Semiotics' Razor: Or, how to tell products' signification apart from products' communication

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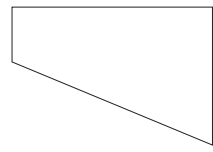
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Semiotics' Razor.
Or, how to tell products' signification apart from products' communication.

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The paper investigates the difference between product signification and product communication by describing the case of the Sensors for Women razors. The paper accounts for the different role the figure of "water" plays for Sensor for Women and SensorExcel for Women, thanks to a semiotic analysis of the two models, which considers also their packaging and their commercials. Whereas water as a "figure" is largely used in Sensor's communication, it tends to disappear in SensorExcel's communication. Nevertheless, "water" plays a role in the signification of both razors. This role is described by analyzing, through to the semiotics of bodies, the way in which the two razors dispose the contact with the shaving and the shaved bodies.

Cette essai examine la différence entre signification du produit, et communication du produit en décrivant le cas des rasoirs Sensors pour Elle. Cette essai rend compte du différent rôle que la figure de l'« eau » joue pour les deux rasoirs, Sensor for Women et SensorExcel for Women, grâce à une analyse sémiotique de deux modèles, qui considère aussi leur packaging et leur pubs. Alors que l'« eau » en tant que figure est largement utilisé dans la communication de Sensor, elle tend à disparaitre dans la communication de SensorExcel. Et pourtant, l'« eau » a-t-elle un rôle dans la signification des deux rasoirs. Ce rôle est décrit à partir d'une analyse, à travers les outils de la sémiotique des corps, de la manière avec laquelle les deux rasoirs disposent le contact avec le corps rasé et le corps qui rade.

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1. Dropping water. An Introduction.

1.1. Configurations

An oval rounded slab, bent on one end, is connected to a smaller rectangular frame. The rectangular frame is positioned perpendicularly to the bent end of the rounded oval slab.

The oval slab contains, within itself, another smaller oval shape. The rectangular frame contains various horizontal plates.

Though a single object, the strong contrast emerging from the juxtaposition of the concentric oval slab to the horizontally structured rectangular frame gives way to a split configuration (Fig. 1).

The description I just proposed applies for both products displayed in Fig. 1. However, the two products, though very similar, are different. Some of the differences are easily visible from the picture of Fig. 1. Others need a more attentive scrutiny.

One displays a strong contrast between light-green and white hues all over its parts (Fig. 1a); the other (Fig. 1b) displays mainly shades of light-blue, with some white and silver elements on the rectangular frame. The inner oval, contained in the slab of the green-and-white-contrasted one, is transparent, light-green, hard, sliding and rough – striated with twelve parallel undulated lines in relief. The inner oval, contained in the slab of the light-blue-shaded one is opaque, light-blue, soft, braking and rough – densely filled with many undulated soft fins.

Other differences emerge if we look at the rectangular frame (Fig. 2). The frame of the green-and-white-contrasted one (Fig. 2a) hosts three elements – two even thin silver plates, accommodated within the very frame, and an overhanging rough light-green strip, which is positioned on the bar of the frame. The frame of the light-blue-shaded one, in addition to the three previously mentioned elements, hosts a fourth blue horizontally striated soft strip on the bottom, opposite to the other strip (Fig. 2b).

a. Sensor for Women (1991) — b. SensorExcel for Women (1995)
Figure 1. Sensors

a. Sensor for Women's head — b. SensorExcel for Women's head
Figure 2. Sensors' heads

1.2. Products

What I have just described are two different products. Actually, one (Fig. 1b) is the upgraded model of the other (Fig. 1a). Despite the unusual oval slab, the two products can be identified as razors – two safety razors – thanks to the more usual frame of the head. The unusual slab is the handle. It has been shaped in this way in order to provide ease of use when shaving body parts other than the face[2]. Therefore, in our western societies, these are two safety razors for women[3]: a Gillette Sensor for women (Fig. 1a), launched in 1990, and a Gillette SensorExcel for women[4] (Fig. 1b), launched in 1995[5].

