

More than a Splendid Blend of Cultures: Exploring the Semiotic Depth of Faux-Asian Fonts

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Abstract

Creative alternative scripts in such typical forms as faux style fonts transcend writing systems. In addition to their artistic value in creating an illusion suggestive of cultural blends, they also provide an interesting case for semiotic analysis. By examining the features of graphemic representations in English scripts rendered using faux-Chinese fonts, this article makes an attempt to explore the depth of semiotic encoding in topographical innovations. Based on a focused review of previous discussions on the semiotics of written language, it analyses how typography as a semiotic resource works to encode meaning within and across writing systems. It is argued that blending the features of graphemic stereotypes in different writing systems contributes to a semiotic superposition which works with contextual properties to foreground one reading of an ambiguous grapheme over other possible alternatives. A semiotic interpretation of this typographic innovation points to the possible merging of typological boundaries and the potential for written linguistic signs to connect and communicate across systems.

Keywords: writing systems, faux-Asian fonts, graphemic representations, semiotic superposition

1. Introduction

Inspired perhaps by the ingenious works of calligraphy lovers, a family of fonts

known as the “faux-Asian” is becoming trendy (see Figure 1 for a glimpse of this novel font). A quick Google image search returns hundreds of resources where ready-made or customized fonts can be accessed. The English-based typeface is characterized by the blending of Asian cultures using styled fonts that mimic the brush-written scripts typically found in Chinese, Japanese and Korean. At first sight, a Western reader would likely have an overall impression that the script, though legibly English, is at the same time exotically Asian. To an Asian reader with some knowledge in English, however, it may appear artificial in a somewhat simplistic manner. Hypothetical reader responses aside, there is much room for discussion as to how the cultural blending is achieved via conscious semiotic representations. Moreover, it also offers a special case for analysis, which is in a line of efforts towards a better understanding of the complexity of written language as manifested in increasingly interactive and connected writing systems.

Figure 1. “Chinese Asian Style” rendered in a faux-Chinese font¹



Through a semiotic lens, this article analyses and interprets how the typographic features in the faux-Asian fonts contribute to creating an artistic illusion via a designed superposition of writing systems. The rest of the article is organized as follows. First, I give an overview of previous research on the semiotics of written language, with a focus on linguistic studies of writing systems in general and semiotic interpretations of typography in particular. This brief literature review is followed by a detailed account of faux-Chinese fonts. Examples from typography archives are presented to illustrate the general features and specific details in the representative cases. Then a semiotic interpretation of the fonts is attempted with insights from preliminary observations. Based on the discussion of faux-Asian fonts, I propose a framework for examining the semiotic depth of linguistic signs in written communication.

2. The Semiotics of Written Language

As a relatively new typeface, the faux-Asian font has not received much research

attention. One possible reason is the general lack of interest in studying typography as more than a conduit of verbal language. A deeper reason for the limited interpretative endeavour may be the devalued place of writing systems in linguistic studies (Amsler, 2010). One representative view of this is attributed to Bloomfield, in his famous declaration that “speech is the real stuff of language”, whereas “writing is merely a record of speech” (Bloomfield, 1927, p. 433). The lopsided attention seems to be explained away by such a received belief that writing occurs posterior to speech, and is thus “inferior” in terms of research value. However, it remains debatable whether linguistic communication in the written mode is but the sheer record of an oral narrative.

In an effort to restore the rightful place of writing systems in linguistic study, Amsler (2010) thoroughly examined the changing semiotic connotation of the letter in conjunction with the emergence of textual consciousness. Core tenets of the scholarly discussion on the topic are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The changing semiotic connotations of the letter (Amsler, 2010, pp. 314-5)

Time period	Major scholarly concerns
Premodern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● theorizing within a complex semiotic matrix of sound, graphesis, and atomistic concepts; ● accommodating writing and letters within a philosophy of elements, change, and variability; ● identifying the asynchronicity between spoken and written codes; ● trying to maintain sound-letter correlations as the primary linguistic representation system.
Early Middle Ages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● conceptualizing and using Latin alphabetic characters to represent non-Latin languages; ● conceiving of written language as representing directly the thoughts, ideas, feelings, and mental images of writers; ● detaching letters from speech sounds; ● reimagining writing as a form of language and utterance which can be activated and voiced by different readers and speakers.

