

Concepts as Reflection of Societal Changes

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KEYWORDS: societal concept construction, objects in the humanities, conceptual changes, influences on concept construction, conceptual life cycle, terminology work

1. INTRODUCTION

Let us firstly recall the standardised definitions of the object and the concept. ISO 1087–1:2000 defines these two concepts as follows:

Object: anything perceivable or conceivable.

Note: Objects may be material (e.g. an engine, a sheet of paper, a diamond), immaterial (e.g. conversion ratio, a project plan) or imagined (e.g. a unicorn).

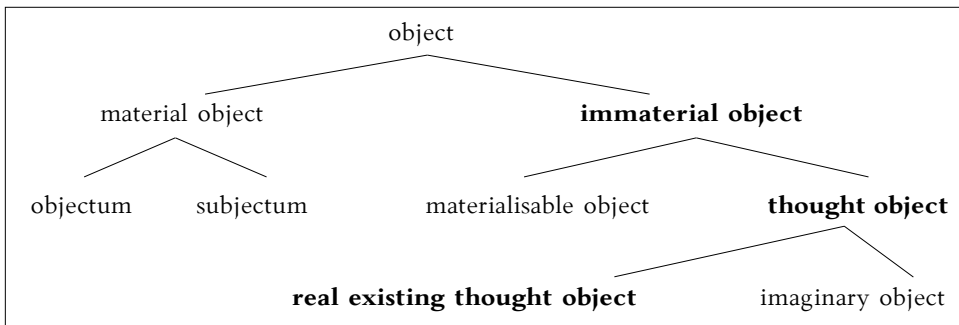
Concept: unit of knowledge created by a unique combination of characteristics.

Note: Concepts are not necessarily bound to particular languages. They are, however, often influenced by the social or cultural background which often leads to different categorisations.

Both definitions are not wrong, but rather knowledge sparse. Obviously, a more detailed reflection on both concepts seems to be indispensable for further progress in the theory of terminology.

Referring to the object, a first and rudimentary classification is given in the note of the standard. We may extend the given classification as follows:

Fig. 1



(Picht 2004: 317)

It is obvious that the object represents the raw material for any concept formation; however, the formation process will differ according to the type of objects. ‘Material objects’ lend themselves predominantly to abstraction — the classical Aristotelian way of concept formation. Considering ‘immaterial object’ and especially ‘thought object’ the formation process seems to be different. Therefore, it might be helpful to recall the definitions of this group of objects:

Immaterial object: object without physical form whose existence and relation to space and time is given through the imagining subject.

Note: My personal idea of freedom.

Thought object: immaterial object which only has mental existence and therefore is related to the thinking subject through whom the space–time–relation is realised.

Note: Ms. Y’s idea of Dante’s nine circles of hell.

Real existing, thought object: thought object which has a mental, but real existence.

Note: Mr. X’s idea of the legal transfer of his estate.

The basic characteristics of these types of objects are:

- the thinking subject is a human being;
- the human being is the carrier of the time–space–relation;
- the human being decides about his ideas and their possible changes.

Concepts based on these premises presumably have a different genesis than abstraction. In the case of abstraction of material objects of a certain class, it is relatively easy to determine the central characteristics, because they are observable by the abstractor and they belong per se to the objects in question. The human being is the observer and abstractor and not the carrier or ‘owner’ of a ‘material object’. The genesis of concepts based on ‘thought objects’, however, obeys different mechanisms such as discussion of ‘thought objects’ and consensus about the characteristics of the resulting concept.

An extended definition of ‘concept’ could read:

Concept: unit of knowledge constituted by all characteristics (chunks of knowledge) intersubjectively recognised and agreed upon by a professional community at a certain point of time; it has a life cycle determined by cognition dynamics. (Picht 2009: 11)

It might be wise to extend the last part of the sentence slightly, reading now: “*it has a life cycle determined by cognitive **and societal** dynamics.*”

2. MY ASSUMPTIONS

1. Societal concepts are predominantly inter- and transdisciplinary.
2. Certain types of societal concepts may be highly normative.
3. The life cycle of societal concepts is mostly determined by societal factors.
4. Most societal concepts are constructions.
5. Many societal concepts are influenced by/based on ideologies or religions.
6. Societal concepts are open to negotiation, interpretation and other influences.
7. Societal concepts may suffer sudden or gradual changes.

