



Graphic Design

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## Decolonizing typeface classification

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### Introduction

Students studying typography in graphic design programs are often, early in their education, introduced to typeface classifications and vocabulary that originate in the European history of printing, and then asked to use these to categorize the typographic styles they use, and are given exercises that focus on roman alphabetic letter forms. Projects are often contextualized in terms of Euroamerican art and design movements such as Constructivism, Futurism, Swiss Style, the New York School, and sometimes as well in more general terms such as Classicism, Rationalism, Modernism, Postmodernism and others.

Cultural hegemony is seen around the world, and that has been a characteristic of communication design as well as other media and practices, and promulgates the cultural values of the dominant group. Antonio Gramsci described the concept of cultural hegemony in the early 20th century<sup>1</sup>. It can be seen to apply to scriptural as well as other forms. This paper is concerned less with the theory, and more with the typographic manifestation of this, and how to challenge the hegemony of the Roman typeface in the context of typographic education.

In many cases in the world, languages without a robust, well-developed, and established writing system have adopted (or had imposed) the roman alphabet (in much of the world, due to European colonialism), Cyrillic, or Arabic to visually repre-

sent the sound of their languages. Brahmic scripts have also evolved into several variations in the Indian subcontinent, and further developed into Southeast Asian scripts, such as those used for Burmese, Thai, and other languages. In other cases, the Latin alphabet has supplanted existing scripts, sometimes by effective imposition (as in the Philippines, which had indigenously developed Brahmic scripts), by government fiat (for example in the case of Turkey replacing Arabic with Latin), or for more complex reasons (for example, Vietnamese, where a version of Chinese script was replaced by Roman partly because of colonization, but also because the Chinese script was not suited to the more complex grammar of Vietnamese.) There are some notable exceptions, such as the designed, rather than evolved, scripts such as Korean, Canadian Aboriginal Syllabics, Cherokee script, Adlam, and, earlier, Cyrillic (an adoption of Greek uncial characters).

Learning and using typographic categories such as those of the very influential Vox-ATypI and similar,<sup>2</sup> and studying the history of typography in design in Europe and America may appear to make sense in the current practice of printing in those parts of the world that primarily use scripts of the Latin tradition. It is useful when dealing with roman typography, and is part of a common vocabulary with others who have the same education in typography.

However, it excludes other scripts, and reinforces a Eurocentric approach to considering typographic form. Should we forget the European history of typography in our contemporary use of it? Or should we contextualize it in terms of other movements of history and a recognition of cultural hegemony?

GLYPHIC	Slab serif
Blackletter	Grotesque
Old style	Geometric
Transitional	Humanist
Modern	<i>Formal script</i>
Egyptian	<i>Informal script</i>

Fig. 1. Most of these classifications typically taught in graphic design programs have little or nothing to do with the forms they apply to. In the example, only Slab serif, Geometric, the formal and informal scripts and Glyphic have a relationship between their names and their forms.

While current Latin scripts have their origins in the Roman Empire (with lowercase having evolved in the later Holy Roman Empire), and European typographic technologies have their origins in the Renaissance, many of the letter forms we use are traceable much farther back to the scripts of the early Middle East of over 3000 years ago, while the technology of typography was developed in China and Korea centuries before it was developed in Europe. As well, the alphabet and printing are technologies that can be and have been adopted by many other cultures as useful tools. The spread of the Phoenician alphabet was due to its adoption in a trading economy in which it was important to communicate over distances. The utility of the alphabet as a relatively simple way of representing language was a technology that was found to be useful by other cultures. The cultural implications attending this adoption were likely ignored or not considered at that time, and as alphabetic technology continued to spread since that time.

This issue is wider than typography alone. As Farshid Mesghali, an Iranian writer and designer suggests,

*Today's definition of graphic design is a Western medium for mass communications"..... Western posters are in line with and a continuation of the western culture. [Iranian] posters, on the contrary, fail to establish any relationship with our culture because they have no relation to [Iranian] society.*<sup>3</sup>

Typography is central to almost all communication design. Though Meshghali is writing about Iranian graphic design, the same would appear to apply to other cultures.

