Language and Systems Theory: Critical Remarks on the Luhmannian Conception[1]

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Language and Systems Theory: Critical Remarks on the Luhmannian Conception. This paper assesses Luhmann's conception of language as structural coupling. Luhmann treated language as a medium, but also tried to incorporate the Saussurean concept of sign. The paper will deal with three conflictive points. The first one is the erasure of all psychic reference that Luhmann performs. The second issue is Luhmann's refusal to consider language as a system. The third point poses the question about the ontological bases of language, in comparison to those of the autopoietic systems.

Key words: *Language; Luhmann; sign; ontology; Saussure*

Introduction

This paper deals with Luhmann's conception of language, which is considered as the medium of the structural coupling between psychic and social systems. Even if the German sociologist did not give to the topic an extremely profound treatment, as he gave to others, the concept of language takes up a central place in the theory, as it is the element that "connects" consciousness and communication. Despite its importance, there is very little critical work on the theme apart from Srubar's paper (2005), whose opinions and problems will be frequent points of departure for our own critiques. We can also cite some other works, as Künzler's (1987) remarks on language, in the context of his assessment of the concept of symbolically generalized communication media. Then we can find Maurer's (2010) article, which can function as a sort of retelling or introduction to the topic, since it accounts for the relationship between communication, consciousness and language, as structural coupling. Dirk Baecker's book (2007) devoted to communication also makes some references to language from a Luhmannian perspective. Furthermore, trying to fill some gaps of Luhmann's utilization of the Saussurean concept of sign (1999), Esposito (1999) extended this line of research adding more semiology. Moreover, we can also mention Urban's (2009) study of the psyche, which discusses in depth Luhmann's conceptualizations of the psychic system. Urban introduces Lorenzer's and Kristeva's ideas, in order to account for the pre-linguistic and the

linguistic development of the psyche. Nevertheless, the author does not make clear how he reconciles systems theory and these interpretations of language. Finally, Wolfe's (2009) chapter on Derrida and Luhmann in the context of the American academy also makes some references to Luhmann's vision of language.

Departing from a brief exposition of Luhmann's conceptualization of language, the criticism will focus on three points. The first two are the result of the tense relationship between systems theory and Saussurean semiology. The first aspect under evaluation here will be the difference between the distinctions of signifier/signified and sound/meaning. The second will be Luhmann's denial to consider language as a system. As a consequence of the previous point, the third one is dedicated to compare the ontological status of systems and language. Finally, we will present the conclusions.

Language as medium

Systems theory starts out of the distinction system/environment (1995b). A system can survive if it can preserve its limits with the environment. In addition, systems are constructed by elements and relationships. Elements are the smallest units of the system, which are produced by the very system. Simple systems are those capable of relating all its elements. When this is no longer possible, the system is forced to select, being time the determinant factor in this process. This situation is called complexity. The obligation to make selections indicates that the system has to designate which elements are to be related in order to allow its self-reproduction (autopoiesis). The difference between elements and relationships constitutes the basis for self-reference. The last one enables self-observation, which involves the introduction of the distinction between system and environment into the system.

Unlike machines and organisms, social systems, as psychic systems, utilize the medium of meaning. Processing meaning implies that the system works continually remodeling the difference between actuality and possibility. As a result, meaning is understood as the continuous actualization of possibilities. In order that a social system with these traits can emerge, it needs to overcome the situation of double contingency. The simplest form of this event entails the encounter of two psychic systems (*alter* and *ego*). As each of them define its behavior by self-referential operations, both tend to presuppose the same regarding the other. This leads them to treat the other as an *alterego*. In this relationship emerges a new order, which cannot be reduced to neither of the systems that produced it. This emerging social system reproduces itself by only one sort of operation: communication. Here communication is seen as the synthesis of three selections: utterance (*Mitteilung*), information and understanding (*Verstehen*). Utterance enunciates information, while information indicates an

event, which selects states of a system. This means that it is not a simple message. Finally, understanding is not psychic experience, but the fact of distinguishing and keeping the difference between utterance and information. When ego can draw that distinction, there is communication. Beyond the unit of communication there is the possibility to accept or reject communication, whose value lies in its capacity to connect communications. In order that communication becomes a process, single communication events must be ordered by themes. Nevertheless, communication also faces three improbabilities: the improbability of understanding; the improbability of reaching the addressee; and the improbability of success, namely, that communication be accepted and followed. The solutions for these improbabilities are: language; media of dissemination; and symbolically generalized communication media. Here language is interpreted as a medium, which increases the understandability of communication beyond the sphere of perception.

