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Conceptual history and the diagnostics of the present

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Abstract

This article explores Niklas Luhmann's semantic analytical strategy. With Luhmann we get a *sociologically* informed conceptual history in which Koselleck's guiding distinction between conceptual history and social history is replaced with a distinction between semantic and social structure, where the latter should be interpreted as the form of communicative differentiation and structural coupling within society. Here the guiding idea is that the constitution of social systems and social forms is reflected in semantic development. I would like to present Luhmann's concepts of semantics, but in a way that might improve its empirical sensitivity and thereby make it more adequate to the observation of contemporary semantic changes.

Key words • concepts • semantics • Koselleck • Luhmann • empty concept • meaning dimensions • becoming concept • universalisation

Introduction

There is a growing interest in conceptual history in management and organisation studies. The work of Reinhart Koselleck and Paul Ricoeur is most often cited in this regard, and in this article I want to suggest adding the work of Niklas Luhmann to the mix. Koselleck and Luhmann, as it happened, had offices quite close to each other at the University of Bielefeld and met on a number of occasions. Luhmann, in fact, was inspired by Koselleck in his own writing on semantics and concepts. But while Koselleck, like the modern historian that he was, developed his conceptual history through a reading of Heidegger and Gadamer, Luhmann grounded his conceptual history in the sociological theory of social systems. While Luhmann anchored the concepts of his semantics into a larger theory of meaning and communication, Koselleck hoped that conceptual history might contribute to a more general social history. Conceptual history was never construed as a radical alternative to traditional history, but as an important and necessary supplement. So there was always a tension between conceptual history and social history in a broader sense. Conceptual history was not a goal in itself but was meant as a contribution to more traditional history.

The relationship between concepts and social was twofold. On the one hand, Koselleck was aware that events in history are sometimes so radical or violent (both in a narrow and broad sense) that the present did not have a language for what was going on. Conceptual development followed events, slowly giving them meaning. On the other hand, concepts frame the present space of meaning including the present horizon of the future, making actions possible (Koselleck 1989). Here Koselleck was following Heidegger's idea that humans directed their attempts to make sense of their lives towards an imaginary future. Koselleck was focusing on what he called *neuzeit*, the time between pre-modern and modern time, observing how the possibilities of modernity were framed by the formation of concepts like state, citizen, contract, privacy, freedom, party, etc. So, while Koselleck represented the linguistic turn in the science of history, he never attacked positivism and realism. In Koselleck's work, then, we get a kind of pragmatic marriage between the linguistic turn and modern realism, without an overall coherent theory (Andersen 2003a; Koselleck and Gadamar 1987).

In some of the later use of Koselleck's conceptual history, social history is replaced with a more philosophical frame of reference. A very good example is an earlier article in this journal by Costea et al. (Costea et al. 2006). Here, conceptual history is a contribution to a kind of management philosophy rather than social history. Instead of a guiding distinction between conceptual history and social history, we get a distinction between conceptual history and philosophical categories. In the article, Nietzsche's categorical distinction between Apollo and Dionysus motivates the study of the conceptual history of play and work, which amounts to a diagnostic narrative of a Dionysian turn in work regimes. We can call this a philosophically informed and inspired conceptual history, very much like Foucault's genealogy.

With Luhmann we get a *sociologically* informed conceptual history. The guiding distinction conceptual history/social history is replaced with a distinction between semantic and social structure, where the latter should be interpreted as the form of communicative differentiation and structural coupling within society (Luhmann 1993a, 9–72). Here, conceptual history becomes a way into the study of the making of social forms, their mode of functioning and inner logic. The analysis of the tensions in social forms becomes a way to understand the driving forces in the making of new concepts and conceptual ruptures. The guiding idea in systems theory is that the constitution of social systems and social forms is reflected in semantic development.

There are at least two interpretations of this idea. One emerges from a reading of Luhmann's work before his use of Spencer-Brown's 'logic of form' and from a reading of the work that came after. The first is closely tied to Luhmann's theory of the evolution of society, which identified three forms of societal differentiation: the segmented, the stratified and the functional differentiation of society. In this theory, the relationship between the form of differentiation and the development of semantics is very fixed. A semantic does not have a life of its own. Only communication operates and always accordingly to the dominating form of differentiation. So the whole concept of

semantics becomes very bounded to the thesis of functional differentiation. Luhmann studied the semantic history of, for example, law, politics, love, art and religion as the evolution of specific functional systems (Luhmann 1986, 1993b, 2000, 2004). The major thesis is that semantic developments follow the shifts in dominant forms of differentiation. This means, for instance, that the shift from stratification to functional differentiation as the dominant form of societal differentiation is reflected in a semantic shift from concepts of status to concepts of individual freedom. This tight link of course limits Luhmann's relevance to studies in the history of organisation. The study of the history of organisations becomes tightly connected to the shift in the form of differentiation. The history of organisation becomes just a supporting line of inquiry that ultimately merely illustrates functional differentiation. Some historical studies, however, have been done in this field. Stichweh has studied the history of professions (Stichweh 1994, 2006) and Kieser has done a number of studies of guilds and of monasteries as pre-organisational institutions (Kieser 1987, 1994). In Kieser's earlier studies, he often draws on Luhmann's theory of societal evolution, but I believe it became a too narrow perspective for him. He simply left Luhmann's theory behind him. Systems theory became a prison rather than an inspiration of the studies of the history of organisation. So in this first interpretation of Luhmann there are many reasons for historians to leave his work untouched. The theory simply made too much historical material irrelevant.

