

BREAKING BOUNDARIES: ON TRANSLATION AND THE CONCEPT OF SOCIETY

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I INTRODUCTION

Let me start this paper with a rather ironic observation: the study of translation is an uneasy topic within contemporary Japanese Studies. The reason for this, as can easily be demonstrated, is to be found in the concept of society they embrace. Everybody will agree that translation is communication; and that it is communication crossing regional boundaries, 'trans-regional' communication so to speak. It is the 'trans-' in the above description that indeed poses a problem for current notions and theories of society, whether they are explicitly thematised or implicitly underlie sociological research. At the end of the twentieth century, the notion of society is still primarily *regionally* oriented. One views society (or societies) as a territorially defined entity – Japanese society, Belgian society and so on – and one assumes that, as different but equivalent entities, they can be compared. It must be stressed here that this observation does not merely concern earlier, 'pre-reflexive' literature; even the more mature, reflexive literature – of which Japanese Studies has produced quite a bit in the last decade¹ – questioning the very premises of Japan research, does not manage to 'deconstruct' the regionalist undertone governing sociological research on Japan.

It will be clear that, precisely for regionally oriented Japanese Studies, the topic of this collection of essays is rather 'exotic'. When regional differences are viewed as primordial, communication transcending these differences (e.g. translation) is like a logical *tertium non datur*. Consequently, translation studies are a kind of twilight zone. It is not clear how the study of translation fits into the current frame, how it can be thematised; and then it is left to other branches of science. That this is true, can be corroborated empirically from the sum total of research Japanese Studies have produced and still produce: translation

studies occupy only a minor part of the large bulk. Indeed, the impact of translations on Japan's social order for instance, has tended to be treated as a marginal phenomenon.

Consequently, the foremost aim of this paper is to propose a new concept of society, one that allows for a full appreciation of communication independent of regional boundaries – among others, translation. The framework we pick is the systems theory of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. Highlighting some key concepts of the general framework provided by his theory of autopoietic social systems (paragraphs II), we will show how a surprisingly distinctive concept of society – '(global) society as the encompassing social system' – is developed (paragraph III). Special attention will be devoted to 'functional differentiation' (III 3), as this constitutes, in Luhmann's view, the central characteristic of modern society and remains the dominant social structure at the end of the twentieth century. In the second part of the paper, the topic of translation is taken up and linked to the concept of a functionally differentiated society (paragraph IV). Contrary to the current paradigm, we will stress the profound importance of translation for societal structure.

II TOWARD A NEW CONCEPT OF SOCIETY?

We may ask ourselves whether it is worthwhile to cling to existing conceptualisations of society, and the area studies's predilection for what could be called national cultures. Does e.g. the philosophy of Jacques Derrida not teach us that precisely the margins deserve our particular interest?² Or, formulated in the terminology of second-order cybernetics: is not the blind spot of an observation important as it makes the observation possible at all?³ Apart from that, the existence *per se* of transregional communication is empirically incontestable. There simply *exists* a large amount of Western works translated into the Japanese language. And especially the twentieth century provides overwhelming evidence of social 'events' that contradict the assumed primacy of territorial boundaries. A phenomenon known in Japanese as *kokusai kekkon* (international marriage) demonstrates that the domain of love does not seem hampered by geographical or political frontiers; the global economy has been reality for ages; scientists meet at international conferences and thwarts, *by definition*, attempts to reduce it to regional specificities (in the sense of 'American econometrics', 'French sociolinguistics', etc.). To cite a striking example, the Japanese mathematicians Taniyama and Shimura made crucial contributions to the

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proof of Fermat's last theorem (Singh 1997), obviously unimpeded by regional differences. Indeed there seems to lurk something highly problematic behind the regionalist concept of society. As Harumi Befu has once pointed out, one risks a mere caricature if conscientiously clinging to it; stating that one does not feel not be bound by the consequences of the regionalist view clearly implies surrendering in the face of more rigorous conceptualisations; and even if we express our reservations vis--vis the regionalist paradigm, it does not necessarily safeguard us from theoretical absurdities.

In any case, for Niklas Luhmann the aforementioned facts suffice to designate the regionalist concept of society as an *obstacle épistémologique* (after Gaston Bachelard). In his monumental study of society *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* ('The Society of Society,' 1997), the regionalist assumption is placed alongside three other obstacles that are contrasted with his own theory of society, which he proceeds to define as an attempt at "radically anti-humanist, radically anti-regionalist, and radically constructivist concept of society" (Luhmann 1997: 34-35). For this chapter one question is of particular importance: is it possible to develop a theory of society that is able to take into account both the trivialisation of regional boundaries by communication on the one hand, and the obvious and equally empirical existence of regional differences on the other? I am inclined to answer positively. How this can be done *concretely* is again explained by means of Luhmann's sociology. *Soziale Systeme: Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie* (Luhmann 1984) shifts to a more *abstract* level of investigation. "Our flight must take place above the clouds, and we must reckon with a rather thick cloud cover. We must rely on our instruments. Occasionally, we may catch glimpses below of a land with roads, towns, rivers, and coastlines that remind us of something familiar [...]. But no one should fall victim to the illusion that these points of reference are sufficient to guide our flight" (Luhmann 1995 [1984], 1). This calls for some elaboration, as it obviously cannot imply abstraction as pure artistry, and certainly not abstraction with a mere analytical relevance. In spite of the often invoked distinction between theory and practice, systems theoretical concepts do refer to things that undeniably exist in the real world: meaning, time, process, and so on. However, the necessity for abstraction lies in the object of inquiry: society. Societal complexity requires a theory capable of formulating a complex analysis of complex (social) phenomena; and *abstraction may prove extremely useful in analysing some societally produced paradoxes, including the aforementioned apparently simultaneous processes of globalisation and region-*

