

Asymmetrization (*Asymmetrisierung*)

→ *Meaning*-constituting systems are self-referential systems, since each element therein refers only to other elements in the system, and through them refers back to itself [→ *Self-Reference*]. This circularity becomes a problem if it takes a pure, tautological form, as in the case of “A is A”. In this form, the operations cannot find any identifiable connection, because they occur with no informational content and without any anchor point. Meaning-constituting systems interrupt pure self-reference by selecting reference points in the operations, and introduce an asymmetry in the circularity of the references. For instance, in the case of “A is A only when...”, the condition “only when...” makes the statement informative, offering connections for (possible) future operations. Connectivity is the condition for the operational capacity of the system, and it therefore constitutes the necessary condition for its autopoietic reproduction [→ *Autopoiesis*].

The introduction of asymmetries does not change the fact that systems are self-referential. Meaning-constituting systems presents the problem of tautology, since they can operate only on the basis of self-reference. Social systems can only communicate and psychic systems can only think: every communication can connect only to other communications, and every thought only to other thoughts. For this reason, social and psychic systems are forced to constantly create conditions that avoid the short circuit of self-reference: they must de-tautologize themselves and unfold their self-reference. Tautology does not disappear in asymmetrization; it remains as a condition for self-reference, and both tautology and self-reference remain the prerequisites for the existence of the system. The introduction of asymmetries solves the problem of the unproductive purely tautological circulation. The system must be capable of inserting additional meaning, which determines the direction in which the system can operate informatively.

Asymmetry can be introduced through the structure of language. Here, the language- and communication-based differentiation of subject and predicate creates the impression that the projected objects are responsible for their own properties, independently of communication.

The most general forms of asymmetrization can be observed and differentiated by referring to three *→meaning dimensions*:

(a) In the temporal dimension, the irreversibility of time permits the introduction of asymmetry. This arises through the differentiation of, on the one hand, the past, which is from this moment onwards lost and irretrievable, and, on the other hand, the contingent, uncertain future. The past provides the opportunity to accept and legitimize the situation in the present; whereas the open, foreseeable future makes it possible to set goals and finalize decisions regarding what we have, in a specific instance, attempted to achieve or imagined as probable. Situations and events are revealed in the passage of time, and, in the present, we must act in order to bring about or avoid future situations or events. The immutability of the past and the uncertainty of the future create an asymmetry in the temporal dimension, an asymmetry that can only be introduced in the present: past and future are imaginary constructs of a system that exists only in its present.

(b) In the fact dimension, the asymmetry is introduced in the differentiation of system and environment [*→System/Environment*], which guides the operations of the system. The system structures itself in relation to an environment upon which it makes itself reliant, and in which it monitors controllable and uncontrollable variables. Tautology would be re-introduced if the system assumed that its relationships to the environment would be different if the structures were different. No system would be able to operate according to the idea that everything that happens is dependent upon it, and that reality is therefore merely its own projection.

(c) In the social dimension, asymmetrization means that many observers are differentiated, each of which observes according to their own, differing perspectives. In modern society, this form of asymmetrization is expressed in the recognition of the individual as point of reference and final decision-maker regarding personal behavior: each person is different from all other persons and is recognized as such in this asymmetrical relationship. This applies to the functionally differentiated society, whereas stratified societies construct an equivalent asymmetrization in that they structure the social dimension hierarchically. Recognition of the individual and hierarchy are functional equivalents that solve the same problem: the tautological basis of the

social dimension. Both these forms of conditioning reveal that, for every individual (ego), other individuals can be observed only as alter ego, that is a projection of the ego in another person.

All forms of asymmetrization are “created” for, and in view of, a specific function. This demands that the semantic forms in which asymmetrizations are processed are made plausible at the social level. The operating system that uses these asymmetries treats them as given, as natural, as unavoidable or necessary, despite being introduced self-referentially in the system by the system. Usually, these points of reference can only fulfill their function if and when the system accepts them as necessary without having to consider that these are system-internal constructs that require specific operations. [G.C.]

Selbstreferentielle Systeme (1988); The Paradox of Form (1999[1993]); Sthenography (1990[(1987/88)]).

