The synchronisation of visual and verbal language; the power of the graphic designer as visual interpreter of verbal language.

The manner in which designers work with language with the intention of making it express specific meanings, is both sophisticated and complex. In some cases both visual and verbal language can be synonymous and of equal balance hierarchically. However, on other occasions visual language can dominate the verbal and can either be used to make sense of and enhance the verbal language or, detract from it, possibly carrying more significance than the syntax. This paper examines the scope of the relationship between visual and verbal language within the contexts of varying graphic design situations.

Cal Swan, within ‘Language and Typography’ [1991 page9] says “These two distinct areas often come together in practice as there is clearly a very strong relationship between the conception of the words as a message and their transmission in visible form”

Examples discussed range from verbal language inspiring and directing the visual interpretation, to visual language dominating verbal meanings, with the possibility of making connotation stronger than denotation. Examples of designers involved in the writing or editing of copy, also demonstrate that this can result in surprising design solutions, processing enhanced mnemonic qualities plus increased communicative effect and value.

Using a mix of linguistic models, semiotics and other analytical processes to explore the connections between ‘the visual’ and ‘the verbal’, this paper will discuss the consequences of the designer as controller of meaning. Choice of language in conjunction with alternatives of typographic design decision making, including, face, case, weight, colour, scale, kerning and composition, will be explored. The implications of these choices, in terms of connotations and semiotics, influencing readers’ understanding and interpretation, will be examined. Finally, the discussion will show how the same message can be presented in a number of varied ways in
order to convey not merely different emphasis or style, but also to elicit diverse responses. Both historical and contemporary contexts will be used to provide examples.

This is probably a good opportunity to acknowledge the considerable individual influence that a reader and their societal and cultural background can bring to the interpretation and understanding of type. Kress and Leeuwen (1996 p.18) comment that

“*Our approach to communication starts from a social base. In our view the meanings expressed by speakers, writers, printmakers, photographers, painters and sculptors are first and foremost social meanings even though we acknowledge the effect and importance of individual differences. They are meanings which arise out of the society in which individuals live and work*”

So, regardless of the designer’s skilled efforts, there still remains a number of uncontrollable aspects including the viewer’s personal perceptions, expectations, knowledge, experiences and preferences, and although it is impossible to cater for all such unpredictable responses to designing with type, awareness is critical.

An example of this could be found by analysing the following typographic design from the campaigning group Greenpeace. This design can be seen at:


In this ad the reader is confronted with a familiar namestyle, that of one of the UK’s favourite chocolate bars the Kitkat. The typestyle, letterform proportions and undoubtedly the use of colour, shape and angle, create an instantly recognisable connection with the Kitkat brand. So much so that the reader could be forgiven for ‘seeing’ the name Kitkat before reading and taking in the actual written message of this example. The familiarity of the brand can be an instant draw and it might actually take a second look for the reader to appreciate the change of message.

The visual language of designing with type can often bring into play and control, not only an audiences’ emotions, but also its responses and typographic subtleties that
effect, convey or illicit emotions and do so mainly via use of connotation. The following examples are simple illustrations of the varied, emotive and highly dominant control that can be achieved by making changes to the visual language of a message, whilst still simply presenting the same language based example.

The first of 2 examples by Glaser, J. and Leak, J. (2010) features a single, large scale, bold word, STOP, set in all capitals and closely kerned.

![STOP](image)

The word is positioned prominently towards the top of the frame, touching both the left and the right hand edges and is shown white through a dark red background. This layout and design choices, undoubtedly make connections with the familiar visual language found within warning signs.

The second example, also by Glaser, J. and Leak, J. (2010), is a dramatic contrast with the first, but also features the exact same word, this time set in a completely different style. The type in the second example is set in a script font, the type size is small and uses lowercase letters.
This example is positioned towards the lower right hand corner of the frame and is also shown in white, but this time against a light purple background. This word says stop; however its visual manifestation could very easily be mistaken for articulating a completely different message, one that has a much a softer, less directive meaning.

Reading aloud examples such as these can be a relatively instant way of appreciating the differing effects of visual language and the consequent, emotive yet predominant subtleties that are achievable. The first example would undoubtedly be heard by an audience as being a loud intense call that reflects urgency and possess distinct authority and impact. Where as, the second example, still utilising the exact same word, is read in a much quieter tone using an almost hesitant voice, lacking the assurance exerted by the first example.

