What is the meaning of 'meaning'? An ontological inquiry of subject-object relationship in Interaction Design

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ABSTRACT

'Meaning' as a term to describe human relationship to artifacts is has become used widely by Interaction Designers. However, often its actual meaning remains often rather blurry and vague. In this position paper I argue for a new conceptualization of the term 'meaning' in the context of material culture and phenomenology. By scrutinizing the term as used in HCI and Interaction Design I seek to open up a discussion about the meaning of 'meaning' but also the agency behind its emergence. In the end I will present three reflection points for Interaction Designers to considerate when relating their design inquiry to meaning.

Keywords

Meaning, Interaction Design, Artifacts

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that the term 'meaning' plays a large role in Interaction design and here in particular when it comes to the description of all kind of artifacts and the interaction with them. Indeed, it seems as if there is almost an inflationary use of the term in papers dealing with novel approaches to design, in particular approaches of the so-called third-wave that seek for new ways to 'give' meaning to designed artifacts and interfaces. But while third-waves extended understanding of context leads to closer examination of "human factors" and the situated use of technology, concepts of meaning remain rather blurry. When the term is used more and more frequently one does not get around asking some more basic questions about this understanding: Where does it come from? What IS meaning? Is it some sort of label that designers and/or users can put on an object? Is it its own entity, floating around just waiting to attach itself to an object? Or does it not exist at all but is just a term to summarize everything we do not quite understand yet in the human-object relationship?

In this position paper I want to argue that it can be beneficial for Interaction Design to scrutinize the meaning of what we mean by meaning. I want to suggest conceptualizing the term towards a key in understanding the subject-object relationship in HCI and Interaction Design. This paper must not be misunderstood as a semantic definition of the term 'meaning', founded on the term discussed by philosophers like Wittgenstein. This has already been done in depth (Krippendorff, 2004). Instead this paper looks at how the term is used and understood in current Interaction Design research when referring to the meaning of artifacts. Hereby I take a more phenomenological view of material culture, dissecting the ontology of the term by reviewing human's encounter with artifacts. At the end of this exploration I will present three suggestions for the use of the term 'meaning' in the context of Interaction Design.

2. Meaning

There has been without any doubt an in-depth theoretical discussion as part of HCI's third wave that has produced important insights about the relationship between users and artifacts. In recent decades HCI and Interaction Design have expanded their understanding of context and socio-materiality widely. 'Meaning' has played a central role in this. Hereby the term itself does have different semantics and has undergone different transformations in the discussion. Firstly, meaning is understood in the semiotic tradition, i.e. the meaning of different words or symbols, like the meaning of what someone has said ('What does that even mean?!'). But from a design perspective artifacts have meanings beyond this semantic context. It is this meaning that has gained so much attention and that I want to scrutinize here; the meaning that is often understood cultural, social or emotional ('this photo has a lot of meaning to me'). One example for this is the work of Dourish. His large contribution to the field is - among other things - centered on the human's relationship to objects and space. He writes about ethnography: *"This ethnographic view, though, focuses not simply on how people explicitly transform or program interactive technologies, but how those technologies take on specific social meanings through their embedding within systems of practice."(Dourish, 2006)*

This phrasing shows that meaning is understood as ranging somewhere between the artifact - here technologies - and social practices. The particular social element of meaning shows that the agency lies in particular on the social actor - the human that somehow makes or assigns meanings to things or places. In his philosophical discussion of HCI Fallman adds another element to this: The user needs to have "acquired the skill to interpret, i.e., to read the instrument in order for it to have any meaning whatsoever." (Fallman, 2011) Meaning in this sense is hidden behind signs and symbols that have to be deciphered - by user and by the designer. Here the interpretation comes very close to a traditional anthropological perspective and traditional material culture.

Meaning as a term in anthropology and cultural studies has always played a larger role in understanding materiality and the role of artifacts in human life. In its early stages anthropology was interested in objects that would represent different cultures for exhibitions and museums - an important work- and research place for anthropologists. In this environment a strong dichotomy was formed between subject - the acting human - and object - the artifact he creates and uses and that thus becomes representative. In this understanding artifacts could get assigned a special meaning, for example through their us in rites and rituals, because they have undergone particular making processes or they are created to represent an event (Miller, 1998) Meanwhile Cultural studies developed an understanding of materiality as just one element in social structure and later as a representation of culture. This dichotomist understanding of materiality was - with the rise of post-modern thinkers - critically re-evaluated (Reckwitz, 2002) Because the agency lies solely within the human it reduces the interaction between human, artifacts and culture to a uni-

dimensional relationship. This approach falls short when it comes to understanding the effect that an artifact has on human culture and how the whole system/structure/ecology/network produces meaning through complex interactions. Because in post-modernist thought objects are not reduced to just meaning per-se, but instead in their capacity for agency (Keane, 2003).

However, it becomes quite clear why the traditional anthropological approach fits so well into a design understanding of the subject-object relationship. It implies that if we just analyze which practice gave an artifact a meaning then a designer can reproduce a meaningful artifact by connecting it to the same practice, materials or cultural structures.

