

Language and Materiality

Ethnographic and Theoretical Explorations

Edited by

Jillian R. Cavanaugh

CUNY, New York

Shalini Shankar

Northwestern University



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4 Fontroversy! Or, How to Care about the Shape of Language

Keith M. Murphy

Introduction

On July 4, 2012, standing in the well of a packed lecture hall on the campus of the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN), just outside Geneva, particle physicist Joseph Incandela looked up at the hall's projection screen and, with only a hint of nerves in his voice, uttered the following pronouncement: "If we combine the ZZ and gamma-gamma, this is what we get. They line up extremely well, and in the region of one hundred twenty five GV, uh, they combine to give us a – an ex – a combined significance of five standard deviations." Before Incandela could even finish his words, the room erupted in roaring cheers. Flashbulbs illuminated the lecture hall. Physicist Peter Higgs, a Nobel laureate, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, removed his glasses, and wiped tears from his eyes as the applause thundered around him for several more minutes. For Higgs this event was the culmination of his life's work, an official public declaration that the elementary particle that he had first theorized almost fifty years earlier had finally been observed. For the rest of the worldwide physics community the announcement of the Higgs boson, as the particle is known, signaled a radical shift in how physics itself is conceived.

Beyond the physics community, however, reactions skewed somewhat differently. Alongside numerous news articles attempting to explain the complex science behind the particle's discovery, several online publications chose instead to highlight a seemingly peculiar aspect of the announcement itself: the slideshow typeface used by the event's second presenter, physicist Fabiola Gianotti. "Higgs Boson Discovery Announcement Made in Comic Sans," proclaimed one headline (Rundle 2012); "CERN Scientists Inexplicably Present Higgs Boson Findings in Comic Sans," read another (Byford 2012). Even the designer of the Comic Sans typeface himself, Vincent Connare, took to Twitter to poke fun at another CERN scientist, his friend Brian Cox, as well as his own creation:

@ProfBrianCox what's with the shit slides! [...]

– Vincent Connare (@VincentConnare) 4 Jul 2012¹

And Connare was not alone. Within hours of the initial announcement, “Higgs,” “CERN,” and “Comic Sans” were all trending topics on Twitter, with “Comic Sans” soon surpassing even the phrase “god particle,” the sensationalized label for the Higgs boson that the news media had taken to using. In the comments sections of many news sites, blogs, and other online publications, and especially on Twitter, the reaction to CERN’s use of Comic Sans was fierce:

aaaaah comic sans ruins science forever

– Aaron Linde (@aaronlinde) [4 Jul 2012](#)

just tuned into the live broadcast from CERN. first thing i see is comic sans glaring back at me. science is bringing me down, man.

– Fyza Hashim (@14eleven) [4 Jul 2012](#)

Can’t take research seriously if it is in comic sans . . . #higgs #higgsboson

– Jackson James Wood (@_jjw_) [4 Jul 2012](#)

Something I didn’t expect from the CERN announcement: Comic Sans. . . . COMIC SANS! Apparently there is no better typeface for particle physics.

– brettflorio (@brettflorio) [4 Jul 2012](#)

Seriously, I’m not a fan of bashing Comic Sans . . . but presenting your god particle research with it is like playing J. S. Bach on a ukulele.

– Marcus Schaefer (@raketentim) [4 Jul 2012](#)

Dear @CERN: Every time you use Comic Sans on a powerpoint, God kills the Schrödinger’s cat; Please think of the cat

– Sinergia Sin Control (@fred_SSC) [4 Jul 2012](#)

Indeed in the moments following CERN’s historic announcement, it seemed like much of the nonphysics world had found something other than the Higgs boson itself to focus on. Someone even posted an online petition asking Microsoft, the proprietor of Comic Sans, to officially rename the font Comic CERNs (Reid 2012), and Connare himself signed it. But not all of the reactions to the presentation were negative. While few online commenters stuck their necks out to defend the choice of Comic Sans, a number of people criticized those who felt so strongly – too strongly, presumably – about the font used by the scientists:

Y’all can make fun of Comic Sans all you want when *you* discover a fundamental new particle that’s a key to modern physics.

– Phil Plait (@BadAstronomer) [4 Jul 2012](#)

But if you hate Comic Sans THAT much, you can do YOUR presentation on YOUR fundamental physics discovery in ANY font you like. #higgs #CERN

– William Donohue (@wdonohue) [4 Jul 2012](#)

To be sure, the tone of this commentary was largely tongue-in-cheek. The humor that comes from privileging the assessment of something as seemingly

Comic Sans

Futura Verdana

Gill Sans

Image 4.1 Four fonts.

minor as a typeface over something as obviously major as a paradigm-shifting scientific discovery was just too hard to resist for many who participated in these discussions. But at the same time, the general critique of typeface appropriateness that these judgments represent was by no means merely a joke. Embedded in these comments, and in similar comments that have appeared in what have come to be called “fontroversies” in recent years (see Garfield 2010), is a widely shared and prominently expressed conviction, a “typeface ideology,” that certain *kinds* or genres of discourse and the particular text forms that give literal shape to those discourses should semiotically align in some recognizably suitable way – and if they do not, then public condemnation is an acceptable response. In this case online commenters reacted negatively to what they identified as a mismatch between the stereotyped qualities of scientific discourse – scholarly, serious, and sober – and the widely articulated, and widely denounced, fatuousness of Comic Sans, a font whose soft edges and rounded lines were designed to mimic the hand-lettered text used in comic books. What is revealed in this clash between CERN scientists and their online opponents is that typeface, like language (Duranti 2011), is not neutral, but is itself subject to and complicit in a range of cultural projects along various affective, ideological, and even political dimensions.

