

# How **VISUAL STEREOTYPES** work

The structure and sociosemiotics of  
cultural typographic mimicry

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# Prolegomena: Basic (grapho)linguistic concepts

- **writing systems** are complex semiotic systems in which given **languages** are provided a material (graphic) substance with the help of given **scripts**
  - scripts as historically grown (or invented) inventories of graphic marks are not inseparably bound to languages, they can be adopted/adapted by different languages, e.g., Roman script, which is being used by myriad languages over the world
  - just because we are familiar with a script does not mean that we can 'read' all writing systems that use it
    - we can recognize the letters but we don't know the pronunciation (graphematic relations) and of course not the meaning

# Multilingual writing



multilingual, monoscriptual



multilingual, multiscriptual

# Monolingual writing



monolingual, monoscriptual



monolingual, multiscriptual (biscriptual,  
cf. Bunčić 2016)



# Monolingual writing: Marked cases



monolingual, transscriptual  
(cf. Androutsopoulos 2020)



monolingual, monoscriptual

# Meaning-making potential

- it is, at this point, accepted that the visual appearance of writing can also contribute to the meaning of a written utterance
  - and it is not necessarily secondary; the degree of its contribution must be evaluated individually in each case



# Example

*I* never said we should kill him.

I *never* said we should kill him.

I never *said* we should kill him.

I never said *we* should kill him.

I never said we *should* kill him.

I never said we should *kill* him.

I never said we should kill *him*.

# Typographic mimicry

- **emulative function** of typography  
(structural function, perspective of the product)
  - typefaces (i.e., different appearances of the same script) are made to resemble something else
  - example: so-called **script typefaces** emulate the appearance of handwriting
  - this also exists in the opposite direction: **hand lettering** in which handwriting mimics the look of printed text

*Script Typeface*

Black Phantom font





# Cultural typographic mimicry

- expressive, indicating/indexical, connotative functions of typography (cf. Spitzmüller 2016)
  - this is a more dynamic semiotic process that views typographic mimicry as a **literacy practice**
- a **source script** (such as Roman script) is made to look like a **target script** (such as Chinese script) in some way

ABCDEFGHI  
JKLMNOPQR  
STUVWXYZ  
abcdefghijklm  
nopqrstuvwxyz  
0123456789

作二铁板，一板印刷，  
自布字。此印者才毕，  
板已具。更互用之，瞬  
。每一字皆有数印，如  
等字，每字有二十余印  
一板内有重复者。不用  
贴之，每韵为一贴，木

