Typography as Context: The Graphic Constitution of Genres and Social Territories

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Written communication is generally considered to be less "empractic" than speech. Since the context of production and the context of reception usually differ, texts seem to be less dependent to external situational context or less “indexical” than oral speech. In this sense, Ehlich (e.g. 1987) states that the "breakage" of situations and the "stretching" of communication is a main characteristic of written communication. However, if this is true, why does written communication usually not "break"? In other words, where do we get the context from if we read texts?

This talk argues that one main factor, besides the verbal content of the text itself, is graphic design. Since they are connected with all sorts of experiences, social ascriptions and expectations (and thus bound to communicative knowledge), graphic means might act as contextualization cues – they provide a frame for the interpretation of texts and thus "stabilize" and "enrich" written communication. This "stabilization" draws on social routines of communication – on genres, understood as "orienting frameworks, interpretive procedures, and sets of expectations that are not part of discourse structure, but of the ways actors relate to and use language” (Hanks 1987: 670).

The main thesis of the talk is that typography co-constitutes genre expectations, which entails expectations about communicative actors (authors and anticipated recipients), text functions, intentions, historicity, social relations, and social values, which are themselves often bound to specific "places" or "social territories". The thesis is exemplified with regard to a domain which involves dense semiotic work, a multitude of genres and territories: football.


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