

PLASTIC LETTERS: ALPHABET MIXING AND IDEOLOGIES OF PRINT IN UKRAINIAN SHOP SIGNS

Jennifer A. Dickinson

Abstract

This article examines the complex intersection of language ideologies shaping alphabetic choices in Ukrainian outdoor advertising and shop signs, focusing on alphabet mixing through the insertion of Latin letters into Cyrillic texts and the juxtaposition of parallel or alternating texts using both of these writing systems. Drawing upon ethnographic data from work with graphic designers and consumers as well as analysis of language use in signs, I argue that while alphabet mixing is often characterized as “faddish” or “youth-oriented” these practices also reflect Soviet-era ideological stances towards both Latin typefaces, seen as “plastic” letters associated with Western capitalism, and Cyrillic typefaces, seen as “rigid” forms subject to strong central control by the Soviet state. The increasing availability of personal computers with word-processing and graphic design software in Ukraine has both increased access by individuals to print technology, and promoted a new typographic aesthetic through the dissemination of Cyrillic fonts based on Latin, not Soviet or pre-Soviet Cyrillic, models.

Keywords: Digraphia; Orthography; Advertising; Ukraine.

1. Introduction

The streets of Lviv are dense with written language, crowded with shop signs stacked one on top of another, displayed on sidewalks, or painted directly on the exterior walls of stores¹. Billboards adorn the sides of buildings, sometimes covering crumbling Soviet-themed mosaics or reliefs decaying since Ukrainian independence in 1991. Dominated by Cyrillic, the alphabet used for contemporary Ukrainian, this abundance of writing on the urban landscape is also characterized by frequent use of Latin script, both in multilingual signs (e.g. Ukrainian-English), and in signs that creatively combine the scripts in a number of ways. In this paper, I examine these multiscript, but not necessarily multilingual, signs as texts designed for, and read by, particular publics. My analysis follows an approach outlined by Sebba (2012) in his analysis of multilingual texts, weaving together theoretical perspectives to analyze examples of multiscript signage as linguistic, cultural and visual artifacts. Considering the different ways in which the form of a text is part of its interpretation on these multiple levels, I argue that

¹ Field research materials included in this paper were gathered prior to the Ukrainian Euromaidan movement and I do not include references to the effects of more recent changes in city ordinances or cultural attitudes.

the cultural significance of script choices lies in the way these choices index particular linguistic ideologies and the aesthetics of public writing.

This holistic approach follows the work of scholars in many disciplines who have been engaging with and developing methodologies for the deep analysis of multimodal texts. Fairclough (1995, 1998) in outlining Critical Discourse Analysis methodologies, identifies three key elements that must be linked: Texts, practices associated with the production and consumption of those texts, and social and cultural practices (1998: 144). Fairclough's adoption of the language of capitalism as a metaphor for the circulation of texts is particularly apt for a discussion of advertising texts and their alignment with postsocialist ideologies of writing in the public sphere. From a somewhat different but in practice overlapping perspective, New Literacy Studies scholars attend to many of the same factors, including social, cultural and political practices of interpretation of texts to "situate" instances of text production or consumption meaningfully (Gee 2000; see also Barton 1994; Street 1993). Both of these approaches emphasize the dynamic quality of discursive practices and the need to attend to the ways that ideology and practice both contribute to changes in the situated meeting of a text over time.

My analysis also draws on recent work that specifically engages with multilingual and multiscript writing (e.g. Ahmad 2011; Jaffe et al. 2012; Piller 2001; Piller 2003; Sebba et al. 2012), and relates these insights to Gal and Woolard's (1994) notion of linguistic publics. Public writing, whether Soviet slogans emblazoned on rooftops, or brand names occupying the same, post-Soviet spaces, implies a reading public able to decode the meaning or meanings of such writing (Gal and Woolard 1994; Scollon and Scollon 2004). The projection of publics is rendered more complex in situations of digraphia in which multiple writing systems are available for a given language (Backhaus 2007; Dale 1980; DeFrancis 1984; Grivelet 2001a; Zima 1974), as in these cases each instance of public writing can also project multiple reading publics variably able to access and decode texts utilizing these different writing systems. In the case I examine here, it is the creation of a notional public that *could* read the signs, or even just identify the indexical value of those writing systems in context, that is key.

The indexical value and pragmatic effects of digraphia in the Lviv context are discernable in the contrast between three types of alphabet mixing visible in shop signs: *Parallel juxtaposition* of the same word in two different languages, *alphabetic juxtaposition* of successive words written in different scripts and *orthographic hybridity*, in which more than one writing system is employed within a single word, or even within a single morpheme. These different digraphic forms can also implicate different forms of language mixing, in which a word written partly in Cyrillic and partly in Latin letters may turn out to be in Ukrainian, English, a bilingual compound, or a compound made up of bivalent elements (Woolard 1999). In my interviews with advertising executives and graphic designers in Lviv, alphabet mixing was strongly associated with the construction of a youthful, multilingual public and was considered by advertising agents in particular to reflect a passing, faddish use of language. Further ethnographic research with Lviv residents indicates that while some aspects of alphabet mixing may indeed be a passing fad, this phenomenon was also widely recognized as speaking to an emerging multilingual (or at least multiliterate) consumer public characterized by youth and an orientation towards Western goods and cultural forms.