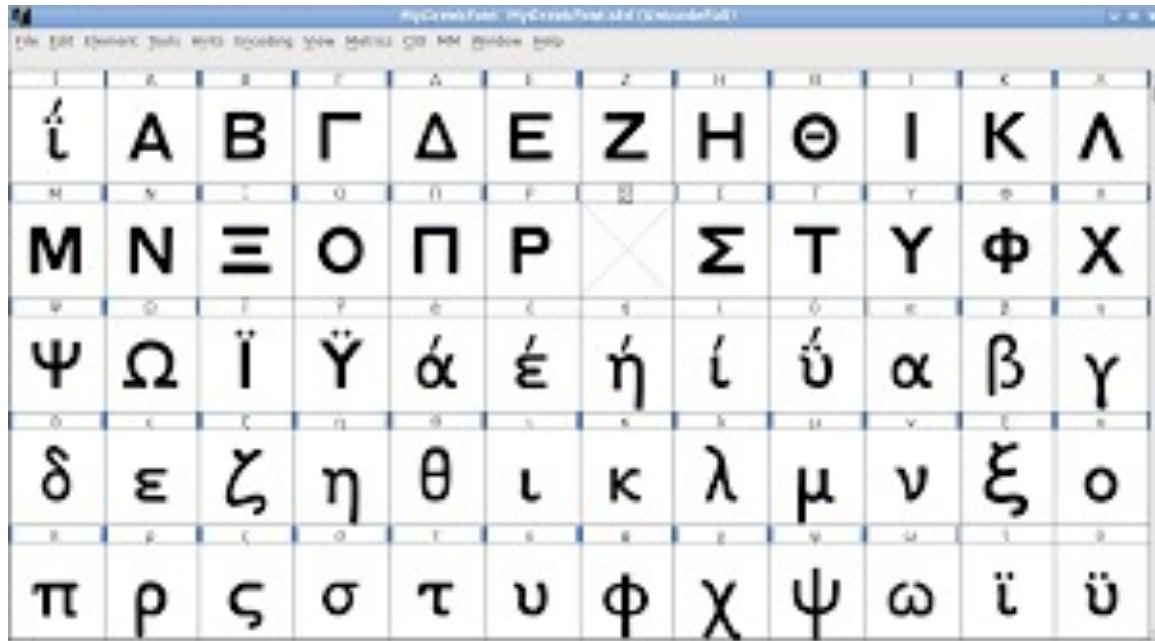
# Examples

वेदरानवग्वारी

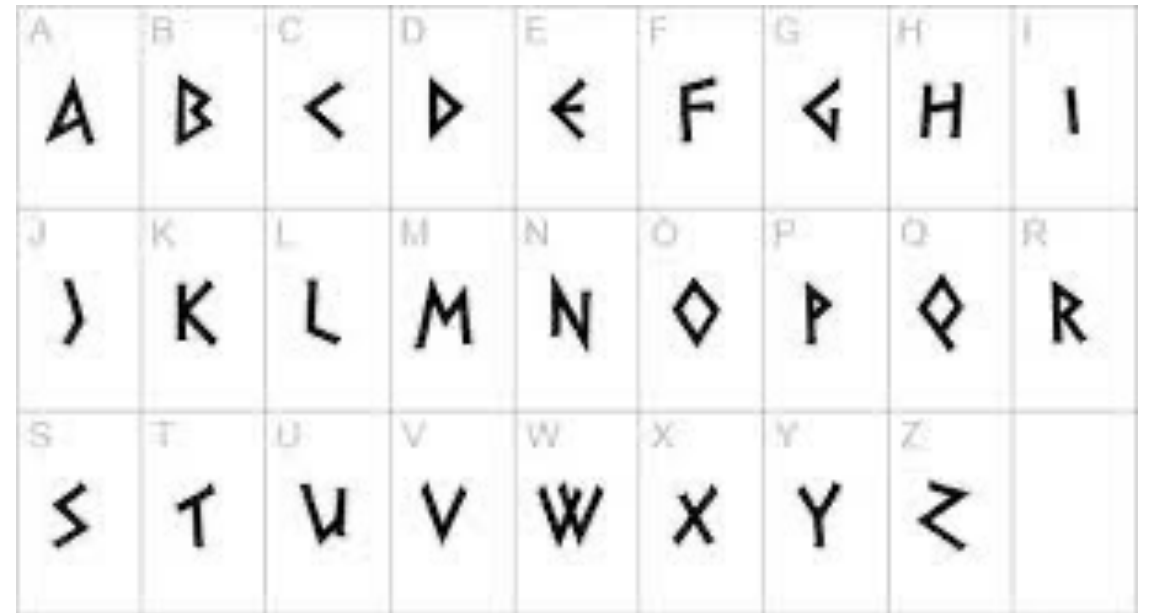
MANIFEST

جنطه

# Structural questions: How are these typefaces built?



a modern Greek font



Gelio font

# Structural questions: How are these typefaces built?



A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
A	B	<	>	←	F	↖	H	I
J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R
J	K	L	M	N	◊	P	◊	R
S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	
S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	

← a Greek inscription



# What is mimicked?

- feature(s) of the visual appearance
  - which aspect/part/feature of the target script?
- the production process
  - e.g., writing with a brush

