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## DESIGN RESEARCH: TYPOGRAPHY WITHIN THE ISRAELI LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

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### Recommended Citation

Blum, Shayna Tova, "DESIGN RESEARCH: TYPOGRAPHY WITHIN THE ISRAELI LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE" (2015). *Faculty and Staff Publications*. 48.  
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# DESIGN RESEARCH: TYPOGRAPHY WITHIN THE ISRAELI LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

## Abstract:

A linguistic landscape signifies language used within a physical or virtual public space, in which communication is presented in typographic form, portraying a message to an audience. Within the state of Israel, the linguistic landscape presents a unique situation in which it is common to view municipal and commercial multilingual signs that are designed using Hebrew, English, and Arabic letterforms. By studying the diverse linguistic landscape within Israeli urban environments, this article offers perspectives on the use of multilingual visual language, based on discussions with five Israeli designers in the summer of 2015.

*Keywords: Linguistic Landscape, Typography, Visual Communication, Hebrew, Israeli Design*

## ***Language & Linguistic Landscape***

The Linguistic landscape is “language within an environment,” (Shohamy & Gorter, 2009: 1; Kasanga, 2012, 48), as well as typography and pictograms that communicate messages to an audience within a physical and virtual space. Until recently, the study of linguistic landscapes has focused on signage in public, physical spaces, such as street signs, billboards, shop signs, and logos. Linguistic landscapes have been predominantly studied by linguists, anthropologists, and theorists who viewed them as having the potential to convey information about specific environments and cultures (Bolton, 2012). Through various fields of study, researchers can identify information about specific environments and cultures, including history and socioeconomic, migration, and education public policy within society. (Agnihotri and McCormick, 2010, Bolton 2012). Those who study linguistic landscapes identify language as defining a social identity that develops through the unity of individuals, and that is capable of helping individuals within a community to

communicate and comprehending one another. In *Signs of Belonging: Culture, Identity, and the English Language*, John E. Joseph (2013) states that 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" (p. 55).

Many studies in linguistic landscapes have focused on the increase of the English language used worldwide in non-English speaking environments. English has become a non-official language because of its international significance in a global market. Luanga Adrien Kasanga (2010), in *English in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, writes, "English is used in nearly every corner of the earth." It is a "global language" and is learned by those globally who are "keen to enter a highly competitive global market." He explains that an education in English is needed to "cope with requirements of an ever-globalizing job market" (p. 50). Kasanga explains that brand advertising signage is one of the "many facets of the presence of English in the linguistic landscapes in the world" (p. 57). He (2010) coined the term "glocal" to describe bilingual signage, combining the words "global" and "local," by which a hybrid writing system presents a fusion of a foreign brand name "with local attributes."

Alireza Hojati (2013), in *A Study of Errors in Bilingual Road, Street, Shop Signs in Iran*, notes that globalization has developed a "phenomenal rise of [the] English language as the foremost and most-widely used international language." Globalization has "led to the increasing use of bilingual signs in different countries (Vaish 2008, Bhagwati 2007, Hojati 2013). According to Hojati, bilingual signs are a "normal" element in a globalized environment, and it is common to view signage where English is presented alongside another dominant local or national language (p.607). Areas such as the Middle East and North Africa use English in the environment as a signifier for "modernity," "technology," and "education" (p. 65).

Studying the linguistic landscape of an environment requires a perspective informed by design and typography. This perspective will enable one to understand the communication of a sign as presented through visual language systems that require comprehension and readability. In Israel, multilingual street signs are a familiar element in contemporary urban culture. During the British Mandate of Palestine, street

signs were constructed in Jerusalem under British architect and city planner, Charles Robert Ashbee (Araryahu, 2012). The signs were written in three different languages with three very different typographic systems. Aligned center, the top line of the text was written in English with linear serif letterforms. The second line was written in Arabic using a calligraphic script, and the bottom line was written in traditional Hebrew block script. After Israeli independence in 1948, language preferences shifted from English to Hebrew, requiring a change in signage to display Hebrew as the official language.

