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Ideology and Ethics in the Discourse of Designers: A Corpus Study

1. Introduction

Within the broader frame of English for Special Purposes (ESP) and English for professional communication, this chapter sets out to analyse the discourse of Designers with the aim of identifying their ideology, i.e. their professional credo, their beliefs, principles and disciplinary debate construed together with some of the major ethical issues represented.

Literature on ideology and discourse includes some major interdisciplinary works by Eagleton 1991; Gee 1992, 1996; Kress/Hodge 1993; Simpson 1993; and van Dijk (in particular, van Dijk 1998). In general, scholars seem to oscillate between, on the one hand, a socio-cultural view of the role of language conceptualised as language in action, language as tied up with the context in which it functions, and expressing, reproducing, if not constructing, ideologies, and, on the other hand, a more psychological cognitive approach to the study of the shaping of ideologies as products of the mind.

Van Dijk attempts to synthesize both traditions by putting forward the concept of ideology as ‘social cognition’, that is, the systems of beliefs, thoughts and ideas at the basis of the social representations shared by members of a group (van Dijk 1998: 9). What is relevant to our purposes is the unanimous focus on ideology as a semiotic and discursive phenomenon.

Particularly, on ideology and professional communication an influential article by Goodwin (1994: 606) argues for the notion of ‘professional vision’ which foregrounds “socially organised ways of seeing and understanding events that are answerable to the distinctive

interests of a particular social group". Goodwin's argument, as well as its reprise in Goodwin/Goodwin (1997), stresses how all professional tools are templates developed by a given profession to classify phenomena and shape their representation of reality, a particular way of viewing and understanding. Thus, any professional vision entails a particular perspective which distinguishes it from that of other professions. Again, discursive practices play a fundamental role in such a vision.

The same socio-cultural view of language in the professions forms the basis of some recent volumes on specialized language. Among others, Gunnarsson *et al.* (1997), on the construction of professional discourse, claim that professional genres are a reflection of the ideologies of the professional group in that they respond to both cognitive, i.e. knowledge-based, and social, i.e. situational, functional, demands. Gotti (2004: 9) deploys the term 'culture' to refer to "standardised social practices peculiar to a specific professional group".

So, whether professional vision or culture, ideology in its most inclusive meaning can be understood as a way of displaying membership in a particular social group or social network. This stress on group membership and on the value-systems associated with it brings into play the other related issue of identity (as also pointed out by Bondi 2004, quoting Gee 1996).

As far as Design is concerned, disciplinary and professional identity is the topic of numerous publications in the field, especially by Design historians and methodologists (Margolin 1989; de Vries *et al.* 1993; Margolin/Buchanan 1995; Bayazit 2004) who, in tracing the history of Design, also try to define its disciplinary and professional boundaries. As will be shown in the Results and Discussion section, the discourse of *ICSIDNews* (the official bulletin of the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design) proves to have the same concern with establishing the identity of this relatively new discipline.

With these theoretical premises in mind, the present study aims to show how the discourse of Designers contributes to the creation of an ideology in terms of group membership and identity shared by practitioners of the broadly defined Design community. Ethics will be treated as a sub-category of ideology to include the value-judgments, prescriptions, evaluations having to do with the moral sphere investing

prescriptions, evaluations having to do with the moral sphere investing professional practices *in situ* (see also Eagleton 1991: 17). Issues of Design and ethics are on the agenda of current international reflections coming from within the profession itself (see, for example, the European conference held in June 2006 specifically on ‘Design, Ethics and Humanism: Products, Services, the Environment and Responsibilities of Designers’), as well as courses being included in many University curricula, which introduce students to real-world ethical problems connected with the professional practice, e.g., public welfare and technological disasters, environmental degradation, supportive economy and fair trade, the role of technologies in fighting a war, and also business ethics.

1.1. Study outline

To this purpose, a computerized corpus has been constructed as a representative sample of Designers’ talk, as can be found in such major platform for sharing experience and reflection¹ as the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID) is. In joining about 150 member organisations in more than 50 countries all over the world, ICSID well represents the ongoing debate on Design issues, research and practices. Particularly, the corpus is a selection of issues of the official bulletin of the association, namely *ICSIDNews* (see the Data and Methodology section for more details).