As language is not only a medium to intensify understanding, but also the medium that "relates" social and psychic systems, it is necessary to introduce the concepts of interpenetration and structural coupling. The first indicates that interpenetrating systems enable each other to introduce their own already-constituted complexity into each other.

It is possible to suppose that the weakness of the concept of interpenetration, partially accepted by Luhmann (2004), has brought him to look for a theoretical alternative, which could better link with his conceptual assemblage. For this reason Luhmann has resorted to another Maturanian category: structural coupling. Firstly, with this concept Luhmann expected to exclude every possibility of combination between the operations of both systems (1995a), trying to exclude an operative coupling. This is expressed with Maturana's formula, according to which structural coupling is orthogonal regarding autopoiesis.

Concerning social systems, these can only be structurally coupled to psychic systems, which implies that communication can only receive permanent irritations from consciousness. If these irritations become stable, it is possible that they guide the development of structures in a certain direction. From another point of view, the structural coupling translates analogical relations into digital ones. In spite of this conceptual turn, Luhmann, in *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (1997), adds that it is possible to talk about interpenetration, when the coupled systems co-evolve.

Language plays an essential role in this context, as it is the medium which allows the structural coupling (but not the interpenetration) between social and psychic systems. In *Social Systems* (1995b), Luhmann indicates that language intensifies understanding beyond what is actually perceptible. Moreover, the sociologist adds that language amplifies infinitely the repertoire of understandable communication, as practically every event can be treated as information.

Finally, Luhmann emphasizes that language ensures the reflexivity of the system, which entails the possibility of self-steering. As Künzler (1987) remarks, Luhmann defines understanding without reference to language. The origin and basic operation of understanding is observation, while language remains only as an intensification of understanding.

In *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft* (1990), Luhmann describes in more detail this conception of language as a medium, indicating that language exists as a medium neither in the physic quality of its signs nor in the states of consciousness of hearing and speaking or reading and writing. In addition, the system of communication does not utilize an existing medium, but it produces and reproduces it in its own autopoiesis. So the assumed reality of the medium, which in communication is presented as a loose coupling of a huge quantity of elements, does not exist in the operative coupling, which enables within the conscious systems its own-determined autopoiesis. This ontological question about the status of language will be picked up later.

Only with *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (1997), Luhmann gave a relevant place to this problem, conceding it a full paragraph. In this regard, the author indicates that linguistic communication is processing of meaning in the phonic medium. As a result, the medial substratum of language will be: meaning / sound. In this context, the author defines meaning as that which "is not the sound but *determines* what sound is to be selected if this meaning and no other is to be spoken about", while "the sound is not the meaning, but with this not-being, as it were, it determines what meaning is spoken about in each case" (2012: 128). This processing of meaning in the phonic medium produces the condensation of sounds into words. Naturally, so that this process takes place, as Luhmann himself reveals, one needs grammar and – alluding to Chomsky, but rejecting the innatist connotations of the concept – deep structures. What Luhmann does not clarify is where such grammar and deep structures underlie, and how they operate in the process pointed out previously. As each distinction implies distinguishing/indicating, and only psychic and social systems operate in the medium of meaning, the process due to which a meaning is distinguished and a sound is indicated cannot be something other than the result of a psychic or social operation. An additional problem is establishing how grammar and deep structures work.

Consequently, words will be the loosely coupled elements of the medium of language. These words, in turn, will condense into phrases, which will be the forms of language, according to the distinction phrases/words. Therefore, phrases come to confirm and condense the meaning of each phrase, condemning to oblivion those that are not utilized for a long time. In spite of this, as much meaning/sound as phrases/words are neither structures, nor elements, nor operations of none of the systems that process meaning. Simply, these two

distinctions constitute the unity of the difference of the form of the medium of language. It is worth adding that words indicate the world, so they introduce the difference between semiotic reality and real reality. The last one will remain irremediably inaccessible to language[3].

In general, Luhmann considers language as an extremely improbable sort of noise, which, thanks to this condition, has the capacity to call the attention. Owing to this, language ensures the participation of consciousness in the communicative operation, as consciousness is fascinated by language. Nevertheless, the descriptive concept of "fascination" (1990) does not make clear how language captures the attention of consciousness, which does not add anything to the solution of the problem, which must be elucidated in the operational level of the system.

