

TYPOGRAPHIC LANDSCAPE IN URBAN SPACE: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPROACH

V. E. Chernyavskaya

Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University
14, Aleksandra Nevskogo St., Kaliningrad, 236016, Russia

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This paper suggests a sociolinguistic approach to typographic landscape analysis. Typography is discussed as a semiotic resource with meaning-making potential. The paper argues that typographic variation provides dynamic indexical links to social practice. It obtains its 'social voice' and becomes an integral part of the social context in which it is perceived as typical and able to generate particular socially loaded meanings. This research is in line with contemporary social semiotics, interactional linguistics, and discourse studies and is based on typographic meaning as a key notion providing the basis for social actors' ideological ascriptions. Typography and typographic meaning formation are discussed within modern Russian urban space. It is argued that urban area enables addressing agency and interaction aspects of social communication. The city space provides access points for observing, shaping and interpreting meanings in the social context. As cases in point, the paper discusses the typefaces such as Antiqua font used in pre-revolutionary Russia, lettering imitating the font of Soviet newspapers, Handwriting font, and Stencil font and their embeddedness in current socio-cultural practice. The analysis uses advertising, social and commercial texts. The findings indicate that typography should be considered as a social meaning which results from indexical connections of a sign and the context it is used in. Semiotification of space allows observing stronger reflexivity and, therefore, metapragmatic activity of communicants.

Keywords: *typography, typographic meaning, landscape, sociolinguistics*

1. Introduction

The present paper focuses on typography as a particular semiotic resource namely the arrangement of written text through the appropriate use of typesetting techniques, fonts, and type composition. It aims to explore how the graphic form of a symbol is interpreted and used in terms of human activity in the social context. The present investigation considers how typography obtains its "social voice" and becomes an integral part of the social context in which it is perceived as typical and able to generate particular socially loaded meanings.

This approach is in line with modern sociolinguistics exploring variation in its meaning-making potential. The theoretical framework of the study was also found in the current research in social semiotics, interactional linguistics, and discourse studies after Kress, van Leeuwen, Cristal, Agha, Blom-



maert, Silverstein, and Spitzmüller. The analysis is based on *typographic meaning* as a key notion that provides the basis for social actors' ideological ascriptions. This framework offers the following way for the analysis to be conducted. Typography and typographic meaning formation are discussed within modern Russian urban space. Generally speaking, urban space is considered as a complex semiotic and anthropological object, a hypertext, and from this perspective, it has received attention in social semiotics, cultural anthropology, urban studies, sociolinguistics, and sociology. The last two decades in modern studies have seen a focus on visual urban semiotics: urban area is now regarded as a visual text, graphic language of urban space (Blommaert, 2013; Markov, 2011; Wirt, 2016; Stepanyan, Simyan, 2012).

The current study puts forward the idea that semiotic and sociocultural urban space enables to address agency and interaction aspects of social communication. A city resident acts both as a text producer opting for semiotic devices appropriate for a specific sociocultural situation and a text receiver perceiving and interpreting meanings, able to communicate in social context and adjust their communicative competence to culturally-specific norms of communication. This perspective allows to emphasize an applied task for researchers namely "to differentiate texts about urban area as a character of verbal texts, urban area as a character of visual narratives and urban area as a visual text (hypertext)", see (Avanesov, 2014, p. 16–17).

The analysis rests on the texts employed in modern Russian socio-cultural practice when producing advertising, social and commercial texts.

2. Landscapes and semiotification of space

The notion of *landscape* stems from the theories and practice of discourse analysis and the current visual turn in human sciences and linguistics in particular. What is of major importance is that the essential multimodal nature of human communication has received recognition. Verbal modus in communication interacts and coexists with other semiotic codes and meaning communication media, cf. "language is moving from its former, unchallenged role as the medium of communication, to a role as one medium of communication" (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, p. 34). This principle was characterized in Kress's G. and van Leeuwen's T. work «Reading images. The grammar of visual design» (1996) and was further defined and explored in (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001; Kress 2010). As Spitzmüller puts it, "*landscape* denotes socially and discursively *shaped* space, not only in the sense of "cultivated" environment but also in the sense of *ideological sites*: material "sceneries" of how the world is supposed to be (Spitzmüller 2015, p. 127; orig. emph.). Materiality becomes functional and associated with social meaning construction, and with Agha's words, "our focus, therefore, needs to be not on things alone or personae alone but on acts of performance and construal through which the two are linked, and the conditions under which these links become determinate for actors (Agha, 2007, p. 235).

