

# **Anatomy of a New “Letter”: A Story of a Design Competition for the Currency Sign of Turkish Lira**

Humanur Bagli\*, Koray Gelmez

Istanbul Technical University, Department of Industrial Product Design

humanur@gmail.com, koraygelmez@gmail.com

## **Abstract**

In 2011, the competition on the Turkish Lira (TRY) “symbol” was announced by Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey (CBRT). However, there seems to have some problems in terms of defining and determining parameters. This study focuses on a short story of a special graphic design phenomenon from the very definition of this competition to its different applications. The problem is widened from the problems of the definition to the results, narratives and everyday use of the new TRY “symbol”, in an analytic manner. By revealing different everyday applications that has started as first steps, it is aimed to prove and discuss the case in a detailed fashion. To do this, the differences between a sign, a logotype and a letter are discussed to be able to reach a series of principles for the briefs of such competitions in a comparative manner.

**Keywords:** Typography, Currency Sign, Turkish Lira, Semiology, Symbol

## **Introduction**

According to Jasmine Montgomery, design consultancy in London, states that “The currency symbol could be a powerful part of the country’s brand iconography, a signal of stability and the fact that it is a player on the world stage” (Westcott, 2009).

In 2005, six zeros were removed from Turkish currency in order to contribute on economic stability. Accordingly, it was a good time to initiate a design competition for the new “symbol” of Turkish Lira (TRY), since it would contribute to the popularity and credibility of Turkish Lira both nationally and internationally. It was also positive for the Turkish government to initiate such a competition related to design, especially as an event in front of the eye of the general public.

However, the competition on the Turkish Lira “symbol” announced by Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey (CBRT) in 2011 seemed to have some problems in terms of defining and determining parameters. The main problem arises from that the item to be designed is called a new “symbol” for Turkish Lira. Here “symbol” is an inadequate word to describe the real function of the product, because “symbol”, by definition, does not refer to a fixed visual appearance. According to Peirce, symbol is part of a semiological system, in which the relationship between signified and signifier are constructed artificially or culturally (Chandler, 2002). In this competition, the requirement is to represent the Turkish Lira symbolically; however, symbol is still a vague term to define the visual limitations of the form to be achieved. However, the sign of new Turkish Lira elected among the other design alternatives, can be regarded as almost like a logo design, because it has “static” and fixed dimensions.

So, both symbol and logotype are not adequate to designate the requirements of the nature of the product to be achieved. In such a context, it would be much proper to define the problem as a new “letter” in the alphabet, as letter is not a static visual element, but an adaptive geometrical system that can be applied and adapted to different kinds of font designs. So it should be taken as a new addition to the current alphabet, with a changing visual identity according to the system it is placed into. The same can easily be observed for the other currencies of Dollar, Euro etc., with a quick look to the adaptation of the same symbol applied to different fonts. In the visual system of a font, as a syntagmatic structure, placement of the static visual symbol of TRY does not fit to that system because it belongs to another syntagm, or does not belong to any. Taken the metaphor of garment

system as a syntax created by Roland Barthes, it resembles to an awkward positioning of a fashion item –like a casual hat– worn together with a formal suit (Barthes, 1983).

After the result of the competition was announced in 1st March 2012 and as the new applications of the symbol start to flourish, the problems became more apparent and valid. These problems can be observed from the visual materials such as advertisements, newspapers and hand-written price tags that it is applied to. Problems are mostly perceived regarding harmony/consistency with the other graphical elements –particularly with the fonts it is “attached” to. As a proof to this, one should download font called *AbakuTLSymSans* in order to find TRY letter/symbol as TRY font is not embedded into each font system separately.