In this chapter I explore how typeface, an ever-present formalization of language in the everyday world, mediates different ideological and affective relationships between differently situated cultural forms. I analyze three notable “fontroversies” – Comic Sans and “serious” discourse, Ikea’s adoption of Verdana, and Gill Sans and British nationalism – each of which roughly displays a different semiotic inflection (iconic, symbolic, and indexical, respectively; see Image 4.1). In examining these cases I show how typeface is not merely a formal stylization of some more fundamental script that is itself the target of

ideological intervention, as we see, for instance, in debates over orthographic standards (e.g., Jaffe et al. 2012), but instead acts as a locus of concentrated metadiscursive reflection and debate in its own right, and with its own effects. But this debate is not always, or even necessarily, about a particular typeface itself or even about language, although of course both are always implicated. Instead, as visible cultural forms appearing in specific discursive domains and text artifacts, and with particular semiotic associations, typefaces often operate as familiar mechanisms through which broader social and political struggles are able to unfold.

What We Talk about When We Talk about Text

Language is typically experienced through a number of different modes in everyday life. Speech is perhaps the most common, dominated by voiced phonetic forms sensed through the auditory channel or, for signers, manual signs sensed through the visual channel. Text, of course, is also quite common. Like speech, text is *physical*, in that it displays distinctive qualia perceivable by a sensing subject, but text is *material* in ways that vary considerably from speech. As Shankar and Cavanaugh (2012; Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014; Shankar 2015) have pointed out, relations between language and materiality manifest in many ways, including the material conditions that give rise to linguistic forms, the channels through which they circulate, configurations of linguistic and non-linguistic signs, and much more. While many dominant models of language have focused on its status as an abstract system mostly or entirely separate from the material world in which it actually thrives, others – particularly those influenced by political economy and especially semiotics, with its attention to relations between material signs and the meanings they invoke – have always kept the material more or less in view (see Irvine, this volume).

The material qualities of text-in-the-world tend to afford linguistic activities that are often foreclosed in speech. The activities in which we interact with text are kinds of language games, in Wittgenstein's (2009) sense – but instead of blocks, slabs, and pillars, these games are played with books, screens, and letterforms. Interactions with text usually involve reading or writing, but those are not always the most significant aspect of the encounter. For example, we can interact with text as a form of play (Meacham 2013), as a means for creating memorable biographical artifacts (Nozawa 2007), and as the springboard for producing improvised prayer (Shoaps 2002). We integrate text production into professional development (Wilf 2013) and read texts aloud as opportunities for social engagement (Cody 2009). In other words, far from acting as a neutral medium through which information is simply “conveyed” by a writer to a reader, text is always socially situated in dynamic courses of action, emerging from but also giving meaning to the particular contexts in which it subsists

(Collins 1995). How text does that, however, is a matter of its specific manifestations. Although we may reflexively experience textual language as “just text,” it actually exists embedded in a rich stratigraphy of non-neutral forms – including a material substrate, orthography, and typeface, along with graphic layout, discourse genre, and more – all of which, both individually and as a bundle (Keane 2003), influence how we interact with the text.

An elemental layer in this stratigraphy is a material substrate on which text is inscribed, the (usually) physical basis of some more complex text artifact (Silverstein 1996). The material substrate is particularly significant to the social life of text because different materials, such as a piece of paper, a metal sign, or a glass cell phone screen, afford different channels, rates, and kinds of circulation and consumption. For example, product catalogs both printed on paper and hosted on the internet can reach millions of people, but only the latter can do it instantly; and while the geosemiotics of urban space (Scollon and Scollon 2003) – the ways in which signage and other kinds of text “in place” are made meaningful – may display common or universal features, they are also highly susceptible to local, culturally shaped regimes of evaluation.

In many ways the particular material form that a text artifact takes is precisely what activates the social force of text. For example, following Benedict Anderson’s (1991) analysis of the role played by “print capitalism” in the formation of modern nation-states, newspapers have been singled out as consequential mediators of various kinds of social action at different social scales. They can, for example, be used not only to promote and advocate particular linguistic forms and varieties (Cody 2009) but also to denigrate and devalue them (Fenigsen 1999). They can help shape public understandings of particular persons (Graham 2011) and facilitate shifting perceptions of cultural difference among a community of readers (Limerick 2012). And other sorts of paper text artifacts, such as documents, files, and lists, have been identified as critical, though often unrecognized, vectors of power and authority, especially within bureaucratic systems (Göpfert 2013; Hull 2003, 2008, cf. Blommaert 2004).

The linguistic aspects of text artifacts must necessarily be inscribed in a recognizable writing system or script: an organized and standardized set of symbols used to visually (or sometimes tactually) represent the sounds of a given language or languages. These symbols can take many forms, including alphabets, in which letters represent one or two phonemes; syllabaries, in which symbols represent whole syllables (comprised of multiple phonemes); and ideographic systems, in which pictographic characters represent morphemes or words. Orthography generally refers to these symbols plus others, such as diacritics, numbers, punctuation, style conventions like bolding and emphasis, and rules for how all of this is organized. Even though two languages may share a script, they may not share the same alphabet, and the diacritics and punctuation required by each language may also vary. Thus, for example, English

and Swedish both use Roman script, but Swedish contains twenty-nine letters, including three vowels (å, ä, and ö) that are not included in the English alphabet.

While orthographic systems serve the seemingly impartial purpose of giving basic shape to written language, they are of course not immune from cultural elaboration, contestation, and critique (see Miller, Chapter 3, this volume). This is especially true where some possible “choice” among textual alternatives can lead to, or exacerbate, political fragmentation. This can occur both “between” multiple languages, as with activist fights against Anglicized spelling and pronunciation of Hawaiian words in Hawaii (Romaine 2002) or the display of fraught allegiances indexed in the use of either Cyrillic or Roman script to represent English words in otherwise Russian-language signs (Angermeyer 2005), and “within” a single language, as in adjudicating whether to inscribe Tamil in a more “literary” or “colloquial” form (Cody 2009; Das 2011) or to use Roman script or an Inuit syllabary when representing Inuit language on street signs in northern Canada (Daveluy and Ferguson 2009). Indeed, political clashes over orthographic details are often staged as proxy battles within broader, ideologically charged ethnolinguistic campaigns (Jaffe 1996, 2013; Jaffe et al. 2012; Johnson 2002).