The term *landscape* brought the researchers to a new notion used to define the multimodal nature of semiotic space. *Landscape* means a complex



configuration of various semiotic devices which generate meanings to be perceived and interpreted by social actors. Such notions as *semiotic landscape*, *visual landscape*, *typographic landscape* (Backhaus, 2007; Gorter, 2013; Järlehed, Jaworski, 2015; Walker, 2001) have appeared to be discussed then.

In 1998 British linguist David Chrystal proposed the term *typographical linguistics* (Chrystal, 1998) and mentioned several factors which hindered the development of this cross-disciplinary field in the 1980–1990s. A major reason for the scientists not addressing typographic design until the present was a logocentric focus in linguistics: language was considered as a central medium of meaning communication and meaning design. However, recognition of multimodal nature of communication changed this theoretical assumption. What we can observe today is a change in investigative approaches and a shift to addressing typography as one of the crucial devices used to communicate meaning. In this regard, typography is referred to as one of the subject matters of linguistics if we agree that important aspects of linguistics are issues on how we express meanings either explicitly or in a latent way. From this point of view, the central question for a typographical linguist might be how the various features of typography express or hinder meanings (Crystal, 1998).

Th. van Leeuwen emphasized in his pioneering research on typography its multimodal character and discussed how it derives its meaning potential by adding to letterforms “colour, three-dimensionality, material texture, and, in kinetic typography, movement. Increasingly, many typefaces also incorporate iconic elements, and deliberately blur the boundaries between image and letterform” (van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 141). In considering typography wide variation of linguistic means has received a considerable swathe of interest in sociolinguistics. These are able to manifest changes in a meaning interpreted in the course of interactional communication between subjects. By saying that, we don’t presume that graphic design and any graphic variants are always meaningful and always make difference. It is a matter of value-based interpretation within social practice.

Typography is seen as one of the modes of communication, to be more exact, of written communication. The modes in this case are regarded as variables, specific features added to mandatory basic properties of a communication medium. Typography refers to the arrangement of written text through the appropriate use of typesetting techniques, and type composition. The arrangement of type involves selecting typefaces, i. e. common design features and principles of font arrangement of characters. Typography follows strict rules which determine the use of fonts for composing and text design depending on the characteristics of a language. Typography can be broadly divided into macrotypography and microtypography. Macrotypography deals primarily with the general design, structure and composition of a printed document, namely visual design, text size, and sheet layout. Microtypography is concerned with the design of type, letters arrangement, typefaces, colour, and size (Stöckl 2005; 2009).

Typography creates the texture of a word. It is non-anonymous but is embedded in social context thus regarded as adequate and inherent in certain contexts. Graphic design generates a particular frame for the text to



be interpreted. Following Johan Järlehed and Adam Jaworski's view, typographic landscapes are "a shifting terrain of sedimented, hegemonic, and contested subject positions, tensions between different world views and performances of place". They are concerned with "ideology, by tracing social meanings that imbue emplaced letterforms, and practice, by engaging with typography as a form of social action" (Järlehed, Jaworski, 2015, p. 117). Typographic landscape involves various typographic forms in their inter-semiotic relationships and planes as typography is connected with other semiotic phenomena, it is juxtaposed and coexists with them in space.

