Abstract
Are social systems autopoietic? If they are, in what way are they? What are the particular processes at work in social systems as autopoietic systems? The purpose of this paper is not to reengage the debate on whether social systems are or are not autopoietic. The paper will rather put forward two suppositions and work from there. First, the paper contends that social systems are autopoietic. As such the key question to understand becomes the unity of social autopoiesis—which leads to the second supposition. The paper supposes that the path to understanding the unity of autopoiesis in social systems is through language. The paper argues that the expressive view of language is primordial, and that the designative role of language presupposes the former. The paper argues that, from an expressive point of view, the Wittgensteinian notion of form of life, and the Heideggerian notion of world, are important focal points for understanding social systems as autopoietic. The paper presents an account of social autopoiesis based on the dialectical interpenetration of self and other in and through language. When we find ourselves in the world, in a form of life, we find ourselves already in language—a set of already there socially significant linguistic distinctions, which we implicitly draw upon as part of saying something that matters, in that particular form of life. We share a world in as much as we share a language. Language is the common unity of our community. However, in speaking, in a community, I also take hold of my own existence. As a speaking-subject ‘I’ express myself as a significant ‘other’, an-other that matters. Through language self and community interpenetrate each other in a fused horizon of significance. It is the conservation of this existential dialectic between same and other, community and self, they and me, in and through language—or rather as language—that is the autopoietic dynamic of social system. To understand social autopoiesis we have to understand language.

Language is the house of Being
Heidegger

The spoken word is gesture, and its meaning, a world.
Merleau-Ponty

Introduction
Are social systems autopoietic? If they are, in what way are they? What is the particular dynamic at work in/between social systems as autopoietic systems? It seems that there is urgency in these questions. I suspect there is, hidden behind these questions, a view that believes that answers to these questions might bring us, as a scientific community, closer to ‘solving’ the complex social problems emerging in our contemporary society. However, there is also a paradox here. If social systems are truly autopoietic (self-organising) then the desire to ‘control’ them will be to no avail. Obviously this does not render the questions invalid.

The purpose of this paper is not to reengage the debate on whether social systems are or are not autopoietic (Leydesdorff 1993). The answer to this question depends on whose specification of autopoiesis one takes as authoritative. Mingers (1996), for example takes the line that Maturana’s formal specification should be the basis for making the judgement. He then acknowledges that it becomes difficult to argue or demonstrate that social systems are autopoietic due to various problems such as the identification and description of boundaries, components, and so forth. It is also on this basis that he critiques the work of Luhmann. Obviously, there is an important debate here that may be worth pursuing. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper I will suspend this debate and put forward two suppositions and work from there. First, the paper contends that social systems are in some sense—not necessarily in the formal sense of

Maturana—autopoietic. As such the important question to understand becomes the unity of social autopoiesis—which leads to the second supposition. The paper supposes that the path to understanding the unity of autopoiesis in social systems is through language. This position flows from the conjecture that social systems are constituted and autopoietically maintained as language. This is not an entirely surprising position as it is to some degree implicit or even explicit in the work of Maturana (1987), Luhmann (1990; Luhmann 1992), Teubner (1993), and others. This paper does not want to disregard this work. Nevertheless, it wants to develop this argument from a variety of hereto under-utilised sources, namely the work Heidegger (1962; 1971), Merleau-Ponty (1962), Wittgenstein (1956), Gadamer (1989), and more recently Taylor (1985). I want to argue with Kirkeby (1997) that phenomenology, and in particular existential phenomenology, creates an alternative which is a genuine anti-formalistic optics, that it refuses any kind of functionalism, and that it has an ability to relate to the existential level of historical and cultural experience. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to develop what I will call the ‘language hypothesis’ of social autopoiesis in some more detail drawing mainly on the existential phenomenological tradition.

The paper will be structured as follows: First, I will discuss language from an existential phenomenological point of view. I will argue that expression is the primordial, and social, role of language. That man is existence and language as expression is the tacit source for actualising this existence as mine; Second, I will develop this discussion in more detail to show how language functions as the horizon of significance that dialectically actualises the self/other relation. I will argue that the self/other relation is not a dualism but an autopoietic, mutually referring, essential tension that is the very source of self and other; Third, I will then return this discussion to the work of Maturana and Luhmann to show how these ideas differ from theirs in important ways; Finally, I will discuss some conclusions and implications.

