

Communication as Challenge to Systems Theory

The term "system theory" does not have a good ring to it. To the untrained ear of the layperson it smacks of rigidity, inflexibility, anti-individualism, or even ant-humanism. Even many literary theorists, especially in the English-speaking world, like neither the word nor the concept that lies, or seems to lie, behind it. Systems theory reminds them of structuralism or the theory of Talcott Parsons and of all the problems of determinism and heteronomy that go with them. In the postmodern age, systems theory seems decidedly out of place.

But appearances can be deceiving. Despite its problematic name, systems theory is not a theory of structures, but of processes; not of heteronomies, but of autonomies; not of determinism, but of freedom. Systems theory is the theory of contingency (what in German is called *Kontingenz*): it assumes that every social action or event is always a selection from a range of possibilities and that, therefore, reality could have been, and can be, different.¹ At least, this is true of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, and this is the version of systems theory I shall be talking about.² More precisely, I want to do two things. First, I want to take a look at Luhmann's theory in general. The aim of this will be to establish how Luhmann diverges from other, more traditional, approaches and to bring out the dynamic nature of systems theory. The second thing I want to do — and this is the principal aim of my paper — is to outline and explain Luhmann's concept of communication. For it seems to me that virtually all applications of systems theory operate with inadequate interpretations of this concept, interpretations which completely overlook its innovative dimension. Yet, or so I shall argue, it is precisely Luhmann's concept of communication that offers the most fruitful starting-point for literary studies.

1 In Niklas Luhmann's formulation: "Kontingenz besagt, daß etwas auch anders möglich ist" (1981, 159).

2 Although this terminological identification of "systems theory" with "Luhmann's systems theory" tends to upset some scholars (see, for example, Jäger 96; Schmidt 227) it is now quite common in academic discourse in Germany.

SYSTEMS THEORY

Since the mid-1960s, Luhmann has been developing a form of systems theory whose main aim is to overcome what he sees as the static and ahistorical nature of other, more traditional, systems approaches. This is achieved, firstly, by changing — in concrete terms: downgrading — the theoretical status of the concept of structure (and of related concepts such as convention and normativity) and, secondly, by conceptualizing systems as self-referential processes. This latter theoretical innovation took place in the early eighties and is generally assumed to mark the transition from the early to the later Luhmann.

The problem of traditional systems approaches, according to Luhmann, is that they are founded on the notion of a deep structure as the necessary condition for the survival of the system.³ As a consequence, they view social action from the perspective of its contribution to this given structure. The result of this preoccupation with the *Bestandsproblem* (the question of the maintenance of a specific structure as a prerequisite for the system's survival) is a picture of society as a basically static entity. Luhmann, therefore, changes the theoretical starting-point. He abandons the traditional problem of the maintenance of a given structure in favor of the more general and abstract problem of the reduction of complexity.

Starting from the assumption that modern society is overly complex Luhmann conceives social systems as the answer to this superabundance of possible experiences and actions: as *islands of reduced complexity*. A system maintains a boundary between its own reduced complexity and the overcomplexity of the environment. From this perspective, structures do not count as given but are seen as contingent, that is, basically variable, contributions to the ongoing process of reduction of complexity.⁴ Reduction of complexity is a potentially

endless process since it always increases complexity as well. The more complexity a system reduces, makes manageable, the more complex the system becomes. After all, when more complexity comes into the system's view the number of its possible experiences and actions increases, and these new possibilities must then be absorbed by new systemic mechanisms. Because of its increased complexity the system is able to absorb even more world-complexity, which in turn increases the complexity of the system, etc.⁵ Metaphorically speaking, complexity is reduced by being sliced up, cut into manageable pieces, but then pops up in a new shape in the different pieces. Science, for instance, differentiates into disciplines, which in turn are faced with complexity they must put in a manageable form, and so on.⁶

In this version of systems theory, then, the concept of structure is of secondary importance only. Luhmann introduces the concept of structure in relation with what Talcott Parsons has called the problem of double contingency: the openness or undetermined nature of social situations, which results from the freedom of the interacting individuals. When a person uses a tool or a piece of machinery she will have certain expectations regarding this thing which can guide her behavior. But when the same person interacts with another person she is dealing not with a thing but with someone who in turn has expectations. In this situation, what is needed is not simply expectations but expectations of expectations (*Erwartungserwartungen*). Certain expectations must be generalized, made "expectable." This is where the concept of structure comes in: structures are generalized expectations. The idea, then, is "daß Strukturen sozialer Systeme in Erwartungen bestehen, daß sie *Erwartungsstrukturen* sind und daß es für soziale Systeme ... *keine anderen Strukturierungsmöglichkeiten* gibt" (Luhmann 1984, 398-99).