The Latin alphabet has cultural weight in many script environments. Many cultures where the dominant script is non-Roman use Roman characters in typographic contexts such as advertisements, product packaging, and business signage. For example, in a 2013 study, 96% of advertisements in 30 Japanese magazines used English for the company name, the product name, in the company logo, or a combination of these.<sup>4</sup> In India, in particular, the use of Roman type (specifically English) is a signifier of aspirational and middle class values.<sup>5</sup>

This is a complex problem; the roman alphabet is imposed (as is the need, increasingly, to work in English in the global context). But it also has been welcomed, where an established script was not extant; and

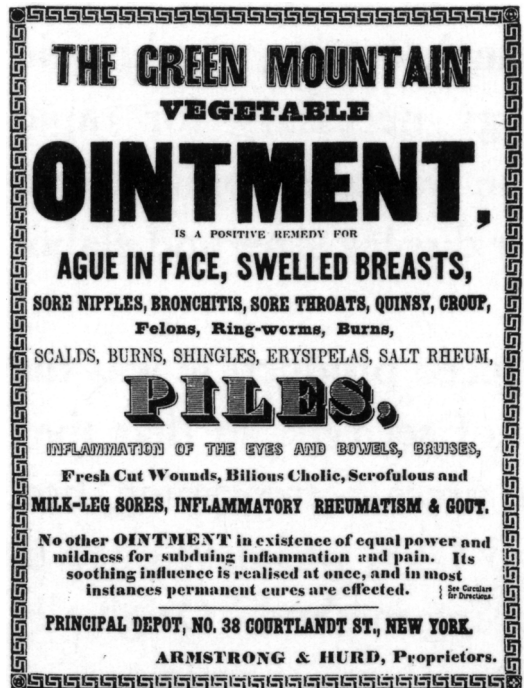


Fig. 2 Label from the 1850s shows a range of the Latin typefaces that were devised with the intention of catching prospective buyers' eyes in a new consumerist society. This experimentation has had far-reaching consequences for Latin typefaces.

the visual qualities of Industrial Revolution typography have also been part of this adoption. A problem has been identified, but the origin of the problem is historical. Successfully addressing its results is next to impossible, but we can at least question and challenge the assumptions that have arisen.

### **The alphabet as technology**

Any alphabet is a tool that enables people to communicate asynchronously and over distances. In societies without a complete writing system (that is one that fully represents language; the adoption of an alphabetic or syllabic writing systems is relatively easy, as long as the language can be approximately represented by the alphabetic symbols. Logographic systems also function as complete writing systems with sufficient characters<sup>6</sup>, but thus more complex and harder to learn, so implementation is more difficult. However, it is not a simple dichotomy. Like any script it is used to represent language. In cases where writing was not highly developed, it has been adopted by speakers of the language to represent that language, and may be used to communicate ideas and values that are antithetical to the bodies from which the writing system was adopted; the employment of the tool itself has relatively little cultural significance in these cases (though as Walter J. Ong in *Orality and Literacy*<sup>7</sup> explains, introduction of a writing system where none previously exists entails a significant shifts from orality). In other cases it has been effectively imposed, replacing an existing writing systems, such as in the case of Roman script replacing earlier scripts in the Philippines, such as Baybayin, during Spanish colonization. In some cases it is a mixture of the two, as in the case of Vietnam.

Alphabetic and syllabic systems have an advantage is that they are relatively easy to learn, and are able to incorporate new words and represent (although to a lesser extent with syllabic systems) different languages.

### **The Roman alphabet as cultural signifier**

Although the alphabet is a technology, the adoption of an external script entails adoption of a less oral and more written culture. More than many technologies, is peculiarly freighted with the culture from where

it originated. The use of Roman alphabet implies an acceptance of the importance of the culture of its origin. As the script of European colonizers, it may further suggest a subordination of the culture using that script by another.

There are cases in which script has been deliberately used as an affirmation of cultural identity. The revival of Hebrew in Israel is an example of this. In the Philippines, the use of Baybayin is being encouraged by the government as a way to strengthen national identity.<sup>8</sup>

The fact that the roman alphabet has been widely used by cultures that otherwise have little or no basis in Greco-Roman traditions is an ongoing symbol of European colonization and Euroamerican dominance.

### **The educational context**

In OCAD University, our records show that in 2020/21, 26.5% of undergraduate students were international.<sup>9</sup> While not all international students come from a context in which scripts other than Latin are used, we also have a significant number of domestic students who are new or relatively new immigrants of whom a significant part of their earlier education was outside Canada in a non-Latin script environment. About 47% of Toronto's population are immigrants. Of these, 14.8% (2016 figures) were recent immigrants (those who have immigrated in the last 5 years).<sup>10</sup>

Although we do not have a breakdown by numbers at the institution at which I teach, classroom experience indicates that there are many students from the Middle East, Korea, and the Indian subcontinent, which is supported by the figures for Canada (see above). Students from all these places are probably at more or less of a disadvantage in the use of typography to communicate language, as they do not have as much experience of Latin typography as those students who grew up in the Latin script context. And while students from a European or other roman script background are likely to have little explicit knowledge or have paid much attention to the aesthetic and connotational aspects of typography, they nevertheless are familiar form exposure with the forms and connotations of the roman alphabet in use. Taking a European historical approach to the classification

of type is amplifies the differences between many international and immigrant students understanding of type, rather than mitigating it. Taking a more formal, and less culturally-based approach to the analysis and classification of typefaces is a more acultural way of addressing this topic.

