

**Systems Theory, Discourse, Positionality –
Towards a better understanding of the interior architecture of
functional differentiation in sociological Systems Theory**

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Introduction

Thank you very much for the invitation and for the possibility to present some very preliminary thoughts about social structure and semantics. What I am going to present is more or less a draft report from an unfinished project.

I will try to elucidate the advantages of a terminological strategy using the terms ‚discourse‘ and ‚social positioning‘. These terms are not located on the same level as the systems theoretical concepts of social structure and semantics. Nevertheless, they demand for the solution of similar constructive problems as they are already embedded in that distinction between social structure and semantics – a central distinction in the sociological part of Luhmann’s work. What I intend is, in other words, the constructive enlargement or amplification of the theoretical architecture requiring the clearance of already existing static problems in this architecture. My assumption is that it will be possible to enhance the

statics with the constructive addition of the terms 'position' and 'discourse'.

Against the background of this assumption, my central interest with the theory of semantics is the concept that I call *positionality*. This concept, which I will try to explain in my talk, presumably helps us to solve some of the problems connected to the idea of semantics. Moreover – and this is why I gave my presentation the subtitle on functional differentiation – positionality alleviates the development of concepts for the analysis of more fine-grained forms of social differentiation. Such forms, as I will argue, are rather covered than revealed by the systems theoretical typology of society, organisation and interaction.

My argumentation starts with this latter aspect, namely with the emergence of social structures *within* the systems theoretical trilogy. In a first step, I suggest analysing the *interior architecture* of society-organisation-interaction with the help of the terms 'discourse' and 'social position'. Asking whether and how my suggestions fits into the theoretical architecture of systems theory I will touch in a second step the debate about social structure and semantics. This debate has been led over quite some years within systems theory. It has shed light on the same conceptual problems, which have to be treated when aiming at the conceptual enlargement that I suggest in the first step. The idea of positionality with the concepts of discourse and social position, as I will try to show, sheds new light on this debate on structure and semantics. As a result, I will share Urs Stäheli's critique of what he calls Luhmann's 'linear retroactivity or retrospectivity' of semantics. I will, however, not share the way, in which he accounts for his idea of 'constitutive retroactivity or retrospectivity'. I think that the same result can be achieved without Stäheli's difficult way via Freud and Žižek, namely by

building on the sociological theory of communication and with the help of the concept of positionality. The very general and abstract character of this concept allows for its application in the theoretical cornerstones of the three types of social systems as well as in the various aspects of the interior design of society, organisation and interaction.

Discourse and position – Thoughts on the interior architecture of functional differentiation

In sociological literature, numerous hints can be found that the classical categories used by the theory of functional differentiation – although far from being wrong – are nevertheless too heavily built for a meaningful sociological analysis. One may, for instance, think of the growing interest that systems theoretical analysis of organisations pays to networks or to spatial phenomena (Stichweh, Nassehi, Baecker). Other examples can be found in cultural sociology, where systems theoretical explorations have also spread in the last years (Baecker, Fuchs). Last but not least one may think of the debate about social inequality, which is still very faint-hearted in systems theory, but has nevertheless started in first approaches.

These examples may indicate that a certain interest is growing in what I like to call the interior equipment of functional differentiation. At various instances the question arises what *else* we can say about social systems besides the fact that they are functionally differentiated. I am far from denying the primacy of functional differentiation in modern society. Nevertheless I would hesitate to say that each and every sociologically interesting observation can be made in the terminology of the three types of functionally differentiated systems – namely, society, organisation, interaction.