There are two points that must be stressed here. First of all, it should be pointed out that it is *not the expectation-structures that constitute the system as a system*. According to Luhmann, the elements of social systems are communications. Communications are ephemeral events, and, therefore, communication must succeed communication if the system is to survive. Now what expectation-structures do is increase the likelihood that the flow of communications does not come to a standstill. The systemic structures, i.e., the social expectations, act as pointers to possible communicative follow-ups. Luhmann, then, defines the concept of structure thus: "nicht als einen

müssen" (1970, 114).

5 To be sure, in this view complexity is not an objective quality of the world. System and complexity are, to use a Heideggerian expression, *gleichursprünglich*. As Luhmann puts it: "Der Begriff der Komplexität bezeichnet stets eine Relation zwischen System und Welt, nie einen Seinszustand" (Luhmann 1970, 115).

6 This is also the systems-theoretical definition of societal evolution.

3 In view of the staggering amount of publications by Luhmann a detailed bibliographical account for the following exposé is out of the question. Works of a synoptic nature are Luhmann 1982 (for the early Luhmann) and 1984 (for the later Luhmann). A full bibliography of Luhmann's publications up to 1992 is provided by Andriani et al. (see also de Berg 1995c).

4 In Luhmann's theory, then, function comes before structure. That is why Luhmann describes his theoretical innovation as the shift from a *strukturell-funktionale Systemtheorie* (à la Talcott Parsons) to a *funktional-strukturelle Systemtheorie*: "Der Grund für die Mängel der strukturell-funktionalen Systemtheorie liegt in ihrem Prinzip selbst, darin nämlich, daß sie den Strukturbegriff dem Funktionsbegriff vorordnet. Dadurch nimmt die strukturell-funktionale Theorie sich die Möglichkeit, Strukturen schlechthin zu problematisieren und nach dem Sinn von Strukturbildung, ja nach dem Sinn von Systembildung überhaupt zu fragen. Eine solche Möglichkeit ergibt sich jedoch, wenn man das Verhältnis dieser Grundbegriffe umkehrt, also den Funktionsbegriff dem Strukturbegriff vorordnet. Eine funktional-strukturelle Theorie vermag nach der Funktion von Systemstrukturen zu fragen, ohne dabei eine umfassende Systemstruktur als Bezugspunkt der Frage voraussetzen zu

Stabilitätstypus besonderer Art, sondern durch seine Funktion, die ... Reproduktion des Systems von Ereignis zu Ereignis [= from communication to communication] zu ermöglichen" (1984, 388). From this perspective, structures are not conceived of as relations between systemic elements but as a kind of communicative signposts. It is this theoretical innovation that allows Luhmann to conceptualize systems as processes: as streams of communications.

The second point that should be made about this version of systems theory relates to the nature of these structures or signposts. Structures, in Luhmann's theory, are non-deterministic. They are pointers: they indicate possibilities but determine nothing. This non-deterministic nature of structures is crucially important because it produces an eminently realistic picture of society. Whereas other theories tend to lose sight of the openness, the nonconformity, the conflicts, the contradictions of social processes or approach them *via negationis* (in effect viewing them as threats to an otherwise stable social fabric), Luhmann's theory is capable of incorporating contingency as constitutive of society.

The importance of the two points I mentioned can be approached from a different angle as well: they allow Luhmann to avoid conceptualizing society as the aggregate of the behavior of socialized individuals. By not viewing society in terms of acting subjects but in terms of contingent communications, Luhmann as it were excommunicates the individual from social systems. This has the advantage of rendering unnecessary the conceptualization of individuals as incarnations of (socially existing or sociologically prescribed) norms and conventions — a conceptualization which rests uncomfortably with observed reality. In this way, individuals are granted more freedom, especially the freedom to act immorally or irrationally.

