

# The Politics of Design

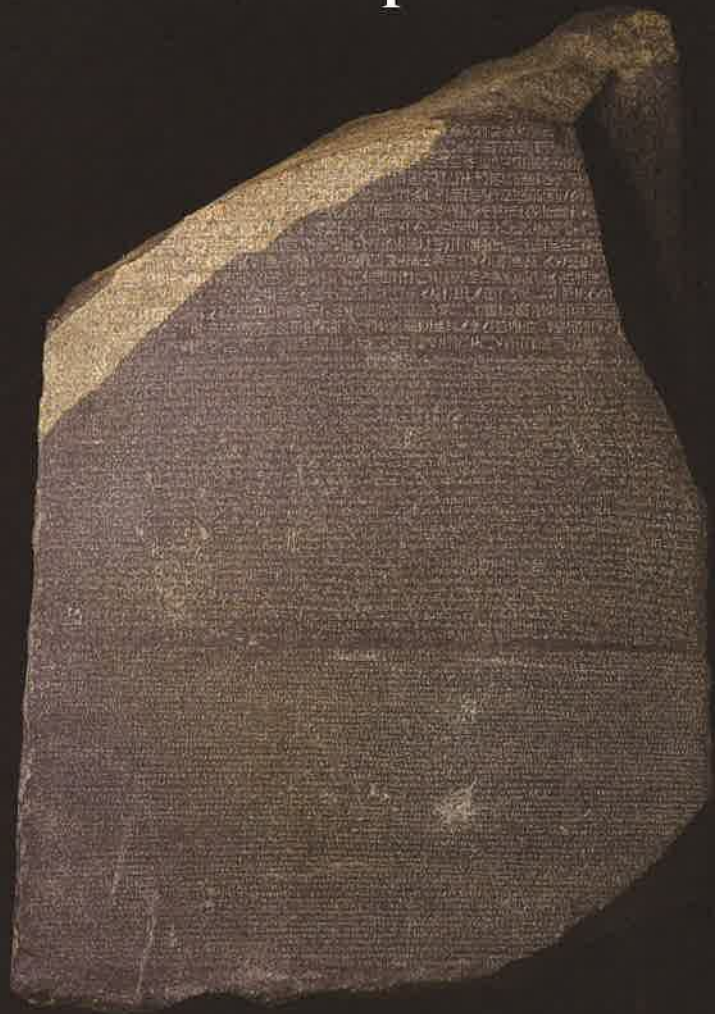
A (Not So) Global Manual for  
Visual Communication

Ruben Pater

# TYPOGRAPHY AND LANGUAGE

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# Tales of the Scripts



Roughly seven thousand languages are spoken in the world today,<sup>1</sup> and communicating in multiple languages is becoming more and more common. In typography, using multiple languages requires handling different scripts from time to time. Learning how different scripts work, can give us some insight into how writing has developed.

In 1799 the French officer Pierre-François Bouchard found the slab of granodiorite that changed the study of ancient languages. Now known as the Rosetta stone, it featured the same text in three different scripts: Egyptian hieroglyphs, Demotic, and Greek. The discovery led to the deciphering of hieroglyphs twenty years later.

The Rosetta Stone is one of the best known multilingual artefacts, and it shows us that societies were always multilingual. In the Egypt of 196 B.C., hieroglyphs was the script for monuments, Demotic was the 'common' script, and Greek was used by the government. The stone was designed to inform all layers of the literate society.

## Babylonian Confusion

The amount of scripts that is in use today is small compared to the variety of scripts that were once in use. Understanding how scripts have developed and how they are different is essential to understanding how contemporary typography works.

The first written languages appeared around 3200 B.C. in Egypt, Iraq, and India. In Africa, the Ge'ez script, the basis of Ethiopian script, was developed around 2000 B.C. The Chinese writing system dates back to at least 1200 B.C. In Mexico the first Mesoamerican scripts date from 600 B.C. Many older signs and symbols have not been deciphered yet, and the invention of writing is probably much older.

The first written languages did not use alphabets but graphic symbols that each represented a picture or an idea. These 'logographic' languages, like the Egyptian hieroglyphs, are the basis of all writing. As societies became more complex, it became impractical because of the large amounts of symbols that were needed. The sounds of words and symbols were added to the language in addition to their literal meaning. By using the rebus, more words could be created using combinations of symbols. Writing became more phonetic, symbols were made to represent syllables, and eventually symbols represented individual speech sounds with the creation of the first alphabets.

← The Rosetta Stone. 196 B.C. Granodiorite. Image: British Museum.

1. Rymer, Russ. 'Vanishing Languages'. *National Geographic*. July, 2012.  
[ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2012/07/vanishing-languages/rymer-text](http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2012/07/vanishing-languages/rymer-text).

## The Difference Between a Writing System and a Script

A script is a particular style of characters, like Chinese, Cyrillic, or Latin. Within each script there are different writing systems. In the Latin script, for example, lies the French writing system and the Slovak writing system, etc. Within the Arabic script there are the Urdu, the Pashto, and the Persian writing systems and many more.

## One Direction

There is no simple answer why languages are written from right-to-left or from left-to-right. Egyptian hieroglyphs could be written in both directions (bi-directional) with certain characters used to announce the start of a reading point. The Phoenician alphabet was written right-to-left and Aramaic inherited the tradition.