This question becomes especially relevant when one works in empirical research using concepts of systems theory. It was exactly this way on which I came across this question, namely in my research on differentiated forms of social inclusion. In systems theory, as is well-known, the term 'inclusion' has a rather sharp contour. It has the form of a binary distinction, with the two sides of social inclusion and exclusion. Exactly with this binary form the concept conceals, as it seems to me, the enormous richness in the variation of social forms of addressability. Inclusion, as I would argue, is a much more gradual and modal concept (Bora 2002, "Wer gehört dazu?"). My experience is that working empirically with this variety of social addressability is a serious challenge for systems theoretical categorisation. Against this background of inclusion as a solely binary concept operating in all sorts of social systems, my research interest very soon switched towards the search for concepts with higher resolving capacity regarding various forms of social differentiation. Such concepts, as I realised, should be based on the general binary distinction between inclusion and exclusion and should then be able to make the large variety of social addressability visible. Once you have started to engage with this interior architecture of functional differentiation, you will very soon face the question of the interrelation between social forms and the mechanisms leading to the emergence of these forms. Inclusion and exclusion, first of all, describe forms, namely the including and excluding effects of social structuration. The mechanisms, which in detail lead to such effects, have to be identified differently. And exactly here was the point, where I was forced to step on virgin soil in systems theoretical research. When analysing such mechanisms based on functional differentiation in a number of empirical research

projects, I made use of mainly two terms, namely discourse and social position (Bora 1999, Bora/Hausendorf (2006), trying to integrate these two terms into systems theory.

Let me describe the two concepts very briefly, in order to give a rough idea of what I am talking about. I cannot report the research here. Everything is, however, well documented and a number of publications about the projects are available.

Discourse and position are closely linked on a conceptual level. On one hand this is the very point of the idea of positionality. On the other hand, the close connection makes the description a bit difficult, because beginning with one of the concepts automatically already implies the other.

Let me start with the concept of discourse. The term, as you know, has no generally accepted meaning. It is rather being used in various contexts and modalities. I will not go into details of this debate. Instead I would only say that my notion of discourse is on the phenomenological level rather similar to Foucault's idea of discourse as a communicative universe with regulating and powerful structures (Bora 2000, "Zum soziologischen Begriff des Diskurses"). However, my theoretical foundations are different from Foucault's. Discourse, as I use the term, designates a *form of internal differentiation in social systems*. As they are understood by sociological systems theory, social systems are communication systems. Such internal differentiation is produced by limiting communicative selections in social, temporal and substantive respect. These limitations govern the way of communicating within functionally differentiated systems. Thereby they furnish the interior architecture by constituting particular thematic preferences in the substantive dimension, particular role patterns or *positions* in the social

dimension, and particular modes of sequencing in the temporal dimension. In other words, discourses are internally differentiated sets of cognitive and normative expectations with respect to legitimate themes, social positions, and rules of sequential conjunction. Within social systems, discourses constitute particular modes of communication. They do not constitute (autopoietic) systems. Therefore, they are not creating a new level of functional differentiation. We are not talking about system formation within systems. Discourses do not produce and reproduce their elements. They are rather built on the autopoiesis of existing social systems. What they do, however, is to constitute elements as depending on a particular discourse and its specific mode of communication.

Therefore, discourses are not systems, but *differentiated structures* of social systems. In systems theoretical language we might say that differentiated structures are internally conditioned (programmed) limitations of selection.

Such conditioned structuration occurs in all types of systems and on all levels of communication. We observe them, wherever a particular mode of communication emerges with particular expectations but without the emergence of new systems, without an own autopoiesis. Think, for instance, of theories or schools in science or in the law, of political camps or directions, of networks and groups. They all develop patterns of expectations and communications that can be described as discourses in the before-mentioned sense. These examples also show that the communications of a particular social system, the law, for instance, or science, may switch between different discourses without touching the unity of the system. No matter, which scientific theory you are using, you will always reproduce science, because every theory belongs to the communicative universe in which the acceptability of

utterances is coded by the validity claim of truth. On the other hand, discourse will often serve a main system reference. This is at least, what we observe empirically.

Obviously, this concept of discourse makes only very modest claims: it can be used for any form of specialised communication without particular specification.

