
Typographical explorations in two unicast alphabets

Jennifer Claudio

Abstract

We take for granted the convenience of expressing emotions in typography for Latin-based writing, such as using capital letters. This submission explores the use of a variety of type attributes including color, typeface, size, and distortion as they are used to convey emotional charge in Hangul (Korean) and Arabic writing.

1 Introduction

The written word has a rich history ranging from engravings through brush calligraphy and into digital typography. While typography itself is defined as “the art and technique of arranging type to make written language legible, readable, and appealing when displayed” (Wikipedia), therein exists a deeper psychological contribution to the emotional charge of words. Likewise, the developing methods and needs of written communication demand attention to typographical methods of expression, which are sometimes limited by alphabetic constraints for some language families.

The purpose of this exploration is to draw attention to typographic methods needed to nurture connections between the spoken and written language, as well as to their associated cultures, to broaden the range of expression used in more world languages.

2 Unicast alphabets

Two unicast alphabet systems will be addressed to provide specific background, Hangul and Arabic. Unicast systems do not have a differentiation of letterforms between upper- and lowercase letters, terminology that traces roots to the early typographic systems where moveable typecasts were stored in drawers with capital letters traditionally in the literal upper case.

Hangul is the writing system of the Republic of Korea, and it currently uses an alphabet constituent of fourteen consonants and ten vowels. The Hangul alphabet is described as an alphabetic syllabary, meaning that although alphabet units consist of vowels and consonants working together to depict a sound, letter and syllable combinations have both a vertical and horizontal relationship. This relationship is in contrast to a language such as English, where each alphabetic letter has only a horizontal relationship with the ones that precede or follow it.

Arabic script, comprised of twenty-eight standard letters, is used for writing several languages, including Farsi (Persian), Urdu, and Pashto, and has variations that have incorporated modifications to the syllabary such as for the Uyghur language. Although Arabic forms, including the number of recognized letters or letterforms, may vary slightly by country or culture, all Arabic script is written from right to left and has letters that change form depending on positioning within a word. Some, but not all, scripts include diacritic markers.

3 Emotion in language

Words carry only as much meaning as their context can convey. A standalone word, “what”, can mean any number of things, yet when written as What, what, or WHAT—even without punctuation—it can elicit varying emotions or response from the reader. Whether the visual imagery of the word conveys surprise, doubt, even potentially anger, depends on the typographic elements of the word. Here, emotions relevant to emphasis (shouting) and endearment will be discussed in the context of typographic needs.

Shouting, or a greater volume when speaking, tends to be written with capital letters, bold face, or a size increase, and it typically occurs when a user expresses anger, assertiveness, demands, or surprise. (Tangentially, this becomes more pronounced in the realms of social media and game chat media.) While it is easy to shout using the Latin alphabet, this cannot be the case in a language such as for the Korean Hangul or Arabic. In these alphabets, besides using extra exclamation marks, shouting must then be conveyed through other typographic adjustments.

Two ways of demonstrating “louder” text that may immediately come to mind are size increases and color highlights. In comics, this is convenient, but it poses difficulty for in-line text. Although both Korean and Arabic can use italics as a usable option for emphasis, it seems that Arabic font kerning is sometimes disrupted by italicizing. Some typographic elements already serve other functions. Although characters that do not disturb the flow of the sentence can be stretched horizontally, this is not a method of changing the emotional charge of the word. A letter is more typically elongated to emphasize strokes that differentiate letters, rather than to imply a different emotional setting of the word.

Endearment or “cute” writing often incorporates letters with softer curves, and graphic designers and artists might choose to modify letters into bubbly forms or dot i’s with hearts. As with the situation for capital letters, some of these modifications cannot

occur in other alphabet systems. Hangul does not have diacritics, although some of its vowels could be heart-morphed. An Arabic phrase of endearment would also not likely find itself with heart-shaped “dots”, and furthermore, using baseline shifts would also be inconvenient, if possible at all, mainly due to the necessity for cursive script and due to the changes of letter shape dependent upon position.

4 Upcoming work

A second phase of this exploratory project will examine typographic methods and modifications in more detail, based on data relevant to perceived emotions conveyed by typographic samples in children’s books, advertising media, and social media in English, Cyrillic, Hangul, Arabic, and Bangla. Future work will also address complexities and typographic modifications specific to Quranic writing.

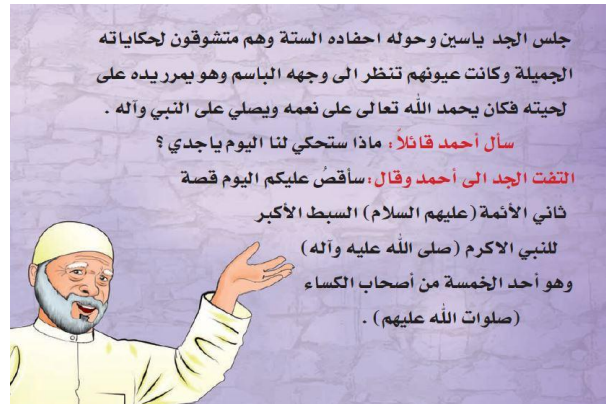
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- ◇ Jennifer Claudio
San Jose, California
claudioj (at) esuhsd dot org



Example 1: Elongations are not used to convey emotion in the titles for children’s books, “I’m Sorry” (left) and “Thank You” (right).



Example 2: The text in red is used to emphasize talking rather than narration.



Example 3: Boldface and type-play are used in comics for emotional emphasis.



Example 4: The Korean phrase “hangsang” meaning “always” (left), and Korean “yeonin” and Arabic “habibati” (right) for “sweetheart” (when addressed to a female), with hearts to express endearment, and without hearts, for comparison, in green.