One central concern in the ongoing debate is what the letter actually means in written communication: is it meant to function as a visual record of the speech sound or does it also convey messages of its own, thus bearing unique semiotic significance? In the current study, the semiotic value of linguistic signs in written communication

is reconsidered in relation to these strands of argument. Furthermore, the changing semiotic connotations of *text* and *talk* in the modern era can be compared with those in the past to shed light on the meaning-making mechanism of linguistic signs in written scripts.

Theoretical discussions aside, in the practical field of research, much of the semiotic inquiries about written language has revolved around literacy. The central belief in this regard holds that “‘literacy’ is the ways of using, and ability to use” written language as a semiotic system (Clark & Ivanic, 2013, p. 10). Script-learning, a crucial activity in literacy development, has been the focus of a series of empirical studies (Kenner, 2000; Kenner & Kress, 2003; Kenner et al., 2004, among others). One productive line of inquiry deals with how children approach and deploy semiotic resources in written communication. For instance, Kenner’s (2000) study established a link between young learners’ sociocultural experience and their perception of the system of visual signs. The study suggests that learners’ being aware of the visual appearance of graphic forms used in spontaneous writing may play a facilitating role in language acquisition. In another study, access to the extended scope of writing systems (Chinese, Arabic, and Spanish) was found to have encouraged young learners to explore meaning-making potentials in their bilingual script-learning experience (Kenner, 2003). This flexible response to managing semiotic complexities across writing systems may point to a hypothetical innate asset for navigating across communicative situations that involve multiple meaning-encoding mechanisms. Meanwhile, it seems to suggest that individuals as readers of linguistic signs hold the capacity to decode messages written in alternative scripts to their native language(s).

In addition to the suggested inborn repertoires of decoding, studies of written language as a semiotic inventory of meaning potentials have been scrutinizing the presentation of linguistic signs in written communication. Inevitably in the digital age, font is made a prominent object of study in this line of inquiry (e.g., van Leeuwen, 2005, 2006; Machin, 2007; Nørgaard, 2009). While “most research on typography has concerned itself only with legibility” (van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 141), recent attempts have been made to enrich the literature with insights from graphic design, which places a heightened emphasis on the semiotic value of typographic elements in conveying a written message. “[L]etterforms themselves have become more important as part of the overall meaning of composition and have themselves become more graphic and iconic” (Machin, 2007, p. 87).

For example, Chandra et al. (2015) gave a detailed description of Bengali letterforms from a semiotic approach. Using an analytical scheme to capture the syntagmatic and paradigmatic features, they examined three aspects of the Bengali typefaces, including structural grid lines, anatomical features, and parameters. A categorization based on the presentational and shared features was also proposed with distinct anatomical nomenclatures.

Focusing on meaning potentials of typography in multimodal texts, Serafini and Clausen (2012) conducted a systematic analysis of typography in contemporary picture books. Following the model of metafunction in Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1978), they reconsidered typography as “a semiotic resource capable of rendering not simply the textual or compositional metafunction, but ideational and interpersonal meaning potentials” (Serafini & Clausen, 2012, p. 7). This view was elaborated on in an examination of the typographic features in a selection of picture books, which covered seven aspects: weight, colour, size, slant, framing, formality, and flourishes (Table 2).

The analytical framework offered in Serafini and Clausen (2012) portrays the major traits concerning typographic representations in a multimodal ensemble. While this seems readily applicable to the analysis of the faux-Asian font under discussion, it is intended to capture typographic features in a specific multimodal genre, i.e., picture books. This exclusive focus may lead to less attention given to the typeface as a constructed independent system of its own. That is, the typographic features are evaluated not in their own right, but in relation to other compositional features in the given discourse. Furthermore, some characteristics, e.g., framing and formality, are closely linked to the presentation of the characters in the narrative genre, thus limited in its potential to generalize to other genres of communication. Therefore, it remains unclear as to how properties of a specific font type would take on semiotic significance by themselves as well as in combination with other textual elements. As the rise of multimodal and digital texts has revolutionized the mode of written communication, more research could be done in this regard so as to reveal the semiotic depth of complex typography. By detaching the textual context where the font is situated, one may arrive at a deeper understanding of the semiotic potential of the typographic elements and how they play a constructive role in conveying the message encoded in a written text.

