

What's your type?

Whether proofreading a document, preparing a translation text for a client or developing a professional website, your choice of font can convey a number of meanings that you may not have considered, writes Laura Bennett



Laura Bennett (MA Cantab, MA Courtauld Inst, Dip Trans kLET) is a freelance translator based in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire. She translates from Italian and French into English, specialising in art history, history and travel and tourism. She can be contacted at laura@culturetranslation.com. Follow Laura on Twitter at [@culturetrans](https://twitter.com/culturetrans).

As translators we often spend hours pondering the nuances of a word's meaning. When translating marketing slogans or snappy texts, such head-scratching can take days as we try to work out which translation best conveys every hint of meaning for a market with an entirely different cultural reference. We may stop to consider where the target text will be displayed: is it for a website, a brochure, or an international marketing campaign? But do we ever consider how the target words themselves will be shown and, more precisely, whether that in itself may also convey a hidden or nuanced meaning?

Different typefaces are a ubiquitous feature of modern life. As the 21st century continues apace, we are being increasingly bombarded by the written word in our everyday lives. Modern technology has latched on to Johannes Gutenberg's mid-15th century invention of the printing press and shows no signs of letting go. Thanks to the boom in computer technology, the typed word is at our fingertips to an unprecedented degree. Even those lucky enough not to spend their days sitting in front of a screen are constantly under attack from the written word – on the high street, at the supermarket, on public transport, in the car, at the cinema.

And just how these words are represented, not only their size and colour, but also their style, is key. Do they convey an image of dependability, modernity, exclusivity, creativity or quality? If you stopped to think about it, even for a moment, you could probably visualise the

typefaces of the logos of a dozen high-profile brand names without too much trouble. Some may argue that visibility and repeated exposure are the intention, regardless of the letters themselves, but this is only half the story. Whether you've conjured up the word Sainsbury's, McDonalds, Shell, Virgin, Coca-Cola or Kit Kat, a message is, consciously or subconsciously, defined by the shape and distribution of those letters.

Controversial choices

In a world of million-dollar advertising campaigns corporate identity is a tricky business. For example, Swedish furniture giant Ikea recently dispensed with its elegant Futura typeface in favour of the supposedly more modern-looking Verdana. With a recent estimate claiming that there are more than 100,000 fonts in the world, making that choice is not an easy prospect!

Back in the 1960s, Swiss designers came up with what was then thought of as the 'ideal' typeface, Helvetica. Clear, modern and apparently multi-purpose, Helvetica was considered the one and only answer to all type dilemmas. It was quickly adopted by a plethora of international companies, from NASA, who used it on their space shuttles, to the US Internal Revenue Service (IRS), who adopted it for their tax forms. The smooth, authoritative, uncluttered lines of Helvetica began to take over the world, in different colours and sizes, so much so that it was given the nickname 'the typeface of capitalism'. Perhaps inevitably, modern creativity has begun to see

the widespread use of Helvetica as too limiting, predictable and conformist. Experiments have been carried out to see whether a day can be spent in the modern world avoiding type written in Helvetica. The colourful and outspoken typographer Erik Spiekermann has described it as 'like going to McDonalds instead of thinking about food'.²

Typefaces certainly can arouse strong feelings. Although some can be iconic and generation-shaping (think The Beatles' voluptuous uppercase B and dropped T), others can provoke controversy. The aforementioned change by Ikea prompted hundreds of complaints, newspaper articles and discussion segments on radio stations. The angular and jerky London 2012 Olympics font (known as 2012 Headline) has been one of the most widely pilloried in recent years, being accused of being the 'graphic equivalent of dad dancing'.³ Comic Sans also arouses such strong feelings in some quarters, apparently 'destroying the historical integrity of

'Even those lucky enough not to spend their days sitting in front of a computer screen are constantly under attack from the written word'

typography', that there is a movement devoted to its eradication.⁴

Questions to consider

This would seem like an opportune moment to clear up any confusion regarding the difference between typefaces and fonts. A typeface is the design of the alphabet, the shape of the letters that make up the particular style of type and, importantly, their layout. A font is the digital file that contains and describes the typeface, the little piece of software that shapes the letters in a certain way on our computer screens.

So, beyond our unavoidable exposure to typefaces in our roles as consumers, it is interesting to consider just how aware we are of fonts in our everyday translating lives.

