

The semantics of artefacts: A semiotic perspective on material culture

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Whether at home, at work or in many leisure situations: as inhabitants of the modern world, we are surrounded by a great number of different artefacts most of our lives. Every year, many new kinds of artefacts are invented, and higher levels of sophistication and technical development are reached. Obviously, artefacts play a central role in all cultures existing today; therefore, *material culture* is an important category of culture theory. For a long time, however, accounts of culture tended to reduce artefacts to their functional and aesthetic dimensions, concentrating on mental representations (e.g. thoughts, ideas, images) and codes (e.g. language, gesture, conventions) as the units driving cultural development.

Today, the view of artefacts as passive results of human activity, produced only to fulfil a certain (practical or aesthetic) function, is no longer tenable. In the last years, different theories of artefacts have been proposed (cf. Margolis/Laurence 2007), covering questions like perception, classification, and cognitive functions of artefacts, as well as artefact use of animals and their role in the phylogenetic development of humans. One important aspect of artefacts, however, has received little attention: artefacts are invested with different kinds of *meaning* in daily-life situations as well as when used in cultural representations; their cultural role is complex and ties in with mental representations and social structures in a number of ways. Our understanding of culture will be incomplete as long as we don't understand the mechanisms guiding the semantization of artefacts, i.e., the processes in which artefacts are invested with meanings. Diverse principles of semantization can be postulated, but they are still only partly understood and not sufficiently empirically verified.

Though our cultures are permeated by meanings, in the study of culture vastly more attention was paid to those that come in form of signs explicitly produced as such (e.g. pictorial representations, spontaneous gestures), as well as to conventionalized sign systems (e.g. languages, icons, or traffic signs). Most artefacts, however, are *prima facie* not signs, but things constructed to fulfil a function. It is not trivial to ask how meanings are attributed to artefacts, thus making them signs. The complexity of the problem might be the reason why the manifold and diverse meanings we associate with artefacts in daily life have not received sufficient attention.

Semiotics, the study of signs and sign processes in nature and culture (cf. Posner et al. 1997–2004), which dates back to Aristoteles, reached its first apex in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance; after a period of decline, it was rediscovered at the turn of the 20th century by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles S. Peirce. Today, many types of signification processes have been studied in great detail, but the focus of most investigations was on sign systems, whether culturally evolved (e.g. language, gesture, conventions) or artificially constructed (e.g. traffic signs or morse code), and on uncoded context-dependent sign processes carried out by sign users in specific situations. Processes of semantization of artefacts have rarely received serious consideration; if they were noticed at all, they were regarded either as codes (= systems of conventional signs) or as entirely context-dependent signs.

In two articles (Siefkes 2011; 2012), the author has proposed an approach that describes artefact semantization in another way: as *culturally shared principles of meaning attribution* without a completely fixed outcome, which are intersubjectively shared and not spontaneously created by sign users, at the same time allowing for a degree of freedom and context-dependency in their application (as opposed to codes).

Bibliography

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