Verbal language, its literal meanings and distinct audible characteristics are frequently used to inspire and direct the design of typographic interpretations with the result of augmenting and enhancing the audiences’ reaction. This can lead to an outcome that is memorable as a result of the careful conjuring of design implication, in companion with literal meaning.
The design examples that follow exemplify the combined effect achievable when bringing together verbal language that has stimulated and helped to orchestrate visual interpretation.

The first example is taken from the work of renowned American graphic designer, Herb Lubalin, who was described in his Monograph by Gertrude Snyder and Alan Peckolick, (1985 p.9) as “a tenacious typographer, who’s graphic concept employed copy, art and typography, and he used available production methods to underline the drama inherent in the message. Idea preceded design.”

This is a particularly pertinent quote, given the topic of this paper, as initially it explains Lubalin as a designer who valued the communicative power of language, typography and composition. The quote goes on to describe him as using production methods not just for effect but as a way of emphasising the meaning and message of his project. At his time of working these would have been manual artwork decisions, confronting Lubalin with greater limitations than presented to a 21st century designer. Finally, this quote explains that for Lubalin, concept was of paramount importance and always came before design work.

1 of his many entries for the 1964 Visual Graphics Corporation competition, features a carefully selected quote from US editor and writer Caskie Stinnett. And can be found at the following link


In this competition entry, using delicate and well considered imposition of typographic detailing, Lubalin has succeeded in making, what is in essence an unpleasant message, seem attractive and pleasing. The quote states “A diplomat is a person who can tell you to go to hell in such a way that you actually look forward to the trip.” The focus of this statement, being told to “go to hell” is shown in an elaborate calligraphic form, thus enabling this mildly offensive statement, at first sight, to be mistaken for something that could be looked forward to as being gratifying.
Some more contemporary examples of the use of verbal language that stimulates and helps to direct visual interpretation, can be seen in the typographic tea towel designs of the 'British Battleaxe Collection'. Each individual design utilises a quote sourced from a strong female character on UK TV or radio.

Certainly, Lubalin’s design reinforces the meanings of his selected statement, whereas the ‘British Battleaxe Collection’ layouts, do something that is slightly different, in that they primarily tend to reinforce the priorities and tone of voice of the assertive, female speakers.

The first example features a quote from the BBC situation comedy ‘Keeping Up Appearances’. The words themselves were spoken by the programme’s central character, the eccentric, social climbing, Hyacinth Bucket. Typographically the letterforms have been selected and grouped to emphasise the desires and priorities...
of the comedic character herself. The words, “I want” and “my”, stand out as a result of the use of dramatic change of scale. “Superiors” is emphasised with capitol letters, where as “your” is diminished in stature and importance, by the adoption of all lowercase letterforms – very much as is intended by the characters manner of address and tone of voice, when speaking to her milk man.

This second British Battleaxe design, typographically interprets a quote from mid 20th century performer, Joyce Grenfell. Grenfell’s theatrical persona, utilises a slightly superior, convoluted tone that is easily recognised. In this design, she is simply asking for a cup of tea, but instead of making the request in a straightforward fashion, Grenfell, verbally dances around the point, selecting words that not only possess a beautiful, almost melodic tone and pace, but also go on to provide appealing ingredients for typographic interpretation. Words that are stressed in
spoken form during this ‘sketch’ are emphasised with the use of large scale italic text that has been sized so that the ‘x’ height equates to the depth of neighbouring cap heights. Close intercharacter spacing is used to reinforce the phrase ‘close proximity’ and the ‘line’ “that you are going to find yourself”, spoken at an increased pace by Grenfell, is set in much smaller lower case letterforms as if to reinforce the speed of that section of speech.

With both of these designs, typeface selection has been crucial to the candid interpretation of the performers voice. A serif typeface with stylish italics and capitol letters, captures fittingly the priorities and cultural setting of these statements from ‘women of a certain age’.

Examining further, the texts from the previous examples, the manner in which typography is used to communicate tone of voice, as well as personality, age, gender and mood, can easily be manipulated. Instead of the familiar serif font that was so successfully used to denote Hyacinth Bucket, a new slab serif is utilised and suddenly the character changes, as does the emotional impact of the statement. Judging simply by font selection the narrator is no longer definitely female, they are no longer in their mid 60’s and their mood is not simply pompous, but could possibly be described as verging on the angry.
In attempting to further deconstruct and understand the typographic decisions made within the examples previously discussed, Saussure's (2006) Linguistic model of the Syntagm and the paradigm, found within the Course in General Linguistics, provides a useful analogy.