In the post-Spencer-Brown phase of Luhmann's work, it becomes possible to frame the relationship between communication and semantics very differently, and it opens up both to a reading of Luhmann as an analytical strategy (Andersen 2003a, 2006, 2010) and a deconstructive reading of Luhmann (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2009; Stäheli 2000, 2010). In this interpretation, the studies of the history of semantics does not have the same automatic relationship to the theory of functional differentiation. The form of differentiation does not simply determine the semantic developments. In this perspective the 'moving figure' of history is never a fixed tension between communicative forms of impossibility and semantic conditions of possibility. Communication always takes a form and in Spencer-Brown a form is the unity of a distinction that always implies a paradox, drawing an imperfect distinction. The form constitutes a kind of impossible relationship that forces communication to continue in an attempt to resolve the paradox. The constant creation of new semantics is here observed as strategies of deparadoxification. Possibilities are produced by impossibilities, so to speak. Semantic formations offer opportunities to deal with communicative impossibilities, and semantic developments sometimes lead to a dislocation of the forms of communication or create new forms and new paradoxes.

This perspective produces a very different setting for contributing to the study of organisational history. No empirical findings are defined as irrelevant from the outset. Theory is no longer a prison for history; instead, semantic history becomes the most important reservoir for achieving sensitivity to social forms and their dislocations. An example here is Stäheli's study of the history of 'soundscapes' of financial markets (Stäheli 2003: 244):

The social is founded upon noise. Noise makes society possible. There would be no social order without an underlying noise providing the opportunity of variation and change. To be more precise, it is the very operation of order(ing) which produces a noise of its own, making it impossible to ever establish the fullness of social order.

He focuses on the semantic history of noise in the stock exchange; that is how noise is observed and how different 'soundscapes' of noise are constituted. He shows that noise is not only relevant to interaction, but also to the historical constitution of certain forms of organisations and functionally differentiated communication. This is one way of opening organisational history through systems theory with semantic history as the entrance.

Another example is Rennison's study of the semantic history of the managerial gaze on wages. In a number of articles, she shows how there is a development and a differentiation in the concept of wages in the public sector in Denmark in the period 1900–2005. This differentiation accelerates with the concept of public management in 1980. The concept of management becomes one of the most important tools in reconstructing the public institution as a partly autonomous organisation with its own self-description and responsibility for its own performances. The manager becomes a symbol of the self in a given institution, and wages become individualised, reflecting performance and commitments to the institution. She uses systems theory to analyse how the individualised wage negotiation not only enfolds one single language game; equivalent to the many historically created concepts of wages, the negotiation should balance many different considerations, like performance, personal rights, experience, personal commitment and capacity for self-development. The effect is to establish a polyphonic wage-negotiation regime that deploys a variety of communicative codes: legal/non-legal, performance/non-performance, better/worse regarding learning and self-development, loved/not loved regarding passion towards the work (Rennison 2007a, 2007b, 2007c). In this way Rennison's studies also point beyond a simple understanding of functional differentiation.

A third example could be my own study of the history of play in organisation. Here, I focus on the semantic articulation of relationships between organisation and play from 1860 until today. Roughly speaking, it was possible to distinguish between three layers of semantics. The first semantic layer was developed between 1860 and 1945. It focuses on competitive games and play was articulated as a medium symbolising the values of the organisation, especially the contradictory values of competition and collegiality. The second layer was developed from 1955. Inspired by war games under World War II, it focuses on management and business training and development games. In this semantic, play has to strive towards a simplified representation of the organisational reality. The third and last semantic layer emerges from 1980 and focuses on games of social creativity. Games should not simply represent reality but facilitate an interactional creation of the organisational reality. The study combines the semantic history of play and organisation

with a study of the history of structural coupling in organisations between the forms of play, power, pedagogy and decision. Where games in the first period subsumed play under power, the second subsumed play under education. In the third period we see a more complex structural coupling where play is more symmetrically linked, functioning as a kind of immune defence in the organisation and counterbalancing fixations in the logic of decision making. This makes possible a certain doubling of both a formal and a virtual organisation (Andersen 2009).

In all three cases, systems theory is used to bring more sociological imagination into the history of organisation, and opening, not closing, new research themes and empirical connections. In all three cases the studies were anchored in a precise but also many-faceted concept of semantics.

