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Meaning and Product Design: Towards a Conception of the Object as Sign/al

Abstract

Our relationship with products depends on how they communicate with us and where we do put them in our entire system of signification. Product design, like most cultural production can be viewed and analysed by language based theories. The basic premise behind this possibility is that every artifact can be read as a sign if there is such a reception. Similarly every artifact can be the subject and object of the signal of the basic communication model in different contexts. The main aim of this paper is to discuss the ways in which the designed product can be the sign of the signification process and the signal of the communication process simultaneously. Emphasizing the difference between communication theories and semiotics, the designed product is discussed as the subject of both areas of inquiry.

Ürün Tasarımı ve Anlam: Gösterge ve Sinyal olarak Nesne

Özet

Ürünlerle ilişkimiz onların bizimle nasıl iletişim kurduğuna ve bizim de onları tüm anlamlandırma sistemimiz içinde nasıl konumlandığına bağlıdır. Ürün tasarımı, birçok kültürel üretim biçiminde olduğu gibi dil bazlı teoriler ışığında analiz edilebilir. Bu önermenin dayandığı ana nokta, eğer böyle bir atımlama varsa, insan eliyle yapılmış her şeyin bir gösterge olarak okunabileceği olasılığıdır. Benzer bir biçimde, farklı bağlamlar içinde her nesne temel iletişim modelinin hem konusu hem de nesnesi olabilir. Bu yazının temel hedefi, tasarlanmış ürünün aynı anda nasıl hem iletişim sürecinde sinyal hem de göstergebilimsel anlamlandırma sürecinde gösterge olabildiğinin tartışılmasıdır. İletişim teorileri ve göstergebilim arasındaki temel farkın üstünde durularak, tasarlanmış ürünün nasıl bu iki çalışma alanının konusu olduğu ele alınacaktır.

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Meaning and Product Design: Towards a Conception of the Object as Sign/al

I. Product Design Process: A Process of Communication

The act of designing as a process is at the same time an act of transformation. Firstly, ideas concerning a determined problem are turned *out to be* product concepts; solutions are symbolized and made visible through a selected medium. This medium can be a drawing, a computer generated image, a rough sketch or *in* the form of a model, but on whatever medium the ideas are presented they are there to communicate an idea. These ideas find actualisation in their real contexts, and materialised for a definite purpose in a second transformation. Finally and that can be called an intermediary level of communication, the products disappear for the sake of creating an entirely new kind of signification called advertising. At this stage, products are transformed into objects of desire that are represented in a dense symbolism. Although objects are solid in their material beings, they fluidly move and change meaning in different levels of production, representation and consumption.

The Project Phase

Design on paper, or on the computer screen, which is a project, is a signifier, whose referent does not physically exist at that stage. It means the signified is a mental picture. This relation fits the definition of the Saussurian linguistic sign, but

this process is not identical. A sketch or a drawing conveys much more than a word (linguistic sign) or a statement. More often it corresponds to an organization of function, an interaction of an object with a user. The methods and combinations of possible solutions to a single problem is endless, so the designer constructs a cycle between his mind, the image he is producing and the tool he is using. This is the stage of the designer's communication with his own mental pictures. Hand produces the image of the mental picture on paper, after this representation, ideas become visible both to the designer and others. The image is then processed by cognitive mechanisms and changes are made on the image. The materiality of the design begins on paper as a realization of ideas. The decision for the best solution is made after trying quite a number of possibilities.

The baby (the design) is born out of a simulation of its future life. Like a mirror image, the storyboard of a life is constructed by the development of the product. The surface of the mirror corresponds to the product here, because like the shiny surface of the mirror, the product is used to project something through. The product at this stage acts like a virtual mirror reflecting a virtual scenario, from future to present. All representations of this future life is done to simulate it as close to reality as possible. The challenge of the project phase lies in the true statement of the problem with a true transformation of ideas of a simulated reality.

The Product...

When the projects are realized, they turn out to be products. Here, drafts turn into actual objects, and this product gains its meaning in a new order of semiotic system. The problem is twofold at this stage. The problem being talked about is a communication problem. What kind of a communication is this? (a) The product's communication with the user, (b) product's function as a sign. The first is like looking at the object under the magnifier, concentrating merely on the artifact. This happens usually at the time or instant the product is being used. The designer's intentions are actualized. The latter, on the other hand, deals with the product within a context.

