

Agnieszka Kołodziej
University of Wrocław
agnieszka.kolodziej@uwr.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0001-5099-8305

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The Double Life of a Packet of Sugar. The Noise(lessness) of Communication of the Items of Everyday Use

ABSTRACT: Kołodziej Agnieszka, *The Double Life of a Packet of Sugar. The Noise(lessness) of Communication of the Items of Everyday Use*, "Poznańskie Studia Slawistyczne" 23. Poznań 2022. Wydawnictwo "Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne," Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, pp. 341–349. ISSN 2084-3011.

This review discusses the book by Aleksander W. Mikołajczak and Patryk Boro-
wiak entitled *Design saszetki z cukrem. O komunikowaniu się z rzeczami* (On the Design
of a Packet of Sugar. How We Communicate with Objects). The text focuses on the
interactions between people and objects, a phenomenon intrinsic to postmoder-
nity, or the contemporary consumerist culture. The work is a peculiar biograp-
hy of the packet of sugar and presents a multifaceted exploration thereof. The
authors depart from the commonly conducted statistical analysis of the object
of interest and instead endeavour to present the full extent of its existence and
all the subsequent stages of its life, pointing to the complexity and the volatility
of the process; this should be considered an innovative approach at its own right.
The packet of sugar is viewed not only in the sociocultural perspective, but also
through the lens of linguistics and onomastics.

KEYWORDS: sociocultural perspective; design; sugar; onomastics; communi-
cation

A large portion of our reality is made up of objects, things that we use in our everyday life. A comparison can be drawn to a jigsaw puzzle: small or large pieces shaped in a specific way that come together as a coherent whole. All the pieces seem important, indispensable even, as only the full set can complete “the puzzle,” the depiction of our reality.

The attraction to the products of material culture and the social transition from modernity to postmodernity have set a new direction for research, which now focuses on the object while the subject has lost its prevalence. Jean Baudrillard, a French sociologist and culture theorist, believed that postmodernity is indeed the era of objects while modernity was the era of subjects (Barański, 2007, 27). According to him, humanity exists in the world in which the objects can have a multitude of values assigned to them, which notably stands in contrast with the views from the previous eras (Baudrillard, 2006, 7); these become very visible in the process of using those objects. The idea of undertaking a study that explores objects and their history entails that a broad, maximalist definition of culture is embraced. That culture goes beyond the “high register”, instead accepting those elements that are simple, basic and whose importance is very often forgotten or not even realised.

The interactions between the humans and the objects around them allow the researchers to approach objects as the components of social life (Olsen, 2013, 7–9), assigned to particular roles and accompanying humans in their everyday lives. It is when using objects, whose core role is to perform tasks, that a human engages in a communicative situation.

The studies on the components of material culture impose an interdisciplinary approach; Marek Krajewski aptly notices that material culture itself should be approached as a construct with an internal hierarchy (Krajewski, 2005, 7–9). Such analysis is required in the case of the packet of sugar. Though it seems it might be just a scrap of paper containing some white sweet powder, it is much more than that: a dichotomous object, both material and noetic, existing both in our reality and as a mental concept. This creates a peculiar relationship that establishes communication between the object and the subject: the human and the object created by culture. The entirety of this relationship leads to a stratification of the images that people have: what they wear, drive and eat (considering the situational context of these phenomena and

activities) begins to represent them and places them in the social hierarchy, providing information about their interests, habits, strengths and weaknesses. Communication with objects is therefore a multifaceted process that encompasses the social, psychological and historical dimensions (Barański, 2007, 87).