In what follows I will only focus on the semantic analytical strategy. It will be based on systems theory, but in its analytical and deconstructive version with a lot of openings to Koselleck of course, but also to discourse studies and deconstruction. In this perspective the concept does not function as a categorical system. Its function is rather to facilitate an analytical gaze, which maximises sensitivity for semantic events.

The concept of meaning

The semantic analytical strategy is constituted by the guiding distinction semantic/meaning. The focus of the strategy is how meaning is formed and how it is conditioned into a number of concepts, which together form a semantic reservoir of meaning that is then made available to communication. The focus, therefore, is the condensation of meaning and the horizon of generalised forms that this implies. Meaning, according to Luhmann, is not based on an external referential relationship, neither in the form of external reality nor signifying structure. Luhmann's concept of meaning is neither structuralistic nor post-structuralistic; it is inspired primarily by Husserl's phenomenology (Luhmann 1985: 101):

The best way to approach the meaning of meaning might well be the phenomenological method. This is by no means equivalent to taking a subjective or even psychological stance. On the contrary, phenomenology means: taking the world as it appears without asking ontological or metaphysical questions.

Luhmann defines meaning as the unity of the distinction *actuality/potentiality* (Luhmann 1995a: 65). Something presents itself as central to thought or communication at a particular moment; something is actualised, but the actualisation is always central to the thought or communication in relation to a horizon of possible actualisations, that is, potentiality. There is always a given core, surrounded by other potentialities, which cannot be utilised at the same time. Potentiality or possibility must not be understood as a structure that precedes actualisation, but instead as a horizon of potentialised expectations, which emerges alongside the actualisation. Something

appears, which thereby excludes other possibilities, but it produces and maintains these precisely as 'other possibilities'. Meaning, therefore, is the simultaneous presentation of actuality and potentiality. The actual and the potential cannot be separated and exist only in a simultaneous relationship with each other. Or as Luhmann (1985: 102) puts it: 'Meaning is the link between the actual and the possible: it is not one or the other.' Meaning is the actual surrounded by possibilities. Any moment of actualisation potentialises new possibilities.

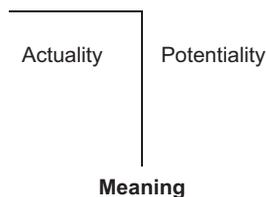


Figure 1 Meaning as form

Meaning can never be fixed. In Luhmann's work, however, the reason for this is not that the structure of meaning is incomplete, but that the core of the actualised disintegrates from the moment something has been marked. Meaning is always formed by an operation, either as thought or communication, and such things disappear at the moment they come into existence. Meaning always has to be created recursively; it always emerges in a reference to meaning. The core of actuality disintegrates from the moment it emerges, and thus meaning causes change. Meaning, therefore, is also the continual rearranging of the distinction between actuality and possibility (Luhmann 1995a).

The concept of semantics

Luhmann distinguishes between system and semantics. He defines semantics as specific structures that link communications by making forms of meaning available, which the communication systems treat as worthy of preservation (Luhmann 1995a). Whereas meaning expresses specific operations, the concept of semantics expresses condensed and generalised forms of meaning available to communicative operations.

The concept of semantics relies on a distinction between *meaning* and *condensed meaning*. Meaning consists in an ongoing rearranging of the distinction actuality/potentiality tied to the immediate situation of actualisation. Communication, on the other hand, is able to develop structure, which condenses meaning into forms that are disconnected from the immediate situation of actuality. Condensation means that a multiplicity of meaning is captured in a single form, which then becomes available to an unspecified communication. Semantics is defined, therefore, as *the stock of generalised*

forms of differences (e.g. concepts, ideas, images and symbols), which can be used in the selection of meaning within the communication systems. In other words, semantics are condensed and repeatable forms of meaning available to communication. These generalised forms are relatively dependent upon the specific situation and obtain their specific content from the communication that selects them (Luhmann 1993a).

In principle, Luhmann is open to the idea that meaning can be condensed into a variety of forms such as ideas, images and symbols. Ultimately, however, the focus in Luhmann's semantic analysis becomes the condensation of meaning into concepts. The guiding distinction of the semantic analysis therefore becomes concept/meaning and focuses on the way in which meaning and expectations are gathered in concepts and form semantic reservoirs, which are available to communication (Luhmann 1993a).

A concept, then, is defined as a condensation and generalisation of a multiplicity of meanings and expectations. A concept *condenses* expectations in such a way that many different expectations become condensed into concepts. Concepts are never unambiguously definable. If one is told that someone is a social worker, this information immediately creates a horizon of different expectations such as, for example, 'she categorises people', 'she is probably liberal', 'she is social and caring', 'she smokes a pipe', 'she removes children from their homes', etc. A concept is a kind of expectation structure. To use a particular concept in a communication establishes particular expectations about the continuation of the communication. Moreover, concepts are *general* in the sense that a concept is not identical with its specific use in a specific communication. The concept is generally available to communication but is given, in the communication, a specific meaning and actualises specific expectations.