In contrast to orthography, a typeface is a higher-level design or style involving systematic manipulation of the core features of a given script, but usually not so much manipulation that the underlying symbols are left unrecognizable as tokens of a given script type.² For example, while the letter “x” can be printed in thousands of different typefaces, its essential form is generally fixed. Typefaces have names, such as Helvetica, Futura, Times, and Comic Sans for Roman script, and they group into families that share some basic features. The term “font” is more widely used than typeface in colloquial discourse, largely due to its endemic presence in consumer word-processing software, but there is a historical difference between the two terms: in traditional typesetting the word “font” refers to a complete set of letters and other characters in one typeface, one style (bold, italic, etc.), one weight (the thickness of its lines), and one size. However because this usage has faded over time, it is generally acceptable to use the terms “typeface” and “font” interchangeably.

Only a few studies have examined the typographic qualia of text itself in their social-semiotic specificity. Even studies of orthographic conventions (e.g., Jaffe 1996; Johnson 2002; Wertheim 2012; cf. Järlehed 2015) tend to focus on the features of systems as a whole, rather than the details of individual letterforms, diacritics, and the meanings they carry. Van Leeuwen (2006), for instance, has attempted to develop a “grammar” of typographical detail that can account for systematic semiotic relations across typographical systems. From more culturally specific perspectives, both Miller (2011) and Vaisman (2014) have analyzed how young women (in Japan and Israel, respectively) use typographic play as both quasi-occult writing forms and means for projecting distinctively

female online identities. Spitzmüller (2012, 2015) has examined how distinctive characters in German script and blackletter (“Gothic”) typefaces have historically (and problematically) developed as signals of “Germanness” in written language. And Londoño (2015: 142) has argued that a particular kind of “brightly colored, bold-faced, gyrating typography with a hand-made quality of imperfection” has come to represent “Latino-ness” and mark Latino spaces in the United States.

Thus any printed text we may encounter in everyday life is composed of a dense stratigraphy of semiotically loaded forms, including typeface, orthography, and a material substrate, each of which is meaningful and non-neutral in its own ways. There are other layers, too, including a letterform’s size, weight, and style, along with color and kerning (the space between letters), all of which are typically arranged in some graphic layout (see van Leeuwen 2006). As one of the most formally manipulable of these layers, typeface *in its aesthetic particulars* can become a critical source of meaning and a site for cultural intervention for various users of text, including readers, writers, the professionals who design text artifacts, and even people consuming text ambiently in the world around them. And in many cases, that meaning is pliable and shifting, publicly shared, laden with affect, and deeply connected to a range of distinct cultural values. These are the conditions within which fontroversies emerge.

Comic CERNs

The 2012 Higgs boson-Comic Sans controversy was not new for CERN. Several months earlier, in late 2011, CERN scientists had used Comic Sans in a media presentation announcing that a “glimpse” of the god particle had been detected. While this presentation was not as widely covered by the media as the later 2012 event, a similar kind of reaction surfaced on Twitter:

I don’t care how important you think the Higgs Boson is, there is NEVER an excuse for comic sans MS. Not even in a postmodern ironic way.

Benjamin Gray @benjaminfgray [13 Dec 2011](#)

CERN may have discovered the Higgs Boson but they’re losing credibility due to their use of Comic Sans on diagrams.

Victoria Ramon @JuliaChildCIA [13 Dec 2011](#)

Seriously @CERN? Maybe the most important scientific discovery in 60 years and you chose Comic Sans? #higgs #Higgsupdate

Tom Anthony @TomAnthonySEO [13 Dec 2011](#)

I’m pretty sure the Nobel Committee will take @CERN’s use of Comic Sans into consideration when they award the next prize. Not looking good.

Luke Scheybeler @LukeScheybeler [13 Dec 2011](#)

Scientific discovery of the century – and they use Comic Sans on the PowerPoint! #Higgs #Epicfail

Steve Holmes @SteveRHolmes 13 Dec 2011

And as in the later case, there were a few defenders of the font choice:

Twitter outcry right now against Comic Sans being used in the PP at the #CERN conference. Chill – they’re scientists, not designers!

3seven9 @3seven9 13 Dec 2011

One prominent supporter, though his support was mild, was Vincent Connare, the Comic Sans designers who seven months later would take to Twitter to jibe the CERN scientists more forcefully. In a news article covering the presentation’s supposed font problem (Urquart 2011), Connare told the reporter, “Scientists and software engineers have skills and knowledge but often lack good design and dress sense. . . . I worked at Microsoft where it was not uncommon to see people in corporate t-shirts at the Christmas ball. I think it showed that Fabiola Gianotti [the physicist in charge] is an intelligent caring woman.”

What all of these assessments – even the supportive ones – articulate is an ideology that presumes a commensurability of form between a particular kind of discourse and the graphic system that represents it. That is to say, this stance posits that the typeface used to present a specific discourse genre should iconically match the genre and its attendant associations, and in doing so the typeface itself should fade from recognition. Typefaces that are perceived to be too informal or are associated too closely with low-prestige text forms should not, so it goes, be used to give shape to explicitly formal, high-prestige text like the kind of scientific information presented at CERN. Typefaces like Times New Roman, Garamond, and Baskerville – with serifs and straight letterforms and adjustable spacing between letters – are acceptable for this task. Comic Sans, with its simplistic curvilinear forms and associations with low-prestige comic strips, is not.

