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The visible voice: Typographical distinction in thesis writing**Abstract**

In 2012 Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli and Tuckwell noted that recent exegetical doctoral writing does 'not necessarily have to fit with a pre-conceived template, or indeed straight-jacket' (342). In discussing a diversity of approaches taken to developing the tenor of the scholar's voice, the essay built on a heritage of discourse that has examined the nature of subjective academic writing.

This article contributes to that discourse but with an emphasis that is less commonly discussed. It considers the role of typography in constructing academic dialect and communicative quality in exegetical writing. Employing four case studies from practice-led, creative research projects undertaken in visual communication design at a New Zealand University between 2011 and 2015, it examines the contribution typography makes to identity construction in academic writing. In addition, it unpacks ways in which individual researchers navigate the shape of language when communicating both the content and ethos of their thesis writing.

Keywords: exegetic writing, typography, writerly voice

Introduction

On my bookshelf, there is a collection of PhD and Masters theses that I have supervised across the last decade. While some of these face outwards with uniform black spines set in glinting gold type, some do not. These alternative formats, while still hardbound represent recent changes in academic writing and formatting in the discipline of visual communication design. Here, carefully modulated typographical considerations permeate and enhance the clarity of the writer's voice. The dialect of these theses is no longer Times Roman, Baskerville, or Arial normal. Typography is nuanced, elegant and cognisant of Romano's assertion that the purpose of type is to 'to advocate, communicate, celebrate, educate, elaborate, illuminate, and disseminate. Along the way he suggests, 'words and pages become art' (Romano 2002: ix).

Concerns with designing the typographic voice do not happen in isolation. Currently within the academy there are contestations across diverse disciplines where researchers seek to extend the richness and clarity of their communicative potential. Such contestations include multimodal research formats that enable the researcher to embed audio and animated files (Ings 2014), the employment of polyvocal writing (Hamilton 2011), and new approaches to document design including page orientation, proportion, foldout spreads, and pictorial information graphics. Arguably, the more such renegotiations of convention appear in the public domain as well resolved expansions to communicative quality, the more we are able to move the articulation of research processes and products forward, Paltridge et al (2012) suggests that little attention has been paid to how typography is actually employed in thesis writing, despite the fact that these documents vary considerably across the academy (Dudley-Evans 1999, Thompson 1999, Ravelli & Starfield 2008). These observations are not new. More than twenty years ago, writers like Noble (1994) and Goodchild and Miller (1997), observed that theses were being written in new ways and the formatting of academic thesis often deviated significantly from prescriptions offered by published guides and university handbooks (Swales & Najjar 1987, Partridge 2002).

Historically students rarely laid out their theses (Hodge 1998), and today many universities still have fixed guidelines within which candidates are expected to operate. By extension, most academic journals still have their typographical voices prescribed by editors. Normally, what scholars write is formatted in a pre-set visual dialect before it is released for public consumption. Although it may be maintained that the quality of written content should take precedence over features of presentation, Bringhurst reminds us that it is typography that endows 'human language with durable visual form' (Bringhurst 2002: 11). Given such observations it is perhaps useful to consider how typographical concerns have become manifest in recent candidates' work.

Methodology

In considering this issue, this article employs a case study methodology. It examines four visual communication design exegeses at PhD and Masters levels at one New Zealand University. Although the use of typographic design is not a ubiquitous practice in higher research degree exegeses, it is becoming increasingly evident in the fields of creative writing, architecture and visual communication design (Ings 2014). In the broader domain, Ravelli and Starfield (2008) note that it builds upon emerging approaches adopted in wider academic scholarship.

A case study methodology is useful because it can be used to consider a distinct participant pool, drawing conclusions only about that group and only within a defined context. Anchored in real life (Flyvbjerg 2001), suggests that the case study can be employed to illuminate and explicate a subject and its related contextual conditions (Thomas 2011). Because a case study does not seek to produce either generalisable, transferable truths, or cause-effect relationships, its usefulness lies in its ability to consider and describe what is existing and evident (Feagin 1991).