2.1. Societal concepts are predominantly inter- and transdisciplinary

Any community, be it a so-called primitive or a highly civilised one, is ruled by certain written or unwritten laws, rules and rites which provide common ground for the community members. The ‘agreement’ often is reached by tacit consensus and it is expressed in concepts. For instance, the legal domain as a social and societal magnitude may be divided into two large conceptual areas:

1. Concepts belonging to the field of knowledge concerned with jurisprudence, its applications, documents, etc. Here we find predominantly rules and prescriptions and their practical manifestations.
2. Concepts and objects upon which legal prescriptions are to be applied. These concepts may be based on any of the object types indicated in the above figure.

Ad 1. The concept ‘purchase’ may be related to material or immaterial objects of nearly all areas of life. A car as well as a right or service can be bought. A right — clearly a societal concept — may be relevant in very different domains, for instance in trade, in succession, in a constitution (e.g. human rights), in legal or administrative procedures, etc. Services are offered, bought and sold in nearly all branches of society, be it the hair dresser, a shipping company or a lawyer’s advice.

Ad 2. An object or a concept may be relevant in very different societal connections. A horse can be an object of insurance, of trade, of meat production, of robbery, related to various types of sport, a patient at the

vet, a zoological research object, etc. The societal focus changes, the concept or object, however, remains the same. It may be called an object's or concept's transdisciplinarity.

2.2. Certain types of societal concepts may be highly normative or even prescriptive

The internal coherence of a society is ensured by norms which determine the relations between the individuals. The legislation of a state, for instance, is normative and binding either for all citizens or for certain limited groups. For example the concept 'tax paying' or 'compulsory education' for clearly defined groups of people is prescribed by law.

However, norms and rules are man-made and therefore depend either on a generally accepted attitude within a society or they may be imposed on a society by exterior force, for instance, by terror, occupation or coup d'état. Norms may develop according to historical or other events such as ideological revolutions or economic crisis. That implies that prescription and norm are not absolute constructs.

In order to accept and to put through any kind of prescription, in a democracy certain conditions have to be fulfilled, for instance,

- a norm is a dynamic magnitude;
- a norm is negotiable;
- a norm has to be accepted at least by a majority of the society members;
- an infraction of a norm entails a sanction;
- the separation of powers aims at a rightful prescription;
- etc.

In non-democratically ruled communities, some of these conditions are different, for instance,

- acceptance by the majority in a society is not central or even necessary;
- a norm is not freely negotiable;
- the separation of powers does not exist;
- the infraction of a given norm by certain groups of the society may be wanted, for example, torture or corruption;
- etc.

In practice we can observe the case that concepts of basic norms may be altered, although the terms are more or less deliberately maintained unchanged in order to disguise or justify societal changes.

Nevertheless, any norm or prescription requires in the long run moral and ethical justifications in order to elicit or enjoy societal acceptance. In addition, any norm or prescription implies by nature a temporal aspect. Regardless of the type of prescription, none of them can be eternal; eternity in this respect would mean everlasting societal stagnation. The reality, on the contrary, reflects 'norm dynamics' according to societal evolution and changes.

2.3. The life cycle of societal concepts is mostly determined by societal factors

The life cycle of a concept seems to be easy to determine — there must be a point in time when the concept is 'born' and another point in time, when the life cycle has finished. However, in reality, it may be difficult to fix these points on a time axis. In addition, one has to distinguish between life cycle and 'eternal' existence of a concept (Picht 2008: 287 ff).