The form of signs is of importance not only as the form itself but as a prerequisite for the message to be perceived. Thus, it is crucial that the material form of a sign, its particular shape is not able to become a sign just because of the very fact that it does have a form of a sign. The material form of a sign becomes the subject of evaluation in social practice, it is generated by the interactionality of communicators, cf. "materiality is not *eo ipso* semiotic. What makes it semiotic are social actors' perceptions and interpretations of material objects" (Spitzmüller 2015, p. 128). A strong association of typography with a certain context in which it is typical and anticipated gives rise to a *typographic meaning* (van Leeuwen 2005; 2006). Typographic meaning is considered as a type of a pragmatic *social meaning* which results from the interpretation of a sign as related to the context it is used in. Social meanings or social indexes have been broadly investigated in contemporary sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, for review, see (Chernyavskaya, 2020a; 2020b; 2021; Molodychenko, Chernyavskaya, 2022). Social meaning arises within the interaction between speakers in sociocultural practice. Specific graphic means are associated with certain social groups as those conveying particular values and social indices. "In analogy to language or linguistic ideologies, such ascriptions might be termed graphic ideologies or ideologies of graphics" (Spitzmüller 2015, p. 132).

Social importance of typography as a means of control over ideologies, values and models of proper behaviour has been always acknowledged. To illustrate, in Russia, after the Revolution of 1917, the orthography was reformed. Much importance was attached to the font as it was considered as one of the crucial elements of the printing trade as well as related to the persuasive power of printed word. The development of a new typeface was set along with other new tasks of the Soviet country on the government level. The USSR had a printing committee which was responsible for elaborating a new standard of the font. By 1930 the Committee had finished the work and introduced new drawing guidelines, methods of composition analysis and assessment criteria of font design. First of all, the font for popular editions and children's literature was developed. In the 1960–1970s in the USSR, the in the German texts and p font was ordered by central Soviet newspapers like "Pravda", "Izvestia", "Trud", "Krasnaya Zvezda" which were perceived as a key format for communicating ideologically significant values and stances in the society¹, for more detail see (Kirsanov, 2007).

¹ After a large break in 1990s font called "Scriptura Russica" was established by the order of the Bible Society in Russia. Later a special font called "Kommersant Serif" was developed for the printing house of "Kommersant".



Social meaning as related to the variation of graphic forms has been discussed in (Spitzmüller, 2015) focused on the interpretation of Gothic font resulting from contextual correlation with the period of National Socialism in Germany between 1933 and 1945. Two font types were widely used in German texts and posters in particular during that period: Gothic Fraktur and Modern. The Gothic Fraktur as a further subtype of the Gothic font gained popularity. The name Gothic was offered in the 15th century during the Renaissance period in order to distinguish the font developed by Germans from the humanistic Antiqua font. So Gothic Fraktur started to serve as a tool for identification and self-identification of German people who separated themselves from others and other cultures. This type of fonts appeared to be ideologically loaded. Since 1933 Germany started to use Gothic font heavily as a marker of the German nation and as an instrument of communicating “German values”. The use of Gothic font was meant to correlate the victorious historic past of Germany with a new mission of the country declared in the Third Reich. The correlation between typography and social practice, in which it was applied, became stronger. It is revealing that in present-day Germany Gothic letter form is directly associated with the country’s National Socialistic past. Today the Gothic Fraktur is associated with neonationalistic practices and neonationalistic-based rhetoric, cf. “many people are indeed firmly convinced that Gothic type does in one way or the other point towards (neo-)nationalistic actors, contexts and practices” (Spitzmüller 2015, p. 135).

Thus typography may appear to be an “*object-sign*” which communicates information about some *social typified practice* which a person is incorporated in or claims to be in by using the given sign. Relatively stable and conventional identity categories like gender and socio-economical class may serve an example of such typified practice. Additionally, other groups, categories and roles a person can be identified with may also refer to the typified practice under discussion.” (Molodychenko, 2020, p. 122; orig. emph.).

3. Exemplification and analysis

Modern urban typographic landscape in Russia is constructed by different kinds of graphic forms. The analysis refers to the following examples, that are quite illustrative.