Furthermore, for students from cultures with other scripts than roman, a modernist western education will probably reinforce existing cultural perceptions that foreground Latin text as a 'valid' subject of study and design element. We have argued that the primacy of Latin script needs to be challenged. Amplifying this hierarchy does not just ignore the attendant problems, it worsens them.

### Approaches to type Classification

We still need ways to mentally organize type. Although ignoring European type classifications would be a mistake, as our graphic design students, whether domestic or international, often intend to work in an environment in which the Latin script is the principal means of typographic communication, it would be negligent to completely ignore them in a North American typography class. Let us consider some of the options.

#### *Historical*

As we know, the organization of typefaces in Europe and America are generally based on the European history of typography. This is often also true of the classification of other script styles, such as Chinese and Arabic, but there is no interapplicability of these. Robert Bringhurst in his influential book *The Elements of Typographic Style* proposes the following classifications of for Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo, Neoclassical, Romantic, Realist, Expressionist, etc.<sup>11</sup> These art historical classifications are an interesting way to approach type classifications, but are at least as lacking in applicability to other scripts than Vox-ATypI. The history of European typography is relevant to today's students, mostly because of the explosion of typographic experimentation during the growth of advertising in the Industrial Revolution when economies became supply driven. But this is less taught in design schools, as Victorian-era advertising graphic design, is not generally considered exemplary owing to its cluttered and often incoherent choices of typeface and layout. (See figure 2.) The



Fig. 5. There are structures analogous to serifs in the Chinese, and the relationship between thick and thin strokes is similar, though more marked in the Chinese example. The Chinese forms are more complex, which is not surprising in a writing system that must have thousands of different identifiable characters. In terms of the construction of forms, the Chinese has smaller, simpler strokes, as the density of many forms would make anything more than slight curves impossible. The connotation of each is similar. The Song Ti is suitable for any text. The Jenson, based on a typeface from the late 1400s, might appear a bit idiosyncratic to many designers, but would likely go unremarked by the average reader.

widespread knowledge of historical classifications suggests that

#### *Structural*

Some ways of type categorization are essentially acultural and apply to any writing system. The weight of a typeface (the light–bold continuum), the internal contrasts of a face (such as the relative difference between thin and thick strokes), and those aspects related to how forms are rendered (angle of stroke, modulation, the amount that strokes of different heights vary.

Gerrit Noordzij's classification is based on the writing implement. Although he applies it exclusively to Latin script (and includes the split-nib pen, which is traditionally a writing implement used only for Latin scripts), writing implements such as flat nib pens and brushes are widely used to write many scripts, so his approach is potentially useful for analyzing and comparing them, both within scripts and between different ones, although he shows little interest in the formal nature of monoline typographic form.<sup>12</sup>

The now-deprecated Panose Typeface Classification Number intended to provide a complete description of the appearance of Roman typefaces. It was used by some applications to match unavailable fonts with a close match. Development was started on Panose 2, but was never publicly implemented.<sup>13</sup> Looking at the parameters, we can see that some of them would

only apply to Latin typefaces, but others have inter-scriptural application.

**Family Kind** denotes whether a typeface is Roman, Cyrillic, or Japanese.

**Serif Style** describes the appearance of the serifs used in a font design. Serif and sans serif faces are classified within this digit.

**Weight** classifies the appearance of a font's stem thickness in relation to its height.

**Proportion** describes the relative proportions of the characters in the font.

**Contrast** describes the ratio between the thickest and narrowest points on the letter 'O'.

**Stroke Variation** describes the rate of transition of stroke thickness changes on rounded glyphs.

**Arm Style** describes diagonal stems and the termination of open rounded letterforms.

**Letterform** differentiates between vertical and oblique fonts and describes the roundness of the character shapes.

**Midline** describes the placement of the midline and the treatment of diagonal stem apexes.

**x-height** describes the relative height of lower-case characters and the treatment of upper-case glyphs with diacritical marks.

Many of these parameters are not specifically cultural, but others apply largely to faces of Greek and Roman provenance (such as x-height, cap height, serif style, etc.) Although there are analogous structures in other scripts.]

### Catherine Dixon's classification system

Catherine Dixon's devised a system of classification as a focus of her doctoral studies. While it does incorporate sources, which suggests a European orientation, she describes eight formal characteristics.

**Construction**, referring to the nature of the stores that make up the letters, typically are composed of round and straight forms which generally have a common nature in a script).

**Shape** refers to skeletal shape of the characters, which (for example, could be round, super elliptical, square, or have high or low horizontal elements.

**Proportions** considers whether overall characters are wide or narrow, and the vertical relationships between the main

body of the type (x-height in roman, but applicable to other scripts with some adjustment.)

