

Negation

In the conceptualization of system theory, negation has a functional primacy because it allows the world to be kept accessible despite the unavoidably selectivity of the operations of social and psychic systems. Negation takes the form of a reference to other possibilities than those that are actualized [*→Meaning*]. As such, it represents social and psychic systems' reference to the *→world* and allows the constitution of the meaning of each communication and each thought.

The concept of meaning indicates the possibility for meaning-constituting systems of reducing the world's *→complexity* without this reduction implying the destruction of non-actualized possibilities. A communicative context selects a topic, concentrates on this topic and temporarily leaves every other thematic alternative aside. These other possible alternatives are negated; however, they remain accessible for a potential further communication. That what is negated does not irreversibly disappear, but instead remains available, can be traced back to two different features of negation:

(a) Negation generalizes what the positive determination does not take into account. When communication selects a topic, it leaves the horizon of excluded topics undetermined. It is not necessary to determine all negations connected with every actualization.

(b) Negation requires a second feature, reflexivity, to make it possible to recover later what the generalization leaves undetermined, which does not disappear. Negation can be applied to itself, regaining what was temporarily excluded and positively determining it. Negating what was negated, the system can find the connections necessary to continue its operations.

Generalization and reflexivity are mutually necessary components of negation. Both are conditions for the operation of meaning-constituting systems: only when the unactualized is left undetermined and can possibly

be recovered later without the world disappearing can communication and consciousness continue to operate.

Thanks to these features, negations are meaningful operations. They play a role in every social and psychic operation and therefore really exist in the real world. However, although it occurs in every social and conscious operation, negation does not have a correlate in the environment: there are no negative objects in the environment. This holds both for defined negations (“something is not”) and undefined negations (“everything that something is not”). In this sense, negation must be understood as a positive operator because it is only used in operations that really (i.e., positively) take place. All negations are used to gain positive operative connections because, to be able to negate, one must be able to distinguish what one wants to negate: one can only negate within a distinction [*→Operation/Observation*]. For this reason, no system is able to terminate itself through its own operations; in any case, negation of oneself is yet another confirmation of autopoiesis. Negation thus seems to be a point of departure for analyzing the construction of reality in meaning-constituting systems [*→Constructivism*]. [*G.C.*]

Meaning as Sociology's Basic Concept (1990); Über die Funktion der Negation in sinnkonstituierenden Systemen (1975).