In 2018, in the city of Rybinsk, Yaroslavl region, local authorities ordered local businesses to replace modern banners with retro-style signs. The purpose of this transformation was to make the city unique from others by bringing back Russian traditions. Obviously, the outdoor advertising market is in line with unified advertising signs according to the template. At the legislative level in Rybinsk, it was decided to bring the entire centre of the city to a uniform style of historical advertising. The management of the city compensated the entrepreneurs for the costs of making banners. All banners were made of wood and metal, the letters were made by hand using ancient technologies. Especially for the correct spelling, the pre-reform spelling and punctuation of the Russian language were studied. Before the revolution,



Russian printing houses were dominated by European fonts: various *types of antiqua* were used, to which the missing letters of the Russian alphabet were added. The letters *yat*, *oita*, *vzhitsa*, *i*, which are out of use today, were used in new advertisements, fig. 1.



Fig. 1. Retro style banners in Rybinsk. The photo by the author

In 2015 pharmaceutical distributor *Pharma Group* launched in Russia a pharmacy chain called *Sovetskie Apteki* (*Soviet Pharmacies*). Major concepts the company relied on were to set low prices and to meet the customers' needs within easy reach. The pharmacy chain's slogan was "Sovetskaya Apteka at Soviet prices!" Obviously, it refers to the Soviet nostalgia and positive opinions about the Soviet Union over the years, that Russians have expressed. Nostalgia toward the USSR is more common among older generations but exists among younger people as well. The romanticization of the Soviet past is not equal to a wish for the Soviet system's return, but is associated rather with personal memories of that time, confidence in the future and a good life during that time. The detailed analysis in this direction is beyond this paper, see for more details and evidence (Zubkova, 2019). It is interesting in the suggested framework that the brandmark of the company *Soviet Pharmacies* has a distinctive *lettering design imitating the font of leading soviet newspapers like "Pravda" and "Izvestia" published in the Soviet Union, fig. 1–2.*



Fig. 2. Pharmacy *Sovetskaya apteka*, the city of St Petersburg. The photo by the author



Fig. 3. Font of “Izvestia” and “Pravda” newspapers

With regard to typography this means that means that typographic design is seen as an index able to emphasize additional connotations, namely reference to present or past, reference to a specific style, social practice etc. The graphic form starts to be used as an additional device for the message foregrounding in the shared cultural space. The form begins to act as an emphasis which attracts attention of the readers.

In the digital era another particular type of font has gained its popularity — *Handwritten font*. It was developed to imitate handwritten text made by a pen, a pencil or a quill. Printing characters resemble handwritten letters. Handwritten font triggers a certain emotional reaction — it is reactive per se and it is perceived as a spontaneous instant reaction in everyday life: to make a quick note by pencil. At the same time, however, Handwritten font is considered as relevant in a complicated, desperate situation when a person has limited resources. Therefore imitation of handwritten font functions as a method of foregrounding particular sections of the text structure and drawing additional attention to them.

A similar effect is achieved by a social advertisement made by St. Petersburg public charity called *Nochlezhka* (*Homeless shelter*). The organization is engaged in providing help to the homeless and attracting the city dwellers’ attention to this issue. Posters of the advertising campaign are placed on the streets of St. Petersburg. During one of the organization’s actions held in the city streets posters “*The layout of the homeless*”, fig. 4 were displayed. The posters show easily recognizable and typical of St. Petersburg well courtyards, to be more exact they demonstrate perspective projections from well courtyards whose shape resemble apartment plans. They bear inscriptions made in handwritten font: “*The layout not to be chosen. The layout dangerous to live.*” The idea of this social appeal is that life on the street is a difficult period in the life of a person who is in trouble. One of the fundamental human needs is to have a home. And there are several tens of thousands of homeless people in such a beautiful city as St. Petersburg. This

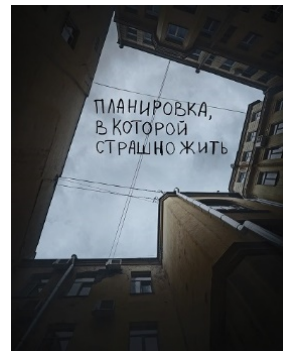


Fig. 4. Social advertising
“The layout dangerous to live”²

² Source <https://homeless.ru/about/akcii/64981/>



is a huge problem for the city. And this problem must be solved. It is almost impossible to get out of this trap without help. People want to escape from the terrible life on the street, but it is almost impossible to do it on your own.

