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The relevance of interactions in functionally differentiated society: The contribution of conversation analysis to the theory of social systems

Zusammenfassung: Während die Funktionssysteme der modernen Gesellschaft kulturelle Voraussetzungen schaffen und zur Geltung bringen, die sich in Form von strukturierten Erwartungen in Interaktionen widerspiegeln, können im Gegenzug Interaktionen kulturelle Voraussetzungen beeinflussen, indem sie Beiträge fördern, die zuweilen neu definieren, was jeweils erwartet wird. Die Konversationsanalyse als eine Methode zur Untersuchung von Interaktionen scheint ein besonders interessanter Kandidat für die Ergänzung der Theorie der Gesellschaft zu sein, indem sie reziproke Einflüsse zwischen Interaktionen und Funktionssystemen zu erklären versucht. Der Artikel erörtert die Verbindungen zwischen der soziologischen Systemtheorie und der Konversationsanalyse. Unsere These ist, dass die Integration von soziologischer Systemtheorie und Konversationsanalyse dazu beitragen kann, die Wechselbeziehung zwischen unterschiedlichen Typen von sozialen Systemen zu erklären. In unserem Beitrag analysieren wir die komplementären Aspekte der soziologischen Systemtheorie und Konversationsanalyse, indem wir Interaktion als ein soziales System verstehen; wir konzentrieren uns auf die Art und Weise, in der die Strukturen der Interaktion in die Funktionssysteme der Gesellschaft eingebettet sind und wir behaupten, dass die Möglichkeit der Interaktion, durch ihre Teilnehmer neue Beiträge einzuführen, es potentiell erlaubt, soziale Veränderungen zu bewirken.

I. Towards and integrated analysis of interaction

Interaction, in sociological theory has been observed according to three main perspectives: 1) as a basic element in society (Parsons 1951); 2) as sociality and then society (Blumer 1969; Garfinkel 1984; Schegloff 1995); 3) as a specific »situation« in society (Goffman 1967; 1969). While Luhmann openly disagreed with observations 1 and 2, he analysed interaction as a specific face-to-face social situation (Luhmann 1979; 1984; 1987; 1997). His observations are included in a general theory of social systems, where he specifies that interaction and society are two different types of social systems and includes his analysis of interaction in a theory of evolution of societies, which focuses specifically on modern functionally differentiated society.

While Luhmann dedicated just a few pages of his huge production to the study of interaction, the study of sequences of interaction has been developed inside a socio-linguistic approach called Conversation Analysis (e.g. Sacks et al. 1974;
Schegloff 1978; 1988a; 1988b; Goodwin/Heritage 1990; Hutchby/Wooffitt 1998). Conversation Analysis (CA) studies »naturally occurring« interactions as organised sequences of talk. It is apparently very distant from the Social Systems Theory (SST) as it rejects »macrosociological« approaches and maintains that interaction is »the primordial means through which the business of the social world is transacted, the identities of its participants are affirmed or denied, and its cultures are transmitted, renewed and modified« (Goodwin/Heritage 1990, 283). Hence, interaction is considered as »the primordial site of sociality« (Schegloff 1987, 208) and there seems to be no space for society as a social system in CA.

Nevertheless, CA has elaborated a method to study interaction which seems to be particularly interesting in complementing a theory of society and in explaining reciprocal influences between interaction and society. This paper explores connections between SST and CA. Our thesis is that the integration of SST and CA can help in explaining the interrelatedness between different types of social systems. In the following sections, we examine complementary aspects of SST and CA in explaining interaction as a social system (II.), ways in which the structures of interaction are embedded in functional subsystems of society (III.), and the relevance of interaction to produce social changes (IV).

II. Interaction as a social system

In SST, interaction is an autopoietic communication system (Luhmann 1984), that is to say it reproduces itself through recursive communication processes. Communication is defined as the unity of utterance (Mitteilung), information and understanding (Verstehen). Utterances are communicatively relevant actions only if they are understood by interlocutors and communication accomplishment is achieved through understanding of both action and information. According to Luhmann (1984), while social systems are constituted by a series of communicative events, the actually visible part of them is sequences of actions: understanding as such is not observable, it is shown through further actions. Likewise, CA observes interaction as a sequence of actions (turns) produced by the interlocutors. The second turn in the sequence makes the interlocutors' understanding evident, that is to say it shows that the meaning of action and information has been achieved, and consequently that communication has been accomplished. CA invites to study the details of these sequences of actions, and therefore to describe interaction as a social system.