Do you always make sure that you

Pangrams: Five languages, five different fonts

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

Helvetica

Buvez de ce whisky que le patron juge fameux

Constantia

Quel fez sghembo copre davanti

Arial

Franz jagt im komplett verwahrlosten
Taxi quer durch Bayern

Verdana

El pingüino Wenceslao hizo kilómetros
bajo exhaustiva lluvia y frío; añoraba
a su querido cachorro

Times New Roman

☉ □ ▣ ◆ ◻ ◼ ◽ ◾ ◿ ✦ ✧ ✨ ✩ ✪ ✫ ✬ ✭ ✮ ✯ ✰ ✱ ✲ ✳ ✴ ✵ ✶ ✷ ✸ ✹ ✺ ✻ ✼ ✽ ✾ ✿ ♂ ♀ ♁ ♂ ♃ ♄ ♅ ♆ ♇ ♈ ♉ ♊ ♋ ♌ ♍ ♎ ♏ ♐ ♑ ♒ ♓ ♔ ♕ ♖ ♗ ♘ ♙ ♚ ♛ ♜ ♝ ♞ ♟ ♠ ♡ ♢ ♣ ♤ ♥ ♦ ♧ ♨ ♩ ♪ ♫ ♬ ♭ ♭♯ ♮ ♯ ♫ ♬ ♭ ♭♯ ♮ ♯ ♫ ♬ ♭ ♭♯ ♮ ♯

Wingdings

return a finished translation to your client in the same font as the source text? My experience would certainly be that I do, but probably without even realising it, as I tend to work mainly in Microsoft Word files.

Do you even notice when you receive a new file in an unusual font? Yes, of course. If I were to receive a document to work on in a particularly off-the-wall font I would certainly change it to ease the translation process.

Do you prefer using specific fonts on your screen? I have a preference for Arial; in fact, that is the font I am using to type this article. The serifs of Times New Roman somehow seem a little too staid, and I often find myself changing the font when a new document uses it as a default.

Do you find particular fonts more conducive to translation or proofreading? I have heard mention that the font Georgia is supposedly easier on the eye when proofreading, and allows for errors to be spotted more easily. I admit I've not quite discovered the benefits as yet, although I do often increase the font size significantly when proofreading a document. I would also undoubtedly consider it part of my job as a proofreader to make sure that fonts are consistent in both style and size when proofing a document, unless there is a particular reason for variety.

Personal choices

As more and more of us are taking the plunge into creating our own websites, and by extension our own brand as a translator or language provider, we are faced with the

moment of having to choose a font with which to instantly convey our image to a potential client. Should we go with a tried-and-tested traditional font in order to convey our professionalism, or should we pick something a little more quirky and individual, to make ourselves stand out in a crowded market? This may depend on the type of translations we deal with. Those of us with more creative or artistic specialisations may

Those working on technical or scientific translations may prefer a straightforward, no-nonsense typeface'

feel that this is a way of conveying a level of individuality to clients, while those working on technical or scientific translations may prefer a straightforward, no-nonsense typeface to underline a sense of reliability and expertise.

Received wisdom is of course that it is preferable, in a professional industry such as ours, not to strike out with anything too individual, but the issue of making our websites memorable is still a relevant one. A brief and admittedly unscientific straw poll of the websites of a dozen or so high-profile translators within our community seems to bear this out. The most popular font choices are the inoffensive Arial and the very clear Verdana (both without serifs), or the more traditional-looking serif font Georgia. However, many of these sites do use varying font sizes, bold text and colour variations in order to

provide visually pleasing variety and emphasis to certain sections of text.

Of course, practically speaking, such choices are often bound by the limitations of our website package; however, the choice is not always as limited as it may at first appear.

Google Sites, for example, lists only a few font choices in the main section of its site builder: normal (similar to Arial), normal with serif (similar to Times New Roman), Courier New, Georgia, Trebuchet and Verdana.

However, there are two ways of tapping into something a little more creative... Your first alternative is to cut and paste in an image including text in a different font, or, if you dig further into the mechanics of creating the site (Manage Sites function), a plethora of different options are available for areas of text on your site, including weird and wonderful intriguingly named statement fonts, Abril Fatface, Cherry Cream Soda, Miltonian Tattoo or Rock Salt anyone?*

To conclude, this brief overview of typesfaces and fonts has merely scratched the surface of a booming industry in the digital age. Given the translator's proximity to the written word and our role in a market in which image is becoming increasingly crucial, it's certainly an issue of which we should be aware. ☑

* Simon Garfield, *Just My Type: A Book About Fonts*, Profile Books, 2010.

† For more about Helvetica, see the fascinating

2007 documentary film, *Helvetica*, directed by Gary Hustwit.

‡ *Internasional Herald Tribune*.

§ www.bancomicans.com

¶ For a discussion of using fonts in website design see www.1stwebdesigner.com/design/short-course-improve-typography/