The multiplicity of meaning in the concept as form is always locked into the opposition between concept and counter-concept (Figure 2).

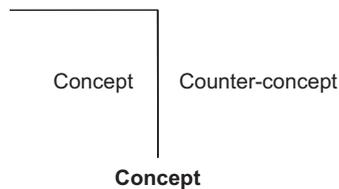


Figure 2 Form of concept

There can be no concept without a counter-concept to hold the concept in place. The counter-concept puts restrictions on the concept. A conceptual pair could be man/woman, where the meaning that has been condensed into the concept of 'woman' sets up restrictions for the meaning of 'man'. The expectations associated with being a woman set restrictions for what can be expected of someone who is marked in the communication as manly (an issue that is not settled in terms of biology). A social worker is only a social worker in relation to a client, and therefore what can be expected of a social worker becomes entirely dependent upon the

expectations linked to the counter-concept of client. The battle over the social worker centres on the description of the client and the expectations that become condensed into the concept of client, for example self-sufficient, active and independent, or lost, helpless and weak.

Semantic analysis, then, employs historicism as a way to describe the current conceptual reservoir. How are meaning and expectations formed, it asks, and how do these become condensed or generalised into concepts, which then establish certain semantic reservoirs for certain communication systems?

Working with the concept of concept

In a sense, Luhmann's conception of concepts is extraordinarily simple compared with similar conceptions in other discourse analyses such as Foucault's knowledge archaeology or Laclau's analysis of hegemony (Andersen 2003a). But despite – or perhaps by virtue of – this simplicity, it generates fruitful analytic questions.

As an example, suppose we are interested in the conceptual history of the social client. We might sense that new phrases such as 'self-help', 'joint perspective', 'active citizenship' and 'citizens' contracts' are causing a shift in the semantic reservoir that is available to social administrations and are paving the way for new communicative forms of inclusion and exclusion. We begin to observe current conceptualisations by looking for oppositions of concepts and counter-concepts, for example the way that 'self-help' is defined in opposition to 'pacifying help', how the concept of 'joint perspective', according to which social worker and client are expected to find a shared view, is defined in opposition to the social worker's 'comprehensive view', and we explore the generalised expectation structures that are made available to the communication.

When we study a concept's history, we have to pay attention to at least seven different possible forms of conceptual shift:

1. The concept may remain constant while the counter-concept changes.
2. The concept may have changed while the counter-concept has remained the same.
3. Both concept and counter-concept may have been displaced.
4. Concept and counter-concept may be the same but the tension between them may be different.
5. The concept may be the same but may have moved to the position of counter-concept.
6. The concept may have lost its counter-concept, which results in the creation of an empty category with unspecified counter-concept, which can be occupied later.
7. Concept and counter-concept remain the same, but the meaning dimension within which the distinction is defined may have shifted.

An example of the first kind of conceptual shift can be found in the history of the concept of the employee. At the beginning of the 1900s, the counter-concept to the

responsible employee was negligence. Today, the counter-concept to responsibility is *having* responsibility. Responsibility remains a positive concept but the emphasis on duty is not; duty as a counter-concept is associated with expectations about passively awaiting a superior's active assignment of responsibility (Andersen and Born 2008).

We may also imagine that the counter-concept remains the same but that the positive concept has changed. In all probability, this would not change the form of the concept because the expectations would be the same and would merely be associated with a different term.

In the third form of conceptual displacement, both concept and counter-concept have been displaced and thereby also the unity of the concept. The third form involves a semantic equivalence between the two concept/counter-concept pairs, but also a rupture in the horizon of meaning.

In the mid-1800s, public servants were mainly distinguished from politicians; the former were employed by the state, while the latter were elected by the people. In the 1920s, however, as the state grew, and more and more people were employed in it, it became necessary to distinguish public officials also from those who were 'merely' employed by the state, that is on a contractual basis with no formal authority to represent state functions. Thus, in the 1800s, we had the distinction official/politician, but it was displaced in the 1920s with the distinction public servant/public employee. The concept of public servant goes from being orientated by its political function to being orientated by its organisational function. This displacement does not simply indicate new expectations regarding employees, but suggests a shift of reference in the definition of an employee. In the first concept, the reference is the political system and the distinction deals with the non-political in the political. In the second concept, the reference is the state as an organisation and the distinction deals with membership criteria.

In the fourth form of displacement, the distinction concept/counter-concept seems at first to remain the same, but the tension between concept and counter-concept is different, which means that the form of concept is also different, for example because the valorisation of the counter-concept has changed. The distinction between 'man' and 'woman' remains intact, but with the association of new expectations with 'woman', new restrictions are placed on the expectations associated with 'man' as a position.

In the fifth form of displacement, the concept has changed position and has become counter-concept to a different concept. One example is the concept of help, which in the 1960s was opposed to the concept of non-help. Help was associated with the professional help offered to a client with certain problems on the basis of a professional diagnosis. Today, this concept of help has become a counter-concept and is denigrated (valorised negatively) as patronising. Helping clients with their problems is considered tantamount to stealing the clients' problems. The new concept has become 'self-help', which is never to be confused with pacifying assistance (Andersen 2007, 2008).