Against this background I can now turn to the concept of *social position*: In our research, we describe with this term a set of communicated expectations about social addresses (persons) and objects. Heiko Hausendorf has made very instructive use of this concept in his research on linguistic membership. In our research on citizen participation such social positions became manifest as differentiated images of self and others in communication. As I mentioned before, discourses constitute, among other things, social positions. They assign slots in the social dimension, in which persons become addressable or objects become describable within a given discourse. In this sense, they constitute social positions. Needless to say that the three dimensions – social, substantive, temporal – are linked with each other communicatively. Therefore we regularly find legitimate themes and typical forms of temporality connected to a particular social position. Insofar the positioning effect of discourses stretches over the three dimensions.

Against this background, we may then say that social positions as phenomena of the social structure are produced by communication, namely by discourse in particular. They are communicative effects, as it seems.

However, the relation is a bit more complicated. The concept of discourse does not allow for such a simple conjunction. For discourse is itself an effect of social positioning processes. As a set of expectations a

discourse itself expresses specific themes, social positions and temporal structures. One can, therefore, with good reasons defend the opposite argument, namely that a given social position constitutes a particular discourse.

In research – and this is quite instructive – you can often if not always argue in both directions with good reasons. In a large European research project that I conducted together with Heiko Hausendorf – Pat O’Mahony was also one of the leading researchers –, in this project we had a long controversy about the interpretation of the data exactly against this background.

In other words: we are facing a general problem. Social positioning, as we have to conclude, is both an effect and a precondition of discourse. Discourses as differentiated internal structures of social systems have positioning effects and are themselves incorporating social positions. We therefore have to ask, on which level our concepts are settled, which distinction they assign, and how they are linked with each other. What makes me confident that we will be able to solve this problem is the fact that we know exactly this difficulty very well from the debate on social structure and semantics.

And this leads me to the second part of my talk. In this part I will explain that the basic phenomenon of the *positionality of communicative events* helps us to prepare a solution of the problem that I mentioned before. This solution will be sought on the level of discourse and position *and* on the one of social structure and semantics. Both levels show similar faces.

The positionality of communicative events

The theoretical duality of discourse and position obviously is analogous to the distinction between semantics and social structure. The latter is,

however, like the typology of functional differentiation, rather heavily built in comparison to the phenomena described before. It is born from the history of the theory and it is focussing on phenomena that are located on the level of society as a whole and are relevant or significant for society, 'important' or 'cultivated' semantics as it were. Exactly these properties are missing in the phenomena that are interesting for us. We are rather dealing with everyday semantics, far below the all encompassing significance of cultivated semantics. In our research context we could rather speak of 'uncultivated' semantics.

What is a common property of both cultivated „great“ semantics and everyday forms of discursive structuration, is the seemingly paradoxical mode of mutual constitution, that is typical for the relation between structure and semantics of the one side and position and discourse on the other. Discourses create the positions, which they presuppose and from which they themselves emerge. A similar observation can be made with respect to social structure and semantics. This is a very common issue in the current debate.

In systems theory it is consented that both social structures and semantics are communicated forms of sense/meaning. (Stichweh, Stäheli, Markus Göbel with a comprehensive study in sociology of science, Göbel 2006). Both social structure and semantics assign the same fact, as already Luhmann wrote. They describe generalised sense/meaning on a higher level (Stichweh 2000). In difference to Luhmann, who thinks of an adaptation of semantics to structural change, his critics look for a more advanced and complex description of the relation between the two sides.

Stichweh (2000), for instance, argues that semantics is also constitutive for social structure, namely as retrospective sense-making. Because all

social structures are expectations, also social structures are forms generalised sense. He suggests seven different variants of the relation between the two sides: differentiation, dispositive, preadaptive advances, retrospectivity of semantics, evolution, knowledge, latency of semantics. These solutions, however, stand isolated without a systematic relation between them. Stichweh only argues that semantics describe *possible* structures, leaving the distinction between cognitive and normative expectations undecided. From an empirical point of view, I am not yet fully convinced by this argument. For there are many semantics with clear cut normative or cognitive orientation, think for instance of revolutionary semantics. Moreover, it remains systematically unclear, on which level of differentiation this argument can be applied. I assume that the situation of indecision can occur in every communication and is not restricted to semantics (in the sense of cultivated semantics in Systems Theory).

