TYPODAY 2015

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Multilingual Typography; Signs and Language Politics of Israeli Urban Culture

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Abstract: Ellen Lupton stated, [typography is] "the tool for doing things with: shaping content, giving language a physical body, enabling the social flow of messages." Typography is a main element of visual communication and graphic design. It is written language presented in aesthetic form to communicate a message to a public audience and has a very important and contemporary position globally. (Ertep, 2011) Typography allows viewers to navigate a flow of content, offering a system of hierarchy in design with text and image.

Within the state of Israel, the typography of public spaces presents the political systems of language preferences. Hebrew and Arabic are the two official languages of Israel, and English is used as the semi-official language. This linguistic structure is re-established within the visual presentation of typography upon the country's linguistic landscape. Currently, trilingual signage is a commonality of Israel's urban environment, where letterforms of Hebrew, Arabic, and English are presented to supply a translation of the same information. As this is the case, language preferences are exhibited within the typographic framework via hierarchy of letterforms through position, size, and appearance.

This essay examines the culmination of Hebrew, Arabic, and English typography within Israeli public spaces and explores language preferences in relation to social and cultural nationalism.

Key words: Typography, Visual Communication, Linguistic Landscape, and Language Preference

Linguistic Landscape

The investigation of language within public spaces through typographic signage; road signs, advertising billboards, street signs, commercial shop signs; is known as "linguistic landscape" and is of great interest to anthropologists, cultural theorists, and sociolinguists. Through the study of linguistic landscapes researchers find information

about specific environments and cultures including social orders such as institutional powers, dominating powers, and ethnic and racial relations. (Bolton 2012) Studying the linguistic landscape of a community requires the review of aesthetic design in typography since it depicts codes of language, social, economic, and hierarchy systems. Historic, socioeconomic, migration, and education policies are factors presented within linguistic landscapes, and visually represent language opportunities and preferences for individuals and social groups. (Agnihotri and McCormick, 2010)

When reviewing the linguistic landscape within an urban or rural community, typographic compositions will support monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual character scripts. Bilingual and multilingual typographic signage are a common feature of a globalized and interconnected world where signs are often comprised of a national / dominant language alongside English as a secondary / international language. (Hojati, 2013)

In Israel, multilingual typographic signage is a familiar element of contemporary urban culture. Beginning with the British Mandate of Palestine, in 1922 street signs were constructed in Jerusalem under British rule showing a hierarchy of language and typographic design placed in accordance of the law's "official language policy" set by the mandate. (Araryahu, 2012) According to this law, the top line of text was written in English; the language of the British colonial power; the second line written in Arabic; the language of the population majority; and the bottom line written in Hebrew; the language of the Jewish minority. After 1948 and the creation of Israel as a Jewish state, language preference changed and typographic signage within Israeli cities was redesigned to display Hebrew as the dominant language.

Language

Language is the "ultimate semiotic system...the very sense of who we are, where we belong, and why and how we relate to those around us, all have language at the center." (Joseph, 2013)

Israel is a multilingual society with two official languages of Hebrew and Arabic, and English as a secondary / international language. The main law that governs the language policies of Israel is the 82nd paragraph of the "Palestine Order in Council" issued August 14th, 1922. The law states that "All Ordinances, official notices of the Government and all official notices of local authorities and municipalities in areas to be prescribed by order of the High Commissioner, shall be published in English, Arabic, and Hebrew." This law, created by the British Mandate was adopted by the new founding state of Israel in 1948. (Lerman, 2010)

Hebrew

In 1948 the Jewish state of Israel was established and Hebrew was declared the official language of the country. Currently, Hebrew is perceived as the primary official language of Israel and is used in government, commerce, Knesset debates, court sessions, schools, and universities. The study of Hebrew is required within the educational curriculum of Arabic speaking schools from elementary and onward. And all educational institutions require a Hebrew matriculation exam for students to move forward to university level education. According to the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (2011), 90% of Jews and 60% of Arabs speak and read Hebrew fluently.