On another text, Luhmann (1999) integrates semiologic categories into his analysis, specifically, the Saussurean concept of sign, conceived as the distinction between signifier and signified. As forms, signs exist exclusively in the operations of a system that utilizes them – and never in the environment –. These signs have their own features, one of these is that signs must be isolated. In this sense, they must be distinguishable and not confused, which makes it possible to use them repeatedly as discernible units. As a result, they can be remembered. In addition, signs must be redundant, providing a surplus of meaning, which allows the anticipation of the next sign. Finally, following the father of semiology, signs must be arbitrary, not in the sense of being freely selected, independently of any structure or context. On the contrary, arbitrariness underlies in the fact that the relationship between signifier and signified is unmotivated, so it has no parallel in "reality". Therefore, it does not imitate nature.

In summary, Luhmann's theory only approaches the semantic dimension of the Saussurean *langue*, while semiological and discourse analysis concepts are completely absent. The concept of language is mainly introduced in systems theory, in order to solve the problem of the improbability of understanding. Then, it will also take the place of the medium of the structural coupling between social and psychic systems. On the contrary, there is no intention to connect systems theory with linguistics, in order to provide a methodological approach for empirical research. Esposito's (1999) reflections on the relationship between systems theory and semiology delve only into formal aspects of the concept of sign, showing no interest for an empirical strategy. Nevertheless, all these attempts to connect systems theory with Saussurean semiology could be

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[3] This representation of language based on the distinction between sound and meaning has some resemblance to Chomsky's principles and parameters theory (Cook – Newson 2007). There, the American linguist distinguishes between a physical world, to which sounds belong, and a mental world inhabited by meanings. Between these two realms, one can find a computational system, which has the ability to combine phonic and logical forms.

fruitful for systems theory, since this would be an opportunity to assimilate or translate rich discourse analysis categories in systems theory language. As a result, the schematic and formal interpretation of language provided by Luhmann, despite being internally coherent, could be seen as an obstacle for the development of a concept of discourse and an empirical research strategy based on a solid linguistic conception.

Critical points of Luhmann's conceptualization of language

Signifier/signified and sound/meaning

The first problem that Luhmann finds in the theory of sign is that a sign indicates an internal state of the speaker (2004)[4]. In this point, it is important to reconsider the main difference between the distinction between sound/meaning and signifier/signified. Analyzing these two couples of concepts more in depth, one can see that the Saussurean signifier is not merely a sound but an acoustic image, which is a psychic trace (Saussure 1995). The sound about which Luhmann talks about seems to be the very material sound (so to use Saussure's words), which is completely independent of any psychic image. In this way, this medium of language can find its abode in a terrain independent of the psychic and social realms. According to Srubar (2005), Luhmann considers the Saussurean perspective completely inadequate, as the sonorous sign (*Lautzeichen)* cannot refer to a "representation" (*Vorstellung)*, as this is only available for psychic systems. These sound references must have an adequate correlate in both psychic and social systems, for this reason Luhmann named the indicated side "meaning". Here Srubar – making no reference to the text "Sign as Form" – explains why signified and meaning cannot be treated as synonymous, as the first refers only to the psychic system, while the other refers to both. In any case, this is not enough to completely reject the Saussurean theory of sign. Firstly, if the advantage of sound over signifier was that the first makes no reference to a psychic state, this is not the case of meaning, because it makes reference to the medium in which both systems operate. If sound is placed in a merely physical environment, meaning (if it is the same meaning described in chapter II of *Social Systems*) remains the terrain over which both systems grow. The main problem with Saussure's approach is not really in the signified, because the signified remains always in the environment and the

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[4] "Diese konstruktivistische Wendung der Sprachtheorie bedeutet, dass man jetzt eine kompliziertere Unterscheidungsstruktur hat und sich fragt, was das Zeichen eigentlich bezeichnet. Es bezeichnet das, was es in der Sprachverwendung bedeutet, also den Sinn von Äpfeln, aber es greift nicht auf den Apfel selbst zu. Oder aber es bezeichnet, und damit wird die Zeichentheorie uneindeutig, das, was das Subjekt gedacht hat, als es das Wort verwendet hat: Es bezeichnet den inneren Zustand des Sprechers. Wenn man von bestimmten Dingen spricht, liegt die Schussfolgerung nahe, dass man an diese Dinge denkt. Deswegen hat man eine Ambivalenz in der Referenz der Zeichenverwendung. Das ist eine der Schwierigkeiten, die ich mit der Zeichentheorie habe, obwohl ich da wirklich nicht eingearbeitet bin, sondern das eher aus der Distanz des Ungläubigen verfolge. Also nehmen Sie das höchstens als Anregung, sich die Literatur einmal selbst anzusehen." (Luhmann 2004: 283)

system operates by chaining only signifiers. Therefore, the troubles are with the last ones, as these make reference to acoustic images lodged in the psyche.