Arabic and Hebrew are written from right-to-left, and the reason for this may be that their predecessor Aramaic was inscribed in stone with chisel and hammer. A right-handed person would start work from right to left, with the stylus in the left and the mallet in the right.<sup>1</sup> The Greeks used clay tablets, which would have them prefer inscribing from left to right, in order not to smudge out words.<sup>2</sup> Latin, Coptic, and Cyrillic, which are the successors of the Greek alphabet, write left-to-right.

## Switching Scripts

Transliteration is the writing of words in a different script. In countries that use multiple scripts, transliteration is a costly endeavour. Street signs, official documents, and books have to be transliterated and produced. The European Union has twenty-three official languages and spends €330 million a year on translation alone.

In Azerbaijan, politics have influenced language in a dramatic way. The Azerbaijani or Azeri alphabet changed scripts four times in history. The Islamic conquest in 667 introduced the Arabic script to unify the caliphate. In 1917 the short-lived Azerbaijan Democratic Republic introduced the Latin script until the Soviet government took over in 1920. The Cyrillic script was introduced in 1939, a transition so sudden that characters had to be changed several times. After the collapse of the Soviet Union a debate ensued whether to reinstate

the Arabic or the Latin script. Neighbouring Iran starting promoting the Perso-Arabic script, and Turkey in turn began to promote the Latin-Turkish script. In 1990 the Turkish influence prevailed and the Latin script was chosen,<sup>3</sup> although three characters were added to it which are specific to the Azeri language and not in the Latin-Turkish alphabet: the 'ə', the 'x', and the 'q'.

FOOL ME ONCE,  
SHAME ON ARABIC.

FOOL ME TWICE,  
SHAME ON CYRILLIC.

FOOL ME THRICE,  
SHAME ON LATIN:

AaaaaaahhhhZERI!!!

1. Brodsky, Joseph. *On Grief and Reason: Essays*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995.

2. Handelzalts, Michael. 'In the Beginning: The Origins of the Hebrew Alphabet'. *Haaretz*, August 4, 2013. [www.haaretz.com/jewish/premium-1.539683](http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/premium-1.539683).

3. Slavs and Tatars. *Kidnapping Mountains*, Book Works 2009. 47-50.

↑ Slavs and Tatars. *AaaaaaahhhhZERI!!!*, 2009. Screenprint. 85 x 70 cm. Slavs and Tatars is an artist collective devoted to the area between the former Berlin Wall and the Great Wall of China.

## PROTO-SINAITIC

## PHOENICIAN

## HEBREW

## ARABIC

## EARLY GREEK

## LATIN

ox

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# Alphabets and Abjads

The Latin alphabet is the most widely used script in the world today. It is an adaptation of the first Greek alphabet from 800 B.C. The letters from the Latin alphabet can be traced back to the three-thousand-year-old Egyptian hieroglyphs, as shown in the evolution of alphabets on the left. It is from the Egyptian writing from which the first true alphabet developed in Greece. 'True alphabet' is how alphabets are called in which both consonants and vowels are treated as equal letters. Not all alphabets do this. The Phoenician, Hebrew, and Arabic alphabets use mainly consonants as letters. Most vowels are spoken, not written, or marks are added to note vowels. This kind of alphabet is called 'abjad', after the first letters of the Arabic alphabet. 'Abjads' like Arabic and Hebrew do contain some vowels, like the letter 'a' which is a direct descendent from the Egyptian hieroglyph for ox, but most of the vowels are spoken, not written.