alisation. The explicit merit of this shift towards a higher level of abstraction clearly lies in the wider range of application abstraction allows for; it may be possible to put things into a different perspective, and experiment with certain problems and the related problem solving methodologies. In 1984, this approach to what constitutes a sociological problem, and how theory building can respond to that resulted in the formulation of a 'general framework': not so much a theory of society in its own right, but a self-supportive construction built of concepts that acquire their meaning in reference to each other (Luhmann 1984: XIX). And precisely because of this, it is necessary to work with concepts that are defined very clearly, very rigorously, in order to achieve a high condensation (systems theory would prefer to speak of 'self-reference') – exactly as in mathematics, in which axioms, definitions, theorems etc. connect to each other.⁴ On the one hand, this elaborate attention towards matters of conceptualisation is largely responsible for the esoteric nature that is allegedly characteristic of Luhmannian systems theory.⁵ On the other, it illustrates the highly constructivist nature of the theory, as concepts are indeed defined in relation to each other, irrespective of any question about the 'real meaning' of a concept. In the end, questioning the commonsensical use of notions may be the appropriate guideline for the design of concepts: one poses a concept, defines it and tests its explanatory potential. "More than any other sociological theory, systems theory does not accept taking anything, be it the world or notions, for granted. Luhmann adds that this is an absurd premise; yet as an absurd premise it avoids the danger of error and moreover forces the theory to reconstruct in its own terms anything it wants to describe" (Baecker 1997: 39).⁶ The consequences for the presentation of the general framework as a coherent whole are surprising. As even the more experienced theorists will agree, *Soziale Systeme* is a difficult book, characterized by a pedagogical structure/arrangement reminiscent only of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* or comparable treatises on (formal) mathematical logic. Aware of the fact that its formulation can only take place in reality and in the world, the theory gradually unfolds. Whereas it is initially concerned with a presentation of the difference between system and environment as its main thrust, it is prepared to rework this theme throughout the following chapters, and relate it to wellknown topics and methodologies of sociological theory. And just as in case of the *Tractatus*, self-reflection is an ultimate keystone of the venture. The framework is therefore concluded with remarks on the status of its knowledge (epistemology) as produced within the world, and subjected to the very premises the theory com-

mitted itself to. The theory thus re-enters itself as one of the objects it has taken to be 'out there' for sociological analysis. It explains the necessity to realize itself as a (social) system in an environment, in concordance with the epistemological presuppositions *unrealised* at the outset but inevitably 'present' in order to support the theory in the course of its composition.

III A RADICALLY ANTI-REGIONALIST CONCEPT OF SOCIETY

I THE THEORY OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS AND SOCIETY

Let us now consider the way by which Luhmann arrives at formulating a theory of society. In the first place, the theory of society is directly linked to (and must be linked to) the more general conceptual framework, which is the theory of social systems (Luhmann 1984).⁷ The distinction between system and environment being its central paradigm, the new systems theory claims to be capable of catching every social phenomenon in terms of either system or environment. This would make it a universalistic – albeit not exclusivist or solipsist – theory. The word 'every' in the sentence 'every social phenomenon' should therefore be taken very literally: it concerns small, relatively simple social systems such as 'interactions', but just as well much more complex systems, e.g. organisations, or very large systems such as science or religion, or even 'society'. Ultimately, as already mentioned, it concerns systems theory *per se* as well, as it comes to view itself as a system in an environment. This 'autological' component need not be reexamined here. Careful to avoid an ontological or definitional muddle, it may be considered wise to rely on the accepted description of (autopoietic) systems as formulated by the Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana: here, systems are defined as "unities, as networks of productions of components, that recursively, through their interactions, generate and realise the network that produces them and constitute, in the space in which they exist, the boundaries of the network as components that participate in the realisation of the network" (1981: 21). When discussing the specific case of *social* systems, this requires the following specifications:

- 1 Social systems produce *communications* as their elements, i.e. communications are the atomic, not furthermore decomposable elements (*Letztelemente*) that represent the unity of three selections: *information* (one must pick something among alterna-

tives to communicate about), *utterance* (a selected information must be uttered), and *understanding* (distinguishing between information and utterance). One cannot sufficiently stress the importance of the latter selection. Understandings, including misunderstandings, mark a full distinction between communication and the mere speech 'act'. At last, the understanding determines the way in which a communication will be conceived in the communicative process, regardless of how it may have been designed by the 'sender'. Strictly spoken, the above conceptualisation not only renders the metaphor of transmission obsolete, as it destroys the distinction between a sender and a receiver; more importantly, it allows for an autonomous sphere of the social (social systems) by drawing attention to the way in which the communicative process itself assigns meaning to itself and its communications.⁸