As a consequence, the radical erasure of all psychic reference that Luhmann tries to perform, leads him to incorporate physical sounds (belonging to the environment) to something that should be a psycho-social structure[5] (belonging to meaning). Moreover, if language has the value of a structure and structures for meaning systems are always expectations, the incorporation of a physical element would break this principle. Observing this problem from the perspective of the concept of structural coupling, a system cannot incorporate to its operativity something external to what it has constructed as its elements. Nevertheless, it can be structurally coupled to its environment. In this sense, social systems cannot develop any structural coupling with another system apart from psychic systems, but, on the contrary, psychic systems couple structurally to social and organic systems. As a result, sounds are only an echo of a structural coupling, as psychic systems can perceive them thanks to the structural coupling with the organism, so social systems have no direct contact with sound. This means that the reference to psychic states is unavoidable, as social systems have no way to perceive sound, so they must count on psychic perception. In conclusion, there is no advantage in the substitution of signifier with raw sound, as social systems must always rely on the acoustic image generated by psychic systems. On the other hand, accepting Saussure's concept of signifier allows both linguistic elements to have their place in the medium of meaning.

This means that, even if one wants to separate the communicative and the psychic utilization of language, this reasoning fails at a deeper level. Namely, it is not enough to argue that social systems use sounds that are recognizable as words to make meaningful communication, and psychic systems use perception of sound, which is also recognizable as words to produce meaningful thoughts. It is clear that words form different clusters in each consciousness, as well as in society. Here we are not impugning this point. What is called into question is the process through which society can recognize these sounds. Our point is that society inevitably relies on psychic perception and elaboration of sound. We cannot ignore that under the social usage of language described by Luhmann there are a series of operations, which cannot be clarified by the mere distinction sound / meaning. If we cannot account for the social perception of sound, we must suppose that society relies on psychic perception of sound. In addition, Luhmann has never tried to clarify how grammar takes part in the social and psychic assemblage of language. As a result, social usage of language remains completely mysterious from an operational point of view, as we cannot observe

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[5] We can assume that this is admitted by Luhmann when he incorporates Saussurean categories to his interpretation of language (Luhmann 1999).

how society combine sound and meaning to construct words and phrases, and how grammar intervene in this process.

Language is not a system

There is a point in which Luhmann takes explicit distance from Saussure, and it is with respect to Saussure's conception of language as a system. In contrast to the Swiss linguist, Luhmann considers that language is not a system, although he recognized its "systematicity" (1990)[6]. Language is not a system for Luhmann, because there are no linguistic operations, which can define the limits of the system (1990; 2004). Therefore, there is no linguistic operation, apart from communication or linguistic thinking. For Luhmann, Saussure distinguished between *langue* and *parole*, between spoken words and language in itself, but then it remained empirically not clear, which is the basal operation (2004).

Criticizing Luhmann's approach, Srubar (2005) indicates that the German sociologist states that language cannot distinguish itself from non-language through its own operations, for this reason it cannot draw its own meaning limits, so it is not a system. But, Srubar wonders if neither grammar, syntax, morphology and phonology – which constitute the formal building meaning of linguistic structures – , nor the semantic or rather the lexical limits of language are not enough for Luhmann, in order to consider language as a system. On the one hand, Luhmann elevates to the rank of autopoietic systems social domains, as art, religion, politics or economics, which have blurred meaning/system limits. In contrast, Luhmann denies to language that status, despite the fact that language is provided of relative constant formal structures and it can draw meaning differences between language/non-language, and between natural languages.

On the other hand, Srubar admits that if Luhmann would have accepted to consider language as a system, it could have not covered the main function that he assigned to it, namely, to couple psychic and social systems. Then, if one transforms language into a communicative system, as Srubar suggests, it would be necessary to find another medium to couple communication, consciousness and language.