## Characters and Letters

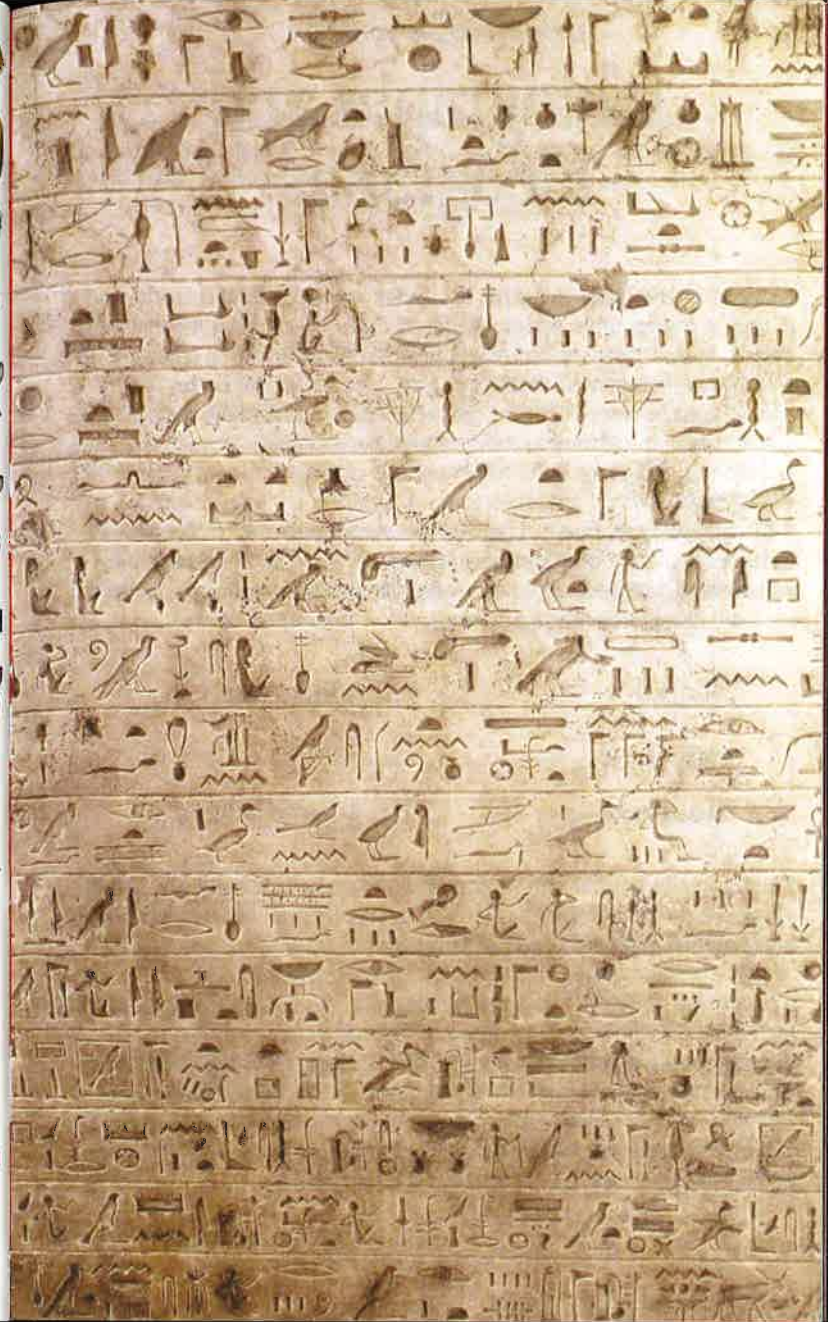
Alphabets and abjads have the advantage that they only need a small amount of letters, usually a set ranging between twenty to thirty-five, while logographies can have hundreds or even thousand of characters. Abjads have fewer vowels than true alphabets, but that does not make them smaller. The basic Arabic alphabet has twenty-eight letters, two more than the English Latin alphabet. Each alphabet has evolved to fit its linguistic needs, with its unique letters and diacritics (accents). Cyrillic alphabets tend to contain more letters because they add letters rather than using diacritics. The Kabardian and Abkhaz alphabets from the Caucasus are the largest in the world, with fifty-eight and fifty-six letters, respectively.

The following pages use the Arabic and Chinese scripts as examples to show how different scripts can influence design decisions and visual communication in general.

← Evolution of alphabets, Image by Ruben Pater.

↓ Apple Emoji. Designed by Apple, based on Japanese emoticons. Apple Computer.

↘ Egyptian Hieroglyphs from the Louvre. Photo: Echelon Force.



# Pictographs and Ideographs

Chinese is the language with the most speakers in the world and it uses a logographic script, which is different from alphabets and abjads, in that each symbol represents a word instead of a sound. It is often wrongly assumed all Chinese characters are pictographs, just like hieroglyphs or emoji. Chinese characters are both used for their pictographic meaning as well as their phonetic pronunciation.

## Pictographs

A pictograph is an iconic picture of the word it represents, like the ox's head in Egyptian hieroglyphs also stands for 'ox'. In Chinese the oldest and most basic characters are pictographs called *hanzi*, many of which are used in Japanese known as *kanji*.

人	human	大	big/great
日	sun	刀	knife
山	mountain	木	tree/wood

The basic pictographs can be combined to make new symbols, called aggregates. For example the symbol for tree (木) can be used to create the symbols for a small or a big forest.

木 tree    林 small forest    森 big forest

Chinese pictographs have a long history. Before the fifteenth century, Chinese was the language of the literate class in the region, which is why Chinese pictographs are still used in Japan. Pictographs allow a person who reads Japanese to understand some basics of a Chinese text, although they can not necessarily pronounce it.

## Ideographs

Ideographs are symbols that represent an idea. For example, the Chinese characters for up and down, and for one, two, and three. Of all Chinese characters 4% are pictographs, 13% are aggregates, 1% are ideographs, and all others are phonetic complexes.

上 up    下 down

一 二 三 one, two, three

## Complex Phonetics

Chinese characters can be used in two ways, for both their sound and their logographic meaning. Not knowing what meaning is intended can be impractical, so phonetic and pictographic characters are combined to make phonetic complexes. Phonetic complexes compose 82% of all Chinese characters. This example shows how the pictograph for rain (雨), can be combined with phonetics of the other characters to create phonetic complexes.

雨 rain + 云 (yun) = 雲 cloud (yun)  
 雨 rain + 辰 (chen) = 震 shake (zhen)  
 雨 rain + 相 (xiang) = 霜 frost (shuang)

## Bi-directional

Japanese and traditional Chinese can be read and written in multiple directions. Because characters are composed of disconnected square units, typesetting in multiple directions becomes easier. Present-day simplified Chinese and Korean is written horizontally from left-to-right like the Latin script. Traditional Chinese and Japanese can be written in both directions, depending on the context. Typesetting traditional Chinese and Japanese in the vertical direction requires special software because the character order that is used vertically can be different.<sup>1</sup>

1. Lunde, Ken. *CJKV Information Processing: Chinese, Japanese, Korean & Vietnamese Computing, 2nd Edition*. O'Reilly Media, 2008.