**The Phenomenon of Language**

Language is a truly enigmatic phenomenon. This is clear from the controversy surrounding it. On the one end of the spectrum we have those that see language as a mere ‘pointing tool’ that humans use to point at the world, or to act as containers to make ‘external’ that which is ‘internal’ such as thoughts, ideas, self, and so forth. This is what Taylor (1985) refers to as the designative view of language—also sometimes called the denotative role of language. In this view language is a rather unproblematic system of ‘pointers’ that merely stand for things, thoughts, feelings, and so forth. The meaning of the word is what it designates. In this view, the problem of language is to sort out or unravel the system of signifiers, and that which they signify, by means of more precise unambiguous descriptions/definitions, and the rules of logic. This is by no means a trivial task for them, however, they see it as always in principle possible.

Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein, Taylor and others have critiqued the designative view of language. It is beyond the scope of this paper to rehearse their arguments here. I will merely point out that essentially the critique offered by these authors involves the idea that any foreground always implicitly, in one way or another, implies a background for it to be significant, meaningful, stand out, and so forth. Wittgenstein (1956), for example, showed that language, as denotation, always assumes a background of implicit social practices (form of life) to ground it and make it sensible to the participants in that form of life. As he put it: it is not an agreement of definition but ‘an agreement in form of life’.  

In contrast to the designative view there are those in the existential phenomenological tradition, such as Martin Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty (1962), Gadamer (1989), and others who argue that language is not merely a tool for pointing at the world, it is the very constitution of the world. Where we find ‘world’ language is always already there. Through and in expression language is the world. There is not thinking and language, language is thinking. There is no meaning and word; the word is the meaning. This is what Taylor refers to as the expressive view of language.

Obviously, the expressive view does not exclude the fact that language also functions in a designative sense. The argument is rather that for language to designate anything at all it has to assume an implicitly ‘there’ background that always already renders it meaningful or significant. For example the ‘pointing’ to the world by a mother through the statement “spoon, Isabelle” to her baby (while holding up a spoon for her to touch) is already significant in the context of a engaged mother teaching her baby about her world, in expressing herself as carer and nurturer of her child. The significance of the statement is not in the pointing to a spoon but the actual manifestation of the gesture of caring and nurturing. As expression, we
do not need to unravel the network of signifiers. The meaning is immediately obvious for those who share that—in this case mother and child—world. In its expressive role language is being-in-the-world (a mother caring and nurturing her child). As such language becomes intimately tied to, or rather constitutive of, a world, a form of life. For Wittgenstein a form of life is a set of language-embedded social practices that becomes the background ‘rules’ or ways of saying (hearing) that renders an utterance meaningful or significant within that particular form of life.

When saying ‘significant’ I mean saying (and hearing) in ways that matter. Heidegger argues that the being (the is-ness) of our human-ness is that the world matters—the being of Dasein is care (Heidegger 1962, p.237). This means to be human is to be always already engaged in the world—to be always already involved. There is no ‘place’ that Dasein can be where everything that is said and everything that appears are equally significant or insignificant. ‘May the Lord bless you’, uttered by a priest to a believer in church matters to that believer in ways that those same words do not when uttered by a stranger on a street corner. What is said refers not first and foremostly to things, thoughts, feelings, etc. but rather expresses, makes manifest, a way or flow of living, a way of being-together, that is immediately obvious (before and beyond reflection) to those immersed in it—an agreement in form of life. This is our being: that the world matters, and this is what we conserve. It is therefore my contention that it is the conservation of this horizon of significance (an ‘agreement’ in form of life) that is central to understanding social autopoiesis. Thus, when I say/do something, I say/do it in a way, at a place, and at a time that matters. This is why a person who seems to babble a string of incompressible or nonsensical words in what seems to be an inappropriate time and place always strikes us as odd. I ‘am’ in as much as I conserve this horizon, this ‘in/between’, which simultaneously signifies me as ‘other’ and as ‘same’ (‘being-with-other’). ‘Other’ as an original source of significance (Taylor 1985) and ‘same’ as an original contributor to a common horizon of significance (a community)—a common horizon that in turn become the very condition for the other to be ‘other’. It is ‘in/between’ the tension of the ‘same’ and the ‘other’ that the community and the self emerges as significant horizon. This horizon of significance is the existential possibility for being, for standing out as something that matters; after all ek-sistence literally means “to stand out”. It is important to make clear that the horizon is not a horizon for an autonomous cogito, the horizon is the self(other).

