Typography and Text Design

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General Definition of the Terms

While typography (from Greek τύπος "letter, sign" + γράφειν "carving, writing") originally denoted the technique to produce printed texts with movable type (as opposed to woodcut, lithography, etc.), the term nowadays more generally refers to "the visual attributes of written, and especially printed, language"[1] and "is concerned with how letterforms […] are organized visually regardless of how the letters are produced."[2]

Usually, two typographic levels are distinguished: micro-typography, which includes the choice and arrangement of typefaces, emphasizing and everything else that concerns the one-dimensional scope of a line, and macro-typography, which includes the two-dimensional placement of letters and paragraphs on the page, the handling of images and the like, as well as the overall layout up to cover design and media/material choices.[3]

Text design focuses on the practice of text creation. The concept stresses that the appearance of a text might be the result of a deliberate action that aims at specific effects. The term was coined by H.-J. Bucher in order to raise the media researchers' awareness of creative text production strategies.[4] The concept includes typography, but it also considers the text's content, its organization (argumentation strategies, coherence, etc.), as well as the linguistic and stylistic choices. Text design thus attempts to "close the gap between layout and text, page design and utterance design, content and form."[5] An equivalent term, proposed by K. Schriver, is document design, which is defined as "the act of bringing together prose,

graphics, illustration, photography and typography for purposes of instruction, information, or persuasion."[6]

General Cultural Functions

The main functions of typography can be subsumed to either text organization or contextualization. The former category includes attempts to enhance the readability of a text by specific typographic choices as well as attempts to ease text navigation (by emphasizing specific parts, adding headings, paragraph breaks, whitespace, running headers, etc.). The latter category, which is most important for protest research, bundles all cases where typographic elements serve as indexes or cues that evoke interpretive frames and thereby co-construct the context of interpretation. Typographic elements might be perceived as indexes of specific text genres, eras, cultures or social groups, of sub-cultural orientation, ideologies[7], etc. It is assumed that these ascriptions are not necessarily conscious to the discourse actors. Hence, the use of typography, even if it follows social conventions, might not always be as intentional as the text design concept implies.[8]

Role in Protest Cultures

Text design and typography play a crucial role within processes of social negotiation, as signifiers of social identities and ideologies. Political propaganda is a case in point: verbal and argumentative strategies are framed by socio-semiotically connotated symbols, images, typefaces, colors, etc. In the light of this, it is not surprising that protest propaganda relies on text design as well. In fact, typographic means have been used that way right from the beginning of printing. The German Protestant movement systematically used blackletter typefaces as an identity signal and roman typefaces as stigmata both in anti-papist pamphlets and in canonical texts (such as the Luther Bible).[9] This "typographical manifesto"[10]

constituted, together with the choice of the vernacular (as opposed to the clerical Latin), an ideological text design strategy proper. Similar strategies can be observed in other protest movements throughout the centuries. As far as modern protest cultures are concerned, it appears that most groups developed and use specific visual forms in their written propaganda, on posters, flyers, T-shirts, banners, stickers, etc. Graffiti, the "anarcho typography" current in punk culture and the use of both blackletter type and nationalist symbols by neo-nationalists (but also, in deliberate opposition, in anti-fascist propaganda) are prominent examples.[11]

Furthermore, in the wake of advertisement, dedicated typographical protest cultures, often driven by professional typesetters, emerged in the twentieth century. Some of these groups (the Italian Futurism, Swiss/German Dadaism, the American "grunge" and "guerilla typography"[12]) attempted to establish an alternative typography that deliberately breaks the traditional norms of typesetting. Others aimed at criticizing capitalism by means of "anti-advertisement" (or "subvertisment") that tries to re-define commercial propaganda by parodying logos, layouts and slogans of major companies. A prominent exponent of the latter strategy is the "culture jamming" movement that is part of the anti-globalization culture, with its currently most active group, the "adbusters" network, founded by a former advertising manager in the late 1980s and allegedly consisting of 100,000 members worldwide (as of 2013).

Theoretical and Empirical Research Perspectives

Beyond academic design theory proper[13], research into text design and typographical communication is still in its infancy. Consequently, basic work still needs to be done. However, many scholars meanwhile set out to explore the field and provided both theoretical and empirical input. Many of them assemble under the label "social semiotics", a research

strand that emerged from critical discourse analysis.[14] The aim of these researchers is to provide a comprehensive theory of multimodal communication and to reconstruct socially rooted semiotic patterns. Further frameworks and empirical analyses are provided by linguistic stylistics, a discipline that increasingly focuses on social issues.[15] Also, there is an increasing interest of sociolinguistics in writing practices and visual communication.[16] Besides these linguistic disciplines, other disciplines from different fields of philology and media research started to explore the field as well.[17]

Research Gaps and Open Questions

Due to the research situation outlined above, many questions are open and many gaps need to be filled. Most importantly, a comprehensive theory that bundles the diverse suggestions and attempts is still missing. Researchers need to query a broad and highly heterogeneous range of disciplines and attempts in order to set up a theoretical framework for their own purpose.