- II As a corollary to this, the unity the system achieves for itself via its elements is made *communicatively*, and in no other way. Consequently, if the system differentiates, differentiation too will be executed according to communicative 'attractors'.⁹ And the system's evolution too will follow the autopoiesis of communication (Luhmann 1997: 2). This way of operating is indeed not merely limited to the achievement of a system's unity, its differentiation, or its evolution: *everything the system does, is done autonomously, via systemic operations* (= communications) (Luhmann 1984: 35-38; idem: 48). Briefly: "the system does what it does" (Luhmann 1997: 88). That is what we mean by the concept of 'autopoiesis'.
- III Last but not least, these remarks are valid for *all* kinds of social systems. In the case of interactions, for instance, the unity will be achieved by means of themes; for gigantic societal sub-systems such as science, on the other hand, communications connect to each other by means of a 'code' available to the respective functionally differentiated systems (Luhmann 1997: 743-776). Important for our discussion, it is argued that scientific communications are regulated and classified by means of the difference between 'true' and 'false'.

The concept of society is brought to the fore for a special reason: "Sociology must have a concept for the totality of what is social – whether one calls this (depending on theoretical preferences) the totality of social relations, processes, actions, or communications" (Luh-

mann 1984: 408). 'Society' is probably the only serious candidate for this role. Equally total signifiers as e.g. 'the world' are too much of an incoherent mass, i.e. they should be studied as aggregates of meanings rather than possessing a systemic unity. In more characteristically systems theoretical words: society is the social system encompassing all other social systems (*Gesellschaft als umfassendes Sozialsystem*). With every communication, society grows, society is altered. Its function is the (re)production of communication itself, and it thus represents the social system *par excellence*. This has some serious consequences. Society is put into a very special, if not exclusive, perspective: as it encompasses all social systems, it is the only social system possessing an environment in which there exists no other system of the same (i.e. social) kind – but this does not mean that society is a system devoid of environment! This condition reveals the particular status of the social sciences as a scientific discipline. In view of the above definition, society cannot be observed from outside: sociology, and sociological theory must refer to themselves as a product of the autopoietic operation mode of the societal system. Different sociologies, including the larger bulk of the area studies, are not bothered by the implications for theory building this clearly entails. If one is inclined to believe that society is a territorially defined entity, it makes sense to believe it can be observed from outside as well. But if one is truly willing to adopt the view of society as the all-encompassing social system, sociology must account for its peculiar epistemological status (and its currently insufficient realisation thereof). And it will need to incorporate the aforementioned and often contested 'autological' component, i.e. it must understand it is subject to the very processes and operations it inquires into. It is for this reason, Luhmann argues, that his theory of society is – somewhat paradoxically – entitled 'The Society of Society': it is a description of society through the eyes of the social system 'society'. Above all, this implies the realisation of the contingency of this description, as it is one (and merely one) among different possibilities. Subjected to the historically contingent processes and evolution of the social system society itself, sociological descriptions of this society cannot simply establish themselves as observations of an observer that is 'objectively' there; rather, the self-referential circularity (and thus: contingency) of society's communications will have to be reflected in the description. The acclaimed universalism of the theory is thereby shown to be the opposite of solipsism *on logical grounds*.

But for our discussion, there is a far more important consequence implied in such theory of society. If we are really willing – and the line of argument indicates that we do – 1) to think of society as a social system realising its unity in autonomously produced communications, and 2) to define society as the all-encompassing social system, one conclusion imposes itself upon us: *society cannot be but global society (Weltgesellschaft)*. “The definition of society as the encompassing social system has as a consequence that there can be only one societal system for connective communication. Strictly speaking, different societal systems may exist, similarly as in the past they used to talk of a plurality of worlds; but if one does so, then only if communication between these societies is non-existent, or, if seen from the viewpoint of the respective societies, communication with the others is either impossible or without consequences” (Luhmann 1997: 145). One may object here that this is a tautology¹⁰: the notion of ‘global society’ is already implied in the aforementioned specifications. And eventually, several systems theoreticians seem to be bothered by this ‘problematic’ conceptualisation (Blom 1997: 217-220). However, we stress that tautologies need not be theoretical deficiencies.¹¹ Society as global society is a mere logical implication of a theoretical choice made at the outset. At this point, one must evaluate the fruitfulness of that choice. When we defined society as a social system, we did so *because we believed it useful to do so* – and we must accept the consequences this entails. Denying or being unwilling to accept them would imply embracing the very essentialism Luhmannian systems theory wants to avoid. We remind the reader here that concepts are not to be judged in terms of their ‘essential’ value, but in terms of their explanatory potential – systems theory would prefer the term connectivity, *Anschlußfähigkeit*, here – that is gained out of the overall construction of concepts referring to each other (cf. supra). In any case, and in contrast to the regionalist paradigm, systems theory seems to be able to account for the empirical fact of globally communicating society; and furthermore it is able to bring a phenomenon such as ‘translation’ into perspective – *because it was willing to test the definition of society as a social system!*

