Language (*Sprache*)

Language is the medium that has the function to make understanding communication probable. Language makes it possible to go beyond the domain of what can be perceived and, with the help of symbolic generalizations in the form of signs, to communicate on something that is not present or is only possible.

A →*communication*—i.e., the understanding of the difference between information and utterance—does not necessarily have to take the form of language. It can also occur on the basis of perceptions: ego perceives alter's behavior (moving quickly and busily) and interprets it as an utterance intended to communicate a certain piece of information (alter does not want to stay and talk). Perception as such is not communication: we perceive sounds, images and stimuli without linking them to communication, processing them instead as information. To stay with the example above: through perception, we can conclude that alter is simply walking quickly. This perception becomes communication only if the distinction between a further piece of information and its utterance comes into play—only in the case that a communication is attributed to someone who utters it: alter communicates that she is currently not available.

At the level of perception, we can never be sure if it is really a question of communication, or whether it is simply behavior with a different purpose (alter was only moving quickly because she was running late): the distinction between information and utterance is never sharp and unequivocal. The situation changes when the utterance uses language: in this case, specific sounds are produced that are articulated in such an improbable and recognizable way that it is very difficult to deny the communicative intention of the utterance. Linguistic sounds are not produced by accident.

Spoken language has a specific form [→*Identity/Difference*]: the distinction between sound and meaning. The sound is not the meaning, but determines

what the meaning is, that is being talked about. Meaning is not the sound, but determines which sound must be used in order to express the given meaning. The arbitrariness of language is based on this distinction: the connection between the linguistic sign and the signified content is not based on any similarity between them (a similarity between the object "table" and the sequence of sounds t-e-i-b-(ə)-l), and there is no internal reason for signifying a certain content with one particular sequence of sounds over another. For this reason, linguistic communication draws a strict distinction between the content and the forms that express them. It makes the distinction between information and utterance clear and generalizes it: we can produce a linguistic sign for any communication content regardless of whether the object concerned is present and can be perceived. As such, it is also possible to talk about "abstract objects," which can never be perceived: truth, justice, immortal people, objects that only exist in the communication, things that are absent or impossible and, above all, earlier communications.

Language, by allowing communication to treat every possible content as an object, also allows communication to take on reflective forms [→*Self-Reference*], i.e., to communicate about itself. Language makes the distinction between information and utterance clear and unequivocal enough to be able to be made into the object of further communication. We may ask, thus, why a certain piece of information was uttered in one way and not another, or check whether we have been understood. Linguistic communication is thus able to reach an extremely high level of complexity because, on the one hand, it refers to earlier communications recursively and can test their assumptions, and on the other hand, it can risk more and more improbable forms (we speak about things that are unknown to the communication partner or impossible). Misunderstanding can, if necessary, be clarified on a reflective level (i.e., with the help of communication about communication). The introduction of writing and, later, the printing press [→*Dissemination Media*] makes it possible to address someone who is not present, or even an unknown person, and thereby marks a further level of improbability of communication.

Using linguistic means, we can communicate a →*negation*, whilst there is no negative perception (the perception of a non-object). We can, for instance, speak about a non-given object as something that does not exist, but we cannot perceive this object. The capacity for negation derives from the specific →*code* of the medium of language: the code yes/no. Language correlates every positive statement ("yes" formulation) with a corresponding negative ut-

terance ("no" formulation) in order that every linguistic communication un-avoidably refers to the possible opposite statement. For every linguistic communication, a negating statement can be formulated and this possibility is always implicitly given alongside. Thus communication takes the form of the distinction between two opposing possibilities and can then—due to the distinction—be processed as →*information*. For this reason, language allows any content to be communicated informatively and is therefore the mechanism of variation for the →*evolution* of society.

Thanks to its particular characteristics, language also plays an essential role in the →*interpenetration* of psychic and social systems. Even though it is constituted of highly structured elements, language serves as a medium [→*Medium/Form*] for both communication and consciousness, which can impose their forms on it: language is suitable for expressing every thought and formulating every communication.

According to this understanding, and contrary to widely accepted linguistic theories, language as such is not a system but a medium, which is used by systems in order to structure their own operations—and in particular to gain reflexivity. Language has no specific operation: language exists only in the operations of psychic and social systems. Its internal systematicity must be traced back to the autopoiesis of the systems that use it and not to the operations of a system of language. Among the consequences that result from this view, it is particularly relevant that linguistic terms are not signs that represent an external referent, but are rather the expression of the autopoiesis of psychic and social systems. Under the condition of autopoietic closure, these operations do not refer to the external world, but rather to the internal operations of the system concerned. *[E.E.]*

Social Systems (1995: Ch. 4.V); How Can the Mind Participate in Communication? (1994); Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft (1990: Ch. 1.IV); Theory of Society (2012: 60-64, Ch. 2.3); Sign as Form (1999).