid.*: 179, 181) sees the narrowing of the distance between politician and electorate over the years as a shift from a relation between

autonomous actors to “une relation de type fusionnel” with “une seule compétence actantielle pour deux ‘acteurs’ formellement distincts.” But suppose that the distance between politician and electorate on the de Gaulle placard were conspicuously shorter than on all other 1965 election placards, and suppose also that all other 1986 election placards left out the electorate. Would that not require a different conceptualization of the relations? Metaphorically, Landowski’s approach is like comparing the structures of two heavily buttressed houses but first taking away the props. Unfortunately, there is then nothing left to compare, for everything has fallen down.

But what about deconstruction? Leaving aside other poststructuralist positions, I will say something about deconstructionism by discussing *Limited Inc*, Derrida’s (1988) critical engagement with speech-act theory.<sup>26</sup> All language, according to Derrida, presupposes the existence of a code, an organon of iterability. For a sign or mark to be meaningful, it must be capable of functioning after, for example, the utterer’s death, or outside the immediate setting in which it is uttered (as in the case of a letter); in short, it must be iterable. This iterability is the precondition for signs to have meaning. However—and now follows the deconstructive turn—iterability not only makes meaning possible but makes impossible the stability of meaning. For every sign, precisely because it is iterable, can break away from the context in which it is spoken or written and acquire a new meaning in a different context. And since signs or utterances, as Derrida (*ibid.*: 12) puts it, “do not constitute their context by themselves, nothing prevents them from functioning in another context as signifying marks” (see also *ibid.*: 79). In the words of Jonathan Culler (1982: 123), “Meaning is context-bound, but context is boundless.” So what remains is a potentially endless process of context changes producing as many different meanings.

Of course, as Derrida makes clear, this is not to say that for practical purposes the process cannot, or should not, be interrupted. Nor does Derrida deny that speakers or writers can, and usually do, intend to express specific things. But these pragmatic exigencies do not alter the fundamental point, which is that a breaking free from a specific context is always possible. Even if there existed intentions that were fully conscious, present to themselves (which Derrida denies), the utterer’s intention could not “keep” the utterance within the intended context. For the sign, owing to its materiality, always also looks, as it were, in directions different from the communicative direction.

26. I am not concerned here with what, specifically, Derrida says about Austin, but I would like to point out that the Austin whom Derrida deconstructs is very much a “category-one Austin.” The Austin of the second category, that is, a genuinely pragmatically interpreted Austin, would have given Derrida much more trouble (see Fish 1989).

From the point of view of systems theory, Derrida cannot be right.<sup>27</sup> To begin with, his remarks presuppose the very thing the systems theoretical conception of communication eliminates: the idea of a code as the provider of meaning. Luhmann abandons the code and every other organon of iterability; indeed, he altogether denies the possibility of a repetition of the same. No self-identity of signs can persist through time, and there is no need for it. A sign does not have to be capable of outliving the temporally unique context of its utterance in order to be meaningful. (And, to be sure, it cannot do so.) For it acquires meaning not via a code but through a contingent (in the sense explained above), temporally unique, difference. A sign, per se, has no kernel of semantic value, no materiality. All that it is, is created in and by the specific communication in which it happens to be used, through the ephemeral difference this communication constitutes. Therefore, one *can* say that a sign or an utterance constitutes its own context—as long as one conceives of this context as differential context. So there is no free play of meaning. Communications, the processing of *sinnhafte* selections, become meaningful via the negation of other contingent communicative possibilities. When used in different communicative situations, a sign will have different meanings. But within each specific communication, the meaning is stable.<sup>28</sup>

Let us, for the sake of clarity, approach the matter from a different angle. As we have seen, Derrida tries to show that the utterer's intention can never entirely dominate or "fill" the utterance and that, therefore, there always is a gulf between what the utterer intends to say and what the utterance says. Now this disconnecting of intention and meaning implies surrendering an interpretive check many people (including me) would rather not do without. It is perhaps the most important feature of the systems theoretical conception of communication that it can preserve the tie between communicative direction and meaning without having to fall back on the subjective *vouloir-dire* of the utterer. For Luhmann conceptualizes intention not as something that precedes the communication but as *gleichursprünglich* (originating in the same process) with it. Communicative content (*Information*) and communicative direction (*Mitteilung*) are products of the communicative process, not entities that could exist by themselves, prior to or outside a concrete communication. So it is not my wanting to animate the utterance with my ideas, as it were, that makes this utterance meaningful (or fails to make it meaningful, as Derrida would have it). It is the communicative process itself that, through the negation of specific other communicative options, constitutes a difference between *Information* and *Mitteilung* that produces meaning.

