

The chromatic speech: the language of the colour as way of significance in the signs of Corporate Identity

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ABSTRACT

Our culture is, as we can observe, mainly visual. As individuals, we are immersed in a universe of signs, transmitters of new messages. Because of that, the necessity for differentiation and competition of our industrial society resorts to the signs of Corporate Visual Identity by means of logos, symbols, etc., which are used as strategic tools for business management. In the praxis, a sign of Corporate Identity has to fulfil a communicative function and it should be socially useful and meaningful, establishing a productive dialectical relationship with its cultural scene or context.

In this particular research about colour, which works as a conveyor of messages and as a basic component that introduces meanings to the graphic system of Corporate Identity, we pay attention to the linguistic basis of Design. We structure and ground aspects that contribute and convey the significance of the chromatic speech or chromatic discourse. With the aim of rationalising the main question of meaning, we have analysed the conformation of visual meaning, studying the interrelations of sense “behind” or “inside” the Design discourse, contributing to understand the nature of the relationship between word and chromatic sign.

1. INTRODUCTION

Thanks to the communicative ability of human beings, we exchange interpersonal messages as well as messages coming from the social environment. The interpretation of these last messages allows the construction of a universe that is essential for any social and cultural individual, and it affects the coexistence among individuals who live in developed societies like ours. Therefore, we think that communication by means of signs of Corporate Visual Identity can be conceived like a cultural phenomenon, in which the rules of Communication are the rules of Culture, of a common set of rules. In this context, colour, which works as a form of expression of Culture itself and goes beyond the simple conveyance of information, is a real mediator among human beings.

Through colour, the graphic designer creates signs by means of an efficient plot of connections, which allows its interpretation. These chromatic signs represent a cultural stimulation that must revert in the appreciation of the image and its uses, granting humanity the capacity of expressing its interests and refer to social spaces. The constant emission of new visual discourses through colour intervenes in the evolution of society, which at the same time influences the development of Language and Culture.

When we talk about “the language of colours”¹ we should understand that colours are subject not only to representing the reality in images, but they can also “speak”. Evidently, colours are not “words”, but they contain meanings, which assist to a linguistic base, previous to Design. This linguistic basis of Design can be grounded. Sometimes this meaning is inherited from the tradition of a specific culture and some other times it is a conventional code created for an unequivocally functional use. Thus, e.g. the opposition hot/cold is a subjective but general answer, which can be given a quantitative character. Thereby, when the diverse empirical facts we know about inter-subjective constants of cultural perception are analysed, we realise that this conventional data is usually based on structural outline types, in groups of oppositions able to receive meanings. Those meanings could be different in each culture. Colour transmits common connotative meanings in a specific cultural context. The diverse symbolic meanings that appear in chromatic messages are of a cultural nature and they can vary according to the context of appearance and in connection with human factors.

2. METHOD

This paper is registered in an research project financed by the University of the Basque Country, titled *El Diseño Gráfico como forma de lenguaje: el “por qué” de los signos de Identidad Visual Corporativa en relación al “para qué”* (1/UPV 00158.320-H-15884/2004), as well as in the Doctoral Thesis titled *Análisis de significados formas y usos de los signos tipo-ícono-gráficos de Identidad Visual Corporativa*, which is being carried out at the same University with the help of a researchers' formation grant provided by the Basque Government. In those works we start from the premise that the signs of Corporate Visual Identity are graphic means of the field of meaning, in which the colour implies one of the visual components that an institution, company or product represents, identifies and divulges. In order to prove that, we analyse those discursive components integrated in the graphic signs which, as well as colour, are producers of sense.

Through the analysis of the sections of colour representation in the signs of Corporate Visual Identity and their capacity to set up as mediators of a discourse regarding their communicative aspect or through mechanisms of analysis about Graphic Design (criteria for classification, principles that organise an empirical material, outlines...), we seek to contribute to amend the lack of rigorous reflection, reconsidering this discipline over a *linguistic base*² and studying the issue of colour from an anthropological principle. Thus, we formulate the Design not as means of personal expression but as a creation of a field where the audience can be reflected. We defend the human value of form and clarity as a basis for communication, considering interaction between humans and the signs of visual context. Colour, as a substance of expression, assumes a language value, in which the linguistic and chromatic components intervene in an exchange relationship, taking part, needless to say, in a major part of the current social, economic, cultural or political relationships.

We have established the aims of this research starting, in general, from the need to reflect on the use of colour as a means of constructing complementary meanings to typographic and iconographic meaning, among others.

From this perspective, we have attempted to find out those aspects that take into account the relationships existing between graphic signs and their interpreters. Among the topics that can be part of this level of research we have considered the following ones: the rules which claim that colours are used as signs, the operation of colour over the graphic signs of Corporate Identity; the ways in which Corporations take advantage of colour for their survival, identification and differentiation, and the importance that colour has in the search for persuasive effects of a psychological nature.

3. EXPRESSIVE VARIABLES OF COLOUR IN THE SIGNS OF CORPORATE IDENTITY

Among the previous results of this research project we want to expose in this paper the definition of expressive variables of the colours in the signs of Corporate Identity, focusing on their representation values, psychological and symbolic values, and code and abstraction values.

