„Reading“ design semantics – from various perspectives

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Basic premise

Objects and images not only signify their basic function, but they also connote meanings.

Both is communicated by means of visual forms (2-d and 3-d shapes, lines, proportions etc.), colors, materials, textures, tones ...
users’/general audience’s interpretation of meaning: according to the cultural, social background, values and lifestyle
„scientific“ interpretation of meaning according to the body of knowledge of the discipline:

- history of the discipline
- theories, concepts
- professional terminology
- methods
Thorstein Veblen, economist, 
*Theory of the Leisure Class*, 1899

- leisure class...
- conspicuous consumption & conspicuous waste...
- status emulation...
- products enhance the status of their owners...
Gerhard Schulze, sociologist,
*Die Erlebnisgesellschaft*
*Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart*, 1992

- from use value towards sign value and experiential value of products
- products as symptoms of societal change
- life itself becomes sort of experiential project

- *culture is connected with the role of meaning in society ...*

- *meaning by association: semantic networks*

- *circuit of culture: representation, identity, production, consumption, regulation*
Roland Barthes, philosopher
*Mythologies, 1957; Système de la mode, 1967*

Marshall Sahlins, anthropologist
*Culture and practical reason, 1981*

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi / Eugene Rochberg-Halton, psychologists
*The meaning of things, domestic symbols and the self, 1981*

Pierre Bourdieu, sociologist,
*Distinction, A social critique of the judgement of taste, 1986*

Friedrich Heubach, psychologist,
*Das bedingte Leben: Entwurf zu einer Theorie der psychologischen Gegenständlichkeit der Dinge, 1986*

Jean Baudrillard, philosopher
*Das System der Dinge, Über unser Verhältnis zu den alltäglichen Gegenständen, 1991*
Jochen Gros, designer, HfG-Offenbach

Theory of product language:
The Offenbach approach towards product semantics, since 1976

- product language (meaning of products) in accordance with cultural contexts (technological, economical, ecological, social issues, lifestyle)
- construction of meaning through design (visual elements ...) and by context
interpretation of meaning from the perspective of various disciplines (and from users‘ perspective) are overlapping ...
... but:
design theory has to define a specific competence,
a point of view that distinguishes design from
other disciplines.
**Theory of product language** is based on concepts from:

- school of symbolism  
  Susanne Langer: *Philosophy in a new key*, 1963

- concepts of perceptual and Gestalt theory  
  (Christian v. Ehrenfels, Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, Rudolf Arnheim)

\[ \text{sign} \quad - \quad \text{symbol} \]

**syntax**
Susanne Langer:

“Symbols are … vehicles for the conception of objects.

In talking *about* things we have conceptions of them, not the things themselves; and *it is the conceptions, not the things, that symbols directly ´mean´.

A term which is used symbolically and not signally does not evoke action appropriate to the presence of its object. If I say: ´Napoleon´ you do not bow to the conqueror of Europe as though I had introduced him, but merely think of him.“

(Langer p. 60/ 61)
Susanne Langer:

“A sign indicates the existence – past, present, or future – of a thing, event, or condition. For example: Wet streets are an indication that it has rained. A patter on the roof is a sign that it is raining. A fall of the barometer or a ring round the moon is a sign that it is going to rain.”  

(p. 57)

Signs are directly connected with the object/ event which they indicate; they announce their objects to someone. Furthermore Langer distinguishes between artificial signs … … and natural signs …  

(p. 59)
Susanne Langer:

“Grammatical structure, then, is a further source of significance. (…)

It ties together several symbols, each with at least a fragmentary connotation of its own, to make one complex term, whose meaning is a special constellation of all the connotations involved.” (p. 67/ 68)
Product functions according to the „theory of product language“
symbol functions
symbolic functions
styles of the future, which are fed by partial styles, as far as they are in accordance with the cultural contexts
styles of the future, which are fed by partial styles, as far as they are in accordance with the cultural contexts.

**symbol functions**

### Period Style
- baroque
- classicism
- historicism
- art nouveau
- functionalism/modernism
- "post-modernism"

### Partial Style
- look
  - ethno look
  - high-tech look
  - retro look
- national style
  - German design
  - Italian design
  - Scandi-navian design
- concept design
  - styling/streamline
  - new design
  - customization design
  - eco-semantic
- corporate style/brand
  - Braun
  - Swatch
- designer’s style
  - Colani
  - Starck
- target design
  - yuppies
  - seniors
  - Milieu lt. Sinus-study
- etc.
**period style**
- baroque
- classicism
- historicism
- art nouveau
- functionalism/moderism
- "post modernism"

**styles of the future**, which are fed by partial styles, as far as they are in accordance with the cultural contexts

**partial style**
- look
  - ethno look
  - high-tech look
  - retro look etc.
- national style
  - German design
  - Italian design
  - Scandinavian Design etc.
- concept design
  - styling/streamline
  - new design
  - customization design
  - eco-semantic etc.
- corporate style/brand
  - Braun
  - Swatch etc.
- designer's style
  - Colani
  - Starck etc.
- target group design
  - yuppies
  - seniors
  - Milieus lt. Sinus-study etc.
- etc.

