Luhmann's "Social Systems" Theory: Preliminary Fragments for a Theory of Translation

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ISBN 978-3-86596-102-0
ISBN 3-86596-102-9

Herstellung durch das atelier eilenberger, Leipzig.
Printed in Germany.
Gedruckt auf säurefreiem, alterungsbeständigem Papier.

www.frank-timme.de

Table of Contents

Instead of a Preface

The following essay is a preliminary attempt to interpret Luhmann's social system theory in its application to translation. For details I refer the reader to my "Versuch einer Intertheorie der Translation" (forthcoming). Frequent repetitions and diverging observations will be inevitable.

In the following remarks we[1] shall limit our discussion to only one of the many works written by Luhmann over the years dealing with a wide range of topics.[2] In his "Social Systems" (1984/1995) Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998) presents (preliminaries to) a general theory of social systems. Terms like "system", "society" etc. denote theoretical, not ontological objects. But even theoretical objects exist (potentially/virtually)[3] on a special level of the "real world" (cf. below). A society constitutes ('is') a social system. There are systems within a social system. (Cf. the approach to culture as idio-, dia- and para-cultures; we shall come back to the topic, when we look at translation as a comprehensive system constituted by a number of systems and/or subsystems.) For our present purpose we understand a general translation system as a special type of social system comprehending a translator (including an interpreter) and her/his acting (with [sub]subsystems, e.g. oral interpretation and written translation),[4] the results of the translator's or interpreter's work (the translations), the

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[1] Niklas Luhmann's (1995) book *Social Systems* was discussed in the 2005/2006 MA-class at the Okan University, Istanbul. I thank the participants of the class for their contributions, questions and critiques: Gülden Oktay Akyol, Hamdi Başman, İdil Boran, Pınar Çırçır, Ayşe Zeynep Güden, Tuğçe Güner, Ebru İzre, Vesile Köse, Esin Karan, Evin Mete, Anıl Yücel and, last but not least, the then director in charge of the department, my colleague Ayşe Nihal Akbulut. – I beg leave to use the first person pronouns "we" and "I" without differentiating consent amongst the participants from my own assumptions and without further specifying the 'authorship', while analysing Luhmann's theory in the following chapters. – My special thanks go to my colleague Ronald Walker, University of Mainz-Germersheim, for correcting the many linguistic and typing mistakes of the first and last drafts of this essay. Without his help I should never have ventured to publish the present paper.

[2] Sporadically we included Luhmann (1992).

[3] I use "potential" and "virtual" and their respective derivations as (quasi-)synonyms.

[4] Oral translation is often equated with interpretation and translation with written translation, but the analogy is only partial. Written translation uses a different language and different media from oral translation and translation in general partly uses different media from other types of interaction and communication.

intended and not intended (casual) recipient(s)[5] and, as far as necessary, other entities, e.g. a commissioner, a source-text author or sender, etc. The translator with her/his acting (translating), the recipients, etc. etc. are understood as forming a set of (interdependent) systems in the environment of the overall translation system. It is in this sense that we consider "translation" a social unit while at the same time postulating a difference between the various systems in its environment without having to determine their differentiating boundaries, but giving them the possibility to function as (relatively) independent systems. This decision can be compared to Pöchhacker's (1992, 217) view where, referring to interpretation, he considers a conference as a "hypertext" composed of an initiator, organizer, speaker, source-text recipients, interpreter, target-text recipients and text-users interacting/communicating with each other for a particular purpose (cf. also Özben 1999, 99), or to Özben's (ib. 122-125, with reference to Dodds 1989), where theories and models trying to investigate and explain interpreting processes are presented as systems within the polysystem of "Interpreting Studies". – Luhmann's social system is related to other systems by "communication" (cf. below). Thus "communication" creates the encompassing social system, e.g. translation, as a system in the above-described sense. Communication means stimulation (activation; cf. below) of reactions/responses. Translation becomes[6] a special type of communicative system.