In favor of Luhmann, it can be said that it is quite complicated to envisage, which would be the operation of language as a system, without falling into operative coupling. In this sense, it would be quite hard to distinguish between psychic and linguistic operations, or communicative and linguistic operations.

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[6] "Während Sprachphilosophen oft meinen, Sprache sei ein System (wenn nicht gar: das einzige System für die Koordination von Lebenszusammenhängen), ist für die hier vorgestellte Analyse entscheidend, Sprache als NichtSystem anzusehen, das Systembildungen im Bereich von Bewußtsein und Kommunikation erst ermöglicht, indem es die strukturelle Kopplung der beiden Systemarten ermöglicht. Das heißt auch: daß man von Sprache auf Kommunikation als Grundbegriff umstellen muß. Entscheidend für die Einheit von Sprache ist ihre Doppelfunktion (gleich der double helix der Biologie?) für Kommunikationssysteme und für Bewußtseinssysteme, nicht dagegen ihre eigene Systematizität." (Luhmann 1990: 51)

From Saussure's standpoint, the individual praxis of *parole* is the only element capable of mobilizing the *langue.* In addition, Srubar includes language as a social sub-system, a decision that can be puzzling. This reasoning put in the same level functional subsystems emerged only in modernity, and language, which differentiation would have occurred much earlier. Probably, Srubar included language in the social system, so to remark that language is a social product and to stress the impossibility of Luhmann's theory to account for that. Nevertheless, it would have been less problematic to consider language as the third system. In this case, the sociality of language cannot be considered as directly given, but something that deserves an explanation.

In fact, Srubar underlines that Luhmann's conception of language recognizes it as a social product, but it does not leave any place in the social system for it, so one must either empirically allocate it in the inner or outer action of subjects or theoretically anchor it in an extrasocial place. For Srubar, the result of Luhmann's denial to accept the Saussurean *langue* as the systematic result of communicative activity leaves to language only the empirical place of the *parole* as the individual linguistic expression or leads to an unexplained terrain of theoretical constitution.

It is undeniable that, if language cannot be considered an autopoietic system, there should be another category capable of making justice to its formal structuration. In this sense, in Luhmann's theory, the fields of structures and media lack of any sort of "systematicity". Structures and media seem to float in indistinguishable waters between social and psychic systems. It is not clear, if there are purely psychic and social structures or media, and if it is possible to separate them from other structures and media born as the result of interpenetration. In addition, there is no organization of structures and media, as it seems that juridical, political, scientific or linguistic structures are all mixed up, and one could resort to them at any moment. As a result, the insertion of more specific concepts capable of explaining more in detail the organization of structures, would be useful to strengthen the concept of structure. An option would be to introduce other sorts of systems, apart from the autopoietic ones[7]. A different strategy has been developed by Bora (1999), consisting in the introduction of the concept of "discourse" to Luhmann's theory, and the incorporation of Oevermann's objective hermeneutics as a methodological instrument, in order to compensate the "hermeneutical deficit" of systems theory (Bora 1993). In a similar vein, Kaldewey (2013) further developed Bora's concept of dis-

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[7] In a previous paper (Calise 2016), I have tried to show certain convergences between Luhmann's systems theory and systemic-functional linguistics. In this sense, the conception of language as a system in systemic-functional linguistics can be conceived as complementary with Luhmann's idea of system. In preceding empirical research, I have used systemic-functional linguistics as a methodological strategy, combined with Luhmann's sociological theory. Nonetheless, I have not tried rewriting Luhmann's theory of language in the light of systemic-functional linguistics, in order to make them completely compatible.

course for systems theory, resorting to Roy Harris' linguistic theory, with the purpose of guiding his empirical research. In this context, discourse is defined as the form of the differentiation at the sematic level, as distinct from subsystems as forms of differentiation at the operative level. Above all, Kaldewey underlies that, for empirical research, semantics must be considered as participating of the autopoiesis of systems, and not just as a reflection of subjacent structural levels.