III THE DIFFERENTIATION OF SOCIETY

Does ‘global society’ then imply a globally homogeneous unity of communications? Certainly not. Defining society as an undifferentiated mass of undifferentiated communications would clearly be a theoretical mistake. The necessity for abstraction indicated in the above para-

graphs was obviously only intended in order to enable further specification, and new distinctions. Above all, systems theory wants to be a theory of differences, of distinctions; distinctions that even mark the conceptual apparatus (system/environment; form/medium ...) itself.¹² Accordingly, differentiation is one of the most central concepts of the theory. And as is the case with most systems theoretical concepts, its definition is not self-evident. Rather than the breaking up of the system into several pieces, it is defined as "the repetition of system formation within systems. Further system/environment differences can be differentiated within systems" (Luhmann 1984: 18). Hence, when we talk of the differentiation of society, we do not hint at the dissolution of society into subsystems.¹³ Rather, society copies itself within itself, thereby producing at the same time more complexity and stability for itself. In *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, Luhmann distinguishes four 'types' of differentiation (Luhmann 1997: 609-618):

- *segmentary differentiation*, i.e. differentiation into similar/equal subsystems (e.g. families);
- *differentiation according to centre/periphery* (e.g. the differentiation of society into equivalent units of which some function as 'spheres of influence'; characteristic of cultural empires),
- *stratificatory differentiation*, by which a fundamental inequality of rank is produced (e.g. feudal society);
- *functional differentiation*, by which both an *inequality* (of function) and an *equality* (of status) of differentiated systems is produced (e.g. the functional subsystems of modern society: science, the judicial system, the economy, politics ...)

For our discussion – and this will be elaborated later in this paper – functional differentiation, or rather *the shift to the functionally differentiated society*, is of particular interest, as it concerns the often discussed and often misunderstood transition from feudalism to modernity. Clearly, the form of society characterised by differentiation according to functional points of orientation is *modernity*. Later on, we will discuss translation in relation to this notion. To be more precise, 'functionally differentiated society' means that communication is directed by the communicative beacons of science, the economy, politics, the judicial system, religion, art, and so on.... Or put in other words: it is the communicative trajectories laid out by those systems differentiated from each other that have primacy over other forms of differentiation, define societal structure, and take on primary impor-

tance for the continuation of communication. This entails a peculiar combination of both *specificity* and *universality*. Specificity on the one hand, as the systems view reality according to their specific code¹⁴; but universality on the other, as the entire social reality is grasped in the terms of each system.¹⁵ Science, the functional system that is most of our concern here, tends to view the whole world in terms of the difference between true and false, and thereby delineates its reach from e.g. religion or politics; and the universality of the 'code' is even extended to include even the distinction between true and false itself (epistemological questions). Therefore we say that functionally differentiated systems are *equal in their inequality* (Luhmann 1997: 613). In turn, this has important consequences for the semantics of society. With the primacy of functional differentiation established, society forsakes the unified standpoint of observation, or an 'Archimedean point'. Instead, it is distinguished by an irreconcilable multiplicity of standpoints, by a lack of controlling instance: in short, by 'polycontextuality' (Günther 1976-1979 II: 283-306). This may well be a unique instant in world history: at no other point in time have societies forsaken to appeal to a unifying viewpoint premodern societies obviously needed. Empirical evidence clearly supports this claim. 'Modern' descriptions of society prefer alienation over identity; multiplicity over uniformity, ... As stated above, differentiation is, just as all system's achievements, a product of systemic operations, i.e. communications. The shift from the stratificatory differentiation of feudal society to the functional differentiation of modern society, for instance, can therefore not be inferred as taking place out of the blue, a blind change of societal structure. It is a product of systemic operations, of communication: society produced this change by itself. Or more precisely, as has been argued by historians (Eisenstadt 1999 [1983]), philosophers of media and culture (e.g. McLuhan 1964), philologists (Havelock 1963; Ong 1982) anthropologists (Goody 1996) and sociologists (again: Luhmann 1997), it is a product of an evolutionary problem: the enormous *increase in communication*, propelled by the 'media of dissemination' (*Verbreitungsmedien*) that are writing and, especially, printing.¹⁶ We cannot enter into an elaborate discussion of the communication-specific aspects accompanying written communication.¹⁷ One may, for instance, point out the enormous upgrading of capacity for social memory (Assmann 1999) this entails. Writing, being a kind of self-produced memory independent of the co-evolution of human organisms, enables society to remember and forget much more at the same time. But of overarching societal importance, is the fact that writing makes use of symbols.

Symbolising should be understood here as the capability to *present* the *absent* as a possible object of communication. Especially Elisabeth Eisenstadt's work has been seminal in describing the importance of printed materials as an 'agent of change'.

