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# The use of distinction in the process of communication

## Aspects of a system-theory of communication

1013

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to improve the theoretical understanding of the communicative processes in social systems.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Conceptual generalisation.

**Findings** – Aspects of a communications theory with three assumptions and ten propositions.

**Originality/value** – The method used and the findings.

**Keywords** Systemic thinking, Communication, Complexity, Systems theory, Philosophy of communication

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

### Introduction

The theoretical perspective of this paper is systems theory, especially Luhmann's (1989, 1995, 2002) perspective of communication. By theory we here mean, the system of propositions (Bunge, 1985).

The theory we develop is a generic one, i.e., it operates at micro-, meso- and macro-level in social systems.

A social system's capacity for self-development depends largely on its capacity to communicate both internally and externally (Miller, 1978). Without some level of communication, the system will very likely disintegrate (Maturana and Varela, 1980). Communication creates the idea of order, even where there is significant complex situations and the system is bordering on chaos (Maturana, 1981).

When individuals, groups and organisations act and interact, their actions must encompass a greater realm of possibility than can be used by the surrounding environment. This is a simplified version of Ashby's (2012) law of requisite variety. Ashby's law can also be described as a flexible response, i.e., social systems must be able to react at all times in such a way as to have a greater number of strategies available than is the case for the surrounding environment.

The aspect of our approach to the use of distinction in communication is our attempt to exploit the connections between the following three concepts: observation, differentiation and interpretation.



The system may be communicating at various levels, for example, individually, within groups or at an organisational level:

*Assumption 1.* The same three processes will operate at all three levels.

*Assumption 2.* Functional differentiation occurs continuously in dynamic social systems.

*Assumption 3.* The use of distinctions can be applied to all phenomena/problems relating to social systems.

When we observe something new in a social system, we always observe differences, or as Bateson (1972) puts it: “the difference that makes a difference, is an idea” (p. 272). Such differences may be observed between the system and the surrounding environment, or between different functional differentiations. Luhmann (1995) subjects functional differentiation to a thorough theoretical examination. In fact, one of Luhmann’s contributions to theoretical sociology may be described as his indication of the transition from structural functionalism to functional differentiation (Knodt, 1995, p. xi).

There is a distinction between linear and circular (interactive) explanatory models (Foerster, 1981; Bateson, 1972). Linear explanatory models may be likened to the billiard-ball model of causality, i.e., where one considers the cause and then the effect. Circular explanatory models are linked to communication systems, whereby the future, by means of a social mechanism based on the phenomenon of expectation, can be used to explain behaviour in the here and now (Weick, 1979). If one fails to distinguish between the linear and circular explanatory models, one may easily commit logical errors and misinterpretations. At worst, one may injure oneself, others and one’s own ecosystem (Maturana and Varela, 1992; Cull, 2013).

The problem which is the foundation for this investigation is that complex situations in communication makes the effective exchange of ideas difficult.

The research question we examine is:

*RQ1.* How can one use distinction in the process of communication to reduce complex situations?

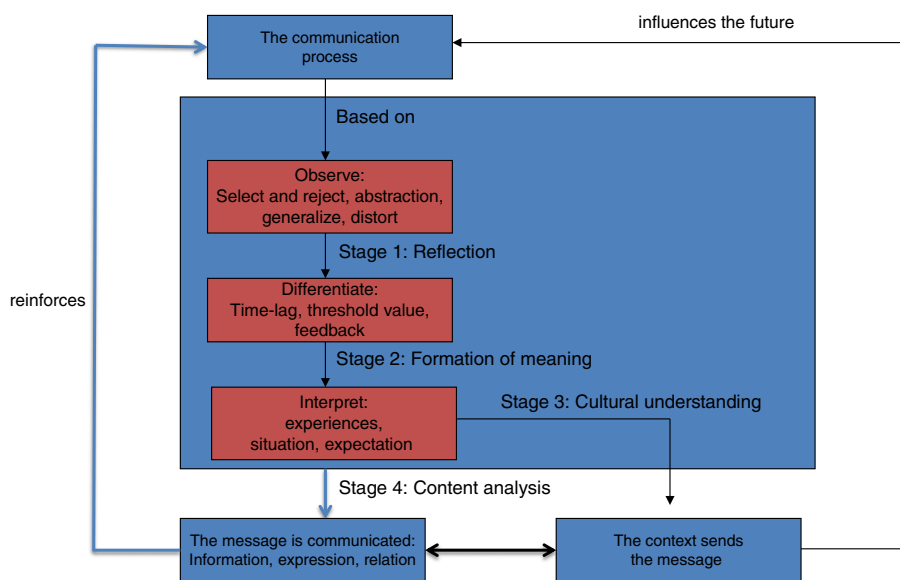
The purpose is to improve the theoretical understanding of the communicative processes.