Connare designed Comic Sans while working as a typographic engineer for Microsoft in the early 1990s, and it has been included as a system font in Windows operating systems since the release of Windows 95. He originally intended for the font to be used in programs aimed at children and computer novices (Postdesk 2011) and thus attempted to create typographic forms that were less intimidating than more traditional typefaces. Many of those traditional fonts, such as Times New Roman and Helvetica, were developed long before the advent of general desktop computing; as such they conform to nondigital printing and signage layout standards and thus are not ideal for viewing on flickering computer monitors. But Comic Sans was one of the first fonts designed specifically for use on this emerging material substrate. Because the

font is easily legible for the children and new computer users whom Connare had targeted, within a few years the typeface had become hugely popular.

But alleged misuses of Comic Sans began to arise. While bake sale advertisements and informal signs warning office workers to “please wash your dishes” are generally considered acceptable uses of Comic Sans, texts addressing more serious or emotional topics – I recently saw a flyer at a hospital with the question “Do you suffer from anxiety or Bipolar Disorder?” emblazoned in Comic Sans – are not. One prominent example occurred in 2007, when NBA star LeBron James left his hometown basketball team, the Cleveland Cavaliers, for a more lucrative and prestigious spot on the Miami Heat, a rival team. In response to this move the owner of the Cavaliers, Dan Gilbert, posted an angry and sarcastic open letter to Cavaliers fans on the team’s website, mocking James and his decision. But the letter was printed entirely in Comic Sans (Biderman and Steel 2010), a choice that seemed to severely downgrade the force of his words. In 2002, in response to these kinds of alleged misuses of Comic Sans, two young graphic designers started a quasi-satirical campaign called *Ban Comic Sans* to agitate against the spread and popularity of the font in inappropriate text genres. On the campaign’s website, which was still active as of 2015 but is no longer on the Web, the founders stated their position forcefully:

Like the tone of a spoken voice, the characteristics of a typeface convey meaning. The design of the typeface is, in itself, its voice. Often this voice speaks louder than the text itself. Thus when designing a “Do Not Enter” sign the use of a heavy-stroked, attention-commanding font such as Impact or Arial Black is appropriate. Typesetting such a message in Comic Sans would be ludicrous. Though this sort of misuse is frequent, it is unjustified. Clearly, Comic Sans as a voice conveys silliness, childish naivete [sic], irreverence, and is far too casual for such a purpose. It is analogous to showing up for a black tie event in a clown costume.

The notion that particular semiotic relations inhere between a typeface, the text or text fragment it gives shape to, and the referent of the text or its discourse genre has long been recognized, though not necessarily clearly understood. In the 1920s Poffenberger and Franken (1923: 312), for instance, noted, “The belief is fairly general that heavy faced type carry with them the atmosphere or feeling of solidarity and strength, and that the thin faced type suggest fineness and delicacy.” This origin of this supposed “atmosphere” of type – the capacity to reflect rather blunt affective categories such as (according to Poffenberger and Franken) “cheapness,” “dignity,” “luxury,” and “strength” – has been attributed to a number of factors, including the qualia of type itself, such as “their shape, size, texture and the character of their lines” (Poffenberger and Franken 1923: 328), as well as the associations that arise from repeated exposure to the materiality of type as specific kinds of text artifacts bearing particular typefaces circulate in relatively narrow contexts of use. In more recent years, as

the *Ban Comic Sans* manifesto attests, typeface has been granted a more anthropomorphized material identity, including a “voice” (Childers and Jass 2002) or “personality” – the tone and connotation that a typeface projects through its particular formal “anatomy” (Mackiewicz 2005)³ – which professionals such as technical communicators treat as significant to a text artifact’s readability and persuasive power. And studies comparing the general perception of typeface “connotation” among groups with different levels of typographic sophistication reveal that professionals, novices, and amateurs alike all exhibit similar basic sensitivities to the indexical meanings of specific fonts (Tannenbaum, Jacobson, and Norris 1964).

While the Comic Sans fontroversy, and CERN’s role in it in particular, has unfolded mostly in jest,⁴ among graphic designers, technical communicators, and typographers the underlying ideology prioritizing the commensurability of forms is actually quite significant. Fontroversies like this one, centered on iconicity and typeface appropriateness, are not primarily concerned with how an individual reader confronts a text, but with socially mediated, publicly circulating ideologies about how information “should” be shaped and delivered by the social actors who select particular fonts from among the dozens usually at their disposal. And this concept of “choice,” that somebody was faced with a range of options but selected the wrong one, is critical. At the core of most fontroversies sits an expectation that type and text, or type and other layers in the semiotic stratigraphy, will somehow align, such that the match between typeface and the meanings and values communicated by the typeface is perceived as appropriate and transparent. However when a perceived mismatch does occur, the discordance is not only noticeable but is also interpreted as a kind of moral transgression on the part of those who have chosen to use the offending typeface. To select a “bad” font or the “wrong” font, according to the logic of this ideology – especially when using a low-prestige font for a serious or high-prestige genre – degrades the integrity of the forms and values mediated by the typeface.