Again, this shift in societal may have been historically contingent, but it can never be described as an arbitrary process. Interestingly, the roots of this shift in societal structure are to be found in the preceding, stratificatory society: "For stratificatory differentiation enables the concentration of resources in the upper-stratum of the system, and this not only in the economic sense, but also in the medium of [political and judicial] power and that of [scientific] truth" (Luhmann 1997: 708). The concentration of resources in the upper-stratum of society paradoxically paves the way for its own progressive destruction! We stress here that this has never been a uniquely European matter. Japanese history provides us equally good examples of such dramatic societal shift. Shogun Yoshimune's policy of *kokusanka*,¹⁸ the 'indigenisation' of foreign products, had obviously to be accompanied by the introduction of 'modern episteme', i.e. science:¹⁹ his policy contained the seeds of the far-reaching differentiation that is inescapable in modern global society. The point is that it did not suffice to merely import foreign products or technology. Equally important were the introduction and acquisition of the 'body of knowledge' associated with the relevant technology, and a sufficient amount of societal will and chance to experiment with this novel way of dealing with written material... For this purpose, one needs people able to read. And when one is able to read, one may very well read literature that is damaging to the ruling elite, highly critical of religious dogma's etc. As a reaction to self-produced complexity, society must develop a form of differentiation which is capable of giving itself positive feedback. Functional differentiation, the form of differentiation that enables societal subsystems to manage communication according to specific codes, proved to be the most effective form, even up to this day. From this perspective, as we will show later in this paper, translation studies are of central importance to the understanding of Japan's modernity.

In any case, it seems undeniable that, from the end of the feudal period on, an increasing amplification of function-oriented communication came to stand out, in the domains of science, as well as the economy (Ooms 1998, 23-47) and politics (Maruyama, 1974).²⁰ We already mentioned Shogun Yoshimune's policy of *kokusanka* or indigenisation of foreign products, simultaneously introducing modern knowledge. A most interesting and very clear example may however be noted in the

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context of military history. The introduction of modern 'Western' military technology – together with Japanese willingness to accommodate it – into sixteenth-century Japan revolutionised the conduct of warfare, and the battle of Nagashino (1575) is illuminating in this context. Whereas earlier warfare was still characterised by an emphasis on differences of 'rank' – one may think of the key notion of 'honour', or of stylistic peculiarities referring to differences of rank – Nobunaga's foreign technology literally blew the traditional code of honor apart, and placed the focal point on the visibilisation of the difference between power and force (societally recognizable 'political power' Luhmann 1975; 2000, 18-68), fundamental for an autonomously functioning modern political system.²¹ Admittedly, one must not assume an abrupt turn: the battle of Sekigahara (1600) for instance, is one example of a typically feudal battle, with still a very strong emphasis on formalism and stylistic prescriptions (Kasaya 1994). But it also was the last battle of this kind. The gun would play a crucial part in subduing the warring clans at the end of the Age of the Warring States, and it was both its visibility as a new weapon and the bakufu's conscious and skillful employment of it as a threat against future insurrections that had radically changed the face of political power (the so-called Pax Tokugawa). Whereas pre-Tokugawa warfare may well have been functional as preserving equalities among the members of the upper-stratum by means of the prevention of the accumulation of wealth and power, the mere possibility of war (that can be avoided if bakufu power is yielded to) served in Tokugawa Japan as the reflection and representation of a centralized political power claiming *legitimacy* for itself – and for itself only. In this differentiation of power and force sociologists may detect the origination of modern political power, and its alter ego, the nation state (Parsons 1967; Willke 1996 [1992] 31ff.).

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IV REGIONALISATION AS CONDITIONING

Does the above conceptualisation unequivocally lead to a view of society as devoid of regional differences? Clearly, this question goes straight to the heart of a regional studies discipline like Japanese Studies. Does Luhmann indeed hint at the destruction of a theoretical ground for area studies? Are regional differences and the concept of culture shut out of the picture? We are inclined to answer negatively. Like Luhmann, we regard the thesis of convergence as highly premature. Regionalisation need not contradict globalisation; they both rather represent two sides of the same coin, two sides of one distinction.²² The globalisation of functional differentiation may very well

need regionalisation in order to strengthen its perspective for world-wide dissemination. The reason for this is to be found in the evolutionary improbability of a phenomenon such as functional differentiation: “In the context of the theory of evolution, it must be accepted that the societal differentiation of specific function systems [...] and especially the shift of the encompassing social system “society” to the primacy of functional differentiation is an *extremely improbable happening* [...]” (Luhmann 1997: 707). At last, the shift from rank dominated societies to societies with a primacy of functional orientation is at least without a historical precedent. For the predecessors of the modern function systems, differentiating in the latter days of feudal society but still strongly under its strains the main task is thus developing some kind of self-recognition, an ‘identity’ or an ‘Eigenwert’ to which future operations can be directed – an operation that has historically been accompanied by numerous evolutionary successes and failures, and the obvious coming into being of regional differences. Hence, globalisation need not contradict regionalisation. The latter can fulfill the function of *conditioning* (*Konditionierung*): it backs up the dissemination of functional differentiation, so to speak, by providing the (regional) conditions for dissemination by means of (regional) experiment. Conversely, the dominant pattern of functional differentiation offers an impetus for the development of (regional) distinctions in dealing with it. Such easily misunderstood intricate arrangement of is this which explains e.g. the existence of differences between Japanese and ‘Western’ styles of management; regional differences in religious practices; differences in the Japanese and the Chinese emperor system; or differences in the execution of power ... Semantically, the notion of *wakon yōsai* (‘Japanese spirit, Western technology’), coined in the Meiji period (*Meiji jidai*, 1868-1912), illustrates our point. Along with slogans as *fukoku kyōhei* (‘rich nation, strong army’), *sonnō jōi* (‘respect the emperor, expel the barbarians’) etc., it gained a mantra-like power at the time, invoking the modernisation of the Japanese state (Samuels 1994). As no other, it expressed the profound understanding of the Meiji reformers that the introduction of foreign technology (*yōsai*) was both desirable and inevitable. At the same time, because of its overarching dominance, it provided room for experiment with different degrees of functional differentiation, experiment with research and development, manufacturing, and so on (*wakon*). In twentieth-century Japan, this bivalent process of globalisation and regionalisation seems to be captured in the ideology of *kokusanka* (indigenisation) (Samuels 1994; Green 1996). As Richard Samuels explains, the circular relationship between key