By a complex situation we here mean that one can steer the process of a complex situation, if one have knowledge of the process. This is not so with complexity, because emergents can always turn the system into chaos.

Figure 1 sums up the introduction and shows how this article is structured.

### **Methodology: conceptual generalisation**

Research falls into two main categories: conceptual generalisation and empirical generalisation (Bunge, 1998, pp. 3-50, 51-107, 403-411). Conceptual generalisation is an investigation whereby the researcher uses other researchers’ empirical findings in conjunction with his or her own process of conceptualisation in order to generalise and identify a pattern. This contrasts with empirical generalisation, where the researcher investigates a phenomenon or problem that is apparent in the empirical data, and only thereafter generalises in the light of his or her own findings (Bunge, 1998, pp. 403-411). The starting point for the researcher in the case of both empirical and conceptual generalisation will be a phenomenon or problem in the social world.



**Figure 1.**  
Philosophy of communication:  
communication as process

Conceptual generalisation and empirical generalisation are strategies that are available for answering scientific questions. Which of these strategies one chooses to use will be determined largely by the nature of the problem and “the subject matter, and on the state of our knowledge regarding that subject matter” (Bunge, 1998, p. 16).

Conceptual generalisation, which is the subject of our investigation here, is “a procedure applying to the whole cycle of investigation into every problem of knowledge” (Bunge, 1998, p. 9).

The approach here is to develop a conceptual model and then discuss each element in the model. An analytical scheme or model is a general sociological analytical tool, which may be used to illuminate and organise a phenomenon, event, action or process. The purpose of an analytical scheme is “the construction of abstract systems of categories that presumably denote key properties of the universe and crucial relations among those properties [...] Explanation of specific events is achieved when the scheme can be used to interpret some specific empirical process”. In this paper, the analytical scheme will take the form of an analytical model (Figure 1), precisely, as Turner suggests, to show relationships between properties.

An analytical scheme may be used methodologically in two ways, says Turner. One way is when an empirical event can be placed in a category in the scheme: “then the empirical event is considered to be explained”. The other way is “when the scheme can be used to construct a descriptive scenario, of why and how events in an empirical situation transpired, then these events are seen as explained”. Both these methods will be used here. In addition to Turner’s approach, we have drawn on Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas concerning how a concept can be studied (pp. 6-9, 15-17), and Adriaenssen and Johannessen’s (2015) elaboration of conceptual generalisation.

**Observe**

When we observe, we assume that we are doing this against the background of three main processes (Bateson, 1988, p. 60; Maturana and Varela, 1992; Bandler and Grinder, 1982, 1990):

- (1) We select something from a phenomenon or problem. Simultaneously, we decide to reject much of what is included in that phenomenon/problem-area.
- (2) We then apply processes of abstraction to make generalisations about what we have selected.
- (3) As these processes of abstraction take place, the material that we have selected is transformed and distorted from its original form. This idea is no more complex than the idea that data is different from information, which in turn is different from knowledge.

When we select and reject material from our observations, to a large extent we do this on the basis of our experiences (Bateson, 1988, p. 60). Our experiences therefore guide us when we decide what we should select and focus on, in the here and now. It is also reasonable to assume that our experiences affect our expectations. If such a presupposition is correct, we may claim that our actions to a large extent are controlled by our experiences:

- P1.* The procedures for what we observe are based on our own fundamental experiences. It is these experiences that are determinative for our selection of some elements and our rejection of others.