This mutual interpenetration of Dasein and world is the fundamental insight of the existentialist phenomenological tradition. To say that man ‘exists’ is to say that man cannot be what it is without world. There is not Dasein then world or world then Dasein. They define each other. Clearly, here world must not be understood as the Cartesian res extensa, a field or extended space of things (in the very general sense of the word) that surround us. A collection of things in a space is not a world. World is a certain whole, a gestalt, which is a given as that in which each concrete thing can appear as meaningful. This “whole of relationships, within which things mutually refer to one another and can manifest themselves as meaningful is called ‘world’” (Kockelmanns 1972, p.12). For example, I enter a room (a study) and see a desk with some books on it, a pen, paper and other writing things. They hang together as a gestalt with some books on it, a pen, paper and other writing things. They make sense to me because I see them in the context of a person reading, writing, studying, and so forth. They hang together as a gestalt each confirming the other as meaningful. World is never an ‘in itself’ even the phenomena in the world of science are only meaningful within the context of the scientific activity, quarks have a meaning because there are scientists who name them and study them. World-without-man or man-without-world has no meaning they interpenetrate each other. “The world is radically human, and the truth about the world is radically human. Without man’s subjectivity no affirmation of reality has any meaning, and without the affirmation of reality all assertions are idle playing with words” (Luijpen and Koren 1969, p.42)

World is this gestalt of interpenetrating relationships that are always already meaningful, or understood. In the world of the believer, the utterance ‘May the Lord bless you’ does not need to be interpreted as if it is somehow ‘strange’ and need to be made comprehensible. It is immediately understood because it is ‘in’ a whole of relationships (the service, the priest, the liturgy, the particular moment in the liturgy, and so forth) that is already meaningful. The believer does not need to ‘unravel’ the network of signifiers and signified since the believer already ‘dwells’ in them—the world of faith. Without these horizons of significance (worlds, forms of life,) the self indeed becomes an isolated object without meaning, a cogito in a perpetual cycle of doubt from which there is no escape. To conclude: it seems reasonable therefore to conclude that it is the conservation of world, this horizon of significance, in and through language that may be the fundamental dynamic of social autopoiesis.
In the next section, I want to further explore the particular way in which language as horizon and language as speaking functions as that which consummates and conserves self/other as a horizon of significance.

**Language and the (Social) World**

The relationship between language and world has two ontological dimensions to it. The first dimension is language as the historical already there horizon of world. Language started with the ‘first word’ and continues to unfold as an ever-expanding horizon of meaning—the already spoken word, not in itself, but as the collective world of community. It is in the world, in this community, that we speak when we speak.

![Diagram of Language as the horizon of significance that recursively constitute other and self](image)

In speaking/listening in the world, we open up possibilities for unexpected meanings to emerge. It is these possibilities for expressing meaning that make us stand out as significant others. It is these two dimensions of language as the already there horizon, and language as original expression that I want to explore as the essential dynamic of social autopoiesis (refer also to Figure 1)

**Language as historical already ‘there’ horizon**

When we find ourselves in a world, a form of life, we find ourselves in language. A landscape of already there socially significant linguistic distinctions that we implicitly draw upon as part of saying something meaningful, something that matters, in that particular form of life. This means that as a human being—a being in-a-world—I am always already in language that become the necessary condition for me to say something significant. I do not speak with language, as a tool, I speak from language. Language is not something I use from time to time, but rather something I am always already in. As Merleau-Ponty (1964) argues “language surrounds each speaking subject, like an instrument with its own inertia, its own demands, constraints, and internal logic, and must nevertheless remain open to the initiatives of the subject…always capable of the displacement of meanings, the ambiguities, and the functional substitutions which give this logic its lurching gait” (p.87). This already spoken language is the horizon of significance that is the ‘they in me’. The horizon that is the background for personal pronouns such as ‘I’ and ‘me’ to have any meaning at all.