Due to its propagandistic nature, *ICSIDNews* shows how an overt ideology is construed in this kind of discourse. The Industrial Designers’ creed, their professional vision, is spelt out explicitly and manifestly. Their culture is stated rather than evoked. However, corpus linguistics research with its data-driven approach may reveal significant things about professional communicative practices which are not immediately visible, but rather more hidden, that is, embedded into subtle linguistic features. Such insights will hopefully contribute

1 The notion has also been labelled ‘reflective practice’, as found in Sarangi/Candlin (2003: 276), who refer to the work of Donald Schön and to his argument that practitioners in all professions reflect on what they routinely do.

an extra tool towards helping Designers, both theoreticians and practitioners, in their reflective practice.²

Therefore, by combining quantitative and qualitative linguistic analysis, the study first compares the Designers' corpus wordlist with the frequency wordlist of a larger general corpus of written English. Second, it analyses the concordances of some of the most significant items that have emerged through the comparison, according to the theory of phraseology (i.e., collocation, colligation and semantic prosody). The concordances are then expanded in order to be able to grasp strands of meaning construed across the text, not just the corpus. Finally, the lexical clustering thus identified is broken down into macro-areas pointing to ideology and ethics.

Before moving to language, ideology and ethics, however, let us briefly define what Industrial Design (hereafter ID) is.

1.2. Definitions of Industrial Design

Industrial Design is broadly defined as the planning and manufacturing of industrial products or services (Bonsiepe 1975; Hauffe 1998; Lidwell *et al.* 2003),³ which can range from articles of daily use, such as furniture, domestic appliances and clothing to tanks and rockets, surgical instruments, wheelchairs and invalid beds. ID extends from limited editions of chairs and glasses to cars, industrial machines, and also includes the design of services such as telecommunications, or new arrays of software tools for designing, thus reaching as far as the total dematerialization of the digital world (Winter 2000).

2 I will not address here the issue of the ethical responsibility of the linguist as researcher towards the community of professional practitioners and the usefulness of such kind of analysis. However, for a thought-provoking contribution see Sarangi/Candlin's introduction to the Special Issue of *Applied Linguistics* on Researching the Discourses of Workplace Practice (cf. Sarangi/Candlin 2003).

3 For a more recent phrasing, see the definition given in the ICSID homepage <<http://www.icsid.org>>: "Design is a creative activity whose aim is to establish the multi-faceted qualities of objects, processes, services and their systems in whole life-cycles."

To get an idea of the far-reaching scope and influence ID has, one can compare the Vodka bottle designed by the celebrated architect Frank O. Gehry with his project of the skyscrapers for the competition of the New Lombardy Region Headquarters: by vertically twisting along its longitudinal axis (Figure 1), the Wyborowa bottle conceptually contaminates what would be more properly classified as Architectural Design, namely his skyscrapers (Figure 2).



Figure 1. The Wyborowa Vodka bottle designed by Frank O. Gehry.

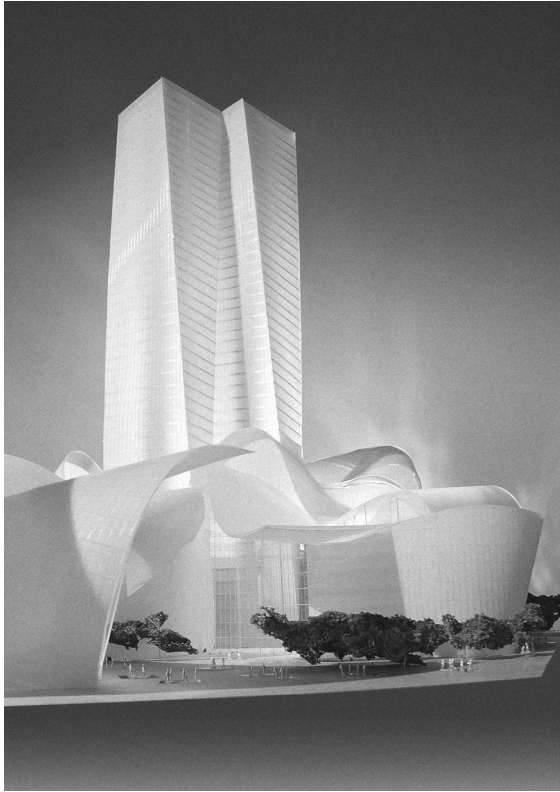


Figure 2. Frank O. Gehry's project for the New Seat of the Lombardy Region in Milan, Italy (published in *Abitare* 441, 2004).⁴