Another type of font under discussion is *Stencil font*. Stencil is similar to handwritten font but it is characterized by a more formal status and is perceived as official. Stencil typography is not neutral, its plastique and rhythm foster an emotional spirit. Stencil is commonly used in posters, billboards, various adverts, socially-loaded slogans of political parties and social movements. Stencil was regarded as a specific feature of the Soviet era urban space. Today Soviet-like landscape has become visual in urban space on transport, as an example the following appeal to pay the fare, fig. 5.



Fig. 5. Appeal to pay the fare in the streetcar in the city of Yaroslavl “Comrades, pay your fare in proper and timely manner”. The photo by the author

Addressing passengers as “comrades”, stereotyped linguistic structure “pay in proper and timely manner” are intensified by typography. The visual text has received a strong persuasive effect as a reference to collective memory about the Soviet conductor-free transport system, civil consciousness and also mandatory control over total observing the rules of behaviour.

From this perspective we see that typography appears to be precedent-setting by nature. To elucidate the mechanism of its precedent nature the concepts of *intertextuality* and to be more precise *interdiscursiveness* are to be focussed. Interdiscursiveness concerns an eternal process of human knowledge semiosis and knowledge transfer. What makes up a discourse at a cognitive level is knowledge about meanings of linguistic units, their usage contexts, historical, cultural and social background, common topics, motives, connection rules, established values, presuppositions, etc. All these enable to trigger the process of making meanings and to interpret utterances in each new case. Interdiscursiveness (and intertextuality as explicit text communication) are part of a communicative competence of interlocutors and help to interpret typographic object-signs which convey particular social meanings. The meaning-making mechanism can be redefined as visual intertextuality or in other terms, intericonicity. According to Jakobson, intericonicity means dialogic communication of different sign systems. As Jakobson puts it, “intersemiotic translation is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs



of nonverbal sign systems” (Jakobson 2004 [1959], p. 139). Visual intertextuality/intericonicity is seen as a method of assigning meanings to utterances through interpretation and transformation of the existent visual images – pictures, posters, caricatures, etc. A visual element is borrowed and then it is dialogically transformed within the structure of a different text. Transformations may result in citation that is literal copying of some sections from one text to another, parodying, semantic contrast.

Another example of a social advertisement made by St. Petersburg public charity *Nochlezhka* (*Homeless shelter*) reveals the impact which visual precedent texts make on contemporary urban space. In 2013 a strong public response was provoked both in social media and the society by graffiti made in the city on fencing, fig. 6.



Fig. 6. Graffiti “Comrades! Indifference makes this part of our life the most dangerous. Every year more than 4000 homeless people die in the streets of St Petersburg”³

The poster appeals to historical memory of the residents of St. Petersburg about the Siege of Leningrad 1941 – 1944. In the poster the image of the city wall during the Siege of Leningrad bearing inscription: “Comrades! Artillery attack makes this part of the street the most dangerous” has been cited both verbal and visual, fig. 7.