These fontroversies are centered on a typeface ideology that stresses an iconic match between font qualia and the qualia of discourse genre or tone, but of course such matches between forms can never be exact in every case. Any given text genre can be suitably represented (i.e., without contestation) in a number of typographical forms, and any given typeface can suitably represent many genres. But there are also limits to these suitable alignments, limits that online fontroversies are aimed at identifying and attempting to legislate. In the context of design style I have previously discussed the concept of “semiotic tolerance” (Murphy 2013), which posits that when forms of different kinds are meaningfully aligned there is a gap within which their matching can credibly hold. Iconic relations extending between different forms – like scientific discourse and an appropriate typeface – are not always obvious and not

always uniformly recognized. But the semiotic tolerance between these forms provides a space for debate, a space for people invested in these forms and their relations to discuss how and why these forms match, or how and why they do not.⁵

Verdanagate

While language itself played a significant role in the Comic CERNs fontroversy, other fontroversial cases are less focused on language than on the relations between typeface and other cultural forms and values in the typeface's orbit. When Ikea, the Swedish furniture giant, released its 2010 catalog in late 2009, many of the company's fans took to the internet to express their anger – not at the company's new line of home goods, but at the typeface used in the catalog. In a move that one popular online graphic design community dubbed “Verdanagate” (Vit 2009), Ikea sent out its 2010 catalog having replaced the familiar font it had long used for catalog copy, a specially modified version of Futura called Ikea Sans, with Verdana, a common typeface that, like Comic Sans, was originally designed for Microsoft. Though in this case the fontroversy remained largely confined to graphic design and typography communities, both *Time Magazine* (Abend 2009) and the *New York Times* (Rothstein 2009), among other media sources, elected to cover the story.

The controversy first emerged on the English-language internet on the Typophile forums, a site catering to both professional and amateur fans of typography, when a Swedish poster named Raumschiff announced,

It's true.

IKEA abandons ~50 years of Futura and Century Schoolbook for [...] Verdana. In an interview with swedish design magazine CAP&DESIGN the reason for the change is to be able to use the same font i [sic] all countries, including asian countries. Also they want to be able to give the same visual impression both in print and the web.

For me it's a sad day.

What are your thoughts on this matter?

In the Swedish-language article to which the poster refers (Wallén 2009), Ikea's director of communications, Ivana Hrdlickova, explained that the need to maintain a consistent typographic profile across linguistic and national contexts, in both print and digital formats – both of which Verdana was designed to handle with relative ease – was more important to the company than preserving the Ikea Sans typeface. “Our identity doesn't rest on the font,” she said. “Verdana is so easy and so neutral, we think we'll maintain our identity with other elements: the language we choose, our message, the whole graphic profile. All the elements will play a part.” In other words, from the point of view of Ikea, the typeface was less significant than other layers in the semiotic stratigraphy.

But a few “voicy consumers” (Foster 2007) partial to Ikea disagreed with Hrdlickova’s claims. Swedish advertising copywriter Mattias Åkeberg (2009) wrote on his blog, “Where Futura and Century Schoolbook have character and directly link that idea to the IKEA brand, Verdana is a super common web-adapted typeface that’s neither more distinct nor more beautiful.” Commenter Mathis Lövström said bluntly of the need for global typeface consistency, “It may seem logical, but it’s wrong.” Back on the Typophile forum, the comments leaned more conspiratorial, with many speculating that Ikea made the switch because Verdana is much cheaper to license than a custom version of Futura: “I really think that this is a nasty case of a business being cheap.” And another elaborated even more:

There’s a difference between financial pragmatism and just being cheap. The value of the Ikea brand has got to be tremendous, and they’ve spent decades and billions of dollars getting there. Changing to Verdana has given Ikea’s catalogs a very different feel – Verdana at large sizes simply does not have the warmth and cheer of Futura.

Some commenters even resorted to accusing Ingvar Kamprad, the founder of Ikea, of ties to the Nazis, a familiar accusation in Sweden (see Murphy 2015). The most definitive analysis of the typeface switch appeared on the popular design blog IDSGN (Challand 2009) where a number of “before” and “after” catalog pictures were posted as evidence of what one commenter called “a disastrous move by a company that’s supposed to be design-led!”:

-Aww, this is sad.

I like Futura and though [sic] it fitted IKEA’s style of furniture designing well.

-What . . .

That doesn’t feel “Ikea” at all.

Ikea almost owned Futura. Even without the pictures you could tell that it was Ikea. That’s what I called a great visual identity.

-This just plain sucks.

Futura is a gorgeous font and really suited Ikea’s simple, straightforward style. Verdana is mundane and has been done to death.

The issue at stake here was a brand failure or, at least, claims of brand failure. As with CERN’s use of Comic Sans, these commenters articulated a perceived mismatch between a typeface and what it represents, and framed their complaint (even more forcefully) in terms of a bad choice. Unlike the CERN case, however, which rested on a mismatched iconicity between discourse and typographic forms, the symbolic relationship between Futura as a typeface and Ikea as a company was more or less arbitrary, an association primarily based on many years of use by Ikea, rather than on any formal similarities – although some commenters did indeed posit a “fit” between font and furniture. Futura is a classic modernist font and Ikea sells contemporary modernist furniture,

and while Verdana, too, is a modernist font (as are hundreds of others), the long-standing match between Ikea's brand and Futura in particular had been cultivated and naturalized by the company to the point that a change in font felt to some consumers like a betrayal. By switching from a familiar and respected font, especially one with a pedigree in modernist typeface design, to a familiar but undistinguished font designed for everyday use, Ikea had violated its relationship with many of its customers, who saw the company's reputation for design sensibility tarnished by its new font choice.

If brands are "performative" (Nakassis 2012; Pang 2008) in their capacity to create and cultivate relationships between companies and customers, a good amount of that work is accomplished through manipulating affect (Foster 2007; Manning 2010; Mazzarella 2003; see also Shankar, Chapter 5, this volume), which is at least partly mediated by their particular aesthetic elements, including typeface. Research in academic marketing has identified typography as a central element in brand recognition, affiliation, and memory (Childers and Jass 2002), and experimental studies have shown that consumers prefer brand marks that use fonts that are somehow "appropriate" for representing the business itself (Doyle and Bottomley 2004, 2006; cf. Henderson, Giese, and Cote 2004). For companies like Ikea, typeface plays a prominent role in managing affective associations with the brand.⁶