There are some critiques from some graphic designers and experts of Turkey in the local magazine “Grafik Tasarım” [Graphic Design], titled as “*Can you design Franklin-Gothic of this Abidin?*” and “*Currencies and what they signify*” in the May-June issue 2012, however none of them pointed out to the systematic problem at the core. Especially the first article includes the opinions about the new TL sign of the experts of graphic designers; however none of them pointed out to the systematic problem at the core. The second article on the currencies from various countries includes a short semiological analysis for each currency. However, there is hardly any concern of the problem of adaptation to different typefaces, only what kind of values they represent is discussed with a very subjective approach. (Tuncer et al., 2012; Kucukerdogan, 2012)

Likewise, Montgomery criticizes the fact that the currency symbol should have a symbolic and cultural meaning of the country. She states that “The dollar, for example, doesn't signify liberty and freedom - there is nothing recognisably American about it” (Westcott, 2009). Moreover, concerning Indian currency symbol, she proposes that “The Indian Government will have to consider very carefully how the symbol would be used in all its technical applications - how does it look on the web, blown up on posters, on mobile phones.”

Other comments can be seen on popular media. They are mostly related to what new TRY “symbol” looks like. It is said that the “symbol” looks like Armenian currency symbol, Euro letter, the initials of the current Turkish Prime Minister etc. (“CHP'den TL simgesi için ilginç iddia”, 2012; “Yeni logoda Ermenistan ile ilginç benzerlik”, 2012; “TL'nin yeni simgesi Twitter'ı sarstı”, 2012; Yurdakul, 2012)

This study focuses on a short story of a special graphic design phenomenon from the very definition of the competition to its different applications. The problem is widened from the problems of the definition to the results, narratives and everyday use of the new TRY “symbol”, in an analytic manner. By revealing different everyday applications that has started as first steps, it is aimed to prove and discuss the case in a detailed fashion.

## **Competition**

According to the brief of the competition, the design should meet five criteria. It should be understandable, original, aesthetical, easy for hand-writing and eye-catching (The Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey, 2011).

In the website of The Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey, the competition is explained as following:

The Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey (CBRT) organized a Competition for the Turkish Lira Sign to further enhance the prestige and to raise worldwide recognition of the Turkish lira. Following some revisions made to the winning design, which was selected from applications received by the CBRT within a stipulated timeframe, a unique symbol (₺) has been determined to represent the Turkish currency. The symbol, which is both easily recognizable and aesthetically pleasing, is at the same time eye-catching and can easily be reproduced by hand. While selecting the Turkish lira currency sign, two marked features of the

Turkish lira and the Turkish economy were highlighted in accordance with the principles set forth by the Board. These are; "confidence" and "steadily rising value". The anchor-like sign emphasizes that the Turkish lira has become a "safe haven". The upward pointing parallel lines symbolize the "steadily rising value" of the Turkish lira and the Turkish economy. ("Turkish Lira Sign", 2012)

The competition was opened on 8 September 2011 and 8,362 applications were sent. After the evaluation process, the Board selected the winner and three applications to be awarded consolation prizes. The competition rules and conditions explained that the Central Bank of Turkey had the right to make changes to the winner's work. Therefore, the in-house graphic designers of the Bank made some minor changes. CBRT declared that these changes were made in order to "enhance its geometric aesthetics". The final version was presented to the public in a press conference on 1 March 2012.

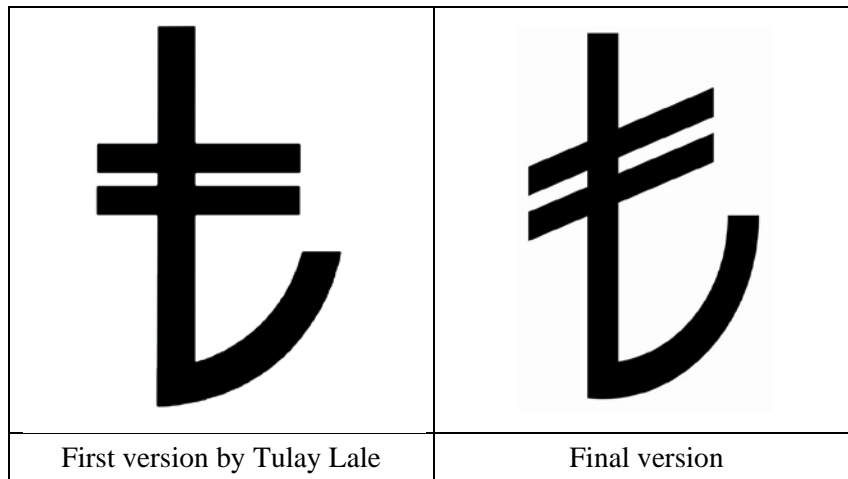


Figure 1. First and final version of new TRY "symbol"