In the sixth form of displacement, the concept has lost its counter-concept and has become what Koselleck calls an empty category, or in Ernesto Laclau's words an

'empty signifier'. In this case, the counter-concept has not simply disappeared, it has become non-specific, which almost calls for new communicative valorisations of the concept (Koselleck 2004: 187; Laclau 1996a: 36–47).

In the seventh form of displacement, concept and counter-concept remain the same, whereas the meaning dimension within which the distinction is primarily defined has been displaced. I will discuss the notion of meaning dimension in greater depth later on, but if we distinguish between a temporal dimension, a social dimension and a factual dimension, one may imagine that the form of the concept changes dimension so that a factual dimension is defined as social or temporal. Within the semantics of gender, for example, there has for decades been a battle back and forth between a factualisation of the distinction man/woman as a genetic or hormonal fact on one side, and a socialisation of the distinction as a social, and therefore reversible, convention on the other. Koselleck has studied the concept us/them historically and points out that the emergence of Christianity, for example, creates a shift from the distinction civilized/barbarian to Christian/heathen, and this shift also involves a temporalisation of the distinction because heathens are defined as potentially Christian. Heathens are not essentially heathens; **they can be converted over time, and this temporalisation of the us/them distinction thus results in rather radical shifts in communicative possibilities** (Koselleck 2004).

The semantic analysis and the meaning dimensions

Luhmann distinguishes between three meaning dimensions, which then allows him to distinguish between three semantic dimensions (Luhmann 1995a). I will not describe this distinction in depth but will only briefly introduce it.

The factual dimension is about the choice of themes and objects for communication and consciousness. Themes and objects are all structured according to the form of meaning termed 'thing' as the unity of the distinction between this and everything else. Similarly, we can speak of a semantic of factuality as generalised forms of 'being-one-thing-and-not-another'.

The social dimension is based on the non-identity between communication participants and constitutes the horizon of possibility in a tension between 'alter' and 'ego'. Thus, it is about that which is not recognised by me as me. In terms of semantics, it is a question of generalised forms of distinction between 'us' and 'them'. Social identities are the unity of the distinction us/them. Thus the social dimension is the dimension for the semantic construction of social identities, where there can only be an 'us' (concept) in relation to a 'them' (counter-concept). There is no 'us' except for in the comparison with 'them'. 'Us' is only us to the extent that it is different from 'them', but 'they' only exist, in turn, in 'our' discourse about 'them'. That means that expectations of 'the others' create the boundary for expectations of 'ourselves'.

Finally, *the temporal dimension* articulates the tension between the past and the future. The temporal dimension is 'constituted by the fact that the difference between

before and after, which can be immediately experienced in all events, is referred to specific horizons, namely extended into past and future' (Luhmann 1995a: 78). The semantics of temporality is about the way in which we observe and conceptualise the past and the future. The future is a horizon of expectations and the past a space of experiences, and any present exists only as the tension between the two. Time is constituted in every communication. Luhmann states: 'What moves in time is past/present/future together, in other words, the present along with its past and future horizons' (Luhmann 1982: 307).

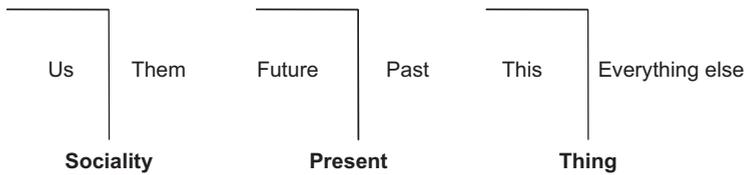


Figure 3 Meaning dimensions

Figure 3 shows how the three dimensions can be formalised. In terms of analytical strategy, the three dimensions can be perceived as 'arch-distinctions' (equivalent but not identical to Koselleck's distinctions between friend/enemy, before/after and in/out (Koselleck and Gadamar 1987)), which we can always look for in the semantic analysis. There are no semantics that do not construct factual, social and temporal forms. Once we have compiled the archive on which we conduct our semantic analyses, it is natural to begin the analysis by reading the different texts with an eye to the distinctions they establish, particularly between 'past' and 'future' and between 'us' and 'them'. One might even draw up tables for the different texts, which make visible the valorisations of 'future' versus 'past', and thereby reach a certain analytical 'tempo' because certain conceptual shifts will stand out very clearly.

Clearly, this is not the whole story, but the tables can function as a good place to begin the observation of semantic shifts. The relationships 'us'/'them' and 'past'/'future' must be understood as concept/counter-concept relationships, and all questions about conceptual displacements must be asked here. Thus, it is not only a question about the way in which 'us' and 'them' are valorised over time but also about the tensions between them.