1.3. Figures

Besides the figure of the razor, Sensor (Fig. 1a) displays another figure that emerges through plastic and figurative traits such as light-green, transparency, undulated lines which constitutes stylized waves: water – fresh water.
Traits recalling water are present not only visually on the handle, but also tactually

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2   *On the factitive and performative role of handles to change the shaving gesture, see Deni (2002).*

3   *On the relation among shaving and gender, see Van Oost (2003).*

4   *In the rest of the paper, I will refer to them simply as Sensor and Excel, which, unmarked, are actually the name of men's models, analysed in Deni (2002). For a history of these razors within the broader history of Gillette see McKibben (1998; see also, Deni 2002, 99-101).*

5   *SensorExcel for Women has been already analyzed by Elisa Bolchi (1999). Mine is then a reanalysis which tries to see if certain features can be more adequately described using descriptive tools which were not available when Bolchi wrote her paper. These tools derive mainly from the semiotics of bodies (Fontanille 2004; Fontanille and Arias-Gonzales 2009).*

on the head. Indeed, the rough light-green (or light blue) strip on top – the Lubra-Smooth strip – (Fig. 2a), when wet, releases a moisture which leaves the skin cool, humid, softened, as if in contact with water. In this way the strip disposes a soothing of the skin, after a possible irritation caused by the passing of the blades. The moisturizing strip is present also on Excel's head (Fig. 2b). However, its oval slab does not recall water as vividly as Sensor does. The light-blue hue used on the 1995 Excel's version, still is a chromatic trait related to water (Bolchi 1999). Also the undulated fins are eidetic and figurative traits related to water. However, in more recent models, the light-blue hue has been replaced by various colors (Fig. 3) and the dense texture created by the soft fins is not easily viewed as a set of waves. The relevance of "water" for Sensor as well as its waning relevance for Excel also emerges by looking at Sensors' packaging and TV commercials.

As for packaging, we can see (Fig. 4a) that on the Sensor's one, green-shaded horizontal undulated stripes, recalling those of the handle and hence "water", are present; whereas, on the Excel's one, only vertical lines, outlining the silhouette of a body or just curves, are present (Fig. 4b, c).

The case of TV commercials[6] is a bit different, because water does not disappear as soon as the new model appears. Up to 1999, water is always present and visible. It is basically the coprotagonist of the two razors: they are always associated with water. In many cases they come directly out of water or are being covered by it (Fig. 5a, b, c). Quite abruptly in 1999, water disappears to leave the stage to silk (Fig. 5d).

Figure 3. More recent Sensor Excel for Women's versions (2004)

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6   *We have taken into consideration only few examples found on the Internet from American and French television. Thus, there has not been any systematic research and these examples do not constitute a corpus or a sample. A thorough and systematic research on commercials has yet to be carried out.*

*a. Sensor for Women (1992) — b. SensorExcel for Women (1996) —
c. SensorExcel for Women (2004)
Figure 4. Sensors' packaging (front)*

*a. Sensor for Women (1993) — b. SensorExcel for Women (1996) —
c. SensorExcel for Women (1998) — d. SensorExcel for Women (1999)
Figure 5. Frames from sensors' TV commercials*

1.4. Issues

Why give up an effective reference when introducing the upgraded model? Why drop water?

With the present paper I will try to answer this question. However, for the sake of this issue of MEI, what is relevant is not so much the answer to these questions, but rather the role played by "water" as a figure in the tension between signification and communication.

Indeed, as we have seen, "water" as a figure plays a role in Sensor's communication within commercials, on the packaging and, last but not least, on the product itself, thanks to the transparent light green inner oval. This feature is indeed made very visible in stores, through to the packaging, which gives visibility to the handle (Fig. 4). In Excel's communication, instead, "water" becomes more and more marginal, until it basically disappears.

Despite the disappearance of "water" from Excel's communication, "water" maintains a role in Excel's signification. Thus, by accounting for the role of "water"

for the two Sensors for Women razors, I should be able to address the difference between product's communication and product's signification.

1.5. Accountings

In what follows, I will then try to account for "water" in Sensors' signification and communication, first through a semiotic analysis of Excel, and then through a comparison with Sensor. Thus, I will not tackle "water" directly. Rather I will describe the various relations to which Sensor and Excel take part, among which also the one with "water".

Indeed, following Louis Hjelmslev (1943, Eng. Transl. 23), with semiotic analysis I intend a description of relations. In order to map which relations have to be taken into account when analyzing tangible artifacts, I proposed a model for the analysis of objects (Mattozzi 2010; Fig. 6), also used also in this analysis. Such model intends to integrate part of the model proposed by Floch (1995), and largely used in Greimassian semiotics of objects (among others, Deni 2002; Mangano 2009), and the script model, as proposed by Madeleine Akrich and Bruno Latour (1992; Akrich 1992; Latour 1992) within the framework of Actor-Network Theory (ANT). For them, a script is a configuration of possible programs of action, competences and roles as proposed by the artifact. It, then, is related to a "scene", as the concept is proposed in Zinna (2005, 9) in relation to artifacts, developed more in general by Fontanille (2008) and is used in Beyaert-Geslin (2009; 2012) to analyze design artifacts.