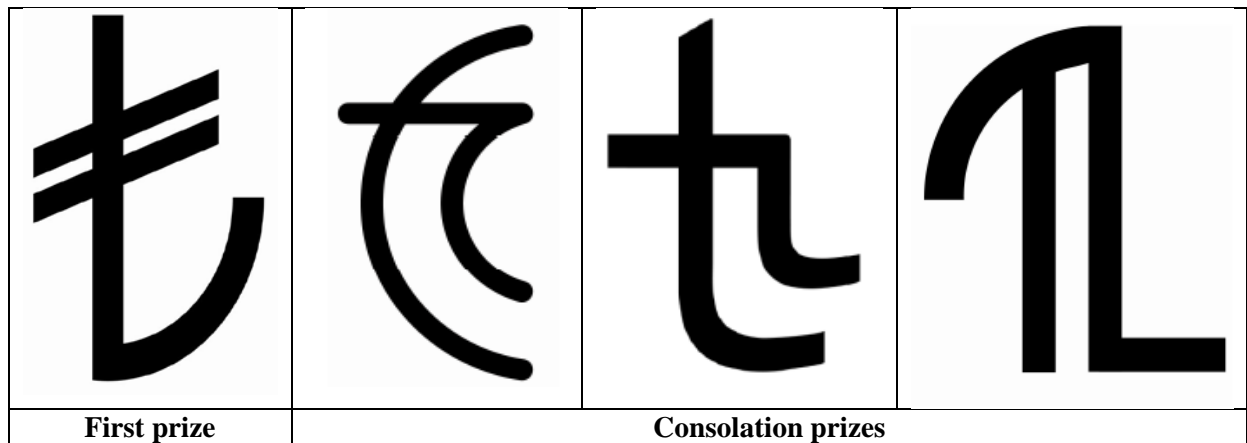


Figure 2. First prize and consolation prizes

Moreover, CBRT states that Golden Ratio is carefully used in the final version of TRY "symbol".

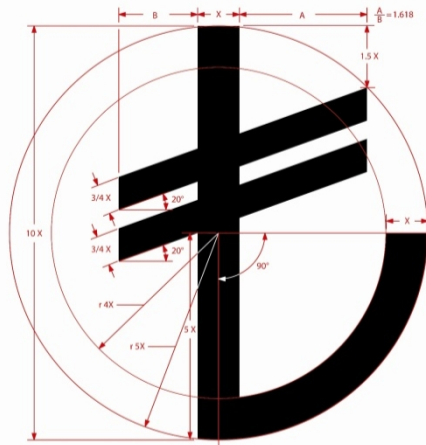


Figure 3. TRY “symbol” technical features

As inferred from the brief story of the competition, the new Turkish TRY “symbol” is designed by considerations of logotype design principles. That is, it is rather rigid and has geometric rules that hinder its flexibility for different font system and hand-writing, contrary to what has been said on the text of CBRT. The problems do not appear only in the work of the first prize. As seen in consolation prizes, they are also designed as logotype.

A closer look to the use of the symbol in different circumstances will be helpful to detail the problem of the definition of the competition.

### Observations

It is surprising to come across the new TRY “symbol” in real life applications within a short time. It has a wide range from price catalogues, price tags, shop windows and books etc. In this sense, the competition can be regarded as successful because it fulfills an existing gap. This means that public needed a “symbol” to use instead of abbreviation of Turkish Lira (TL), because the use of the symbol has an additive value to Turkish Lira among other currencies that the public is used to see, like Dollar and Euro symbols.

However, the quality of the use is so illustrative about the problems that are mentioned. As seen from the alternatives, together with the typeface harmony; width, height, spaces, kernings and sizes are mostly problematic in different applications. Because the fixed symbol does not contain “bold” use, it looks so weak and alien when used together with the big and bold numbers and letters.