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technologies and ideas on development, adaptation of such technologies constitute 'national systems of innovation', technoeconomic paradigms, responsible for the relative successfulness with which technologies can be introduced and implemented. In Japan, more specifically, a long lived ideology and beliefs on the importance of high technology for the preservation of national security may have given rise to the most successful production and research methods at the end of the 20th century (Samuels 1994). But regional differences remain of a different order than functional differentiation; the primacy of functional differentiation is undeniable. Regional differences, as they serve the purpose of *conditioning*, facilitate differentiation. Experiments obviously leave room for difference, but do not destroy the unifying thread among them. It follows that we can identify the difference between Japanese and Western styles of management only if we can project 'economic organisation' as the unifying standard to which the differences can be measured. And for the same reason, it is absurd to compare Japanese management style with Western religious practice.

There exists, however, a kind of regionalisation coinciding with the globalisation of functional differentiation and still different from the above distinguished possibility of regional conditioning. This kind of regionalisation does *not* take place on the level of societal structure, but on the *semantic* level.²³ In other words, it is related to the way societal change and structure are registered and 'meaningfully' processed in communication that is possible only in view of the dominant form of societal differentiation – a level, indeed, on which structural 'data' are (un)consciously referred to. Specifically, we mean the simultaneous rise and interrelation of functional differentiation and the semantics of the *nation*. Notions as 'revolution', still strongly associated with the nation state, play a key role here, as they are intended at expressing an innovation for society as a whole. Just as can be said of regionalisation that it has a (conditioning) function for functional differentiation, we attribute a similar *function* to the notion of 'nation'. We view it as a resource of *identification*, not in the least the identification of state and society: "A nation distinguishes itself from other nations (and not from aristocracy or living in the country or the economy or science). It makes it possible to oppose to the *universalisms* of functional orientations the *particularisms* of regional communities as more valuable. [...] In brief: the notion of nation offers a concept of inclusion that is not dependent on the particular conditions of single function systems, and that forces even politics to treat all members of the own nation as equal" (Luhmann 1997: 1051-1052). In order to be successful, i.e.

unhampered by the remnants of premodernity, the various functional systems need to be 'fine-tuned', i.e. all of them must incorporate the semantics of the nation as an 'attractor': "A nation is a means of regulating the political, economical, educational, and semantic reproduction of a society, implementing such a regulation by imposing cross-references from the political to the economical, from the semantic to the educational, and from the educational to the political" (Baecker 1997: 46).²⁴ The attentive reader may have noticed that our analysis can equally be applied to the regionalist paradigm we initially deemed inappropriate for contemporary Japanese Studies. While it is possible to deny it much explanatory potential (as we repeatedly did), it is clearly more fruitful to try and explain this paradigm as an historically contingent body of thought accompanying modernity. Its analytical potential is, as illustrated by the topic of translation, questionable – but one should not overlook its function for society!

IV TRANSLATION AS A PROPELLER OF FUNCTIONAL DIFFERENTIATION

In the preceding pages we have outlined a frame of reference that is prepared to grant societal relevance to all communication. By delineating a distinct sphere of 'the social', distinguished from the psychic, in short, by allowing for 'social systems', systems theory circumscribes the fuzzy terrain of concepts needing prefixes as 'trans-' ('transmission') or 'inter-' (as in 'intercultural'). Instead, its theory of society centres on the focal point of global communication; and translation must thus be treated as highly relevant for societal structure. But what could be the ramifications for the study of translation? Is this concept of society capable of specifying the phenomenon of translation? Clearly, translation must be put into perspective. More assumptions will have to be developed in order to test the value of our frame *vis-à-vis* empirical reality.

One possibility for outlining a systems theoretical treatment of translation could be the analysis of technical difficulties characteristic of translation. But as we are primordially guided by a sociological in casu systems theoretical interest, we consider it more appropriate to conduct such discussion in relation to the above remarks on societal structure and differentiation.²⁵ More specifically, we assume a strong relationship between the dissemination of translations and functional differentiation. In Japan, this relationship may be considered most prominent in the field of science, or science-related developments – this is,

indeed, the thrust of this book. Shogun Yoshimune's policy of indigenising foreign drugs and the concomitant introduction of Western pharmacopoeia have been mentioned repeatedly in our paper. The concept of *Rangaku* as Western learning equally illustrates the development of and interest in the clearly functionally oriented system of science. In this context, one should reserve the necessary attention for the considerable time lag in the introduction in Japan of primordial scientific literature. Dodoens's *Cruijdeboeck* is exemplary. It did not reach Japan before the first half of the seventeenth century; and even then, it did not attract attention until the eighteenth century. Generally speaking *Rangaku*, literally 'Dutch Studies', were in a way a scientific fossil – as Japan's enlightened moderniser Fukuzawa Yukichi was to discover. But once the Japanese leaders firmly decided to modernise the country and 'open up' to Western science and technology, one may even be tempted to regard that as the start of *systematic* functional differentiation.

