The Design of Multilingual Type Families

Recently, I wanted to design a typeface that offers a practical response to a theoretical question: which considerations are necessary in establishing the relationships between different writing systems in a single typeface design? I chose to work on a complement of Arabic, Cyrillic, Greek and Latin to cover a relatively wide scope of languages, with shapes and structural logic that were sometimes similar, and sometimes very dissimilar to each other. Natalia Chuvatin, Irene Vlachou and Kristyan Sarkis joined me in co-designing this typeface. The following are some observations that came from our experience in designing a multilingual type family and which I hope will be useful to others.

To a significant degree, learning a form of writing comes from an unconscious cultural knowledge: I "know" what an "a" must look like, but how long would it take for me to see with the same certainty what an "alpha" or an "'alif" must look like? Natalia Chuvatin studied in Moscow, Kristyan Sarkis studied in Beirut and Irene Vlachou studied in Athens, and they brought to this project a deep understanding of their respective writing systems. All four of us are readers and writers of the systems we have designed.

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A small detail can make a letter seem "natural", or make it seem "artificial". But this is not the only reason to work with readers and writers of a given system; I see two others. The second reason is that a type can be beautiful but not very readable, and so there is a tendency to tack its inherent "cultural aesthetics" onto another writing system. The third is that it can be useful for a type designer to anticipate how people will use a typeface, but it is difficult to anticipate the work process automatisms of a graphic designer or an editor for a language without having typeset this language oneself.

What do we seek generally in the design of a multilingual type family? To get something that is both readable (effective) and aesthetic (harmonious). In order to better explore these two concepts, I started with two ideas. The first is that if each of us drew his/her own writing system, the readability issue of the obtained shapes would not be *a priori* a problem. The second idea was to work on a *minimum* optical continuity between these systems, allowing us to focus gradually on the issue of harmonization by questioning each visual connection.

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a ɛ я د

The four systems that we have made are visually differentiated. Priority is given to the readability and the expression of the specificities rather than seeking primarily to create a homogeneity. One could perhaps maintain good legibility in pursuing further homogenization, but it seemed more interesting in the context of this experiment to think about what was only fundamentally necessary to make these forms coexist. The Latin was the starting point of the project but it could have been another system, or several other systems.

I compiled a list of possible ways to harmonize these four writing systems, based on the advice of Robert Bringhurst in combining typefaces[1]: color (optical gray), contrast, flow, slope, optical size (visual equivalence in a given point size), and extension (ascenders and descenders). In this non-exhaustive list, only the optical size seemed inherently necessary, and this is the only constraint which

was imposed on the three other designers. We have tried to show that each system can be expressed independently, without needing to copy another by establishing numerous visual connections.

Let us look at a concrete example to illustrate this approach. There are glyphs, designating different letters, which are in both Latin and Cyrillic: “c”, “e”, “ o”, “p”, “x” and “y”. We asked ourselves whether it was better to give them a common shape or differentiate them, systematically or unsystematically, and depending on which criteria. It turns out that among the glyphs that appear to share a single graphical form, some translate the same phoneme while others represent different sounds. So we drew these letters in the same way if they referred to a single phoneme, and took the liberty to differentiate their designs otherwise.

In order to allow us maximum freedom during the design process, the different writing systems were not combined into one working file; we wanted to preserve the possibility of drawing glyphs common to several systems in different ways. I found it important that everyone was independent in their design, so their own cultural baggage would be present in every detail of his/her design, from the basic form of letters to the design of punctuation, and from the character set to the particulars of individual metrics. It would have been easy to approach this project with preconceived notions about the relationships of the scripts to each other, but we tried to approach it as if nothing were predetermined. Working like this requires making fundamental choices, and a design in which these choices are made is more meaningful and makes more sense.

Another specific example regarding the connection between Latin and Cyrillic is the shape of the serifs. The horizontality is very pronounced in a text set in Cyrillic characters. This is due to the structure and frequency of straight letters, while in a Latin text this horizontality is weakened by the numerous rounds letters: “a”, “c”, “e”, “o”, “u” or “s”. We therefore chose to have shorter and lighter serifs in the Cyrillic to avoid intensifying an already strong horizontality by systematically using those of the Latin.