The typographical voice

Typographical decisions in thesis writing can establish expectations for a reader about not only the thesis writer's identity (Ravelli & Starfield 2008) but also about the authority (Anderson 2012) and credulity (Morris 2012) of the text they create. This is because as Brumberger notes, 'we assign personality/emotional attributes both to typefaces and to passages of text, and as a consequence, typographical treatments may be understood as having personas that convey not only visual texture and mood, but also rhetorical stances that vary in their emphases' (Brumberger 2003: 208).

By encouraging writers to conceive typography as part of their written voice, supervisors can significantly enrich new ways of 'knowing' and creating. Typographical consideration can lead to levels of embodiment and ways of being 'in the physicality' of voice. Accordingly such emphasis may open spaces, trajectories and encounters that had not been previously envisaged or imagined. By exploring pedagogically such meaning making possibilities we have the ability to significantly enrich processes of writing.

In an environment where a plethora of font options is available at the scrolling of a menu, writers have increasingly become 'their own typographers' (Stöckl 2005: 213). While this may sound egalitarian, effective typographical design is a complex skill and considerable care needs to be taken with how the appearance of a writer's voice is constructed. When we talk about designing such a voice, we are considering not only letterforms but also a range of other factors including spacing (tracking, kerning and leading) [1], justification and line set, emphasis (weight, size), and complementary relationships.

These issues are integral to how visual communication designers construct written text. Indeed, critical writing in the discipline has a long history of expression through typography. Among the most respected professional and academic journals: *I.D* (est. 1954), *Visible Language* (est. 1967), *Creative Review* (est. 1980), *Émigré* (est. 1984) and *Eye* (est. 1990), one can trace these concerns with communicating simultaneously, the content and typographical ethos of what is written.

Approaches to voicing the thesis through renegotiations of its typographic form are not new. Early experiments may be traced back at least to Armstrong's (2002) doctoral project, 'Towards an Ecosophical Praxis of New Media Space Design', where he used non-standard approaches to columnisation and leading. More recent doctoral level examples may be found in two distinctive Indigenous theses, Talita Tolutau's (2015) elegant, 'Veitalatala: Mātanga 'o e Talanoa' and Patrick Stewart's (2015) controversial deconstructionist dissertation 'Indigenous Architecture through Indigenous Knowledge'. The latter was designed with a distinctive arrangement of spacing that replaced uppercase letters, full stops and commas.

Positioned against these negotiations of the distinctive scholar's voice is a largely conservative and cautious academic mindset. Here Ravelli and Starfield (2008) suggest, 'features such as a sans serif font, standard layout and orthography have come to be naturalized as a conventional and acceptable form of academic presentation' (144). Significantly, Anderson (2012) in his discussion of the employment of designers by academic publishers notes that most journals pursue solutions closely related to the aesthetics of authority. While these concerns may arguably be supported by Morris' (2012) research into the impact of typefaces on perceptions of credulity [2], they also reside in the context of a burgeoning volume of online 'advice' to thesis writers. Indicative of this is Jewell's (2013) *Typographic essentials for academic texts* that lists five typographic 'essentials' for thesis writing. Among these are instructions to use a serif typeface for the main text and a sans serif typeface for headings, tables and figures. She also states that writers should avoid more than two typefaces in a single document and refrain from underlining for emphasis. Significantly, her advice is that when in doubt the student seeking an authentic typographical voice should err on the side of conservatism [3].

Voicing Identity

But perhaps it is useful to question this preoccupation with convention. When in 2001, Katie Salen's seminal essay 'Surrogate multiplicities: Typography in the age of invisibility' considered how typography operates as an agent for cultural standardisation, theorists began to reconceive type as an instrument of social marginalisation (Ings 2011, Papaalias 2015, Sinfield 2014, Waldner 2013). Salen argued that typographic treatments could function as a form of 'visual voice over, which constitutes a ... symbolic environment, as well as the organic process by which a standardized voice is generalised across an entire range of cultural expression' (Salen 2001: 134). Thus, she argued typefaces like Helvetica, Bell Gothic, Arial, Univers and Interstate have become ubiquitous voices of a dominant order that we rarely question. She suggested that these faces, being utopian and generic, belong nowhere, they are regionless, and without an accent. In a mediated, global environment, they have no dialect and no affiliation to region and although seemingly non-aligned; they are culturally superficial and stereotypical.

