

Self-description (*Selbstbeschreibung*)

Self-description is a particular type of self-observation [*→Operation/Observation*] which is produced as a description of a *→social system* within the system itself through the communicative production of texts. Self-description is a simplified construction of the unity of the system that makes it possible to communicate in the system about the system; therefore, the system becomes its own theme. Thus, self-description generates the system's identity as a selective observation of the unity of the system.

Self-descriptions are produced in *→communication*, as communication is the operation of social systems. In particular, self-descriptions may be reproduced in written or printed texts and in oral narratives. Self-descriptions develop as the result of recursive observations in the system through operations of communication. These operations first generate descriptions, then establish and stabilize these descriptions as texts or narratives. They stabilize a *→semantics* that allows the social system's self-reference. Thus, self-descriptions also change the system in which they are produced, because they are part of this system. Self-description is a retrospective operation of communication that requires the existence of something to describe, in particular it requires the construction of memory [*→Time*] within the system. Therefore, self-description may be defined as a historical form of semantics.

Self-descriptions are selective because it is not possible to describe everything is happening in the system as the identity of the system. Thus, self-descriptions lead social systems to reflect on what possibilities are excluded from the form that the identity takes (e.g., society describes itself as unstable and this leads society to reflect on the conditions of stability). The system's reflection [*→Self-Reference*] on other possibilities of identity construction determines the contingency of self-descriptions, which in their turn change over time according to the system's changes.

On the one hand, self-descriptions orient communication in social systems (e.g., focusing on the condition of instability), thereby influencing the level of societal complexity, which may require new social structures (to face instability). On the other hand, self-descriptions are influenced by structural changes and societal complexity, as new connections between communications lead to the introduction of new themes and the production of new narratives or texts (from instability to critical reflection on conditions of change).

Self-descriptions can be produced in all forms of society simply based on *→language*. However, their production is influenced, on the one hand, by *→dissemination media* and, on the other, by the form of societal differentiation [*→Differentiation of Society*]. Concerning dissemination media, the invention of writing has allowed the production of the first elaborated self-descriptions, which fix the topic of communication. Much later, the system of *→mass media* strongly influenced the production of self-descriptions, generating a great amount, and rapid change, of options.

Concerning the form of society, the functional differentiation of society has triggered a huge amount of new, more articulate, more differentiated and contingent forms of self-description. In the functionally differentiated society, self-descriptions are produced in functional systems. In the subsystems of this society, there is a strong increase in second-order observations, which become relevant as self-descriptions. Comparing prices, conditioning politics through public opinion, scientific publications, conversations on demonstrations of love, and mediated communication are all opportunities for self-descriptions. Each functional system can both produce self-descriptions concerning society (e.g., in the science system, sociology describes society) and stabilize its own self-descriptions (e.g., the political system can describe itself as State, the economic system as free market). Against this background, sociology becomes both a description of society and a self-description within society. It can provide a theory of society that contributes to the production of the object it analyzes; specifically, it can change this object because it is part of it. The production of a sociological theory changes society because it is an internal production, regardless of its specific effects for other functional systems (e.g., political effects).

In the functionally differentiated society, self-descriptions also become the subject of self-descriptions: society can describe itself as a self-describing system and each self-description is contingent, since it is one among many different possibilities. Against this background, self-descriptions also make it possible for a social system to generate resistance against itself by defining

critical points in the system. The social system can open up several possible scenarios of change, which increases the potential for change and its sensitivity to new problems.

Self-description requires a particular self-referential form of a social system: reflection, which is the *→re-entry* of the distinction between system and environment into the system. The theories of reflection, which develop conceptualizations of reflection, are specific and demanding forms of self-description. Through a theory of reflection, a social system can observe and describe itself. Each subsystem of the functionally differentiated society develops theories of reflection; for instance, there are theories of knowledge in the scientific system, theologies in the religious system, theories of law, of the economy, of aesthetics in the system of art, and so on. In the functionally differentiated society, a centralized theory of reflection is not possible, therefore theories of reflection can be realized only in functional systems. This society generates a plurality of theories of reflection.

The concept of self-description replaces the concept of culture in the history of societal semantics. The concept of culture refers to the supply of possible themes made available in concrete communicative processes. This concept has been produced in the history of society as a set of concepts and ideas, and, in particular, it has been linked to the comparison of different memories and traditions, and thus to the introduction of cultural diversity within society. The concept of culture has been used in Europe for this purpose since the end of the eighteenth century, stressing the necessity for social memory and comparative analyses of different social memories. Thus, culture is a concept which belongs to the history of societal self-descriptions, and should be replaced by the concept of self-description itself.

The limit of self-descriptions is that they cannot describe the distinction between the operation of describing and what is described, since what is described is the system that describes itself (e.g., self-descriptions cannot describe the difference between the societal operation of describing instability and the resulting description of societal instability). Self-description introduces the distinction between describing and the described into the social system, generating a paradoxical condition, i.e., it negates the difference between the observer (the social system) and its object (what is described in the system). For instance, instability is described as a condition of society, rather than a communicative production in society. [C.B.]

Theory of Society (2013: Ch. 5); Art as a Social System (2000: Ch. 7.I)