For these reasons I rather tie in with the problem analysis put forward by Urs Stäheli. It is mainly Stäheli's merit to have brought the controversy about discourse and position as well as the one about social structure and semantics back to the basic distinction between *operation and observation*. He provides evidence for the fact that this distinction plays an important role already on the general level of the differentiation between system and environment. Against this background, he thoroughly analyses Luhmann's concept of semantics.

Luhmann also concedes that observations are always operations. He tries to mitigate this blurred relation by two means: Firstly, he quantifies the operational aspect of semantics and says that it is of only marginal relevance (Stäheli 213). Secondly, he limits the significance of the operability of semantics to specified systemic fields with particular

types of operations (Stäheli 213.) In all other cases, i.e. in their majority, he argues, semantics follows social structure. Stäheli calls this standard relation 'linear retroactivity'. In contrast to this concept, he suggests a model of 'constitutive retroactivity', which is strongly built on psychoanalytical terms. As I mentioned before, I am not going to follow Stäheli in every detail. I would rather like to go back to the distinction between operation and observation. It helps us to identify the general property of *positionality* on the level of communication theory. From the perspective of positionality, the *constitutive* relation between social structure and semantics and between discourse and position will be applications of the general concept.

With my considerations about positionality I follow some hints in the writings of a branch of systems theory that was active at the University of Giessen during the eighties and nineties. In the Giessen group the relations with socio-linguistics and ethnomethodology are particularly strong (Peter Fuchs and WL Schneider are important names; also a close connection to Jörg Bergmann, who – far from being a system theorist – influenced the debate from the ethnomethodological perspective). Particularly Peter Fuchs has given some important – although very implicit – hints regarding positionality in his theory of communication in 1993.

In the relevant paragraph (1993, 23 f.), Fuchs says, that a communicative event is characterised by the fact that it is only what it is in difference to a second event that attaches to the first and only *thereby* fixes it. A communicative event, as he argues, gains its identity only by being treated in a consecutive event, by being dealt with in an event that is no longer the first one. No utterance, as he says, 'has itself', each one observes another one and is being registered only 'post festum' of itself –

namely by yet another utterance. The identity of an event is, in other words, differential. An event implies *two* temporal positions in order to be *one* event. It is never fixed to one single temporal position. Its definite being (Latin: *esse*) is the communication of its having-been (Latin: *fuisse*).

What does this mean sociologically? For me it means that pure operationality cannot be conceived on the level of communication. Utterances only occur as communicative events in their positionality, in other words in what Fuchs calls the record of having-been, or in systems theoretical terms: in the observation of an operation.

We may take a general example in order to see the basic relevance of positionality: Why is the beginning of a communication always difficult (cf. ethnomethodology, Garfinkel, Sacks, Goffman)? It is difficult exactly because of the positionality of communicative events that only occurs *after* the first utterance. 'Pure' operation does not have any difference. Therefore, the constitution of a *social* event requires observation. The fact that this observation is a positioned one, that it occurs in a 'post festum' position, helps us to understand the empirical difficulty connected with every type of communicative opening, constitutive speech acts, rites of enthronement etc. All beginnings are difficult – due to positionality.

The point with my considerations lies in a general insight on the level of communication theory, namely the conclusion that operation and observation are linked with each other in a relation of *mutual constitution*. To define communicative events as 'positioned' determines them as *social* events. This determination only arises from positionality, namely from the fact that mere operation is positioned in a temporal sequence with its observation.

As far as I can see, this concept of positionality has a high connectivity with Luhmann's theory of communication. Think, for instance, of the well-known quote from 'Social Systems', saying that every new event in communication is being glued with the foregoing and is being treated as if it would have been expectable (Luhmann 1984, 391.). The event itself does not carry a meaningful motivation for its occurrence. The meaningful structuration emerges from the various possibilities of conjunction and their difference to the one conjunction realised in the sequence of events. I call this incorporation of all communicative events in such a structural relation, in a temporal chain of events, *positionality*.