Does this mean that I am a ‘prisoner’ of language? Clearly, I can say whatever I want, wherever I want, in whatever way I want. This is so, however, in as much as I want to say something that matters, in a particular form of life, I will have to address myself to this horizon of significance I am already ‘in’. As Gadamer (1989) points out: “Everyone who is situated in a tradition must listen to what reaches him from it” (p. 463). To take a very obvious example: I can not stand up in a conference on the philosophy of language and propose that the audience somehow entirely ‘forget’—if this is possible at all—the already there tradition of philosophical discourse on language that emerged over thousands of years. Even if I want to disagree with it entirely, or use concepts in totally different ways, I will still have to draw on this very tradition—of linguistic distinctions—to say how, or in what way, my use of this language will be different.
Now one may say that this is clearly true for a very technical form of life such as academic philosophy, but is it equally true for everyday life? It would be my contention that the multiplicity of forms of life or worlds which we dwell in as part of everyday life, such as my family, my place of work, the sports club, and so forth, are equally always already a very particular horizon of significance. A set of implicitly there preconscious linguistic distinctions that is the very horizon from which I will have to speak if I want to say something that matters in that form of life, or rather for ‘me’ to matter in that particular form of life. In a similar manner that Gadamer (1989) demonstrated that our prejudice is the very condition for understanding something so to language is the already there, already understood, hermeneutic whole that becomes the very condition of saying something significant, something that matters.

This language, our form of life, which we dwell in, is our community, our common unity. The very notion of community draws upon the idea of a common horizon of significance that we implicitly share or draw upon to say something that matters. The root of the word ‘common’ in Latin is com–minus (more correctly com–manus). Manus (literally meaning ‘hand’) is indicated in the following contexts of the use: to be near; to have in hand, to be engaged on a thing; to know for certain; to come to hand; to fight at close quarters; at hand, in readiness, in hand; to give with one’s own hand; and so forth. Other English words that have the same root are manual – both in its sense of a book that is kept close to hand and in its sense of labouring by hand; and manifest – as in clear and obvious. Thus, community refers to that horizon of significance, that language, that is implicitly present at hand, near, clear and obvious to those who dwell in it. We share a community because we already share (are) a horizon of significance, a language. It is the horizon that make us ‘stand out’ (exist) as a common-unity. This common horizon is not a separate horizon; it is rather the fusion (already fused) horizons we already are. Furthermore, we should not conceptualise this horizon as some completely unambiguous (even uncontested), fixed background with clear and fixed boundaries. It is rather a dynamic (transformed with every expression) and silent (implicitly there) horizon with fading boundaries that only become apparent when they no longer apply.

It is this horizon, this language, which we must conserve as our existential possibility to belong. We belong to a community in as much as we dwell in a language. However, this does not mean that we explicitly and consciously create this community; this language we dwell in. Although language flows from the speaking subject it is not the product of the speaking subject—it belongs to the community and no one. Language and world interpenetrate each other. Dasein does not ‘name’ a world after ‘gathering it together’ in some coherent way. There is not meaning then word. It is in fact the opposite; “the word, the name, restores the emerging essent from the immediate, overpowering surge to its being and maintains it in this openness, delimitation, and permanence” (Heidegger 1959, p.172). But this does not imply that the word proceeds all experience and simply attach to an experience in an external way. As Gadamer (1989) explains: “Experience is not wordless to begin with, subsequently becoming an object of reflection by being named, by being subsumed under the universality of the word. Rather, experience of itself seeks and finds words to express it. We see the right word—i.e., the word that really belongs to the thing—so that in it the thing comes into language” (p.417). We always move within language as the unfolding ‘text of life.’ We always already belong (Gadamer) to language/community. It is the very horizon from which we speak when we speak. In Heideggerian terms we would say that we are always already ‘thrown’ into language. The pointing ‘out’ of things in the world is already meaningful because it is already in the world, already in language. To make this point clear, and to the degree that it is possible, let us imagine the moment of the first word uttered by humanity. What would have been the gestalt that will make this word mean something that matters? Of course our only response could be that we do not know; it is unknowable an enigma. World without language, as its irreducible horizon, and in a like manner, language without world, is inconceivable; they interpenetrate each other. Ott (1972) refers to this mutual interpenetration as the hermeneutic structure of language: “Thus, the ‘proximity of world and things’ taken as linguistic structure means that language is not merely a vehicle of information in a pre-given world; but, while particulars are discussed in it, language at the same time brings with it the horizon of meaningfulness of the particulars and founds this for man” (p.177, my emphasis).