Typefaces like these have become the default for much publishing, including a lot of what is produced within the academy. Writers' voices are encapsulated within pre-set typographical templates. Inside these, our dialects of otherness become subsumed and reconstituted. Significantly, Salen suggests that it is against these sanctioned faces of the dominant order that typographical representations of otherness become demarcated and defined.

But what of otherness? In contrast to positivistic traditions that have conventionally framed the researcher as detached and objective, Griffiths notes that in all research, we should acknowledge both our subjectivity and that of our readers because 'all facts and information are value laden [and] ... knowledge of human beings gets its meaning from the value system of the knowers' (Griffiths 1998: 46).

In exegetical texts that often accompany research by artistic practice, the writer's voice is normally required to accommodate both objective review and reflective subjectivity (Brabazon & Dagli 2010, Ings 2014, Hamilton 2011, Paltridge et al 2012). Here the voice is something that must speak outwards in an authentic manner because as Griffiths notes 'the self is inescapable, because the person creating, responding to, working on, developing or evaluating performances, artefacts and practices is central to those activities' (Griffiths 2010: 185). How the writer's voice is constructed becomes central to the integrity of their text.

Recent examples

Ravelli and Starfield (2008) note that 'a doctoral thesis in Australia is typically prescribed by formal guidelines which delimit the nature of the binding, paper size, the required front pages ... single or double sided printing, minimum font size, line spacing and margin size' (134). The same may be said for many New Zealand universities [4], although there is increasing flexibility around format that in certain institutions may be agreed to by the department, supervisor and the candidate [5]. The following case studies demonstrate the distinctive ways in which four individual visual communication designers renegotiated these guidelines in the pursuit of a more nuanced voice that might speak with a greater level of resonance to the analytical and subjective concerns of their work.

Derek Ventling

Figure 1. Chapter sheet and following double page layout of Derek Ventling's MPhil exegesis, 'Illuminativa: The coalescence of light and craft thinking' (Ventling 2014: 49-52).

Background

Derek Ventling trained as a graphic designer in Switzerland. His MPhil thesis constituted a practice-led investigation into light as a metaphor for divine wisdom and considered how it might interact conceptually, physically and creatively with manual craft. The genesis of his project lay in Saint Bonaventure's 13th Century work *On the reduction of the arts to theology* (see Noone & Houser 2013). This treatise proposed a connective relationship between manual skill, sense perception, intellectual capacity and divine wisdom (as the source of all illumination).

Designing the voice

Discussing the typographical rationale for his writing the candidate stated:

It is my intention to create a cohesive expression of the reflective-personal and the scholarly, using both discursive and visual modes of communication. My desire is that this thesis might therefore be accessible and of use to, both the academy and graphic design practitioners. (Ventling 2014: 18)

This concern with strategically positioning research inquiries so they serve both the academy and the professions is a growing phenomenon as universities pursue closer relationships with industry. The significance and accessibility of thesis research becomes an increasing part of this association. By extension, students also know that what they write will normally become available online. Thus, for many visual communication designers their exegeses will become public demonstrations not only of their research but also of their ability to design and present information.

Accordingly, Derek spent weeks refining his exegesis. He said:

I agonise over page layout and typography because they fundamentally give documents such as these, their essence of being ... I tried a variety of mock page layouts for my exegesis because I wanted a lot of 'whiteness' in keeping with my thesis' theme of light. Therefore, the type needed to be 'open', fine, and used sparingly on the pages. I aimed for a voice that was minimally austere yet accessible, hence a book format that is slightly taller, and has a single column layout. (Derek Ventling 2015, pers. comm., 29 August)

The font he finally selected was Directors Cut Pro. He had already determined that he wanted a contemporary serif font because he wanted to establish a concurrent sense of professional and academic credibility in the design (see Figure 1). On a practical level, the face was available in a number of cuts and styles that afforded him flexibility as he negotiated variations required for denoting body text, footnotes, captions and titles.

