

Visible Language – cultural dimensions issue– abstract

Function and Expression: Student experimental work in English and Indian Languages

Graduate and undergraduate students at four Indian universities and design schools worked on a typographic exercise using English/Roman alphabet, Hindi/Devanagari, and several other Indian languages and alphabets. The exercise employed the text of a simple Indian recipe for a rice and yogurt dish often served for lunch or snack. To arrive at a shared understanding of terms to facilitate work, discussion generated lists of attributes relating to basic concepts (functional, expressive, integrated)* in relation to typography and this exercise.

The students were asked to take the text in English and create compositions that fulfilled the requirements of ‘functional,’ ‘expressive,’ and ‘integrated.’ Typeface choices were limited to a few sans serif faces for pedagogic and practical reasons. The students worked at the two extremes (admittedly artificial) and finished (somewhere) in the middle of the spectrum.

Among the groups of students there was a wide range of experience with typographic design and related formatting software. In addition, the educational experience and mindset of specific groups made certain parts of the exercise easier than others. For example the student groups studying at the technical universities had problems working in an ‘expressive’ mode whereas the art/design students did not.

Following the English compositions, the students chose another Indian language. In most cases this was Hindi, but some knew and chose Marathi, Kannada, Tamil and Malayalam. Marathi uses the same (Devanagari) alphabet as Hindi; the others use their own alphabets. I welcomed this opportunity to learn more about these languages and alphabets within this typographic context. Once the second set of exercises was completed, discussion included comparisons among the languages, alphabets and the consequences for typography, both practical and interpretative. For example, much of English readability requires adequate leading between lines, assisted by the strong horizontal

baseline of the letterforms. In comparison, Kannada uses very soft and rounded forms that do not make a strong base; in consequence, more leading is needed to create the visual horizontal. In a second example, English has two cases and uses capital letters as grammatical and typographic cues for the beginning of sentences and for visual and informational hierarchy. All the Indian languages used in the exercise have but one case. Distinction and clarity are not as readily achieved and size difference becomes more important. One might quickly ask about weight changes; only recently has digital typeface design made available multiple weights (as well as an explosion of new type styles for all the alphabets). For a third example, Hindi employs a horizontal line (sirrekha) along what Roman alphabet typographers would call the top of the x-height. This line physically connects the letters to each other and to essential accents and other marks (matras) to create the variety of vowel sounds. Though we can still read English when letterspaced, Hindi cannot be read (the letters/consonants lose all meaning) when physically separated, thereby eliminating this typographic alternative.

The Indian students experienced creative growth through the exercise, by comparative study and discussion about the features, advantages, disadvantages, and compensatory design strategies required by the Indian languages. By their report, they had not studied Indian language typography before. At the end the students were preparing to take on the complexity of typographic design in a country with two official languages and about 20 others, some dominant in their own regions. There are important cultural and political ramifications of the ability of designers to produce inventive and successful communication materials in such a range of 'voices' for a billion people.