Table 2. Constructs of an analytical framework for typography in multimodal texts (Serafini & Clausen, 2012, pp. 8-14)

Feature	Description
Weight	Thinness/boldness of the font used to create emphasis in presentational formats and to direct the attention given to a particular typographic element
Colour	Colour of the font used to classify, discriminate, and connect among design elements, to express emotions and social meanings
Size	A primary compositional element used to provide emphasis and add salience to particular aspects of a text
Slant	The slope of the letters used to suggest a dynamic presence or increased level of energy
Framing	Borders and lines used to separate and connect particular visual elements in a text
Formality	Degree of formality adds to the suggested traits of a particular character by the use of a formal/informal font in rendering the narrator’s dialogue
Flourishes	Additions to a font used to add to its meaning potentials and effects including the degree of formality, vividness, and liveliness

Though limited in scope, previous research offers valuable insights from which the current study has greatly benefited. Theoretically, it intends to continue to track the changes in the conceptualization of the letter into the modern era. Deconstructing the emerging features of a digitalized multimodal world of text may strengthen the argument against a subservient role of typography in written communication as well as the largely under-recognized place of writing systems in linguistic research. Practically, it aims to apply and modify the established analytical framework in examining the features most relevant to a specific font type. This modification may assist the interpretation of alternative scripts as a complicated semiotic resource with meaning potentials to contribute to a diversity of communicative situations.

3. Features of Faux-Asian Fonts

The special charm of the faux-Asian fonts lies in the initial false impression they create. The carefully crafted details of the typeface intend to trick readers into believing that the constructed script is written in Asian characters² rather than letters from the Roman alphabet. To reveal the secret to the trick, I take a close look at one representative type of the faux-Asian fonts, i.e., the faux-Chinese font to be examined

in this section. I first analyse how imitations of character-specific strokes are used in the creative reconstruction of letterforms. Then I offer an interpretation drawing on the notion of the grapheme in writing systems and its representation in faux style fonts.

3.1 Exploiting the inventory of character-like strokes

Though varying in style, faux-Asian fonts seem to share a number of similarities which constitute the essential characteristics that confer their distinctive “Asianness”. Most evidently, the continuous curves which largely characterize an alphabetical script are “straightened out” into strokes that intuitively define an ideographic script. An example of what might result from this metamorphosis is the faux-Chinese-style English alphabet as showcased in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The English alphabet rendered in a faux-Chinese font



On the whole, each letter in the English alphabet in Figure 2 is rendered in strokes which approximate at best the images of Chinese characters. This entails exploiting the stock of CJK strokes. The variety of Chinese character strokes builds around a few basic units (Table 3) which can combine to form stroke clusters (e.g., *heng zhe wan gou* as found in ‘乙’). This inventory of character-specific strokes forms the basis of the typographic innovation, as the letters in the faux-font English alphabet are remoulded from these building units.

Table 3. Basic strokes in Chinese characters (adapted from Abraham & Li, 2019, p. 18)

Name	Stroke	Description
Dot (<i>dian</i> , 点)	丶	A tiny dash or speck
Horizontal (<i>heng</i> , 横)	一	A horizontal stroke going from left to right
Vertical (<i>shu</i> , 竖)	丨	A stroke falling straight down vertically
Throw (<i>pie</i> , 撇)	丿	Descending to the left, with a slight curve
Press (<i>na</i> , 捺)	㇇	Descending to the right, with an emphasis at the end
Upward horizontal (<i>ti</i> , 提)	㇇	A flick up and right
Horizontal hook (<i>heng gou</i> , 横钩)	㇇	Ends another stroke by creating a sharp change of direction either down or left
Vertical hook (<i>shu gou</i> , 竖钩)	㇇	Cuts a concave path on the left or on the right