The use of Hebrew as a national language for Israel was a political strategy from the onset of the country's development. Jewish settlers of Israel did not speak Hebrew as they were Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe; who spoke Yiddish, a dialect of Hebrew, German, Polish, and Russian; and Sephardic Jews from Spain, Portugal and the Middle East North Africa region; who spoke Arabic or Ladino, a language mixed of Hebrew, Spanish, and Portuguese. (Safran, 2005)

Some believed that the "new" Jewish nation of Israel would be born and reestablish its spiritual and cultural roots through the primary use of Hebrew as a national language. (Levine, 1998) Writer Menahem Mavshan wrote in 1919 "only Hebrew could turn the Jewish people in Palestine from a mere heard into a nation". Like most Zionist thinkers of this time, the use of Hebrew as a spoken language was seen as a national tool, one that was encouraged to be learned, through schools and written literature. Zionists believed that by replacing Hebrew with the languages of the Jewish Diaspora meant the creation of the "new Jew". (Helman, 2002) Many felt the use of Hebrew as a national language promoted the idealized Israeli Jewish identity. Arguing that the use of Hebrew as a national language was an essential element for the building of a Jewish state. "[T] hose who disregard the Hebrew tongue betray the Hebrew nation, and are traitors to both their race and their religion." (Pg. 45)

The revival of Hebrew, referring to the everyday spoken and written use of the language in Palestine from the late 19th century onward, is seen by many as "miraculous" and is a formal element of the cultural and national symbol of the Jewish people. Hebrew had been the common language of the Israeli people prior to 200AD when it died from the conquering of other cultures. While the language was lost in spoken dialect, it was preserved through the religious texts of the Bible and Mishnah. (Fellman, 1973) And at the time of the expansion of modern Zionism, primarily religious scholars who read and wrote religious texts utilized Hebrew for religious study, letters, business and legal documents.

Over time, Hebrew presented itself in the Jewish Diaspora through mixed dialect with the language of the country in which Jewish communities resided. (Fellman, 1973)

As Hebrew was used for centuries purely in religious texts and scriptures, Zionists saw a challenge in reviving the language when placed in competition with the many mother tongues of the Diasporas Jews. Ultimately, the Jews of Palestine were prevented from using their native tongue as an attempt to assimilate all Jews into one national culture from their multitude of ethnic differences. " [Jewish] immigrants and refugees should be required to assimilate into Jewish Palestine and to properly learn Hebrew." The language should dominate the public and private spheres including individual's thought process since "only original thinking in Hebrew could create the "new Jew". (Helman, 2002)

Arabic

Though an official language of Israel, Arabic is perceived as the secondary official language within the country. Mostly those of Arabic decent including Israeli Druze and Mizrahi and Yemenite Jews speak the language. Israeli Arabs, who contribute to approximately 5% of the Israeli population, speak Arabic firstly and Hebrew fluently as a secondary language. In 2000 it was decided that Arabic would appear more extensively within the Israeli system. Laws were established to sustain the use of Arabic within the linguistic landscape including road signs, food labels, and government public messages.

While Arabic has always been a language approved for use within the Knesset, it is rarely adhered to since Arabic speaking members are fluent in Hebrew and fewer Hebrew speaking members are fluent in Arabic. Arabic is taught within Hebrew speaking schools from middle school onward. And in 2008, an Arabic Language Center was established in Haifa to further develop the education and use of Arabic within the Israeli system.

English

During the initial stages of The Israeli state development, the use of English decreased as it signified the language of the British Mandate colonial state. Initially, French was utilized as a diplomatic language. However, in the 1960's Israeli / French relations were questioned and the alliance between Israel and the United States grew stronger. The Israeli / USA relationship gave way to the reestablished use of English for international relations and foreign exchange. Although Israel and the United States continue to have strong ties, English is yet to be sanctioned for use within the Knesset for debates and legislation. However, English is learned by the majority of Israeli's in secondary schools and is used in corporate and organization branding logos, as well as

other areas of the country's linguistic landscape. Individuals' accent and written context of grammar and spelling is primarily American, and the future of English within Israeli culture will depend largely on the relationship with English speaking countries such as the United States.