Saussure's syntagm forms a 'latitudinal' plane that combines and brings together cumulatively, words that create a sentence or phrase. The paradigm makes up a contrasting longitudinal plane that helps to define meaning as a result of selecting specific words rather than others.

The idea that the meaning of a sentence or phrase is achieved via not selecting certain words, in favour of others is an interesting concept that has direct parallel if Sauassure's model is to be interpreted using type. In linguistics the meaning of 'the'
as in 'the boy walks the dog', is achieved because it is not something else, such as ‘a’ - ‘a boy walks a dog’ - A boy can be any boy, where as ‘the’ boy is a specifically identified individual.

Within typography the same reasoning can be used to achieve a distinct change to visual language and in turn, to meaning, as demonstrated in the following diagram by Glaser, J. and Leak, J. (2010).

Within the paradigm, type size can be increased, weight or font can be changed, or positioning within a frame altered and meaning also changes - the authoritative,
urgent, bold large scale, STOP can suddenly become more light hearted, having less volume and might even come across as if teasing, for example ‘Oh stop it! I like it’!

Semiotics, as an activity that analyses meanings and messages, has an inescapable link with culture and society. Meaning is not just derived from the contrasting difference to another sign, as Saussure’s ideas discuss, but meaning is also established because of the context within which these signs exist. This idea, from Roland Barthes, is known as ‘Secondary Signification’. Barthes mentions that a sign
does not just have one meaning as could be deduced from Saussure’s work, but that a second, socially and culturally specific, signified meaning can be understood, based on the framework within which the sign is used.

In western society, an example of this could be found by analysing the typographic styling of fashion brand Juicy Couture [http://www.juicycouture.com/](http://www.juicycouture.com/).

The chosen gothic letterforms are seen by the brands intended audience to be the height of fashion and desirability, whereas to other individuals, the same typeface within a different context denotes aspects including tradition, heritage, political persuasion and reputation. An example of second, signified meaning associated with this style of font is found in the masthead design for UK newspaper The Telegraph [http://www.telegraph.co.uk/](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/).

Type detailing undoubtedly plays a role in semantics, but context also has an involvement in the determination of meaning. For example the distinct style of a typewriter typeface might be recognised as a standard default font, sometimes utilised simply for ease rather than as a result of conscious, well considered selection; however, in the context of a charity appeal or mailing such as the NSPCC appeal, the same font could be used to help to communicate a number of secondary, yet important messages.
For example, the font might be used to connote a responsible attitude to finance and budgeting, indicating the prioritising of expenditure on the charity’s main aims, rather than adopting an extravagance of spending on design or marketing.

In the context of a recent VW ad campaign from 2011, the use of what appears to be slightly naive, carefully hand lettered text, is present to reinforce the message that the running costs of a VW Golf are 18% cheaper than the unspecified competition. (The ad. can be seen online within [http://www.marketingmagazine.co.uk/news/996236/VW-shifts-ad-focus-value-message/?DCMP=ILC-SEARCH](http://www.marketingmagazine.co.uk/news/996236/VW-shifts-ad-focus-value-message/?DCMP=ILC-SEARCH)) This typographic approach also communicates the secondary, yet equally important message that VW cars are affordable to purchase and that the company doesn’t produce extravagantly designed ads, as this all helps to keep prices keen for customers.
A third example of the use of secondary messaging that utilizes type, can be seen within the identity of Abel and Cole, an organic food retailer –

http://www.abelandcole.co.uk/

Their namestyle, appears to be a mark made by hand, printed with a rubber stamp and much of the supporting type style, like all other type used in their promotions, takes on the appearance of being carefully hand written. In combination these typographic approaches come together to create a complex message - the first level of which undoubtedly communicates the character of the company. The second level of possible interpretation is suggesting that the same amount of care and personal attention to detail goes into every Abel and Cole product or order, as has been expended on the hand generation of their namestyle - nothing is mass-produced here! There is also a third level of interpretation, associated with ecology and the environment. As a purveyor of organic products the hand generated feel to the namestyle and text also implies little impact upon the environment. As with the previous examples, Abel and Coles’s hand generated text connotes a company’s regard to economy and affordability.