Observation may lead to spontaneous action, without progression through the stages of differentiation, interpretation and, finally, communication of a message. This point is considered by Luhmann (1995, p. 300). According to Luhmann (1995), this is precisely what happens in complex social situations, because the processes of observation and communication occur spontaneously (pp. 301-303). Because communication will take place more-or-less spontaneously in the aftermath of observation, one might envision that this is precisely what happens in crisis situations:

- P2.* In crisis situations, the communicative process is abbreviated to include only observation and then communication: the stages of distinction and interpretation are omitted.

When communication occurs in a crisis situation, one may envision that the reflective stage will take place after the communication of a message. Further, one may envision that this reflective stage will support an expectation about what one should do the next time a similar crisis occurs. Accordingly, the sequence of events is as shown in Figure 2.

When reflecting on an action, one may obtain knowledge about the mistakes one made or the strategies by which one achieved success. This knowledge is then internalised as a kind of expectation that will be used in the new process of observation that one will conduct if a similar crisis occurs at a later date. The basic process, both in crises and in more ordinary situations, is that we select some things and thus reject others, we abstract and thereby distort what was our initial perception. Next time a similar incident occurs, we have internalised a process of reflection that will cause our spontaneous communication to be different from how it was on the previous occasion:

- P3.* Reflection is crucial to future communication processes.

## Differentiate

We assume that differentiation takes place on the basis of three main processes (Bateson, 1972; Luhmann, 2002; Foerster, 1981):

- (1) Time-lag is embedded.
- (2) There are complex feedback loops.
- (3) All phenomena and problems have a threshold value. If the threshold value is exceeded, irreversible processes may be triggered[1].

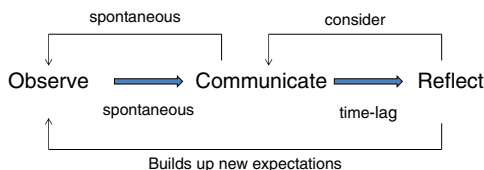
When differentiating, it is important to have a clear understanding of the three terms, feedback, time-lag and threshold value. The importance of feedback may be illustrated by the following example: what would happen if one puts one's hand on a glowing hot plate, and it takes ten minutes before the brain receives a signal of pain? In the novel *Dead Souls* (1842) by the Ukrainian-Russian author Gogol, there is a description of what happens in a social system when there is a long time-lag in the communication of vital information; he describes how "dead souls" could be bought and sold as if they were financial assets. The "dead souls" were deceased serfs. Landlords received a subsidy for each serf, and they continued to receive the subsidy after a serf had died, because there was a considerable time-lag between the death of a serf and when the Moscow bureaucrats registered their deaths. Thus, in the time period between the serf's death and the registration of the death, the "dead soul" could be bought and sold. Similarly, "inside trading" may also represent a case where there is a time-lag in the communication of information. In this case, there is a time-lag before certain information becomes public, thus giving "insiders" an advantage using non-public information which they can exploit when trading stocks.

In differentiating we constantly attempt to make comparisons. We even compare comparisons in an attempt to find patterns. We compare what we know with what we do not know. We compare what we believe to be facts with what the facts represent. We compare concepts to other concepts. We compile concepts in models and try to see if it may tell us something about what it is intended to represent. Comparisons are never objective, they are subjective. However, subjective perceptions can be tested against what they represent, i.e., subjective perceptions can be subjected to objective analysis through tests. Similarly, tacit knowledge can be objective in its consequences, even if it is subjective for the beholder of tacit knowledge:

*P4.* When we differentiate, we create differences.

There are some conditions that must exist so that we are able to compare and create differences. These are the following; in analogy to Bateson's (1988) six criteria of mental processes (pp. 134-135):

- (1) Comparisons must be made between two or more systems where the parts and the whole constitute an integrated system. The rationale is that comparisons



**Figure 2.**  
Observation,  
communication,  
reflection

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can only be made within the same category, otherwise it is like comparing the word “fish” with an actual fish, and there is of course no resemblance between a fish and the word “fish”.