**association regarding expression**
- old - young
- cold - warm
- traditional - modern
- natural - artificial
- strong - weak
- rational - emotional
- happy - serious
- extraordinary - casual
- interesting - boring
- etc.

**symbol functions**

- **corporate style / brand**
  - Braun
  - Swatch etc.
- **designer's style**
  - Colani
  - Starck etc.
- **target group design**
  - yuppies
  - seniors
  - Milieus lt. Sinus-study etc.
- etc.
Symbol functions in product language:

• communicate the period/ the country in which the product was designed

• are based on cultural and social backgrounds and emotional factors

• express various cultural and social values, ideas, dreams ...

• communicate and support the identity of a person (lifestyle) / the identity of a company (brand)

• make a product meaningful and desirable
Indicating functions in product language:

• are based on practical product functions and characteristics

• mediate between technic and human beings

• support the understanding of the practical product functions / the material world

• contribute to ease of use / user-friendliness / self-explanation of the product

• communicate reliability of the product
indicating character

- Š Identification as chair, as stool, as easy chair etc.

- Material
  - Patina
  - Production technic
  - etc.

- etc.

indicating functions
indicating functions

indicating character
- Š identification as chair, as stool, as easy chair etc.
- material
- patina
- production technic etc.
- ec.

indicating practical functions
- pointing to a direction
- handling
- ergonomic appearance
- stability
- stableness
- stackability
- dismantling
- recyclebility
- interaction with GUI
- etc.
indicating good grip
indicating function: stableness
indicating function: stableness?
Formal aesthetic functions in product language:

- are based on Gestalt principles, i.e. order and complexity

- give structure to visual elements (form, color etc.), to acoustic elements (tones) ...

- support the expression of meaning by giving grammatical structure to the visual, acoustic etc. elements
formal aesthetic functions

order
- simple
- enclosed
  - enclosed by proximity
  - enclosed by good curve
- similar
- symmetrical
- clear
- horizontal/vertical
- in balance
- familiar
- fitting with context

complexity
- manifold
- open
  - open by distance
  - open by disconnection
- dissimilar
- asymmetrical
- unclear
- out of horizontal/vertical order
- out of balance
- unfamiliar
- contrasting with context
order: similarity and enclosure
Knowledge building in theory of product language

- informs, guides, provides concepts by deduction
- contributes to, enhances by induction

theory and history of design

“practice”

design of (experimental) objects
**Application** of theory of product language:

- analysis and criticism of existent artefacts
  (design history up to the present
  products from competitors …)

- analysis before, during and after the design process
  (briefing, evaluation …)

- inform changes: “experimental” and “new” designs
Case study: C_furniture

1985 M. Piore & Ch. F. Sabel
*The Second Industrial Divide, Possibilities for Prosperity*

1993 Davidow & Ch. Mallone
*The Virtual Corporation, Structuring and Revitalizing the Corporation for the 21st Century*

1994 B. Joseph Pine
*Mass Customization, The New Frontier in Business Competition*

1998 Frank Th. Piller
*Kundenindividuelle Massenproduktion: 
die Wettbewerbstrategie der Zukunft*
Semantics of the post-industrial, neo-craft production

Products that are rigorously designed to the conditions of digital technology (CNC, Internet ...)

- Indicating signs of the digital production technology in furniture design ??

- Products that express the characteristics of the new production technology symbolically

- How can individuality be expressed in a truly meaningful way today?
  Might historical citations and regional identity patterns contribute to individualisation?
Traditional wood joints
Transformation into digital woodjoints
Digital woodjoints
CD-ROM: 50 digital woodjoints (incl. processing data)
Furniture, based on digital wood joints ...
customized versions ...
Art Customization: „New Arts and Crafts“

... individualization through engravings
„New Arts and Crafts”

... individualization through engravings
... individualization through form
... individualization and personalization through laser intarsia
**Criticism of product semantics**

„Product semantics is borrowed theory, rationalised with the definitions appropriated from other disciplines. It lacks contextual definition, methodology and techniques of validation."  Charles Burnette, 1992

„The operational insufficiency that affects both **semiotics** and **rhetoric** is that they do not help the decision-making process beyond the display of possibilities.  

This is where the pragmatics of communication have to reach over for sociology, psychology and marketing ... to develop the information required for the construction of effective communications."  Jorge Frascara, 1997
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Literature:

**English:**

**German:**