Anja Krause: Colours, signs and effects – types of layout and design in German non-fiction book series for children and adolescents

Text and scripture are embodiments of culture. But after the written word has medially dominated for a long time, a so-called "iconic turn" can be detected in the last years. Content is more and more transferred by pictures and symbols than by text and scripture. The iconic turn comes along with the increasing importance of new media: TV, mobile phones, PC and internet. To comprehend new media, the interpretation of pictures and the capability of understanding hypertext structures are much more important than reading text in a linear and continuous way.

Children and adolescents are the main users of new media. At the same time, studies like PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) have demonstrated that literacy of children and adolescents is no longer self-evident.

This analysis examines the coherence between those proven problems in continuous reading and the consumption of new media, which does not request abilities like concentrating and linear thinking, but quite the contrary: getting used to switching, zapping and zooming.

The main part of this study deals with the question whether this change of perception is also reflected in the products formerly connected with linear thinking: in books. How do publishers react to the new requirements? To get to the bottom of this question, 16 German non-fiction book series for children and adolescents are analysed. Important parameters are, amongst others, the ratio of text and illustrations or photos, the length of text portions and the layout of the text itself (font, font size, line length, line pitch, emphases).

The analysis works out four types of layouts:

1. A completely linear layout which only allows continuous reading (Reines Linearlayout).
2. A parallel layout which consists of a continuous text and several smaller text portions (Parallellayout). The smaller text portions can help the reader to find an easier access to reading the continuous text.
3. A partially linear layout which is composed of a continuous text divided up into fragments (Partielles Linearlayout). The reader is constrained to read continuously – but only short passages (mostly 1 or 2 pages).
4. A layout with only small text portions and totally without a continuous text (Portioniertes Layout). This type of layout corresponds to hypertextual structures in new media.

All those types can be found in the analysed book series, but most publishers choose layouts of type 2 and 3. The reason for this might be that on the one hand, a layout with continuous text only is in fact too difficult to read for children and adolescents influenced by new media. And on the other hand, layouts of type 4 don't allow giving books a logical configuration because each of the small text portions could be the first one to be read. On the contrary, type 2 and type 3 accommodate with the new ways of perception without neglecting the own traditional character of books.