- (2) Comparisons can only be made between systems that operate and are driven by differences. The rationale is that such systems operate in the communicative world, while systems in the natural world operate in relation to force and energy. If a distinction is not made between these two system categories, then logical errors may occur, culminating in errors of category.
  - (3) Comparisons can only be made between systems that operate using interactive (circular) information processes, not linear. The rationale is that all systems in the communicative world are driven by interactive information processes, while processes in the natural world may often be understood linearly.
- P5.* Differences in communicating systems occur along two axes: (a) the axis: part-whole; (b) the axis where circular processes constitute a guiding principle.

### **Interpret**

It is assumed that three processes are involved in interpretation (Luhmann, 1995, pp. 59-103):

- (1) our fundamental experiences;
  - (2) the context in which the interpretation occurs; and
  - (3) to our expectations, providing guidelines for interpretation in the present.
- P6.* If our fundamental experiences change drastically, it is highly probable that our whole interpretation will also change.

When interpreting a distinction there are always two sides; this may be figuratively compared to a T-account, with left and right hand columns. When a person chooses to interpret one side of a distinction, then he/she rejects or de-emphasises the other side. This may be figuratively compared to tossing a coin – if the coin lands heads, the tails is still “involved” in the process even if it is the flipside (comparable to that which is rejected). In other words, the other side of distinction is still involved, although excluded from further interpretation, which in turn influences the communication of the message.

On the basis of such an understanding that one thinks using differences and distinctions, it can be assumed that the social world is interpreted from what is selected and rejected in relation to the distinction. Or to put it another way, it is possible to interpret the social world, and communicate this interpretation, precisely because there is something you choose not to interpret. Luhmann (2002) says: “Nothing can be observed (not even the nothing) without drawing a distinction” (p. 87). This distinction, this boundary if you will, did not exist until an individual observed a problem or phenomenon and drew this distinction. The interpretation is thus a result of this highly personal and subjective demarcation or drawing of boundaries that creates a distinction. In this interpretation process something is selected and something is rejected; it creates an inside and an outside, where something is emphasised and something else is de-emphasised (Herbst, 2013, p. 88):

- P7.* Interpretation is carried out by means of distinctions.

Creating distinctions and interpretation is done, amongst others, on the basis of the fact that social systems maintain expectations (Luhmann, 1995, p. 303). In this way, the distinctions that are created, and the interpretations that are made, are maintained through the norms and values that exist in the social system we are a part of.

When an observer creates a distinction, he/she simultaneously creates one or more meanings in relation to those who interpret the distinction, i.e., the distinction between tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge (Polanyi, 1983; Wagner, 1987). Meaning is thus a result of two processes. First, a distinction is created. Then the individual chooses to emphasise one side of the distinction and de-emphasise the other. Through these two processes meaning is developed. In this way, the observer frames in the phenomenon or problem in a certain way. This framing creates a dimension of interpretation that others have to relate to. As follows, the distinction gives the observer the power of interpretation, which can be utilised for various purposes. Whoever creates the distinction develops thereby meaning which is ascribed to the phenomenon or problem. The distinction thus becomes a marker, which creates a boundary. On one side of the boundary exists one reality; on the other side exists another. The meaning of the phenomenon/problem created by the individual is thus amplified by the fact that we develop our fundamental experiences through this process. Simultaneously, our expectations mechanism is also reinforced, i.e., how we should interpret similar situations in the future:

*P8.* Expectations guide the interpretation process.

Similar to the physical limits imposed by national boundaries, it may be imagined what happens to the development of meaning when it is subjected to a de-limitation process. On one side of the boundary (i.e. distinction), one school of thought or meaning will emerge while a different school of thought/meaning will emerge on the other side. The boundary or limit in a distinction thus creates two completely different universes of thought/meaning. These schools of thought/meaning are created by the fact that there will always be some who choose to emphasise one side of the distinction that has been created, while others choose to emphasise the other side.

Distinction first creates a limit or a boundary; then it creates a dimension for interpretation. This dimension also provides guidance for action, which implies that the two schools of thought/meaning also interpret the actions of others differently.

The interpretation process similar to the observation process is a process of selection, i.e., we select something and reject something else. In addition, the outcome of the interpretation is also dependent on our experiences, the situation dynamics and our expectations. The provisional final result is that meaning is created. The interpretation is not a case of copying someone else's message or one's own observation and differentiation, but a creative process that creates meaning for the individual:

*P9.* Interpretation creates meaning.