Michael Hutcheson

Figure 2. Double page spread from Mike Hutcheson's 2015 exegesis 'Paradox: How New Zealand culture enables creativity yet mitigates against its spread' (Hutcheson 2015: 86-87)

Background

Michael Hutcheson was a mature student who came from a very different background. Before embarking on an academic career, he had been a managing director of Saatchi and Saatchi and also the founder of a number of leading advertising agencies in New Zealand. His MPhil thesis, 'Paradox', examined the concept of creativity in the context of contemporary New Zealand business. The thesis project comprised two complementary components; a 30-minute video documentary that constructed interviews with four prominent creative business people; and a series of short podcasts for online viewing by business and business-school audiences, that reconstituted key insights from the interviews.

Designing the voice

While addressing the requirements of academic research, the candidate was anxious that the outcomes of his research should be easily accessed and digested by business organisations. This was because he wanted his thesis to have a high level of professional currency. Michael saw his written exegesis 'as an extension of my concern with the effective design of information, [that] seeks to reconstitute the designed academic voice so it is concurrently accessible to professionals' (Hutcheson 2015: 76). His written voice was formatted so it might be read in a manner similar to what one might encounter in a contemporary business periodical. The copy was set in the contemporary faces, Tiempos Text (a New Zealand font) and Graphik (OTF).

The design Michael adopted was positioned a considerable distance from Warde's 1932 assertion that typographic decisions should be so discreet (transparent and light) as to be indiscernible (Warde 1956). Building on her assertion, many typographers have argued that one should encounter a page where readability and legibility are so subtly handled that one is not aware of the type.

However, in contrast, this exegesis pursued a high level of typographical distinctiveness. The main serif face was consciously disrupted by the candidate's decision to employ a stylistic phenomenon closely related to the Prague School's concept of *foregrounding*. Here sections of his voice were designed to stand out from the norm established by the serif text (see Figure 2). The foregrounded sans serif text is orange. It operates as a 'hook' that responds to the propensity to seek summaries of content at a glance when reading large bodies of copy in magazines. While contrasting with the main text, this foregrounded material establishes cohesion within the writing because it is presented in the same colour as the palette used for both the exegesis cover and illustrations.

Lisa Williams

Figure 3. Chapter cover and single page spread from the introduction to Lisa Williams' exegesis: 'Beyond words: An investigation into aspects of meaning articulated through the material forms of old media as expressed in a polysemous narrative' (Williams 2011: 13-14).

Background

Lisa's 2011 PhD thesis in creative writing considered a new form of narrative design that unfurled through a range of artefacts including a novella, a television newscast, newspaper journalism, an audiocassette recording and archive photography.

Designing the voice

The candidate's voice was pitched very quietly in this exegesis, being both modulated and formal in its tone of address. Her body text was set in Berkeley Oldstyle, a font family created in 1983 as a revival of Goudy's design originally produced for the University of California Press at Berkeley. This updated serif font has unusually elongated descenders and a uniquely light style that enables it to speak with a considered caution. This reflected the critical approach evident in the candidate's writing. The six chapter covers in the exegesis were each illustrated with a redundant print technology and were set in AkzidenzGrotesk. This traditional font dates from the 1800s and was among the first sans serif typefaces to be widely used. Unlike Helvetica it maintains circular counters and bowls that allow it to speak with a quiet clarity and to be clearly readable when it is reversed out from background images (see Figure 3).

When Lisa began her PhD, she had no training in typography. However, she was able to work successfully with a fellow candidate who was a graphic designer, because she knew on very intimate levels the tone, weight and spirit of her voice. Her relationship with this designer was co-creative and it permeated the whole of her research trajectory.

At the outset of the thesis, where a candidate has no formal background in typography, I generally encourage them to begin 'looking at' the voices of other writers. Normally colophon pages note the typefaces used in art books or high end literary publications. Such texts can be used to provoke thinking and critique that can lead to more informed discussions with a designer. Increasingly, candidates like Lisa also enrol in concurrent short courses in Visual Communication Design. These programmes can open up an awareness of print potentials, layout, stock (grain, paper weight), binding systems, and the principles of typography.

Each of the six chapter covers in Lisa's exegesis illustrated a redundant print technology. The body copy for the writing was set in AkzidenzGrotesk. Both she and the designer selected this font because it established a reserved formality that unlike Helvetica maintains circular counters and bowls. These allow it to speak with a quiet clarity and to be clearly readable when it is reversed out from background images (see Figure 3).