When brand names are translated into Chinese, it is done phonetically, which creates new meanings. In 1928, Coca-Cola translated its name as 驃马口蜡, which could be read as 'bite the wax tadpole' or 'female horse stuffed with wax'.<sup>1</sup> Disappointing sales led translators to find a

new translation. They searched through the 200 combinations that would pronounce the name with a more appropriate meaning. Translators came up with 'happiness in the mouth' (可口可乐).

1. Ricks, David A. *Blunders in International Business*. Blackwell, 1993: 37-38.

Female Horse  
Stuffed with Wax



love (traditional)

love (simplified)

# Characters Without a Heart

Research by Yin Aiwen

A culture war is going on between traditional Chinese and simplified Chinese. Taiwan, Hong Kong, and parts of the Chinese diaspora use traditional characters, while simplified Chinese is used in mainland China and Singapore.

Traditional Chinese has a long history, but it was institutionalised during the Qin dynasty in the third century B.C. These elaborate characters could only be read and written by the elite, and some traditional characters needed as much as eighteen strokes to be drawn.

The characters had been simplified for practical reasons in every day use, but they were not made official until Mao's cultural revolution in 1956. The communist regime wanted to standardise the language by introducing simplified Chinese throughout the whole country, which would strengthen the economy and help raise literacy rates.

The first version of simplification was rushed and had inconsistencies in symbol replacement, making it prone to errors. Over decades, rounds of character modifications were needed to correct the inconsistencies. Taiwan and Hong Kong kept traditional characters. They argued that the 'authentic' aesthetic of Chinese writing was lost in the process of simplification.

Proponents of traditional Chinese claim that those who write in simplified characters 'have no heart', because the traditional character for love (愛) has the symbol for heart (心) inside it, and by simplifying the character (爰) the heart was replaced by the character for friend (友). As a counterargument, proponents of simplified Chinese argue that those who use traditional Chinese 'have no friends'.<sup>1</sup>

This is how the aesthetics of language have played an important role in the cultural tensions between the Chinese-speaking countries.

1. Huang, Yuqi. 'Simplified Chinese "Family can't see", "Love has no heart"? Mainlander: Why not "party without darkness", "Team has talent"', *SETN News Net*, 2014. [www.setn.com/News.aspx?NewsID=51705](http://www.setn.com/News.aspx?NewsID=51705).

# Celebrity Guide to Politics with Taylor Swift

Always in public and under scrutiny, celebrity life can be demanding. It is only natural that celebrities aren't always aware of the political context they are in, and occasionally make mistakes.

In July 2015, Taylor Swift announced her new album and world tour titled *T.S. 1989*. A marketing campaign and a webshop was launched with a spray-painted logo. Journalist Fergus Ryan first mentioned that *T.S. 1989* could also be interpreted as Tiananmen Square, 1989, the year of the student protests in Beijing and the massacre that followed. All mentions of this event are heavily censored in the Chinese media. By the time her tour arrived in China, the title *T.S. 1989* was abandoned, and the items from the webshop with the spray-painted *T.S. 1989* logo were not available to Chinese users.



@taylorswift13 is going to sell T-shirts with '1989' on them in China.  
#awkward #tiananmen – @fryan, July 22, 2015

↑ Hooded sweater from Taylor Swift webshop [www.taylorswiftstore.co.uk](http://www.taylorswiftstore.co.uk), © Taylor Swift 2015.



## featuring Katy Perry

Katy Perry's 2015 performance in Taiwan surprised both her fans and the media. She was dressed in a sunflower outfit, donning the Taiwanese 'Republic of China' flag. She used the costume in all countries of the world tour, so she was probably not aware of highly sensitive relation between China and Taiwan, and the Taiwanese student sunflower movement protest against Chinese trade policies in 2014.

Her Taiwanese fans praised her support of the movement, but in China the response was less enthusiastic. Images of her performance were all deleted from Chinese social media sites the next day.

@KatyPerry put our national flag on herself during her speech tonight. #PrismaticWorldTour #PrismaticTaipei  
– @theauragirl, April 28, 2015

## – and Cameron Diaz

A shoulder bag with Mao's personal slogan became an issue during Cameron Diaz' visit of Peru in 2007. People were outraged by her bag. She apologised when she realised the conflict in the 1980s and 1990s with the 'Shining Path' Maoists had cost the lives of 69,000.

↑ Katy Perry in concert in Taipei, 2015, Photo: LuXChiara

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አብቃ።

ከፈለጋችሁት።

መልካም፡ገና፡ከሞላኑል፡እና፡የኩ።

# War is Over in Africa

With Missla Libsekal and Michael Thorsby

'War is over, if you want it.' The famous words of peace by John Lennon have grown into an ongoing art project, currently with translations in over 100 languages. Missla Libsekal from Another Africa realised there was no version for Ethiopia and Eritrea, a region troubled by conflict. She decided to join hands with designer Michael Thorsby to make a version in Amharic and Tigrinya, the languages of the two countries. Both make use of the Ge'ez script, the oldest African writing system that dates back to the fifth century B.C.

The scarce availability of digital typefaces in the Ge'ez script led designer Michael Thorsby to create new characters based on its original calligraphy, to match the Franklin Gothic letters of the poster. Native speakers helped to check and correct the final outcome.

Missla Libsekal shares some advice for designers: 'Having a native speaker participating is absolutely necessary to address issues such as readability, grammar, etc.' Libsekal recognises that illiteracy of the designer can allow a fresh view on type design, but designers do have to take care that aesthetic choices do not result in miscommunication.