### **Cultural understanding and content analysis (Stages 3 and 4 in Figure 1)**

When we observe, it is always done in a context. A context is the psychological framework of a situation, event, etc. (Bateson, 1972, pp. 186-187). Is it then possible to "see" a context? The context sends messages, Bateson (1972) writes (pp. 185-187). To observe, differentiate and interpret (ODI) in a context, one must be able to understand the signals transmitted by the context. Bateson refers to the psychological framework as meta-communication, that is, in order to "see" in the context we are in, we



must understand the meta-communication. Culture may also be viewed as a meta-communication system. If the signals transmitted by the culture are not understood, it will be difficult to communicate in the context of which the individual is a part.

If the meta-communication is not understood, then paradoxes will easily arise. The occurrence of paradoxes in communicative contexts has a history of at least 2,000 years; the paradoxes of the Greek philosopher Zeno (490-430 BCE)[2] (Zeno's paradoxes) are well known. Paradoxes are often divided into two categories, logical and rhetorical (Luhmann, 2002, p. 80). Logical paradoxes should be avoided, while rhetorical paradoxes are used for various reasons. The Norwegian philosopher Zapffe formulated a paradox, Zapffe's Paradox: "It is that which you are good at that will be your downfall"[3]. Such rhetorical paradoxes provide a basis for reflection. For example, we are so good at technology that it is perhaps this which will be the destruction of mankind! In other words, rhetorical paradoxes are sentences and statements that contradict common sense. Paradoxes often create unexpected meaning that is contrary to assumed ideas (Luhmann, 2002, p. 202, note 7).

Paradoxes may occur in communication when there are differences in the abstraction of logical types between communicating parties. This may lead to loss of meaning, but also to humour bringing the parties closer to each other (Bateson, 1972, pp. 187-189). Paradoxes can emerge between the two sides in a distinction. Consider the Liar's Paradox, for example. In this case the two sides of the distinction are true-false. The paradoxical statement is as follows: "All Cretans are liars" (the utterer of the statement is also a Cretan). To solve a paradox of this type, one must establish acceptable conditions for the statement (Luhmann, 2002, p. 88). The paradox has no conditions in itself and that is precisely why it is a paradox. In order to solve the Liar's Paradox it must be broken down into three conditions:

- Statement 1: the utterer is from Crete. Condition C1.
- Statement 2: all Cretans are liars. Condition C2.
- Condition C3: C1 and C2 are disconnected.

When a paradox is unravelled in this way, it is no longer a paradox, but only two statements that are connected to conditions. The two statements above must then be verified empirically. Is the speaker from Crete? Is it true that all Cretans are liars? The probability that an infinite number of "black swans" will turn up in the empirical study are large, i.e., one quickly discovers that condition C2 is not true:

*P10.* Paradoxes in communication occur when the communicating parties operate at different levels of abstraction.

### *Theoretical implications*

Differences in the communication world may be explained in causal terms in relation to the billiard-ball model of causality in the physical world. Differences and ideas are created, inter alia, by a process that may be called punctuation. Ideas are created, according to Bateson (1972), precisely through "the difference which makes a difference" (p. 457). By punctuation a distinction is drawn between cause and effect; this is done with a clear motive in mind (Bateson, 1972, pp. 292-293). A causality is thus created which does not actually exist in the real world, and one is then free to discuss the effects of this cause which has been created through a process of punctuation. A sequence of a process is selected, and then bracketed. In this way, we de-limit what is punctuated from the rest of the process. Figuratively, we may imagine this as a circle

that is divided into small pieces; one piece of the circle is then selected and folded out into a straight line. This results in the creation of an artificial beginning and end (a circle obviously has neither beginning nor end). However, this relationship is created through punctuation for the purpose of appearing logical and consistent to an untrained observer. The premises are thus accepted and the observer falls into a communicative trap. In illustration, one can quote Ibsen's Peer Gynt: "The wilder the starting point, the result will oft be the more original"[4].