Thus, in as much as I want to say something significant, something that matters, I must ‘listen’ to language/community—that I already am—and speak from it. Speaking in the world is therefore also already ‘listening’ to language. We can not ‘make’ the community text speak. We must listen, on our toes as it were, to the unsaid possibilities always lurking in the fusion of horizons. However, to listen/speak in a community is already to have a common-unity. What is the tacit source of this common unity that grounds the community text? What is the ground that makes the fusion of horizon already available. It would be my
argument that it is a shared ethos, a shared actuality. A shared actuality refers to an implicitly shared way of living. A way of living that permeates our being-together on a pre-conscious level. A shared meaning that cannot be reflexively be grasped, a facticity that dissipates under the intentional gaze of consciousness, or the intentional grasp of intersubjective discourse. Maybe it is to this ‘shared actuality’ that Bin Kimura, a phenomenological psychiatrist, refers to with the notion of unindividualised private intersubjectivity. He notes (Kimura 1996, my emphasis):

Such private intersubjectivity can be considered, in contrast with the public intersubjectivity [which is] based on an open network system composed by plural individual intentionalities, to be an actual state of affairs in which the “Between-ness”, “aida” in Japanese, itself come to assume its own intentionality, functioning like a single subjectivity existing quite independently of the real individual subjectivities constituting this very “Between-ness.”

He argues that it is the type of intersubjectivity (fused horizon) that make an ensemble of musicians play with a harmony as if they were one. It is also this ‘oneness’ that makes the child’s pain interpenetrate the mother in a way that makes it impossible to separate their pain. It is the pain of the in-between. In their way of living together they dwell in this always already fused horizon. Every utterance already has meaning, already make sense. A common intentionality that is already understood because it is just there, on the surface as it were—a selfcessity in Kirkeby’s sense.

To sum up: Dasein dwells in language. When I get ‘there’ language is already there. When taking up the word in a particular form of life, language, as the already spoken word, speaks. Thus, when Dasein speaks there is a simultaneous fusion of an already there historical horizon of significance from which Dasein speaks, and the particular situatedness in which Dasein speaks to express itself as an ‘I’ that matters. It is this latter element that will be explored in the next section.

Language as expression: speech in the world
If I am always already in language, am I merely (re)reading the historical text of language? Am I forever doomed to the already there horizon of significance? No surely not. Although it becomes the necessary horizon for Dasein to address/comport itself to the world, in ways that matter, there is always the possibility of transcending this already there thrownness of language. The concert pianist can take the same score and produce a flat dull reproduction or a brilliant and inspiring piece of music. Likewise the original speaker (the poet Heidegger would argue) can harness the ‘silence around the words’ (Merleau-Ponty)—can draw on the unsaid possibilities in ways that would ‘tear a new sound from them.’ Indeed this is where the expressive view of language is most important. Through speaking, as expression, the invisible possibilities of meaning may be harnessed to actualise my own existential possibility for being an ‘I’. It is through speaking in the world that ‘I’ can stand out as a significant other, a significant other self. I stand out as a self that is an original source of significance, a being in the world that matters. As a significant other self I weave together the common already there text in new and unexpected ways that make me stand out as an ‘I’ that matters.

This ‘I’, however, is not a transcendental ego, or a res cogitans. It is not some substantive in-itself that already exists and then takes up language to express itself. It is rather at the moment of speaking, of saying ‘I’, that the individual is constituted as subject. Subjectivity is “nothing other than the speaker’s capacity to posit him or herself as an ego, and cannot in any way be defined through some wordless sense of being oneself, nor by deferral to some ineffable psychic experience of the ego, but only through an linguistic ‘I’ transcending any possible experience” (Agamben 1993, p.45). It is not the ‘I’ that speaks; speaking is the ‘I’.