One can trace such societal changes and the shift towards functional differentiation through the development of technical issues in the translation process. Especially in the first phase of confrontation with Western books and treatises, the clumsiness of the translation is striking; and so is the lack of conceptual refinement, the great number of mistakes, etc. Well into the Meiji period, the enlightened Japanese ruling elite, understanding the importance of 'catching up' (*oitsuki, oikose*) with the West, could not mobilise enough resources for a smooth incorporation of Western knowledge. At least not immediately: the great number of missions abroad would gradually make good the backlog. Interestingly, this lack of foreknowledge ironically explains the paradigmatic value of Dodoens's *Cruijdeboeck* and *pharmacopoeia* for the introduction of Western episteme and the further development of science in Japan. Herbals, *pharmacopoeia*, or eventually books on fortress building are indeed *illustrated* (in the case of Dodoens they were furthermore said to be excellent!), and that facilitates understanding – as illustrations do not carry the translation-specific difficulty of 'difference'. Language functions by means of differences expressed by tokens²⁶, and mastering them is obviously the central difficulty in the 'art of translation'.

There is an interesting corollary to be deduced from the above remarks. When translation can indeed be said to have an amplifying value for the dissemination of functional differentiation (*in casu* functionally differentiated science), it contains some embarrassing consequences for the ruling classes of feudal societies. In the final analysis, the shift from feudal society to functionally differentiated society is

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a shift in societal *structure*, i.e. a change of communicative expectations. Communications are no longer primordially directed by differences in rank, but by functional points of orientation (scientific truth, political power, judicial justice...). Consequently, the upper class loses the lucrative position of collecting resources (cf. *supra*): “[Societal] changes affect above all the nobility; not in the form of competition from another upper-stratum, but through the slow devaluation of the difference that distinguishes nobility from the masses. [...] For all the stress on accustomed differences of rank, [the nobility] will gradually experience that the newly arising functional systems do not depend on nobility, and that their full differentiation cannot be realised by the nobility” (Luhmann 1997: 712-713). Paradoxically, the ruling elite will have to hedge against the self-induced changes! We may borrow a notion from the philosophy of Jacques Derrida here: the idea that writing is subversive and dangerous, as it can ‘get out of hand’ (Derrida 1972).²⁷

Although suppositions about harsh Tokugawa censorship must certainly not be exaggerated (both in terms of legislation and enforcement censorship was unsystematic until after the Meiji Restoration) (Kornicki 1998, 320-362), the Japanese upper class indeed attempted to safeguard its status by shrouding writing and knowledge in secrecy. This was already the case in the early Edo period (*Edo jidai*, 1600-1868), when the Bakufu had the monopoly of e.g. calendars. But especially the establishment and growth of Dutch Studies (*Rangaku*) seems to have been cloaked in secrecy. Foreigners residing in *Deshima* were not allowed to travel through the country; studying Japanese was forbidden to foreigners. But the deliberate holding back of the *Oranda fûsetsu-gaki*, reports written by the Dutch on the geopolitical situation, and medical knowledge, is illuminating. A similar story can be told about the knowledge of the *tsûji*, the interpreters. This knowledge was monopolised by a few families, for an obvious reason.

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V CONCLUSION

As will be clear to many commentators, the topic of translation is not a self-evident one for Japanese Studies. With our paper, we have tried to explain that the identification of the concept of society with the geographically delineated nation state may be the crucial stumbling block for putting the importance of translation into perspective. Hence, we analysed the dominant conceptualisation and pointed out that exactly the alleged importance of regional boundaries 1) did and does not

allow for the recognition of a globally communicating society, and 2) thus cannot but attribute a marginal status to the study of translation. At the same time, the explanatory potential of a different concept was tested: the concept of society as a social system. We demonstrated that it is very well possible to assign a place to translation studies, if one is willing to cast off 'common-sense' (i.e. semantical) notions, and test the explanatory potential of others instead.