In distinction and punctuation, differences are introduced into the communication process. Distinction also creates a time dimension where expectation plays a role in interpretation. One acts, for example, often on the basis of what one expects from oneself and what one thinks others expect you to do in the situation in question. Expectation is thus an important subset of the communication process, relating to a potential future where the future is also a part of the communication process.

### Conclusion

The answer to the research question in this paper is briefly formulated in the following: distinction as a method consists of the main processes: ODI.

The communication processes ODI result in communication, bringing both past and future into the communication process. If there was no distinction between past and present, the individual (person A) would be able to present him/herself as he/she is in the present without considering the past. However, memory prevents the individual in question from presenting herself as she would like to be. Reactions from another person (person B) involve interpretations that take the individual's past into consideration, not only as they appear in the present. In this way, the communication processes, observation, differentiation and interpretation also create a connection between past and present, adding meaning to how the person "is", not only how he/she appears in the present. It may be said that history's "slow field" comes into play regarding the memory of the other, which becomes an important social mechanism for keeping person A firmly within an historic context. This context creates meaning, identity and coherence for person B in the communication process.

If the meeting between two people who have known each other is to be authentic, an effort must be made to forget what they know about each other. Of course this is in one sense impossible; therefore such a meeting will always be an encounter with the past. The individual is embedded within their culture and history, so that the presentation of himself/herself only constitutes a small thread of the whole.

Thus, memory functions as a very strong conservative characteristic in communication. One maintains perception of the other over time until differences impinge on what is perceived as their past. Even then an attempt will be made to reach further back in history within the culture in order to maintain our own perception. In other words, through the distinction process one keeps the other in an "iron cage" of memory, and will reluctantly release him/her.

The differences that the other presents over time must be differences that matter, and they must surpass some threshold value before we slowly begin to change our perception. It might be said in agreement with Bateson that our brains create images of the other, which we think we perceive.

A common reaction when meeting new people, Bateson says, is to adopt assumptions characterised by suspicion, hostility and an authoritarian manner. It may seem that one becomes unsure and confused when it is not possible to use experience and memory when meeting the other. Without communication's iron cage of memory

one becomes confused and attempts to find other interpretative frameworks out of which one constructs “a cage”, such as a person’s geographical origin, their CV, their mode of dress, language, appearance, etc.

#### *Further research*

Hirschmann (1990) speaks of three main categories that operate in communication:

- (1) exit;
- (2) voice; and
- (3) loyalty.

It seems plausible to add a fourth category to Hirschman’s three categories, namely, the position of neglect. For instance, in the neglect position one may ask the question: “What is the problem? Can you repeat what you said, because I do not understand the problem?” In other words, the dignity of others may be compromised by such a ploy. Thus, statements of the type: “I do not understand what you mean” may be experienced by the other as a rejection as a communicating subject.

“Neglect” is a rejection of the understanding of the other. In the position of neglect all three processes, ODI are used to reject the other’s understanding of a situation. Thus, one refuses to understand the other’s position by treating him/her as a nonentity.

What is new in the “neglect” position, and not found in Hirschman, is the understanding that silence can function as an effective means of communication, or rather ignoring how others perceive a message. A message always contains the elements: information, utterance and relationship. “Neglect” in such a context means that one rejects the information, utterance and the relationship one has with the other. In other words, the position of “neglect” is not so much concerned with a semantic perspective, but rather with a psychological one. Before the position of “neglect” can be added to Hirschman’s three categories of communication, more research needs to be carried out. However, more knowledge about such a communication process will enhance our understanding of communication, strengthening the aspects of the communication theory that has been developed in this paper, especially neglect in the relation to ODI.

#### **Notes**

1. Threshold values can also be systemic, i.e. exceeding a threshold value in one part of the system can affect the threshold value at another place within the system. Systemic thresholds can also be triggered without an individual single threshold value being exceeded. However, threshold values may interact through complex feedback loops, so that they jointly exceed unforeseen threshold value and trigger irreversible consequences.
2. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zeno\\_of\\_Elea](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zeno_of_Elea)
3. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter\\_Wessel\\_Zapffe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Wessel_Zapffe)
4. “Very often the oddest beginning, can lead to some really surprising results” (Ibsens, Per Gynt, translator: Peter Watts).

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