

Imagining design: Transitive and intransitive dimensions



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The present study contributes to literature concerned with conceptualising design imagination as social by identifying an analytical distinction between transitive and intransitive dimensions of design conversations. Whereas transitive dimensions, which remain the focus in much contemporary research, concern relations between imagining designers and imagined design objects, intransitive relations draw attention to process of growth irreducible to either subjects or objects. To illustrate our approach, we draw from the metaphor of weaving and examine a design conversation in which two software developers jointly imagine a 'simplest editor' for a software system. The analyses allow identifying three concepts that offer analytical alternatives to going concepts in the literature: instauration instead of construction, correspondence in place of representation, and place-making instead of meaning-making.

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Always starting without a definite image of the thing that the work is to create, design work begins with a founding paradox: it is devoted to the *imagination* of a thing that does not yet exist but possibly could. During a considerable part of design research history, this imaginative operation has been attributed to the individual mind, 'a new mental combination that is expressed in the world' (Sawyer, 2012, p. 7). More recently, an increasing number of researchers have strived to conceptualise design imagination as an achievement not of individuals but of *conversations*—whether between persons or between persons and their situations (Bucciarelli, 1988; Schön, 1983). In this context, it has been argued that design communication (talk, language) is a *performative* 'productive force' (Dong, 2006, p. 5) that *constitutes* (Fleming, 1998) rather than merely expresses the design object. This view is consistent with the notion that thought *becomes* in the materiality of communication rather than preceding it (Merleau-Ponty, 1945; Vygotsky, 1987). Thus, even the greatest of poets, 'one who makes things new' is typically unable to make clear exactly what it is that he wants to do before developing the language in which he succeeds doing it' (Rorty, 1989, p. 13). Yet,

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and despite a heightened interest in what talk has to tell about design (Oak, 2010), concerns have been raised that much design literature still tend to focus on either internal cognitive or else on external discourse (Alexiou, 2010; Paton & Dorst, 2011). If it is right to state that ‘language *does* design rather than merely *represents* design’ (Dong, 2006, p. 6), then design research requires of ways of conceptualising the *doing of talking* in ways that do not reduce it to either the talking subjects or the language talked.

This study contributes to the above-cited literature by offering an empirically grounded theoretical discussion and vocabulary to conceptualise the imaginative role of conversation in design without reducing it to either the intentions of the individuals talking, the language being used, or the design things being talked about. The latter reductions follow when verbs such as ‘to design,’ ‘to make,’ or ‘to imagine’ are approached exclusively in their transitive form, that is, as verbs for actions that have a direct object. Designing, making, imagining, however, can also be approached intransitively, without an object. Thus, in this study we analyse a design conversation at a software company. The conversation followed a meeting with a team leader in which two software developers were tasked with articulating ideas for what should be a ‘simplest editor.’ Throughout the conversation, the simplest editor is not yet a *thing* but is made present with the materials at hand, using talk and gesture but also notes and drawings on a whiteboard. Approaching the episode transitively, we may say that the software engineers were designing, creating, or imagining the design object, the simplest editor. We may then say that the designers use language in the way someone uses a tool. The process would in that case have been accounted for as a transitive, cause–effect relation that separates design action from design object first, and then works towards connecting them. By contrast, our goal is to find ways of describing design such that the design action and the design object are not divided a priori, but are seen as united in a process of *growing* (Ingold, 2013; Roth, 2016), both in relation to each other (transitive) and in relation to their joint future (intransitive). Anchored in the assumption that (design) discourses shape in very important ways what we can know and discover about design (Krippendorff, 2005), the purpose of this study is to elaborate on and empirically ground a type of discourse on design conversation that shall allow for treating design conversations intransitively.

We ask, *How can we conceive of conversation as a process that generates both designers and designed things without exclusive recourse to either?* and *What can be learned from such a conception?* Consistent with the performative premises elaborated here, we address these questions by analysing *the joint, irreducibly social work* that it takes two software engineers to imagine a ‘simplest editor’ in and through a design conversation. Analysing the conversation while giving primacy to the social involves considering designing in its *intransitive*

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