ID itself and the profession of the Industrial Designer started with the Industrial Revolution and large-scale production, and with it also that misleading separation typical of the modern age between form and function (Bonsiepe 1975; Hauffe 1998). In the 19th century, as a result of reform movements in the areas of craft, social engagement and development of taste, the slogan 'form follows function' was coined, i.e. the idea that form should suit its function with no superfluous ornamentation and that the language of form should be simple and

4 See also *Il Giornale dell'Ingegnere*, 53/3, 2005, for more on this project.

standardised. The theory of ‘functionalism’ thus dictated the definition of design (Hauffe 1998: 13). The form-function controversy is a long-standing one. As a matter of fact, it also affects the way Designers consider themselves nowadays, that is, as the necessary interface between human-beings and commodities, in an attempt to overcome any non-organic separation. This topic is explored in the next sections in the light of the data analysis.

2. Data and methodology

The study was carried out on a corpus consisting of issues of the official bulletin of the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID). Particularly, the articles contained in all issues of volume 2003 and part of 2004 of *ICSIDNews*⁵ were put together to form a computer-readable corpus. Given the size of the corpus, by no means do I intend to generalize the conclusions which have been drawn on the basis of the data observed. The insights obtained are necessarily limited to a span of time of roughly two years. More data will be needed to claim that the results of this small-scale study can be extended to a more general level. However, ICSID, which was established in 1957 to advance the discipline of ID at the international level,⁶ today plays a major role in aggregating members worldwide. It is thus well representative of the community of Designers and their discourse.

The methodology followed combines quantitative and qualitative analysis. It is quantitative in that it uses some of the standard resources available to corpus studies, namely word frequency lists, phrase frequency lists and concordances. It also draws comparisons between corpora, particularly the ID corpus with the written BNC World Edition, through the Wordsmith Tools suite of programmes,

5 As of March 2004 the format of *ICSIDNews* changed and it is now more strictly a newsletter with no feature articles except for the editorial.

6 The information is taken from the site, <<http://www.icsid.org>>.

both version 3.0 and the latest one, 4.0, in an attempt to assess the significance of certain words found to be frequent in the corpus under study.

Regularity or patterning is one of the distinctive outcomes of corpus-driven studies (Stubbs 2001; Tognini-Bonelli 2001). In other words, the typical concordance foregrounds language patterns that would otherwise remain hidden or at least subliminal to a more traditional reading of individual texts and it thus allows for a linguistic mapping which casts new light on this type of discourse. At the same time, however, the methodology does not reject a more qualitative approach to the data insofar as it considers phenomena that are not numerically significant, but which might provide valuable linguistic insights.

By comparing the wordlist of the ID corpus, a small and specialized one, with the wordlist of a much larger corpus of general English like the BNC World Edition, one gets an idea of which frequent words are statistically significant (Kilgarriff 2001) and can be considered 'keywords' (Scott 2000, 2001). In Table 1 below, some of the words found to be among the first 25 most significantly frequent in the ID corpus are given. Although the label 'keywords' can be misleading to the extent that it overemphasizes a functional role that these words have by default, the first few being clearly topic-dependent, the idea is that such a frequency list is a first step to then look at what surrounds these frequent words, i.e. their immediate co-text.

<i>Keyword</i>	<i>ID Corpus Freq.</i>	<i>Reference Corpus Freq.</i>	<i>Keyness</i>
DESIGN	486	12852	3867,55
DESIGNERS	88	964	848,84
ICSID	42	0	693,61
SUSTAINABLE	40	680	351,97
WE	292	300833	343,94
DISCIPLINES	38	1113	294,17
OUR	137	93455	249,17
DEVELOPMENT	84	32010	237,29
TECHNOLOGY	58	11685	232,20
WORLD	99	53806	217,81
PRODUCTS	50	10587	195,46
KNOWLEDGE	53	14372	182,66
PYRAMID	22	488	182,21
SOLUTIONS	31	2541	177,69
AFRICA	41	7295	173,78
BARRIERS	26	1445	168,72
SANITATION	16	160	157,07
NEED	77	54873	134,41
INDUSTRIAL	39	11457	128,61
QUALITY	44	16223	126,86
AND	982	2624341	120,12
CREATIVE	23	2478	119,62

Table 1. Most frequent words in the ID corpus when compared with the written BNC World Edition.