My model is based on the idea that signification is a process taking place through successive translations between configurations, i.e. sets of relations – "forms" for Hjelmslev (1943). The model singles out sets of relations which are relevant for the analysis of artifacts and it presupposes that the signification of an artifact is the result of the translation of each set of relations into the following set[7] (Fig. 6). Or, in other words, each set of relations disposes what the following set deploys or unfolds. Therefore, each set of relations is a virtuality actualized by the following set.

Although the analysis I'm going to present is based on an exhaustive use of the model, in the present paper, I will mainly focus on "outward relations" (Fig. 6), which are the relations that account for the "script"[8].

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7   *The model tries then to answer to Zinna's (2009, 78) question about the "construction des descriptions exhaustives" by articulating "la multiplicité de [...] modes de signification" (Zinna 2009, 71) of objects.*

8   *Despite such circumscribed focus I will not limit myself to it (Fig. 6). Thus, I will be able to address many of the descriptive categories discussed in Zinna (2009), starting, as I already did (§ 1.1.), with the "plastic configuration".*

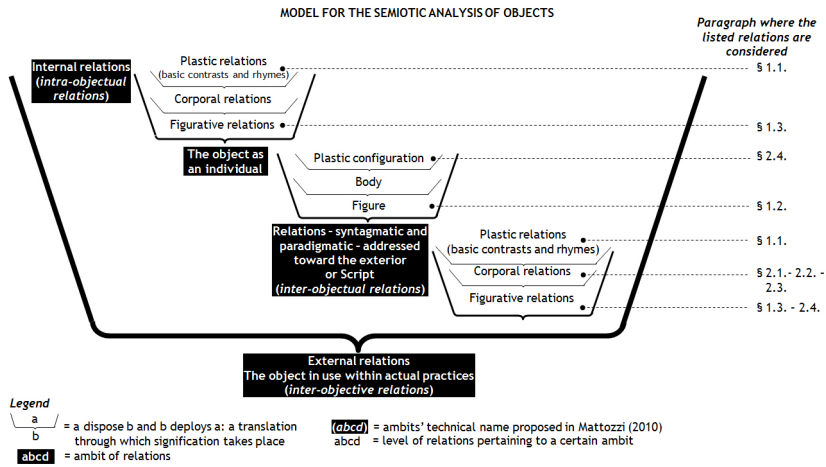**MODEL FOR THE SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF OBJECTS**

Figure 6. A model for the semiotic analysis of objects (Mattozzi 2010)

2. Touching bodies. An Analysis.

2.1. Razors

A razor[9], according to the dictionary, is "a keen-edged cutting instrument for shaving or cutting hair"[10]. "Shaving", in turn, is defined as "to sever the hair (from the head or another part of a body) close to the roots" or "to cut off (hair or beard) close to the skin".

The reference to "sever" and to "cut off" – i.e. to "[...] keep apart: to divide [...]: to remove" ("sever" in Merriam-Webster) or "to divide into parts" or "into segments" (third and fourth definition of "cut") or to "separate, isolate" (fifth definition of "cut off") – clearly shows that shaving is an operation of selection (tri) (Bastide 1987; Floch 1995, Engl. Transl. 156-157), through which a whole is divided into parts. As for the case we are considering, such operation of selection takes place between the root and shaft of each hair (Fig. 7).

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9   On razor and design, see Munari (1981); on razors, design and semiotics, see Bolchi (1999), Deni (2002) and Zinna (2005).

10   All the following definitions are taken from Merriam-Webster on line. Dictionary use is a common procedure in Greimassian semiotics. Dictionary's definitions of artifacts and of actions related to artifacts display what, for a specific group of people using a certain language, is the "predicative scene" (Zinna 2005, 9; Fontanille 2008) to which the defined artifact takes part.
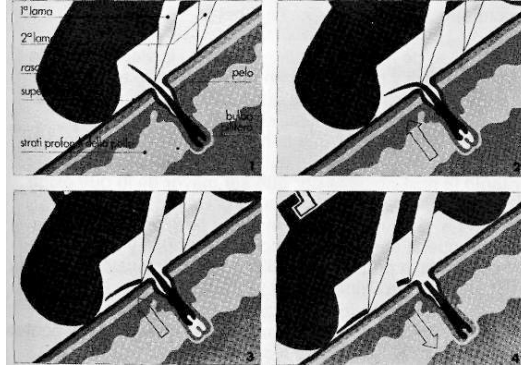
Figure 7. How the razor's head works (taken from Munari 1981)

Such selection can occur thanks to the "keen edge", i.e. the blades. They are then the "core" of the product (Fontanille 2004), since they carry out its narrative program (Greimas and Courtés 1979) or program of action (Latour 1992), as outlined by the definition. The rest of the product – the frame of the head, the handle – are successive envelope-interfaces that modulate the relation between the "core" and other bodies external to the product.