The criteria for the application of colour in the signs deserve a meticulous study about their communicative nature. They transmit values to the previously mentioned signs by means of denotative and connotative associations. For the analysis of the variables of colour and its use, we have explored the different relationships that can be established between colours and the objects/ideas that they could represent; in other words, the codes and associations established by means of colours.

For this process of analysis we have organised a category of functions and variables of colour: denotative colour, connotative colour and schematic colour³. In the following tables, we illustrate a concise example of the categorisation of the dimensions of colour usage and its variables, applied to the graphic signs of Corporate Identity:

Table 1 Denotative Colour. It is the colour applied in its capacity of figurative meaning. The variables of this kind of colour are defined according to the image, that is to say, the colour that is associated with a greater realism for the identification of the objects. Within the variable of the denotative colour, we can establish an outlook of expressive colour gradations in the signs, based on a declining scale of iconicity. The colour is stressed to add new meanings, which divert from the denotative meaning getting close to the connotative meaning.

Iconic colour. The chromatic expressiveness acts as an acceleration that identifies what is being represented in the image. By the usage of this chromatic variable, the empirical fact that “each thing has its colour” is confirmed.



Saturated colour. It is a more stressed chromatism. It is a kind of an exaggeration of the “artificial-made” colour that obeys to the need created by the strong competitiveness of the world of images, and that shares their “enthusiastic” role.



Imaginative colour. (Conceited colour) Through a transgression or an altered expression of colour, an opposite road to reality is taken, adopting a value of imagination. With this variable the fantasy is considered a new form of expressiveness.



Table 2: Connotative colour. Connotation is the aesthetic component that affects not so much the mechanisms of iconic perception as the subtleties of sensitivity, causing inner sensations in its psychological variable as well as in the symbolic variable. Connotative colour operates within neither the non-descriptive constituents nor in explicit ones, but specially psychological, symbolic or aesthetic. It corresponds to a “universal subjectivity” that goes beyond the represented object.

Psychological colour. It is perceived as an action upon the psyche, which generates connotative meanings from inner sensations. It is an impression that affects sensorial perception and which creates associations that complement rational perception of the visual environment surrounding us. The characters attributed to colours are empirical data, based on inter-subjective constants of cultural perception. These psychological associations should be understood in certain cultural contexts.



Symbolic colour. Symbolic colour constitutes a code that settles a kind of a collective psychology, a conventional relationship that finally derives in a cultural phenomenon. The symbolic variable of colour means a sensorial factor that is in the place of some other absent thing which it represents, but without any existing causal relationship between the symbol and its meaning.



Table 3: Schematic colour. It is the variable of colour extracted from its iconic or denotative context, turning into an autonomous property which is coded and that simplifies and synthesises the diversity of features and shades, until it becomes extracted from its iconic context. Definitely, encoding through colour is an instrument that facilitates the identification and transmission of graphic information.

Emblematic colour. Emblematic colours are those that maintain their meaning through tradition, colours that have become an emblem for their social use. It is a “practical” and utilitarian symbol, created under a corporativist ideology in order to favour the identification and memory of organisations and services.



Signaletic colour. In this signaletic variable all the schematic power of colour are extracted with the aim of obtaining a highly sensorial code, used for “indications”.



Conventional colour. This variable is applied with an absolute freedom of abstraction, whose communicative efficiency always comes from the designer’s expressive intention. The dimension of conventional colour can be used for many different objectives: it could look for a plastic effect, emphasise the typographic legibility, look for contrasts, value optic visualisation...



Upon this research about a linguistic base of colour, we want to point out the polarity⁴ as an outline of conjunction, that is to say, the association of emotional distances or contrast of opposite



psychological colours. This way, we can appreciate the different expressive qualities of colours, bringing to the surface several polarities on which generic contents fall.

Table 4: The linguistic base of the colour, polar sensations⁵ of the colour.

Cold/Warm	Passive/Active
	
Natural/Artificial	Traditional/Modern
	

Regarding the external or contextual factors of colour in the signs of Corporate Visual Identity, we also want to mention the effect of association of ideas which connects different signs with the same sector, or on the contrary, they will differ, with the aim of emphasising their distinction. These signs, since they belong to the same context, coincide in the use of colour to transmit the same ideas, the same linguistic concept and the same meaning.

Table 5: Signs that coincide in the use of the same colour to transmit the same idea.

Green (nature)	Blue (sanitary aspects)
	

4. CONCLUSIONS

The world of meaning is the world of human beings, where colours conform a language used for social communication. Therefore, the world of meaning is intentional. The principle of the senses is the classification of an expressive substance, such as colour, in order to establish it in interchangeable meaning. Colour can be submitted to subjective interpretations, but that is not an obstacle for the detection of objective data that derives from signical material itself or from “inter-subjectivity” that defines criteria for the sensitivity and interpretative conformity based on the linguistic structure of the chromatic matter.

This collective knowledge is what allows for the colour of a sign of Corporate Visual Identity to serve as a vehicle of meanings with a social sense.

Referentes

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