It is important to recognize that this construction of a putative reading public for multilingual signage also implies excluded publics. While walking down the street with a middle-aged friend, I pointed out a small sign written in Latin script advertising a product with an English name, and asked “What do you think when you see that sign?” Despite his English fluency, he answered firmly “That it’s not for me.” This example demonstrates how the process of text production in the context of an advertising campaign can be interact with cultural practices of text consumption, with the consumer reading (or choosing not to read) the text as it is embedded in social context (Fairclough 1995).

Like Riskedahl’s discussion of Lebanese political advertising (this volume), the Ukrainian situation is not an example of “true” digraphia, for in more formal contexts writers can not choose among established writing systems as they can, for example, in Lahu (Pine, this volume).² At the same time, increasing ties with Poland and Polish, heavy marketing of products by foreign companies utilizing Latinized logos and brand names, and the rapid emergence of English as a prestige language (Bilaniuk 2006) have made the Latin alphabet available for a range of expressive purposes. In this paper, I argue that the form of contemporary, public written language in the city of Lviv layers a set of complex linguistic ideologies onto the landscape itself. Focusing on advertising and shop signs, and supplementing my analysis of alphabet mixing in these contexts with ethnographic materials from research with local advertising executives, Lviv residents and graphic designers, I consider the pragmatic effects of such manipulation of writing systems, and the linguistic ideologies embedded therein.³

My analysis of the meaning of biscriptual public writing in the city of Lviv Ukraine considers both the organization of this writing as part of local rules for usage, and the political history of Cyrillic and Latin alphabets in Ukraine. I argue that the meaning of biscriptual forms is dependent on longstanding associations of Cyrillic with a centralized State monopoly on both typography and public writing. While alphabet mixing is visible in a range of contexts that emphasize unlicensed use of language (Sebba 2007) such as rave posters and graffiti, this same linguistic resource also offers designers the opportunity to express a sort of conventional unconventionality, producing the effect of a youthful and contemporary aesthetic. The examination of concrete strategies for the presentation of two alphabets, in conjunction with the politics of font creation and use, demonstrate a political economy of writing in which alphabet mixing ideologically frames Latin script embodying features associated with the market economy, including flexibility, creativity and on a less positive note, chaos. These features stand in sharp contrast to the Soviet politics of centralized state control over the form and content of public texts, from dictating the use of certain typefaces for graphic design, to rigidly controlling the shape and color of shop signs. This ideological linkage of languages, scripts and non-linguistic features exemplifies Irvine and Gal’s (2000)

² In Lviv, often considered the “capital” of Western Ukraine, Ukrainian is the dominant language and Russian was rarely if ever used in public signage during the fieldwork period encompassed by the data presented here.

³ The research in Lviv utilized for this paper, conducted in 2008-2011, includes archival research on images of Lviv city streets from 1900 to the late Soviet period (1980’s), ethnographic fieldwork focused on the postsocialist landscape in Lviv, fieldwork and interviews with advertising executives and graphic designers and extended situated ethnographic interviews with individual Lviv residents walking around their neighborhoods, discussing various geosemiotic features associated with post-Soviet landscape change, and a number of focus groups with Lviv residents of different ages.

discussion of fractal recursivity, in which perceived comparative or oppositional relationships between languages or their speakers become connected to non-linguistic domains. In the next section, I provide historical and contemporary ideological context for the use of Cyrillic/Latin multiscrypt forms in Lviv and link them to emerging aesthetics of postsocialist public writing.

2. Ideologies embedded in alphabets

2.1. *Indexical values of Cyrillic and Latin alphabets*

The dividing line between European languages that use the Cyrillic alphabet and those that use the Latin (Roman) alphabet is one that reflects political and historical contexts for the introduction of writing, as well as the significance with which particular writing systems came to be imbued. A commonly cited European example of this is the contrast in writing systems utilized for Serbian and Croatian, where Serbian, historically aligned with Orthodox Christianity, is closely associated with Cyrillic texts, while Croatian is generally associated with a Latin alphabet and alignment with Roman Catholicism (see White 2006; Magner 2001). Moving eastward further into Eurasia, Sebba (2007: 81) cites Moldovan as an example of the historical influence of the Russocentric policies of the Soviet Union. Moldovan, mutually intelligible with Romanian, was written using the Latin alphabet from 1863, when the use of Cyrillic was banned, until 1941, when Cyrillic was introduced by Soviet authorities. Cyrillic remained in use until 1990, when a Latin script was reinstated. Indeed, throughout the former Soviet Union, Cyrillic scripts were introduced for languages both with established writing systems and those without, effectively creating a unified visual representation of languages under Soviet control (see, e.g. Grivelet 2001b on Mongolian).