In his introduction to a collection of the sociological articles entitled *W stronę socjologii przedmiotów* (Towards the sociology of objects), Krajewski indicates that the studies conducted so far make it possible to distinguish certain defining features of objects that emphasise the importance thereof as well as their universality:

[P]rzedmoty stanowią system, że są materializacją i obiektywizacją istniejących w danej kulturze systemów wartości, ale też, że ich używanie wytwarza społeczną i kulturową rzeczywistość, że aktualizuje jej zasady; że są *rzeczami wykonanymi* nie tylko w sensie materialnym, ale przede wszystkim społecznym; że ich używanie nie sprowadza się do stosowania ich jako narzędzi, ale przenoszą one znaczenia i je chronią, że są funkcjoznakami, obiektami przejściowymi, że reprezentują tożsamości zbiorowe i indywidualne; że stajemy się dzięki nim samoświadomymi osobami—nie tylko bowiem pozwalają one wyrażać siebie w sposób zrozumiały dla innych, ale też porozumiewać się z samym z sobą; że nie tylko oznaczają przynależność do określonej wspólnoty, ale również bardzo często są jedynym powodem, dla którego wspólnota się staje i trwa w czasie; że mają swoją *biografię*, że ich stabilizacyjna rola ulega dziś zachwianiu, bo ich znaczenia, wytwarzane na potrzeby promocji, są niestabilne itd. (Krajewski, 2005, 8).

([O]bjects constitute a system, thereby being a materialisation and objectivisation of the value systems of a given culture; moreover, their use shapes social and cultural realities and amends their rules. They are *created objects*, but not only in the tangible sense, but, mostly, in the social one; the use of objects is not restricted to them being tools, as they carry and protect meanings; they are function signs, transitory objects that represent collective and individual identities; they make us conscious, as they allow us to both express ourselves in a way that is understandable to the others and to communicate with ourselves; they denote our

belonging to a given community, but also are often the sole reason for which communities form and last; they have their own *biography*; nowadays, their role as stabilisers is often subverted, as their meanings, created for promotional purposes, lose their anchorage etc.)

The monograph consists of six chapters and a preface, supplemented with a reference section, an index of persons, an index of images and their sources, and a summary in English.

The preface wonderfully introduces the content of the subsequent chapters. It considers both the ontological and the symbolic dimensions of the packet of sugar and indicates how complex this notion really is. The reference to the practices of Baba Vanga, a blind Bulgarian mystic, is perhaps the most striking example here. Though her prophecies are well known, many are not aware that she sometimes used a cube of sugar as the medium. The cube would be placed under the pillow of the person wishing to 'discover their future' and then was tasted by the mystic. That usage-based relationship thus opened up a peculiar communicative space. In the act of tasting the cube of sugar that represented the object, a real entity, Baba Vanga arrived at her projections; these in turn were related to the abstract ideas occurring in the mental sphere or to presentification of the object.

The authors themselves state that "the book is an attempt to reinterpret the existing approach to design as both the 'language of objects' and the designed form of objects" (Krajewski, 2005, 15). In their approach to design, they go beyond the classical analysis of objects that, in Aristotle's terms, are built of form and matter; instead, they consider the "entire life" of objects and various stages of their creation, thus perceiving the process of creation of those objects as a dynamical phenomenon.

Each of the six chapters can be approached as a specific stage of the object's creation while the book as a whole is a peculiar "biography" of the packet of sugar.

The authors explore the packet of sugar as a component of the consumer culture through its properties and its connections to marketing and sales. As they unveil the cultural and social history of sugar, they emphasise the importance of technology (and the evolution thereof) used for the production of sugar for its use and embodiment.

The core goal of the newly designed object is to engage in an interaction with its user. Thus, the packaging seems important. It is worth mentioning that the packaging itself is not simply the item that protects the product; instead, the packaging plays many roles, e.g. marketing and social, the role of “a mute salesman” (Romek, Tarnawski, 2007, 7). The appearance of the packages (objects) does to a large extent define the success of the marketing communication process. Many factors are important here: colour, shape, pragmatics, informativeness; in other words, certain rules of neurodesign should be followed (colour, contrast, simplification, centralisation, multisensory level). The authors have thoroughly explained all those aspects.