Moreover, besides the first two or three words on top of the list, the next few further down are revealing in that they trigger a different reading of the texts in which they are found and ultimately help reconstruct the picture that is summarized in the following section. Notice, for example, *sustainable*, *development*, *disciplines*, *technology*, *knowledge*, *solutions*, *need*, *quality*, but also the grammatical words *we* and *our*: all these function as pointers for the linguist who tries to decode the Designers’ ideology. They flag a semantic passage in the flow of discourse worth considering. Their concordance lines will

consequently be analysed with a view to checking their collocational behaviour.

In the following section, some results of the analysis are reported and discussed in relation to the twin themes of ideology and ethics.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Ideology

The following four points summarize what seems to be the ideology of Industrial Designers, as found in the data observed:

1. Looking for an identity: the FORM-FUNCTION controversy;
2. The rhetoric of cross-disciplinary knowledge: breadth vs. depth;
3. Designers as facilitators and problem-solvers;
4. Design for the sake of something good.

As far as Point 1 is concerned, the question goes back to the discussions on the design qualities a product should have. The issue has gone through various reformulations at different times, but is still a crucial question in the ongoing discussions and seems to be taken up in terms of identity of the profession of Designers. As has been briefly introduced in section 1.1, 19th century reform movements separated the functional qualities of an object from its formal features. Quality meant that a thing worked, while form referred to the more superficial, ornamental and also symbolic qualities of an object, that is, the fact that it is beautiful and that it tells a story (Hauffe 1998). This implied that the Designer was either capable of dealing with the former or with the latter aspect of the design process, but not with both. Such a view necessarily separated the one concerned with the determination of a product's form, but 'technologically illiterate' (Bonsiepe 1975: 18), from the one who solves the technical problems, namely the engineer,

but leaves to somebody else, precisely the designer, the aesthetic and creative side of the design process.⁷

Ill at ease with such misleading divisions of knowledge fields, Designers today advocate a unity of thought, an organic rather than non-organic approach, where they find the ideal niche of their professional activity, thus, their very identity. Therefore, the question of professional identity seems to be rooted in the attempt to go beyond the form-function controversy.

A search for *identit** (with the wildcard to include both the singular and the plural forms) has provided evidence of this interpretation by allowing us to shift from the vertical reading of the concordance to the text (see Table 2).

Table 2. Concordance of *identit** (left-sorted).

rica does not have a coherent *identity* or continental design
 hat give them their discrete *identities*? Why is everyone t
 never quite established firm *identities* in the first place
 ook that tries to define its *identity* and parameters -Natha
 bsolutely clear sense of its *identity* and boundaries. Ess
 e. Versions of this 'mixed' *identity* persist: is design ab
 tion between the branding of *identity*, the Johannesburg c
 asingly becoming factors of *identity*, supporting both in
 need to declare overtly our *identity* the less we really be
 ns and the old professional *identities* and divisions. We
 s a very radical idea, that '*identity crisis*' could be a go
 ing or aesthetics? All these *identities* exist under the br
 y and pedagogy, a universal *identity* remains elusive. Agai

This discussion leads us on to the next point, which is closely connected to the previous one. That is, the paradox of Design being simultaneously interdisciplinary and subject to specialization, as a consequence of the amount of information and technical knowledge available. Such paradox is sometimes worded as breadth vs. depth. In fact, a recurrent motif in the articles in *ICSIDNews* is the willingness to forge inter-professional alliances, to move freely across boundaries of professions and sectors, without, however, de-legitimizing the discipline and the profession. Among the most recurrent phrases, we found *design as such* (that is, not any one field or specialty), *the design disciplines* (notably in the plural form), and *breaking down of*

7 On form and Design, see the very famous 1961 article by Louis Kahn (see the *References* for further bibliographical information).

barriers, or *blurring the barriers*. Designers go as far as to say that the essence of ID is its lack of essence. They argue that there is a direct link with its pre-Renaissance origins, when knowledge was not specialized yet. The rhetoric typical of a discipline born at the intersection of several others is centred around the prefixes *cross-* and *inter-*, and the prepositions *between* and *across*, all found to be frequent in the corpus. Such colligational patterns are complemented by metaphors like *ability to connect*, *to build bridges between knowledge fields*, *people and professions*, *to collaborate across boundaries*: the old separations are seen as increasingly irrelevant.

Point 3 is concerned with the way Designers see themselves, namely as facilitators or problem-solvers, without any further specification. This follows directly from the awareness that disciplinary knowledge bases are shifting constantly and that new challenges do not respect old professional divisions, that the methods, the modes of work and the technologies should cut across the field. The point is substantiated by the sequence *design solutions* which occurred among the most frequent phrases of the corpus.