The majority of Israelis can speak, write, and understand English at a basic level. While the proper use of English is considered a signifier of a good education and modernization. Since the 1990's with the abundance of exposure to American culture, most Israelis born from the 1980's onward have developed superior skills and understanding of the language in comparison to their relatives from earlier generations.

Typography

Typography is more than legibility and aesthetic presentation. It is the visual power of a word and language. "It is the embodiment of a culture's identity." (Blankenship, 2003) Typographic signage within public spaces represents a significant role in a county's visual culture by presenting language letterforms used to communicate a specific message to a public. (Spiekermann, Ginger, 1993) Signage within social systems dominates public spaces, and by utilizing typographic design they offer messages of information to viewers.

"From the beginnings of the ancient ages writing has been an indispensable factor in our lives and has become one of mankind's oldest and crucial means of expression since the creation of the alphabet." (Ertep, 2011:1) According to Ellen Lupton, typography is a "tool for doing things with: shaping content, giving language a physical body, enabling the social flow of messages." Typography takes the spoken word and places it into visual context, a material object specifically designed with it own aesthetic purpose. The typographer's form relies not only on the positive character presentation, but also the negative shapes and spaces surrounding each character. (Lupton, 2004)

An effective approach of communicating visual content through typographic design is the textual organization of linguistic information in levels of importance through hierarchy. The design structure allows viewers to clearly receive information and guides readers to understand the content priority levels. (Loyd, 2013) The sizing, placement, color, and structure of the type determine the design hierarchy. And hierarchy used in typographic design exhibits a system of content emphasis, allowing viewers to navigate a flow of information. Cues are specifically indicated by spatial elements such as, indentation, line spacing, letter spacing, and text location as well as, design elements including; letterform size, weight, color, and style of the typeface. (Lupton, 2004)

As Semitic languages, Hebrew and Arabic share oral and visual similarities in their linguistic systems. Referencing the visual, both languages read right to left, and contain

symbolic markings above, below, and within letterforms to indicate sound and word meaning. Many letterforms have the same pronunciation and/or name, and when placed individually, specific letters have similar appearances.

When comparing the forms of Latin and Hebrew letters, similarities reside in the solid, independent character spacing and the favored vertical linear format. Latin type is predominate in its vertical form and each letter is independently positioned next to another character. Similarly, Hebrew letterforms stand separate from one another allowing negative space to complement the textual shape. Proportions are created equal by aligning the Hebrew body height with the Latin x-height when using Latin lowercase letters. Extenders from both character scripts follow similar measurements. And should Hebrew letters be placed alongside Latin uppercase characters, the Hebrew letterforms will align with the Latin cap-height. (Davidow, 2011)

The separation of character form is nearly nonexistent in Arabic, where letters are commonly interconnected in a flowing path. Many designers have developed strategies of utilizing Latin typography and Arabic script in cohesive union, but to do this, the designer must consider adjusting line weight and styles to create aesthetic compatibility and linguistic design equality. Arabic script appears smaller and in greater horizontal in form in comparison to Latin letters. When presented at the same point size, English and Arabic typography are not proportionate, and the Latin type will usually appear massive in comparison to the Arabic script. (Milo, 2011)

When working with the two different writing systems of Latin and Arabic, it is important to understand and accept the cultural differences as well since language text reflects the culture and history of the society in which it's used to communicate within. (Blankeship, 2003) Arabic typography is written with a sense of spirituality exhibiting a flow of rhythm, repetition, and patterning. The abstract design formed from the script fluidity is more important than the material object in which it represents. Latin letters on the other hand, exhibit characteristics of western thinking, emphasizing the individual and describing elements of efficiency, progress, and production. Motivated by legibility and clear communication, the letters are spaced separate from one another and may be perceived as formal, impersonal, geometric, static, and mechanical. (Blankenship, 2003)

Examples

Throughout urban communities in the state of Israel, it is common to view multilingual signage utilizing Hebrew, Arabic, and English. The use of the typographic languages within the county's signage exhibits language politics / dominance depending on

various elements such as signage location, ownership, and purpose. Depending on these three elements, typographic signage is perceived in the following listed format:

- English, Arabic, Hebrew
- Arabic, Hebrew, English
- Hebrew, Arabic, English
- Hebrew, English, Arabic

The series of examples included over one hundred photographs taken within the three largest urban communities of Israel; Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa. The purpose was to document linguistic hierarchy and preference via visual communication and typographic signage design. The paper includes a selection of photographs, which exhibit the said listed typographic structure.