Israel is a diverse and multilingual society with two official languages, Hebrew and Arabic, and a secondary language, English. Still today, multilingual typographic signage is a familiar element in the county's urban culture. The main law that governs the language policies of Israel is the 82<sup>nd</sup> paragraph of the "Palestine Order in Council," issued on August 14, 1922. It 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 in 1948 by Israel and has been a topic of debate ever since.

Hebrew is the official language of Israel and is most commonly used in all institutions, including governmental, commercial, and educational. The study of Hebrew is mandatory for all students from elementary school and onward. According to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics (2011), in Israel, 90% of Jews and 60% of Arabs speak and read Hebrew fluently. Also, as an official language, Arabic is mostly spoken by Israeli Arabs, including Israeli Druze and Mizrahi Jews. Arabic is taught within schools from middle school onward. Israeli Arabs, who comprise 5% of the Israeli population, speak predominantly Arabic, while Hebrew is 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 street signs, food labels, and government public messages.

During the initial stages of the development of the state of Israel, 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 1960s, Israeli and French relations were questioned and the alliance between Israel and the United States grew stronger. The relationship between Israeli and the USA 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 has yet to be sanctioned for use within the Knesset for debates and legislation. However, the language is studied by the majority of Israelis in secondary schools and is used commonly within the linguistic landscape. The majority of Israelis can speak, write, and understand English at a basic level. The proper use of English is considered a signifier of higher education and modernization. Since the 1990s, with the abundance of exposure to American culture, most Israelis born from the 1980s onward have developed superior skills and understanding of the English language in comparison to their relatives from earlier generations.

### ***H&A Typography***

As Semitic languages, Hebrew and Arabic share oral and visual similarities in their linguistic systems in that 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 typographic forms of English/Latin and Hebrew letters, similarities reside in the solid, independent character, shaped with a vertical and horizontal linear format. Latin type is dominated by 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. The proportions between the writing systems are equal, aligning Latin lowercase letters with Hebrew letterforms measured at the Latin x-height, and uppercase letters with Hebrew characters measured at the cap height. Extenders from both scripts follow similar measurements (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 a cohesive union, but to do this, the designer must consider adjusting line weight and styles to create aesthetic compatibility and linguistic design equality. On the other hand, Arabic script appears significantly smaller and much more horizontal in form compared to Latin letters. When presented at the same point size, English and Arabic typography are not proportionate. 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 since language text reflects the culture and history of the society in which it is used to communicate (Blankenship, 2003). Arabic typography is written with a sense of spirituality exhibiting a flow of rhythm, repetition, and patterning. 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, Latin letters are spaced separately from one another and may be perceived as formal, impersonal, geometric, static, and mechanical (Blankenship, 2003).

### ***Perspectives***

The multilingual signage utilized in Israel serves the utilitarian purpose of communicating information to a diverse linguistic population. An examination of the typographic linguistic landscape can provide further discussion about design, language, and culture. In 2015, interviews with designers Yehuda Hofshi, Oded Ezor, Habib Khoury, Liron Lavi Turkenich, and Yaniv Zarfati provide insightful perspectives about multilingual typography in Hebrew, Arabic, and English. The interviews addressed the present Israeli urban linguistic landscape.

Graphic designer and instructor of Visual Communication at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem, Yehuda Hofshi, stated that in Israel, there exists a Hebrew speaking majority, and therefore, type presented in the visual environment commonly exhibits Hebrew followed by Arabic and English (Interview, [June, 27, 2016]). Hofshi explained that multilingual signage is mainly located in areas where population is culturally and linguistically diverse.