As far as protest research is concerned, much empirical work is still required until protest communities' text design strategies can be generally evaluated. The range of fundamental questions concern the socio-semiotic values attributed to given graphic elements within protest communities, the actual use of such elements, patterns, conventions, policies and prescriptions of visual protest propaganda, graphic stereotypes, metadiscursive negotiations of graphic practices as well as identity work and "othering" by means of visual communication. To this end, particularly interdisciplinary attempts are required.

Recommended Reading

Stöckl, Hartmut. "Typography: Body and Dress of a Text – A Signing Mode between
   Language and Image," *Visual Communication* 4, no. 2 (2005): 204–214. This article

outlines a socio-stylistic theory and classification of typography and provides a solid framework for the analysis of typographic design.

Van Leeuwen, Theo. "Towards a Semiotics of Typography," *Information Design Journal* 14, no. 2 (2006): 139–155. Van Leeuwen outlines a socio-semiotic approach to the analysis of typography that stands in line with the general socio-semiotic theory of communication.

Spitzmüller, Jürgen. *Graphische Variation als soziale Praxis. Eine soziolinguistische Theorie skripturaler Sichtbarkeit* (Berlin, Boston, 2013). Provides a sociolinguistic theory of graphic variation (with a major focus on typography) and case studies on the use of typography as a means of genre, ideology and identity construction.

Jaffe, Alexandra et al., eds. *Orthography as Social Action: Scripts, Spelling, Identity and Power* (Berlin, Boston, 2012). A recent collection of articles on diverse sociolinguistic and socio-political implications of variation in writing, which gives a good overview on the current sociolinguistic research on scriptal variation. Some chapters also focus on typography.

Note

1. Robert Waller, "The Typographic Contribution to Language. Towards a Model of Typographic Genres and their Underlying Structures," PhD thesis, University of Reading, 1987, 5.
2. Sue Walker, *Typography and Language in Everyday Life: Prescriptions and Practices* (London, 2001), 2.
3. For a detailed classification, see Hartmut Stöckl, "Typography: Body and Dress of a Text – A Signing Mode between Language and Image," *Visual Communication* 4, no. 2 (2005): 204–214.
4. See Hans-Jürgen Bucher, "Textdesign – Zaubermittel der Verständlichkeit? Die Tageszeitung auf dem Weg zum interaktiven Medium," in *Textstrukturen im Medienwandel*, eds. E. W. B. Hess-Lüttich, W. Holly, and U. Püschel, (Frankfurt a. M. et al., 1996), 31–59.
5. See ibid., 33; my translation.
6. Karen A. Schriver, *Dynamics in Document Design* (New York, 1997), 10.

7. For details, see Jürgen Spitzmüller, "Floating Ideologies: Metamorphoses of Graphic 'Germanness'," in *Orthography as Social Action: Scripts, Spelling, Identity and Power*, eds. A. Jaffe et al. (Berlin, New York, 2012), 255–288.

8. See ibid.

9. See John Lewis Flood, "Humanism, 'Nationalism', and the Semiology of Typography," in *Italia ed Europa nella linguistica del Rinascimento: confronti e relazioni. Atti del convegno internazionale Ferrara, Palazzo Paradiso, 20-24 marzo 1991*, eds. M. Tavoni et al., 2nd vol.: L'Italia e l'Europa non romanza. Le lingue orientali, (Ferrara, 1996), 179–196.

10. Ibid., 187.

11. See Spitzmüller, "Floating Ideologies."

12. See Susanne Wehde, *Typographische Kultur. Eine zeichentheoretische und kulturgeschichtliche Studie zur Typographie und ihrer Entwicklung* (Tübingen, 2000), 390–413, for Futurism and Dada; see Brenda Danet, Cyberpl@y: Communicating Online (Oxford, 2001), 289–244, for "guerilla typography."

13. For an overview, see Waller, "The typographic contribution to language"; and Walker, *Typography and Language in Everyday Life*.

14. See Ron Scollon, and Suzie Wong Scollon, Discourses in Place. Language in the Material World (London, New York, 2003).

15. See Nikolas Coupland, *Style. Language variation and identity* (Cambridge, 2007).

16. See Mark Sebba, *Spelling and Society. The Culture and Politics of Orthography Around the World* (Cambridge, 2007).

17. See Danet, *Cyberpl@y*.