In addition, it is important to be aware of the fact that distinctions can be re-entered into themselves. Re-entry means that a distinction is copied and re-entered into itself, which causes the distinction to become a part of its own whole (Luhmann 2002; Spencer-Brown 1969). Re-entry establishes a paradox because the two distinctions are simultaneously identical and different from each other. When a concept becomes a part of its own whole, this impacts the way in which it offers up expectations. Appearing as a part of its own whole, the concept makes impossible the expectations it makes available at the moment they emerge. If we take the temporal dimension

as an example, this means that the future might not simply be the future of the present but can be the future of the future, the future of the past, the present of the future, the past of the past, and the present of the past. All these re-entries in the temporal dimension have of course their history and play an enormous role in the developments of organisations. Decisions, planning and strategy making are all communications drawing temporal distinctions, but the temporal distinctions are drawn very differently. To put it simply, decisions draw a distinction between before and after the decision, where 'before' the distinction is defined as a state where a lot of uncertainty and open contingency exists regarding expectations. 'After' the decision is defined as a state where the same contingency exists, but now in a fixed form (we decided to do this but we could have decided differently). Planning involves decisions about later decisions and as such adds a re-entry on the temporal dimension. The present becomes the past premise of a future decision, and the future becomes the future of a future decision. Strategy might again be observed as a decision of third order: a decision about possible future references in planning (Andersen 2003b; Luhmann 2005). My point is that developments in temporal semantics, including modes of temporal re-entries, are indeed constitutive of the possibilities of organising and the handling of temporal complexity.

The same logic applies to us/them, where, for example, somebody among 'us' may act like 'them'. There are many different possibilities for the re-entry of the us/them distinction, and a semantic analysis has to remain aware of the possible re-entries. An example here could be Foucault's study on the history of madness. Observed in Luhmann's framework, Foucault studied how distinctions are drawn between us (the rational and productive) and them (the mad and unproductive), a distinction that at the same time was one between inclusion in society as communicative relevant and exclusion from society as irrelevant. In Foucault's studies we can also see how this distinction is later handled through re-entries of the distinction. The emergence of internments and hospital for criminals, the unemployed and mad people represent a re-entry of inclusion/exclusion. The excluded become included in society though internal forms of exclusion such as the internments (Foucault 1971; Luhmann 1995b). Through semantic evolutions of social forms of re-entries, new complexity can be handled, and this of course is also of major importance in the study of the history of organisation.

Singularisation and generalisation

The relationship between concept and counter-concept always entails a tension between what Koselleck refers to as the general and the singular (Andersen 2003a; Koselleck 2004) or what Laclau terms the particular and the universal (Laclau 1996). Linking up to a concept is always associated with particular conditions, and the concept is always linked to universal qualities. Any concept condenses a multiplicity of meaning and comes into being as a generalisation that overrides the particular communicative situation.

This has been generally ignored in Luhmann's works because he primarily works with cultivated semantics, which has evolved over hundreds of years, establishing reservoirs for well-established functional systems. He only seldom studies contemporary semantics with a short history where one may be uncertain about the concepts' conceptual character. In Luhmann's analyses, we are either dealing with a concept or not. Concepts are generalised forms of meaning. Luhmann works with concepts about which there is no doubt as to their status of generalised forms. However, when working with more contemporary semantics, such as the semantics of sustainability or the semantics of active citizenship, it is less obvious whether the analysed object, as a concept, is a fully generalised form or a developing form; that is, a form that is emerging through generalisation, but where the generalisation and condensation has not been brought to its conclusion. In terms of analytical strategy, it is not simply a question of determining the concept's status of general form. The challenge is to develop analytical concepts that make it possible to observe the incompleteness of incomplete concepts with the particular structures of expectations established by incompleteness. In order to do this, we have to take yet another look at the concept of a concept. Luhmann makes two propositions: (1) that concepts are condensed forms of meaning and (2) that a concept is the unity of concept and counter-concept. If we look at these two definitions at the same time, we have to perceive the distinction concept/counter-concept as a re-entry of the distinction conceptual form/meaning. This means that we can no longer maintain a simple distinction between concept as a generalised form on the one hand and meaning as a specific operation on the other because the specific or particular re-enters the form of concept. Any tension between concept and counter-concept, therefore, must be studied as a (perhaps incomplete) tension between the general and the particular (Figure 4).