Talita Tolutau

Figure 20
An example of photography used as a composite image
(© Lisa Williams, 2011)
Each approach to combining images helped me to think through, and find, potential meanings in the texture of the surface of each book's cover. I used this form of photography as a way of reimagining the landscape as a total experience. Hence, I drew and connected elements that were very subtle and unrecognised that they played like the intervisibility of memory. This use of photography operates as a kind of distance thinking space where I experience the spirit of the world I am building.

4 RESEARCH DESIGN

*Manatu'i 'a e hula na'i he tohi 'a'i fonoaga
mai ai, pua he pua 'a'i tohi hui 'a e hula na
ia pua 'a'i tohi hui 'a'i 'a'ale 'a'ale 'a'ale 'a'ale
tohi hui hui hui.*

*Remember the path you have travelled and
if it is a hazardous path then you should
turn towards a path on which it is
smoother to journey.*

This saying is Tongan. It has often been told to me as a gentle
caution by my parents and relatives. The words refer to a *hula*
(path) on which we must travel. If it is *hula hui* (hazardous)
then we must seek out a better route. In relation to my creative
research in this thesis I am constantly reminded of its wisdom.

This PhD charts unfamiliar waters, yet it also journeys along the
same *hula hui hui* (a rough road) or *hula hui hui* (a flat road)
that the *hou'eiki* father who form its focus experienced. Like the
migrations of these *hou'eiki* fathers to other countries, I did not
undertake this journey knowing the shape of my destination,
but like them, I knew clearly the purpose of my going. In this

regard, one is reminded by William and Ormand (2000) that
research is "a process of seeking explanation and meaning" (para.
3). As such we may employ it when we either seek to generate
new knowledge or "make a contribution to human experience"
(Schreier, 2006, p. 42). In such instances we deal with some
questioning rather than simply re-orchestrating facts.

49 In this case Schreier argues, "the creative production, as an object of experience, is more important than my knowledge embodied in it" (2006, 362).

Figure 4. Two double page spreads from Talita Tolutau's PhD exegesis, 'Veitalatala: Mātanga 'o e Talanoa' (Tolutau 2015: 38-39, 50-51)

Background

Talita Tolutau's 2015 PhD thesis 'Veitalatala: Mātanga 'o e Talanoa', considered the nature of a relatively obscure Tongan discursive form called *veitalatala*, and its creative translation into designed artefacts that interpret the lyrical nature of Indigenous women's speech. The project worked with the memories of three *hou'eiki fafine* who left their islands to settle abroad. It creatively synthesised their storytelling into a new form of artistic narrative that was designed to capture the cultural and emotional resonance of their identities. Talita's artistic works orchestrated photography, animation, musical composition, sound design, film, graphic design, and sublimation printing into texts that challenged the notion of the 'Western' audio/visual interview.

Designing the voice

Talita's typographical design reflected her thesis' concerns with 'lyrical and graceful speech'. In the conclusion of her exegesis she wrote:

I have taken considerable effort to design this text so it not only articulates core concerns within the work (contextualisation, methodology, critical ideas and practice), but it also captures the ethos of the thesis as a whole. Thus, I have approached the design of information graphics in a manner that is distinctively Tongan in its aesthetic. I have also developed nuanced treatments of typography and layout so a poetic balancing of image, text and space offsets the density of the thinking. In doing this I see the design of a thesis as more than its structure; it is also the 'poetic voice' with which the thinking speaks. (Tolutau 2015: 89)

The 'poetic voice' the candidate described utilised the classically proportioned Cinzel Decorative for its headings and variations of Calendar Plus for the body text, subheadings and footnotes. The combination of these faces in a spatially luxurious design produced a text that breathed with distinctive lightness. The 'grace of voice' this produced was enhanced by her decision to print the work on a light cream 180gsm stock, which reduced the contrast between written language, the page and the delicate images that illustrated her thinking. The overall design spoke with something other than a traditional 'Western' voice.