Speaking in the world as expression needs further elaboration. First, “what is it that is expressed in speaking”; and second, following from the first, “what provides the directedness (or intentionality) of the expression?” As posited above, in speaking I do not express my ‘mind’ or an independent, internal, already ‘there’ self or ego. As Merleau-Ponty (1962) argues:

In the first place speech is not the ‘sign’ of thought, if by this we understand a phenomenon which heralds another as smoke betrays fire. Speech and thought would admit of this external relation only if they were both thematically given, whereas in fact they are interwove, the sense being held within the word, and the word being the external existence of the sense. … Words cannot be ‘strongholds of thought’, nor can thought seek expression, unless words are in themselves a comprehensible text, and unless speech possesses a power of significance entirely its own. The word and speech must somehow cease to be a way of designating things or
In the Cartesian language that permeate our discourse this formulation sounds odd and counter intuitive, In order to argue this point let us follow Merleau-Ponty’s lead and consider the example of music. Clearly, music does not consist of meaningless sounds that we hear and then interpret to ‘fill’ them with meaning. The moment of the production of the notes, the moment of expression itself, accomplishes the full meaning of the music. Before hearing the music for the first time, we can not, with any level of analysis, anticipate it. In addition, any attempt to analyse it after the performance can only be done by taking ourselves back to the very moment of experiencing it. Thus, its complete meaning is accomplished in the very moment of expression. The meaning of the music is immediately and obviously there at the moment of expression—when played and when heard. This is also true for words of speaking. Words do not accomplish ‘internal’ thoughts. There is not some internal meaning and then words to express it in a similar way that there is not meaning and then music. Thought is not some internal state that exist independently of the world and of words. As Merleau-Ponty explains: “What misleads us in this connection, and causes us to believe in a thought which exists for itself prior to expression, is thought already constituted and expressed, which we can silently recall to ourselves, and through which we acquire the illusion of an inner life. But in reality this supposed silence is alive with words, this inner life is an inner [silent] language” (183). The words, the utterances, are the meanings themselves. The spoken word is a genuine gesture that always already contains its meaning. Speaking is not the ‘transfer of information’ but rather a way of being in the world. In the same manner that our movement through everyday life (such as using everyday objects to do whatever we do) does not surprise us so to the speaking, in the form of life, no longer surprises us. I do not take hold of the door handle and wonder how, why and what for. My body knows the door even before ‘I’ think of it, my body speaks even before ‘I’ am conscious of it. Speaking is my comportment, my being-in-the-world.

If it is not internal thought, meaning, or a self that we express what is the source of the expression? Clearly there exists in our comportment towards the world a certain ‘sense-giving intention’, a certain ‘void of consciousness’ or ‘momentary desire’ that calls for, even demands expression. Yet, this “sense-giving intention knows itself only by donning already available meanings, the outcome of previous acts of expression. The available meanings suddenly link up in accordance with an unknown law and once and for all a fresh cultural entity has taken on an existence. Thought and expression, then, are simultaneously constituted, when our cultural store is put at the service of this unknown law, as our body suddenly lends itself to some new gesture...” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p.181, emphasis added). What is this “unknown law” that is the source of the sense-giving intention? Is it not some inner self, some self-sufficient cogito? It is my assertion that this ‘unknown law’, this primitive force, is the primordial existential will-to-be, to ‘stand out’ as a significant other—to be an-other that matters. It is a willing without a source, a meaning that cannot turn back on itself to discover its roots.

It is the will to be a significant horizon (other/self) in a significant horizon (same/community), or stated differently, to be a self that matters to a community that matters for a self that matters. It is this dialectical existential play between actual/possible, other/same, community/self, they/me, that provides the directedness of the sense-giving intention. This dialectical play is not something we choose or not, it is something we are. It is our essence. Our standing out, as significant, matters to us as beings who have as there essence the working out of that which we already are. The “essence of Dasein lies in its existence” Heidegger (1962, p.67). Furthermore, it is the coherence (the gestalt) of this same/other dialectic that we conserve as the autopoietic unity of our existence.

To sum up: the subject exists as, and only as, a speaking subject. Or, stated differently, ‘I’ am embodied language. The source of meaning that directs the sense-giving intention, that which is expressed in speaking, is the working out—in and through language—of my existence; to stand out as a subject that matters. However, the speaking subject is a speaking subject only in an always already fused horizon. This horizon is the already spoken word, that which the speaking subject always already dwells in—a landscape of already there socially significant distinctions. That source of meaning that grounds the fused horizon (the common-unity) is the ‘oneness’, a way of living together. (unindividualised private intersubjectivity). It is the conservation of the existential dialectic between same and other, self and community, me and they in and through language (or rather as language) that is the autopoietic dynamic of social systems. To
understand social autopoiesis we have to understand language. Maybe we can summarise this interpenetrating dialectical dynamic as in Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emergent status</th>
<th>Self / Possible</th>
<th>Other / Actual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form of Language</td>
<td>Self as an ‘I’ (that matters)</td>
<td>Common-unity as a form of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tacit ‘source’</td>
<td>The speaking I (word)</td>
<td>The already spoken they (word)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Will-to-be / existence</td>
<td>Way of living / belonging</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Summary of the whole/part relation in social autopoiesis