"Shaving" is, anyhow, a double operation of selection, as somehow the adverb "off" underlines. Besides separating the root from the shaft, hairs must be separated from the skin too. And this is why a cut close to the skin is required: only in this way hairs are removed from the skin. Other actions related to the containment of hairs differ exactly for the kind of selection they require: "cutting hair" requires an intervention only on the shaft, whereas "epilating" requires an intervention on both the shaft and the root[11].

Such peculiar operation of selection is the ground for a somewhat contradictory program of action. Indeed, within the same gesture, two opposing forms of

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11   *See also Zinna (2005), who proposes a similar analysis based on the concepts of a general social function, related to the matter of content, and of a technical function, related to form of content. As it should be clear, I prefer not to use the term "function", intended as the transformative aim of an artifact addressed toward its surrounding. In order to account for issues related to the "transformative aim of an artifact addressed toward its surrounding", I prefer to talk about "narrative programs" or "programs of action". Especially for tools, they can be described more in detail in terms of operations (Bastide 1987) and contacts (Figg. 8 and 9) on bodies (Fontanille 2004).*

contact (Fig. 8)[12] must be accomplished: a pressure on each hair, which has to end up in a penetration, and a grazing of the skin[13].

As it often happens, the management of contradictory programs of action – or better, contradictory sub-programs of action within a more general program of action – entails a distribution of competences (Latour 1992). The competences to manage the contradiction can be left to the user, and in that case the user has to acquire them – as a professional barber should do. Or, they can be delegated to tools and devices. This second option is the ground for safety razors: competences are delegated to the head (Fig. 7). Indeed, the head is "able to" (pouvoir) and "knows how to" (savoir) (Greimas and Courtés 1979) keep blades at the right distance, at the right angle and with the right pressure, in order to only graze the skin, without penetrating it (Fig. 7)[14].
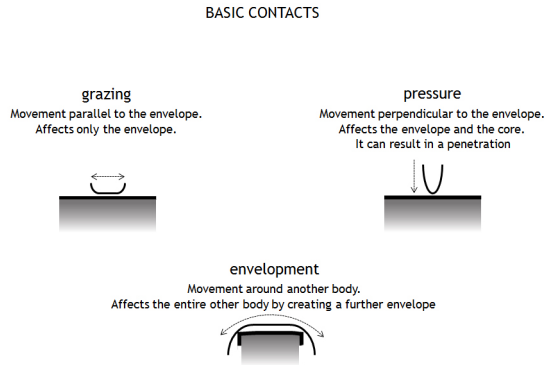
BASIC CONTACTS

grazing
Movement parallel to the envelope.
Affects only the envelope.

pressure
Movement perpendicular to the envelope.
Affects the envelope and the core.
It can result in a penetration

envelopment
Movement around another body.
Affects the entire other body by creating a further envelope

Figure 8. Basic contacts (personal elaboration from Fontanille 2004)

12   *Touch, which will be tackled in the next paragraphs (Figg. 8 and 9), has been recently considered in Beyaert (2012) also in relation to design objects by using, as I do, Fontanille's semiotics of the body. By following the semiotics of practices (Fontanille 2008), she attributes vision to the level of the object and touch to the level of the practice. I really do not see any reasons for such distinction. For me, contrasts among features addressing various senses (among which, touch and vision) constitute the internal relations, which dispose outward relations (Fig. 6), which, in turn, will be actualized in various ways within actual practices.*

13   *All along the analysis, I am using Fontanille's (2004; Fontanille and Arias-Gonzales 2009) semiotics of the body, casted, anyhow, within a more symmetric framework derived from Actor-Network Theory. Thus, whenever I talk about bodies they can be either human or non-human bodies.*

14   *Zinna (2005, 12) tries to answer the question of how and why the razor has changed, by noticing that it has changed for the emergence of the protection device typical of safety razors, which work is described in a way similar to mine. The one he proposed is, however, more an answer to "how" it has changed, than to a "why". The latter is very likely related to the need of a redistribution of competences, not mentioned in Zinna (2005). I think that the "distribution of competences" is one of the main issues on which design can intervene.*

2.2. SensorExcel

2.2.1. Contacts

Excel's is a safety razor (Figg. 1b; 3). However, its head is more articulated than the hypothetical and generic one I have just described (Fig. 7). On Excel's head [15] (Fig. 2b) there are two different strips modulating the contact between the very head – and hence the blades – and the skin. Moreover, the head is also mounted on a pivoting system that allows it to tilt, further modulating the contact [16].