In Ukraine, the site of this case study in the language ideological implications of script choice in public written language, debates over the standardization of Ukrainian in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reflected not only religious diversity among its speakers, but also the social, linguistic and geographic position of the language, pulled in two directions by Russian and Polish empires, and occupying a subordinate position with respect to each of these politically powerful languages (Shevelov 1989). As Yavorska (1995, 2010) notes, Russian, and later Soviet control over alphabetic choices, particularly in public writing, also served to centralize control over linguistic representation, including banning the use of individual letters unique to some Ukrainian orthographies.

The city of Lviv, located in far Western Ukraine, was an ethnically and linguistically diverse city during the period of Polish domination prior to the Second World War. The cosmopolitan nature of pre-war Lviv was frequently pointed out to me by informants discussing popular and scholarly images of the city as the antithesis of the homogenized urban center Soviet planners sought to make it after the city became part of the USSR (see e.g. Czaplicka 2005). Geosemiotic representations of this linguistic diversity were recently uncovered in the city center, when paint removal from historic shopfronts revealed trilingual inscriptions in Polish, German and Yiddish advertising goods for sale within. Left unrepainted, these inscriptions became points of reference to

the multiscriptural past and both a reflection of pre-Soviet ethnic diversity and pre-Soviet advertising.

In the 2000's, the city of Lviv moved ideologically between its status as a peripheral, even marginal city within the Soviet (and to a lesser degree, Ukrainian) context, to a city whose location enhanced contact with Poland and, by extension, the EU. During the Soviet period, this border location rendered Lviv at once strategically important and economically and socially distant from both the Ukrainian Republic center (Kiev) and the Soviet capital (Moscow). In the post-Soviet period, local discourses reversed this "peripheral" status to emphasize Lviv's historical centrality as an ethnic and cultural crossroads within central Europe, a point often emphasized to me by Lviv residents born and raised in the city. The uncovering of these faded multiscript shop signs and their subsequent establishment as iconic representations of Lviv's multicultural past dovetails with contemporary notions of multiscript linguistic representations as evidence of cosmopolitanism.⁴ My colleague Viktor, a Lviv resident and historian pointed out to me an underlying irony in this ideological use of the revealed signage, namely that Cyrillic is notably absent from these inscriptions as public writing in Ukrainian was generally not permitted in Lviv at the time. When Lviv became part of the Soviet Union near the end of World War II, Polish language domination ended, beginning a new period in which Cyrillic scripts dominated the visual representation of language in public spaces.

While discourses of a return to Lviv's past as part of Central, not Eastern Europe focus on the pre-Soviet period, Soviet practices and centralized control of public spaces have had a far greater impact on expectations for writing in (and on) public spaces. During the Soviet period, Cyrillic writing, largely in Ukrainian but also in Russian, was a key element of the landscape. In addition to signs marking street names and storefronts, political banners, posters and enormous signs spelling out propaganda slogans were actively incorporated into the city design plan for Lviv (Skrypchenko 1982). It is also important to recognize that during the Soviet period all signs, posters and placards were approved centrally by government officials. Each year, artists received guidelines and materials that dictated typeface choices and layouts ideologically aligned with current Communist Party policies and priorities. Several artists and typeface designers who worked in graphic design under the Soviet government recalled the tight control exerted over producers of public texts.

Both my review of archival images of Lviv during the Soviet period and ethnographic data I gathered from long term Lviv residents confirm a Soviet urban aesthetic of minimal text use on buildings and of unobtrusive shop signs. Graphic artists and advertising executives further recalled the strict control that Soviet authorities exercised over the development and use of images and words in public spaces, from political posters and displays to shop signs. The overall effect of this control was not lost on the public. One Lviv resident characterized typical Soviet era "political advertising" in this way, noting that the prevalence of Communist slogans in red lettering contributed to the uniformity of language use in the urban landscape:

⁴ Some shops and cafes in the tourist section of the city center have recently replicated this style, writing lists of goods sold in the shop on the exterior walls in Ukrainian, using a font evocative of these uncovered advertisements.

“The Party Calls” [*Partija zovjot*] quoted in Russian as a generic slogan; continues in Ukrainian] or any one of their slogans [would be typical]. In general they were practically uninteresting, monotone, red...So, homogeneous, uninteresting, and let’s just say they had little impact on people, visually speaking.

During this same period, writing in the Latin alphabet did appear in Lviv in certain public, almost exclusively multilingual, contexts such as murals devoted to international friendship, and somewhat less publically on materials marked for export as “Made in the USSR.” Links to both of these contexts of usage, as well as to censored Western music, created indexical linkages between Latin script and export-quality (luxury) goods, youthfulness, and unfettered expression.⁵ In the next section of this paper, I consider how the rapid rise in the use of Latin scripts in advertisements and shop signs over the past ten years has brought these two writing systems into much more intimate contact, layering new indexical meanings onto these historically significant ones.