Finally, Point 4 allows me to spend the next few paragraphs discussing in detail the observational procedure and some key linguistic concepts that have guided the research. The result referred to in this stage is the phrase *design for x*.

3.1.1. *Design for the sake of our well-being*

The analysis of the concordance lines of the most frequent word in the corpus, namely *design* (as could be easily expected from the nature of the corpus), revealed a less expected fact: a strong collocational pattern, *design for*, emerged.⁸ A look at the co-text to the immediate right, specifically the noun phrases complementing the preposition *for*, gave the following list of X's:

8 The strength of attraction of this collocate pair is again calculated by the computer programme.

Design FOR x

- need, not just for desire
- development
- sustainable development
- economic growth
- quality of life
- the improvement of the lives of people around us
- recycling
- the global scene
- the world
- the developing world
- the bottom of the pyramid.

Such a list can be interpreted in light of the four semantic categories of co-selection of words as proposed and developed by Sinclair (1991, 2003, and also 2004: 141): collocation, colligation, semantic preference and semantic prosody. According to Sinclair's definitions of the four categories, the collocates are those words that frequently co-occur in a text or corpus; they colligate if they also belong in specific grammatical categories, or parts-of-speech; they share the same semantic preference if they are ascribable to the same semantic field; and, finally, they might show a specific prosody if they convey an evaluation, whether positive or negative, good or bad.

Design and *for* are found to frequently co-occur in the corpus, and, as can be observed in the list above, the semantics of all the instances retrieved to the right of it share the same grammar, thus a colligational pattern, in that they all belong in the same prepositional phrase beginning with the preposition *for*. They also share the semantic feature of 'improvement of humankind' and, as a result, indicate a very positive evaluation of design, thus a positive semantic prosody.

Therefore, the *design for* sequence probes recent theoretical statements regarding the unit of meaning in language and the issue of how the nature of the phraseology influences the meaning of a word.⁹

9 The field of phraseology has been receiving increasing attention by corpus linguists; see, among others, Cowie (1998), Moon (1994) and (1998), and

Such influence is so strong that, it is argued, a unit larger than the single word is the ultimate repository of meaning (Sinclair 1991, 2004; Tognini-Bonelli 2001): in fact, the meaning of *design* is re-defined in its own turn by its collocates.¹⁰

In conclusion, the ideological stance of Design listed under Point 4 in section 3.1, ‘design for the sake / at the service of a good cause’, emerges as a pattern. It would not have been traceable otherwise, with the simple reading of each individual text. It has been possible to trace it as a consequence of the patterning. This very positive semantic prosody associated with the way design is seen by its practitioners could be related to the etymology of the word. In fact, from the Italian *disegno* (which, in its turn, comes from the Latin verb *designare*), it carries the positive meaning of “the drafting or drawing of a work and, in general, the idea at the root of it” (Hauffe 1998: 10).

3.2. Ethics

In this section I will comment on those issues that have proved to be the major ethical concerns, namely:

1. the issue of ‘glocal Design’, or, localization vs. globalization;
2. Eco-Design: sustainable development and environmental protection;
3. the rhetoric of Design for ‘the user, not the buyer’; and,
4. the humanization of technology.

Some of the lexico-grammatical strings analysed point to the crucial issue of ‘glocal’ Design, that is, the tension existing between the two opposing tendencies of globalization and localization. Designers are faced with what they call the paradox of a networked, interconnected world and the ‘other’ situation, when they observe that in our global economy while a product is available to us almost anywhere, from

more recently Erman/Warren (2000), Gledhill (2000), specifically on collocation and scientific discourse, and Wray (2002).

10 Elsewhere I have glossed this perspective to the study of meaning as ‘prosodic semantics’, drawing on the notion of semantic prosody (Louw 1993, 2002).

almost any spot in the world at almost any price (globalising tendency), the same product is never within reach where it is most needed. Against this backdrop, they claim, new design solutions (and here, the rhetoric of the Designer as problem-solver is central) should be searched for, which are suited to a local context. While they say that they need to look to innovative technologies, they also encourage their colleagues to look at ways in which local communities of the past coexisted with their surroundings, in order to find design solutions within the available means and the existing cultural context (localising tendency). This dual viewpoint is sometimes called ‘pre-industrial and post-industrial’ design. In fact, the concept of ‘glocal’ Design covers another dichotomy, that of crafted artefacts vs. industrially made products, also closely related to the main division just outlined.