EXCURSUS

From a theoretico-historical perspective, Luhmann's approach must be seen as a critical reaction to the so-called cultural determinism of Talcott Parsons's systems theory. In the words of Jan Künzler: "Kulturdeterminismus ist das Ergebnis einer Theoriestrategie, die soziale Ordnung nur dann für möglich hält, wenn das Problem doppelter Kontingenz immer schon durch übereinstimmende, normative Orientierung der Akteure an einem gemeinsamen Kultursystem wenigstens partiell gelöst ist" (74-75). Luhmann, by contrast, sees — and I am quoting Künzler again: "den Schwerpunkt der Systemkonstitution nicht in einer ausgezeichneten Lösungsstrategie des Problems doppelter Kontingenz, sondern im Problem selber. Nur als Problem, also indem sie gerade nicht endgültig aufgelöst und beseitigt werden kann, wird doppelte Kontingenz zum autokatalytischen Faktor für die ... Reproduktion sozialer Systeme" (75).

Cultural determinism continues to haunt the radical-constructivist theory of literature, represented chiefly by the work of Siegfried J. Schmidt and Gebhard

Rusch. Their systems theory hinges almost entirely on a Parsonian concept of convention. Gebhard Rusch, for example, gives the following definition of conventions:

A erwartet, daß in der Situation S sein Interaktionspartner B seinerseits erwartet, daß A die Handlung H ausführt; also führt A die Handlung H aus.... In systemtheoretischer Terminologie würde man vielleicht sagen, daß Konventionen zu denjenigen Mechanismen gehören, die soziale Interaktion unter den Bedingungen doppelter Kontingenz überhaupt möglich machen. (Rusch 9, note 2)

This results in an exceedingly problematic overrating both of the existence and of the effect of norms and conventions, as can be seen from the clash between NIKOL (the group of literary theorists led by Siegfried J. Schmidt) and Ernst von Glasersfeld:

N: Das ist auch der Clou der ganzen Sozialisation, daß das Verhalten von Kindern oder auch Heranwachsenden so kanalisiert wird, daß sie sich als sozialisierte Individuen und Mitglieder von Gesellschaften zu verhalten lernen. EvG: Daß sie von den Anderen als sozialisiert befunden werden. Was sie in Wirklichkeit, d.h. von sich selbst aus tun, mag etwas ganz anderes sein. Und das spielt keine Rolle. Es spielt keine Rolle, bis zu dem Tag oder dem Moment, wo sich eine Diskrepanz zeigt, und diese Diskrepanz zeigt sich, weil auf einmal der Andere (der gedacht hat: das ist jemand, der sich in den Situationen, die ich definiere, so benimmt, wie es mir gefällt), weil dieser Andere nun enttäuscht wird. ([von Glasersfeld] 415)

It is precisely its decentring of the subject that allows Luhmann's theory to steer clear of this determinism. (For a detailed criticism of radical-constructivism's determinism see de Berg and Hoogeveen).

According to Luhmann, modern Western society consists of social systems differentiated on the basis of a specific *function*: the political system, the economic system, the art-system, the science-system, etc. Every social system is *autopoietic*,⁷ that is, self-referential, in that it uses its own operations to continue to exist, that is, to use its own operations. The elements on the basis of which the system operates are its communications. Every system produces its own form of communication by structuring its communications in terms of a system-specific *binary code*. For example, the law-system communicates about things and events in terms of their being lawful or unlawful (not, say, lawful/unlawful/profitable) whereas the economic system focuses on things and events from the perspective of to have/to have not. This makes possible a radical reduction of complexity because everything that appears on the "screen" of a

7 This is a concept Luhmann borrows from the biologist Humberto R. Maturana. See Maturana and Varela.

system necessarily appears in terms of the system-specific code.

All systems possess their own sets of criteria — *programs*, in Luhmann's terminology — on the basis of which all that is communicated about is assigned to one of the two poles of the code. The programs are historically variable. Examples of programs are scientific theories in the case of the science-system, and poetics or poetological views in the case of the art-system. The ambiguity and incompatibility of the various programs of a system generate constant discussion and foreclose a static, mechanistic relation between program and communication.

Because social systems do not function as simple input/output models but are self-referential, they are operationally closed, which means that other systems cannot influence them causally. Thus, the political system may prohibit the use of nuclear energy but how, and whether, the economic system then continues to operate depends exclusively on the economic system itself.⁸ While social systems are operationally closed they are informationally open. They can scan their environment and process information (but, of course, in terms of their respective binary codes only). So, although the political system cannot determine the state of the economy, financial markets *are* able to react to political developments. Also, autopoietic closure does not imply that social systems are totally independent. There is, on the contrary, a high degree of interdependence between the various systems. The political system could not survive without the law-system, the art-system needs the economic system, etc. Autopoiesis, or autonomy, means the independent handling of interdependencies and dependencies.