2.2. Ideologies of plasticity and creative typography

While my primary focus in this paper is on printed signage, creative use of multiple scripts was evident in other, less professionally produced instances of public writing. One example appeared unexpectedly while I was walking in the historic district of Lviv with a friend and native Lviv resident who suddenly laughed and pointed to a handwritten sign clearly designed and placed to attract the groups of Polish tourists visiting the city. Only a single word was written on the sign, starting with a large capital Latin “S” but followed by the remainder of the Ukrainian word *suveniry*⁶ (souvenirs) in Cyrillic. This hybrid text, a seemingly effortless combination of Latin and Cyrillic scripts, was nonetheless a puzzle. On the one hand, local Ukrainians might be able to decode the sign in its entirety, but would probably assume, seeing that Latin “S,” that the store’s prices were pitched higher for foreign visitors. On the other hand, Polish tourists might not read Cyrillic or know Ukrainian well enough to read the second portion of the sign. After some discussion, we decided that the word was not meant to be *read* in full by either Ukrainians or foreigners; so powerful was the context of the sign’s placement in front of that store, in that area of the city, that a capital Latin “S” could convey a complete commercial message.

At first glance, alphabet mixing such as this appears to challenge the hegemony of monoscript written standards. However, multiscript writing can also dovetail with larger ideologies that posit alphabetic writing systems, and more specifically Latinized writing systems, as an inevitable point of convergence for the world’s languages. Thus what is a marked practice in the local context of Lviv public language, namely the use

⁵ As Yurchak (2005) notes in his analysis of the Soviet ban on “dangerous” rock bands, from Pink Floyd to the Sex Pistols, unfettered expressionism was variably viewed depending on one’s position relative to the power structure. Risch (2011) further explicates these divisions along ethnic lines, noting that while both Russian and Ukrainian youth in Soviet Lviv engaged in a range of activities that were considered subversive, including listening to Western music, they often came from distinct social positions and ideological frameworks in doing so.

⁶ This particular word uses many Cyrillic letters that might be challenging for Latin script readers to decode as they are “false cognates,” letters that look like Latin letters but represent different sounds.

of Latin instead of Cyrillic to write Ukrainian words, appears unmarked in a broader transnational context. Scholars studying highly individualized writing, for example handwritten texts and cellphone or computer mediated communication, have focused to some degree on how individual elements in writing also fit within broader paradigms for the use of multiple writing systems either as an expression of individuality or in some cases as an instantiation of community standards for language use, such as the pursuit of novelty in written expression (Androutsopoulos 2000 and 2012; Kataoka 1997; Miller 2004; Noy 2008; Smith and Schmidt 1996). This association of Latin script with Westernization and the use of certain text-producing technologies has added further layers of indexical meaning to the contrastive use of Latin and Cyrillic. In this section, I briefly elaborate on the role of graphic designers in the subtle visual reinforcement of the idea of alphabetic convergence.

My introduction to the concept of “plastic” letters came during fieldwork with graphic designers in Lviv. One day, I found myself sitting with Jaroslav, a designer in an advertising firm, examining the capital “D” in the middle of a logo he designed. He pointed out that while the letters on either side are in Cyrillic, the D in the middle is a Latin D. In response, I noted that in Cyrillic, “cursive” (italic) typefaces, a capital D closely resembles a Latin D, which is quite distinct from the standard Cyrillic “Д”. Jaroslav acknowledged my point, but demonstrated that in this case he purposefully incorporated a D from a distinct Latin typeface into the middle of the logo to create visual balance and avoid interference between the descenders on the Cyrillic “d” (д) and a neighboring Cyrillic “u” (у). Thus the Cyrillic version of the logo incorporated a small caps Latin “D” between lowercase Cyrillic letters⁷, while in the Latin version, a lowercase “d” is not similarly set off from the surrounding text.⁸

This strategic use of Latin letters (or parts thereof) is common among Ukrainian graphic designers, who in addition to using individual Latin letters to expand their design options, will often cannibalize letters in a Latin font to create similar Cyrillic letters and preserve parallel looks in both writing systems.⁹ Oksana, a young designer, even lamented the necessity of utilizing Cyrillic letters at all, explicitly contrasting, as most designers I talked to did, the perceived “plasticity” and “greater expressiveness” of Latin letters to the boxy inflexibility and creative limitations of Cyrillic ones.¹⁰ How then, do readers of these subtly or overtly hybrid texts interpret these carefully deployed letters?

Some conclusions can be drawn from three focus groups with Lviv residents in different age categories conducted as part of this research. After discussing a number of

⁷ Roman (non-italic) Cyrillic letters have the same form in upper and lowercase, hence the perception that in Latin typefaces there are more forms to choose from for each letter.

⁸ In Eastern Europe, graphic designers frequently produce both Cyrillic and Latin versions of company or brand logos.