Kress and Leeuwen (1996 p.17) affirm the role of the visual element of typography

“The visual component of text is an independently organised and structured message, connected with the verbal text, but in no way dependent on it and similarly the other way round”

Typographic detailing is immensely important in communicating meaning and by taking Barthes secondary signification model one step further, it is possible to evidence that carefully chosen combinations of face, case, scale, weight, colour etc. can not only signify semantic differences, but can also be instigative in determining and indicating different contexts.

Using type detail to aid visual literacy and contextualise a design, the example discussed earlier of the authoritative, urgent, bold, large scale, STOP could also be seen as a warning sign or alert to impending danger. Using the same skills to aid contextualisation, the smaller light weight italic ‘stop’, also discussed earlier, could
be analysed and found to signify a more light hearted, less categoric ‘voice’ that can be interpreted to mean exactly the opposite of what is written - ie. please carry on.

The impact achievable by designers having involvement in the writing or editing of copy, can be dramatic. Bringing together from the outset the eloquence of the wordsmith, in combination with the knowledge and skills of the designer, typographer, can ensure an unexpected, yet totally cohesive response to design problem solving. Words selected not only for their literal meaning, but often for their sound, length or shape, can help to ‘sculpt’ a particular design response, enhancing the value of a message in an carefully reasoned manner.

An example of this variety of collaboration is found in a promotional brochure for homebuilders Wimpey. As with most consumables, it could be argued that every new residential property has many ‘like’ characteristics and within promotional endeavours, will most probably use similar language and terminology. Within this
context, there is the need to add distinction and individuality, in order to help establish desirability.

This double page spread design features an extract from the poem ‘Spring’, by Christina Rossetti. Its descriptive tone is used to reinforce not only this housing development’s proximity to countryside and all things natural, but it’s also used metaphorically as a way of pleasantly describing the establishment of roots and life beginning in a new home. The typographic interpretation of the Rossetti poem, selects and emphasises certain words for their meaning, but also for their sound and shape. If each highlighted word is seen together and as a consequence read as one group there is still a relevance and connection. The conscious selection of this poem has meant that it has been possible to create specific line lengths that sit comfortably together as a staggered grouping, complementing the other compositional decisions of the page.

Other examples of the collaborative effect of bringing together writer and designer are showcased in the design projects that regularly promote Ben and Jerry’s ice cream. Variety names and promotional descriptions are humorously assembled to allow for enthusiastic design and typographic exuberance. This carefully crafted approach is used to assert the message that Ben and Jerry’s ice cream is a speciality product, could be thought of as being hand made, and is certainly produced using high quality ingredients, by caring individuals with a sense of humour and eye to all things fun.

http://www.benjerry.co.uk/adgallery/2004/

As mentioned previously, the collaborative effects of writer and designer are being used to add distinction and individuality, and to create desirability.

The ads. shown at the above mentioned link, feature comment on the ingredients of the products. This has been done in a ‘tongue in cheek’ way that by implication suggests that other competitive products may not feature the quantity and quality of
ingredients that consumers might expect from a variety’s name. The illustrative style reinforces the home made attributes described earlier, and also strengthens the customers anticipation of the product – cherries are portrayed as being extra large and juicy, and nuts are depicted as varied and plentiful. Typography uses carefully selected visual language to endorse these characteristics and thus confirm purchaser desire. As with the Wimpey brochure, the combined effects of copywriting and design have meant that it has been possible to create specific line lengths and shapes that sit comfortably together and are grouped to complement the other compositional and illustrative elements of the ads.

In examining the scope of relationships between the visual and the verbal, there are of course, endless examples that can be discussed of synergy between designer/typographer and writer. Undeniably, the way in which designers and writers can work in synchronicity or independently, is highly complex. This is especially true, as the end result needs to express particular meaning to a specific, focussed audience. Sometimes, as has been discussed, visual communication professionals can choose to allocate similar importance to visual and verbal language so that there is equal balance; on other occasions, one can dominate the other, helping to either make sense of and develop verbal meaning, or to form a distraction. The consideration of ‘the visual’ and ‘the verbal' together, certainly enhance expression and in turn, communication; however, returning to Cal Swann's Language and Typography (1991 p 93) is a thought provoking way of concluding, when he comments:

“Just as linguistic communication succeeds only under certain conditions, the visual message-maker succeeds only when an attitude is intended to be conveyed and the reader recognises this attitude.”
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