Jürgen Spitzmüller (University of Zurich, Switzerland)

Visible by Design: The Significance of Typography in Media Communication

1 Introduction

My talk deals with a topic that I'm increasingly engaged in for some time now, namely an aspect of communication which is still very much neglected at least in European and American linguistics, even though some initial work has been done recently, particularly in researches more or less associated with the so-called *Social Semiotics* (consider the works of Kress/van Leeuwen or Scollon/Scollon, for instance). I might go into the social semiotic approach in the discussion.

The aspect I'm talking about is typography and its role in written communication. Ever since the days of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, if not earlier, typography has been declared irrelevant in mainstream linguistics and even in semiotics. In the *Course*, the following statement is to be found:

> "Whether I write in black or white, in incised characters or in relief, with a pen or a chisel – none of that is of **any** importance for the meaning."
> (de Saussure 1983: 118)

Following this verdict, linguistics has long time been focusing on the content of signs and the structure of the system only, without caring much for the concrete visual or performative appearance of communication, or even for the role of the media that are used to communicate. As we all know, this has changed quite a bit over the course of the recent decades. There certainly is now a lot of interest for performativity and the role of the media in linguistics. However, a great part of linguistic research on media communication is still focused almost exclusively on *verbal* specifics of language use in the new media and on the technical background of the media. The

visual *appearance* of written language is, apart from specific graphematic phenomena such as emoticons or capitalization, still to be explored.

There are many reasons for this situation. The most important ones are the result of the history of the discipline, and this history is indeed very much linked with Saussure's structuralism, amongst other things. Robert Waller highlights four positions that have been dominating linguistics in the 20th century and that have lead to the absence of typography in linguistic theory:

> "Why have graphic factors received so little attention from modern linguistics? Compared with other, weightier, matters that preoccupy the relatively young discipline of linguistics (such as 'what is language?'), they are presumably seen as relatively trivial, although necessary to mention when the existence of writing is to be acknowledged. More than this, though, the exclusion of typography from mainstream linguistics can also be seen as a corollary of four major theoretical positions: the primary of speech, the restriction to the sentence level (not too many typographic events happen within the sentence), the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, and the linearity of language." (WALLER 1996: 346)

Even if those theoretical positions have lost influence, Waller's general judgment still holds true, at least – as far as I can see – for linguistics in Europe and the US. I can imagine that the situation is different in Japan, where iconicity in writing is much more important than, say, in Germany – I'm thinking of the *Kanji* system as well as of the high status of calligraphy in your culture. So maybe what I'm arguing for looks like a matter of course for you. Therefore, I'm looking forward to your feedback and I'm very eager to learn about your point of view, and not least about your experiences concerning the specific situation in Japan in contrast to Europe or Germany and Switzerland, the two countries on which I will put the main stress.

Anyway, contrary to the linguistic opinion I have just outlined, I think that typography can very well be of importance for the meaning and is a significant factor in communication, particularly in written media communication. In this talk, I try to substantiate this thesis both on a theoretical and on a (small) empirical level.

The outline of my talk is as follows:

1. First, I will sketch my notion of 'typography' briefly,

2. then, I try to argue why I think typography is indeed significant for communi-cation on the basis of some fundamental semiotic reflections;

3. after this, I'll present you some data from (mainly German) media communi-cation,

4. before I'll draw some conclusions.

2 What includes 'typography'?

So, what am I talking about? The term *typography* traditionally denoted a specific technique to produce printed text, namely printing with moveable type. Hence, typography was associated with *professional* typesetting. This notion of typography is still common. The well-known typographer ROBERT BRINGHURST, for instance, defines typography as a *craft*, namely "the craft of endowing language with a visible form" and "an independent existence" (BRINGHURST 2005: 11).

However, with the technical developments during the last 20 years, this conception of typography became obsolete to some degree, as SUE WALKER pointed out in her book about *Typography in Everyday Life*:

> "Technological developments in the form of desktop publishing and the world wide web mean that non-experts have far more control of the vi-sual organisation of writing than they traditionally have had. It is no longer the case that typography is solely the province of the professional, and the influence of the non-expert typographer on the visual organi-sation of writing is becoming an increasingly important shaper of our graphic language." (WALKER 2001: 2)

Due to these developments, the term *typography* has been more and more expanded from expert printing to any form of printed (or even: any form of *written*) text, notwithstanding the production technique or the profession of the producer. A typ-ical contemporary definition that reflects these changes is the following, taken from a German dictionary of media publishing: "Typography [is] the visual appearance of written language in print". This is basically how I understand the term as well, with one further reservation: "Print" is to be understood in a literal as well as in a

metaphorical sense, since the concept of typography can certainly also be applied to computer mediated communication, which is rarely really printed. So, my very basic definition of typography boils down to the following: "Typography is the visual appearance of written language, notwithstanding the medium".