Pragmatically, one may define the life cycle as the period of time a concept is considered correct and as such in active use. For instance, the concept 'illegitimate child' was until 1983 an impediment to take holy orders according to the law of the Roman Catholic Church. In this case it is possible to determine exactly the end of the life cycle. In other cases such as the concept 'witch-persecution' it may be possible to determine when it was forbidden by law, but what about social reality? In some regions the life cycle has finished definitely, in others it seems to be doubtful, at least in certain less educated social classes.

The end of a conceptual life cycle is not identical with the 'death' of a concept. Concepts cannot die. A concept is defined as 'unit of knowledge', thus the death of a concept would be equal to permanent loss of knowledge. Humanity would be without conscience of its intellectual evolution and history. For instance, we still know the concept 'ether' as 'substance in ancient and medieval science'; we do not use it any longer in this sense, because it is recognised as false; however, the concept still disposes of the knowledge it was a carrier of.

A concept can fall into oblivion, but then we have to talk about a lacunae in our present knowledge about former stages of knowledge caused by a

variety of possible circumstances, e.g. when any form of concept representation is lost or no longer understandable. Nevertheless, at least the theoretical prospect of concept recovery by research exists (Picht 2010: 24) as it, for instance, happened with old Egyptian concepts when the archaeologists were able to read the Egyptian hieroglyphics.

The life cycle of concepts especially in the natural sciences and their applications may be delimited by the concepts of 'verification' and 'falsification', 'need for a technical solution' and 'end of its application'. Consequently, cognition is the dominant parameter in natural sciences.

2.4. Most societal concepts are constructions

Many instances of concept formation in society start with an unclear and fuzzy feeling of a need to clarify a certain state, problem, status or condition. The general tendency is to find a solution; however, the society as a whole is hardly able to start the solution finding process. Most frequently, we will find individuals proposing possible solutions trying to describe or explain their individual thoughts. In other words, they propose their 'thought objects'. These objects may be considered the raw material for a possible later concept creation process. Objects have properties — not characteristics — and these properties, when made communicable by the individual carriers, may become the basis for a concept construction process. This process often takes the form of a clarifying discussion with arguments for and against certain properties. Ideally, the result of such a process which is based on an agreement upon desirable and acceptable properties is a constructed concept. The properties agreed upon then make up the intension expressed by characteristics, which are the precondition for being able to formulate a definition. It is obvious that in this kind of process the individual 'thought objects' do not undergo an abstraction where only common properties of a class of objects can obtain the status of characteristics, which in fact represents a reduction process, because any abstraction is reductionist by nature.

Of course, not every cluster of individual 'thought objects' will lead to a new constructed concept, because acceptance by the society is an important factor and this factor includes the power of rejection.

This process may be illustrated by the following example: a county is experiencing unemployment, underdeveloped infrastructure and very little tourism, but it has a pristine landscape, an interesting history, ancient

buildings and a beautiful lake. Some leading persons are of the opinion that something has to be done, for example, to promote the positive factors in order to neutralise the negative elements. The county administration decides to set up a commission of five persons. Each of these five persons has his individual ideas about a solution. As a first clarification they agree to strengthen tourism. But how? Every person describes his ideas (thought objects) and a list of ideas (properties) is generated and discussed. This process may take time and imply long argumentations for and against advantages and disadvantages, economic and ecological consequences, ways of realisation, etc. Finally, they agree upon the creation of a tourism promoter with defined functions, obligations and competences. This proposal — in reality a concept with a defined intension — is presented to the county's council as the decision making authority. There the proposal is discussed again and perhaps revised. The result is a new concept with the final intension of the 'county's tourism promoter'.

A negative example could be the proposal to abolish celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church. This proposal which has been presented several times in the last decades was rejected; that means the concept of celibacy remains unchanged and in force.

2.5. Many societal concepts are influenced by/based on ideologies or religions

It is a fact that a considerable array of concepts related to social behaviour originates directly or indirectly from religious or ideological convictions. For instance, concepts from national socialist legislation such as 'racial defilement' (Rassenschande) and 'kin liability' (Sippenhaft) or from Russian communist legislation such as 'common property' (коллективная собственность), 'collectivization' (коллективизация), 'Great Purge' (чистка), 'population transfer' (депортация) or 'dekulakisation' (раскулачивание) may illustrate the issue.