In SST, the participants' presence is both the selection principle and the boundary formation principle of interaction, which differentiates it from other types of social systems, societies and organisations. Interaction exists when the participating individuals perceive one another, that is when communication takes participants' mutual perception into account. The basic concept in CA is that
of the adjacency pair, a basic sequence of actions showing mutual perception. Adjacency pairs are organized in a way that the second pair part, turn 2 in the sequence, shows the interlocutor’s understanding of the first pair part, or turn 1. The concept of adjacency pair suggests that interaction can be viewed as a system of continuously alternate actions. The boundaries of interaction can then be observed as actions (or turns) which open and close a complete sequence of continuously alternate actions: these opening and closing turns define the discontinuity of each conversational episode, differentiating one interaction with respect to other social systems in its environment.

The autopoiesis of interaction can be observed in the Turn Allocating System (Sacks et al. 1974), that is the observation that turns are structured in relation to each other on the basis of the mechanisms of »turn-taking« where the speakers show their commitment to interactional participation. In these terms, any »current action may project (...) one among a range of possible next actions« (Goodwin/Heritage 1990, 288) and next actions show their being in tune with former actions. It follows that the actual relevant specificity of interaction as a social system consists in making it probable that all participants »contribute« in it, taking their turn and actively participating in communication. Continuity of alternate active participation is the main feature distinguishing interaction as a specific type of social system.

CA shows that active participation is not produced freely and loosely in the interaction. On the contrary, there are structures of interaction which bind and make the selection of participants’ contributions possible. These structures of interaction are observed as linguistic structures. While in the SST perspective language is a medium which makes understanding probable (Luhmann 1984; 1997), in the CA perspective, language use allows the construction of interactional meanings in the sequence of turns (Pomeranz 1984; Glenn 1989; Schegloff 1995). Specific turn-constructional units, such as conjunctions, expressions for seeking attention or addressing the interlocutor, markers of footing change, continuers, repetitions, reformulations, question forms perform different functions in the achievement of understanding and their position inside the specific turns and in the turn-taking sequence is indicative of action projection and understanding by the interlocutors (e.g. a greeting projects a reciprocal greeting or a question projects an answer). This usage of language allows next positioning to take place in communication. In turn-transition, the interlocutors show their understanding and the type of contribution that seems relevant to them.

According to CA, therefore, language is a medium for both actively participating and constructing meanings. This use of language can produce social reflexivity, which is a particular »condition of complexity« for interactions (Luhmann 1987). Reflexivity is self-reference of communication processes, such as learning to learn or negating a negation. In interactions, the linguistic structures can reframe previous actions, for example by repairing previous misunderstandings,
interpreting the meaning of previous turns differently, changing footing (Goffman 1981), and so on. In these cases, the interaction creates reflexivity where a communication process interrupts the routine of autopoietic reproduction by repairing, interpreting or redirecting the ongoing communication process.

III. Structures of interaction in functional systems

According to SST, society is a system which includes all communications (Luhmann 1997). That is to say, that the environment of interaction contains other communication systems which are produced inside the society and which interaction cannot control. Interaction and society are different types of social systems, where society includes interaction. In the SST perspective only society can create its own structures and is, in this sense, an evolutionary system. Interaction adapts to society and its evolution, and is, in this sense, an adaptive system.

The analysis of the interplay between interaction and society is not central in Luhmann's work. He attributed scarce relevance to interactions in reproducing society, particularly in the modern functionally differentiated society. In the SST perspective interactions are considered small, ephemeral systems, continuously decomposed and reconstituted and they exist only in the background of the continuity of society. The functionally differentiated society is organised around primary functions performed by subsystems, such as economics, politics, the laws, science, education, families, etc. and its fundamental connectivity in time is guaranteed by mediated communication, rather than single interactional episodes.