According to Luhmann autopoietic systems are closed systems. We prefer the term "semi-closed" for reasons to be explained in the course of this essay. Systems become by translation[7], i.e. by activating processes *in* the system by means of a stimulus or rather a set of stimuli (e.g. "food" or rather a "dinner") coming from the 'outside', i.e. the environment of a system, e.g. from another system as part of the former system's environment.

In the attempt to lay foundations for translation as a (social) system we must go beyond Luhmann. Starting from the theory and terminology borrowed from evolutionary epistemology (*Evolutionäre Erkenntnistheorie*)[8] we distinguish three world levels: the microcosmic level of micro-

[5] Some colleagues prefer the term "receptor" or "receiver".

[6] Cf. Whitehead (1978) for the use of "become" (often without predicate). In German I use "werden" without predicate, too.

[7] Cf. Dizdar [forthcoming] for the meaning of "translation" in different scientific disciplines.

[8] Cf. Vollmer (2000). – The EE distinguishes the following three levels: the microcosmic, mesocosmic (as the world human beings live in) and the macrocosmic level (i.e. the astronomical level). In this paper, "mesocosm" denotes Luhmann's "real reality", i.e. the world/universe as perceived by organisms, here: human beings. By

physical elements (processes and events; cf. Whitehead 1978)[9], the mesocosmic level as the world(s) of organisms (cf. below) and the macrocosmic level as the world(s) of memetics (cf. Dawkins 1989; cf. below). In contrast to Luhmann, we shall operate on all three levels, though always (and inevitably) from the 'human' meso-level perspective (cf. below). The meso-level is considered the "real reality" or "real world" (as Luhmann says) of human beings.[10] Both encompass the ontological reality as seen from the point of view of human beings, and the level of the application of theories. Theories are conceived on the meso-level but transgress it into memetic potentiality on the macro-level. We shall partly use our own terminology hoping that there will be no confusion. We follow Luhmann's recommendation not to compare two systems looking for analogies, because such a procedure "would mislead us into believing similarities to be essential" (14)[11]. Luhmann prefers "the longer path of generalization and respecification" (14). Strictly speaking, comparison is impossible, because similarity does not exist. If all simple elements (processes and events) are instantaneous/momentary[12] individualities, they must be different from each other. As simple elements they cannot have qualities, but 'inherent specificities' ("predispositions"; Scheibmayr 2004, 41)[13] must be admitted whatever these are and whatever this means (cf. "sensitivity" in microphysics). We shall term them "qualia" (singular "quale"). Nevertheless, such a distinction between qualities and qualia remains a paradox. – We also differ from Luhmann in the use of the terms "process" and "element" differentiating at the same time between (mostly) simple microphysic entities and complex meso- and macrocosmic entities. The

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"macrocosm" we understand the "cosmos" of potentialities/virtualities, e.g. "concepts", created/generated by human beings through the production of "memes".

[9] We use "event" in the loose sense of simple micro-events as well as complex micro-, meso- and macro-events in the sense of Whitehead's "actual occasion". Likewise we call "process" any energetic occurrences on both the micro- and meso-levels. The meaning becomes clear from the context.

[10] Luhmann distinguishes the "real world" as the encompassing 'world' of a system and its environment from the "real reality" as the universe perceived under the contingent perspective of human beings. (Cf. below for the plural "realities".)

[11] Throughout this essay numbers in brackets refer to the English translation by Bednarz and Baecker of Luhmann's "Social Systems" (1995) unless otherwise indicated.

[12] Both terms are used to denote what in mathematics is called a "point" without spacial and temporal extension. From a mesocosmic perspective I sometimes use the term "(quasi-)instantaneous".