Another example is 'ethnic cleansing' defined as a the process or policy of eliminating unwanted ethnic or religious groups by deportation, forcible displacement, mass murder, or by threats of such acts, with the intent of creating a territory inhabited by people of a homogeneous or pure ethnicity, religion, culture, and history (*Ethnic cleansing* – Wikipedia).

In the case of concepts influenced by religion we may distinguish three types:

1. Concepts which came into being by divine revelation, for instance, the Ten Commandments. In Christianity they are the ethical and moral foundations for civil and penal legislation and its concepts.

The Sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church are “efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us.” (*Sacraments of the Catholic Church* – Wikipedia).

2. Concepts which are based on a dogma, for instance, the concept ‘papal infallibility’ is defined as a dogma of the Roman Catholic Church which states that, in virtue of the promise of Jesus to Peter, the Pope is preserved from the possibility of error “when, in the exercise of his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole Church” (*Papal infallibility* – Wikipedia).

Islam prohibits conversion to any other religion, although the corresponding sura of the Quran does not express it directly. The legal sanction in many Islamic countries is according to Sharia capital punishment. Thus, this concept belongs to the dogma or tenets of Islam.

3. Since one of the aims of a religion or an ideology — sometimes the difference is minimal — is to guide, to control and even to dominate a society, quite a number of concepts that were originally religious or ideologically based have a double role — a religious and a secular one. However, the connection between these two spheres very often remains obvious. For instance, in the Roman Catholic Church, marriage is a sacrament which means that a marriage can be dissolved only in very special cases; usually it is annulled. According to civil law of many secular states, a marriage may be dissolved without any ideological or religious obstacles. However, in German law for instance, church marriage and civil marriage vary in the force they have; civil marriage is the first and obligatory step with legal force. In Denmark there is no legal distinction between a church and a civil marriage.

Another example could be the self-inflicted martyrdom of a suicide bomber who receives his reward in paradise. According to a certain interpretation of a religion and ideology it is a positive concept. Other Islamic doctrines consider suicide — regardless of the reason — a severe sin.

Islam, as with other Abrahamic religions, views suicide as one of the greatest sins and it is utterly detrimental to one’s spiritual journey. A verse in the Quran instructs: “And do not kill yourselves, surely God is most

Merciful to you.” Quran, Sura 4 (An-Nisa), ayat 29. Furthermore, Jafar al-Sadiq, the sixth Shia Imam, has said the following with regards to suicide: Abi Walad said, I heard Aba Abd Allah say: “Whoever kills himself, intentionally, he will be in the fire of hell for eternity” (*Religious views on suicide* – Wikipedia).

From these examples we can derive that religious and ideological concepts may split up in several concepts as it is the case of suicide, where a pair of concepts with opposite values emerged. In the case of marriage the original concept fostered a second, secular concept. These changes are only due to social attitudes and values dominant at a certain point of time. They are not due to cognition.

2.6. Societal concepts are open for negotiation, interpretation and other influences

The intension of the concept ‘gravitation’ can hardly be negotiated; it may be discussed and scientifically proved by repeated experiments, but it cannot be subject to human attitudes or opinions expressed in a negotiation. In contrast to many concepts from the field of natural sciences, societal concepts considered as constructions are open to negotiation, because they are based on changing human ideas. Conceptual construction again reflects certain societal circumstances and states of mind which are not constant constructs; they may be questioned, discussed, changed or abolished according to altered political, economic, ecological, climatological or other exterior or interior conditions. Societal circumstances and states of mind form the mental environment of human beings; and these human beings are the ‘owners’, ‘creators’, ‘interpreters’ and ‘negotiators’ of societal concepts. The concept ‘political correctness’ is defined as “the attitude or policy of being extremely careful not to offend or upset any group of people in society who have a disadvantage, or who have been treated differently because of their sex, race, or disability” (CED).