Figure 4. Examples about width, height, spaces, kernings and sizes.

Also, as the logo is closer to italic characteristics with some angles used within and devoid of the typeface accompanied to it, the harmony is also interrupted. This explains another problem of the symbol; upright inclination that does not refer to any other visual element (like the one in the letter K, or V) might create a problem of the perception, since upright inclined angles are characteristic to the italic use.

Another issue is the handwritten alternatives (Figure 5). It is natural to see different handwritings changing according to the style of the person writing the letter. Each person's handwriting can be considered as a font system. However, the sharp angle change at the bottom part of the symbol is apparently so hard to apply in the fast and practical process of writing. This is also because it strongly resembles to the miniscule letter t, so people have a tendency to write as such.



Figure 5. Examples for handwriting

This phenomenon of hand writing can be a good feedback for reconsidering the original design with a different definition. It would be much practical to have a formulated definition of the symbol such as “lower case of t letter with double horizontal line”, so the symbol would be more adaptable to be used as a letter, not only as a fixed visual material.

Use of the symbol as a letter, not as a fixed entity would make it possible to find the symbol readily embedded in each font system, so it would not be a problem to find it as an individual symbol each time it is needed to be used.

After the competition results, The Turkish Language Association and The Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey did not agree on which side to write to new “symbol”. According to The Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey, parallel to the international applications, the “symbol” is used at the left side of the amount without a space. However, The Turkish Language Association suggested to use the “symbol” should be put to right side of the amount after a space (Öğüt, 2012). Later on, The Turkish Language Association proposed not to use the “symbol” in a text; instead, it is more convenient to use “TL” or “Turkish Lira”. In other areas of use, the “symbol” is proposed to be used by CBRT. This left-right confusion can also be observed from everyday use (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Left-right side confusion

## Recent Update

Thanks to the recent update from Windows (late October 2012), new “symbol” can be used in Turkish keyboards by pressing AltGr+T combination. This results in a relative adaptability for bold and italic use. It also provides two variations for serif and sans serif. Still, there is a lack in availability in different fonts. Problems become more apparent in the last 4 fonts in the following table:

Font	Euro	Dollar	Pound	Turkish Lira
Times New Roman	€34	\$34	£34	₺34
<b>Times New Roman, Bold</b>	<b>€34</b>	<b>\$34</b>	<b>£34</b>	<b>₺34</b>
<i>Times New Roman, Italic</i>	<i>€34</i>	<i>\$34</i>	<i>£34</i>	<i>₺34</i>
Arial	€34	\$34	£34	₺34
<b>Arial, Bold</b>	<b>€34</b>	<b>\$34</b>	<b>£34</b>	<b>₺34</b>
<i>Arial, Italic</i>	<i>€34</i>	<i>\$34</i>	<i>£34</i>	<i>₺34</i>
Courier	€34	\$34	£34	₺34
Helvetica LT Light	€34	\$34	£34	₺34
<b>Impact</b>	<b>€34</b>	<b>\$34</b>	<b>£34</b>	<b>₺34</b>
<b>Bauhaus</b>	<b>€34</b>	<b>\$34</b>	<b>£34</b>	<b>₺34</b>

Figure 7. Examples for different fonts (no application for orange-colored cells)

This new update also supports our arguments on flexibility above. The need for adaptability to different fonts reveals two variations: serif and sans serif. Hopefully, there will be different variations for all other fonts. Thus, the rigid geometry of TRY “symbol” will become more flexible. It is a long and challenging issue to adjust a character for coding standards such as Ascii and Unicode. As Sudeshna Sen, foreign editor of India's Economic Times explains, “It's going to take a very long time before it translates into something” (Westcott, 2009).

We can also see a new problem of legibility in some serif alternatives above, because the upper serif results in the reading of the letter as capital “E” rather than small “t”. This is one of the reasons that the letter is not designed according to different applications, but as a logo or fixed symbol.