Typography thereby includes not only the choice and the design of the typeface, to which the term is frequently limited in ordinary language, at least in German and English. Rather than that, it includes the visual appearance in a general sense, that is, the arrangement and design of the letters in the line (what is usually called *micro typography*) as well as the arrangement of the text on the page, that is the *layout*, the choice of colors, the placement of images and even the choice of the medium (all of this is usually subsumed to *macro typography*).

In summary, my interest is the *visuality* of written communication in its concrete form or performativity. So why should this be of any significance for communication and media communication in particular? I'll try to answer this question now, before I'll present some examples.

3 Why is typography significant?

Why is typography significant in written communication? Because it has the *potential* to refer to a specific value system and thus can be used to express values, attitudes, associations, etc. In other words: typographic elements might be used as *signs*.

To substantiate this statement, I have to expand a bit on what I think *communication* and *signs* actually are. My concept of communication and linguistic signs is based on the instructive semiotic theory of the German linguist RUDI KELLER, which is elaborated in Keller's book "Zeichentheorie" or "A Theory of Linguistic Signs", as the title of the English translation reads.

Keller's basic thesis is that "Communication is an intelligent guessing game", "an inferential process [with] the attempt to bring the addressee to certain conclusions." Or, as he puts it later in the book:

> "*communication* will denote every intentional behavior, performed in an open manner and with the aim of bringing an addressee to recognize something." (KELLER 1998: 89)

Signs, then, are the means that are used to make these intentions visible and to trigger the inferences. Or, as Keller puts it:

> "The means that one uses in attempting to get others to recognize what one wants them to recognize are generally called **signs**. Signs [...] are clues with which the speaker 'furnishes' the addressees, enabling and leading them to **infer** the way in which the speaker intends to influence them. Signs are not [...] containers used for the transport of ideas from one person's head to another. Signs are hints of a more or less distinct nature, inviting the other to make certain inferences and enabling that other to reach them. [...] The process of making such an inference is called **interpretation**; the goal of this process is **understanding**. Communication, then, is an act that consists of giving the other hints that put into motion by that person a process of interpretation, the aim of which is discovering the desired goal of the attempted influence, that is, understanding the speaker's act." (KELLER 1998: 90)

Certain prerequisites have to apply in order to make communication possible. In the first place, the addressees need to recognize the signs as distinct entities. Thus, signs have to be *perceptible*, as Keller puts it. Next, the perceptible entities must be recognized as something that is, in the addressee's view, intentionally used by the producer in order to give the addressee interpretative hints: signs must be *interpretable*.

Interpretability means that the addressee is able to guess in which way the sender wants to influence him by using a specific sign. In order to do so, he must know how a specific sign is used in general or how it might be used in the given situation, for that matter. He must know the *rules of use* of the given signs, which is nothing else than the "meaning" of the sign, according to Keller, who is of course referring to WITTGENSTEIN:

> "To use a word correctly means to know its meaning. There's nothing 'behind' the rule of use that guarantees the correctness of the use, as it were. Use does not 'flow' from meaning; it is not a result of meaning; it *is* meaning." (KELLER 1998: 52; original emphasis)

Consequently, the meaning of signs is nothing static. Rather than that, it is negotiated interactively during the process of communication. This negotiation is based on what Keller calls "semiotic knowledge", the knowledge of usage rules of certain signs. Whether a sign is interpreted in a specific way is very much dependent on the semiotic knowledge of the addressee and on the semiotic knowledge that the producer is supposed to share with the addressee, in the addressee's opinion. Therefore, something is not a sign *per se*. Something is only a sign if an addressee *assigns* meaning to it:

> "Signs emerge in the process of our attempts to reach communicative goals." (KELLER 1998: vii)

To sum up: *Meaning* is the result of a negotiation process that is based on semiotic knowledge. Communication is an interactive process where signs are used as hints to trigger conclusions. If an addressee thinks that the sender used a given element intentionally to give him, the addressee, a specific hint (which presupposes that the addressee thinks that the sender thinks that the addressee knows the usage rules of this element as well), then this specific element serves as a sign.

I made this longer semiotic excursus because I think that Keller's theory is an excellent basis to both substantiate the thesis that typographic elements might be used as signs indeed and to explain how that actually works. On the basis of Keller's semiotic concept, typographic elements are indeed signs, if

1. they are perceived as distinctive elements by specific addressees, and

2. if these addressees think that the producer of the text has used these typographical elements deliberately in order to give the addressees interpretative hints

The semiotic status of typographic elements therefore depends on the semiotic knowledge of the participants involved in a specific communication process. This does also explain why specific typographic elements are significant for some participants, while they are 'meaningless' for others.