This definition seems quite reasonable and acceptable in a civilized society. However, the interpretation of the concept by different social groups varies considerably ranging from a deliberately narrow interpretation which criminalizes any critical and justified utterance to a fuzzy and watered-down interpretation which permits nearly any disparaging comment. In this case the range of interpretation is so wide that a generally

accepted intension of the concept is impossible to establish. The question is then, how to treat such a concept terminologically? Do we talk about one or several concepts?

An example of ‘other influences’ could be the concept ‘ecological farming’; “ecological farming is recognized as the high-end objective among the proponents of sustainable agriculture. The goal of ecological farming is not only sustainable food production, but is to optimize the provision of ecosystem services, both in the design of the farm and by significant reduction of the ecological footprint made by the post-harvest consumers of the farm produce.” (*Ecological farming* – Wikipedia)

The creation of the concept ‘ecological farming’ could be considered a reaction to highly industrialized farming which again is an adaptation to, for instance, economic and demographic evolutions and their resulting effects. However, traditional — old-fashioned — farming would neither be able to provide the quantity required nor to fulfil the customer’s demands for variety and quality of products. ‘Ecological farming’ would ensure a more sustainable food production, but it is well-known that the yield from ecological farming is less, no thanks to a range of technical and legal restrictions. The dilemma of the concept ‘farming’ is partly a societal one and partly the result of facts only indirectly influenced by society.

This case shows two things:

1. a societal concept may be influenced by factors inherent to society;
2. a concept may split up in competing concepts representing different societal attitudes; the scientific foundation of the attitude towards the concept of ‘ecological farming’ is still weak and not proved as a general solution.

2.7. Societal concepts may suffer sudden or gradual changes

Gradual changes in societal concepts may take several years or even decades, especially in legislation, because a legal system shows a certain inertia, which makes it difficult to react immediately to changes of established values. Inertia should be seen as a positive factor, because it ensures unequivocal administration of the law in time. Changes have to be recognised and observed over a longer period of time in order to exclude passing trends which may lead to legal uncertainty. However, to bridge the time until a justified change of prescriptive norms can take

place, discretionary decisions open up for gradual changes adapted to value changes, however, without changing the written norm.

In former times the legal status of an illegitimate child, for instance in Germany, was deliberately inferior to that of a legitimate child. This fact was clearly expressed in the text of the civil law of 1896. To be an illegitimate child was considered a stigma and not in accordance with general moral values of that time. During the following century several reforms were intended and partly realised, which meant a gradual adaption to a changing societal reality; nevertheless, the adaptation took place in small steps which illustrates the already mentioned inertia. It took no less than a century to radically change the status by law. Since 2011 German law does not distinguish any longer between legitimate and illegitimate children (*Unehelichkeit* – Wikipedia).

Sudden changes of societal concepts usually require sudden changes of a society, which very often have the character of revolutions, complete defeat of a country, violent occupation of a state, change of the form of government, etc.

For instance, basic societal norms, values and institutions changed after the Russian Revolution in 1917. The foundations of the new societal order were adapted to communist ideology — and consequently its conceptual apparatus had to be introduced or even created.

The defeat of the Third Reich eliminated the whole set of ideologically shaped concepts, and legislation was adapted to democratic standards which implied sudden and profound conceptual changes due to another form of government and ideological orientation.

The violent occupation of the Baltic States by the Soviet Union entailed changes in legislation, form of government, foreign institutions, etc. which altered at least the official conceptual apparatus of the affected states.

Spain is a good example of a relatively quiet change of the form of government from Franco's dictatorship to democracy. Also in this case a considerable part of the legislation was adapted to the new regime.

3. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICAL TERMINOLOGICAL WORK

Since societal concepts based on thought objects are highly dependent on societal changes, interpretations, schools of thought, etc. it may be reasonable to assume that especially terminological analysis requires methods which take into account the nature of societal concepts.