The product's use value can only be appreciated by its function's legibility; so the product should carry its function to the user through either using a system of labeling, packaging, color coding, etc., or through its form. It is similar to our experience within the city or a building. We are informed by signs on roads about where to go, at the same time we know that we have to use the road and we are directed by the architectural forms. The actual *poiesis* of the product can only be possible when we use it, when we get in an interaction, although the hints are on and within the product itself. It is always ready to open itself to us, even if the cues are hidden consciously. Our relationship with products depends on how they communicate with us and where we put them in our entire system of signification.

PRODUCTION: Encoding, CONSUMPTION: Decoding

Previous introduction stated that the design, in the sense of the finished designed product, has communicative aspects, but similarly the whole process of design can be accepted or taken as a process of communication. The reason is that if the outcome of the process is a signal, then the production of the signal is

worth examining for the sake of understanding the signification mechanisms throughout the process. It is explicit up to here that ideas and projections regarding the design go into a transformation all the way through just like it happens in the basic communication model provided by Kroehl:

A very simple yet precise idea of the communications process is provided by the basic model of mathematical information theory concerning the electrical transmission of news. There is a transmitter sending signals through a channel to a receiver. The nature of the signals is determined by the characteristics of the channel, for example sound waves in the air, electrical impulses through a cable or printing ink on paper. News must always be transformed in such a way that it can be transmitted, for example from alphabetical characters into a Morse code for telegrams. This process is called coding. It is always based on a repertoire consisting of the signals possible in a given channel. The signals available in the repertoire are given meanings by means of a code, whereby they become signs. It is always the case that they are signs only for the human sender or receiver, while for the technical equipment they always remain signals (13-23).

The information theory quoted above helps us to interpret the product as a coded signal in which the medium it travels is the physical materiality. The sender is the interpreter of technology, sometimes the designer, sometimes the engineer or both of them. The receiver is basically the user. The decoding of the user is generally at the level of function. The amount of information encoded in the object is fairly much more than that is interpreted. It all depends on the point of view, context, cultural conditions; so it is obvious that the information theory is not sufficient for such a complicated analysis. The relations can be put forward by using the terms sender, receiver, signal and channel, but it would be merely a reduction for the sake of a simplified abstraction. A more developed model of communication is offered by Shannon and Weaver in Fiske's *Introduction to Communication Studies* (29):

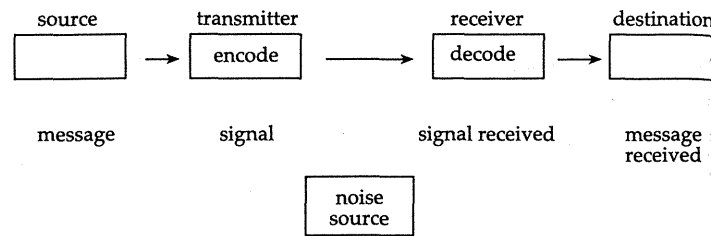


Fig. 1:
Communication model of Shannon and Weaver (qtd. in Fiske, 1990: 26)

Fiske divides the schools of communication into two; one dealing with the process, that what is important is the accurate departure of message from senders to receivers. These two models; the information model and the Shannon and Weaver model are examples of this type of approach, which is a rather mechanical view of communication. There is a flow, a transmission; but it does not deal with who is communicating, why, where or under what circumstances. This magnified model of the process covers only the visible or the manifest, but it does not cover all the complexity of the signification. When cultural and social aspects of communication are considered, going beyond the visible or the manifest content becomes a methodological necessity.

The other school, on the other hand, studies communication under the heading of semiotics, as Fiske states dealing with "production and exchange of meanings" (12). The framework of the definition or understanding of communication is different in semiotics. Culture is an important input; such that the reasons of inaccordance between the sender and the receiver are usually labeled as defects in the communication by the process school; semiotics handles this mismatch quite independently from the study of communications, relating it with the cultural differences between the sides. These kinds of factors are squeezed under the topic of noise by the first group which is obviously a very limited and narrow classification. Another point that Fiske makes is the decline in the importance of the sender in semiotics. What seems more essential is how meaning is structured in the text or work

and how it is deciphered by the receiver. The modellers of communication draw the charts of the process until it reaches the receiver, and the semioticians deal with the remaining part of the story. Colon puts out the difference between communication science and semiotics very nicely in a web page:

Communication is defined as the transfer of information from a source to a receiver. The goal of a communicator is to accomplish this process efficiently and effectively. Hence, communication theorists are committed to find and provide models by which communication can be enhanced. The challenge is to come up with the right combination of codes, media and contexts in order to make the transfer of information fast, cost effective, and accurate. This process can not be separated from the fact that humans are the ones that decode the information they receive through a particular medium in a specific context and make meaning out of it. This is where semiotics comes into play (1).