In their description of the design process (in this case, the patterns on the packet), the authors refer to the aspects of function complex defined by Victor Papanek as: the method, the use, the necessity, the teleis, the association and the aesthetics (Mikołajczak, Borowiak, 2020, 51–71). They also point to the relationship between the function of the packets of sugar and the approach to their packaging and customisation.

After it is designed and produced, the object enters the next stage, i.e. the commodification, through which it becomes a commodity. At this stage, the object is approached as a marketing instrument. The authors highlight that for the commodity to play its marketing role, certain components of marketing have to be used. These have been classified by Edmund Jerome McCarthy as 4P, i.e. product, price, promotion, place (Mikołajczak, Borowiak, 2020, 96).

Moreover, a large role here is played by the graphical presentation of the object and the use of visual cultureemes which are, to a certain degree, rooted in the history and culture of a given society or nation. The authors propose the concept of an emblem which includes the inscription (as a lemma) and a logo/imago: the image, as well as the subscript, which is a piece of information that explains the relationship between the image and inscription. There are many examples of the packets of sugar that contain visual cultureemes deeply rooted in a particular national history: the packets of the Ukrainian company ТОВ-Конді come with the pattern representing Ukrainian embroidery and the English lemma “ЦУКОР SUGAR”; Croatian packets made by the company EURO NOVA refer to the Glagolitic script and come with a black and white drawing of

Poreč and a lemma that contains, i.a., information regarding the name and the address of the producer and the weight of the product; finally, the Bulgarian packets refer to the *chalga* genre¹, using the images of sparsely dressed women and innuendo in its slogan: “We are working for you” (Bulgarian: *НИЕ РАБОТИМ ЗА ВАС*).

The linguists might be interested in the section of the book that is a (successful) effort to build an onomastic and iconic classification. They stress that the existing onomastic analyses focus on the message alone that is conveyed by a particular onym while disregarding its iconological sphere (Mikołajczak, Borowiak, 2020, 123). Hence, the efforts to expand the way in which the analysis is conducted does indeed appear valid. At the onomastic level that is reflected by the lemma, three categories of chrematonyms are provided: ergonyms, pragmatonyms and ontonyms. The definitions of these categories, however, do not necessarily match the terminology used in the field. Ergonyms and pragmatonyms are already present in the onomastic dictionary, while ontonyms have been proposed by the authors of this monograph. When building those categories, the authors consistently used the Greek etymology of the words. The meaning of ergonym is narrowed down to the proper name of a given product but excludes the proper name of the brand or company; pragmatonyms (the names of objects in the context of sales, services and manufacturing) retain the meaning assumed by Artur Gałkowski; ontonyms are understood as the specific names of objects, e.g. historic sites and tourist attractions. Some of the proper names for the objects that the researchers refer to as ontonyms are viewed as chrematonyms and toponyms, which is caused by the setting they occur in and their basic functions. The sphere of chrematonyms reaches further than just the number and the variety of the objects being named and the newly devised names. That sphere also involves the notion of establishing proper names that refer to the particular creations and products. Some of them become commonplace in the onomastic terminology and gain international recognition while the others are used infrequently

1 A Bulgarian genre that combines the native elements with Arabic, Greek, Turkish and Gypsy themes.

and remain confined to a particular language area. The proposed word, “ontonym,” remains transparent both meaning- and structure-wise. It does not sound artificial, and neither is it a hybrid word. One might only question whether this term could be permanently included into the onomastic dictionary or whether it should only be used in the analyses similar to the one conducted by Mikołajczak and Borowiak. It has to be noted that the onomastic terminology currently trends towards a more systematised approach, which can be exemplified by the work of the ICOS teams; as a result, new terminology is introduced quite rarely.

The iconic sphere encompasses four categories: signs, indications, allegories and symbols. Philip Kotler’s division of advertising objectives is used by the authors to propose the model of the relationship between the chrematonym and icon categories and the advertising objectives.