(Figure 1)

English, Arabic, Hebrew

The photograph of figure 1 was taken in an East Jerusalem neighborhood primarily Arab in population however, frequented by western and eastern tourists because of its many hotels and close proximity to tourist destinations. For this reason, the signage hierarchy exhibits English text listed first presented in all san serif capitals. Arabic script is listed

second and slightly larger in typographic sizing from the Latin and Hebrew letterforms. The alignment of each language text is equal where margins remain the same from both left and right. While similar in textual alignment to the Arabic and Latin letterforms, the Hebrew letterforms are listed last and appears slightly smaller from the other two language texts.
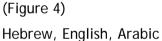

(Figure 2)

Arabic, Hebrew, English

The photograph from figure 2 was taken in the historical town of Acre, a small city north of Haifa. Highly mixed with both Arab and Jewish communities, it is common to view multilingual signage where Arabic and Hebrew typography exhibit equality. This particular sign presents three languages, Arabic, Hebrew, and English, written in typographic hierarchy in which Arabic is prioritized as it is listed first. However, all letterforms are written in the same bold red color, and designed with similar size, line width, height, and alignment. Thus, exhibiting an element of language equality.

(Figure 3)

Hebrew, Arabic, English

The photograph from figure 3 is an image of a lifeguard stand on the beach in Tel Aviv, a historically Jewish populated city. A cover signifying "Swimming Prohibited" protects the stand to indicate that no lifeguard is on duty and no swimming is allowed within the area. Here we see a pictogram of a swimmer in water crossed out as a "universal" indicator of "no swimming". Following the pictogram reads text in which the typographic listing of Hebrew, Arabic, English is presented in various forms. All language letterforms are exhibited in the same intense red and alignment on left and right sides are equal. However, the Hebrew letterforms dominate the signage design by being presented in the largest, boldest, and most didactic of the textual languages. The language listing does not coincide with the typographic hierarchy. Arabic script is listed second, after Hebrew text, but appears miniscule when compared to the Hebrew and Latin letterforms. English is listed last, yet being presented in capital san serifs with thick line width it is only slightly smaller than the Hebrew text.

(Figure 4)

Hebrew, English, Arabic

The photograph of figure 4 was shot outside the old city of Jerusalem. Here, the viewer sees a directional municipal sign indicating the location of Alrov Mamilla Avenue. This signage lists Hebrew typography first followed by English second, and finally Arabic third. The alignment of each line appears equally justified, and initially, all three languages appear similar in size. However, there is still a slight indication of language preference via the listing of the language text and the sizing and line width of the letterforms. The Hebrew letterforms are slightly larger and thicker than the English text, and significantly bolder than the Arabic script. The English letterforms, written in san serif capitals are secondary in size and line width, and reflect similarities to the Hebrew text. The Arabic script is last in the hierarchy being placed at the bottom of the list, with a script that appears considerably smaller than the Hebrew and English type and contains thin and delicate line weights.

Conclusion

The multilingual signage utilized in Israel serves a utilitarian purpose of communicating information to a multilingual community. Through typographic design elements such as letterform structure and hierarchy, the signs are also signifiers of

linguistic power identities and social political strategies. In multilingual cultures such as Israel, street signs represent a display of language preference policies developed by the city, state, and/or nation. (Azaryahu, 2012) The environment of Israeli urban communities, support the demographic and linguistic preferences through the typographic design in common multilingual street signs. The signs offer concepts of identity politics significant to the Jewish and Arab populations through the placement of language typography; Hebrew, Arabic, and English letterforms; and the sizing and alignment of scripts, which exhibit a typographic design hierarchy. (2012)

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