**Modelling** deals with the stress and relationship between thin and thick strokes (if present).

**Weight** deals generally with the relationships between stroke and counterform.

**Terminations** deals with how strokes are terminated (pointed, what kind of serif structures, if any).

**Key characters**, while useful in comparing varieties within a script, is not applicable between scripts.

**Decoration** deals mainly with treatment of the forms (shadow, outline, inline, etc), and do not usually address the forms themselves.



Fig. 4. The similarities and difference of these two examples of different scripts can be usefully considered using Catherine Dixon's systems. They are structurally similar in terms of weight, contrast, cursive modelling and variation between heights of different parts of letters, and cursive in nature. They differ in terms of taper, in how strokes are terminated and the modelling is less complex (as is typical) in the Latin script. However, they have nothing in common historically (or in terms of connotation); on the left is a typeface based on the French Gothic cursive hand of the 1700s. The Arabic is based on the Naskh cursive hand which was developed 600 years earlier. The Latin is a display face that might evoke Arabic script, while the Arabic is used for contemporary text.

### Other approaches

Perhaps recognizing that historical approaches are not something that even designers with a grounding in Latin script may be aware of, Adobe, on the Adobe fonts website, offers several ways to classify type. The first option users are offered are mostly connotational tags, which in most cases are unlikely to translate well across different script traditions, followed by broad divisions that are Latin-oriented. The last classification is by properties, which is the least oriented to Latin (though the references to x-height, caps only, and figure styles are clear Latin references.





Fig. 5. The Adobe fonts website offers a number of ways to categorize fonts: by connotation or association, by basic classification, and by properties. Although they all are clearly Latin oriented, the ‘properties’ categories of weight, width, and contrast comes closest to a more universal approach to scripts.

## Conclusion

So there is no simple solution. No classification system works for all scripts (or even one that works very well for a given script: think of ‘display’ appearing as a category as an example of this shortcoming.) However, whatever systems are used by those we work and discuss typography with will continue to have their uses, whatever their faults.

For students from non-Latin script writing cultures, and for those with Latin script backgrounds who are increasingly likely to have to engage with different script in bi-scriptual, the VoxATyp1 system is not sufficient, and reinforces a Eurocentric view of type. Any designers dealing with typography will benefit from a more flexible and open minded approach to how they think of typefaces, one that recognizes the different anatomies and connotations of typographic form in different cultures, and opens them to different approaches to type. To avoid the imposition of Eurocentric aesthetics it is necessary to avoid imposing their own (or inculcated) typographic culture and aesthetics on other scripts. Recognizing that designers with other script backgrounds have, by education

and exposure, absorbed Latin culture and aesthetics makes it equally important to ask students of typography with non-Latin backgrounds to question the influences of their typographic decisions and consider the affordance, values and traditions of their own scripts. Analyzing and classifying any script in terms of formal attributes rather than according to historical categories is a step in the right direction.

The problem with focusing on attributes is that it can become complex, as we have seen. From a pedagogical point of view, it seems that starting with simple structural differences is the place to begin, with a more complex and sophisticated approach developing as the student does. Instead of focusing on European historical applications (though they should be introduced, for reasons discussed earlier), it will be both more inclusive and more broadening to focus on the structural qualities of typefaces and scripts.

There are some characteristics that have wide application. Some are **weight**, which considers the ratio of the length of the longest vertical stroke to its width, and comparing the ratio of stroke to counter space; **contrast**, the relationship between thin and thick strokes; **modelling**, the rate and points at which variations in weight change; **curvivity**, the degree to which the forms appear based on a freehand flowing stroke; **formality**, the degree to which parts of letters show consistency and geometric; and **axis**, which applies to the placement of relationship between thicker and thinner strokes (if present). These of course should be considered in terms of range, rather than as discrete characteristics. This does allow for different interpretations, but many historical classifications allow for the same thing. For example, Times Roman might be classified as transitional, because of its thin serifs, or old style because of its axis.

It seems an ethical duty to both discourage the idea that the Roman alphabet is the only one worth considering, and to be willing to recognize the history, forms, and traditions of other scripts. Many of us have expertise in the use of roman typography, and little or no understanding of other traditions. But this should not stop us from considering other scripts, and when possible, encouraging students with that knowledge to both employ it in their work, and to educate both instructors and fellow students about them. Approaching the classification of scripts from a more structural and less historical basis is a small step in that direction.



Fig. 6. Comparing these examples of Chinese formally is possible without any knowledge of Chinese historical classifications. The version on the left is formal, with low contrast, of moderate weight, with vertical axis. The central word is moderately informal, with slight contrast, with an axis that leans slightly to the right is very informal (cursive) with a vertical axis.

## Notes

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