In my opinion, semiotic knowledge is the key to understanding of how communication by means of typography actually works. As any other sign, they refer to a

specific usage practice and thereby suggest a specific interpretation of a text, indicate a specific type of text or suggest classifying the sender of the text as belonging to a specific social group. In other words: typographic elements might serve as *contextualization cues* in the sense of John J. Gumperz or Peter Auer.

4 The 'use' of typography in (German) media communication: some examples

I think it's time to illustrate these theoretical reflections with some examples. I've chosen examples from Internet communication about popular music, because the phenomena in question show up very clearly there.

This is due to several reasons. First, the Internet provides an ideal platform for non-expert to make use of typography. People can make use of multiple typefaces, type sizes, font and background colors, they can embed images, etc. And they can present the result to a theoretically unlimited audience, at little cost.

So the Internet is an excellent playground for typographical communication, and it has been used as such right from the beginning, as the instructive study of Brenda Danet demonstrates.

Second, popular music is very much associated with typography. The German linguist and youth language expert Jannis Androutsopoulos points out that

> "In late modernity, all music-related subcultures use typography as a resource for the creation and propagation of an aesthetic identity." (Androutsopoulos 2004)

He refers to the five most influential pop-music movements of the last 50 years:

- *Hippie culture* (1960s): psychedelic letter style, many bright colors

- *Punk rock* (1970s): "typo-anarchy" (ransom note cutouts, old-fashioned typewriter lettering, stencil types)

- *Heavy Metal* (1980s): "Gothic" typefaces (that is, black letter types), calligraphic scripts, dark colors

- *Techno* (1990s): typefaces related to computer culture and the aesthetics of science fiction

- *Hip-Hop* (beginning 21st century): graffiti lettering, Gothic typefaces

As Androutsopoulos points out, the typographic elements that are associated with these movements are used all over the place: on CD covers, t-shirts, posters, flyers, in fanzines and not least in the Internet on fan sites, in fan shops, in fan forums, on band sites, etc.

Let's finally have a look at some examples. First, I'll show you some banner advertisements for pop music sites. You'll see that their typography indeed corresponds to the classification of Androutsopoulos.

- Swiss *Hippie* fan-site: typical psychedelic typefaces and colors.

- German *Punk* fan-shop: ransom note cut-outs, typewriter lettering, Jolly Roger symbol, all evoking associations to illegality, anarchy and criminality.

- German *Heavy Metal* fan-site: black letter typefaces and black and red colors that indicate the preferences of metal fans to Gothic mysticism, as well as their liking to play with the air of militarism, machismo, pathos and even nationalism.

- German *Techno* fan-site: Science-fiction look, typeface known from the *Star Trek* series; indicates the preference for modern technology as well as the self-perception as citizens of a modern, digital society.

- German *Hip-Hop* fan-site: Graffiti, which are a central element of the hip-hop culture.

These elements keep resurfacing all the time on Internet pages about these particular pop-music movements. I'll present you some further examples from diverse pages that are dedicated to Heavy Metal, Punk music and Hip-Hop. Some are from Germany and Switzerland, some from other European countries such as Italy and Uzbekistan. The latter two pages indicate that these typographical elements are of international use, and it is striking that one can class them to the correct pop-cultural scene on a first sight, without even knowing the language.

=> Examples (1)–(21)

5 Conclusions

I think these examples show clearly that typographical elements are indeed used intentionally to signify specific things, namely the sub-cultural context they locate themselves in, the preferences of the producers and the target group of preferred addressees. They do this by drawing on sub-cultural knowledge about which typographical elements are common in which sub-cultural scenes, but also why this is the case (for instance, because of certain associations that express the ideologies of the group members).

Thus, typography can be regarded as an integral part of the social style of peer groups and as a means to construct social identity.

Aleida Assmann coined the nice sentence that style is a "means to increase social visibility" (Assmann 1986: 127). I think this applies to typography very well: In the cases demonstrated in this talk, the producers of mass media texts indeed used typography in order to make themselves socially visible – visible as members of a specific social group. To be precise: they make themselves visible *by design*, both in a literal and in an idiomatic sense. In a literal sense, they make themselves socially visible by using specific design elements, specific typefaces, specific colors, etc. In an idiomatic sense, they make themselves visible *deliberately*, that is to say, they use design elements *intentionally* in the way Rudi Keller understands it – they use design *by design*.

My intention – to put it with Keller one more time – was to influence you in such a way that you agree with me that typography is an important and integral part of written communication in general and media communication in particular, and that a science that aims to describe and explain media communication as a whole cannot refrain from considering visual and performative phenomena such as typography. I'm not sure I managed to do so, however, I'm looking forward to your feedback and critique.

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Contact:

Dr. Jürgen Spitzmüller
Universität Zürich
Deutsches Seminar
Schönberggasse 9
8001 Zurich
Switzerland
spitzmueller@access.uzh.ch