The tilting movement, by disposing the frame to follow the contour of the face, disposes, in turn, the very frame to be as much as possible parallel to the skin. In this way, the blades can stay as much as possible at the right distance and angle, thus preventing perpendiculars contacts, which could result in a penetration (Fig. 8).

The soft fins of the bottom strip (Fig. 2b) dispose the envelopment of bits of the skin, producing a resistance to grazing (Fig. 9). Such resistance disposes, in turn, a stretching of the skin. In this way, portions of the skin, which could increase the resistance to grazing by introducing perpendicular contacts (Fig. 9), tend to be flattened.

The moisturizing strip is positioned on top and intervenes as the last element (Fig. 9). Only after the fins have stretched the skin, the tilting movement has adjusted the angle of the blades and the blades have cut the hairs, the moisturizing strip intervenes by releasing a cool and wetting unguent. Thus, this strip disposes a restauration of the skin to the condition it was before the passing of the blades. These latter, indeed, by grazing the skin, even if they do not penetrate it, can still scrape it: penetrate the most external surface of the skin – the envelope of the envelope – drying and chapping it. Thus, the moisturizing strip disposes a re-softening and a re-flattening of the skin (Fig. 9).

Through this quite complex articulation, the frame disposes the avoidance – through the tilting movement – and the removal – through the elastomer strip – of possible perpendicular contacts. Such perpendicular contacts would increase resistance to the grazing movement over the skin and dispose penetrations (Fig. 9). Moreover, it disposes the restoration of the soft and even condition of the skin to as it was before possible superficial scraping from the razor.

Excel's other visible part is the handle (Fig. 2b). As we have seen (§ 1.1.), Excel's handle contrasts the head plastically. The handle is also in contrast with the head for the operations it disposes and, consequently, for the corporal relations disposed, in turn, by those operations (Fig. 9). The blades have to accomplish an

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15   About this head, used in male models too, see, besides Bolchi (1999), also Deni (2002, 118-120).

16   This pivoting system is based on springs, present also in the head's loading and unloading system. The presence of such devices turns this razor, which is apparently a tool, in a machine, according to the classification proposed in Zinna (2005, 7). I am not delving here on these aspects, since, as said (§ 1.5.), I am mainly interested in "outward relations" (Fig. 6), when the razor is assembled.

operation of selection (tri) and the head an operation of non-mixing (mélange). Indeed, the latter has to ensure that two separated bodies – the shaving body, i.e. the blades, and the shaved body, i.e. legs, armpits, pelvis, etc. – stay separated. On the contrary, the handle has to dispose an operation of mixing (mélange) (Fig. 10). Indeed, it has to dispose unity between the very handle – and from there, the rest of the razor – and the user's hand (Fig. 2). The curves characterizing the shape of the handle dispose such operation. The latter can take place as an envelopment – the user's hand envelops the handle (Fig. 11a, b: "for underarms"), like it also happens in male razors – or as pressure – and this is the special feature of this razor, as shown on the heads packaging (Figg. 2 and 11a, b: "for legs"). The soft fins dispose a reduction of resistance especially for this second contact. The center of the oval yields easily and envelops, in turn, the user's fingers (Fig. 9).
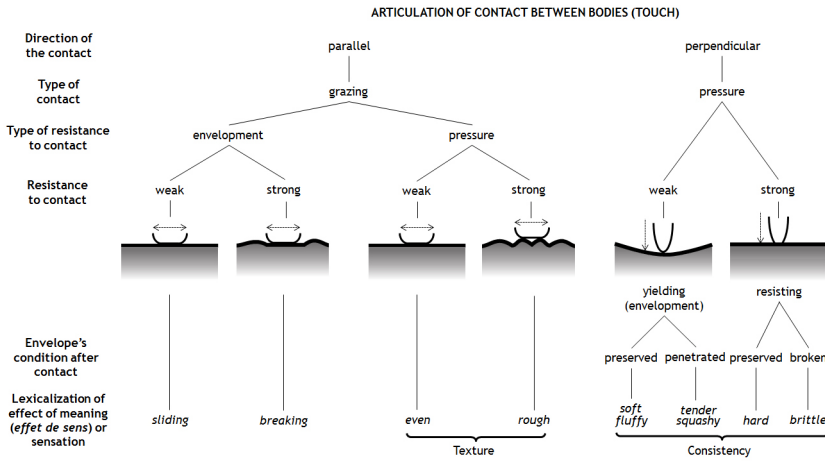