27. I may be overplaying my hand here, for the following probably cannot be considered conclusive.

28. This does not mean that an addressee will always grasp this meaning. I will come to this problem later.

The same, incidentally, holds for the representation of reality. A communication does not represent a reality given outside this communication; the represented reality, too, is constituted in and by the communicative process. This should not be taken to mean that there is no empirical reality or that signs refer to other signs only. The reality is there, and communications do refer to it. But since communication is the processing of selections, it refers differentially. *Information* and *Mitteilung* are selections that are not “out there” but originate in the communication itself. Communication is the communicatively constituted synthesis of communicatively constituted selections. So what is represented (presented, if you like) *is* reality, but reality-as-selection. In and by every specific communication, the world, which every communication presupposes, is reorganized as a specific unity of difference (cf. Luhmann 1990: 27–28). In short, what is represented is an *emergente Realität* (a reality that emerges in the communicative process).

### 5. The Unsolved Case; or, The Relationship between Communicative Utterances and Social Systems

In this last section, let me examine a problem that I am not able to solve: the relationship between specific communicative utterances, their specific contextual differences, and social systems. This question is equivalent to the one regarding the relationship between the systems theoretical conception of communication expounded above and Luhmann’s systems theory as a whole. Let us first of all take a look at Luhmann’s (1984) version of systems theory.

Luhmann conceptualizes modern<sup>29</sup> Western society as a concatenation of functionally differentiated social systems, such as the law system, the art system, the political system, the economic system, and the science system. Every social system is autopoietic (a concept Luhmann borrows from the neurophysiologist Humberto Maturana [1982; see also Maturana and Varela 1980]); that is, it cannot be influenced causally by other social systems; the state that it is in is self-determined. Every system reproduces itself by producing the elements of which it consists by using the elements of which it consists. So, a social system uses its own operations to continue to exist, to continue to use its own operations. Social systems do not function as simple input-output models but are self-referential. Thus, the political system may prohibit the use of nuclear energy, but how, or whether, the economic system then continues to operate depends exclusively on the economic system itself.

Autopoiesis also explains why any attempt by avant-garde artists or *artistes engagés* to destroy the existing art system is doomed from the start.

29. That is, from the second half of the eighteenth century on. I would like to stress that the following account is only a rough sketch; it does not do justice to the complexity of Luhmann’s sociological theory.

These attempts are made from within the art system itself; therefore, they are part of the autopoiesis of the system and will necessarily contribute to its reproduction. Of course, the autopoietic closure (*Geschlossenheit*) of a social system does not imply that the system is completely cut off from the rest of society, that is, from the other systems. Every social system can and will react to the other social systems. But it is always the system itself, on the basis of its own, internal criteria, that determines what outside influences to incorporate or assimilate and how to deal with them. Financial markets, for instance, do react to political events, but the political system does not prescribe the economic situation. In other words, social systems are operationally closed but informationally open.

A social system consists of communication that operates according to a specific binary code. The elements of the law system, for instance, are all communications that focus on things (e.g., transactions) from the angle of their being lawful or unlawful (not lawful/unlawful/beautiful, and as opposed, for example, to the economic code to have/to have not). All law-system communication is structured in terms of this, and only this, binary code. The criteria according to which something is considered lawful or unlawful can vary, however, depending on historical, geographical, or other circumstances. Every social system possesses its own sets of criteria—"programs" (*Programme*), Luhmann calls them—on the basis of which all that it communicates about is subsumed under one of the poles of the system-specific binary code. For example, the programs of the law system are laws, court rulings, treaties, and the like; the programs of the science system (*Wissenschaftssystem*) are scientific (*wissenschaftliche*) theories.