Now that we have established an understanding of language as the basis or framework for social autopoietic it may be useful to relate this to some of the ideas of Maturana and Varela (at the level of biology) and the work of Luhmann to demonstrate the plausibility of the supposition.

**Social Autopoiesis, Maturana and Luhmann**

When it comes to social autopoiesis there are mainly two schools of thought. There are those who follow the work of Maturana and Varela (1987) in conceiving social autopoiesis as the development of a consensual domain. A consensual domain is the coordination of linguistic acts that results from the ontogenetic structural coupling between two structurally plastic organisms. The consensual coordination of these consensual coordinations of action Maturana calls languaging. As humans we language and therefore dwell in language. This position seems to be very close to my analysis above. There is, however, a fundamental difference. For Maturana there is some already there nucleus that already is and which then take up language to co-ordinate its co-ordination. On several occasions in lectures, when pointed to the work of Heidegger, he would argue that it is ‘I’ that speak through language and not language that speaks. I would suggest his formulation would be: ‘I’ am through language but ‘I’ am not language. This seems to me to be a serious limitation since it has the potential to create all sorts of dualism’s that serve only to clutter the already dense landscape such as body/I, thinking/world, language/thought, and so forth.

The second school of thought, based on the work of Luhmann explicitly endeavours to move beyond the notions of the subject and action as the basis for understanding the nature of the social (Luhmann 1995). Luhmann, in a clearly brilliant move, solves the problem of the intersubjective world by positing the individual consciousness (psychic system) and the social system as separate autopoietic systems. The social system is a system of communications that autopoietically conserves itself, and for which the psychic system is an environment—merely a source of perturbations. Central to this controversial view is Luhmann’s radical reformulation of the notions of meaning and communication. Let us first consider his notion of meaning (Luhmann 1995, p.65, emphasis added):

Meaning is the continual actualisation of potentialities. But because meaning can be meaning only as the difference between what is actual at any moment and a horizon of possibilities, every actualisation always also leads to the virtualisation of the potentialities that could be connected up with it…And to have meaning means that one of the possibilities that could be connected up can and must be selected as the next actuality, as soon as what is actual at the moment has faded away, transpired, and given up its actuality out of its own instability…Meaning is the unity of actualisation and virtualisation, of re-actualisation and re-virtualisation, as a self-propelling process (which can be conditioned by systems)

I will not attempt a complete discussion of this passage; I will merely highlight some important aspects relevant to the discussion. It is clear that Luhmann does not concern himself with a notion of meaning as meaning-for. Meaning, in Luhmann’s account, is an self-referential, self-propelling process whose dynamic is the instability created by the virtual possibilities always already present in the actual, which through its actualisation transpires and as such forces the selection of the next actuality. With this formulation Luhmann does not need to concern himself with the issue of grounding. Meaning is closed off as an in-itself unity. Meaning ‘resides in the self-referential structure of a consciousness (or communication) that consists solely in and through its autopoietic operation. This formulation of meaning, drawing on the notion of an unstable difference between possible and actual, also becomes the basis for Luhmann’s notion of communication. For Luhmann, communication is the synthesis of three selections:
information as a selection from a repertoire of referential possibilities, utterance as a selection from a repertoire of intentional acts, both of which are the selections of the utterer (alter), and understanding as the observation of the distinction between the utterance and information by the addressee (ego). What matters is that the ego observes a difference/deferral between the information and the utterance. The observation of this difference (actual/possible difference) will create the instability for communication to continue. How does consciousness (psychic system) and communication (social system) interact? ‘Both systems run simultaneously without interfering with each other autopoiesis’. They may become structurally coupled through mutual perturbation, but they always maintain their organisational closure (their autonomy).