In the concordance lines below, *local* occurs as a pre-modifier in various noun phrases. The head-nouns it modifies have been highlighted in italics. Notice that the word *local* acquires a positive semantic prosody in all the instances retrieved, often by virtue of expressions occurring in the left co-text (which have been underscored), such as *giving prominence to*, *knowledge of*, *suited to*, *organised as to involve*, *increasing*, *add value to*, etc.

Table 3. Concordance of *local* (right sorted).

<p>ss by <u>giving prominence to</u> <i>local</i> activity in design pro <u>establish teams</u> of experts, <i>local</i> and international, to d a hard day of farming. The <i>local</i> box manufacturer disco marrying his <u>knowledge of</u> <i>local</i> conditions to his se design solutions <u>suited to</u> a <i>local</i> context. Issues. Clearl ies, private companies, and <i>local</i> craftsmen could meet t od. Hijacking. It displaces <i>local</i> cultures, depletes the ve had a lot more impact on <i>local</i> design challenges than rather settled already. The <i>local</i> design agendas that conf as <u>organised to involve</u> the <i>local</i> design community in brin overnment advisors and the <i>local</i> design business communi ultural business, <u>increasing</u> <i>local</i> employment. Traditiona ot of <u>important</u> regional and <i>local</i> events can be arranged sible by using the web and <i>local</i> IDA interest chapter vidual, personal and often <i>local</i> in nature, and they bear Botswana to <u>add value to</u> its <i>local</i> materials to turn them able of <u>moderating between</u> <i>local</i> needs and global requir lp groups (SHGs) through a <i>local</i> NGO. These are group t is that other agenda - the <i>local</i> one - that really count ed flights, bewildered as to <i>local</i> time and currencies an economy where desperate <i>local</i> unemployment needs t n Nepal, further <u>increasing</u> <i>local</i> wealth; - children can</p>

The second point, that of Eco-Design, sustainable development and environmental protection, is as crucial as the first one, and one that is advocated repeatedly. Indeed, *sustainable* and *development* both occurred among the most frequent keywords and they are also found to collocate repeatedly in the corpus (see Table 1). That economic progress can impose an excessive burden on the environment is an acknowledged fact. Any good design, a design for the improvement of the quality of life, should, therefore, be guided by principles of sustainability to keep the impact on the environment to a minimum.

Point 3, which I have glossed as ‘users vs. buyers’, once again brings in the question of who – in a system of production and consumption – should be the final beneficiaries of ID and stresses the contrast existing between the bare needs of a major part of the world population and the brand builders, the marketing analysts and other corporations which are the protagonists of our economy. According to the discourse of *ICSIDNews*, Designers should help the developing countries to use the possibilities of ID in their planning processes. ID should be concerned with problems of urban poverty, such as unsafe housing, lack of clean water and lack of sanitation services – all conceived of as ID issues which should be addressed and solved by Designers.

Finally, Point 4, the humanization of technology summarizes the whole ethical view of Designers. In sum, the expression *humanization of technology*, as found in the corpus, means that they are positioning themselves as the necessary interface between humans and the goods and services they produce, supporting cultural diversity despite the globalization of the world.

4. Some conclusions

By way of conclusion, I would like to emphasize that there seems to be a clear collective identity in the discourse of Industrial Design shared by its professional practitioners, at least as far as the discourse

of *ICSIDNews* has shown. Of course, it should be kept in mind that propaganda is indeed one of the functions of the examined genre, and therefore, so strong an identity might not emerge when analysing other discourse types, like, for example, research articles. Instead, more diversified tendencies and concerns might replace the homogeneous picture given here.

Such identity emerges from a purely linguistic analysis that combines corpus methodology with a more traditional text-based examination. In light of the findings reported, it seems possible to maintain that by giving prominence to collocational patterns together with their semantic prosodies, the corpus helps to better understand a specialist field such as Design. As has been shown when discussing the implications of the phrase *design for x*, or the collocational behaviour of *local*, regularities crop up that were not visible through the initial text analysis, which provide the analyst with a different interpretative key to this kind of domain-specific discourse.

The concept of ideology has been broken down into identity and ethics, that is, on the one hand, those aspects of self-representation of the profession having to do with its role and professional tools, and on the other, those more strictly ethical matters of individual, social and global responsibility. A partial circularity has emerged between ideology and ethics insofar as Designers seem to characterise their identity by claiming the centrality of some major ethical issues, like the enhancement of the value of life achieved through the practice of a Design for All, which is said to be the ultimate task of Industrial Design.

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