

Generating a Participatory Design Pluri-Glossary

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ABSTRACT

Participatory methods involving observation, interpretation and collaboration require a shared language to operate and be performed. However, the absence of a design-based language beyond the Anglo-Eurocentric understanding of design renders problematic, particularly in the field of social design. This issue requires distinct attention when working with communities claiming their space in the margins, because this implies an engagement in bounding processes to preserve cultural and identity practices. The challenges presented to designers require preserving the nuances and pluralities of languages—and thus lifeworlds—if they are to become truly inclusive and allow the co-existence of many worlds. It is imperative to adopt context-based design languages that emerge from the communities in which designers are working with. To contribute to the development of a real plurality and cultural interlocution—as opposed to translation, we propose a participatory and generative conversation space that will seek to co-construct and propose a potential design pluri-glossary.

Keywords

Pluriverse; cultural interlocution; cultural practice; design languages; glossary

INTRODUCTION

Design-based terminology and the language used most often in design processes relies almost exclusively on the English language. It is possible to think

about this imposition of design language as part of design's anglo-centric universalizing program. It is a form of epistemic erasure, as the imposition of a foreign language negates the possibility of uncovering context-based language needed for thinking about other forms or kinds of design. This is not to be read as there being a lack of language(s) used to describe other practices of design happening outside of the Anglo-European centers, there are in fact many terms and many languages that have not gained design's recognition or validation.

The lack of non-English design language brings epistemological and ontological considerations to the practice of design. Epistemologically, it narrows the understanding of what design is exclusive to those that operate in English; design theory is being produced in English and it's being consumed in English. Academic centers around the world reproduce this language hegemony (Bennett, 2007), and although this might be true in all academic spheres, design is not only failing to communicate beyond the Anglo-proficient populations, it's expecting these Anglo-terms to permeate the local culture of designers. A good example of this is precisely the pervasiveness of Design Thinking around the globe and yet it is known exclusively as "Design Thinking" everywhere. This imposition negates the possibility of context-based language to emerge and expand the ways we think about other forms of design. This is an issue that designers not working in anglo-proficient communities need to look into because the ways we think about design condition the ways we practice design. If there is a lack of context-appropriate language the practice of contextual design will not be fulfilled, thus narrowing its possibilities for more appropriate expansions. This is an issue that becomes particularly problematic in the field of participatory design.

Ontologically, language matters because we use language for sense-making; as Winograd and Flores (1986) put it “language (...) is no longer merely a reflective but rather a constitutive medium. We create and give meaning to the world we live in and share with others. To put the point in a more radical form, we design ourselves (and the social and technological networks in which our lives have meaning) in language” (p.78). Language is the first technology we have to make sense of the ways we think about the world, therefore, if we are trying to understand other worlds by use of foreign languages, we are flattening difference through language and forcing those worlds to fit into the ways that foreign language afford us to understand it.

The issue of language is an issue that needs to be discussed beyond the possibilities of mere translation. It is not solved by taking the Anglo-bodies of design literature and making it available in other languages. It is an issue that takes us back to thinking about the geopolitics of knowledge production. The current mainstream definitions of design cater mostly to an Anglo-Eurocentric worldview, which are then exported (sometimes by use of translation) and imposed on the rest of the world. This aids the (re)production of the underdevelopment discourse, as the Global South is oftentimes unable to carry out these practices of design that require specific material possibilities not found or replicable in most of its contexts. Beyond the material impossibility of reproducing this idea of design, the imposition of language is problematic because it negates the possibility of developing designerly practices grounded in historic and cultural specificity that consider other worldviews. Other ways of design need other terms and specific language to make sense of these pluralities and their contextual emergence.

The absence of design-language beyond the Anglo understanding of design renders particularly problematic in the field of social design and participatory design. Designers rely on ethnographic, observation-based, participatory methods, and community workshops to bring in community members and other stakeholders actively into the design process. Any method involving observation, interpretation or participation needs a shared language to operate and be performed, and yet the issue of language is rarely discussed. Again the issue here is not an issue of translation, but one of cultural interlocution. A designer that seeks to understand the experience of anyone being-in-the-world needs awareness of how language is used to disclose

those worlds. Winograd and Flores (1986) believe that language is crucial in creating worlds, individual identity does not emerge from these worlds, but it is shaped by the individual’s interpretation of the world and it is created by the use of language. “Any individual, in understanding his or her world, is continually involved in activities of interpretation. That interpretation is based on prejudice (or *pre-understanding*), which includes assumptions implicit in the language that the person uses (Ibid, 29).