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NOTES

- 1 We refer to the numerous contributions to the debate about the ‘paradigm in Japanese Studies’, published for instance in the Japan Foundation Newsletter; also the concluding sessions of many Japanese Studies-related conferences etc. The more impressive, if controversial, fruits of reflexive literature are doubtlessly: David Williams (1994) and Miyoshi & Harootunian (1988).
- 2 We refer here to Derrida 1972a.
- 3 See particularly: Luhmann 1990: 82-85.
- 4 See: Luhmann 1990: 201; Barnes 1977: 10.
- 5 That this condensation jeopardizes the communicability of research results, has been the subject of some workshops and has been thematized within systems theory as well. It is a question of *Gesprächsfähigkeit* (or even: *Anschlußfähigkeit*, ‘connectivity’) of the theory. See Fuchs 1998.
- 6 With a strong reference to Luhmann 1971.
- 7 See Eva Knodt in the ‘Introduction’ to the English translation of *Soziale Systeme: Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie*: “*Social Systems* does not present a sociological analysis of modern society or a theory of society (*Gesellschaftstheorie*) but elaborates the general conceptual framework for such a theory. It supplies the instruments for observing a variety of social systems – societies, organisations, and interactions – not primarily such observations themselves. The distinction is far from trivial. In positing a difference between “what” questions and “how” questions, the theory of social systems situates itself within the “de-ontologized” realm of “second-order observations,” a level of abstraction where, to speak in Kantian terms, questions concerning conditions of possibility arise” (Luhmann 1984: xvii).
- 8 ‘Communication’ is therefore discussed in contrast to ‘action’ (Luhmann 1984: 135-175). Note furthermore that the addition of ‘understanding’ as the third selection actually seems to reverse the temporal process of communication: “Communication is made possible, so to speak, from behind, contrary to the temporal course of the process” (Luhmann 1984: 143).
- 9 The term ‘attractors’ is taken from non-linear systems theory. On the way the term is received in the social sciences, see Kiel and Elliott (1996: esp. 19-116). An application of the concept in strategic studies can be found in Alberts and Czerwinsky (1997).
- 10 I thank Jan van Bavel and Rudi Laermans for drawing my attention to this point; the discussion was conducted in the context of a Ph.D. seminar on Luhmann’s theory of evolution.
- 11 A very good illustration of this is provided by Wittgenstein’s remarks on logical expressions: “Die Sätze der Logik sind Tautologien” (Tractatus: 6.1 and further). Mathematics gains its clarity precisely by its tautological nature. Numbers, for instance, cannot be said to refer to something that is ‘there’ in the environment. They acquire their meaning in relation to themselves: self-referentially. In spite (or rather: *because*) of this, their range of applicability is vast.
- 12 Again, we have to point to the importance of Spencer-Brown’s calculus of indications for Luhmannian theory design. In his calculus, forms are understood as distinctions, indicating one side of the two sides separated by the distinction. On the other hand, there is Luhmann’s indebtedness to Gotthard Günther. See, in the context of differentiation, “Life as Polycontextuality” (Günther 1976-1979 II: 283-306).
- 13 The system/environment paradigm thus replaces the ‘old-European’ distinction between the parts and the whole.
- 14 On a theoretical treatment of the systems theoretical concept of (binary) codes (*Kodierung*), see: Luhmann 1975: 170-192 and 1994: 13-31.
- 15 The meaning of a social ‘event’ can therefore only be judged in relation to a system. Sticking to the topic of this paper, a translation will be viewed by science in terms of the scientific truth it embodies, by the economy in terms of the money that can be made from it ad so on. When we want to talk of a social event, it will thus always be necessary to do so in reference to an observing system.
- 16 In the twentieth century, one may add electronic media (the computer, ...) to the list (Luhmann 1997: 302-311). Note that they pose specific problems for and have different effects on the nature of communication.
- 17 Luhmann devotes an entire chapter to this topic (Luhmann 1997: 249-290). Probably most fundamental is the fact that, the introduction of written communication has the ramification of differentiating the different dimensions of meaning. *Temporally* speaking, writing has several ‘presents’ at its disposal. *Socially*, the increasing insecurity of acceptance must be stressed. And third, as the physical presence of speaker and listener is less relevant, the *factual* dimension emerges as the one drawing most attention.
- 18 See in this context: Kasaya’s essay in the present volume.

- 19 One may be tempted to speak here of 'Western science', but why would we? With its introduction into 'the East', science loses its regionally 'Western' characteristics. This does not mean that it is impossible to observe regional differences, e.g. in the organisation of universities etc. But such regional differences do not have primacy over the 'core' of scientific communication that is the difference between the – abstractly defined – code values of 'true' and 'false'. Regional differences do moreover get a place in our theory, namely as conditioning (*Konditionierung*); they have the function of enabling the global introduction and dissemination of the evolutionary highly improbable achievement that is functional differentiation (cf. *infra*).
- 20 This is not to say that other ways of differentiation have become outdated: segmentary differentiation, for instance, may connect to the primacy of functional differentiation. The system 'science' is differentiated into segments, called disciplines (e.g. physics, biology, etc.), the political system into segments called states and "authorities". There seems to exist discussion concerning the latter point, however.
- 21 For a treatment of Oda Nobunaga 織田信長 as a 'modern' ruler (in the sense of Machiavelli): see Lamers 1997.
- 22 See in this context: "Distinction is perfect continence" (Spencer-Brown 1969: 1)
- 23 On the importance of the distinction between societal *structure* and societal *semantics*, see especially: "I start the analysis of the modernity of modern society with the distinction between societal structure and semantics. My preference for this start – a preference that cannot be justified at the start – has to do with the confusing characteristic of this distinction, namely the fact that contains itself. In itself it is a semantic distinction" (Luhmann 1992: 11).
- 24 On the workings and functions of this semantics in Japan, see Gluck 1985.
- 25 See, for instance: Douglas Hofstadter (1997) and Jacques Derrida (1988).
- 26 See in this connection, with strong reference to de Saussure, Luhmann 1993b: 45-70.
- 27 Derrida 1972b: 'La pharmacie de Platon'.