⁹ While large companies and international conglomerates will pay design companies to produce matching Latin and Cyrillic company font sets, or to create Cyrillic versions of Latin typefaces used in print ads they wish to utilize in Eastern Europe, Lviv designers are usually working for local or smaller nationwide firms.

¹⁰ The Ukrainian term *plastychni* ‘malleable (pl.)’ utilized by many designers to refer to this quality of Latin letters may derive from the aestheticization of the technical interpretation of the distinction between Cyrillic typefaces, which in their non-italic form have identical upper and lowercase forms and are not directly derived from manuscript writing traditions, and standard Latin typefaces. (Mitchenko 2007; Interview with Jaroslav Kuts 2008).

questions related to advertising and shopping practices, participants were presented with a series of photographs of shop signs. One example showed a sign in which a lowercase Latin “d,” orange in contrast to the surrounding white text, had been inserted into the word “*miledi*” a transliteration of the English “milady.” The Latin “d” was further offset by being tilted to the right relative to the non-italicized Cyrillic text. In each focus group, this “d” provoked considerable discussion, as did the blue, white and orange color scheme of the sign, which was considered inappropriate for a shop clearly trying to attract a female, perhaps older, clientele. Although the letter was never directly identified as a Latin or English letter, it was the only letter on the sign that garnered attention, with participants variably describing it as “interesting” “playful” and even “has had its head chopped off and now it is bleeding to death.”¹¹

Below, I argue that the practice of orthographic hybridity can serve to index any or all of any array of features associated with Latin script, including youthfulness, globalized modernity and luxury. While graphic designers in pursuit of flexible materials for use in their work may incorporate subtly constructed hybrid forms, examples in which such usage are doubly or triply marked, such as the “S” in the souvenir shop sign or the orange titled “d” in “*miledi*” are also common. The reaction of focus group participants to the Latin “d” can be linked to the multiple ways in which this letter is marked as different from the surrounding text. At the same time, each group’s overall assessment of the sign was generally negative, with most participants expressing a dissonance between the store name, which for them evoked images of older women, and aesthetics of the sign, which was seen as stark, with potentially confusing script choices characterized as unappealing to an older, female consumer. Thus while the foregrounding of visual qualities of scripts in stylized writing contexts such as advertising might appear to override other elements, here I follow Gee (2012)[1990] in pushing for a deeper recognition of the social contexts that enabled the consumers of the text to articulate its potential appeal to a demographic (older women) consistently identified as the targeted public for the business and imagined as potential readers of the sign. As in the earlier example of a middle-aged reader identifying a product advertised in English as “not for me,” here readers struggled to reconcile their image ideal consumer invoked by the salon name with the use of Latin script in the shop sign.

In the next section of this paper I provide a richer description of the social context of multiscript literacy in Lviv by focusing on two uses of Latin fonts in the production of “hybrid” writing: Juxtapositioning of Latin and Cyrillic text; and the insertion, as in Yaroslav’s logo, of isolated Latin letters into a Cyrillic text. My exploration of these examples demonstrates the complex associations of Latin computer fonts with ideologies of Westernization and, more broadly, with an ideology that posits the public language of post-socialism as the aesthetic opposite to that of the Soviet state. Thus the contextually dependent decoding and interpretation of letters and words in Ukrainian public space rely on the recognition of intersections in meaning between parallel alphabetic systems, as well as the significance of their intentional overlap or juxtaposition in public spaces.

¹¹ An English lowercase “d” is most similar in form to a script/italic lowercase Cyrillic “*д*” thus perhaps the perception that the curling ascender or “head” of the letter had been removed.

3. Cyrillic next to Latin: Alphabetic juxtaposition and orthographic hybridity

When Western companies first set out to establish a firm foothold in the Soviet Union with brands like Pepsi, Coca-Cola and Pizza Hut, they transliterated their product names and logos into Russian (and later into the languages of various Soviet Republics).

In the post-Soviet period in Ukraine, however, companies gradually shifted from transliteration to the use of trademarked logos in their original language, which are almost always in Latin script. This trend was reinforced by debates over the 2004 Ukrainian Law on Languages, which stipulated that only Ukrainian can be used in advertising, with the exception of trademarks registered in Ukraine that utilize another language (Tkachenko 2004). Stores using signs in foreign languages were also required to post a transliteration of that sign into Ukrainian Cyrillic.