A significant portion of Ikea's brand is heavily reliant on affect-inflected concepts of domestic comfort, beauty, and intimacy (see Kristoffersson 2014). Similar to many other companies, Ikea attempts to promote positive relationships with consumers through the way it deploys its brand, which Ikea does in some specific ways. In addition to the post-purchase use of Ikea furniture in the home, which the company can only hope is experienced by consumers as comfortable and beautiful, the pre-purchase shopping experience in Ikea stores is designed to be a spectacle (see Murphy 2013, 2015). Fully decorated showrooms are complemented by large collections of display furniture, all of which customers are encouraged to use as if relaxing in their own homes. The Ikea catalog, which is sent to tens of millions of homes around the world every year, is replete with photographs of model rooms occupied by model families all performing model positive domestic experiences. And in stores across dozens of countries, in catalogs printed in dozens of languages, and on websites displayed in those languages, the same text is strewn across walls and pages and screens, text that not only describes the furniture's details but also emphasizes its comfort and beauty. This highly controlled branding system attempts to bring into semiotic alignment a range of otherwise discontinuous things, including particular kinds of descriptive language, material objects like furniture and catalogs, digital and print photographs, curated retail spaces, and – crucially for the brand – concepts of comfort, beauty, and intimacy that all of these other phenomena are designed to support. It is a strategy that directly exploits linguistic

materiality, recognizing that the cultivation of specific affective stances requires attention to the relations between all of these brand fractions (Nakassis 2012) at once.

But affect is “sticky,” in Sara Ahmed’s (2010) phrasing, alighting on ideas, values, and objects with variable intensities and bringing them into different sorts of alignment – and stickiness is not always controllable. When Ikea changed its typeface, the warmly positive affect once attached to Futura, a font described by several commenters as “beautiful,” was lost, and the negative affect linked to the more “mundane” Verdana began to seep into some consumers’ connection to the brand. Given all of the work that Ikea does to foster intimacy in relation to its brand, some sort of reaction to the new typeface was all but inevitable. Commenters expressed a range of emotional states with regard to the switch, including sadness, frustration, incredulity, and disappointment. Many were upset not only by the relative aesthetic merits of each font but also what the choice signaled about Ikea’s commitment to design, a value that has helped the company become the largest furniture retailer in the world. The newer font was both aesthetically and economically “cheaper,” commenters argued, and prioritizing cost over design was a betrayal of the company’s core values (an ironic position, given that Ikea’s business model is based on selling inexpensive furniture). Many warned that the company would pay a steep price for its folly.

Yet after 2009 there were no signs of a downturn in Ikea’s fortunes: dire predictions of a font-based catastrophe did not come to fruition. Each subsequent version of the catalog, and in-store signage across the world, continued to be printed in Verdana. However while Verdanagate participants may not have won their fight with Ikea, similar fontroversies that emerged since then – most noticeably with The Gap in 2010 – resulted in companies reversing decisions to change typographic aspects of their brands.

A Font, Sans Gill

If some fontroversies concern iconic relations between language and typeface, and others, like Verdanagate, involve symbolic relations between typeface and other nonlinguistic phenomena, such as adjacent brand fractions, still others are focused more of the morality of choice and what is indexed in making that choice, embedded in using a particular font.

Eric Gill (1882–1940) is a minor national treasure in the United Kingdom, though today there is a sort of “cultural intimacy,” in Herzfeld’s (2005) sense of shared collective embarrassment, in that appreciation. He was an artist who worked in a number of different media, but he is best known for his sculpture and type design. Gill’s sculptural works adorn a number of buildings in London, including the BBC’s Broadcasting House and Westminster Cathedral, as well as

other buildings elsewhere in Europe. His typographical pedigree was also quite sound. He apprenticed with calligrapher Edward Johnston, who designed the original typeface used in the London Underground, and his own most famous typeface, Gill Sans, is largely based on that font. Gill designed several other typefaces too, including Perpetua and Joanna, and for his contributions to art and typography he was named Royal Designer for Industry by the Royal Society of Arts, the highest honor a designer can receive in Britain. With such strong connections to such English and British things, Gill seems like an ideal representative of what a good Englishman should be. The problem, though, is that Eric Gill was also a sexual deviant.

In 1989 author Fiona MacCarthy (1989) published a 300-page biography of Gill in which she recounted some of his most extreme predilections, including bestiality and incest, which Gill had logged in his diary with the casual insouciance of a disinterested chronicler. MacCarthy refused to sensationalize these newly revealed details, but neither did she dismiss them, insisting, instead, that they held a “very serious relevance” (MacCarthy 1989: 239–241) for understanding Gill as an artist. For fifty years Gill had occupied an exalted position in British culture. His sculptures were inextricably linked, quite materially, with some of the most significant institutions in British society, and his most famous typeface, Gill Sans, had attained a status that only a few fonts ever do: it was both widely used and widely adored. But with the publication of MacCarthy’s book, the British public was unsure what to think. In 1998, for example, after years of debate, advocates for sexual abuse survivors called for Westminster Cathedral to remove Gill’s sculptures from the church, but to no avail (Rohrer 2007). Indeed, the moral discordance that MacCarthy’s biography produced – is it OK for a contemporary designer to use a font created by a typographer with such aberrant behavior? – is still playing out, a quarter-century later.

On many online forums and blogs geared toward typography professionals, the mere mention of Eric Gill or Gill Sans, even in purely technical typographic discussions, will still produce at least a few mentions of his personal life. Occasionally someone will call for a boycott of the font. In 2009 a poster named Jonathan posed the following quandary on the Typophile forums:

i was recently asked to rework an outside designers input for promotional material prior to the receipt of final titles when i noticed that a bold Gill had been used [. . .] This work was for a family show across Scotland and as a [. . .] typeface geek i rapidly recalled the somewhat shocking revelations of Gills life throughout the early to mid 90’s where his extreme sexual misbehaviour was detailed. Not only was he prone to extra marital affairs (hardly unique) but also child abuse (his 2 daughters) incest (his sister) and most worryingly of all, **** (the family dog).