The general sketch I have just given also makes clear that systems theory — in spite of what many of its critics are saying — is by no means a conservative glorification of the status quo. Systems theory rigorously brings out the key problem of contemporary society, which lies in the inexorable dynamics of its function-systems: every social system moves on, or races on, but there is no societal center, no superordinate position, from where these different dynamics can be harmonized or attuned to one another. This is visible most clearly with problems which concern society as a whole and which for that very reason tend, so to speak, to fall between all stools. What makes environmental pollution for example so extraordinarily difficult to deal with is the radical diversity of interests of the various function-systems, which make them approach this phenomenon from virtually incompatible angles.⁹ Luhmann puts these societal

8 Or, since art is a social system, this means that the evolution of art is an autonomous, art-internal process — as already asserted by Tynyanov, who, however, failed to provide a genuine theory of society and a theory of communication to back up his claim. Here, it seems to me, Luhmann's theory is more helpful.

9 Luhmann 1986 offers an extensive analysis of the way society deals (or does not deal) with environmental pollution.

problems more radically than probably any other theorist.

Of course, all this is not to equate Luhmann's theory with actionist, *praxisbezogenes* thinking. Systems theory is no latter-day critical theory. Neither is Luhmann's emphasis on the contingency and openness of social processes equivalent to a naïve *Machbarkeitsideal*. His position is rather, "that social reality is the result of a contingent historical process, that could have taken a different course and could have led to different results. However, given the path which has been chosen and given the high complexity of modern society, it is clear that not everything is possible anymore — unless of course no price is too high" (Blom and Timmermans 73).

COMMUNICATIONS AS CHALLENGE TO SYSTEMS THEORY

Let me now move on to the problem of communication. We have seen that communication is a key concept, indeed *the* key concept, in systems theory. However, it seems to me that basically all interpretations and applications of systems theory miss out on the very aspects of Luhmann's concept of communication that distinguish it from other conceptions such as hermeneutics or the sender/receiver model of communication. Yet this specificity of Luhmann's concept is not only central to his conceptualization of society as a process grounded in contingency, it is also capable of throwing new light on the problems of meaning and understanding in literary studies. My aim in the following will be to expound and explain Luhmann's concept of communication, as I see it, and to bring out its innovative dimension. At the same time I shall try to indicate what new perspectives this concept opens up for the study of literature.¹⁰

Luhmann's theoretical turn is founded on the idea that communication is a negation-driven process. This means that the semantic dimension of language is no longer defined as the result of an ontological referentiality (as in representationist models) or a code-determined referentiality (as in sender/receiver models) but as the result of a communicative differentiality. Meaning does not result from the actualization of a pre-existing system of potential meanings but is the product of contingent — that is, temporally specific — negations. There are no fixed semantic oppositions, so there can be no fixed meanings either. From this perspective, meaning is both contingent and stable. It is contingent in the sense that the same sign can have entirely different meanings in different communicative situations. But it is stable in the sense that there can be no deconstructionist "jeu des différences," for every communication constitutes its

10 I realize that the following account is rather condensed and apodictic. In his paper, my colleague Matthias Prangel deals with some of the possible misinterpretations of, and objections to, the concept presented here.

own, specific, identity-constituting difference. The identical outward appearance, or formal stability, of words and formulations should therefore not be mistaken for the existence of cores of meaning. Semantic identity only exists in the form of communicatively produced differences.

As I indicated, one of the most important implications of this theory of communication is the dethronement of the concept of code as the guarantee of meaning and understanding. The code, after all, neither determines nor tells us what contingent options are negated on a particular occasion. So the linguistic assumption of a rule-based competence should be exchanged for, or complemented with, a negation competence. This entails a radical temporalization of semantics. For the systems theoretical shift from linguistic reference to communicative difference makes it clear that changes in the meaning of signs are not so much a matter of historical evolution but rather of a historical change that occurs both chronologically and in the *heterochronicity of one and the same historical context*.

To avoid misunderstanding it should be stressed that the postulate of a temporalized semantics is by no means equivalent to a simple plea for the historical contextualization of texts. Such a plea rests on a false premise: the premise that it is the context which determines the meaning of texts (or of words, or of signs). But even within one and the same *historical* context the *communicative* "situatedness" of texts may vary considerably. It is not as a product of its historical context that a text receives its semantic profile but as a specific communicative position within this historical context.

Now what are the implications of this theory of communication for the study of literature? In what way does it differ from concepts and positions developed by literary theory? Let me first mention some points of a general nature. After that, I shall take a look at the more specific problem of literary historiography.