Examples of such posted signs often fall into the category of what I term *parallel juxtaposition*, in which a word or phrase in two different alphabetic systems is presented in the same visual field (such as a billboard, storefront or shop sign). In Ukraine, this generally occurs in one of two scenarios. In the first scenario, the two versions are presented in almost identical fonts, in similar size and often immediately next to each other. This form of parallel juxtaposition subtly encodes language ideologies. While Ukrainian Cyrillic is hegemonic in public writing (particularly in Ukrainian-dominant Lviv), Latin script is widely recognized as encoding Western-ness. Piller (2001, 2003) in her analysis of English in multilingual advertising has argued that English usage reflects an emerging international norm in advertising, and that its use indexes idealized modern consumers of advertising and consumer goods. This interpretation is consistent with my analysis here, yet I also propose that in the Ukrainian case, this relationship between English language and globalized consumption is complicated by Soviet-era associations with English. These associations are ones of exclusivity and high quality, linked to the prevalence of English labels on Soviet-made export-quality goods as well as any of several Latin script European languages on imported goods. Some Ukrainian companies, such as the chocolate maker Roshen have logos that are solely inscribed in Latin letters, a trend also reported by graphic designers. It is important to note however that the coexistence of these two interpretations of English text in commercial contexts can create ambiguity for readers as to whether luxury (see e.g. Figure 1), modernity (e.g. Figure 2) or both is on offer from a given store or brand.¹²

Scollon and Scollon (2004) have argued the relationship between codes as spatially represented in writing on the landscape can be interpreted in terms of the geopolitical status or socioculturally defined relationship between those languages. In Lviv, this is often evident in the relative placement of the Latin and Cyrillic text, “top” and “left” positioning being culturally associated with primary or original status, with

¹² Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, I note here that Roshen’s choice to invest in a non-Cyrillic logo was a risky one since the trend for the previous ten years or so in Ukraine had been towards a preference for locally produced food products. When I asked about the Roshen logo in 2008, people inevitably noted that it is a Ukrainian company in spite of the perceived ambiguity in the brand’s Latin script self-presentation. Competitor Svitoch, which just a few years earlier was iconic of the superiority of Ukrainian-produced foods, always maintained a Cyrillic logo utilizing an “old-fashioned” manuscript typeface, but lost its market edge when it was purchased by the Nestle conglomerate.

rightward or bottom positioning communicated secondary, or transliterated status. The purpose of parallel juxtapositioning is to preserve the indexical value of the Latin script (and the legal brand rights with which the logo is imbued) while also making the auditory value of that script (the name as spoken) available to readers, many if not most of whom would have trouble decoding the spoken value of the written word(s).



Figure 1. “Bolero clothing and accessories”

Figure 1 represents the second scenario for parallel juxtapositioning, in which the sign for a clothing shop, “Bolero,” uses ornamental Latin letters and a much smaller placard offers the store name in Cyrillic along with a description of the goods sold there (clothing and accessories). The contrast between the two signs in Figure 1 is striking, with the Latin script sign displaying a number of attention-drawing qualities including the ornamental serif font, the arched, three-dimensional sign, and the use of an “outline” color on the individual letters. The size, shape and placement of the Cyrillic sign, as well as the plain sans-serif font used in it, reference (but do not copy directly) the style of placards near the entrance of official (state, municipal) buildings. The overall impression is of a linguistic division of labor between the attractive power of the elaborate Latin script sign and the stark informative power of the Cyrillic script sign. This form of parallel juxtapositioning is very common in Lviv, and does not in and of itself index a particular “consuming public,” except perhaps in the sense just noted of providing information about the pronunciation of a brand name that might not otherwise be accessible to readers unfamiliar with Latin script or the orthographic conventions of the source language for the brand name.

In the remainder of this section, I discuss two other distinct and more ideologically charged forms of alphabet mixing in public writing in contemporary Ukrainian public space. The most common form is what I term *alphabetic juxtapositioning*, a form in which one part of a sign or advertisement, such as an image of a product or a company logo, is printed in Latin script, while the remainder appears in Cyrillic. A more recent development is what I call *orthographic hybridity*, most often seen in shop signs, in which single Latin letters are inserted into words otherwise written in Cyrillic. I discuss the language ideological underpinnings of each of these below.



Figure 2. life :) logo in a municipal sign, Uzhhorod

Figure 2 offers a clear example of alphabetic juxtapositioning. The brand name “life :)” a mobile phone service company, has been incorporated into a municipal street sign along with the word *stels*, a standard transliteration of the English word “styles,” pointing the way to “life :) *stels*” one of the brand’s local storefronts.¹³ Although both words are English, the transliteration of only the second part can be attributed to legal restrictions at that time on the use of languages other than Ukrainian in public writing, with the exception of registered trademarks (Tkachenko 2004). While legally motivated, the resulting juxtaposition of the two writing systems is an increasingly common geosemiotic landscape feature. As with orthographic hybridity, which I discuss next, alphabetic juxtapositioning effectively introduces Latin script text into advertisements, signs and other public writing contexts. What the use of the Latin script indexes depends to some degree on the brand or item referenced as well as on the typographic features of that text. For example, the life :) brand and services are explicitly youth oriented, as reflected in the “instant messaging” qualities (all lower case sans serif font; introduction of an emoticon) of the brand logo.

Figure 3 offers an interesting variation on alphabetic juxtapositioning, as it contains a complex bidirectional configuration of Latin text, connected to a straightforward piece of Cyrillic text by a dash, creating a literal compound of the two script forms. This linguistic compound is visually underscored by the use of equivalent font forms for the two parts of the compound, matched in their proportions and other features. The referential content of the first half of the logo (“cool box”) again orients towards a putative younger (hipper) reader who is in fact more likely to be able to decode the Latin text than an older reader.