Ontology of language

Ontology seems to be a bad word in Luhmann's theory, and, in fact, he claims to have developed an ontology-free or de-ontologized theory. Ontology is identified with the semantics of old Europe, with the distinction being/not-being, and with the Western stratified society. According to Rasch, the "de-ontologicalization of reality" means the denial of the significance of the ontological distinction, although reality *per se* remains an ineradicable blind spot (2012: 86-87). If Rasch's vision is correct, this "de-ontologicalization" does not eliminate ontology. It only denounces the ingenuity of expecting a privileged access to the "essence" of phenomena. Also Nassehi is forced to admit that, with Luhmann and against Luhmann, ontology-free operating is impossible. However, the being of things is no longer identified with aprioristic transcendental conditions of possibility, but with a posteriori empirical conditions of possibility. A posteriori, because the system-relative conditions are not given before every experience, but systems emerge after their own operations. Empirically, because the enabling conditions of reality are not transcendentally pre-structured, but they arise in practice each time anew. (1992: 67)

There is no doubt that the ontological foundations of Luhmann's theory are different from those caricatured in his descriptions of the semantics of Old Europe. In our view, this does not allow Luhmann to deny that he also constructs a certain ontology. In fact, Luhmann begins his book *Social Systems* with, in our opinion, an ontological corollary[8] of his epistemology – even though Luhmann would not have recognized it –: "there are systems" (1995b: 2) (*"es gibt Systeme"* [1984: 16]). With this corollary, Luhmann claims that systems are not mere analytical constructions of an observer, as Parsons or the radical constructivists believed. In contrast to an analytical vision of elements, Luhmann postulates that "the element is constructed as a unity only by the system that enlists it as an element to use it in relations" (1995b: 22). Luhmann believes that, in this way, he eliminates ontology, but we can think that there is a substitution of an ontology of the pre-given, with an ontology of the constructed, which is similar to Nassehi's interpretation. Elements are not some-

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[8] We assume that this is not an axiom, but a corollary, as it is the *a posteriori* (using the words of Nassehi) result of his constructivist epistemology.

thing absolute, but are elements for the system that constructed them. They cannot be further dissolved for that system, which does not mean that one can find further microelements that constitute that compound. They are no further simplifiable, because with the micro-compounds of the element the system cannot operate, it can only do that, when those micro-compounds are combined to constitute that element. For us, this is the essential trait of the ontology of Luhmann's systems.

If the corollary "there are systems" brings to conclude that the elements of the systems are neither analytical constructions, nor pre-given entities, but real compounds constituted by the system, one can think that the reality of other constituents of systems, such as structures or media, is also secured. Regarding language, Luhmann indicates (1990) that its existence is neither in the physical characteristics of sign, nor in the conscious states of hearing and speaking or reading and writing. In addition, communication systems do not utilize a pre-existing medium, but this medium is produced and reproduced in its own auto-poiesis. Until now, it seems that the medium of language acquires its existence in the same way as the elements of an autopoietic system. However, in the same book, Luhmann also says that language is only a moment of the autopoie-sis of communication and consciousness. Its reality is not based on the fact that it is a sign for something else, which is actually real. Its reality lies in the fact that its utilization is observable[9]. This statement can be interpreted in this way: if there is no observing system that observes language, language would not exist. But, in contrast, systems do not need to be observed or self-observed in order to exist. They exist because they operate, even if nobody has observed them yet. For language, in a Berkeleyan sense, *esse est percipi,* its existence depends on the observation of a system (social or psychic or both at the same time?) Or, expressing this same point in a more radical way, as language is not a system, it does not operate and it cannot observe itself. As a result, its reality can only be observable in the forms that it makes possible, which are systemic forms. Therefore, we cannot observe language neither in its medial nature, in its forms, in its operations, nor in its self-observations. In the only text where Luhmann refers to the existence of language, he states that its existence is of short term, it is eventful and it is only an episode of autopoiesis[10].

This means that the formula "*es gibt Systeme*", even if it is an ontological statement about the existence of the systems as wholes, focuses mainly on op-

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[9] „Sprache ist ein Moment der Autopoiesis von Kommunikation und, mehr beiläufig, auch ein Moment der Autopoiesis von Bewusstsein. Sie ermöglicht die Konstruktion einer Welt, die aber als Konstruktion ihre Realitätsbasis nur in den Opera-tionen selber hat. Ihre eigene Realität besteht nicht darin und ist nicht abhängig davon, dass sie als Zeichen für etwas an-deres, wirklich Reales dient. Ihre eigene Realität besteht darin, dass ihr Gebrauch beobachtet werden kann." (Luhmann 1990: 52)

[10] "Und Sprache wäre dann die faszinierende Form, die zugleich das beteiligte Bewusstsein *und sich selbst* als Medium für die Formen behandeln kann, auf die es letztlich ankommt, *weil sie nur kurzfristig, nur ereignishaft, nur zur Fortsetzung der Autopoiesis existieren."* (1987: 468)

eration. The emergence of the operation of a system is the compound that founds the formula. Then, the question will be: which element can help this newborn system in his task of chaining operations one after the other? The answer will be: structures. Essentially, the construction of structures is a by-product of the systems operativity, which produces expectations. In this sense, the survival of these structures depends on its utilization, namely, if they are not used, they disappear[11].