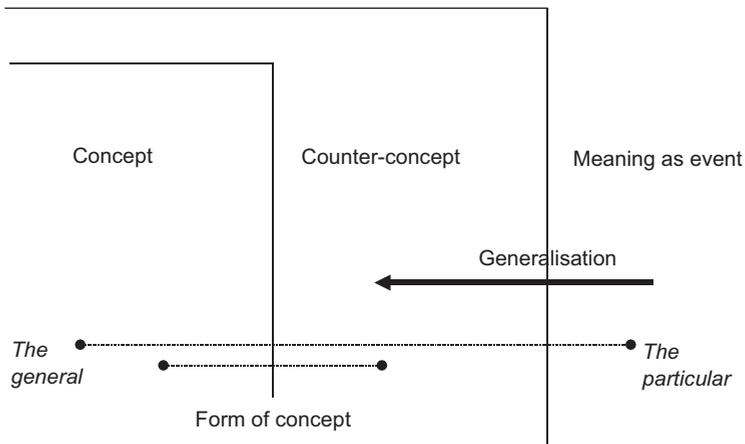


Figure 4 Becoming concept

The relationship between the general and the singular is singularly tied to the individual concepts and should therefore always be an element of the semantic analysis. Koselleck pays particularly attention to the relationship between the general and the singular in relation to the social dimension and the distinction between us and them (Koselleck 2004). He points out that identity markers for the indication of 'us' are sufficiently general to not be emptied of meaning by a singular articulation. Concepts such as 'party', 'movement' and 'interest group' can be employed similarly in the self-construction of many different identities. These concepts are *transferable* in the sense that they can be appropriated, employed and translated by many different groups in many different contexts. Similarly, the identities that are constructed in association with these concepts are *mutual* in the sense that they do not exclude and preclude each other. For example, there are currently 10 political parties in the Danish Parliament, which all establish their identity through reference to the concept 'party' without the identity of any individual party being precluded by a competing party.

On the other hand, says Koselleck (2004: 156), there is undoubtedly a tendency towards *singularisation*, that is, towards the subjugation of the general to the singular: 'Historical agencies tend to establish their singularity by means of general concepts, claiming them as their own.' This obviously applies when a religious denomination claims the concept *the* Church or when a party alone claims to represent *the* people. But it also applies when generality becomes restricted, such as when specific kinds of political parties are outlawed – for example Communist or Nazi – or when not everyone who seeks the state's approval is recognised as a religious denomination, or when the Danish Parliament makes it illegal for female judges to wear headscarves because they are perceived as a symbol of an Islamic religious legal order. It applies generally whenever there are specific, that is singular, conditions for the connection with the general. That is always the case, which is why the general is never entirely general. There is always a limit to transferability and mutual identities are only mutual, therefore, in relation to the identities that they commonly exclude. The singular and the general appear in mutually constituent and conditioning distinctions. Laclau (1992: 90) puts it like this: 'The conclusion seems to be that the universality is incommensurable with any particularity yet cannot exist apart from the particular.'

The question of the singularisation of the general means that analyses of the way in which identities are constructed in the context of concept formations have to always be sensitive to the definitions of the tension between singularity and generality. How, for example, is meaning condensed in environmental discussion into the concept of sustainability in a way that the concept obtains universal qualities while also defining singular conditions for the sustainable representation of the environment in the communication, for example, so that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) without economic interests are more entitled to speak on behalf of the environment than the oil industry. In Denmark, as in many other countries, we have freedom of religion, but this freedom is thought to be represented better by the Christian state church than by Muslims who 'flaunt' their religion through the way they dress.

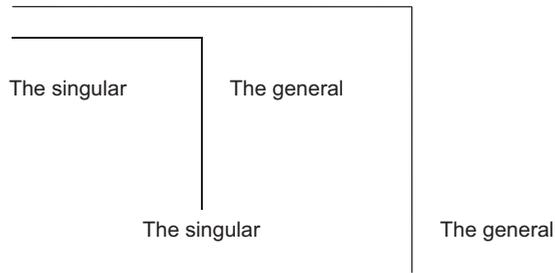


Figure 5 Universalisation logic

The universalisation logic is depicted in Figure 5. The distinction singularity/generalities opens up for the observation of the way in which the condensation of meaning into concepts also contains questions about the creation of generalities, which can be communicatively linked to under singular conditions.

This paves the way for studies about the way in which the particular is sought universalised, how particular conditions are established in conceptual distinctions for the representation of the universal, and how the condensation of forms of meaning as universal positions also defines what can appear as singular.

Can semantics be qualified?

So far, our analytical efforts have made it possible to observe conceptual shifts. Luhmann's conception of semantics is precisely the focus on the *condensation* of expectations into forms. However, we are only able to observe the condensation processes when they have taken forms. The process in itself is invisible to us.

As already mentioned, Luhmann chose mostly to study cultivated semantics in relation to social differentiation. His focus was the semantic histories of the function systems, and these typically stretch over several hundred years. I have mentioned the problem of the too rigid distinction in Luhmann between either concept or not concept (which in fact is contrary to his entire way of thinking meaning). It also creates problems for the entire concept of semantics since Luhmann configures, along the line of the concept/not concept distinction, a distinction between cultivated semantics/uncultivated semantics according to which uncultivated semantics is everyday semantics, which may be important for day-to-day living but not for sociology, whose focus is the structures of society. The problem is that a large number of semantic reservoirs that are central to the description of our society and its different systems are neither cultivated in Luhmann's sense nor constitute simple everyday semantics. They lack the structurability they would need to become constitutive for social systems outside of the systems of interaction. It simply does not make sense to go along with Luhmann here, particularly not if one is interested in the present and

its many shifts and displacements. The result is a continuum between cultivated semantics and everyday semantics. It is impossible to work with such a continuum because it leaves doubt as to the object's status of object; that is, in what sense does what we refer to as semantics then become semantics.