Chinese  
calligraphy →



← Kashima Brush  
font

# Thai script and mimicking typeface

ก ข ข ค ค ฅ ง จ

ฉ ช ช ฌ ญ ฎ ฏ ฐ

ฑ ฒ ณ ด ต ถ ท ธ

น บ ป ผ ฝ พ ฟ ภ

ม ย ร ล ว ศ ษ ส

ห ฬ อ ฮ

LOREM IPSUM  
utinam habemus assuevit  
ex eam nusquam comm  
LOREM IPSUM dolor sit  
utinam habemus assuevit et est.  
ex eam nusquam comm. Vis ex per  
LOREM IPSUM dolor sit amet, te ducit  
sed ut perspiciatis unde omnis iste

loops as a visually salient feature

# (Typo)graphic vs. graphematic crossing

- is intimately tied to the type of graphic knowledge
- in (typo)graphic crossing, the appearance of a foreign script is emulated; this corresponds with typographic mimicry
- in graphematic crossing (which often coincides with graphic crossing), actual graphemes of the target script are borrowed which are visually similar to the graphemes of the source script (cf. Spitzmüller 2007)
  - this can lead to problems for biliteral readers of both scripts as they recognize the graphemes' actual functions

アムハムも  
 アムハムも  
 アムハムも



アムハムも アムハムも

Line (consonants)	w	r	y	m	h	n	t	s	k	Column (vowel)
ん n	わ	ら	や	ま	は	な	た	さ	か	あ a
		り		み	ひ	に	ち chi	し shi	き	い i
		る	ゆ	む fu	ふ fu	ぬ	つ tsu	す	く	う u
		れ		め	へ	ね	て	せ	け	え e
	を o	ろ	よ	も	ほ	の	と	そ	こ	お o





# Example



# This is **not** a Roman script-phenomenon



Japanese kana  
mimicking Thai



Chinese script  
mimicking Arabic script

# Graphic knowledge and meaning-making I

- recipients recognize the structural similarities because they have (rudimentary) knowledge about the target script
  - this knowledge can be acquired in different ways (i.e., education is just one possibility) and it does not need to be explicit; indeed, in many cases it is arguably implicit
  - possibly the actual target script has also been encountered in culturally specific contexts (see next slide), whether in the context of the actual culture, e.g., through travelling, or in the source culture

# Graphic knowledge and meaning-making II

- recipients have repeatedly encountered similar-looking typefaces in culturally specific contexts
  - mostly in commercial contexts, e.g., restaurant signage or food packaging
- in some cases, there can be no structural similarity as the source and target scripts are the same
  - e.g., Hot Tamale for 'Mexican'
  - in some cases, the name of the typeface is also indexical



**HOT TAMALES**



# Agents: Who practices it?

- distinction between actors/agents who **create** mimicking typefaces and users who merely **use** them
  - and for both groups, differentiation according to the degree of graphic knowledge
- a metapragmatic discourse analysis (Meletis 2021) shows that it is a widely held belief that it is members of the (supposedly) indexed cultures themselves who predominantly practice typographic mimicry
  - they want to signal their own culture to outsiders; typographic mimicry is not used to appeal to in-group members

# Contexts: Where is it practiced?

- in **commercial contexts** in which culture is a vital part of (marketing) the product
  - a certain 'exoticism' is meant to be conveyed; consumers are promised a product that provides them a glimpse into a different culture
- other contexts are also possible, in which design is foregrounded and meaning is conveyed also through visuality (think of infographics or children's books)



# Examples



# Motivations: Why is it practiced?

- to sell an ‘idea’ and, in turn, a product
- to convey meaning through the visual appearance of writing rather than just its content
  - thus, visual stereotypes in the form of typographic mimicry become ‘visual shortcuts’
  - “When I’m driving down a street with dozens of signs per block, I don’t have time to read them. When I see that font, I KNOW ‘Chinese restaurant,’ and that might be all I need to make my decision.”