As there are many countries within global society, there is a trend in Israeli culture to utilize the English language as an "International language" that offers the user a reputation as an educated and modern individual. Most businesses, organizations, and institutions utilize the English language and typographic Latin letterforms in branding and marketing materials, which, as Hofshi describes, the use of Latin typography as a way to present an illusion that the business is international (Interview, [June, 27, 2016]). Therefore, it's bigger, better, or fancier. Hofshi argues, "I don't believe it, and I have many arguments with my students...Many people consider the Hebrew letters, especially for signage or branding, as to be a bit old or conservative, more traditional, or something that is not attractive enough or appealing enough" (Interview, [June, 27, 2016]).

According to Hofshi, international brands that use Latin letterforms in their logos and advertisements do not need to change their visual identity into the Hebrew text since the Israeli market will understand the typographic image and the visual identity, regardless of whether or not they read English (Interview, [June, 27, 2016]). It suffices to present the original logo and adhere to government standards that Hebrew letterforms must be presented in any signage or marketing materials by writing the business name in simple Hebrew type underneath or to the side. Hofshi explains that in many cases an appropriated visual identity would not work since the translation in a language could possibly present miscommunication or a lack understanding; an exception may be the appropriation of the Coca-Cola logo design (1980s) where "The English and Hebrew (typography) work very well together" (Interview, [June, 27, 2016]). To Hofshi, "A translation can be strange. The company 'Car2Go' would look ridiculous in Hebrew type. Therefore, there is no need to put effort into creating an appropriated visual identity in Hebrew... it depends on the necessity."

In Hofshi's advanced visual communications course, fourth-year students are assigned a project in which they design a book utilizing three languages in different typographic characters. The goal of the project is to study specific languages, words, and translations to develop harmony in design using typographic characters with varying alphabetic forms. According to Hofshi, "If you can't read the language, then you can't design the font in the language" (Interview, [June, 27, 2016]). He suggests that one needs to know the history and background of a language in order to design typefaces in that language. "You can't force languages to work together visually" (Interview, [June, 27, 2016]).

Oded Ezor, a graphic designer, typographer and lecturer at Holon Institute of Technology, addressed the typographic design of the municipal, multilingual street signs located throughout Israel. Ezor clarified that trained graphic designers do not design municipal signage. Rather, the work is developed at the Ministry of Transportation, where typefaces and sign layout are designed by engineers and technicians, who follow a universal principle of design (Interview, [July 24, 2016]). He believes that the overall design of the multilingual presentation of the signage is satisfactory in its readability: layout, type sizing, and style.

When discussing typography in brand identity, Ezor described the transition between Latin and non-Latin letterforms as an approach to dialogue about visual communication. He believes that in the 1980s there was a better resolve in Hebrew logo design (Interview, [July 24, 2016]). As mentioned by Hofshi, Coca-Cola is an excellent example of a successful logo where the company recreated their original typographic logo (based on Latin letterforms) into a Hebrew typographic design. Ezor agreed with Hofshi that there is no longer the need for logo variation from Latin type into Hebrew, thus it is not done (Interview, [July 24, 2016]).

In Ezor's opinion, to strengthen Israeli design, contemporary designers need to engage with Hebrew typography and visual language, from early civilization to present (Interview, [July 24, 2016]). However, since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the present, Israeli design was most reflective of Western culture. The lack of



historical and cultural identity in current designs makes work appear as cultural imitation. Ezor believes that exploring the history of textual aesthetics and design, as presented in the global Jewish diaspora and the Middle East, would benefit the designer in creating an ideal contemporary Hebrew design. "Israeli legacy as a melting pot is being ignored from the limited angle in which the Israeli heritage is being perceived by concentrating on western visual influence and disregarding the regional culture" (Interview, [July 24, 2016]).

According to Ezor, the influence of the Bezalel Academy in Jerusalem, in which the curriculum, developed and taught by immigrated European Jews at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, favored British and European design movements, arts and crafts, and later, Bauhaus, DiStyl, and Constructivism (Interview, [July 24, 2016]). However, the Academy and its influence on Israeli art and design had no dialogue with the visual history and culture reflective of the region. Since the Arabic influence or style would have signified "the enemy," Jews coming from North African and Middle Eastern countries were not included in the country's visual language discourse (Interview, [July 24, 2016]). While the reasoning was justified, the historical outcome has presented a gap in Israeli design aesthetics and visual culture.