1. Photo Missla Libsekal and Michael Thorsby, 2010.

2. 'War is Over, if you want it' in Amharic. Missla Libsekal and Michael Thorsby, 2010.

# African Alphabets

One quarter of the world's languages are spoken only on the African continent, somewhere between 1,250 and 2,100 languages. Islamic and European colonisation has influenced African alphabets dramatically.<sup>1</sup> One of the most spoken languages in West Africa is Hausa, spoken by 35 million, mostly in Nigeria. For centuries it was written in a version of the Arabic alphabet called Ajami, until the British colonial administration changed it to the Latin alphabet in the 1930s.

Before colonisation, different scripts were abundant on the continent: the Tifinagh script of the Tuareg, the N'Ko script of West Africa, Nsibidi of south-eastern Nigeria, and the Vah script of the Bassa people in Liberia, etc. The Colonizing powers imposed Western writing systems over local writing systems to control communication and influence the production of culture. The use of local scripts and languages declined, except in Ethiopia—one of the few independent African nations. Their Ge'ez script remains in use today. While colonisation has marginalised many African scripts, some have survived in small communities.

## Reviving African Alphabets

Designer Saki Mafundikwa researched African scripts and collected them in his 2004 book, *Afrikan Alphabets*. He has noticed a revival of African alphabets in the last few decades. In Morocco, neo-Tifinagh is being used for teaching Berber languages, and the N'Ko script is being adopted for apps and social media use.<sup>2</sup> Saki Mafundikwa has opened a design school in Harare called 'Zimbabwe Institute of Vigital Art'. He explains the importance of reviving African alphabets: 'I am not calling for the Roman alphabet to "reflect Afrikan culture", rather in a situation where we have seen type design in the age of technology being mutilated and distorted in grotesque ways, I see Afrikan alphabets offering a breath of fresh air that can rescue the Roman alphabet from the vagaries of style and trends'.<sup>2</sup>

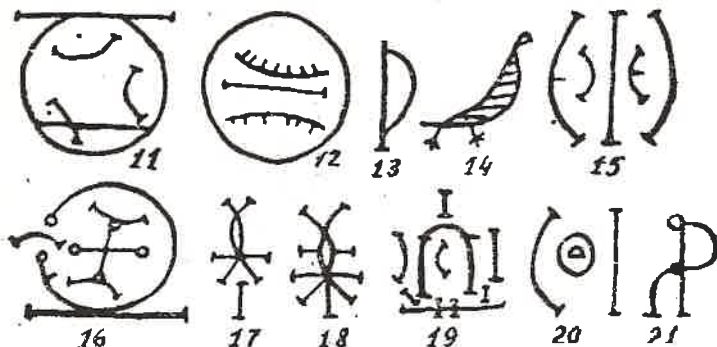
→ Nsibidi symbols used in Ukara cloth. Igbo. Cloth (Ukara), 20<sup>th</sup> century. Commercial cotton, indigo dye, 58 x 78 in. (147.3 x 198.1 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Purchased with funds given by Frieda and Milton F. Rosenthal, 1990.132.6. Photo: Brooklyn Museum.

→ Nsibidi symbols. Image from [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nsibidi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nsibidi).

→ Nsibidi type design on Nairaland forum by Crayola1. Image source: [www.nairaland.com/973985/nsibiri-pre-colonial-writing-south-eastern](http://www.nairaland.com/973985/nsibiri-pre-colonial-writing-south-eastern).

1. Gregersen, Edgar, A. *Language in Africa: An Introductory Survey*. Routledge, 1977. 176.

2. Okon, Ima-Abasi. 'Sharing the Wealth of Contemporary Africana', *IDPure* 31, 2013.



# Arabic-Latin Type Design

Contemporary visual communication requires typeface designs that include not just one, but several scripts in their character set. Like Arabic, Cyrillic, Hindi, Latin, etc.<sup>1</sup> Categories like 'non-Latin' are outdated and imply a hierarchy, and ignore the realities of a growing multilingual audience.

The economic growth in the Arab world has attracted many investors, and with it comes the need for new Arabic typefaces and visual identities.<sup>2</sup> However, many Arabic typeface designs are made to fit an existing Latin typeface. When a Latin script is used to dictate the form, the Arabic script becomes secondary, disregarding the visual and cultural heritage.<sup>3</sup>

## Cross-Pollination of Typography

Pascal Zoghbi is a type designer who works together with other type designers to create typefaces that have both Arabic and Latin characters. The idea is to respect both scripts and not to deform either script for the sake of the other. The Arabic letters should not be created from copied and pasted components of the Latin letters, and vice-versa.<sup>4</sup>

One of the typefaces he designed is Zeyn, a contemporary Arabic and Latin typeface designed with Ian Party from Swiss Typefaces. Zeyn (زين) is an Arabic word meaning beautiful, graceful, and elegant. The Arabic and Latin letters were created simultaneously and without any sacrifice of one script on behalf of the other.<sup>4</sup>

What is striking about the result is that both writing systems keep their unique aesthetic and identity, but also start to influence each other's design of the letter forms. Instead of creating hierarchy of scripts, a multilingual type design like the Zeyn can allow mixing and cross-pollination of the world's typographies into new practices of type design.