Evidently, it is no easy task to reshape the English alphabet using Chinese strokes, given the obvious divide between the two writing systems. While the English writing adopts a Roman alphabet, the Chinese language boasts thousands of characters that are pervasively taken as defining features of a pictographic or ideographic language. In terms of the difficulty involved in reconstructing the letterforms using character strokes, some letters are easier to render than others. Some of the readily renderable ones are the letter ‘I’, ‘T’, and ‘O’. These letters have relatively simple structures that can be refashioned using basic strokes like the vertical and the horizontal. In rendering the letter ‘O’ for instance, a square-shaped image is used in place of a circle. This image happens to coincide with the Chinese character ‘口’, which works to evoke a vague impression of a Chinese script.

Notwithstanding the coincidence, not all the reconstructions look quite like Chinese characters. Despite the creative efforts to “bend” and “twist” the strokes into a character shape, some faux letterforms appear to be inappropriate structures compared with standard modern Chinese script. For instance, the letterform ‘Q’ takes after the letter ‘O’, yet supported with a rightward press, the head of which is attached to the bottom of the square image. This somewhat awkward image, though bearing some traits of resemblance to the Chinese character ‘口’, ostensibly diverges from the perceived impression of what a Chinese character is. Other letterforms appear odd or peculiar due to the lack of a corresponding similar-looking unit in the character inventory. The majority of the letterforms in the faux-Chinese font presented above can be thought of as belonging to this type.

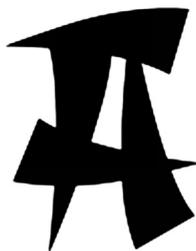
The reason why some of the faux “characters” fail to make very good sense, at least to native Chinese eyes, is that the character as a basic structural unit in written Chinese is far more than a random combination of strokes. Rather, the legitimacy of each character hinges on the ordering and arrangement of the individual strokes. Rather than lending itself to numerous possibilities of combinations, the Chinese writing system operates on complicated and delicate rules which favour certain sets of possibilities over others. For example, the horizontal (一) and the vertical (丨), two of the basic strokes, may, in theory, generate indefinite “shapes” (patterns of position) by taking minutely different positions in two-dimensional space. If a meaningful combination assumes “meeting” of the strokes at some point, then the possibilities can be reduced to only a handful, among which three perfectly symmetrical structures are: “⊥”, “+”, and “⊥”. In the modern Chinese writing system, however, only the crisscross is in active use.³ There is also a general tendency, in the shaping of complex Chinese characters, for the stroke clusters to be arranged within a certain structure rather than spreading out randomly. The radical combines with the remaining portion of the character in principled ways (e.g., left-right, top-bottom, half-enclosed, full-enclosed), hence the combinational nature of Chinese characters (Li & Zhou, 2007).

In general, by comparing the rebuilt letterforms with the inventory of Chinese characters, it seems reasonable to suggest that what makes the rendering particularly challenging is not the lack of available building materials, but in this case, the character-like strokes. That is because, in practice, all the letterforms in the English alphabet can be properly reconstructed using strokes, though with varying degrees of precision. However, it is the absence of a legitimate character to correspond with the innovated image that leads to the frustrating results in some cases. “Imitation” in this context is but a loose concept for an imprecise description of what is intended by the typographers. Nonetheless, on the whole, it is fair to say that they have succeeded in creating a distinctive Asian aura by exploiting the character-like stroke inventory.

3.2 Semiotic superposition of writing systems

To explore further beyond the artistic value of the faux style font, one may take a close-up look at the individual letterforms in a rendered script. The figure below illustrates the English letter ‘A’ rewritten in a faux-Chinese font.