The process of my getting this piece of information out of the internet fits perfectly to the model of communication. There are two addresses, one where the information is, and the other: me and my computer. In fact there are two layers of communication here, one between the reader and the author, and the other between two systems of computers. The seeker of information firstly finds the web page of it and then the coded signals (digital vocabulary/signals) are decoded as words and images through the system. The first receiver is again the computer, and after the transmission is completed technically, the second face of decoding is the reading of the ideas out of the text. The mechanisms of producing and reading a narrative is another story in itself, but information transmission in the internet has another aspect that is the possibility of instant feedback. The number and the addresses of people access to a particular web page can be detected.

Communication theorists would be interested in the processes of information transmission through the Internet, but semioticians would be dealing with the appearance of web

pages, the significance of colors, the style, and the whole system as an entity. Semiotics can cover anything as its subject matter even though they are not produced, or simply even if they are not there for the sake of communication. It is a method teaching how to look at the world. The aim of this distinction is not to state one approach is better than the other, but to distinguish the levels of analysis both considered in same field: communication. As Leach states in his *Culture and Communication*: "Human communication is achieved by means of expressive actions which operate as *signals, signs and symbols*" (9). By definition we know that semiotics is the science studying signs and symbols, but Leach emphasizes the difficulty of separating the three actions, as they are not fixed, defined and stable. He gives the example of Pavlov's dogs that respond to the bell which becomes the signal, although it was the index of the presence of food by producing saliva. He makes an analogy of the human behavior with this as common responses to everyday symbols or acts are alike of dogs, because of shifts of meaning by conditioning (23-24). The green light in traffic, which is a sign, makes the driver take it as a signal to go automatically or as Leach suggests the reader treats the "syntagmatic chain of signs" in a book as if they are "signals" (24).

If we go back to the relationship between design and communication, Fry's definitions will help us to understand this relation extensively, although he uses the terms of a basic communication model:

...Design is used to order, organise, make operational, make visible, and to promote the 'modern' world. Design is essential in the economic and cultural production (the encoding) of our world as well as in its economic and cultural consumption (the decoding). These two moments are not separable poles, they are, in fact, brought together all the time, they exist in a relation to each other and in the same moment. Design, therefore, is implicated in how our cultural and economic circumstances are reproduced (17).

He ties this view to the capitalistic order of the economy and its close links with the idea of design, how they feed each other, their dependency. As a nonverbal element of communication, the designed object's paradox lies here. In its material being the object is the transmitter of messages, but its very nature denies any kind of connotation attached to it anytime it is being used. It all depends which way to take it or look at it.

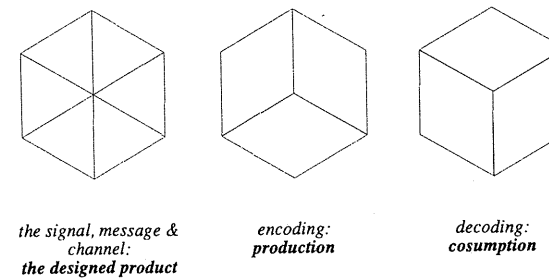


Fig. 2:
The cube illusion as an analogy of the unified elements of encoding and decoding on the designed product.

The realization of production and consumption occurs at the same place, on the object, within the object, by the object. The first implies the aesthetics (outlook, appearance); the second, technology (how and what it is made, the inside); the third, use (the instant the function is in action). This overlap makes the reading both difficult and easy at the same time; just like a cube of illusion in which both positionings can be seen consequently. Two of them are present inside a single image, but only one can be viewed at a single look (Fig. 2). Both of them can not be seen at the same time. In order to make things easier firstly the two cubes should be separated from each other to have a clear vision. The method offers to handle the processes of encoding and decoding as separate processes; unifying them under the process of design activity. The outcome is the conception of the analysis of the process of design as a production of communication.