There are many similarities between my discussion above and the ideas developed by Luhmann. However, there are also fundamental differences. I will endeavour to highlight the most important difference. In Luhmann’s account meaning, consciousness, and communication are of self-referential systems operating on the instability of the actual/potential distinction as its medium and its outcome. In this account he refers to terms such as ‘intention’, ‘selection’, ‘observe’, ‘ego’, ‘alter’, and so forth, as abstract functional states in the autopoietic process without burdening himself with the fact that these are implicitly references to actual humans immersed in the facticity of everyday life. Human beings who’s be-ing is an issue for them. I have no doubt that one can construct, in a very eloquently manner, social systems as systems of communications, in the way that Luhmann does. However, getting rid of the subject does not also need to imply getting rid of the embodied everyday being-in-the-world of Dasein. Human communication is not an intrinsic value, a mere play of differences. Communication is first and foremost the expressions of a being’s will-to-be. Communication is the existential will to stand out as an-other that matters. The background that make communication matter is that Dasein has as its being to care. Because differences matter, communication makes sense and not merely because of the inherent instability of actual/possible distinction. The instability of the actuality/possibility distinction is also central to my account as the dialectical self/other distinction. However, it would be my contention, based on my discussion above, that it is a necessary but not sufficient condition. What makes it a sufficient condition is that it is grounded in the projection of Dasein as care, as the working out of my existence as mine. Possibilities are only possibilities when those possibilities are mine. I would claim that without grounding in existence Luhmann’s society is a more or less random walk across an abstract space of endless communication.

Conclusion

In this paper I attempted to develop an account of the self and the other as constituted in and through language as a basis for understanding social autopoiesis. What is presented is merely an outline of such an account. There are many contentions without sufficient arguments to support them. There are also many issues which I have put aside in favour of the initial coherency of the account. In fact, I still need to show, in a systematic why my account can be called an account of social autopoiesis. Those familiar with the autopoietic description may ascertain the essential elements of autopoietic paradigm such as the self-referential poiesis of the system, operational and organisational closure and structural coupling. The particulars of these obviously still need to be spelt out.

Nevertheless, I argued that language is the appropriate way to understand social autopoiesis. It argued that language is not a tool for pointing, for conveying information, thoughts and ideas. Rather language is the existential condition for being, of self as well as community. It is the existential dialectic of same (community) and other (self) in language that provides the rich possibilities for understanding social autopoiesis. Self and community interpenetrate each other in and through a fused horizon of significance, a common language. From this basis it may be possible to develop a more elaborate and coherent theory of social autopoiesis that does not fall prey to the disembodied abstract formalism we find in Luhmann (1990; 1992; 1995), or the idiosyncrasies of the legal world as we find in Teubner(1993). If the suppositions of this paper proofs to be convincing then the focus of social autopoiesis ought to shift to language and its enigmatic role in the everyday social shaping of society. I hope that this paper is a first tiny step, but a very decisive step nonetheless.

Endnotes
I don’t believe it to be fundamental that our understanding of autopoiesis should necessarily conform the Maturana’s specification for us to be able to draw on the power of this perspective. This does not however imply that I am saying that we should merely use autopoiesis as a metaphor as has been suggested by Morgan (1986). It does not seem to me to be useful to argue that it is either the ‘complete’ Maturana or merely as some sort of metaphor. It seems rather valid to claim that there are other ways to specify autopoiesis that takes into account the difference in domain of manifestation and still maintain the essential aspects of the theory.

Expressive here should not merely be interpreted in as ‘something that express’ something else’. This will become clearer in the discussion to follow.

Obviously one could argue that there are medical and psychological conditions where the world seems to be equally significant or insignificant—maybe this happens in a state of severe depression. However, it is also equally true that it is precisely at this time when the sense of loss of being a human being is most acutely present.

An obvious anomaly is the use of propaganda.

Here I am using the notion of actuality in the technical sense of Kimura (1996).

Kirkby (1997) uses notion of selfcensis to indicate simultaneously self-evidence and necessity. “It is meant to render the notion of something that you cannot help to do, whether you want it or not, and of something that is obvious at a level before reflection, and obvious beyond reflection” (p.9).

Obviously I am reluctant to use ‘intentionality’ here because of the traditional interpretation of intentionality as intentionality of some substantive self. Hedegger’s use of the comportment would be better but still suffers the fate of substantive interpretation.

References