← 29LT Zeyn by Ian Party and Pascal Zoghbi, 2014. Image: Pascal Zoghbi.

1. Baki, Randa Abdel, 'Bilingual Design Layout Systems: Cases from Beirut', *Visible Language* 47.1, 2013, 38-65.

2. Interview with Pascal Zoghbi by Huda Smitshuijzen AbiFarès on [www.khht.net](http://www.khht.net).

3. Interview with Pascal Zoghbi by Lebanon Art Magazine on [lebrecorecord.com](http://lebrecorecord.com).

4. From 29LT website [www.fonts.29lt.com/retail.150](http://www.fonts.29lt.com/retail.150).

29LT Zeyn

زين

وطنى  
Bold

المنفى  
Medium

منفاي  
Regular

الكلمات  
Light

My nation  
is the exile.  
My exile is  
my words.

فِي بَنِي الْبَشَرِ شَرٌّ ضَرُورِيٌّ يَمْرُحُ وَيَنْزَحُ  
لَمْ يَكُنْ لِي فِي الْبَحْرِ شَيْءٌ إِلَّا السَّرُّ

Extensive set of ligatures and stylistic sets

# Arabic Adaptation for Latin Logotypes

With Pascal Zoghbi

The need for Arabic logotypes is growing. The governments of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have a bilingual policy that requires each international brand to appear both in Latin and Arabic. However, Arabic adaptations are too often done hastily or incorrectly.

## A Short Tutorial

First, designers should realise that Arabic has a different origin than Latin. Arabic letters are based on calligraphy and not constructed like the Roman capitals. Latin styles like serif, sans-serif, humanist, or script are not applicable. Arabic has calligraphic styles like Kufi, Naskh, Thuluth, and Diwani. All of these have religious, cultural, and historic backgrounds that should be considered when choosing one.

Do not create an Arabic adaptation of a Latin logo by cutting up Latin letters and creating Arabic letters with disregard for the strokes, or proportionality of the letters. If the type is constructed and not based on any Arabic calligraphy style it will look like 'Frankenstein Arabic', and characters can be hard to read or even be misread because they look too much like other characters.

Start by analysing the typographic aspects of the Latin type, and choose the Arabic calligraphy style to 'match' the Latin. For example, geometric sans-serifs work best with Kufi, humanist sans-serifs with Naskh, serifs work best with Naskh, Thuluth, and Diwani. There is not one 'Arabic' but many languages and dialects that use versions of the Arabic script. Lastly, since there is no x-height in Arabic the height of characters, descenders and ascenders have to be determined in relation to the Latin.<sup>1</sup> Visual narrative elements in the logo have to be translated so they can be read from right-to-left.

These rules may be ignored for various reasons, as long as the designer is aware that these choices can have cultural consequences. Always test your designs with speakers of the intended language.

1. Based on a tutorial by Pascal Zoghbi from 2009. [blog.291t.com/2009/01/25/arabic-logotypes-adaptations](http://blog.291t.com/2009/01/25/arabic-logotypes-adaptations).



↑ 'Frankenstein' Arabic logos found in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Photos by Pascal Zoghbi.

↓ Latin logos and their Arabic translations. Copyright of Burger King, FedEx, Amazon, and Subway.



**FedEx**

amazon.com®

**SUBWAY**



**فِيدِكْس**

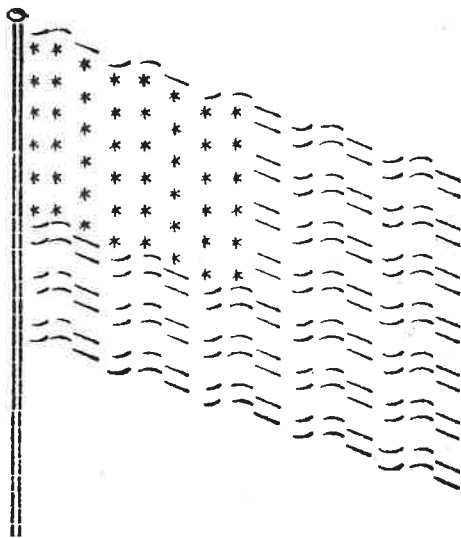
أمازون بالعربي

**سبواي**

# Cold War Character Coding

Thanks to Pedro Oliveira

The languages we speak and write in are not necessarily available for digital communication. Early computers and e-mail services had very limited memory that only allowed a small character set. The first computers communicated with ASCII, short for American Standard Code for Information Interchange. It was limited to 128 characters which included the English alphabet, basic functions, and mathematical symbols. No French, German, Spanish, let alone other writing systems or scripts were available. The ASCII standard is how the English writing system became the standard language for computers and the internet.



↑ Pre-ASCII art. U.S. flag created with a typewriter by Menno Fast, *Popular Mechanics*, Oct. 1948.