As criticized in this paper, concerning Euro “symbol”, Jurgen Siebert, head of graphics software company FontShop in Berlin, also indicates that “The European Central Bank presented it as a logo. At the time, it hadn't considered the technical consequences of it being incorporated into the everyday graphic language, and how it would translate to, say, computers or mobile phones” (Westcott, 2009).

This is another proof that whole design process of a currency symbol should be planned according to different applications and contexts.

**Other Cases**

In 2009, Indian government also announced a competition to choose a “symbol” for its currency. According to the competition rules, the design “should represent the historical and cultural ethos of India”.

One of the interesting discussions in one of the forums about the Indian Rupee is that people seek for more original symbols; for example, they mostly criticize because top five different alternatives look alike, all deriving from R letter. Second thing is people are resistive to the two lines used in the symbols look like the Euro symbol and they look for a totally new visual identity differentiating from all currency symbols (“Rupee: Which of the 5 final designs do you like?”, 2010).

The Central Bank of Russian Federation also announced a “symbol” competition for rouble. Before the winner was announced, some design and typography studios declared to use their own “symbol”. They believe that they are “influential enough to shape the opinion of the design community, members of which will team up with us using the rouble sign before it is officially approved.”

However the symbol is not the one selected, the standards and adaptations to different basic fonts presented in the website very positive and can be seen as a model for a standart requirement for such competitions (“The whole rouble”, 2007).

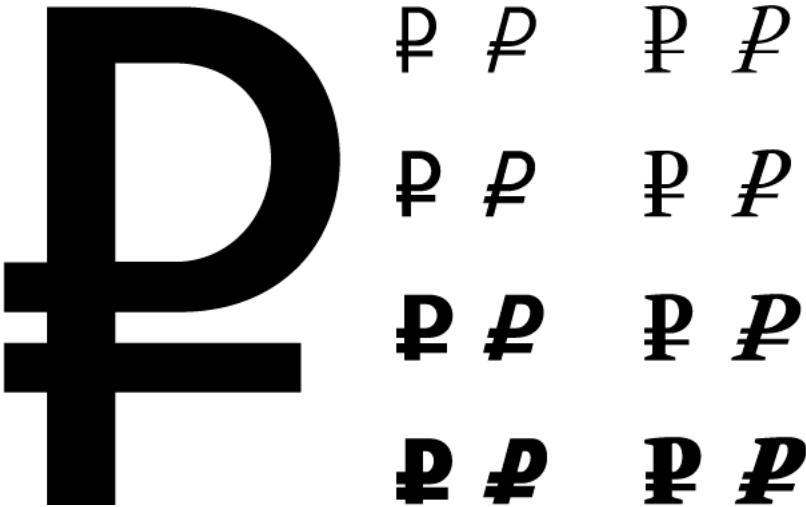


Figure 8.Suggested symbols for rouble (“The whole rouble”, 2007).

**Conclusion and Discussion**

From the parameters discussed above, the series of principles to be sought for the brief of this and similar competitions can be like this:

Technical:

1. The symbol/letter should suit to different varieties of fonts and styles with or without serif, italic, bold etc. These considerations make the design understanding for such competitions as an additional new letter to the Latin alphabet. So, the symbol to be designed must fulfill a series of definitions of principles rather than fixed formal compositions. For example, K as a letter is an ever changing form in different font systems, however, when we attempt to define K as a line composition “consisting of a vertical straight line touched by a corner of cracked line in the middle from the right hand side.”, then we can define and propose a visual system with different adaptations with the same principle. So, together with the visual material, the

submission should have contained a formulated definition for TRY symbol, such as “lower case of t letter with double horizontal line”, so the symbol would have been more adaptable to be used as a letter, from the very beginning.

2. This, of course, requires another design process in that the symbol is adapted to other typefaces, if the definition is comprehensive and expansive.
3. It should reflect the “currency sign” identity, because of the functional considerations. Looking back to the discussion about the Fashion System, it is good to have a coherent syntagmatic relationship among other currencies, so that the symbol is recognized as “a currency sign of TRY”. So, the discussions such as in the forum about Indian Rupee should be reconsidered and designers should try to find a way to balance between originality and recognizability as a currency symbol.
4. Values, spaces, kernings should be all planned in the context of use together with other characters, especially numbers, so that, it should be legible, definite and harmonious whatever the dimension and the typeface it is applied to is.