[13] Scheibmayr's critique of Luhmann's theory makes no distinction between Luhmann's early and later publications. It is normal procedure to look for analogies in earlier works. There is indeed (and naturally) a theoretical progress in Luhmann's publications over the course of the years.

qualification of the difference as simple and complex allows us to use only one term for these two levels. In Luhmann's theory, system elements are only system-specific. In our use microcosmic elements are individual, but not system-specific, mesocosmic elements are individual and system-specific, macrocosmic elements are partly individual, partly general and in any case system-specific. In the latter case they appear as adapted to a system's needs. When processes and events (cf. Whitehead 1978) etc. are mentioned, the terms comprehend material as well as immaterial phenomena. The same holds good for other terms as will be indicated.

The terminology used in sociology, linguistics and translation studies needs careful revision. Metaphors are allowed as long as they are consciously taken for and understood as metaphors (for further warnings and literature cf. Dizdar [forthcoming]). On the other hand we recognize and accept that metaphors are extended to other circumstances and situations with different bases of knowledge and observed from different perspectives than the ones in which they were generated. (In such cases, e.g. the 'agential' grammatical structure of English sentences, there is the danger of their being misinterpreted.) It is difficult to get rid of the burden of the past; but we find it wrong to assume a purposely misleading terminology on such occasions as some postmodern authors seem to do.

On the micro-level there are only instantaneous individualities. Similarity is a generalization on the meso- and macro-levels (cf. below). The conditions for generalizations are case-specific (cf. below: "culture"). That means that there is no common parameter for comparison and similarity. Besides, according to Luhmann, there is no direct contact between systems (cf. below: "communication"). A system can only make inferences about other systems. Similarity becomes an assumption based on biased observations. All observations are 'biased' (cf. below: "perspectivity").

It seems necessary to stress from the outset that the following remarks are in no way complete, but a kind of "bricolage". Yet even in their preliminary form they should (paradoxically?) be understood in a holistic sense. Holism means taking inclusive account of the unity of what are often falsely referred to as connotations ranging only after cognitive/rational denotations, if they are considered at all. We keep the term and understand by connotations emotions cum evaluations and associations.[14] We put the connotations in first place, because we consider them the most important

[14] We are aware that holism includes more than emotions etc. Gestures etc. are perceived through air waves, partners, according to the situation, by smells, touches etc. – In the present essay we leave aside formal holism, e.g. typographic design etc. (cf. Schopp 2005).

factors of neuronal activities in guiding an organism's behaviour. In spite of the perspectivity of all acting, holism should be strived for.

In the present essay we shall mainly follow Luhmann's ideas in the order in which they are discussed in his book. Thus repetitions become inevitable. Sometimes a subject will be mentioned and dealt with in detail only later. At times, a 'staccato' reading may become necessary, i.e. to proceed sentence by sentence. The concept of "system" will remain controversial.

Under the precondition that one already has a good understanding of translation without this understanding having attained a definitive form, a critical analysis of Luhmann can suggest several useful ideas and insights into the subject under observation. Observation is the chief task of science. Observation and therefore scientific behaviour mean making distinctions and "recording information with the help of a difference" (540[29]).

In the present first attempt we shall widely refrain from drawing parallels to "translation" as a system, but it will not be difficult to find them. An extensive discussion would enlarge the present paper considerably and must therefore await another occasion. For the present it will suffice to show the indefinite complexity of translation and, as a consequence, the translator's freedom and responsibility, when (s)he accepts a commission.

Reading Luhmann is not only an exercise in text analysis. It becomes necessary to analyse Luhmann's somewhat unusual terminology carefully. A system is assumed to be a structured (ordered) unity. Structure is perceived by human and other beings, in each case from an organism's individual as well as from a type generic perspective. The structure human beings perceive is the structure they read into a system. Human beings need to perceive structure in order to reduce the complexity of their (!) world in order to become able to deal with it. Is the universe as such ("an sich") structured? Microphysics tends to understand it as a probability, that means a probability of there being a structure. Or rather a probability of probabilities. Under certain conditions it becomes possible to translate a system into another system. Within the system, observation allows the discovery of subsystems which can be treated in analogy to the system. If the system itself can discover such substructures, the process of discovery is called "self-abstraction". (2) In certain cases features can become "zero", i.e. they can be ignored or are absent altogether. Luhmann avoids definitions; they would be out of place for a general theory in an ever-changing world.