## Hacking ASCII

When SMS and internet use became more widespread, those with little knowledge of English were left behind. Internet users in Arabic countries came up with a clever way to communicate in their language without an Arabic keyboard. The Arabic chat alphabet or *Arabish*, is a language that uses ASCII numerals and other characters to replace Arabic letters; 3 is the Arabic letter *ayn* (ع), 5 is the Arabic letter *kh* (خ), and 9 the Arabic letter *saad* (ص). This track list of an album by Jerusalem in my Heart is an example of what the Arabic chat alphabet looks like:

Mo7it Al-Mo7it

01. Koll Lil-Mali7ati Fi Al-Khimar Al-Aswadi
02. Sandalib Al-Furat
03. Yudaghdegh El-ra3ey Walal-Ghanam
04. 3anzah Jarbanah
05. Dam3et El-3ein 3
06. Ko7l El-3ein, 3emian El-3ein
07. Amanem

## Unicode

It wasn't until the 1990s that ASCII was replaced by a system that could include languages other than the English language: Unicode.<sup>1</sup>

Unicode was invented in 1992 to accommodate over a million characters instead of a few hundred. Unicode has now become the new standard and is capable of including all languages of the world. It is the first international text character coding system that allows digital transliteration of different scripts and writing systems. Version 8.0 includes 129 scripts, including ancient scripts like hieroglyphs or cuneiform. New scripts are still added each year.

Unicode is coordinated by the Unicode consortium, a non-profit organisation that keeps expanding the system with new writing systems and character sets. On [www.unicode.org](http://www.unicode.org) you can find a list of scripts supported by Unicode, which includes roughly 120,000 characters. Unicode also includes many non-lingual character sets like mathematical characters, icons, graphics, and emoji.

<sup>1</sup> Track list in Arabic chat alphabet of the album *M07it Al-Mo7it* by *Jerusalem in My Heart*, a music project by Radwan Ghazi Moumneh. Album released on Constellation Records, Montreal 2013.

1. Bringhurst, Robert. *Elements of Typographic Style*, Hartley & Marks 2004. 180-181.

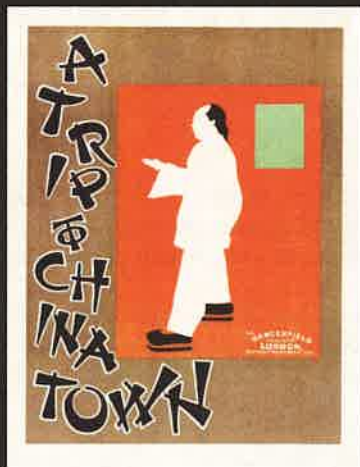
# Ethnic Typography

Sometimes typefaces seem to have a very distinct ethnic association. You can find these 'stereotypes' at restaurants that want to prove how authentically Greek, Chinese, Russian, or German they are.

Sometimes typography is not explicitly ethnic, but has grown to signify certain ethnicities through its historic use. Design writers Rob Giampietro<sup>1</sup> and Paul Shaw<sup>2</sup> have done excellent research on this. Despite their efforts, many designers still have the tendency to use 'authentic typography' when it comes to designing a certain ethnicity.

## Chinatown Type

After the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, a Chinese neighbourhood was built to replace the old destroyed Chinatown. Shaw explains how a typeface called 'Mandarin' became synonymous with the neighbourhood.<sup>3</sup> It was designed by a U.S. designer in 1883, intended to look oriental, as it was constructed out of swashing pointy brushstrokes. An early use of the Mandarin typeface can be seen in the 1899 poster by the Beggarstaff brothers for the play 'A Trip to Chinatown', which

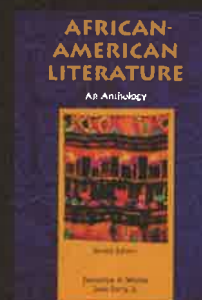
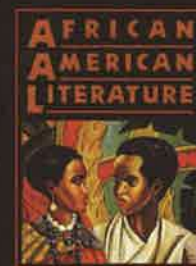


↑ A Trip To China Town, Beggarstaff brothers, 1899. © Estates of James Pryde and William Nicholson.  
 ↗ Chinese Take out packaging. Image source: [www.fold-pak.com](http://www.fold-pak.com)



helped to popularise the typeface.<sup>2</sup> A whole range of these 'oriental' typefaces, nicknamed 'chop suey', spread around the world to attract customers for Chinese, Japanese, and other 'Asian' restaurants.

In 2002, clothing brand Abercrombie & Fitch designed a line of T-shirts with 'chop suey' typefaces featuring Asian caricatures with texts like 'Two Wongs Can Make it White'. One response came from Lela Lee, a Los Angeles cartoonist: 'the T-shirts depict century-old stereotypes of Asians as "kung-fu fighting, fortune-cookie-speaking, slanty-eyed, bucktooth servants."' The storm of complaints forced the company to pull the T-shirts from their stores.<sup>3</sup>



## American Spirit

Neuland and Lithos are two typefaces that have been used as a typographic cliché for African American texts and publications. This typography has been used for African American literature, African anthropology, and exotic/adventurous marketing for movies like *Jurassic Park*, *Tarzan*, *Jumanji*, and *the Lion King*. How did this bold jugendstil typeface become synonymous for 'exotic' typography, and African and African-American culture?

↑ American Spirit package, Natural American Spirit, © Santa Fe Natural Tobacco.  
 ↗ Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. *African-American Literature*, Holt McDougal, 1998.  
 ↗ Worley, Demelrice A., Perry, Jessie. *The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature*, NTC Publishing Group, 1998

1. Giampietro, Rob. 'New Black Face: Neuland and Lithos as Stereotypography', *Letter-space*, fall/winter, 2004.  
 2. Shaw, Paul 'Stereo Types'. *Print Mag*. June 17, 2009. [www.printmag.com/article/stereo\\_types](http://www.printmag.com/article/stereo_types).  
 3. Glionna, John M. and Abigail Goldman. 'Answering Protests, Retailer to Pull Line of T-shirts That Mock Asians'. *LA Times*. 19 April, 2002. [articles.latimes.com/2002/apr/19/local/me-shirt19](http://articles.latimes.com/2002/apr/19/local/me-shirt19).