# Problems: Eurocentrism

- typography in general is very Latin-centered: “The dominance of Latin script is felt [. . .] acutely in type design practices, to the point where the world of typefaces is divided into two main categories: Latin and (all the other) non-Latin scripts” (AbiFarès 2019: 13)
- “On one hand, designers are ‘modernising’ scripts by minimising shapes and reducing forms, which some criticise as merely mimicking Latin type. Latinisation has been, and still is, a highly controversial and much discussed topic – which is why, on the other hand, technological developments are utilised to make scripts more calligraphic, traditional and livelier by incorporating, for instance, countless ligatures.” (Wittner 2019: 7)

AbiFarès, Huda Smitshuijzen. 2019. Working bi-Scriptual: Multiscriptual typographic design and typesetting. In Ben Wittner, Sascha Thoma & Timm Hartmann (eds.), *Bi-Scriptual: Typography and graphic design with multiple script systems*, 12–23. Salenstein: Niggli.

Wittner, Ben. 2019. Script is language is communication. In Ben Wittner, Sascha Thoma & Timm Hartmann (eds.), *Bi-Scriptual: Typography and graphic design with multiple script systems*, 6–8. Salenstein: Niggli.

# Example

<b>เอเเดรียน</b> ฟลูธิเกอร์ นีว แอลที โปร ภาคภาษาไทย <b>บรรจงอักษร</b> ภูมิใจยิ่งการนำเสนอเพื่อสนองบนเลย์เอาท์ สะอาด ละเอียด เรียบร้อย <b>มินิมอล</b> การสมคบคิดทางสุนทรียะอักษร ผ่านความเป็นมืออาชีพของสายการออกแบบ <b>คอลลาบอเรท</b>	<b>เอเดรียน</b> ฟลูธิเกอร์ นีว แอลที โปร ภาคภาษาไทย <b>บรรจงอักษร</b> ภูมิใจยิ่งการนำเสนอเพื่อสนองบนเลย์เอาท์ สะอาด ละเอียด เรียบร้อย <b>มินิมอล</b> การสมคบคิดทางสุนทรียะอักษร ผ่านความเป็นมืออาชีพของสายการออกแบบ <b>คอลลาบอเรท</b>
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# Problems: Cultural appropriation

- there was a debate whether uses of typographic mimicry are racist (Meletis 2021), especially if practiced by non-members of the indexed culture
  - in some cases, typefaces' names are also problematic (cf. Circumcision)
- through using typographic mimicry instead of the actual target script, 'Westerners' do not have to educate themselves in different cultures and their scripts, they are always accommodated
  - this also means that members of different cultures prioritize a distorted public image over their authentic self-image (however, this is often done for personal, e.g., commercial, gain)

# Problems: Depreciative othering

- aside from the fact that members of other cultures feel the need to cater to the needs of the (in many cases) majority, this is often felt to be depreciative on two levels:
  - firstly, the type design is often felt to be of lesser quality when compared to Latin type design, and it is often type designers who are not part of a culture who design mimicking typefaces
  - secondly, the fact that members of the cultures adopt these typefaces to refer to themselves and their cultures is self-deprecating; it is a form of silently agreeing to the hegemony of Roman script/Latin type

# Possible 'solutions'

- more culturally sensitive design of mimicking typefaces
  - by designers who are members of the indexed culture or in collaboration with them
  - notably, it is not clear how, from a design perspective, mimicking typefaces can be 'better'
- use of the actual target script accompanied by non-mimicking typefaces of the source script
  - e.g., the name of a Chinese restaurant is printed in Chinese script and below (possibly in a translation) in Roman script
  - this way, maximal authenticity is achieved and cultures co-exist rather than one being appropriated by another



# Conclusions

- the appearance of typefaces can be a visual 'shortcut' to a culture based on the (varying but generally widespread) graphic knowledge of recipients
  - the recognition of a typeface as indicating a culture can either be due to actual visual similarity or due to prior encounters with the typeface in specific cultural contexts (or both)
- this shortcut is designed (mostly) by people who are not members of the indexed culture but used by members of said culture in commercial contexts, raising questions of hegemony and agency
- in very broad strokes, this phenomenon shows that (the negotiation of) literacy practices – especially in multicultural contexts – is rather complex and that they are always also material, and in some cases (such as for typographic mimicry), their materiality is their most important feature
  - there is not just a linguistic literacy, but there are also visual and cultural literacies