Figure 9. Articulation of contact (touch)
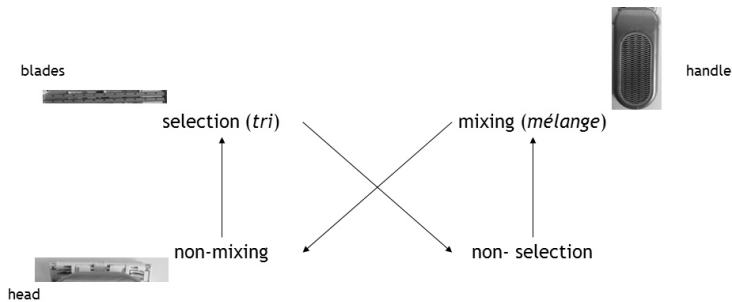*(personal elaboration from Fontanille 2004)*

Figure 10. SensorExcel's parts in relation to the operations of selection (tri) and
*mixing (mélange)*

2.2.2. Smoothness

Despite all the differences between the handle and the frame, Excel disposes a general reduction of the resistance to contacts (Figg. 9; 12). However, it accomplishes such reduction in different ways, according to the program of action and the specific operation carried out by each of its main parts.

On the back of the packaging there are many references to "smoothness": "protective microfins for a closer, smoother shave" (1996), "the spring-mounted twin blades can shave you closer and smoother" (1996), "[t]he safe and easy way to have ultra smooth legs" (2004) (Fig. 11b, c). Moreover, the moisturizing strip is called Lubra-Smooth strip. As we can see, "smoothness" is referred, at the same time, to the process of shaving and to its results, up to becoming the actual program of action of this razor – "hav[ing] ultra smooth legs" (Fig. 11c). In the 1996 packaging the resulting feeling is also described by reference to silk: "provides aloe and extra moisturizers to leave your skin feeling satiny soft".

I think that the term "smooth" – which cannot be reduced to "not rough", i.e. lisse, in French[17] – can be borrowed in my analysis in order to name this general reduction of resistance to contact, which is what Bolchi (1999) called "buon contatto". Such reduction of resistance to contact is indeed the effect provided by silk or by velvet which tend to feel, at the same time, sliding, even and soft (Fig. 12).

Excel is then designed to be a quite effective razor: not only a woman is disposed to experience "smoothness" after the shave, but also during the shave, through the contact the razor makes possible.
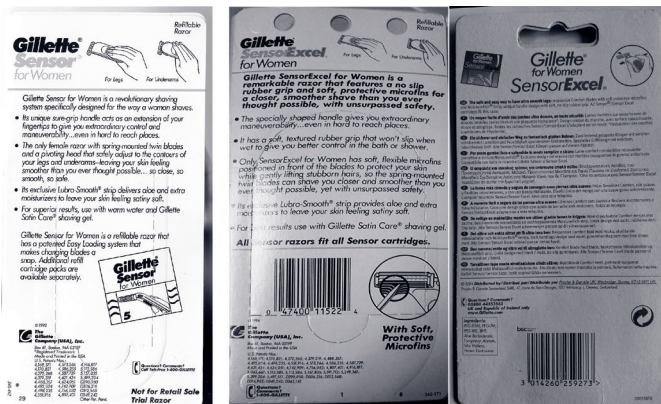
a. Sensor for Women (1992) — b. SensorExcel for Women (1996) —
c. SensorExcel for Women(2004)
Figure 11. Sensors' packaging (back)

17   *Indeed, the 2004 packaging translates it with "douce" (Fig. 11c). See also the other translations (Fig. 11c): words indicating not rough are not used or, if used, are complemented by other words expanding the meaning.*
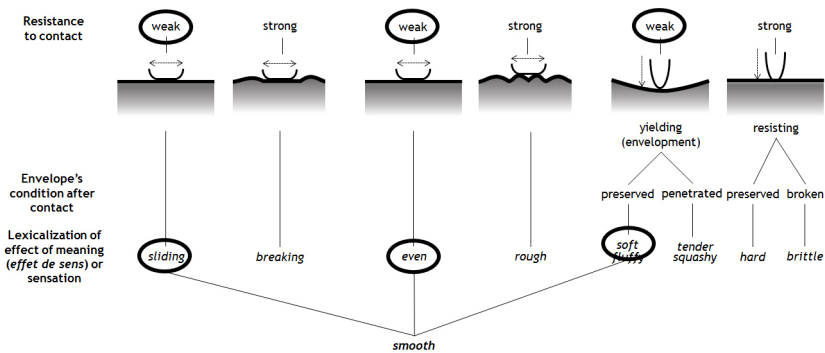
Figure 12. Smoothness as the combination of sliding, even and soft.