II. Product as Sign: DE(SIGN)

The science that studies signs was first conceptualized under the name Semiology by Saussure and Semiotics by Peirce. These two thinkers were not aware of each other while claiming their theories in their lectures and papers, later to be compiled in Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, and Peirce's eight volume *Collected Papers*. Saussure's definition of sign depends on a dyadic relation that of the signifier and the signified. In his theory, the concept of sign resembles to a sheet of paper, one face being the "sign-vehicle" and the other "meaning," in which two of them are inherent (Eco, 1976: 14). Peirce, on the other hand, constructs his conception on triadic relations that of representamen (the sign), object and interpretant (Nöth, 1990: 42-43). The representamen can be considered as the signifier or the sign-vehicle in Saussure. The object is the thing that the representamen represents or indicates. It can either be a material being or a mental concept. The interpretant is another sign evoked in the mind of the interpreter. By this concept of interpretant Peirce enables an "ad infinitum" (qtd. in Nöth, 1990: 43), or as Eco called it an "unlimited semiosis" in the world of meaning, objects and signs (qtd. in Silverman, 1984: 5).

The basic distinction between the sign conceptions of Saussure and Peirce is offered by Eco:

It is not by chance that all the examples of semiological systems given by Saussure are without any shade of doubt strictly conventionalized systems of artificial signs, such as military signals, rules of etiquette and visual alphabets. Those who share Saussure's notion of sémiologie distinguish sharply between intentional, artificial devices (which they call 'signs') and other natural or unintentional manifestations which do not, strictly speaking, deserve such a name.[...], but Peirce's definition offers us something more. It does not demand as part of a sign's definition, the qualities of being intentionally emitted and artificially produced (15).

Eco, on the other hand, prefers to define the sign as "everything that, on the grounds of a previously established

convention, can be taken as *something standing for something else*" (16). Deriving from the rules of linguistics, enlarging the boundaries, semiotics may deal with *everything*, if a thing is interpreted as a sign by some meaning producer or interpreter. This scope of semiotics leads the way to the conception of products as signs. The communicative aspects of designed products were explored, and it was said that the encoding done by the production of the item is decoded through its material being during consumption. This one to one relationship demanded the actual interface with the object itself. Coding and decoding is done on the object itself. Both the channel and the signal are united and materialized on the product. This causes the two components of the communication act to be unseparably integrated with each other, demonstrated by the two different visions of the same cube in the illusion.

In the case of semiotics, the signal function of the object does not disappear, but just like the cube conception, they are united.

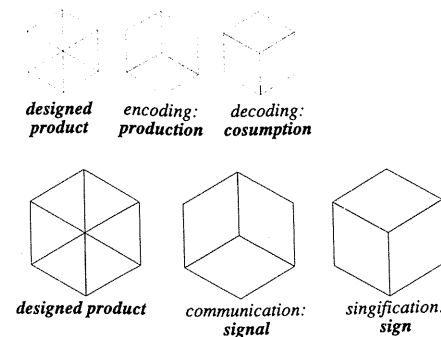


Fig. 3: The cube illusion as an expanded demonstration for the signal and sign functions inherent in the designed product.

The designed product is a sign and a signal at the same time.

The gaze of the reader perceives either the sign or the signal. Quite the contrary, Krippendorff and Butter are disregarding this semiotic component inherent in the object (1984). From a designer's point of view, they criticize the

relevance of the semiotic theories in the very moment of design. Product semantics, they say, should deal with how well the product conveys its functionality through its form. The product language should be used to communicate this denotative layer of meaning which is the function of the product. Semiotics, they say, should deal with the secondary elements of visual information, like displays, packaging, or typography, etc. This view is quite modernist and consistent in its totality. The objection, or let us say, divergence that I would offer is that, along the premises and ideals of product semantics, an object is/can be located, used, consumed and reproduced within so many different contexts that it is impossible to control the signification in decoding. This cube metaphor is used to stress the fact that there is no an absolute, fixed meaning assigned to a certain object. It is a process of formation and reformation in terms of cognitive perception of the product, depending also on social and cultural circumstances.