Other examples of alphabetic signaling of a bilingual interpretation for a compound are more visually and linguistically challenging. For example, in a poster for a musical event the word *urbanizatsija* (“urbanization”) was printed in a single typeface for both Latin and Cyrillic letters, but was visually divided into two parts, “urban” in black, Latin lettering, and “izatsija,” in contrasting white. In this second morpheme, the two “i”s and the “a” are potentially bivalent, leaving the reader to look to the shape of the “z” “ts” and “ja” graphemes to identify the script being used. The script division, rather than neatly mirroring the morphemic and graphic division of word in two, transitions to Cyrillic script at the point of “ts,” a disruption of conventionality and

¹³ The smaller text beneath the store name gives the telephone number and address. This photograph is not from Lviv, but rather another Western Ukrainian city (Uzhhorod)

expectations that effectively elides the transition between the scripts for the reader while at the same time preserving the iconoclastic quality of unlicensed orthographies.



Figure 3. coolbox-dekor

In other cases, the use of contrastive font features can tip perception towards a Latin text reading for part of a sign that can be read bivalently. An excellent example of this was evident in a sign for a clothing store in which the English, the serif stenciled form of the Cyrillic letters (reading “clothing” “shoes”) that frame the logo “OK” contrast with the sans serif rounded form of the logo letters. When I asked people whether they read the “OK” in the sign as English or Ukrainian (*okej* being a widely used but relatively recently introduced borrowing) they invariably identified it as English, and noted its association with inexpensive, youthful clothing. This cultural/commercial knowledge of the store associated with the sign influences their reading of the logo as Latin, not Cyrillic text despite the potential bivalency of it.

The final form of multiscript writing I will discuss here is the introduction of single Latin letters into Cyrillic words, what I term *orthographic hybridity*, a practice that is strongly associated with youth culture in Ukraine. While Yaroslav, as noted above in section 2.2, offered a graphic design argument for the use of Latin letters where needed, in general both designers and consumers I spoke with characterized the trend as a fad intended to attract young people to particular stores or brands. Embedded within this assessment is a language ideology that associates not *simply* the use of Latin scripts and/or English with young people, but the hybrid use of Cyrillic and Latin scripts, including the kind of juxtapositioning discussed in Figure 3 (coolbox) above.



Figure 4. FAB@IKA

As with the logo Yaroslav designed, most examples of orthographic hybridity that I found in Lviv involved the use of a Latin letter in the middle, even the exact center, of logos, as in the clothing store ФАБРИКА (lit. “factory”) and the cellphone store BataRejkA (“battery”). The most common letters used for this purpose were R and D, which offered both distinctiveness as Latin letters and readability, since they would not be confused with Cyrillic letters, some of which resemble Latin letters but are associated with completely different sounds in the two writing systems. Whereas alphabetic juxtaposition often involves strongly similar fonts in each writing system, in many of my examples of orthographic hybridity the Latin letter is set off by being capitalized in a non-initial position, set off geometrically (as in Figure 4) or presented in a contrasting color, font, or style. This trend underscores how the goals of orthographic hybridity, which serves to highlight rather than erase the incorporation of two writing systems, differ from those of alphabetic juxtaposition. At the same time, the two techniques are similar in that both reflect an imperative of comprehensibility, whether through offering a transliteration or choosing Latin script elements that are widely comprehensible. One interpretation of this use of language mixing is recognition of an ideology that posits the primary function of the mixing of writing systems as the creation of visual and/or linguistic novelty, a trend in noted in other work on orthographic inventiveness as an index of youth consumer culture (Miller 2004; Androutsopoulos 2000).

Examples such as those discussed above illustrate contemporary practices for the use of multiple scripts in public writing, where distinct writing systems are brought together in a range of proximities beginning with appearing in the same visual field and ending with hybrid biscriptual forms. The indexical value of all of these forms is to some extent shared: As commercial writing they attempt to attract consumers by conveying information about a business or brand and its desirable qualities (Picard 2003). At the same time, the publics projected by these different modes of combining Cyrillic and Latin writing systems incorporate historical and contemporary values for scripts and the qualities they “represent” as ideologically mediated linguistic forms. In the next section of this paper, I consider the implications of the simultaneous decentralization and commercialization of control over print aesthetics in the post-Soviet period.

