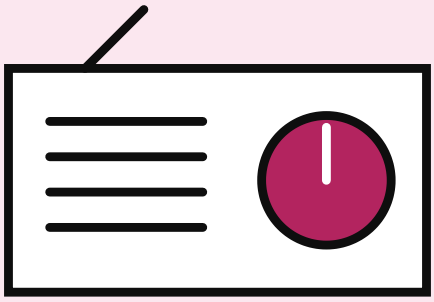
Model

Product semantics

Approach that studies what objects mean to people and how those meanings guide their use, in order to shape products from there.



In Spanish

Semántica del producto

Origin

Krippendorff and Butter (1984); Krippendorff (2006)

What problem it addresses

We don’t use an object for how it is made, but for what we understand it to be. Industrial design takes from it the task of making form explain the product.

Components

Meaning comes first

People act on what an object means to them, not on its physical qualities.

Use

Form helps people recognize the object, explore it and use it without thinking.

Language

How a product is named and talked about also changes what it means.

Life cycle

Meaning changes from the moment the object is conceived until it is thrown away.

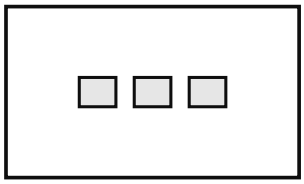
Ecology

Every object lives alongside others and makes sense together with them.

An example

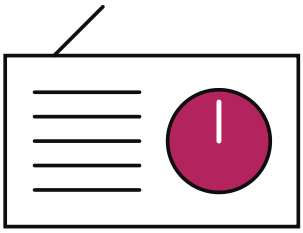
An illustrative example: two radios with the same circuit inside.

Neutral box



A plain box with three identical buttons.
It doesn't say what it is or what each button does.

Form that explains



A grille shows where the sound comes from and a large wheel invites you to turn it.
You can tell what it is and how to turn up the volume.

The inside is the same; what changes is what the form tells about the object.

How it works

1 

We interpret the form before touching the object;

2 

that meaning decides what we try to do with it;

3 

so meaning is designed, not just function.

Applications in design

Use it like this

Ask people what they think the object is and how they would use it, before explaining it to them.

Avoid

Forms that imitate something else and confuse people about how the object is used.

Don't fall for it

An object doesn't mean the same to everyone: test it with the people who will use it, not just your team.

4 contexts

What the research says

Krippendorff proposes reviewing a product's meaning in four contexts: use, language, life cycle and ecology (Krippendorff, 2006).

Connections

Used in

- Human-centered design
- Color, material and finish (CMF) design

Related to

- Affordance
- Denotation and connotation
- Semiotics

Authors and works

1984	**Klaus Krippendorff and Reinhart Butter**	Named product semantics in a special issue of Innovation, the IDSA journal.
2006	**Klaus Krippendorff**	In The Semantic Turn, made it a foundation for design centered on what objects mean to people.

Sources

Original sources

- Krippendorff, K., & Butter, R. (1984). Product semantics: Exploring the symbolic qualities of form. Innovation, 3(2), 4–9. View source (https://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/40/)
- Krippendorff, K. (2006). The semantic turn: A new foundation for design. CRC Press.

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