



Universität Zürich

Deutsches Seminar

Schönberggasse 9  
CH-8001 Zürich  
Tel. ++41 44 634 25 61  
Fax ++41 44 634 49 05  
juergen.spitzmueller@ds.uzh.ch  
www.ds.uzh.ch/lehrstuhlduerscheid

## Visible by Design: The Significance of Typography in Media Communication

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Dr. Jürgen Spitzmüller

## 1 Outline

1. Introduction
2. What includes typography?
3. Why is typography significant?
4. The 'use' of typography in (German) media communication: some examples
5. Conclusions

## 2 Quotations

### 2.1 Introduction

"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)

"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 primacy 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)

### 2.2 What includes typography?

"Typography is the craft of endowing language with a visible form, and thus with an independent existence. [...] So long as the root lives, typography remains a source of true delight, true knowledge, true surprise." (Bringhurst 2005: 11)

"Technological developments in the form of desktop publishing and the world wide web mean that non-experts have far more control of the visual 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 organisation of writing is becoming an increasingly important shaper of our graphic language." (Walker 2001: 2)

"[...] traditionally associated with design using type and the design and production of type itself [...], 'typography' is being used increasingly to refer to written language however it is produced." (Walker 2001: 2)

"**Typography:** [...] the visual appearance of written language in print." (Rautenberg 2003: 496; my translation)



## 2.3 Why is typography significant?

“Communication is an inferential process. It is the attempt to bring the addressee to certain conclusions. [...] Communication is an intelligent guessing game.” (Keller 1998: ix/x)

“[...] *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)

“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; original emphases)

“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)

“Signs emerge in the process of our attempts to reach communicative goals.” (Keller 1998: vii)

## 2.4 The ‘use’ of typography in (German) media communication: some examples

“In late modernity, all music-related subcultures use typography as a resource for the creation and propagation of an aesthetic identity. identity. An early example is the 1960s hippie culture with its psychedelic letter style, which spread through record covers, concert posters and the music press. [...] Typical for punk-rock are ransom note cut-outs and old-fashioned typewriter lettering [...]; typical for heavy metal are ‘gothic’ typefaces and calligraphic scripts; artists and fans of techno (or electronic dance music more generally) typically choose fonts related to computer culture and the aesthetics of science fiction, whereas hip-hop is associated to graffiti lettering and to gothic typefaces.” (Androutsopoulos 2004)

## 3 Theses

- Typographical elements might be used intentionally to signify sub-cultural context, ideologies 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, and why

- Typography can be regarded as an integral part of the social style of peer groups; they are "means to increase social visibility" (Assmann 1986: 127) *by design*
- Typography is a significant factor of written communication in general and media communication in particular
- Thus, a science that aims to describe and explain media communication as a whole cannot refrain from considering visual and performative phenomena such as typography

## 4 Internet pages

- (1) <http://www.heavy-metal.de> <14/02/2007>
- (2) [http://www.hatreddivine.de/start/startframe\\_ger.html](http://www.hatreddivine.de/start/startframe_ger.html) <14/02/2007>
- (3) <http://www.metal-district.de> <14/02/2007>
- (4) <http://www.steinionline.de/index2.html> <14/02/2007>
- (5) <http://www.planetheavymetal.de> <14/02/2007>
- (6) <http://www.barflies.net/bowling> <14/02/2007>
- (7) <http://www.punkmusic.com> <14/02/2007>
- (8) <http://www.hamburgpunk.de> <14/02/2007>
- (9) <http://www.treibsand.net/Welcome/> <14/02/2007>
- (10) <http://www.rapbase.de.hm> <14/02/2007>
- (11) <http://www.saargebeat.de> <14/02/2007>
- (12) <http://www.personaggiscomodi.com> <14/02/2007>
- (13) <http://www.aks.uz/uz/index.htm> <14/02/2007>

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The presentation slides are available online:

<http://www.ds.unizh.ch/lehrtuhlduerscheid/docs/spitzm/pres-tokio-2007-03-02.pdf>