Various Foundations for Design Semantics

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During many years of studies of semantics in design literature, I have come across various theoretical references and, hence, foundations for the authors' further discussions. One could use the word *eclectic* in this context, because eclectic refers to selection and use of the best from various sources. This has most probably been the intention. It also follows that the eclectic collection of foundations may expose disparate conceptions of design. These may lead to different views of the role design has in contemporary society. Would it not be high time for a closer look at the most used theoretical approaches and their foundations?

The object of my paper is the study of two much used approaches in design semantics. The first book is by Jochen Gros and Dagmar Steffen from the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Offenbach, the second by the Swedish industrial designer Rune Monö.[1] They have been published in English, German and Swedish and, at least partly, in many other languages, and they have been presented at international conferences and used in design pedagogy as text books.

Due to the use of various theoretical references, the employed terminology differs accordingly. It is, therefore, difficult to discuss and compare the books and their usefulness. For design students without relevant educational background the situation seems especially demanding. A basic design course at a university, for example, seems to use only one book on semantics, i.e. introduces one approach, perhaps even neglecting to mention other kinds. However, since the actualization of design semantics as one the basics of the design field in the mid 1980s, the variety of approaches has been obvious.[2]

In my analysis, I will use a third approach, which compared to Monö's book also relies on a semiotic philosophy, namely the one developed by Charles S. Peirce. This view differs from the ones used by Gros, Steffen, and Monö. Gros and Steffen refer, among others, to Susanne Langer's thinking, and Monö aims at applying the mathematical model of communication by Claude Shannon and Warner Weaver (1949) and combines it with Karl Bühler's "Organon model"(1934). I will look for similarities in both foundations as well as point at diverging conceptions, and discuss possible differences from a peircean view.

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[1] Steffen, Dagmar (ed.): *Design als Produktsprache. Der "Offenbacher Ansatz" in Theorie und Praxis.* Verlag form theorie, Frankfurt am Main, 2000.
Monö, Rune: *Design for Product Understanding. The Aesthetics of Design from a Semiotic Approach.* Liber, Stockholm, 1997.

[2] Not much research has been done on the various foundations. The Danish scholar Jörn Guldberg has recently analysed, e.g., Klaus Krippendorff's approach to Product Semantics (1984, 1989, 1995).

It is no accident that one of the two approaches bases its thoughts on concepts worked out in linguistic research. Clearly enough this is stated by Monö (1997, 79). He also refers to Plato as a background figure of Bühler. Monö modifies the approach to design thinking and visual analyses. In addition to the interesting questions concerning the theoretical foundation itself, also the outcome of the modification, the explicit entailments for design, are worth scrutiny. How does a linguistic background constitute conceptions of design?

Gros has already in the beginning of the 1980s used especially Susanne K. Langer's philosophy as the theoretical point of departure.[3] She (1961, xv), in turn, has been influenced by the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer. Also Gros has modified basic philosophical conceptions suitable for design.[4]

This paper, which is a work in progress, strives to highlight some points of thought, which have decisively influenced the authors' conception of visual design, in specific its semantic dimension. In addition to pointing at some critical conceptions, the aim is to introduce alternative ways of conceiving semantic problems. The discussion should help one to orient in the terrain of eclectic semantic foundations.

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[3] See Langer, Susanne K.: *Philosophy in a New Key. (1951)* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1963.
[4] Gros, Jochen: *Grundlagen einer Theorie der Produktsprache. Einführung.* Heft 1, Hochschule für Gestaltung Offenbach am Main, 1983.