The most obvious implication is the impossibility of viewing a text as an organic unity. A conceptualization of the text as the sum total of its internal relations is inconsistent with the principle of differentiability, which situates the foundation of meaning outside the text.

Neither can the intentions and goals of the author be seen as the determinant of meaning. It is not the author who as it were animates the text with meaning (how would he or she be able to do that?) but the communicative positionality of the text. Meaning is not a matter of authorial intention but is produced in and by a differentially determined area of communicative tension.

By the same token the reader drops out as potential producer of meaning. As embodiments of temporally specific selections texts are not mere *Kommunikatbasen* (à la S.J. Schmidt) or free-floating, decontextualized, entities (à la Ricoeur) but are differentially anchored in a discourse-situation that precedes their reception.

The fourth point concerns the dichotomy between an ordinary or scientific,

or in any case straightforward, use of language on the one hand and special, or parasitic, uses of language such as literature on the other. A systems theoretical approach (at least in the interpretation presented here) invalidates, or in any case undermines, this dichotomy by positing the historical uniqueness of *all* communication.¹¹

This historical uniqueness or historical otherness should finally not be confused with the one postulated by the *wirkungsgeschichtliche* approach. To this approach the historical otherness of texts is simply the result of historical distance, of the course of history. What we are really dealing with, however, is a *double* historical otherness, which results not just from the difference between the present and the past but from the difference between simultaneous differences as well.

At this juncture, and before I move on to the problem of literary historiography, it seems appropriate to take a short look at structuralism. In what way does the concept of difference I have used so often differ from Saussure's?¹² Unlike Saussure, Luhmann conceives the differential quality of meaning not as resulting from a covering language-system but as a communicative event. Thus, the differences that produce semantic identity are not linguistic but communicative entities: they are constituted by and in — exist only as products of — historically concrete and temporally unique communications. From this contrast results yet another difference between Luhmann and Saussure. As is well known, structuralism postulates the arbitrariness of the sign. This postulate means more than the simple fact that there is no natural relation between signifier and signified. It means that the signifieds themselves are arbitrary. According to Saussure, it is not the case that different languages use different words for one and the same concept. Rather, the concepts themselves vary because different languages divide the world in different ways. According to Luhmann, too, signs do not refer to an objectively given world, a world outside language. But because Luhmann focuses not on the linguistic system but on communication he is able to temporalize this idea. Referentiality, then, is not a matter of an *a priori* given linguistic system but is constituted in and by the communicative process. Communication is the processing of contingent selections and as such produces a continual dividing-up of the world. In and by every specific communication the world, which every communication presupposes, is reorganized as a specific unity of difference (see Luhmann 1990,

11 Including scientific communication, which therefore can not be seen as clear by or in itself.

As a matter of fact, the so-called descriptive statements or propositions are particularly open to misunderstanding because, as Luhmann puts it, "die 'ist'-Sprache ... unfähig ist, mitauszudrücken, gegen welche Differenz das bezeichnet worden ist, was gewählt werden soll, und demzufolge dazu bestimmt sein soll, verloren zu gehen" (1984, 205, note 20).

12 For a comparison of Luhmann's and Derrida's theories of difference see de Berg 1995b.

27-28). In short, signs refer to an *emergente Realiteit*, a reality that emerges in the communicative process.

Let me now come to the problem of literary historiography. The advantage of Luhmann's theory, it seems to me, is twofold. Firstly, it recognizes the contingency of communications. It avoids the determinism that, for example, reduces communications to their historical context or to the socialization-history of the author, and it preserves the fundamental openness of history. This brings me to the second advantage of Luhmann's approach: it takes the temporality of communication into account. If one neglects the differential anchoring of communication then there is only one way left to incorporate historical otherness: as the result of the gap between past and present. Hence, history is reduced to a sequence of transitions from one historical period to another and is stripped of its own, internal, dynamics. Indeed, the presumed unity of a historical period depends on the comparison with other postulated historical periods — depends, in other words, on historiographical ideas. Luhmann, by contrast, draws attention to the fact that historical otherness is not produced by historiography but in the historical process itself. Otherwise, past communications could never have articulated their specificity.

I know that all of this is very abstract. I know that there is still a long way to go to a full-fledged methodology. And I know that without the annoying concept of communication, systems theory — whether Luhmann's or another version — might well be much easier to apply. But I also know that if we want to preserve the contingency of social and historical processes we cannot do without this concept. That is the challenge communication offers to systems theory.

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