

Title: From words to tags. The information revolution as a materialization of the link between words and things.

Abstract: The current information revolution could be characterized in several ways. We would like to insist on one of its most fundamental aspects: the way it affects language itself.

With the advent of the Web, first conceived as a giant hypertext system linking documents to one another, hyperlinking became a ubiquitous feature. The rise of social tagging Web services (like delicious or Flickr) has long since demonstrated how useful associating words (and linguistic expressions in general) to hyperlinks could prove for information retrieval, knowledge-sharing, categorization, etc.

Not only were those services successful, they also betokened an evolution towards more materiality (be it in the forensic sense of the word or the formal one, to borrow concepts from Matthew Kirschenbaum¹). Indeed, as much material devices as semiotic ones, tags exhibit a remarkable duality. While the symbolic bonds between words and things do not the least require to be implemented in any way (no technical apparatus is necessary for a word to point to an object, no artifact will ever make up for this possibility), on the other hand, as regards tags, the relation between a tag and the Web resource it grants access to is produced through technology (thanks to the Hypertext Transfer Protocol, HTTP, in the case of the Web).

David Kaplan² once wrote that “when we construct a model we must distinguish those features of the model which represent features of that which we model, from those features which are intrinsic to the model and play no representational role”. Now, what characterizes the advent of the information and digital revolution is how difficult it has become to judge what exactly is intrinsic to the model and hence considered irrelevant to what is, by contrast, relevant.

Furthermore, by all accounts, what is realized through technology does not only play a representational role in relation to an abstraction. Books are *not* tantamount to materialized texts full of irrelevant features. Material forms contribute to the expression of meaning. We are thus led to believe that the increasing materiality typical of the digital age makes it necessary to take into account the effects of these new material forms – against early accounts of the virtual. Thanks to such artifacts through which meaning is now expressed as tagging systems, it becomes clear that our comprehension of language forbids any clear-cut separation between the technological and the purely symbolic levels.

¹ Kirschenbaum, M.G. (2008), *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*, MIT Press.

² Kaplan, D. (1975), How to Russell a Frege-Church, *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 72, No. 19, Seventy-Second Annual Meeting American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division, pp. 716-729.