Figure 3. The English letter ‘A’ rendered in a faux-Chinese font



Linguistically, the smallest unit of a writing system is referred to as a grapheme (Coulmas, 1996, p. 174). An individual grapheme does not necessarily carry meaning or correspond to a single phoneme. It comes in various forms, including alphabetic letters, Chinese characters, typographic ligatures, numerical digits, and punctuation marks. A grapheme can also be taken as an independent graphical sign representing a segment of linguistic material (Altmann & Fan, 2008). Since the current analysis deals mainly with the presentational features of written linguistic signs, rather than the correspondence between written signs and speech sounds, it adopts the latter sense of a grapheme to refer to the basic building blocks of a script. Upon close scrutiny, the grapheme in Figure 3 is found to be made up of four identical stroke-like units. Each unit resembles a “throw” (丿) or a “press” (㇇) in the CJK stroke inventory. By connecting the four units “head to tail”, the typographer creates an imitation of the Chinese character ‘开’. However, the constructed grapheme clearly distinguishes itself from the original character. Although the Chinese character is also composed of four strokes, they come in three distinct types: two horizontals, one vertical and one throw. Not only are they categorically dissimilar, but they are also presented in different manners. For instance, the vertical stroke should be presented falling straight down with a decreasing thickness towards the end. This is reverted in the faux font, however, as the right-side unit features an emphasized end. Even the two horizontal strokes are not presented in the same fashion, as the top one should be drawn shorter than the lower one in the middle.

Moreover, instead of one-to-one correspondence, the mapping between the purpose-designed letterform and the source character seems more relaxed than rigorous. That is, the ‘A’ letterform in a faux-Chinese font is not absolutely associated with one definite character but can be connected with several graphically similar characters (e.g., 开, 升, 井, 元), as in the ‘升’-shaped letter ‘A’ shown in

Figure 2. Thus, the essence of creating an Asian illusion in the script does not lie in establishing a meaning-based relationship between the signified and the signifier, i.e., for the constructed sign to mean within an alien sign system. Rather, it relies on the iconic mapping of the overall properties of one sign system onto another. The artificial merging of the individual graphemic representations—in the illustrated case above, the English letter ‘A’ and the Chinese character ‘开’—points to the latent overlaps and parallels in writing systems that involve arbitrary coding.

One would assume that there is arbitrariness in associating one set of written signs with the designated meanings that the signs are supposed to carry within and possibly across scripts. As demonstrated in the murky case of a letterform in a faux-Chinese font, the concept of stereotype may help locate the boundaries between categories of typographic units. Interestingly, to some extent, the word “stereotype” has retained its original meaning rooted in the printing business, to which the current discussion on typeface appears most relevant.⁴ Perhaps this inherent meaning of a fixed image has forged the illusion that there shall be one established typeface consisting of the most representative or distinctive types in the conventional scripts. Several questions then arise: what features of a linguistic sign shall be taken as stereotypical? Is the English script defined by Times New Roman, a standard font widely applied in typesetting and word processing? Likewise, is the Chinese script confined to the expressive potential of the Song type style? Would the competing alternatives—English sans serif fonts such as Arial and Chinese Kai and Imitation Song—also make formal, presentable scripts in print?

Given the difficulty in deciding on the stereotypical image of the letter or the character, it may be a valid proposition that the letter and the character are essentially not very different from each other. As the basic building blocks of a text, they share the qualities of a written linguistic sign within “a separate, secondary, dependent, but comparable sign system” in relation to speech (Chandler, 2017, p. 14). In Saussure’s terms, they both work to establish a link between the “concept” (*signifié*) and the “sound-image” (*signifiant*) (Saussure, 1916). This “sound image” is thus compositional, in the sense that meaningful interpretation of the image as a whole does not rely on decoding the individual grapheme in isolation, but on construing one in relation to other graphemes, a process often aided by contextual cues.

For a lack of textual signals, reading the faux-Chinese styled letter ‘A’ in the

illustrated case above can be confusing. The graphical features of the faux style ‘A’ reside somewhere in between a letter and a character, thus can be placed on a letter-character continuum (Figure 4).