I should add a final note on how this project was organized between four designers. We live in three different countries and there were no physical meetings; all of the discussions were done through hundreds of emails. I find it encouraging that a project like this can be completed by participants who are in different regions of the world. As part of this project, we tried to get people to think about how we can design and use multilingual type families. I do not think the idea of making different writing systems look alike is *a priori* a good idea, first because it is not useful to the reader, and second because it dispenses with the history of writing. The resonances between different writing systems may be something worth keeping. ▪

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[1] Bringhurst, Robert. - *The Elements of Typographic Style*. - Hartley & Marks Publishers, 2005 (Version 3.1). - 382 p. - Chapter 6 “Choosing & Combining Type”, pp. 93-117.

Thanks to Mark Jamra for his advice and editorial assistance with this article. *Colvert Arabic* ▸ Kristyan Sarkis | *Colvert Cyrillic* ▸ Natalia Chuvatin | *Colvert Greek* ▸ Irene Vlachou | *Colvert Latin* ▸ Jonathan Perez | *Arabic Production* ▸ Mathieu Réguer. | | ▪ | | |

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Colvert is comprised of four families: Colvert Arabic, Colvert Cyrillic, Colvert Greek and Colvert Latin. These four type families can be used alone, or blended with one another, in an harmonious way. Each family has been made by a designer native speaker of the concerned writing system. This character has been envisioned as a peculiar approach to the question of the relationship between different writing systems. Each of the four families that make up Colvert is as visually differentiated as possible. We have tried to establish a minimum optical continuity and not to seek homogeneity between these type families, so each one can express at the best its own characteristics.

αβγδε

Τα Κολβέρτ αποτελούνται από τέσσερις οικογένειες γραμματοσειρών: τα Κολβέρτ Αραβικά, τα Κολβέρτ Κυριλλικά, τα Κολβέρτ Ελληνικά και τα Κολβέρτ Λατινικά. Αυτές οι τέσσερις οικογένειες μπορούν να χρησιμοποιηθούν μόνες τους ή να συνδιαστούν αρμονικά με κάποια από τις υπόλοιπες. Κάθε οικογένεια έχει σχεδιαστεί από ομιλιτή σχεδιαστή του αντίστοιχου συτήματος γραφής. Ο χαρακτήρας αυτή της γραμματοσειρας, έχει επιλεγεί ως μια ιδιαίτερη προσέγγιση στο ερώτημα της σχέσης μεταξύ των διαφόρων συστημάτων γραφής. Κάθε μία από τις τέσσερις οικογένειες που απαρτίζουν την Κολβέρτ είναι οπτικά διαφοροποιημένη η μία από την άλλη όσο το δυνατόν περισσότερο.

абвгд

Кольверт состоит из четырех семейств шрифтов: Кольверт арабский, Кольверт кириллица, Кольверт греческий и Кольверт латиница. Эти четыре семейства шрифтов могут быть использованы по отдельности либо же в гармонической связи друг с другом. Каждый из них был создан дизайнером – носителем языка данной системы письма. Эта гарнитура был задумана как оригинальный подход к вопросу о связи различных систем письма между собой. Так, каждое из четырех семейств, составляющих Кольверт, визуально индивидуализировано настолько, насколько это возможно.

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كولڤرت يحتوي على أربع عائلات: كولڤرت العربي، كولڤرت السيريلي، كولڤرت الإغريقي وكولڤرت اللاتيني. يمكن إستعمال كلّ من هذه العائلات بشكل منفرد كما يمكن مزجها بتناغم. صَمَّم كل من العائلات مصمِّم ناطق باللّغة الأصليَّة لنظام الكتابة المعني. يَطرح هذا الخط الطباعي طريقة مميَّزة لمعالجة موضوع علاقة أنظمة الكتابة ببعضها. كلّن من العائلات الأربعة التي تكوِّن كولڤرت تتمتّع بميِّزات خاصَّة تفرِّقفها عن غيرها. حاول المصمِّمون تثبيت الأسس الضرورية لحدّ أدنا من التَّكامل البصري، وليس للتماثل أو التطابق بين عائلات الخطوط هذه، لتَتَمَكَّن كل عائلة من التَّعبير عن ميِّزاتها بأَحسن طريقة مُمكنة.

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