System and Function

Luhmann starts with a careful circumscription: "The following considerations assume that there are systems" (12). – The existence of systems is not affirmed, it is only an *assumption*. This leaves open, whether systems exist and if so, where, i.e. in which "world" they exist. Luhmann constructs a theory. A theory, although constructed by an ontologically existing being, does not belong to the "real reality" of ontological objects. This is the paradoxical problem of determining what ontology is assumed to mean and deal with (cf. below the influence of potentialities/virtualities on the "reality" of the "real" mesocosm). In general, theories are assumptions (cf. hypotheses), but assumptions 'are' (exist). Even to assume, to make an assumption, becomes (cf. Whitehead 1978) a decision. Decisions are made in the "real reality". We are back at the beginning.

Hermans (1999, 103)[15] declares that "there are no systems. Systems exist only in system theory". So they exist (on the macro-level). They exist, as said above, non-ontologically and in a pluriform way: because human beings exist who invent systems, because systems are and must become manifest in a form that human beings are receptive to (e.g. in writing) and, last but not least, because talking or writing about systems in English (and many other languages) forces the speaker/writer to affirm their existence by using an affirmative expression, e.g. the present indicative. – One can of course say that systems are man-made, but so are structures, and ultimately everything human beings can perceive (cf. below: perspectivity and meaning).

We shall not go into the historical development of systematically constructing systems. For our interests in translation cf. e.g. the Russian "formalists" since the early teens of the 20th century in the literary field and Even-Zohar's "polysystem" theory since the 70's of the last century, which also lean heavily towards literature and language. (A good summary is to be found in Hermans 1999, 103-119.) Certain basic features of Luhmann's theory are already to be found with the formalists and Even-Zohar (which does not suggest direct influence), e.g. the assumptive character, relativism, constant change (fluidity), intersystemic relations and more. Further attempts to construct system theories in the linguistic or literary as well as other fields mentioned by Hermans (ib. 120-136) include José Lambert's

[15] The subtitle of Hermans' book is "Descriptive and Systemic Approaches Explained". On the outer cover one reads somewhat differently: "System-oriented Approaches Explained".

"communication maps", Lefevere's "rewriting" and connecting issues, Bourdieu's sociology of literature and Luhmann's social systems theory spreading out into a number of wider fields of cultural interest. (Cf. "Translation as System" in Hermans 1999, 137-146.)

Throughout this essay we shall come across assumptions. Assumptions constitute the most tolerant approach to scientific observations. Nevertheless, an assumption *is* already a statement (12), at least in its formal representation as a grammatical indicative in English and other languages. Even an assumptive statement is preceded by a decision: the decision to make it. An assumption (as statement) refers "to the real world" (12), the[16] mesocosm. Again, such a statement is a real statement. "World" in Luhmann comprises a system and its environment as a whole (*ein Ganzes*).[17] "World" thus gains two meanings: as the individual world of a system and its environment (cf. Luhmann) and as the totality of all these individual worlds with their contingency of perspectivity (cf. the macrocosm as described above), in a way the "universe". World cannot be differentiated from non-world. As perception is only possible through differentiation (cf. below), a non-world cannot be perceived (cf. below for "perception" and "meaning"), because world as a whole has no counterpart outside an inconceivable macrocosmic "idea" (which perhaps is not even a concept). Only parts of the all-encompassing world, the universe, can be perceived. Below, Luhmann will argue that whatever can be perceived has meaning. The converse statement becomes possible: whatever has meaning can be perceived. It would be still better to substitute the verb "to be" in these sentences by the Whiteheadian "become": what can be perceived becomes meaning and what becomes meaning can be perceived. (Cf. below: difference.) "World" gets/acquires/"becomes" meaning (e.g. for human beings).