Figure 4. A letter-character continuum



Therefore, the decision as to whether the graphical sign is intended as a letter or a character can only be made by resorting to the textual components that constitute a meaning-generating system. When represented in company with other units in the system, the script takes on a meaning endowed by the system. The meaning in this sense does not refer to textual meaning with which written communication is primarily concerned, but meaning potentials with reference to the ideational or interpersonal aspects of the communication. By contrast, reading of the more stereotypical signs—the letter ‘A’ on the left end side, which is presented in Times New Roman, and the character ‘开’ on the right end side, which is presented in Kai style—is more intuitive. This is only true, of course, with readers who are familiar with either or both language system(s). Otherwise, it is highly likely that they would find neither of the graphical signs makes much sense, and that the ambiguous case in the middle would appear just as indecipherable.

In a deeper sense, though, the contested notion of a “standard” font and the possibility of a letter-character continuum may loosen our grip on some of the culturally received ideas about languages and writing systems. One pervasive belief along this line highlights the “unbridgeable” gap between the alphabetical English and the ideographic Chinese (Chen, 2017). Many with a linguistic background in alphabetical languages may still hold the simplistic view that Chinese characters are “square-shaped” images. In a comprehensive introduction to Chinese characters, Han (2009) gave an account for “why the Han characters have square forms”:

Han characters use form to indicate meaning, and a square form is the most convenient way to achieve this. Square forms occupy a two-dimensional space and provide scope for a sufficient amount of content. There are various combinations of strokes that are written up and down, and left to right, and creating them within a

square formation is the easiest way to achieve symmetry and visual balance. Because of this, all Han characters developed in a square form. (Han, 2009, p. 82)

The “square form”, as described in the idiomatic Chinese “*fang kuai zi*” (literally “square characters”) characterise the impressionistic view of a Chinese script. This abstraction, though easy to envision, is potentially misleading. For one thing, the word “square”, in the sense of a regular quadrilateral shape in geometry, can be an imprecise and overgeneralized depiction for the intricate combinational patterns of Chinese characters. Undoubtedly, a couple of characters do feature a typical square shape, especially characters enclosed in a ‘口’ radical (e.g., 国, 回, 团). However, one would find it a less accurate description for characters featuring more “jagged” than “rounded” structures (e.g., 人, 大, 广). Conversely, the English letters, though apparently with more “curves” than “straight lines”, might also be considered to “occupy a two-dimensional space” with symmetrical and balanced features (e.g., A, O, T). Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that linguistic signs as realized in a written mode all take certain “shapes”, and that “form” matters in conveying meaning in the text regardless of language types. Thus, to contend and prove that the Chinese character is unique in holding a square shape tends to be along a deductive line of thought, which is more impressionistic than fact-based.

It is pertinent, at this stage, to reconsider the notion of writing systems and their connotations in the changing linguistic landscape. As communication across cultures becomes more common and active, the way written messages are encoded in one language may cease being isolated, but reach out to connect with some neighbouring or even distant languages. In terms of the motivation for connection, much of the interaction is expected to serve practical purposes. The multiple translations presented in parallel on public signs can be understood as one such case. The interaction can also happen on a deeper level, however, when presentational units within the language-specific scripts acquire features hitherto considered “alien” or “exotic”.

More than a metaphorical hypothesis, recent neurological studies in language processing have added biological evidence for the basis of this possible connection and interaction.

...it is now known that alphabets, though markedly different from such writing-systems as those used in China and Japan, are cognitively and even neurally quite similar to them, albeit with lesser differences that are becoming rather well understood. What writing-

system one uses affects how one writes and reads, but less than what ‘intuition’ might suggest, and rather less than early work seemed to demonstrate. Chinese ‘characters’ are not ‘pictures.’... (Chinese ‘characters’ can be understood with or without attaching sound-values to them, to a large extent; but so can the letters of the alphabet.) (Watt, 2013, p. 3)

In sum, by mixing the graphemic features in one system with those in another, one may achieve an artificial blend of cultures, and more significantly in a semiotic sense, the possible connection between diametrically different language systems judged by typological traits. This blending can be roughly taken as a superposition of writing systems, or to be more exact, one between language-unique presentational units. The blurred notion of stereotype and the murky boundaries between language systems in the changing era of communication warrant a fresh look at languages as semiotic systems. Meanwhile, they point to the possibility of tapping our capacity for processing and harnessing semiotic potentials across languages.