Although aimed at explaining and demonstrating the ideological reading of the cultural phenomena, Barthes' sign conception schematized in the following figure (qtd. in Silverman, 1984: 27), seems to be closer to the cube paradigm exploring the sign function of the object within the other meaning constructions (Fig. 4). Firstly the object's denotative layer of meaning is deciphered through its function. It is identified and classified among the similar objects performing similar tasks. Then over this identification, any other connotative meaning can be activated by the interpreter. Barthes' model offers a parasitical relationship between the

1. Denotative Signifier	2. Denotative Signified	
3. Denotative Sign I CONNOTATIVE SIGNIFIER		II CONNOTATIVE SIGNIFIED
III CONNOTATIVE SIGN		

Fig. 4: Barthes' mythical signifying model (qtd. in Silverman, 1984: 27).

denotative sign and the connotative signifier.

Gottdiener's socio-semiotic approach will help to understand the sign function of objects in society ruled by the norms and hegemony of mass culture.

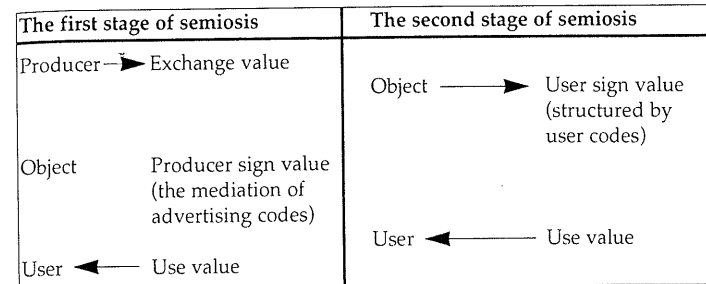


Fig. 5: Gottdiener's model for demonstrating the stages of mass cultural semiosis (181).

According to the first stage of semiosis, the exchange value of the logic of production turns into the use value in consumption. The relation is located between the producer and the user. The object is turned out to be a sign in the discourse of advertising to achieve to evoke the desire to purchase in order to match the two intentions. The second stage is related with the user's side of the story. The relation in this case is between the user and the object. Consumers make certain objects act like their cultural codes within society to differentiate themselves, either as individuals or groups. Mods, punks, or rockers are some examples of these kinds of subcultural groups, having

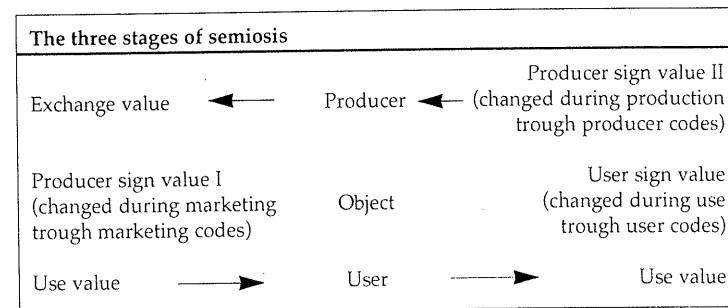


Fig. 6: Gottdiener's model for demonstrating the stages of mass cultural semiosis (184).

common objects associated with them.

The third stage defines the relation between the producer and the object. This model is more sophisticated and comprehensive when compared with the former two: In this close circuit of production/consumption (encoding/decoding) the users value (his/her signification in decoding) becomes a feed back for the later stages of the production process, thus leading to a change in the exchange value of the product. Surely this adaptation causes a shift and decline in meaning:

for example, the signifier "punk rock" was sanitized by the Top 40 radio industry and changed to "New Wave". Whereas the former connotes a revolutionary counterculture, the latter is a marketing statement utilizing the power of stimulus "new" to indicate a change in product (Gottdiener, 1993: 183).

Gottdiener's remarks and models of mass *cultural semiosis*, beautifully states the components of the issue in a system of capitalistic mass production, communication and consumption.

Baudrillard is the key thinker to this debate regarding the status of objects, has treated the issue thoroughly, from a viewpoint combining the Marxist conception of the object as commodity with exchange and use values, with the sign function of being the signifier of a signified, in his *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. His basic argument depends on the fact that an object could only be an object of consumption

A functional logic of USE VALUE	operation	utility	INSTRUMENT
An economic logic of EXCHANGE VALUE	equivalence	market	COMMODITY
A logic of SYMBOLIC EXCHANGE	ambivalence	gift	SYMBOL
A logic of SIGN VALUE	difference	status	SIGN

Fig 6:
Table demonstrating Baudrillard's logic of signification (Baudrillard, 1981: 66).

if it is freed from its other functions, except being a sign. He classifies the other functions and the sign function of the object as such:

This logic of sign value derives from and is closely linked to the contemporary concept of consumption. Baudrillard claims that people living before industrialization were not consuming, they were furnished by objects of symbolic properties satisfying their needs in their material beings (1996). On the other hand, he defines the contemporary object as being "nothing [...], but the different types of relations and significations that converge, contradict themselves, and twist around it, as such [...]" (1981: 63).