4. Public writing and the decentralization of aesthetic control

During the Soviet period, control over visual production was strongly centralized through devices of the state such as censors, the issuing of guides to artists for the production of propaganda (which included approved typefaces for use in public signage) and strict control over the design of typefaces and technologies of production and reproduction (printing presses, copying and mimeograph machines). A professor of graphic design told me with considerable bitterness that only selected artists, most in the administrative center of the empire (Moscow) were permitted to design fonts, and that the legacy of this preferential treatment can be seen in the monopoly that ParaType, a Moscow-based font design firm employing many Soviet-trained graphic designers, holds over the Cyrillic font market. In addition to doing work for foreign companies

seeking to create Cyrillic versions of their proprietary fonts, ParaType offers a range of new Cyrillic¹⁴ versions that mimic the proportions and other stylistic elements of Latin fonts available in US and European markets. Filtered through ParaType, the aesthetics of contemporary Western graphic design thus become quietly folded into the aesthetics of postsocialism in the Former Soviet Union.

At the same time, the rise in ownership of personal computers in urban Ukraine in recent years and corresponding access to desktop printing technology have led to an abrupt decentralization of print production, once one of the most closely monitored areas of activity within the Soviet system. Throughout my fieldwork, professionally trained graphic designers periodically bemoaned the amateur with pirated graphic design software undercutting their business (and producing poorly designed signs). However, for me the greatest contribution of desktop publishing to the aesthetics of post-Soviet writing in Ukrainian urban spaces was the emergence of what I will call “ubiquitous Times” in home-printed ads and announcements. Ubiquitous Times has largely replaced handmade signs created using stencils or drafting-style lettering, once a staple of locally produced albums and wall newspapers during the Soviet period.

As the default font on Russian and Ukrainian Microsoft Word, ubiquitous Times is an unsurprising choice for desktop-printed signs, ads and announcements. Nonetheless, the concept of a “default” font, whether explicit (e.g. when it becomes the requested font for the submission of academic papers or grants) or implicit (when it is encoded into a word processing program and must be manually altered by the user) it is incorporated into larger aesthetic choices, expectations and language attitudes, all, I argue, key aspects of language ideology. While understandings of print readability may influence conventions regarding the use of a serif space-saving font like Times New Roman for signs, these conventions then become part of aesthetic evaluations. Thus, my (American) reaction to a kiosk selling inexpensive goods whose sign used Times Cyrillic to spell out “Everything for 5 hryvnias” was that it looked homemade, and thus cheap and even seedy in a commercial context. In contrast, a Ukrainian interviewee offered a similar assessment of hand-lettered or stenciled signs which typified many temporary public texts such as wall displays or announcements during the Soviet period.

The shift from a single “client” for publicly displayed professional design work such as signs, namely the Soviet state, to a situation in which little if any central control is exerted over the design and production of writing in public spaces has created a wide-open landscape in which language ideologies structure relationships among types of writing in public spaces, including writing associated strongly with the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Despite ongoing processes of reconstruction, the range of writing on the landscape in a Ukrainian city like Lviv still includes everything from Soviet era shop signs and decaying political slogans atop buildings, to graffiti, advertising, street signs and more. Within this complex field of public texts, the meaning of no one component can be understood without taking others into account.

¹⁴ The Cyrillic typefaces produced by ParaType include a range of Cyrillic characters so that they can be used with Russian as well any of the other dozens of languages written in Cyrillic. <http://www.paratype.ru>

5. Conclusions: Writing systems and the ideological value of languages

During my fieldwork, the line between “Latin script” and “English language”¹⁵ would sharpen and then blur again as I discussed public writing on the Lviv landscape with people, whether in theory or in situ. Despite scholarly and journalistic attention to the politicization of language in Ukraine (see e.g. Arel 2002; Bilaniuk 2005; Kulyk 2011) I would argue that at the time of this research in Lviv the most meaningful linguistic and symbolic dialogue was not between Russian and Ukrainian languages, but rather between Latin and Cyrillic writing systems. In my analysis, the use of Latin script does not represent a preference for English over Ukrainian per se, as the indexicality of Latin and Cyrillic scripts does not directly correspond to, or even reference language use. Instead, examples of alphabetic juxtaposition and orthographic hybridity are embedded in larger ideologies of Ukraine’s relationship to Western economic forms. As highlighted here, the representation of Latin script as primary, hierarchically superior and central reflects other ideological representations of the flow of economic forms, commercial goods and modernity from West to East.

The use of Latin script serves a powerful function of iconicity and fractal recursivity (Irvine and Gal 2000) here, identifying, even with a single letter, a non-Soviet reading public comprised of corporations and consumers. Historical intricacies of the development of European writing systems contribute in subtle and sometimes unexpected ways to this distinction, with the implications of utilized forms extending far beyond their referential meaning as representing phonemes. The use of multiple scripts supports and also is supported by a political economic context in which Ukraine is “Cyrillic” and the West is “Latin,” Cyrillic is “inflexible” while Latin scripts are “plastic” and alphabet mixing captures the image of a youthful public devoted both to Ukrainian and the consumer ideologies indexed by Latin letters.

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¹⁵ Sometimes also referred to as “foreign languages,” a category that generally excluded languages of the former Soviet Union most notably Russian, which were hegemonically defined as non-foreign except in politicized nationalist discourse. See also Bilaniuk (2005)

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