I chose to avoid using Gill thereafter. Am i alone in this decision?

Most of the responses were sarcastic and critical of Jonathan's position, asserting the clear futility of boycotting a font that has nothing whatsoever to do with its creator's behavior. But a few responded with some sympathy:

- Jonathan – you're the first I've heard of avoiding Gill's typefaces because of his personal behavior... Frankly I think there's enough evil in the world *right now* that I wouldn't be worrying about the morality of using a dead man's typeface.

- This world is full of lovely typefaces who's first connotation is something other than dog-shagging.

But the responses were not entirely dismissive:

- I love the man's type if not the man's behavior, so I'll go on using them. But kudos to you for your decision. I can't fault that.

- I would be sensitive to the use of Gill typefaces in something like a brochure for survivors of childhood sexual abuse, simply because if someone were to draw attention to Gill's abuse of his daughters it would cloud the purpose of the brochure and may cause distress to the clients. This isn't a matter of principle, but of sensitivity.

These comments reveal some potential pitfalls involved with the indexical ordering of typographical signs, as well as struggles with how to handle emergent indexical reshuffling when faced with a selection of typographic alternatives. From the perspective of a graphic designer, a typeface should be used to frame a text, to give it tone and texture, and signal a discourse kind, but for the reader the font should ultimately fade into the background. The perceived problem with Gill Sans, however, is that the font itself is intimately linked, at least in the United Kingdom, to the identity of its creator, Eric Gill, who was revealed to be linked with bestiality and incest. Through the indexical reordering that MacCarthy's book brought forth, amplified by the continuous recirculation of the debate in the years that followed,⁷ the typeface now, according to the logic of these comments, inescapably indexes bestiality and incest through its association with Gill. As such, it should not be used at all, or only sparingly, and definitely not in text artifacts that have anything to do with sexual abuse, lest its use in such publications, through the presumed transparency of its indexical ordering, negatively affect a sexual abuse survivor.

MacCarthy's revelations also had bearing on Gill's indexical standing with regard to the British nation. Whereas Gill had for decades stood as an honorable Briton who had contributed many well-known cultural works to the British public, including the Gill Sans typeface, his suddenly tainted reputation threatened to simultaneously taint the reputation of the nation with which he was indexically conjoined. Of course this general problem is not entirely uncommon. As mentioned earlier, allegations of Nazi ties have followed Ikea's founder for decades, blemishing one of Sweden's most potent national

symbols. And Martin Heidegger's connection to the Nazi Party has cast a shadow over the man who is often described as Germany's most significant twentieth-century philosopher (see, e.g., Faye 2011). In Gill's case, while this indexical reshuffling was a general problem in the United Kingdom after his biography was published, some graphic designers and typographers accustomed to working with Gill's fonts were compelled to reckon with the issue through their own professional concerns. Not only might the use of Gill Sans be a tacit endorsement of Gill's unsavory behavior but it could also contribute to the debasement of the British national image by continuing to promote what was once a positive indexical relationship to Gill, despite his now decidedly negative associations.

All fontroversies foreground a preference for felicitous matching between typefaces and other semiotic layers that surround them. In the case of Gill Sans, the details outlined in Eric Gills' biography completely disrupted semiotic relations that had previously been treated as stable, at least for graphic designers, typographers, and allied professionals who pay the most attention to the details of text. Where the typeface had once been a suitable choice for almost any kind of discourse genre or text artifact, in the years following the release of MacCarthy's book, using Gill Sans in one's work became a glaringly non-neutral choice. Perhaps more than most other people, these professionals were well aware of the various links between Gill the typographer, his typefaces, his dishonored biography, and his status as a valued British persona, and they were trained to be aware of, and indeed rely on, the power of such links in their work. As such, the morality of font choice for them became a matter not just of professional responsibility but also of a heightened social responsibility. Would using the font in certain text artifacts negatively affect children or survivors of sexual abuse? Maybe it should not even be used at all, thereby removing one index of Eric Gill from everyday life and thus reconfiguring, if not totally erasing, his widespread presence as a sign of British nationalism. Thus while the scope of participation involved in this fontroversy was certainly small, especially compared with those of Comic CERNs and even Verdangate, the ambit of its moral consequences was quite extensive and profound.

Conclusion

In this chapter I examined three different fontroversies to explore some of the ways in which typefaces, as specific formalizations of language embedded in material text artifacts, are mobilized *as a set of aesthetic qualities* that help organize collective, mediated debates not just about language and text but also more generally about "appropriate" alignments of different cultural forms. The fontroversies are all differently scaled and differently politicized, and organized along different semiotic axes. The case against Comic Sans, based on a sense of

misaligned iconicity, is the longest running, most active, and perhaps strongest fontroversy to have emerged to date, and the ideological stance condemning the typeface has reached common-knowledge status among younger generations – at least on the internet. Verdanagate, in contrast, went nowhere. The online debate and news articles on the subject faded away, and since the publication of the 2010 catalog Ikea has continued to use Verdana for its text copy without issue. The once-sacred symbolic connection between Ikea and Futura is now a glimmer in the company's past. Finally, Eric Gill will most likely continue to occupy an ambiguous position in the menagerie of significant British cultural figures, and while the Gill Sans typeface is still widely used and is under no serious threat, its status will always be up for questioning in light of Gill's personal history.