The condition of media is different. As Luhmann states in another text (1995c), media are media only for forms, in this sense, language is a medium for consciousness and consciousness is a medium for communication[12]. Here we find another time that the system, which uses the medium, "constructs" the medium as medium through its utilization. Nevertheless, the analogy that Luhmann proposes is not completely convincing from an ontological point of view. Even if language and consciousness can be interpreted and used as media, consciousness continues to be a system with its own operativity, so its "existence" is ensured by its operativity. Language is not a system, and the only place that it has is that of the medium. In this sense, language seems to float in a psycho-social void, as words waiting for a consciousness, which could come to put them together into sentences. As structures, but in a more dramatic and mysterious way, language depends on the operativity of consciousness and communication to continue existing as a medium. However, language, as every medium, is not a "part" of a system, as structures are. It has no clear place in the world, which makes very difficult, if not impossible, to interpret its weak ontological condition.

Conclusions

This study started with the exposition of Luhmann's conception of language, where we found that there are two explanations, which are not completely compatible. One is the more utilized (by Luhmann himself) interpretation of language as the medium of the structural coupling between psychic and social systems. The second introduced the Saussurean concept of sign, approach which is only explicitly exposed in one text. Despite this second conception of language, Luhmann was very critical with Saussure's semiology, because of two main reasons. The first one was the reference to an internal state of the speaker that the concept of sign entails. As Saussure explained, the signifier is an acoustic image, a psychic trace and not a mere physical sound. On the con-

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[11] We leave aside explicitly the complicated question about a memory of the system that could remember unused structures. As Luhmann's concept of memory presupposes mainly a cultural memory that remember distinctions (Luhmann 1997), it is not clear if social memory, for example, could remember social structures.

[12] It is important to remark that, as far as I know, this idea was only exposed in this text, which could be considered as a minor work.

trary, when Luhmann conceived language as a medium, he seemed to allude to the material sound. This was done in order to avoid the problem that the "sound" of the medium of language (sound / meaning) would make reference only to psychic systems. Nevertheless, in this way, a new problem arises, as now one finds a physical element in the domains of meaning. In addition, the psychic reference seems to be unavoidable, because social systems rely on psychic and/or bodily perception and on their capacity to produce sounds.

The other controversy concerning Saussure is its conception of language as a system. For Luhmann, there are no linguistic operations, which can define the limits of the system, so we cannot consider language a system. Nonetheless, Luhmann admitted its "systematicity". In contrast to this view, Srubar argues that language has clearer limits compared to other subsystems of the functional differentiated society. So, for him, Luhmann's justification is unacceptable. The main problem behind Srubar's intention of considering language a system, is that it will be necessary to find another medium capable of coupling structurally communication, consciousness and language. Therefore, elevating language to the rank of an autopoietic system will not be the best alternative to give justice to its systematicity, as it generates more problems. Considering that structures and media lack any sort of structuration or organization in Luhmann's theory, we think that, behind autopoietic, self-referential and operative closured systems, it is necessary to explore the possibility of the existence of other species of (non-autopoietic) systems.

Observing the problem of the non-systemic nature of language from an ontological point of view, we have found that its reality should be based on the fact that its utilization is observable. This means that its ontological fundament is completely different from that of systems, which reality is ensured by their operationality. Therefore, the reality of language depends on the operativity of social and psychic systems.

Interpreting language as a medium does not provide more solid ontological bases, but it remarks the weakness of this conception. If one accepts that a medium is constructed as a medium through its use by a system, practically everything can be seen and utilized as a medium. Consequently, consciousness becomes a medium for communication, and language a medium for consciousness. The problem here is that, from an ontological point of view, language cannot be equated to the other two systems, as its existence is not ensured by any operation. As a third dimension between psychic and social systems, the social nature of language is not safeguarded by any sort of mechanism. In fact, this view shows that psychic systems provide social systems with linguistically structured utterances, so it seems that language is reduced to the individual practice of the Saussurean *parole*. As a result, the only deep reason to claim for

the social nature of language would be its mysterious emergence during the situation of double contingency.

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