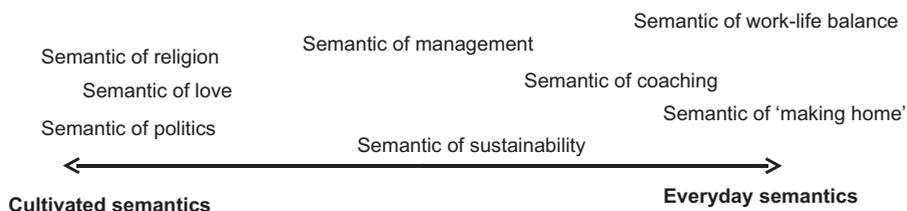


Figure 6 Cultivated semantics: A questionable concept

Stäheli (1997: 136) has formulated a similar criticism of Luhmann's distinction between serious and non-serious semantics:

The 'non-serious' semantics is a sort of leftover: it is that which is not fully absorbed by the dominant form of functional differentiation. Therefore, it is only consequent, when arguing within the logic of systems theory, that the excluded semantic cannot be the important one: it does not fit into functional differentiation. This, however, leaves many important questions unanswered when it comes to discourses that construct their object... through drawing from several semantic registers (e.g. the discourse on AIDS).

We have to enter the question from a different place, and I believe that we have to take on the analytical/strategic challenge of figuring out how to render observable the condensation of meaning. That is no simple task. The *process* of condensation is fundamentally invisible. There is no way for us to turn it into an observable object. What we might instead be able to do is to qualify condensation. By qualifying condensation we are able to evade the 'either-or judgments'; that is, we can avoid either having a concept according to which we can identify condensation of meaning, or not having a concept and therefore no condensation of meaning.

One possibility is to distinguish between empty concepts, semantics and norms as three different levels of condensation and generalisation of meaning. Empty concepts, accordingly, have the lowest level of condensation and norms the highest. The relationship has to be seen as cumulative; that is, norms presuppose semantics and condense semantic concepts. Semantics presupposes empty concepts, and condenses and unfolds them by multiplying them in countless semantic concepts. And on every level of the condensation there is contingency. Whether and how an empty concept becomes specific semantics is always contingent.

One could of course create other more sophisticated distinctions. However, if the distinctions become too demanding and precise they lose their analytical power. The question, of course, is what the significance of drawing the above distinctions really is? As already mentioned, Luhmann's semantic analyses typically spanned several centuries because his focus was the bigger questions, such as the evolution of political semantics, the semantics of love, the semantics of law, etc. There was never any doubt as to whether a political semantics had been established, only as to *how* it had been established. If, on the other hand, we wish to study semantics that are less epochally defined, such as the formation of the semantics of modern environmentalism, active citizenship and diversity management, these are to a large extent 'incomplete' semantics that are still evolving as we study them, which makes it significantly more difficult to determine whether we are actually dealing with a 'new' semantic. The important thing is to include the nature of semantics into the semantic analysis so that the analysis is not only sensitive to the reservoir's content of concepts over time, but also becomes sensitive to the way in which it is a reservoir. The semantic analysis has to define its semantic criteria as an empirical question.

Final remarks

I have tried to operationalise the semantic analytical strategy in order to improve its capacity for dealing with contemporary semantics where we cannot have the same certainty regarding the quality of concept and semantic.

In principle, one can conduct a semantic historical analysis of any concept. There is no concept whose origins one might not inquire about. A semantic analysis does not necessarily constitute a significant contribution. Koselleck's many conceptual-historical works all contributed to the exploration of *neuzeit*. He focused on conceptual transformations in the transition to the modern political order. The criterion for whether a concept was worth studying, therefore, was whether its transformation was constitutive for modern political concepts and categories. Luhmann's semantic analyses typically relied on the thesis about the functional differentiation of society and therefore focused on the emergence of the semantic reservoir of the individual function systems, for example the semantic of politics, the semantic of love and the semantic of art.

I have tried to develop his semantic analysis so that it fits contemporary studies and becomes capable of grounding a diagnostics of the present. This should allow us to deal with changes that take place within the functional form of differentiation but also change (and challenge) the conditions for the unfolding of the functionally differentiated society. This includes regime variations within functional differentiation and what they do to management and organisation. It includes all developments that do not at first glance fit the categories of functional differentiation but nevertheless take place within a functionally differentiated society and shape the possibilities and impossibilities of management.

Much sociology is a diagnostics of the present, but very often it does not have roots in historical analysis and we get a weird, dreamlike sociology. To me, it is imperative that a diagnostics of the present is solidly grounded, both empirically and historically. Perhaps a sociologically motivated conceptual history can provide the basis for realising this ambition.

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