2.2.3 No slip grip

Excel is not, however, a piece of silk or velvet. The reduction of resistance to perpendicular contact through soft fins introduces other forms of resistance, as, for instance, to grazing (Fig. 9; § 2.2.1.). However, these forms of resistance do not introduce a contradiction in the overall meaning configuration of Excel, rather the contrary.

Since the reduction of resistance is actualized differently on different parts, in accordance with their program of action, resistance can acquire a local relevance without undermining the general feeling related to its reduction. This is what occurs on the handle which disposes a weak resistance to pressure, but a strong resistance to grazing, provided by the envelopment of the fingers by the fins (Fig. 9; § 2.2.1.). Such articulation of contacts disposes a tight grip, which is a feature coherent with the program of action of the handle, which is mixing (mélange). It has been extremely valorized for the launch of this razor (Fig. 4b).

Also the fins on the head's strip dispose a resistance to grazing, which, in this case, by flattening possible sources of perpendicular contact, ease the grazing of the frame and of the blades.

2.3. Sensor

We have already seen in how Sensor differs from Excel as for its internal relations (§ 1.1.): a contrasted distribution of colors both on the handle and on the head; a hard, transparent, sliding oval inside the handle; the lack of the soft fin strips on the head. These differences dispose another configuration of contacts. Without the soft fin strip, the head only disposes the restauration of a smooth skin, thanks to the moisturizing strip, and the avoidance of perpendicular contacts, but not their removal. Without any soft element, the handle disposes a strong resistance to pressure.

Resistance to grazing is only provided by its rough surface – the stripes in relief – and partially by a slight cavity on the bottom side of the handle, which predisposes a loose envelopment (Fig. 9). On the hard and quite sliding materials of the handle, sliding, indeed, becomes possible, especially if the contact is mediated by water.

The handle, then, by not reducing resistance to perpendicular contact, but partially reducing resistance to parallel contact, works in a way similar to the head, however on a part that presupposes a different program of action and a different operation (§ 2.2.1; Fig. 10). The repetition of features of the head on the handle takes place also for the figure of "water", as we have seen. However, "water" is recalled by addressing two different senses. The head recalls water tactually – through the moisturizing strip –, the handle visually – through the inner oval. Furthermore, high visual relevance is given to the latter, thanks to the stark contrast it enjoys with what surrounds it: a sharp discontinuity in color and in opacity, which Excel completely lacks (Fig. 1).

On overall, Sensor is more effective in disposing smoothness as a result, mainly thanks to its head, than as a process.

2.4. Comparing configurations

The two Sensor models, though very similar, articulate two different configurations and, through them, two different processes of signification.

Sensor displays a repetitive articulation, through which equivalent or similar features – chromatic contrasts, recalled figures, disposed contacts – are presented on both the handle and the head. Excel, instead, increases the visual contrast between the two main parts – especially in the more recent versions where the frame of the head is white and the handle is colored (Fig. 3). Moreover, it distributes on the two main parts – head and handle – different tactual features. However, these tactual features complement each other, by providing an overall reduction of resistance to contact. Thus, the two razors achieve unity and coherence differently, in an artifact which is otherwise split: a more visually relevant repetition on the two contrasting parts; a tactual complementarity between the two contrasting parts.

2.5. Configuring water

As we have seen (§ 1.3.), in the passage from one configuration to the other, water is dropped. Or, better, water is dropped visually as a vivid figure which can play a relevant role in the communication of the product. However, "water" still plays a role all along the various configurations and for both processes of signification – something that should not surprise us, since female shaving is a wet-practice (Van Oost 2002). Water is, then, part of the "predicative scene" of female razors

(Fontanille 2008) and, through this position, it plays a role in the signification of both Sensors.