4. Towards an Interpretative Framework for Linguistic Signs in Scripts

In an artistic manner, transcultural practice in typography lends support to the view that “any well-formed signifier could have been used in either language—a well-formed signifier is one that is consistent with the orthographic, phonological, or other type of structure characteristic of the code to which it appertains” (Sebeok, 2001, p. 6). To solve the ambiguity in an intended blending, an experienced reader may intuitively choose to follow a specific decoding path. This decision is conditioned by the linguistic experience one has—an acquired ability to identify the features pivotal to accessing the textual information.

As a typographic innovation, this trendy design challenges the established view that linguistic signs shall be transparent so as not to draw attention to their “materiality” (Chandler, 2017, p. 15). In traditional reading, this imposed immateriality reduces linguistic signs to “an extraordinarily economical medium” (ibid.) and conduit. This interpretation is reassessed in the current discussion, which shifts to focus on the increasing materiality and visibility of the linguistic sign in written communication.

In a general sense, writing as a linguistic solution to communicative scenarios has been challenged to embrace new traits in a globalizing and digitalizing world. Globalization brings languages into contact and allows interaction and influence

between typologically distant languages. This contact can lead to mixtures and borrowings and may go even further to inspire alternative ways of representation and communication by transcending the boundaries between languages. In this regard, the changes in writing are more likely to be associated with conscious efforts of the language user than those occur in speech. While linguistic changes in speech resulting from language contact tend to be linked with spontaneous and natural adaptations (e.g., code-switching and pidgin), changes in writing seem to involve deliberate modifications concerning nuanced aspects of the semiotic system. This may have a bearing on the cognitive processing of a text. Specifically, the change from traditional print-based texts to multimodal texts enriches the means of encoding while presenting decoding demands for average readers.

To appreciate the semiotic value and harness the meaning-making potentials of letterforms in the specific faux-Asian font, and of written linguistic signs in general, I propose a framework for analysis with borrowed insights from Amsler (2010) and Serafini and Clausen (2012). Following the tripartite model of metafunction (Halliday, 1978), the framework covers three meaning potentials, which intend to capture the meaning-making mechanism within and across systems (Table 4).

Table 4. Constructs of an interpretative framework for linguistic signs in scripts

Meaning potential	Focus of analysis
Ideational	how the presentational features of a linguistic sign draw attention to themselves; what images they evoke in the mind of the reader
Interpersonal	how the presentation of the signs communicates the thoughts, ideas, feelings, and emotions of the author and/or typographer
Textual	how the signs convey messages encoded in the text

The interpretation follows a similar logic to that in previous typological analyses, only with extra attention to the interaction between systems. First, a decision shall be made on whether one system or multiple systems are at play in constructing the message code. The “system” in this context refers to the writing system that underlies the operation of one specific language or a group of related languages in written communication. If no evidence for an intervention of alternative writing systems is detected, then the system can be evaluated in accordance with the established aspects of graphic design to explore its added meaning potentials within the system. In cases

where there is evidence for a superposition of systems, the typographic features that work to formulate this impression need to be identified. This can be done by plotting the featural parameters on a spectrum and assessing them with reference to graphemic stereotypes in the superposed systems. These features are deemed as essential to adding extra layers of meaning to the text and thus deserve an in-depth description and analysis.

The meaning potentials of the typographic units in the texts can then be approached by teasing out the ideational and interpersonal meaning aspects from their transparent textual function. Specifically, the ideational meaning can be obtained by focusing on how the presentational features of a linguistic sign work to draw readers' attention to themselves. The depth of interpersonal meaning can be gauged by reflecting on how the presentation of the signs works to grab and engage readers. In considering this trait, the grapheme can be taken as the minimal semiotically meaningful unit in text. The analysis shall thus focus on graphical features of the individual graphemic representations (e.g., weight, size, colour, slant, and flourishes of the typeface) which constitute the "local" features. Meanwhile, considerations also need to be made for the "global" features. That is, how individual graphemes work in conjunction with other compositional elements to achieve the overall effect of the written message (e.g., framing, formality). A brief analysis of a faux-Chinese font design (Figure 5) demonstrates how this framework works in interpreting the semiotic depth of a functional written text.