While the ephemeral nature of interactions and the preponderance of mediated communication in affecting society are non controversial facts, the relevance of interactions seems evident in some functional systems, such as families, education, and healthcare. According to Luhmann, the primary function of these systems consists in »people processing«, in that they regard individuals with their problems and needs. In their autopoiesis, these interactions consider individuals as »persons« with needs, problems, and requirements. In such interactions, then, personal contributions are expressed and dealt with. For instance families, as a social system, are based on intimate and daily interactions, education on classroom interaction, healthcare on doctor-patient interactions. Seen in this way, other important functional systems include interaction in their fundamentals. For example, while on the one hand, communication in economics and politics is frequently produced through the media in a global world, international managers dealing with trade all over the world are constantly engaged in interactions, and national and international parliament assemblies, as well as national and international political meetings, are based on interactions which are crucial in decision-making. These considerations
lead us to observe the importance of the connection between interactions and functional systems, their structural coupling.

While interactions are ephemeral, in their autopoiesis it is possible to observe contextualization cues, linguistic turn-constructional units which «highlight, foreground or make salient» (Gumperz 1992, 232) particular cultural presuppositions. The relevance of contextualization cues in the interaction is shown by the fact that interactions are part of the complex network of functional systems and are embedded into the systems themselves. Although they are ephemeral, their being part of functional systems is evident: doctor-patient interactions take place on the basis of patterned expectations about the roles of doctors and patients, of the significance of the patient's disease and of particular therapeutic programmes; business meetings take place on the basis of patterned expectations about the relevance of money and exchanges, the roles of vendors and sellers, the significance of negotiations. Ephemeral interactions then are included in functional systems and participate in reproducing them.

Functional systems originate cultural presuppositions that are patterned expectations in the form of coding, programmes, roles, and persons. These presuppositions are created «trans-interactively». Interactions reproduce cultural presuppositions and contain the cues of their reproduction. The relevance of interactions in reproducing these presuppositions may be shown through the function of a linguistic turn-constructional unit, a unit called «formulation». Formulation consists in «summarising, glossing, or developing the gist of an informant's earlier statement» (Heritage 1985, 100). A formulation projects a direction for subsequent turns by inviting responses insofar as they «advance the prior report by finding a point in the prior utterance and thus shifting its focus, redeveloping its gist, making something explicit that was previously implicit in the prior utterance, or by making inference about its presuppositions or implications» (104).

Ian Hutchby (2005; 2007) analyses formulations in a system of child counselling which has the function of helping children to overcome mental diseases caused by parents' divorce. According to Hutchby, in this system, formulation is systematically included in a specifically structured sequence of actions, Question-Answer-Formulation (QAF). The counsellor asks a question (e.g. How does your mum get your dad to hear what she wants to say?), the child answers (e.g. She shouts really loudly because she is a teacher) and the counsellor develops the gist of the child's answer, through a formulation, which is generally opened by a prefatory So (e.g. So, she is good at sort of shouting like, like she is being a teacher). The sequential as well as the turn structure are associated to the cultural presupposition that the expert is supposed to listen to the child actively, reflecting the quality and the intensity of the child's feelings, which means that the counselling is «centred» on the person of the child (Mearns/Thorne 1999). This is a specific programme of counselling, which gives relevance to particular roles of counsellors and patients and aims at promoting patients' personal self-expres-
sions. The »person-centred« programme and the connected roles are presupposed in the system of counselling, and are reproduced through pre-structured sequences of actions in the interaction.

The autopoiesis of functional systems creates and selects the cultural presuppositions which are patterned in reflexive expectations in interactions, and interactions produce contextualization cues which indicate these presuppositions. QAF maybe considered one such cue. Structures of interaction and structures of functional systems are thus closely connected. Symbolically generalised coding, programmes, roles and persons shape what can be expected in the interaction: these structures provide the presupposition for participants' turn-taking, which in its turn reproduces the cues of these presuppositions and makes them evident.