As Gaston Bachelard (1942) noticed, water can have many different valorizations. Softening, moisturizing and cooling are three valorizable properties. Sliding is another one – water slides over the skin and makes bodies slide over other bodies. All these four properties can be related to smoothness – since the beginning, one of the values which these razors aim at (Fig. 11; § 2.2.1.). However, sliding is a more slippery property than the other three. Indeed, it can be actualized as flowing or as slipperiness. Thus, "water" can actualize a complementary program of action to the one of the head, as well as an anti-program of action (Latour 1992) to the one of the handle. This is especially true for Excel's handle, which is designed and valorized (Fig. 4b) to counter slipperiness – which in the "scene" of female shaving can be generated by water. More in general, Sensor razors, besides "smoothness", valorize – and are valorized through reference to – maneuverability and safety (Figg. 4b; 11). Excel, by distributing different kinds of contacts on different parts, is better able than Sensor to coherently actualize both safety and smoothness. However, for Excel, "water", as a figure, becomes too ambiguous. On one hand, it cannot be associated with the handle, on the other cannot be easily managed for the overall communication of the razor. That is why it has very likely lost relevance in Excel communication. Nevertheless, "water" and its properties still takes part to Excel's signification – they are part of its configuration.

3. Communicating signification. A conclusive reflection.

All along the reflection about objects, design and signification, from Roland Barthes (1964) to Roberto Verganti (2009), technical, material and "functional" features of objects have been considered outside of the domain of signification and communication or opposed to it. A sort of concessive discourse has dominated such reflection: "this object is not only used for ..., this object allows not only to ..., this product is not only a physical object ..., but also signifies, ... but also symbolizes, ... but also communicates, ..."[18].

By following Greimassian semiotics and ANT, which have always considered "function", as well as technical and material features, part of signification (Akrich 1990; Akrich and Latour 1992; Beyaert-Geslin 2009; 2012; Deni 2002; Floch 1995; Mangano 2009), I did not comply with such discourse. Thus, signification has been here considered as a process of articulation of meaning (see Greimas and Courtés 1979, entry "signification") that takes place through successive translations between a configuration and another configuration (Fig. 13)[19].

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18   For an example see how Vihma (1995) is summarized in Burdek (2009, 48). Burdek (2009) in its entirety is a good example of this attitude, except maybe for the reference to Krippendorff (2006, 53), for whom the meaning is also related to "the set of their imaginable uses".

19   See Latour (2005) for a similar approach to social processes more in general.

The mentioned concessive discourse is certainly the result of the tendency to reproduce western dichotomies – and especially the mind/body one – in every domain. However, I think that, in this specific case, such discourse has also been possible thanks to a confusion between signification and communication: too often the first has been reduced to the second and opposed to materiality, "function", technology.

Materiality, "functions", technology come in configurations and take part to configurations. Therefore, there is no reason to think that they do not take part of signification processes, intended as translations among configurations (Fig. 13). Semiologists cannot but describe moments and portions of these processes. Communication, as exchange (Greimas and Courtés 1979, entry "Communication"), is a specific way through which signification takes place. By framing portions of other processes of signification (Fig. 13), communication carries out a débrayage – disengagement (Greimas and Courtés 1979) or shifting-out (Latour 1992) – which «permet d'énoncer quelque chose qui ne se confond pas avec l'interaction qui est à l'origine de cette possibilité d'énonciation» and which introduces «une distance temporelle ou spatiale (par rapport à l'interaction originelle)» (Fontanille and Arias-Gonzales 2009, 64) (Fig. 13). Through such a débrayage a portion of another process of signification is exchanged (through a negotiation) between an enunciator and an enunciatee (Fontanille 1989).

This is exactly what happens with Sensor and with Excel: "water" is part of the configuration and hence of the signification of both models, however only in one case it is used within communication – Sensor. Only in this case it is framed and débrayée – on the handle, first of all, on the packaging, which uses the handle as a mise-en abyme, then, and in the commercials, finally.
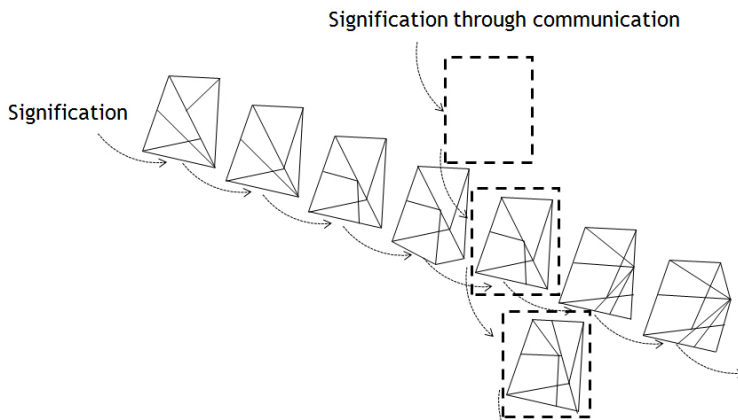

Figure 13. Signification and communication as translations among configurations

Nota
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