Abstract

The title I propose alludes to Joseph Mankiewicz’ movie, All about Eve (USA 1950), although the content has nothing to do with it, neither to its plot, except in the sense that nothing is what it seems to be. ‘All about words’ concerns the Glossolalia postdoctoral research now in progress at the Faculty of Architecture, Lisbon University, under the supervision of Dennis Doordan, Fernando Moreira da Silva and Luís Manuel A. V. Bernardo, supported by a fellowship by Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (FCT). The aim of this project is to clarify and discuss a list of words (or better yet, a list of key concepts) in its usual context(s), which are fundamental for a meaningful discourse that circulates in the field of Design. There are a number of design-related dictionaries available today. Without wishing to question their usefulness, they are far from reaching the level of certain dictionaries in other fields of knowledge, which they fail to match in terms of theoretical, critical and historical reach. The success of the Glossolalia project will require the prior identification of the terms, their genealogy and the contextualization of their use (historical, philosophical, critical, theoretical, social, cultural, political, ideological…), and a critical review of what is capable of producing meaning when applied to design. With this article I intend to stress the importance of words, since everything – Design included – is ‘all about words’.

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Words are exclusively “human factors” – robots can use them, but in a limited way according to their manufacturers’ specifications. Even Hal 9000 (the computer of 2001 Space Odyssey) was restrained by his master’s voice, and this was the reason why he could not obey the crew’s orders. Humans can create infinite combinations with words, as long as they fit in a language code, which of course involves the cultural and historical contexts of its use. Everything is language (although there are languages that do not need words to express meaning, such as Art and Math). This article is entirely on the importance of words in the Design field.

There are a number of design-related dictionaries available today but they are far from reaching the level of certain dictionaries in other fields of knowledge because they fail to match them in terms of theoretical, critical and historical reach. As examples of the latter type, we can refer to R. Williams [1], M. Payne [2], A. Forty [3], J. Wolfreys [4] and C. Ceia [5], and, as an example of the former group, the Design Dictionary edited by M. Erlhoff and T. Marshall [6]. Indeed, despite the excellence of most of the contributors and the standing of the publishing house, this publication, the most recent of its kind within Design, does not meet the expectations of those who seek more than a brief definition of the concepts presented as immutable in time and space and uncritically devoid of the layers of meaning that usage has deposited on them. Furthermore, it does not include a bibliography that could justify the authors’ choices and facilitate further research by its users – be they young or experienced. We intend to present an e-book as the most important result of this research project given that it accepts updates almost costless, and considering that most design students are generally reading less and less and hardly ever read printed versions.

At the AHFE 2015 Conference I intend to stress the importance of words, since everything – design included – is all about words.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nomenclature</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Design Thinking (DT)</td>
<td>A kind of thinking that mobilizes a set of specific cognitive processes (H. A. Simon) to identify and develop design opportunities focused on users’ needs and expectations. The designerly way of thinking can be used beyond design boundaries (N. Cross) because it facilitates creative cognition where and when there is a problematic situation to be found and/or solved.</td>
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<tr>
<td>E-Language</td>
<td>a “set of sentences and other structures, considered independently of the mind” (N. Chomsky)</td>
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<tr>
<td>I-Language</td>
<td>a “system of rules and principles in the human mind” (N. Chomsky)</td>
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<td>type</td>
<td>it is a word, abstract and unique (C. S. Pierce) – “reference to types is not limited to letters, vowels and words (…) In aesthetics, it is generally necessary to distinguish works of art themselves (types) from their physical incarnation (tokens)” (L. Wetzal).</td>
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<tr>
<td>token</td>
<td>in linguistics it is a word in ink, pixels of light in a computer, sound waves, smoke signals, hand signals, and so on (C. S. Pierce).</td>
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<tr>
<td>User Centred Design (UCD)</td>
<td>UCD is a design concept focused on users’ needs, dreams, expectations, desires.</td>
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<td>universal grammar</td>
<td>N. Chomsky argues that every human is born with this ability (it is the “language instinct” that enables the child to learn more than one language even before s/he can learn the formal grammar of her/his mother tongue). In this article, the concept is used in a broader sense, as if there was a universal design grammar tacitly in use by all designers and craftsmen all over the world.</td>
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2. Andante (con spirito)

This project is inspired by my students’ needs, and by my personal passion for words and their meaning (in different languages). Language, thought and culture are the “human triumvirate” [7]. Words – better say types and tokens – are the “atoms of language” [8]. Alone or in a group, they can communicate one or more ideas or concepts. However, language is much more than a compound of words, even if we are able to reach its enormous variety and the subtleness of its meaning in different semantic and syntactic contexts, both in common speech, and in a specific disciplinary field; the use of words in design discourse also depends on the pragmatic, phonological, idiosyncratic and pragmatic (unspoken) rules. There are words that circulate through the common discourse, as well as in Design – such as modern, ancient, antique, classic, and son on. These words are keywords as well as key-concepts. R. Barthes argued that concepts are not abstract because they are pregnant by their situation as they are not thinkable outside a certain context, even if the context only exists in the mind of the thinker. This is also the reason why the meaning of words is never fixed or completely described in dictionaries. He suggested that sometimes it is useful to invent neologisms to fit a specific situation – however, in the attempt to make meaning, one may introduce further noise in the discourse. Most of the times it is better to use a substitute, less trivialized or more appropriate to the historical, social, cultural, or ideological context [9]. To clarify concepts we have to convocate more words and to discuss several possibilities of their use (which implies more words), in a given time, place, and specific situation.