These structures make it possible that the mechanism of next positioning takes place and that meanings are achieved in the interaction. Interaction in child counselling is based on a coding opposing (light) mental disease and personal health. The function of counselling is that of transforming disease into health. Child's disease is the positive value in the coding which: (1) motivates parents to encourage their children to interact with counsellors, and (2) explains the recurrence of QAF as a peculiar therapeutic programme related to particular technical roles, and personal involvement. The analysis of interaction explains the ways in which these cultural presuppositions (coding, programmes, roles, persons) are reproduced through specific linguistic structures, e.g. formulations.

Social structures, such as coding, programmes, roles and persons, make continuity in the fulfilment of function probable. Specific interactional structures make probable either continuity in active participation, through the system of turn-taking, and reproduction of the functional system's presuppositions. The linguistic structures of interaction provide cues for (re)producing the generalised expectations of the functional systems.

IV. The relevance of interaction in changing functional systems

Functional systems generate cultural presuppositions as coding, programmes, roles, and persons which cannot be controlled by interaction, and are thus reproduced in the interaction through its linguistic structures. Interactions, however, can change these presuppositions through their own linguistic structures, promoting and regulating participants' active contribution. Consequently, the linguistic structures of interaction can renew the patterned expectations of functional systems. While interactions are influenced by the cultural presuppositions constructed in functional systems and contain their cues, they are also evolutionary systems which can re-shape the systems' presuppositions through reflexivity. While structures of functional systems restrict the possible
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range of turn-taking and next positioning, interactions can also produce unexpected changes to what is expected. We can see changes of this kind in the case of formulations. Active listening and person-centred counselling can be shown through signals of understanding and »continuers«, such as »mhm« or echoing of previous turns which encourage the interlocutor to go on speaking. This is the type of action suggested by the experts in order to perform a person-centred programme (see Mearns/Thorne 1999). As a matter of fact, the QAF structure introduces different types of actions in the child-counsellor interaction, changing the counselling programme, the counsellors' roles and the meaning of personal involvement.

This structural change is enhanced by the children resistance to counsellors' questions. Hutchby illustrates an interactional dynamics in which the children answer »I don't know« to the counsellors' questions. Patients' talk about their own feelings is the necessary starting point of person-centred programmes. In the QAF sequence, the counsellors' question (Q) aims at projecting the child's answer (A) as expression of feelings, while the counsellor's formulation (F) should be a signal of understanding and encouragement which permits prosecution of the child's expression of feelings. In fact, while they appear »resistant« to the counsellors' attempts to project their feelings' disclosure, children express themselves as persons in a way that is different from what is expected in the counselling system: they express their withdrawal and reticence to contribute.

Their personal active involvement in the interaction promotes new presuppositions in the counselling system. In theory, counsellors' turns should reflect back the quality and the intensity of the children's feelings. In fact, formulations interpret the gist of children's feelings and make inference about their presuppositions. In this way formulations introduce reflexivity and redirect the ongoing communicative process. In the example above, the child's expression that his mother »shouts really loudly because she is a teacher«, is interpreted through the formulation that »she is good at sort of shouting like, like she is being a teacher«: the counsellor develops the meaning of the mother as a teacher in her professional life, into the meaning of the mother as a teacher in the family interaction.

This shows that the counsellor's role and the person-centred programme in the child counselling system have been changed in the interaction: in these interactions, we cannot observe the cues of generalised cultural presuppositions; on the contrary, we can observe a new programme of counselling, which is reconstructed and projected through the use of language. The cue of this programme is observed in the QAF structure and particularly in formulations. The cultural presuppositions of »person-centred« counselling and »active listening« are renewed into an active interpretation that is made evident in the formulation.
A similar example is presented in a study about interpreter-mediation in doctor-patient interactions (Baraldi / Gavioli 2007). This example shows that translation in the interaction does not take place on a bit-by-bit basis simply »repeating« previous doctors' and patients' turns in the other language: rather it is an active contribution which promotes alternatively either doctor-centred interaction, or patient-centred interaction, that is two different cultural presuppositions of the medical system (Heritage / Maynard 2006). In particular, translators may confirm and support the patients' feelings, echoing patients and encouraging them to tell more. This form of active listening may be followed by a formulation in the other language. This kind of formulation enhances doctors' attention for patients' needs, worries and complaints. In these cases, formulations allow the promotion of reflexivity, redirecting the communication process, and the related change from detached impersonality to personal involvement in doctor-patient interaction.