Figure 5. "Chinese Takeaway" font design by Jonathan S. Harris



The initial impression of the textual design suggests the presence of multiple systems. Several prominent features of the graphemic image help formulate this impression. The creative use of character-like strokes results in a set of reconstructed images of the letter. The font deliberately calls attention to itself by its added weight, which is achieved using all capital letters presented in a thickened and enlarged font. The Chinese character image is distinguished by the choice of black ink colour and straight over slanted font characters. Most noticeable are the flourishes added to the

font; specifically, the edges of the character-like strokes have been textualized to look as though they are written with actual brushes as in Chinese calligraphy. These typographic features combine to initiate an iconic mapping of features of the Chinese character onto the English letter, thus creating a bond between the two language systems.

The ideational function aside, the font also conveys rich interpersonal meaning potentials. For one thing, it appeals to readers by imposing an exotic “Oriental” flavour. For another, it sends out an invitation to have a taste of the unique “Chineseness”, in the sense that readers of the text are encouraged to have an appreciation of the written sign while visualizing the authentic Chinese food it serves to offer. It is thus reasonable to assume that the design conveys a strong message in an English advertisement for Chinese takeaway. Thus, the textual message encoded in the words “Chinese” and “takeaway” is stylistically heightened by the use of the purpose-designed font.

5. Concluding Remarks

As multilingual and multimodal communication becomes increasingly a linguistic reality in the world today, one would expect to see more cases of “blending” and “superposing” in written language. As additional dimensions of meaning are generated within systems, there arise new ways of producing meaning beyond the system. The contact between languages as semiotic systems motivates transboundary connection that superposes one system over another. In the faux-Asian font case discussed in the article, a linguistic illusion is created through the marriage between impressionistically alphabetical and ideographical languages. The effect thus achieved points to the typographical traits of the text. For a better appreciation of the meaning-generating potential of these formal features, a tripartite analytical framework can be referred to that collectively considers ideational, interpersonal, and textual aspects of a written message.

The preliminary findings on the faux-Asian font help reveal the materiality, semioticity, and aesthetics of the expressive sign. Meanwhile, they tend to challenge some of our stereotypical views of written communication and of language types in general. The multiplicity of meaning found in the artistic design presses us to reconsider the value of a written sign in the text—the encoded meaning as well as

the encoding, the means by which the former is conveyed. Despite the successful blending, it seems a little far-fetched for the moment to design a writing system that operates on a universal meaning-representing system regardless of language. Nonetheless, the creative crossing of the language borders in typographic innovations indicates the role constructed script as a semiotic asset can play in connecting and communicating between languages.

Notes

- 1 The figures presented in the article are downloaded from the following websites: <https://www.fontspace.com/category/faux-chinese>, <http://calligraphyalphabet.org/calligraphy-alphabet-a/>, and <https://www.fontspace.com/category/faux-asian> (accessed Sept. 29, 2019).
- 2 In its general sense, the term “character” denotes any mark or symbol that appears in writing, including numerals, punctuation marks, and various symbols (e.g., the ampersand ‘&’, the dollar sign ‘\$’). A “letter” in this regard can be seen as a “character” that is part of an alphabet. In this article, a narrow sense of the term “character” is adopted. It is used to refer to Chinese characters (Hanzi) structured by CJK (China, Japan, and Korea) strokes used exclusively in East Asian calligraphy tradition.
- 3 The other two shapes ‘丄’ and ‘丅’ are recognized as archaic Chinese characters, denoting the characters ‘上’ and ‘下’ respectively.
- 4 The word ‘stereotype’ originally means “method of printing from a plate”. According to the online etymology dictionary (<https://www.etymonline.com/word/stereotype>, accessed Sept. 29, 2019), the word is derived from the French word *stéréotype* meaning “printed by means of a solid plate of type”. Its meaning of “a stereotype plate” is from 1817, whereas the meaning of “image perpetuated without change” is first recorded in 1850.

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