At least four items seem to be of special relevance:

1. Choice of documentation. Does the documentation reflect the actual state-of-the-art? Which interpretations are relevant and recognised? Are there different schools of thought? Are the concepts characterised by gradual changes?

2. Monolingual analysis. Do definitions and explanations reveal different intensions although the designation/term is the same? Are the differences so pronounced that they correspond to different concepts which require their own entry? Is it possible to describe minor differences in notes in order to create greater transparency for the user?

3. Concept ordering. Is it possible to establish appropriate and user friendly concept systems? Or is it more adequate to use the more flexible concept field? Which type of concept relations can be used? Is it necessary to introduce other relations than those described in the standards? Are there subject field dependent relations (probably ontological relations)? Since concept systems may differ between societies with the same language (e.g. Austria, Switzerland, Germany), separate systems have to be established. The same is valid for multilingual systems. How to solve the problem of conceptually nearly incomparable systems?

4. Equivalence. As different societal systems deviate from each other, how can equivalence at term level be established? Which type of term formation seems to be the most adequate? Notes referring to equivalence required?

These are only a few questions we have to face when doing terminological work within the fields of social sciences in a broad sense. Unfortunately, not very much theoretical literature is available, which reflects research lacunae to be filled.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Societal concepts are predominantly inter- and transdisciplinary, since a society covers all areas of life; every object and concept may be or become relevant for society.

Certain types of societal concepts may be highly normative, for instance, legal concepts. However, they are open for interpretation at the ontic level.

The life cycle of societal concepts is mostly determined by societal factors according to the evolution of a society. The life cycle of a concept starts with its genesis and comes to an end; however, a concept does not

die, it remains as a carrier of knowledge belonging to former stages of cognition, belief or evolution.

Most societal concepts are constructions and not abstractions, because they are based on 'thought objects' the carriers of which are human beings who, through discussion of their ideas and acceptance of the result of their discussion, construct a concept.

Many societal concepts are influenced by/based on ideologies or religions. Societal concepts can be based on concepts revealed by the founder of a religion. Dependent on the personal attitude towards a religion, one may consider these concepts as constructions made by human beings — this interpretation will not be acceptable for orthodox believers — or as concepts created by divine revelation.

Societal concepts are open for negotiation, interpretation and other influences. Since a society is a developing organism, the means of evolution determine changes which are reflected in a society's conceptual apparatus.

Societal concepts may suffer sudden or gradual changes according to the dynamics of a society.

It is obvious that several of my assumptions are intertwined and cannot be separated in practice; however, one of the assumptions may be dominant in a certain case, for example in terminological analysis or in concept system construction.

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SĄVOKOS KAIP VISUOMENĖS POKYČIŲ ATSPINDYS

Straipsnyje trumpai apžvelgiamos ir kritiškai įvertinamos standartinės sąvokų „objektas“ ir „sąvoka“ apibrėžtys, pabrėžiama pirmaeilė objekto kaip „žaliavos“ svarba sąvokų formavimuisi. Pristatomi ir apibrėžiami skirtingi objektų tipai. Konstruktas kaip sąvokinis darinys priešpriešinamas abstrakcijai. Bandoma pagrįsti šiuos teiginius:

1. Socialinės sąvokos dažniausiai yra tarpdisciplininės ir transdisciplininės.
2. Tam tikri socialinių sąvokų tipai gali būti aiškaus norminio pobūdžio.
3. Socialinių sąvokų gyvavimo ciklą dažniausiai lemia socialiniai veiksniai.
4. Dauguma socialinių sąvokų yra konstruktai.
5. Daugelis socialinių sąvokų yra veikiamos ideologijų ar religijų ar jomis remiasi.
6. Socialinės sąvokos yra kintančios, atviros interpretavimui ir kitoms įtakoms.
7. Socialinės sąvokos gali kisti staiga ar palaipsniui.

Straipsnio pabaigoje keliami su socialinėmis sąvokomis susiję klausimai, į kuriuos reikėtų atsižvelgti dirbant praktinį terminologijos darbą.

Gauta 2013-10-10

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