These examples show that interactions can increase the variability and the instability of cultural presuppositions in functional systems. This is due to the fact that interaction is based on the promotion of systematic active participants' contribution, e.g. that of the children or that of the translators, which enhance reflexivity. Opportunities for children and translator systematic and active participation introduce variations in the cultural presupposition of the counselling system and the medical system respectively. Further, interactions can transform this variability and instability into new selections inside functional systems: active listening can then develop into new cultural presuppositions of the counselling or medical systems, namely formulations and the corresponding role performances and personal expressions. Luhmann (1997) observes that in society there are many events which are not shown in the interaction. It is equally true that small changes in interactions are not immediately evident in society, while in the long run they can contribute to replace existing cultural presuppositions. Children and translator active participation in interactions may enhance this replacement. This is achieved through the promotion of reflexivity in the interaction. Interactions do not produce simple variations in functional systems: they can also introduce new selections of meanings and compel the functional systems to create new levels of stability. The cultural presuppositions created in functional systems (patterned expectations in coding, programmes, roles, and persons) are frames of interactions. Turn-taking makes such presuppositions visible and projects them in the interaction; next actions in the adjacency pair can accept or reject them. In this way, interactions can both reproduce and renew generalised expectations. Changes derive from structural constraints in the interaction system hence they can be expanded in functional systems. In particular, interaction enhances the relevance of specific individual interests and needs in understanding and performing the roles which are presupposed, through a particular relevance assigned to personal expressions. Interaction can favour self-expression in spite of norma-
tive or cognitive generalised expectations, in this way introducing both variability and new needs of stability, related to personal expressions. Hence, the analysis of interaction is important for understanding possible changes at a societal level, because generalised presuppositions in functional systems can be changed through generalised active and personalised participation. For this reason, analysing the ways of promoting participation in interactions is particularly important for the analysis of functional systems.

V. Some consequences for social systems theory

To sum up, the structural coupling of interactions and functional systems may be described as follows. The structures of functional systems provide patterns of expectations for interactions to take place as coding, programmes, roles and persons; these patterns give meaning to specific Turn Allocation Components, adjacency pairs, and next positioning. Interactions adapt to them, as the linguistic structures of interaction provide space for understanding and accepting these presupposed meanings. In this way, the generalised cultural presuppositions of functional systems, and the linguistic structures of interaction cooperate in reproducing communication: 1) generalised cultural presuppositions select meanings and support interaction; 2) the linguistic structures of interaction enhance understanding and generalised participation.

Functional systems limit the opportunities of interacting, restricting the possible range of turn-taking and next positioning through their structures. However, interactions can also create space for generalised active participation which enhances reflexivity. Our analysis here leads us to observe some changes in the »conditions of complexity« which concern interactions and their relationship with functional systems. The main contribution of CA to SST can be summarised as follows: 1) interaction is observed in the continuity of turn-taking, based on adjacency pair and made relevant or non-relevant through next positioning; 2) social reflexivity in interaction is associated to active generalised participation; 3) interaction is structurally coupled with generalised expectations in functional systems, about coding, programmes, roles, and persons, that is with generalised cultural presuppositions; 4) these presuppositions can be observed in interactions through specific linguistic cues; 5) the linguistic structure enhances generalised participation in interactions; 6) for this reason, it can change the cultural presuppositions of functional systems producing both variations and selections; 7) the probability of these changes is linked to the variety produced through personalised expression and their force in changing the patterned expectations.

These assumptions could push towards new theoretical developments in analysing the relationship between established societal structures and active participation in interactions, and in explaining social change from a systemic
perspective, and as an alternative to concurrent general theories, such as structuration theory (Giddens 1984), or communicative action theory (Habermas 1981).

References


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