3. Meaning-ful

Tholander et. al. discuss the agency of objects and underlines exactly that: That not designers or users are the ones assigning meaning but the object in itself plays a role as well: "Not only do the humans construct meaning out of their representational acts, but the objects themselves actively contribute in the meaning making process." (Tholander, Normark, & Rossitto, 2012) While resolving one dichotomy - the one between subject and object - this way of framing potentially opens up another: The dichotomy between objects with meaning and those without: Because what about those objects that have not gotten a meaning constructed around them? This becomes particularly apparent when the term 'meaningful' is used. Just from the plain meaning of the term 'meaning' and 'meaningful' are quite different from each other. Nonetheless they are often used quite close to each other. One example for this is the excellent inquiry of college students and their things by Bales and Lindley (2013). While the college students keep "meaningful items", "meaning" was "*associated"* with these things. So while artifacts can be full with meaning (in the sense of the word), the meanings themselves are individual to the user. Again the sole agency lies within the user who determines if something is meaningful.

I want to argue that in practice Interaction Design, in seeking to design for meaningful interaction, is often taking a dichotomist approach that divides artifacts and the interaction with them into meaningful and non-meaningful. However, the use of the term 'meaningful' is misleading. Because it can lead to the assumption that only some things have a meaning, thus we risk overseeing meanings that are embedded into more taken-for-granted objects. Even though one might not see the interaction with these more 'invisible' things around us as meaningful, all things that are encountered in everyday have a meaning that needs to be acknowledged as such in order to understand everyday interactions.

Phenomenologist Heidegger criticized the traditional anthropologists approach, because, as he said, it was taking things in their "ready-to-hand-ness" (Heidegger, 1976, p. 58). What he meant was that things were seen only if surfacing, only then - to translate it to the terms here - when they become meaningful. Much more important for him was the, what he called "Being-there", the existence that lies in the encounter with the world. And this world - the phenomenological life-world (Husserl, 1970) - does not only consists of things that are particularly important to us - or meaningful. Instead it is the being-there as whole - consisting of numerous encounters in our everyday - that has to be understood in its meaning.

4. Meaning-making

The final point of discussion - and probably the one that is of most interest for designers - is that of how meaning can be inscribed or somehow assigned to an artifact. Often this is referred to as 'meaning-making'. Again we are standing before the problem that it is rather unclear how and by whom this meaning is made. The process in itself remains a mystery, seen in the variety of verbs connected to meaning: Making, assigning, reading, emerging; all these actions in the context of meaning show that - even though the agency itself might be clearer - the action behind it is often not so much scrutinized.

Many authors of design inquiries implicitly and most likely unconsciously think about the emergence and origin of meaning of an object. It has to be emphasized that none of these understandings of meaning are explicitly discussed or defined, instead they result out of the way that meaning is used to explain other concepts or the creation of a design.

(1) Meaning as something that is assigned to an object by the user: This dichotomist view separates between subject and object and gives agency solely to the user of an artifact.

(2) Meaning as something that is inherent to an object: This view is strongly related to the idea that objects are mere representations of a culture.

(3) Meaning as something that is given to an object by the designer: Here meaning becomes almost like a label that can be attached to something.

It remains unsolved who is the meaning maker. Can it be the work of a designer to add meaning to an object where before has been none? Or is it even an unforeseeable process that a designer can have little insight to? So maybe here the problem does not lie in the meaning but in the essence of the object; the essence that is not just a representation of what people see in it but instead something that lies within the object? If at the core of meaning lies what relationship we have to things, what lies at the core of the thing in its relationship to us? While Heidegger's early ontological approach towards 'being there' zooms in to a very close analysis of the relationship between human and things, in later years he stepped away from the mere subjectivity of the life-world towards the essence of what actually *is the essence of things.* Now things become existent in themselves and not just as objects. However, this new idea requires a new understanding of their existence. In his 1950 held lecture 'The Thing' in which he analyzes a jug step by step, he calls this existence "thinging". According to Heidegger thinging shows that the jug does indeed stand by itself and at the same time is being made by someone, which in turn requires this maker to have an idea about the thing he is making (Heidegger, Barton, Deutsch, & Gendlin, 1967). This complex relationship between the thing, the subject, the maker and the idea of the thing - even though it is not an easy to grasp concept - might help to understand meaning in different terms: As the relationship between maker, the user and the thing, all of them connected through the idea of the thing.

5. Conclusion

This position paper should not so much solve the problem of meaning in Interaction Design but rather show that 'meaning' is a term that should not be used light-heartedly. Thus this short introduction can merely scratch the surface of an interesting and promising discussion about subject-object relationship's role in Interaction Design. From the argumentation in this position paper I infer three points that should be scrutinized by a designer before making use of the term 'meaning' as part of their design inquiry.

(1) Resolve the dichotomy between subject and object: become aware of agency: It is necessary for Interaction Designers to reflect on the agencies of subjects and objects. There does not seem to be a clear idea how and by whom or what meaning is created.

(2) Resolve the dichotomy between meaningful and meaningless: Designers should avoid a certain carelessness also when it comes to the term 'meaningful'. Even though things might be particular meaningful to a subject, it might be useful to think of user and objects in terms of encounter. When seen like that, everything encountered will have a meaning of some sort; a meaning that can easily been overseen. In the end the designer has to ask himself: Are there things that are meaningless?

(3) How does meaning emerge? In the center of a designer's inquiry stands mostly the designed object. So when thinking about the subject-object relationship, the essence of the thing has to be scrutinized and even the most evident assumptions have to be questioned. Heidegger concludes his reflection over the jug with that its essence - its thingness - is the void. Similarly the essence - and the meaning - of every designed object might surprise.

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