Isotype and Logical Positivism: A Critical Understanding through Intersemiotic Translation

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Abstract : This paper examines two sets of pictograms published in Neurath's books Basic by Isotype and International Pictorial Language in order to investigate the reasons for pictorial language having become an end in itself despite its potential to be relevant, especially in the 21st century digital age of heightened interlingual engagement. ISOTYPE was developed by Otto Neurath to be an 'international language' (pictorial) in the late 1920s. It was derived from the philosophy of logical positivism (of the Vienna Circle), which believed that language can be reduced to sets of direct experiences as bare symbols, devoid of the emotive and expressive functions. In his book International Picture Language, Neurath noted that any language is less clear-cut in one or the other way, and hence the pictorial language was justified. However, Isotype, as an ambitious version of logical positivism in practice distanced itself from the semiotic theories of language, and therefore his pictograms were defined as an independent set of signs rather than signs as a part of the language. This paper attempts to investigate intersemiotic translation in the form of Isotypes and trace the effects of logical positivism on Neurath's concept of isotypes; the 'international language'.