One can understand why Luhmann analyzes society in terms of social systems rather than in terms of individuals and groups of individuals. After all, it may well be impossible to satisfactorily explain society and societal change by simply adding up individual actions. But why define social systems in terms of communications and not in terms of actions? Because, Luhmann asserts, things can become socially relevant only when they are communicated. For example, environmental pollution is not a problem of society when it is not "communicatively" existent.<sup>30</sup> More crudely, the bombing of a small village in Vietnam has no social impact if it is not talked about (*denounced* would in this case perhaps be the more appropriate term). Another example: The Kurds would have fallen out of society, so to speak, if the worldwide mass media had not communicated their plight. It should be stressed that Luhmann does not deny the existence or importance of individuals and human actions. He does not claim that only language is real or that only language counts.

30. A convincing analysis of the way environmental pollution is (not) dealt with in social systems is Luhmann 1986b.

Luhmann asserts only that it is not (groups of) individuals and their actions as such that drive society as we know it but the way these actions are communicatively existent.<sup>31</sup>

There is another reason why Luhmann takes communication as his starting point. It allows him to conceptualize social systems as dynamic entities, as processes. Here, it seems to me, Luhmann's version of systems theory has a decisive advantage over structuralist theories, which tend to analyze systems as synchronic entities.<sup>32</sup> To be sure, in Luhmann's theory, too, systems are held together by structures. The structures of a system are the social expectations (*Erwartungsstrukturen*) valid in it. Thus, in a way, a social system can be viewed as a network of expectations that differentiates itself from an environment (*Umwelt*) that is not structured in terms of these expectations, that is, from social systems structured according to other expectations. However, this view is misleading in that it focuses too much on the structures. In Luhmann's theory, the concept of structure is of secondary importance only. The elements of social systems are communications, and these elements constitute Luhmann's point of departure.

Now, communications are transitory events. Thus, for a social system to continue to exist, it is imperative that communication follow communication. At this point, Luhmann introduces the concept of structure. *Erwartungsstrukturen* increase the likelihood that the stream of communications, the autopoiesis of the system, does not come to a standstill. So structures are not linked to the (traditional) problem of maintaining the system's stability or identity. Luhmann conceptualizes structures not as relations between the systemic elements (the communications) or as relations between relations of elements but as nondeterministic pointers to possible communicative follow-up. That means that the flux of communications, not the structures, constitutes the system as system. The structures are a supporting cast only. This is an important departure from French structuralism, which, because of its almost exclusive focus on structures, tends to lose sight of the "processual" dimension of systems.<sup>33</sup>

Before discussing the problematic relationship between separate communicative utterances and social systems, I would like to illustrate the dynamic nature of Luhmann's (1981) concept of the art system by comparing it to ideas developed by Siegfried J. Schmidt (1989). According to Schmidt, the binary code of the art system is art/no art. This code

31. Hence the importance for society of bringing problems and misdeeds into the open instead of hushing them up. Hence, too, the powerful role of the mass media in our society.

32. This is truer of French structuralism than of the Russian and Czech varieties.

33. For an extensive discussion of the relationship between structure and time in systems theory see Luhmann 1984: 377–487.

serves to distinguish actions and communications that are part of the art system from actions and communications that are not. It operates through the application of two conventions peculiar to the art system: the aesthetics convention and the polyvalence convention. According to the former, communications do not refer directly to reality or formulate practical rules; according to the latter, communications have more than one meaning. If a person acts in accordance with these conventions, he fulfills a role within the art system, the possible roles being those of producer (e.g., writer), distributor (e.g., publisher), recipient (i.e., general reader, viewer, or listener), and critic. Luhmann, contrariwise, proposes beautiful/ugly (*schön/hässlich*) as the binary code. This code, according to Luhmann, serves not to create consensus but to actualize specific criteria, which in turn can create consensus or dissensus. Of course, the code should not be taken literally. In art, something “ugly” can be beautiful. Also, in Marxist aesthetics, being beautiful is equivalent to “mirroring society ‘objectively,’” and *littérature engagée* views the social relevance of a work of art positively (beautiful) and its “beauty” negatively (ugly). Like all the other system-specific codes, beautiful/ugly is meant as an abstract scheme; it is “filled in” according to the aesthetic program of the art system.