The systematic and limitless process of consumption arises from the disappointed demand for totality that underlies the project of life. In their ideality sign-objects are all equivalent and may multiply infinitely; indeed, they must multiply in order at every moment to make up for a reality that is absent. Consumption is irrepressible, in the last reckoning, because it is founded upon a lack (Baudrillard, 1996: 205).

This theory of consumption regarding and producing the sign-object is closely linked to the concepts related to advertising. Contemporary mechanisms of turning the object into a sign could only be possible by the object's transformation of a product as the outcome of a company, a brand and profit, consequently advertising. Through the codes of advertising the object disappears in the idea of the perfect and desirable product, it is turned into a sign to be consumed among the other examples or sets of items. It is turned into *nothing*, but a mental image of a mirrored discontinuous self to be completed by the lack of it, in the discourse of the advertisement. That is the reason why we are consuming sign-objects instead of the real ones and that is the reason for the object's inevitable transformation of a sign in order to be consumed. Gottdiener, on the other hand, finds Baudrillard's assumptions on the sign-object as a "radical

reductionism", in terms of his claim on the sign value's *domination* over the relation between individuals and material objects (178). Gottdiener's remarks derive from his view named as socio-semiotics, a synthesis of material culture and symbolic processes:

According to socio-semiotics, any material object constitutes the intersection between social context and the codified, connotative ideologies of social practice, on the one hand, and the material, objective, production or design practice which produces the object world, on the other. It is the latter's relation to the former that has been neglected by both semiotics and symbolic interaction (56).

The definition of socio-semiotics fits perfectly well with the aim to cope, match and integrate meaning as a tool for making objects in design practice as a methodology, also by taking various readings of them in social and cultural context as informative inputs. This inquiry of meaning in design may lead to a socio-semiotic design methodology.

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Amerika'da Eğitim Dili Politikaları ve "Öteki" Diller

Zeynep F. Beykont

Özet

Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde göçmen ve etnik gruplar ana dillerini tehlike sinyalleri verecek bir hızda kaybetmektedirler. Araştırmalar, farklı dil gruplarının iki ya da üç kuşak içerisinde hatta daha hızlı bir biçimde ana dilleri yerine İngilizce'yi benimsediklerini göstermektedir. Çocuklar İngilizce'yi benimseyerek ana dillerinde yetersiz kalmaktadırlar. Bazıları ebeveynleriyle ortak bir dilde konuşamazken, büyük bir çoğunluğu ise, büyük anne ve büyük babalarıyla aynı dile sahip değildirlir. Bu makale, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'ndeki azınlık dillerinin strateji erozyonuna yol açan faktörlerden biri olan eğitim dili politikalarını incelemekte ve 20. yüzyılda İngilizce tek-dilciliğinin empoze edilmesinde devlet okullarının önemli bir rol oynadığını ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışmada, dil azınlığı öğrencileriyle ilgili dil politikası tartışmalarını ve uygulama programlarını üç döneme ayırarak ele alınmaktadır: Birinci Dünya Savaşından İkinci Dünya Savaşına kadar; İkinci Dünya Savaşı'ndan 1980'lere kadar; ve 1980'den bugüne kadar.

School Language Policies in the United States and the "Other" Languages

Abstract

In the U.S. immigrant and ethnic groups are losing their heritage languages at an alarming rate. Research has indicated that language groups replace their native languages with English in two or three generations or faster. Children grow up fluent in English with little proficiency in the native language. Many are unable to speak to their parents in the heritage language; most do not have a common language with their grandparents. This article examines one contributing factor to the rapid erosion of languages in the US, namely school language policies. English imposition in schools is illustrated by discussing school language policy debates and program decisions in the education of language minority students in reference to three historical periods throughout the 20th century-between World War I and II; from World War II to the 1980's, and from 1980 until 2002.