Fig. 7. St. Petersburg, Nevsky Prospect, 14. Photo made by the author

³ Source: <https://www.asi.org.ru/news/2013/10/15/sotsial-naya-reklama-nochlezhki-v-zashitu-bezdomny-h-pobedila-na-mezhdunarodnom-festivale-p-o-r-a/>



This inscription is well-known to each resident of both Leningrad and St Petersburg and has been preserved in several streets of present-day St Petersburg. Similar inscriptions were written by the residents of the city during the war – by the Leningraders using paint and stencil plates in the most dangerous and bombarded parts of the streets. The Homeless Shelter' text dialogically borrows a verbal component of the inscription made during the Siege of Leningrad and copies its visual element, uses the same colours, font style – stencil inscription, the city wall background. This social action was held along with other actions organized by “Nochlezhka”. To illustrate, historical park statues in St Petersburg Summer Garden were marked by plates bearing the following inscriptions “*Art is preserved. Human is helpless.*”⁴. It should be noted that it was social citation that triggered the strongest response. According to Fontanka. ru newspaper dated 13.06.2015 the effect that action had was an increase in the public charity website traffic by 12 times and the amount of Internet payments and donations tripled⁵. To be able to interpret and understand a contemporary text – a social advertisement, to grasp its meaning (message) one should refer to the precedent text – the inscription made during the Siege of Leningrad. Intertextual knowledge about the historical, cultural and situational background of the utterance, its prehistory is crucial to proper understanding. To bridge the gap between two texts – contemporary and that from the past communicators should possess intertextual competence of communicants.

4. Conclusion

This paper introduced a sociolinguistic approach to typographic variation and to typographic meaning that provides dynamic indexical links to social practice. The results of the research indicate at least two clear trends. Firstly, use of heterogeneous ‘object-signs’ which convey particular social meanings implies widening a range of reflexive practices, namely activities in which signs are used to identify other perceivable signs. Semiotification of space allows us to observe stronger reflexivity and therefore metapragmatic activity which reveal evaluative stances, presuppositions implied by linguistic and semiotic ways of expressing meaning. One can assess the persuasive effect achieved only by assuming that a communicator possesses a particular communicative competence in terms of Dell Hymes’s definition of this notion. Secondly, we need to consider the typography as precedent-setting by nature. It works as a semiotic resource for constructing and interpreting meanings. Typography should be considered as a kind of a pragmatic, social meaning which results from indexical connections of a sign and the context it is used in.

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⁴ Source: <https://homeless.ru/>

⁵ Source: <https://www.fontanka.ru/2015/06/13/013/>



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The author

Dr Valeria E. Chernyavskaya, Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, Russia.

E-mail: Chernyavskaya_ve@spbstu.ru

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ТИПОГРАФИЧЕСКИЙ ЛАНДШАФТ В ГОРОДСКОМ ПРОСТРАНСТВЕ: СОЦИОЛИНГВИСТИЧЕСКИЙ ПОДХОД

В. Е. Чернявская

Балтийский федеральный университет им. И. Канта
Россия, 236016, Калининград, ул. Александра Невского, 14

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В статье анализируются понятия «типографическое значение» и «типографический ландшафт», а также их объяснительный потенциал в современной социолингвистике. Типографика рассматривается как особый семиотический ресурс смыслообразования, а вариативность на уровне типографики создает особого рода индексальные связи знака с социальной практикой, в которой его использование типично и ожидаемо. Теоретико-методологические основания предлагаемого анализа созданы современными разработками в социальной семиотике, интеракциональной лингвистике, дискурсивном анализе. Смыслообразующий потенциал типографического значения рассматривается в связи с современным российским городским пространством. В про-



странстве города создаются особые точки доступа для наблюдения и изучения интеракциональности и агентивности человека, взаимодействующего с другими в процессе коммуникации с использованием разного рода семиотических ресурсов. Показано, как разные типы шрифтов – антиква; шрифт, стилизованный под использованный в советских газетах «Правда» и «Известия»; рукописный шрифт – используются в современных рекламных сообщениях в городском пространстве и создают индексальные связи с прошлыми практиками их использования. Наблюдения над процессами семиотизации в городском ландшафте позволяют делать выводы о метапрагматической активности и рефлексии коммуникантов.

Ключевые слова: типографика, типографическое значение, ландшафт, социолингвистика

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Об авторе

Валерия Евгеньевна Чернявская, доктор филологических наук, профессор, Балтийский федеральный университет им. И. Канта, Россия.

E-mail: Chernyavskaya_ve@spbstu.ru

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