The divergence between Schmidt’s conception and that of Luhmann is evident. For Schmidt, the code is inextricably bound with conventions to which people have to conform. (And they do so, or so says Schmidt, because of their—literary—socialization.) The focus, then, is on consensus; there may have been discussions of whether specific artifacts are or are not art, but these discussions do not constitute the art system as a social system. According to Schmidt, whether or not people follow the conventions is decisive; the art system is founded on the fact that the actors within the system share conventions that make their roles (as writers, publishers, readers, etc.) compatible.<sup>34</sup> Thus, in Schmidt’s theory the code aims at establishing agreement. In Luhmann’s theory it has a quite different function. The fact that the communication of a system is coded binarily makes communicative follow-up more likely. One need take into account only the aspects relating to the code and can leave other aspects aside. Contrary to the Middle Ages, for example, political or religious claims in the art system are irrelevant. The concrete application of the code, however, always arouses discussion and implies not consensus but dissensus. For Luhmann ties up the code not with generally accepted conventions, so called, but with the different, competing,

34. This normative dimension of Schmidt’s theory has been criticized by others as well. For an overview of the critiques see Kramaschki 1991, which also touches on the tenability of the aesthetics convention vis-à-vis postmodern theses concerning the relationship between reality and fiction.

aesthetic *Programme* of the art system. These different aesthetic programs invariably produce different opinions and a clashing of evaluations. This is a much more dynamic view of the art system than Schmidt's theory is.

Luhmann's version of systems theory as outlined above is, in my opinion, very much worth studying in communication theory and literary theory as well as in sociology. This is not to say that it does not need elaboration and emendation. One of the most important points that demand clarification is the relationship between, on the one hand, individual communicative utterances and their differential contexts and, on the other hand, social systems. It is this problem I want to turn to now.

As we have seen, every social system, according to Luhmann, operates on the basis of a specific binary code. For example, the communications of the art system work in terms of beautiful/ugly; the communications of the law system work in terms of lawful/unlawful. This implies that every specific communication is to be seen as a historically concrete instantiation of a specific systemic code.<sup>35</sup> This in itself is not a problem. Problems arise when one asks how to determine to which system (to which systemic code) a specific communication belongs and what role it plays in this system. Every communicative utterance has its own selective, differential context, but this intended context (again, in the apsycho-logical sense) need not play a role in the reception of the utterance. Should one not distinguish, then, between an utterance's more direct meaning, which depends on its contextual difference, and its social impact or resultant meaning?<sup>36</sup> In order to give an empirically satisfying explanation of the functioning of social systems, one has to be able to identify, demarcate, these social systems. But binary coding and programming, though theoretically sound concepts, cannot, it seems to me, be considered empirically infallible.

The empirical demarcation proves to be particularly difficult in the case of the art system. For contrary to, say, the law system, which operates on the basis of explicit, easily identifiable programs (laws, treaties, etc.), the art system does not have hard *Programme*. Does that mean that there is no art system, or just that the art system is difficult to demarcate? How does one know whether a specific communication is part of the art system? But the demarcation of the other systems poses problems as well. For instance, is an informal scientific discussion between two scientists a communication of the *Wissenschaftssystem*? And what about the art criti-

35. I leave aside the problem of everyday communication, such as a chat about the weather or some other nonsystemic (*lebensweltliche*, as Habermas would say) communication.

36. Luhmann himself, in his overall analysis of social systems, almost completely neglects the differential structure of individual communicative utterance, which he postulates in his theory of communication.



cism practiced at universities? Is that a part of the *Wissenschaftssystem*? To these empirical questions Luhmann has offered no solutions.

There are other questions regarding the relationship between individual communications and social systems. As far as the meaning of communications is concerned, what exactly is the advantage of not just adopting Luhmann's definitions of *Sinn*, of the contingency of communications, and of the identity-constituting role of negation, but buying his systems theory in toto? To put it differently, where does the systemic aspect enter in establishing the meaning of a communication? Is there any correlation between the structure and meaning of a communicative utterance and the system of which it is a part, or between the utterance and the state the system is in? Again, Luhmann has no really satisfactory answers to these questions.<sup>37</sup> Yet it is extremely important that these questions be answered, lest communication theory be reduced to an exclusively text-oriented activity instead of the social science it should be.