Paradoxically, another point of view seems more realistic: at any moment each system creates its own world, i.e. there are as many worlds as there are systems and as many systems as there are moments, indefinitely many. These worlds cannot be compared to each other (cf. below). The meaning of "world" is system-specific (cf. Leibniz's "monads"). Theoretically a theory is atemporal (it has no temporal extension). Thus it can

[16] The definite article indicates the general mesocosm of human beings. More exactly speaking, we must assume a mesocosm for each individual organism at each moment of its existence (cf. Vermeer [forthcoming]).

[17] Luhmann distinguishes the whole (*das Ganze*) as a unity from the totality (*die Gesamtheit*) as the sum of parts. Throughout the book the English terminology runs the danger of not corresponding exactly to the German terms (cf. below "meaning" and "Sinn"). In German "Totalität" has a different philosophical implication (e.g. in Nietzsche).

also be considered instantaneous. As the meaning of an entity within Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic theory is what all other entities do not mean (cf. below: Saussure as a basis for Luhmann; cf. also Peirce), there is no extra-individual instantaneous meaning of "world". Instantaneous processes and events are unique; they do not allow repetition (cf. below). As each world is understood as the unity of a system and its environment (cf. above), these two concepts, system and environment, become incomparable, both with one another within a system and with those of other systems. The "world" cannot be conceived exhaustively by a system which is a part of the world (cf. Goedel's theorem; cf. Hofstadter 1983). Luhmann argues in terms of pairs of elements opposing and generating each other. If a system is a structured event, the environment must be chaotic. And so forth.

The above assumption about Saussure's theory shows it as a closed system. The moment a new element would be introduced or an element eliminated, it would become another system in which all its elements would change their meaning. (In another context I shall show the paradoxical consequences of such a system.)

To make a continuation of the present essay possible it becomes necessary to seek a solution in individuality. With Luhmann, we shall find it in generalization. Generalizing means ignoring any individual disturbances to an argument by qualifying the disturbance as a 'quantité négligeable', i.e. ignoring it. Poor science.

Systems and environments do not have fixed delimitations. Their "boundaries" are relative to observations, perspectives, situations etc. But boundaries are created by decision. Decision makes them. Decision creates the world. But the creator is the human being, a human being or a set of human beings: a {human being}[18]. The "world" is man-made, an assumption due to man's contingency (cf. below). The observer is the observing system (or an observing system). An observation can only be carried out by a system which thus establishes its boundaries with the environment (of which the observed system is a part). This means that the difference and the boundaries are assumptions made from the perspective of the observing system at the time of observation. Therefore the difference, i.e. the very distinction between system and environment, 'is' not ontologically "real", neutral, but depends on a decision by the system. It is the system which draws the boundaries according to the situational conditions prevalent at a given moment. As they change, it becomes possible to use the terms referring to this event in the plural (especially in the case of translations): the meaning of the terms is generalized.

[18] I indicate "sets" by { }.

As we said above, the expression "real world" refers to the world as perceived by human beings, a *phenomenal* world in contrast e.g. to Kant's *Ding an sich* ("thing in itself"), also called "objective reality" (cf. the difference between micro-, meso- and macrocosm). Luhmann's general theory is a generalization, therefore paradoxically a "real" reduction and abstraction from real "events" (Whitehead 1978).

To repeat, we distinguish three levels for the following considerations: [1] microcosmic instantaneous, simple processes and events, which are not or not simply localizable in space and time (cf. microphysics), [2] mesocosmic complex processes and events (complexities, systems), and [3] memetic processes and events (cf. below: potentiality/virtuality).