While all of these fontroversies may be different in scale and scope, they do share some common features that help constitute the fontroversy itself as an emergent genre of action. First, all fontroversies are collective moral deliberations about shaping some wider cultural landscape, even if they seem to manifest as public debates about the semiotics of typography. The three cases examined reveal that typeface works as a mediator between stratigraphically arranged forms that are all centered on text, including linguistic forms (like discourse genres), material forms (like catalogs and PowerPoint slides), conceptual forms (like beauty), affective forms (like despair and disgust), and social forms (like the nation). Indeed, all fontroversies reveal a particular sensitivity to typeface as a significant infratechnology (Murphy 2013), a basic technology embedded in more complex and visible technologies that in this case holds these layers together and helps order the relations between them in actual text artifacts. The fontroversy allows participants to display, contest, and work out alignments of various cultural values and their formal manifestations, and to express their understandings of how the stratigraphy is ordered. Some debates concern language itself, but often they focus on the relation of type and its associations to the nonlinguistic semiotic layers in which a text is embedded. In all of these cases, however, typeface renders language embedded in text artifacts a mechanism by which all sorts of cultural forms and values can be publicly displayed, discussed, and debated.

Second, social media and the affordances of online communication are obvious requirements for fontroversies to thrive. Increased public attention to fonts in recent years beyond the world of graphic design is unquestioningly related to the rise of social media and other communication technologies, which not only place many typefaces in front of people's eyes but also allow (and encourage) public, shared evaluation of those fonts. In this regard typeface is not unique: people hold and express ideological stances about lots of things – almost everything, really – and typeface is only one among them. Moreover, people really like to share those stances through social media. But precisely because typeface

is such a basic component of interaction with mobile technologies and is so ubiquitous in online communication, not to mention so many other text artifacts, it is prominently poised to receive a significant amount of critical attention in online forums.

Third, fontroversies are never dispassionate evaluations of fonts and their meanings, but are always affectively inflected, as the portmanteau itself implies. While some participants may express basic feelings such as “liking” or “disliking” a given font, most of the “controversy” involves translating often inchoate experiences of affective intensities into verbal language, with results that are often blunt, sometimes extreme, and rarely explicitly emotional. The Comic CERNs fontroversy is, of course, largely a satirical social project. But alongside the ironic transformation of an innocuous font into a typographical pariah, something specific has occurred: lots of people actually respond negatively to the (mis)use of Comic Sans. That is to say, each iterative reemergence of the Comic Sans fontroversy, of which Comic CERNs is only one instance, has contributed to a widespread cultural cultivation of a negative affective stance toward the font, at least in the Anglophone world. Individuals may not be able to articulate exactly *why* Comic Sans evokes a negative affective experience when they see it, but they nonetheless have a framework for arguing *that* the font is a terrible choice. In the case of Gill Sans, nothing about the qualities of the font itself indexes negative associations, but the typeface is so closely identified with its wayward creator that some contemporary designers will argue its mere presence in the world is a tacit endorsement of his behavior. Indeed, fontroversies thrive as much on shared expressions of affective stances toward type – even if those expressions are not always commonly shared – as they do on online channels of circulation.⁸

Finally, fontroversies all at least implicitly center on a critique of intention and agency in crafting and ordering cultural forms. Unstated questions about choice underlie most fontroversy contributions. Why would scientists choose to represent their work in a childish font? Why would Ikea choose to switch from a respected modernist typeface to a boring Microsoft font? Why would a designer choose to use Gill Sans, knowing the details of Eric Gill’s moral transgressions? And while all of these questions concern specific fonts used in specific semiotic stratigraphies, they also all reflect a moral valence that extends beyond the cases at hand. Who gets to decide what counts as a high- or low-prestige form? What sorts of symbolic violence can companies inflict on us in our relationships with their brands, which capitalism all but demands of us? How do we negotiate – or renegotiate – emblems of collective identity, and who gets to decide if that effort is worth it? And more.

This is not to argue that typeface controversies are the most critical sites of contemporary social or political struggle. But neither are they neutral or frivolous. As fontroversies unfold on various online (and offline) forums they

operate as sites of serious play within which users of text – professionals such as graphic designers and technical communicators, readers, and amateur fans of typography – can articulate and work through ideologies about the shape of language and other cultural forms in the everyday world through explicit metadiscursive discussion (cf. Jones and Schieffelin 2009). Moreover, in many ways these fontroversies do in fact mimic some contemporary forms of political activism, like boycotts, petitions, Twitter protests, and fierce online debate. And like many such protests they are sticky with deep affect, laminated with overlapping layers of anger, frustration, pleasure, humor, and joy. As such they represent a new and emergent space in which specific language ideologies operate in consequential ways to shape attitudes and practices around text production and reception, and in turn entangle language in broader social and even political concerns.

NOTES

- 1 All examples taken from Twitter, internet forums, and blog posts are presented as they were originally written, although some have been edited for length, which is indicated by bracketed ellipses.
- 2 While there is debate as to whether nonprint kinds of writing (e.g. calligraphic, hand-lettering) can be properly labeled “typographic” (Walker 2001), when I use the term here I am referring to forms derived from analog and digital printing.
- 3 See Drucker (2006) for a critique of the atomist view of typeface elements.
- 4 And CERN is in on the joke. On April Fools’ Day 2014, Fabiola Gianotti appeared in a video announcing that CERN would switch to using Comic Sans as the institute’s official font.
- 5 In 2014, as a result of the Comic Sans fontroversy, a new font called Comic Neue was created and freely distributed, designed to update the formal details of Comic Sans – sharpening its angles and curves mostly – in order to make it “feel” like a more high-prestige font. As the creator’s website prominently proclaims, “Make your lemonade stand look like a Fortune 500 company,” a matching of forms that this new typeface presumably tolerates. See <http://comicneue.com/>
- 6 For more on a text and affect, see Ahearn (2003); Besnier (1989, 1990); Kataoka (1997).
- 7 In 2012, for instance, when hundreds of child abuse allegations posthumously emerged against BBC television presenter Jimmy Savile, the Eric Gill question once again appeared in the news (e.g., Rohrer 2012).
- 8 This is undoubtedly related to other affective phenomena in online forums, including “flaming” (Moor et al. 2010) and “emotional contagion” (Guadagno et al. 2013), emotional responses to things that are amplified by social media circulation.

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