Ellen Lupton has argued that with typographical design, the 'goal is to find an appropriate match between a style of letters and the specific social situation and body of content that define the project at hand' (Lupton 2004: 30). She raises here something interesting about the writerly voice. The 'social voice', be it ethnic, economic, gendered, or disciplined-focused, may be viewed as requiring more than a preferred set of options laid out in a thesis writing manual. If as academics, we engage with different epistemologies, as well as different ways of being and speaking of the worlds we inhabit and study, then not only is the content of what we voice, but also the shape of that content, integral to how we address the world.

Conclusion

None of the theses discussed in this article used Times Roman, Baskerville or the faces Salen nominated in her 2001 critique of the sanctioned voice. The designs were not constructed from a set of prescribed options. Each was considered in relation to the writer's position to their thesis.

Significantly all of the candidates in these case studies began working with typography early in the development of their theses. Even in early drafts of their research writing they were laying up pages, negotiating image text relationships and trialling typographical tone and impact in their work. Inside this process they developed increasingly advanced skills in visual communication design that heightened the quality of information graphics, conference presentations and research dissemination documents emanating from their theses.

The care they took in constructing their typographic voices raises two points for consideration. The first is pedagogical. If we expose students to a greater variety of scholarly writing that engages with both the content and shape of the academic voice, we may enable them to think more deeply about the potentials of how they process, present and receive knowledge [6]. By extension, we also need to think carefully about the 'readability' of what we construct. Here, I am taking a term from typography and expanding it to mean being cognisant of, and designing writing effectively for, an intended audience. While in the first instance, the readers of a thesis will probably be in the academy, many influential projects reach well beyond universities because their thinking is designed to both represent and help shape a wider world.

Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr once said, 'A word is not a crystal, transparent and unchanged; it is the skin of a living thought, and may vary greatly in colour and content according to the circumstances and the time in which it is used'. The written word is exactly this ... it is 'the skin of a living thought' (Holmes 1918). It is carefully positioned and crafted. It is a reflection of identity. How it speaks alters the way it is understood. It is entirely logical that as writers in the academy we should pay heed to the potentials and implications of such a thing.

Notes

[1] Tracking refers to adjustments made to the spacing throughout an entire word. Kerning describes the adjusting of space between letters or characters so they appear to be visually balanced. Leading refers to spacing between lines of text. return to text

[2] Morris' research found that certain fonts engender significantly higher levels of belief in the authenticity of printed statements. The research involved 45,524 participants and demonstrated that text set in Baskerville (compared to Georgia, Comic Sans, Computer Modern, Trebuchet, and Helvetica) made true statements more likely to be accepted and less likely to be dismissed. However, Anderson (2012) has questioned the research outcomes noting that while Morris believed he was simply testing typefaces, he was also concurrently testing a range of factors including their kerning, leading, line set, and size. Moreover his testing occurred on backlit monitors and the findings may not be automatically transferable to print environments. return to text

[3] Jewell recommends 'standby serif typefaces like Garamond, Computer Modern (in LaTeX), Sabon, Bodoni, Caslon and Baskerville' (Jewell 2013). In extending this 'conservatism' to sans serif choices she suggests that academic writers should limit themselves to Helvetica, Helvetica Neue, Myriad Pro and Gill Sans. return to text

[4] Indicative of these regulations are:

University of Waikato: <http://www.waikato.ac.nz/library/study/guides/thesis-writing/4> (accessed 15 March 2016) return to text

[5] Indicative of this flexibility, see:

University of Auckland guidelines:

<https://cdn.auckland.ac.nz/assets/central/for/current-students/postgraduate-students/documents/policies-guidelines-forms/guide-to-theses-and-dissertations.pdf> (accessed 15 March 2016)

University of Otago guidelines:

<http://www.otago.ac.nz/study/masters/handbook/otago050803.html> (accessed 15 March 2016)

AUT University guidelines:

<https://cdn.auckland.ac.nz/assets/central/for/current-students/postgraduate-students/documents/policies-guidelines-forms/guide-to-theses-and-dissertations.pdf> (accessed 15 March 2016) return to text

[6] Both Flowerdew (1993) and Paltridge (2002) suggest that the use of online genre analysis may be useful in this regard. return to text

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