

Attribution (*Zurechnung*)

Attribution is a technique for localizing selections [*→Meaning*]: the observed selections are ascribed to someone or something. Attributing selections, a system can determine everything in the world. Attribution is thus a prerequisite of observation [*→Operation/Observation*]. Attribution is determined in the three dimensions of meaning [*→Meaning Dimension*] and therefore it is based on their different schematizations.

In the temporal dimension of meaning, the basic schematization of attribution is constant/variable: we can attribute to anything either constancy (objects and situations) or variability (events). In the social dimension of meaning, the schematization is ego/alter: we can attribute anything either to ego's selection or to alter's selection. In the fact dimension of meaning, the schematization is internal/external: the selections are attributed here to either action or experience. Thus, the observer ascribes selections either to a system (action) or to its environment (experience). In both cases, however, the observing system ascribes the selection to the observed system: in the first case as action and in the second case as experiencing environmental selections. The difference is between experienced meaning taken as externally constructed (in the environment of the observed system), and meaning of action taken as *→complexity* reduction carried out by the observed system itself. This attribution demands the constant dual presence of both sides of the differentiation of experience/action: experience and action can only be understood in relation to each other and are functionally equivalent modes of selection.

There is an important difference between the attribution of action and of experience. The attribution of actions permits the observation of the reproduction of a system: a system can only be observed through the attribution of actions [*→Communication*]. This does not mean that the system reproduces itself through the attribution of actions; the attribution is a product of observation that reflects the view of the observer, rather than the *→autopoiesis* of

the observed system. The attribution of experience, on the other hand, allows the observation of the reproduction of meaning. Meaning can only be created and reproduced through experience since every observation is the experience of something. The possibility to ascribe action to a system is much more limited than the possibility to ascribe experience: everything that is not action is experienced.

Attribution renews *→self-reference*, both the self-reference of the system (through the attribution of action) and the self-reference of meaning (through the attribution of experience). Attribution is a condition for the self-reference of the system because it allows the *→asymmetrization* of *→double contingency*. When ego can attribute a selection (uttering something) to alter, communication arises: ego can ascribe to alter an action (alter utters what she has decided) or an experience (alter utters what she knew). Thus, the production of communication requires the possibility to ascribe an utterance to alter, which can show both alter's action and alter's experience. Since it depends on observation, the modality of attribution is contingent. What is attributed in a certain way (for instance, as experience) can be attributed differently (as action) at other moments, under different conditions, or from a different point of view. The formation of a social system requires attribution rules, as well as the possibility to coordinate experience and action. Only in this way can expectations of any kind stabilize.

In the course of societal evolution, the contingency of attributing experience and action grows and coordination problems increase. As the complexity of social systems increases, so too does the scope of attributing action, because higher complexity means more possibilities to attribute action. A more complex social system can attribute itself more selections. Law is no longer attributed to nature, but is set down by the legal system. Power is no longer attributed to God's will, but rather to the decisions of political systems. Nature is no longer viewed as an unchangeable reality, but rather as being constituted by the scientific system. In this perspective, the change in the scientific system is the most relevant: causality and deduction are regarded as attributed by an observer able to construct some determinacy. In a sociological perspective, the functional method [*→Functional Analysis*] allows the view of attribution as a form of asymmetrization that makes the system capable of operation. [C.B.]

Social Systems (1995: 83-86; 165-166); Meaning as Sociology's Basic Concept (1990).