Typographer and graphic designer, Habib Khoury, has created over forty Arabic typefaces and hundreds of branding, packaging, marketing, and exhibit designs. Khoury is best known for his use of multilingual design in his work. In "A Conversation with Habib Khoury," Gregory Cole quotes Khoury: "In the course of time, typographic design became the visual mirror of each language and culture... Living within different societies and nations, multiculturalism is an important issue for every designer. It contributes to broadening one's horizons in design thinking and resolution" (Cole, 1998).

When discussing linguistic landscapes and the concept of multilingual visual communication in Israeli culture, Khoury offered the same explanation as Oded Ezor when stating that municipal signage on streets and highways were developed through an agreed upon template designed by the Ministry of Transportation (Interview, [July, 19,2016]). Just as Ezor had stated in his conversation, the multilingual typography,

symbols, and specific colors had been designed by government engineers and selected by government officials. Much of the design was influenced by American and European signage design, where semiotic readability was the main goal in the design. Khoury explained that since the signage had not been designed by designers, there was no thought put into details when working with multilingual text (Interview, [July, 19,2016]). Therefore, a visual language hierarchy via typographic shapes was not developed intentionally or via a specific system but rather haphazardly formulated. "The phenomena of collaborative trilingual signage is not a real system. 'Sign makers,' not designers, attempt to develop a universal signage system... It is the Ministry of Transportation, MOT, that is in charge of all municipal signage. The issue is not so much that the signage may present language via typographic design. More of a problem is the misspelling of words or placing incorrect names of locations" (Interview, [July, 19,2016]).

Habib explained that private entities, such as business organizations, did not have to adhere to the same rules of governmental signage and could present multilingual text in the way they wished (Interview, [July, 19,2016]). However, many designs using multilingual typography in this context also presented a language text with little thought to composition and style. Most corporate brands that establish a market in Israel, utilize their original Latin typographic brand style. Other than a select few, such as Coca-Cola, most western companies do not choose to adjust their visual identity in Hebrew letterforms, nor was there a major necessity for the work. However, by law, storefronts for any business, large or small, must present Hebrew text in the signage. When presented with multilingual design, this requirement can look aesthetically unpleasing with randomly selected and/or placed letterforms. When designing storefronts, some businesses experiment with the logistics and end up creating odd combinations with words and typographic styles. Even with the multilingual design challenges, lesser-known Israeli brands favor using English names and Latin typography in the visual identity of their brand. This is a marketing strategy to promote the business as a "modern and western" style that is favored by the market.

Designer, Yaniv Zarfati was born in 1978 in Tel Aviv and began working in fashion at the age of 22 at Marcel on Shenken Street. Through his work experience in fashion,

Zarfati gained an education, developing his skills in aesthetics and design. In 2002, Zarfati co-founded Sabotage Art, where he collaborated with local Israeli designers on fashion design that incorporated a unique urban style. In 2007, Zarfati split from Sabotage Art to develop his brand, Emelis.

Sold in boutiques throughout Israel, Emelis fashion exhibits a strong typographic presence with English quotes and text ornamenting the fabric in an urban, punk style. The printed content visually communicates a message through font details, style, size, and color, which vary depending on the textual content and fabric form. In the initial stages of the design process, Zarfati visualizes the typeface needed to express the concepts intended within the clothing design. Influenced by the punk culture of the 80s and 90s and trendy street art design popular in contemporary global urban culture, Zarfati developed Emelis fashion by reinventing ready-made clothing pieces for men and women. The designs are an exploration of text and image, combining separate parts to create a total form. By allowing an aesthetic form to develop via chance and the subconscious, Zarfati states that in his process a design is developed through random selection. "What comes, comes." He doesn't plan but instead allows the process to develop the (Interview, [July, 15, 2016]).