Stäheli deals much more critically with Luhmann arguing that Luhmann in his threefold concept of communication (information – message – understanding) undermines the very strength of the differentiation between operation and observation. As Stäheli (123) argues, Luhmann's concept of understanding is somehow settled below the level of 'yes'- or 'no'-statements, that means below the possibility of basic operations.

Against this argument I would stress the fact that the term positionality does not presuppose a positioning in the difference of 'yes' and 'no'. It rather describes a much more fundamental mechanism of the social constitution of communicative events in the difference between operation and observation. This is much less than confirmation (yes) or denial (no). It is, as Luhmann says, distinction and designation.

Stäheli talks about positionality, too. However, he refers to circumstances inside semantics saying that positioning a term in the network of semantics decides about the possibility of later effects in the constitution of meaning. In this understanding, positionality becomes a relation between different observations. This is rather similar to much what had been discussed in semiotics. It does, however, not meet my

sociological intentions with positionality. For I suggest conceiving positionality right in the realisation of the difference between operation and observation. The concept of positionality indicates the fathomless quality of pure operation. Because – not although – because pure operations can mean literally anything, they are thread in a sequence with an observation constituting sense and meaning.

Stäheli also is aware of fathomless operation. However, he addresses this fact with reference to Derrida's understanding of the 'empty significant'. He is, therefore, very close to Derrida's notion of *differance*. I would not deny the possibility of this argument, but would rather prefer to remain in the field of systems theory, at least as long as the theoretical possibilities do not seem to be exhausted. Like in *differance*, in the theoretical fundament of systems theory there is also 'pure' operation needed. Without such operability, without any distinction, nothing social could ever emerge. However, only in difference to observation, more precisely in the execution or realisation of this difference operability will constitute as a *social event*. Therefore, I conclude that on the level of general communication theory, positionality is a fundamental property of all social events.

Against this background, I define positionality

- as the operational implementation and observation of the difference of operation and observation,
- or in other words, as the identity of the difference of operation and observation.

This very general and abstract definition of positionality and the process of positioning based in general communication theory can then be applied in various fields of sociological theory. From this perspective,

distinctions like the one between social structure and semantics or the one between position and discourse appear as specifications of a common property of all communications, called positionality.

It is certainly indispensable to separate this concept terminologically against similar strategies and to embed it in a broader theoretical and sociological context. I can only drop a few names at this point:

Positionality as a philosophical concept has to be taken into consideration, mainly in Helmuth Plessner's philosophical anthropology. He speaks about excentric positionality. In comparison to the general theory of communication, this concept is placed on a rather high level of reflexivity. In a way, it treats a special case of positionality. – Others: G.H. Mead, Whitehead, Peirce.

With respect to *methodology*, the tradition of social positioning theory gives a lot of valuable insights. This was mainly the aspect we made use of in our research.

In terminological respect, *social position* is already an implicit sociological concept in a number of theories. Simmel, Parsons, and Bourdieu are sociological candidates for a terminological delimitation respectively for the formulation of a broad concept of social position. Role and status, inclusion and exclusion would have to be checked for comparability. Semantics and social structure can be conceived according to the idea of positionality. They refer to only one of the various levels, on which the distinction between operation and observation becomes effective. Another level refers to the interior structure of functional differentiation. It is related to the distinction of position and discourse. Discourse communicates expectations regarding legitimate themes, positions and temporal sequencing. In the same

course of events a discourse itself is being constituted as a social position.

Well, these were my very preliminary and experimental attempts on discourse, position and the interior architecture of functional differentiation. As you see, there is still much to be done. Nevertheless, I do hope that I could present some provocative and hopefully stimulating thoughts. I look forward discussing them with you. Thank you for your attention.

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