Considering that there are many design cultures but a ‘design thinking’ [10] or a designerly way of thinking [11], we can suppose that there is a design language, even assuming that ‘thinking’ and ‘language’ are not the same [12], that is linking design language with design thinking. Imagining this possibility perhaps – only perhaps – will facilitate the translation of some words in use in a design context to different linguistic platforms.

3. Allegretto

The simple idea of the existence of a “universal grammar” which rules all languages is beautiful [13]. However grammars are closed systems, whereas lexicons are open systems. “Lexicon is not a homogenous system, and it may be more appropriate to speak of various subsystems of the lexicon, given that in the lexicon coexist the words of everyday use, of writing, of speech, neologisms, archaisms, loanwords, technical vocabularies, regional and social vocabularies, etc.” There are word compositions (“lexicalized units”) that become fixed to create a certain meaning – e.g. (in Portuguese): cortar a palavra (‘to cut the word’, meaning to cut off one’s speech), passar a palavra (‘to pass the word’, meaning giving someone else a chance to speak) – therefore, “the lexicons of different languages are not mere lists of words that we may relate bi-univocally from one language to another. One same extra-linguistic reality (the referent) can be ‘translated’ in a very distinct way by two genetically related languages. Considering the languages of the Indo-European family, of Latin origin like the Portuguese or the French, we see that there are important differences at the level of the lexical structure. We say in Portuguese fazer uma pergunta [‘to make a question’, meaning to ask a question]. In French we can no longer use the verb faire, as literal translation of fazer [to make], because in the French language, the chosen lexical structure is poser une question [‘to put a question’, meaning to ask a question]” [14]. The wonder of languages is that they are both very different and very alike. This is the “Code Talker paradox”, a concept designed by M. Baker observing that, in spite of the radical differences between Navajo and English, as well as the cultural differences between Navajo Indians and English native speakers, they share the universal grammar but they diverge because they follow different combinations of “parameters” (which are “the atoms of linguistic diversity” [7]). While anthropologists and sociologists stress the importance of cultural and social differences to explain the differences between (E)languages, psychologists stress the similarity of the human cognition processes to explain the resemblances of (!)languages, because “language is ‘a mental organ’ “. This is why Chomsky considers Linguistics as a branch of Psychology [12]. This is also a beautiful and useful assumption for the Glossolalia project. We shall not discard other approaches to words, certainly unexpected but also relevant. For instance, we can find different uses of words (both practical and poetic) in this calligraphic work on the expenses of the Lisbon town council with the inaugural celebration of the Equestrian Statue of King José I of Portugal (1775, 6-8 July) (see Fig. 1). Resembling visual poetry, this work and the unique event it celebrates echo for eternity.
Fig. 1. Manuel Gomes Vieira, Mappa de toda a despeza que fez o Senado da Camara… 1777, Manuscript, China ink on paper, dim. 415x547 cm, Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal, D. 12 A. (Source: BNP).
4. Finale (only for now), allegro assai: on the Glossolalia project

Glossolalia is the supernatural ability to speak several languages (from the Greek words glossa, meaning tongue or language, and lαλēō, meaning to speak, talk, chat, or to make a sound), the origins of which can be traced back to the Pentecost miracle in which the Apostles were given the gift of speaking various languages [15,16]. Jumping to science fiction, the Star Trek crew had an ear implant that allowed them to understand and speak all the languages. First the Greek, then the Latin, the French, the Esperanto and, to a certain extent, the English, tried to achieve universality, attempting, in their own way and in their time and place, to fulfill the utopia of peace and global understanding. Diversity is more democratic than the tyranny of one language (and the danger of just one way of thinking), even if something will be “lost in translation”. The Code Talkers (during the World War II) demonstrated that, in spite of the (cultural, linguistic, social) differences, they were extremely fast and rigorous in codifying and de-codifying complex messages in English. If nothing else was there to legitimize the survival of the languages, with increasingly less speakers and at the mercy of the efforts of some families that try to maintain them against all official initiatives, the simple idea that each language is connected to peculiar ways of thinking the world and interacting with it should suffice to justify its existence, otherwise one day it may not be possible to understand what subsists of the presence of these speakers in the territory. We have in History some sad examples of language extinction and its consequences. The absence of the key – like the Rosetta Stone for Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs and Demotic script – to decipher the Maya writing, severs our connection to a substantial part of that vastly rich (im)material culture, which is a great loss for humankind (i.e. for what makes us humans). Therefore, Glossolalia project intends to approach key concepts – represented by meaningful words in design – that circulate in several languages, seeking to establish the possible correspondences. “If concepts die, they die a natural death (…) passing from one form to another – which is still the best way of thinking”. It is precisely these concepts (and those processes of metamorphosis) that I am interested in exploring. Baudrillard called them mots de passe (passwords), entrance keys that allow us to think [17] – and, I add – in Design… ‘designerly’.

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