#### Cultural:

1. For the popular use, it should be studied for applications of handwriting. This aspect is important also from the perspective of social design, where the adaptations by the public are regarded as an important issue. It would be ideal to have a testing process by the users/writers before the symbol is started to use and circulated.
- 2.
3. The meaning of the symbol has to be not very explicit, however, not so implicit either. The abstract notions; like the “upward pointing parallel lines symbolizing the steadily rising value of the Turkish lira and the Turkish economy” can sometimes be so additive and artificial. However, non-representational implicit approaches can also be questioned for a symbol like this, because it is a candidate for a strong national and international reflection almost like a national flag for a country. So these aspects should be scrutinized both in the formulation of the brief, also assessment of the results.

The story still remains; we start to see better and worse adaptations and applications of this new TRY letter/symbol in different contexts. This shows that, whatever the quality of design is, the new TRY symbol is widely circulated as the money that it represents with different variations and it is a valuable source of feedback for upcoming briefs and designs nationwide or worldwide.



## References

- Barthes, R. (1983). *The Fashion System*. University of California Press.
- Chandler, D. (2002). *Semiotics: The Basics*. Routledge, London.
- CHP'den TL simgesi için ilginç iddia [Interesting claim for TRY symbol from the political party, CHP] (2012, March 1). Retrieved January 1, 2013, from <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/ekonomi/20035186.asp>
- Kucukerdogan, R. (2012, May-June). Para birimleri ve simgeledikleri [Currencies and what they Signify]. *Grafik Tasarım*. 48. 12-16.
- Öğüt, G. (2012, June 11). *Reklamda TL simgesi [TRY symbol in advertising]*. Radikal. Retrieved January 2, 2013 from <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalYazar&ArticleID=1090720>
- Rupee: Which of the 5 final designs do you like?. (2010, July 16). Retrieved January 1, 2013 from <http://business.rediff.com/slide-show/2010/jul/16/slide-show-1-rupee-symbol-design-what-the-other-finalists-say.htm#1>
- The Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey. (2011). *TL simge yarışması şartnamesi [TL symbol competition terms and conditions]*. Retrieved from December 25, 2012, from <http://www.tcmb.gov.tr/yeni/duyuru/2011/TLsartname.pdf>
- The whole rouble. (2007, August 1). Retrieved January 2, 2013 from <http://www.artlebedev.com/news/2007/rouble/>
- TL'nin yeni simgesi Twitter'ı sarstı [The new TRY symbol has shaken Twitter] (2012, March 1). Retrieved January 2, 2013, from <http://www.cnnturk.com/2012/yasam/diger/03/01/tlnin.yeni.simgesi.twitteri.sarsti/651407.0/index.html>
- Tuncer, S., Erkmn, B., Pektas, H., Karamustafa, S. and Tuna, V. (2012, May-June). Bana bunun Franklin Gothic'ini yapabilir misin Abidin? [Can you design Franklin-Gothic of this Abidin?]. *Grafik Tasarım*. 48. 30-44.
- Turkish Lira Sign. (2011). Retrieved November 23, 2012, from <http://tcmb.gov.tr/yeni/eng>
- Westcott, K. (2009). India seeks rupee status symbol. *BBC News*. Retrieved January 1, 2013 from [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/magazine/7923825.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/7923825.stm)
- Yeni logoda Ermenistan ile ilginç benzerlik [Interesting similarity with Armenia in the new logo]. (2012, March 2). Retrieved January 1, 2013, from <http://haber.mynet.com/yeni-logoda-ermenistan-ile-iliginc-benzerlik-618469-guncel/>
- Yurdakul, M. (2012, March 2). TL'ye ortaya karışık simge [Confused symbol for TRY]. *Milliyet*. Retrieved January 2, 2013, from <http://ekonomi.milliyet.com.tr/tl-ye-ortaya-karisik-simge/ekonomi/ekonomidetay/02.03.2012/1510057/default.htm>