Neuland was designed by Rudolf Koch in 1923 as a modern version of the blackletter, at that time used in Germany for bibles and literature. In the U.S., Neuland was marketed for advertising and categorised by designers as a woodblock style type. Giampietro<sup>4</sup> explains how this style was used for 'lower class' products like tobacco and circus advertisements, the latter being full of associations of the exotic and adventurous. By both associations, Neuland became a stereotype in the design of products for the African-American market and representations of African-American culture until well into the 1990s.<sup>4</sup>

The African-American community itself did not follow the stereotyping with 'ethnic typography'. For example the African-American owned *Ebony* magazine and Blue Note records in the 1960s used modernist typefaces like Futura, Trade Gothic, and Clarendon.<sup>4</sup>



### Totem Poles and Patterns

The *Afrika Museum* in the Netherlands is a museum that shows both historic and contemporary art from the African continent and the African Diaspora. In 2006 Dutch type designer René Knip was invited to design the new identity for the Museum. He designed an ornamental stencil typeface using African inspired patterns and shapes. The letterforms were cut out of metal and dispersed around the museum site as signage, like a kind of 'totem pole'.<sup>5</sup>

↑ Afrika Museum identity, Atelier René Knip, © 2006.

4. Giampietro.

5. Bruinsma, Max. 'René Knip de Letterbouwer', *Addimagazine*, March 2006.

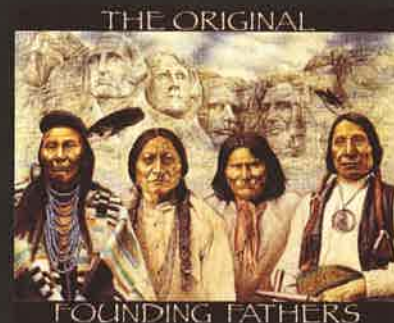
6. Knip, René. 'Wandering Through the 2.5 dimension', *TYPO San Francisco*, lecture 2014.

Design critic Max Bruinsma said about the typographic design, 'The letters radiate with an animist magic'.<sup>5</sup> In a lecture in 2014, Knip clarified that his design was not intended to 'be serious' because mostly school children visit the museum.<sup>6</sup> It is clear that the design is not based on what actual African culture or African typography has to offer, but reflects merely the designer's imagination of what 'African' looks like. This reduces the historic and contemporary art of an entire continent to a colonial stereotype.

### Alien Exoticism

Ethnic typography transcends boundaries of time and space. The science fiction movie *Avatar* from 2011 follows a classic colonial storyline. Papyrus was the typeface chosen for the *Avatar* poster and merchandise, a typeface designed by U.S. designer Chris Costello in 1983. In an interview from 2007 he said the design was inspired by his image of the ancient Middle East. Papyrus is one of those typefaces which can be found on any design that needs an exotic, spiritual, ancient, or ethnic association.

Ethnic typography can lead to racist designs, but more importantly the use of ethnic stereotypes prevents the public from seeing representations of minorities treated with the same respect as those of the dominant cultures.

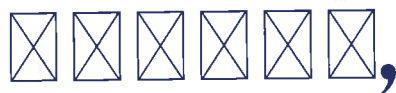


Papyrus

↑ Movie poster *Avatar*, © 20th Century Fox, 2009.

↑ The Original Founding Fathers. Image via [www.papyruswatch.com](http://www.papyruswatch.com).

'It looks like  
Greek,  
Chinese,  
Hebrew,  
Turkish,  
Arabic,



mumbo jumbo,  
jabberwocky,  
gobbledygook,  
to me'

## Greek It Till You Make It

'Graphic designers don't read' is a widespread cliché. Whether true or not, you can often find meaningless text in a graphic design sketch with some fake Latin words or repeated nonsensical text.

'Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet' are the first words of the dummy text used by the typesetting and printing industry since the 1500s. Originally a Latin text by Cicero from the first century B.C., the text was adapted to mimic the appearance of European languages. The letters K, W, and Z were added (which are not used in Latin), and words were changed to appear more random. Dummy text can be useful when designs have to be judged without actual content available, and clients want to see the form and structure of typography without being distracted by readable unrelated text. This is somewhat peculiar since typography is used to give context and structure to a text so it can be read better.

### Language of the Barbarians

The typographic term for using dummy text is 'greeking'—just like saying 'this is Greek to me' is an expression to describe incomprehensible writing or speech. Many languages have a similar saying, like 'this looks like Chinese', 'this is mumbo jumbo', or 'it looks like Turkish to me'. Innocent sounding fantasy words like 'gobbledygook' and 'jabberwocky' are made up to describe these strange words and symbols we cannot decipher. This goes back to the ancient idea that everything revolves around your own kind, and we are weary of the strangers who we cannot understand and who mumble unintelligible words.

The Greeks were the ones who first used the word 'barbarian' when they encountered people they could not understand. The Greek origin of barbarian is 'barbaros', literally the babbling of a person speaking a non-Greek language.

Whenever you come across unknown writing, and you want to say 'it looks like Greek to me', think about how the Greeks would probably call you a barbarian.