The issue of language requires attention when working with communities that are claiming their space in the margins, which is often the case for participatory and social design. These groups — as a condition of their marginality— engage in bounding processes; these, though, are fundamentally different from bounding as it relates to nation-building processes (Anderson [1983] 2016, Castles, et al. 2005). In these cases, these bounding processes are intended to preserve common cultural and identity practices. This bounding is performed through language; any individual that’s outside of these groups probably does not have a common understanding of this language. The designer’s interpretation, by means of design-based language, can undermine and flatten these language nuances, therefore providing a disservice to the community it is working with.

In *Designs for the Pluriverse*, Escobar (2018) also deals with the issue of language and interpretation as it relates to design: the “(...) key aspect of design is the creation through language of the domains in which people’s actions are generated and interpreted” (115). If design is to start a more inclusive project, where many worlds shaped by many different subjectivities are able to co-exist, there is an imperative to develop context-based design languages that emerge from the communities in which designers are working with. Any designer engaged in social research must be wary of imposing design’s Anglo-Eurocentric terminology as it is imposing more than just language, it is an ideological imposition that seeks out to flatten cultural difference. This calls for an awareness by designers to recognize their subjective position within the system in which they are conducting research, “that the observer is not separate from the world she or he observes but rather creates the phenomenal domains within which she or he acts; the world is created through language (again, language is not a mere translation or representation of reality “out there” but is constitutive of such reality (...))” (Ibid: 111).

FORMAT

In response to the core theme of the conference related to diverse meanings and ontologies, our conversation will not have a traditional passive format. Our aim as the organizing group is to foster a collaborative and participative experience from assistants to engage in a conversation that critically and reflectively analyzes design terminology originated in English that lacks culturally appropriate terms in other languages. Stemming from the activities that will take place during the session, participants will begin to generate the foundations for a living glossary of culturally diverse terms. In this manner, the Conversation can be seen as the launch of a larger, longer-lasting conversation that we, as Spanish speaking PhD students in an English-speaking university, think is relevant and pertinent to have as a way to bring to the forefront aspects of interculturality in the politics of design theory and practice.

Even though the proposal is being submitted in English, we are focusing our efforts in facilitating a participatory activity where the conversation will be bilingual — depending on participants perhaps multilingual— and multimodal. We want to avoid the unidirectionality of translation from English to Spanish, Portuguese and indigenous languages but rather create a dialogic multidirectional exchange by including provocations such as: what are the sociopolitical and cultural nuances of a particular vocabulary? How does the use of a specific terminology define the lifeworlds of a design practicing community?

The format will be divided into two main activities of 30 minutes each. The first half will prompt participants to identify a set of particular definitions of untranslatable words or appropriations in either language(s). We will provide prompts intended to begin a collective conversation about some of the barriers faced when doing participatory design in languages different than English. We will rely on the experiences of participants to guide most of this conversation.

Afterwards, we will ask participants to take the conversation into smaller groups to create multiple/common/different definitions for the words participants have thought out. Interpretative inclusivity is pivotal for us, which is why those definitions will not be expected to be done only through syntax, but we want to encourage participants to engage in multimodality practice and use not only text but utilize other modes for composing their concepts (visual, spatial, gestural,

audio, etc.), however they feel comfortable explaining the nuances of their definitions.

In the second half, a panel of three practitioners and academics working in the intersection of language multimodality and design will address some of the reflections and commentaries from participants. As a conclusion, we will highlight how this type of process of (re)forming our vocabulary as designers can embrace a plurality of ways of thinking and being in design practice and theory. Additionally, this conclusion and the Conversation are a call to action for participants to share and invite other designers to continue the development of the pluri-glossary.

DEBRIEF

A crucial aspect of this Conversation is its afterlife in the form of a pluri-glossary. As aforementioned, the aim is for the glossary to become a wiki or communal tool that allows non-anglophone communities to develop a localized intrinsic language for their design practice. We propose the materialization of it through an online platform initially fed and populated with the information generated during the Conversation. Nevertheless, the intention is for it to be public, accessible and open to the larger community.

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