CONNECTING ARABIC TO LATIN SCRIPT

A visual conversion of a verbal situation in Lebanon

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Abstract: My research is divided into six sections. There is a Fact that most Lebanese mix Arabic, French and English in their daily life. To this verbal cultural situation, I created a visual, the Idea, writing Arabic with Arabic letters and writing English and French with Latin letters. It is the purpose of my study. The Arabic and Latin are written in opposite directions, when combined, there are problems of readability. One problem is the direction of reading: should the reader start with Arabic or with Latin script? The second problem is the omission of a script: some readers judge it enough to read one language and drop the other. The Solution is the connection of letters: it forces the reader to read both scripts and imposes a direction of reading. The fifth part is the Application in a useful context. The Effect on visual communication is the last part, the conclusion.

1. Introduction: the Fact

One thing is obvious in the Lebanese linguistic culture: the mixture of languages. The country has been a big mixture of cultures since its recorded history. It is natural in today’s Lebanon to have the amazing and unique interaction of three languages: the Arabic, the English and the French. At least two of these three languages are fairly spoken by the Lebanese population, as a minimum, fairly understood and largely recognized. In the scholar year 2000-2001, 900 000 Lebanese students (the population of Lebanon is approximately four million) were going to 2671 different schools in Lebanon. Among them, and according the CRDP [1], the 2/3 (or 600 000 scholars) chose French as a second foreign language (Arabic being the first) and 1/3 (or 300 000 students) chose English [2].

2. The Idea: a visual to a verbal situation

The idea is to use for each language its own letters and then combine the two scripts. The combination of Latin to Arabic script is on two levels: horizontal and vertical. The Latin and the Arabic letters are written in opposite direction, this is where the interests of the combination start. A horizontal combination is mixing words within one line, adding one script to the other in the same line. A vertical combination is combining the upper line to the lower line in a paragraph. It is the alternation of the two scripts: the two alternated scripts would go back and forth, following the natural flow of the eye, which is more or less a definition of the boustrophedon. The Boustrophedon is an old way of writing by alternating a line and its image in a way that permits the reader to read back and forth instead of coming back to the line at the end of each sentence. The reader would go left/right with the Latin script and come back right/left with the Arabic. Instead of flipping the letters, the idea is to alternate the Arabic anc Latin through an inspiration from the boustrophedon.

3. The Problems

The Arabic letters are written from right to left while Latin script is written from left to right, thus, when combined, there are problems of readability. For the horizontal combination, the major problem is the direction of reading: should the reader start with Arabic or with Latin script? The second problem is the omission of a script: some readers judge it enough to read one language and drop the other. The Solution is the connection of letters: it forces the reader to read both scripts and imposes a direction of reading.

4. The Solutions: the Connections

The solution is the connection of scripts: it forces the reader to read both scripts and imposes a direction of reading. Some factors facilitate the connections. For example, one of the factors is the same root of the Arabic and the Latin script: the Phoenician alphabet. Consequently, there are some visual lettering elements, such as the counters and the ascenders, which bring the similarities closer, as shown in the poster of the fig.6 [3]. Another factor is the opposite direction of writing which aid the fusion of letters. A third factor is the connective particularity of the letters. The Arabic, printed or handwritten, is a connective writing system. The Latin letters as well would be connected. In fact, nine students of the 4th year of advertising in the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts and 31 students of design in the University of Balamand in Lebanon [3] were asked to answer a questionnaire. 36 students (or 90%) wrote in attached letters while only 4 (or 10%) wrote with detached letters. Consequently, Arabic and Latin letters, especially handwritten letters, have a common visual aspect: the connective cursive style of writing. The elasticity of the connections is clearly shown in the poster of the fig.1.

The similarities of the two scripts, the opposite directions of writing, the connective particularity of the letters and the connective glyphs lead to the visual solutions, the connections of the two scripts. As same as for the combinations, there are two ways of connections, the Horizontal and the vertical. The horizontal connection attach two words in one line, as in the posters of the fig.1, fig.2, fig.3 and fig.4. There are two divisions in the horizontal connections: the convergent and the divergent connections. The convergent is when the last letters of two words are attached; the divergent is where the first letters of two words are attached. For the vertical connections there are also two major divisions:
the Latin/Arabic connections: attaching the end of a Latin word of a line 1 to the start of the Arabic word of the next line; and the Arabic/Latin connections: attaching the end an Arabic word to the start of the Latin word. The Vertical connections tie one line to the next line as seen in the posters of the fig.5, fig.6, fig.7 and fig.8.

From the 26 Latin letters and the 28 Arabic letters, there are 728 (26 x 28) necessary divergent connections and the same number for converging connections making the total of horizontal connections 1456. As for the vertical connections, the number is also 728 for the Latin/Arabic and 728 for the Arabic/Latin connections.

5. The Applications

The application is a part of my research where I show some of what might be done with these connections, as the use of vertical connections in conversations, fig.2 or in balloons, fig. 5. However, the most interesting application is the boustrophedon. The boustrophedon used in the connection of Arabic and Latin script is rather an inspiration than an application. The Arabic and Latin letters are written in opposite directions. Instead of using the flipped image to come back, the idea is to write one script on one line and come back with the opposite script on the next line. As seen clearly in the poster of the fig. 7, the writing goes right with the French and comes back left with the Arabic.

6. Conclusion: the Effects

Connecting Arabic to Latin script is a visual need to a situation in today’s Lebanon. This visual might expand to all Arabic countries. For example, Arabs of the North African countries, such as Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, use and mix French and Arabic in their everyday life. Many countries from the Arab Gulf use English extensively in parallel to the Arabic language. In these Arab countries, the connections of Latin and Arabic letters would have a greater extension: the visual of the connections would fairly be similar to all countries, what would make the difference is the content of the messages affected by the cultural background.

Notes and References

[1] CRDP: Centre de Recherche et de Développement Pédagogique, the Lebanese Ministry of Education
[3] All the posters are from workshops conducted by the author