In closing, I want to give a more elaborated example of both the possible fruitfulness and the deficiencies of Luhmann's ideas. I will do this by applying these ideas to the problem of literary evolution. As we have seen, Luhmann holds literature and the other arts to constitute one autonomous social system. This system consists of all the communications in terms of beautiful/ugly, and it reproduces itself in that artistic communication follows on artistic communication. Because of its autopoietic organization, other social systems, such as the religious or the political system, cannot influence it causally. The art system determines its own course. Seen from a systems theoretical perspective, then, literary evolution always follows internal systemic criteria. However, Yuri Tynyanov (1988 [1924], 1988 [1927]) already defined literary evolution as an autonomous process. In what way does Luhmann's theory differ from, or improve upon, Tynyanov's ideas?

Literary evolution, Tynyanov asserts, consists in the substitution of automatized literary techniques by new literary techniques. Literary construction principles that are used for some time inevitably lose their effect and are abandoned in favor of other construction principles. This, according to Tynyanov, is a strictly internal literary process. The rest of society, if I interpret Tynyanov correctly, is interrelated with this process only through language.<sup>38</sup> That is, the nonliterary reality can enter into the literary system only as a verbal entity. "Influence," then, is possible only at such a time and in such a direction as the literary system permits. The problem of this theory is its unspecific conception of society. Tynya-

37. Luhmann (1980–89) has made attempts in this direction, but they all tend to reduce communication to a mere reflection of the historical period in which it originated.

38. Here Tynyanov is rather unclear, probably because of his unspecific conception of society.

nov does distinguish between the literary system and the rest of society but does not theoretically conceptualize the latter. Put polemically, and perhaps too harshly, the rest of society, to Tynyanov, is simply everything that is not literature. As a result, the relationship between the literary system and its environment remains unclear. Tynyanov does postulate, for example, that the economic system cannot determine literary evolution, but he is unable to satisfactorily explain this fact. Contrariwise, the concepts of autopoiesis, system-specific binary coding, and programming, though in need of elaboration (see above), seem to provide a promising starting point for explaining the autonomy of the art system's development.

Thus, Luhmann's systems theory not only supports Tynyanov's postulate of literary evolution as an autonomous process but provides a theoretical foundation for it. However, systems theory and Tynyanov's theory also differ considerably in at least one important respect. According to Tynyanov, literary evolution occurs when a new literary construction principle replaces an older, worn-out principle. This, of course, takes time, during which the literary system enjoys stability and continuity.<sup>39</sup> In Luhmann's theory, however, stability and system are mutually exclusive. Every single communication implies change, since a communication can acquire meaning only by negating other positions within its context, by distinguishing itself from other communications. The art system, then, is always in motion; it changes from communication to communication.<sup>40</sup> The system develops not via a linear sequence of series (orders) but in a much more complex way. Luhmann's postulate that meaningful communications connect only by differentially reacting to other communications points to constellations as follows: text B reacts differentially to text A, and text C, too, differentiates itself from text A; text D then differentiates itself from text B, and text E from text C. There is no linearity; instead, the system assumes a pattern not unlike the one occurring in dominoes.

This is not to say that Luhmann's theory rules out the replacement of construction principles by other construction principles. This form of evolution, however, should be linked not (or not only) to the artistic communications themselves but to the art system's "structures of expectation." Communications necessarily differentiate themselves from one another, so there will always be change. Genuine artistic innovation is therefore equivalent to departing from or destroying the system-specific

39. This formulation is misleading in that Tynyanov postulates several literary series, or *orders*, which have their own development, but the fact remains that Tynyanov, within these orders, assumes periods of stability.

40. I maintain not that Tynyanov thinks that texts written on the basis of the same construction principle are all basically the same, but only that Tynyanov lacks the theoretical instruments to say something about the differences.

orientations. (Here, there is a convergence with ideas of Jauss [1970].) Other expectations will take their place, but they, too, will be replaced in time, and so on. This, of course, is very much like Tynyanov's model. The difference, though, is that now one can postulate artistic innovation, change from one construction principle or period to another, without eliminating the differences between concrete communications.

So Luhmann's theory offers a promising new way of looking at the evolution of art as a system. But important deficiencies remain. How is the relationship between a single artistic work and the systemic expectations to be conceived of? How homogeneous is the network of expectations? How homogeneous should it be? These and other questions cannot be answered here. Clearly, a good deal of work has to be done for these new ideas to be applied in communication theory and literary theory in a theoretically convincing and empirically verifiable way. The expounded systems theoretical ideas, including their problems, deserve this work.

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