Instantaneousness and simplicity go together. Such entities are indivisible, i.e. cannot be analysed into elements, e.g. qualities, and unique, i.e. they exist only for an instant and cannot be repeated. We assume, nevertheless, that microcosmic processes and events influence and therefore co-determine meso- and macrocosmic processes and events (cf. brain activities).[19] Meso- and macrocosmic entities are complex and are therefore said to have localizable *extension* in space and time (temporal extension is also called *duration*). The extension can be quasi-instantaneous or can last for an indefinite time. Macrocosmic processes and events are potentialities/virtualities. There are events which show meso- and macrocosmic features (cf. below: concept, meaning etc.)

Mesocosmic social *organisms* (living systems) which live in groups of two or more entities must adapt themselves to each other. Adaptation means reduction of individual *behaviour* (including *acting*) to common potentialities of social life. We call this behaviour *cultural/culture-specific behaviour* or simply *culture*. A social system is a cultural system. Culture makes a social system. Cultures develop 'horizontally' on the background of geographic, orographic (cf. the different use of the voice in the music of people living in mountainous regions vs. those living in the plains) and climatic conditions. (Cf. the distance to and exchange with highly civilized societies or isolated groups.) At the same time, cultures can be 'vertically' observed in the course of their history. Social organisms possess culture. By culture we understand the system of rules of behaviour which is obeyed to make social life possible; if ignored the organism runs the danger of being punished. We use the term "phenomenon" to describe whatever is

[19] We shall not strictly distinguish between the meso- and macrocosm(s). The macrocosm, in the sense it was described above, is the sphere of memes which emanate from human beings whose sphere is the mesocosm. – We use the term "brain" as a shortcut for neuro-physical apparatus.

(potentially) perceivable in the real world, be it material or immaterial. Thus, in a way, the macrocosm emanates from the mesocosm.

For the following considerations the micro-level is taken as the basis for the meso- and macro-levels; the 'vertical' general and cultural meso- and macro-levels form a unity which can only be split into two by a methodological analysis. Therefore, the macro-level can, under certain circumstances, be considered part of the meso-level; this in consequence can be split 'horizontally' into the two levels of a material real world and an immaterial, memetic, virtual world of concepts etc. (cf. Plato's "ideas").

Here it becomes necessary to make further distinctions (cf. also Scheibmayr 2004, 36; we shall go beyond his statements). From the micro-perspective we can distinguish an indefinite number of "real" worlds: those of each species of organism, within them, those of each organism and, finally, of each organism in each moment of its life. (In the present essay we do not take into consideration "worlds" of inorganic entities, if such exist.[20]) The distinctions include perspective differences. By generalization (cf. below) we generate one world, e.g. the universe, which encompasses all the afore-mentioned other 'worlds'. The latter exist in and form part of the one universe-world which so to speak oscillates between (or comprises) the meso- and macro-level. We can call it "universe" and split it in two: the mesocosmic material and immaterial-energetic universe and the macrocosmic concept <universe>. The latter emanates from the meso-level; meso- and macro-level are both part of the "real" (human) world. Each of the organism's worlds has its centre in the organism or, generalizing according to the 'normal' human feelings: in the planet on which the organism in question lives. Worlds do not have absolute centres, not even the "universe" of science. In the following considerations we refer to the human "real world" or, as Luhmann says, "real reality", following Luhmann unless otherwise stated.

Another remark will be useful: With Luhmann we often speak of "observation". To observe means to differentiate. As the above-mentioned worlds and the organisms which generate them are contingent, all observation is made and only possible from a "perspective", a point of view also in the real sense of the word. Observations are processed in an organism's neuro-physical apparatus; we call the result "perception". (Later we shall distinguish several stages of perception.) For brevity's sake we shall call the neuro-physical apparatus "brain", but we shall remember that many processes (and events) attributed to the "brain" are holistically

[20] Not a few scientists assume/affirm that "life" pervades the whole universe (cf. "sensitivity"). Freezing water makes rocks burst: the water 'acts' on its environment. – Note the agentive grammatical structure.