The functioning of the packets of sugar in the world and their ephemerality are the two final matters considered by the book. It would appear that cafés and other such venues are the natural environments for packets of sugar. However, for a packet to come to exist and be used, it does require both context and “company” of other entities, as the packet obtains its value exclusively through a relationship with humans. Hence, the “life” of such a packet is characterised by ephemerality and fugacity. Once it “debuts” on the table at a café, its role is over; the packet is ripped apart and its content ends up in a cup of coffee or tea. As the authors aptly note, the moment the packet is used, it is also destroyed; this emphasises its disposability, a characteristic that is typical of the contemporary consumerist culture.

The book shows that even simple, trivial things or objects may hide a plethora of important cultural, technological and philological ideas. Decoding the language of packets of sugar does give an insight into the culture and history of a society or a nation.

Perhaps the only shortcoming of the reviewed monograph is the volume. Even though the book has 200 pages and fits all the volume requirements placed on such works, the sheer amount of information conveyed by the authors, the threads they open and, most importantly, the narration of the text are so interesting and coherent that they make the reader crave for more chapters.

The scope of the text is limited to the packet of sugar, which is probably a thousandth or a millionth part of the set of objects around us; it does appear that every object that we interact with during our day to day existence and communicate with deserves a similar analysis. Given all the above, it should be recognised that this work can be an excellent matrix for similar analyses. It is worth making the effort to unpack the “language” of other objects that accompany our everyday rituals, such as preparing tea or coffee.

A similar methodology can be assumed for the studies of many other objects related to consumerist culture: the smaller objects such as the mini-butter packages, various cheeses or even the entire; and the more sizeable set of daily activities typical for sweets, coffees, teas, spices and other foods as well as the various household appliances. The analyses of many of them could transcend the purely sociocultural or onomastic approaches, as was done by the authors of this reviewed monograph. Given the assumption that the packaging constitutes the main marketing tool, an increasing number of companies decides to make their products stand out. To do so, these packagings include the graphical culturemes specific to the particular region or city; next to the respectiveonyms of the product, these packages hence also contribute to the success of the product and the company promoting it.

The authors of the monograph depart from the existing approaches to describing objects through their static features and as the ready-made products. Instead, they find it more suitable to present the entire extent of the existence of these objects, which is very much akin to the basic stages of human life: conception, birth, puberty, adulthood, the elderly years and eventually, death. This notion of viewing a packet of sugar through a dynamic perspective is undeniably a huge strength of the reviewed text and marks it as an innovative work.

The monograph can also be understood as an invitation of sorts, directed at the representatives of other disciplines from humanities and beyond to cooperate and conduct further interdisciplinary studies on the world of objects and the phenomenon of communicating with these objects. The authors propose a basis for future analyses to be undertaken and indicate how broad the scope of these studies could be,

as well as the wealth of the methodological tools that could potentially be used for the description.

When pondering over the design of the packet of sugar, it is also worth paying attention to the very cover of the text being reviewed and what it is trying to convey. The answer is simple: straightforward in form, with the image of the symbolically torn packet, it assures the transparency of the content and reliability of the information contained within.

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- **AGNIESZKA KOŁODZIEJ**—holds a doctoral degree in humanities, in linguistics. She is employed at the University of Wrocław, Poland and is the head of the Centre for Slavic Onomastics at the Institute of Slavic Studies of the University of Wrocław. Her research interests are centred around comparative zoonomastics and chrematonomastics, cultural linguistics, cultural anthropology and language policy. She has authored the monograph entitled *W kręgu urbozoonimii słowiańskiej. Studium porównawcze nazewnictwa*

zwierząt pokojowych w wybranych językach zachodnio- i południowosłowiańskich (The Urban Zoonymy of the Slavic Countries. A Comparative Study of How Pet Animals Are Named in the Selected Western- and Southern-Slavic Languages, Wrocław, 2019), as well as several articles related to various onymic categories.