For twenty years, Zarfati has developed this concept by reflecting on urban environments, culture, people, behaviors, while drawing inspiration from cities such as New York, Tel Aviv, and Milan. Using Latin typographic forms and English statements, Zarfati addresses linguistic preference to a language that is not his mother tongue. "Israeli culture doesn't want to see Hebrew in fashion design. Hebrew is historical with letterforms symbolizing religion. The letterforms are 'unstylish' and wouldn't look cool or fit with the style of the design (Interview, [July, 15, 2016])." Zarfati's interest in the English language and Latin letterforms used in his work reflects a global phenomenon in which non-English speaking cultures in the east view English as an international language, "used all over the world," signifying its use in a linguistic landscape as modern and cultured (Interview, [July, 15, 2016]). Zarfati believes that English language and typographic letterforms are what the market wants to view.

Israeli graphic designer and typographer, Liron Lavi Turkenich, received a Master of Arts in Typography at the University of Reading, UK, and a Bachelor of Design in Visual Communication at Shenkar College of Design, in Tel Aviv, Israel. Her interests in design reflect multilingual typography through the creation of Hebrew, Latin, and Arabic letterforms.

Born and raised in Haifa, Turkenich experienced an environment where the co-existence of Hebrew and Arabic visual language was familiar in the landscape. However, having little formal study of Arabic, Turkenich viewed the printed script as shapes and symbols rather than textual communication. As a designer, Turkenich was curious that she had spent her life viewing the linguistic landscape of Haifa but never realized the ongoing disconnection. Having developed a bilingual typeface in the past, Turkenich sought the challenge to design a new bilingual typeface that combined Hebrew and Arabic letterforms into a hybrid letterform. Her goal was for a viewer to “read the language of choice but not ignore the other (Interview, [June, 28, 2016]).”

Turkenich’s typeface project, Arivrit, resulted in a digitally modern script in which individual letterforms juxtapose past and present typographic aesthetics. The complex yet simple characters were formed through curvilinear lines that competed with both sharp and soft edges, resulting in shapes even in weight value and with little contrast. The creation of the typeface was a study into two linguistic cultures by uniting the Hebrew and Arabic language letterforms to form an alternative alphabet. Turkenich’s research for the project offered her the opportunity to understand the visual relationship between Hebrew and Arabic letterforms.

From studies conducted by nineteenth-century optometrists, Turkenich discovered she could merge Hebrew and Arabic text without harming readability and comprehension. She accomplished this by removing the top half of a Hebrew letter so that the bottom half of the Hebrew letter would be presented, and removing the lower half the Arabic letterform so that the Arabic would read on top. Research found that the design of a hybrid letterform using this method could be developed with success. Turkenich was determined to design the linguistic hybrid typeface. In the initial phase, Turkenich considered ways to separate physical forms that could be used to create a new form.

In her process, Turkenich selected pairs of mundane items and brainstorming and sketching options in physical formation. Her research included variations in design combination, and she concluded that “while connections formed between objects, the identity of each individual form was maintained (Interview, [June, 28, 2016]).” Turkenich sought to continue utilizing this strategy when designing Arivrit, and over time the project “took on a life of its own (Interview, [June, 28, 2016]).” Turkenich finalized Aravrit as a decorative font in 2014.

### ***Conclusion***

Archeologists and sociologists believe linguistic landscapes have the capability to define a culture through language identity. Within the state of Israel, the linguistic landscape presents a unique situation in which it is common to view municipal and commercial multilingual signs that were designed using Hebrew, English, and Arabic letterforms. By examining linguistic landscape through the lens of multilingual typography on visual signage within Israeli public spaces, additional discourse concerning visual language and culture may be investigated, thus bringing attention to an ignored element in the history of contemporary typography design.

Further study of the subject would examine, hybrid alphabetic systems in visual communication for branding and marketing, multilingual typography in virtual spaces, and multilingual design complexities as defined by traditional typographic principals.

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