



Charles University  
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# A Sociolinguistics of Typography

## Why Graphic Design Matters to Linguistics

### 1 Concepts & Terms

#### Typography: Definition

Etymology: Greek τύπος (*týpos* = 'letter, sign') × γράφειν (*gráphein* = 'to scratch, to write')

Original (strict) meaning: Production of a printed work by means of a specific technical procedure, namely printing press with re-usable, movable (metal) letters.

⇔ Lithography, Xylography, etc.

Modern Definition: “the style and appearance of printed matter” (Oxford English Dictionary)

⇒ Including style and appearance of written language *on screen*.

#### Typographic Levels (Classic Categorization)

Macrotypography: Overall design of a printed matter and the composition of letters on the page

- Selection of printing material (paper etc.), selection of type faces, visual composition of the page (*layout, type area*), setting of type sizes and distances, page breaks, visual layout of the document as a whole.

Microtypography: Composition and design of script in a line

- Composition of letters to words, emphasis (= bold face, italics, small capitals, underlining, tracking, mixing of type faces, etc.), letter distance (*running width* and *kerning*), distance of words (*justification*), hyphenation, alignment, line distance (*leading*); a wide definition also include design of type faces.

#### Typographic Levels According to Stöckl (2005)

Microtypography: “the design of fonts and individual graphic signs”

- type face, type size, type style, color of type

Mesotypography: “the configuration of graphic signs in lines and text blocks”

- letter fit, word spacing, line spacing (*leading*), amount of print on page, alignment of type (type composition,) position/direction of lines, mixing of fonts

Macrotypography: “the graphic structure of the overall document”

- indentations and paragraphing, caps and initials, typographic emphasis, ornamentation devices, assembling text and graphics [image]

Paratypography: “materials, instruments and techniques of graphic sign-making”

– material quality of medium (paper quality) practices of signing [specific production technique]  
 (Stöckl 2005: 210)

**Latin Type: Blackletter vs. Roman**

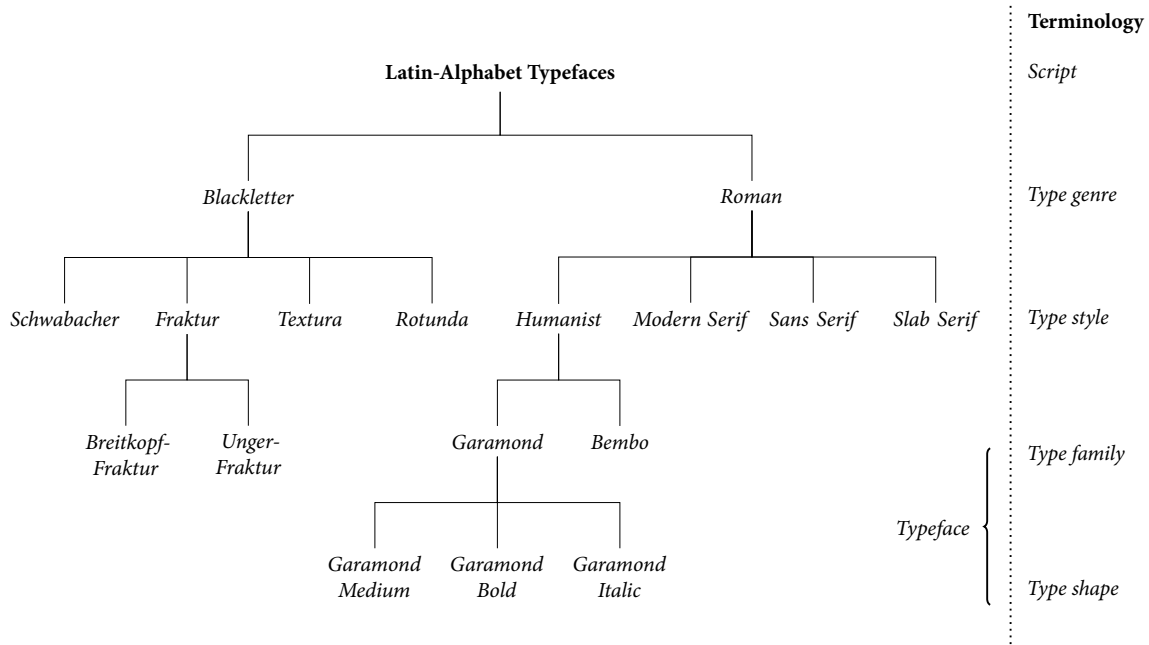
Blackletter variants:

(Some) Roman variants:

**Textura**  
**Rotunda**  
**Zastarda**  
**Schwabacher**  
**Fraktur**

**Humanist**  
**Modern Serif**  
**Sans Serif**  
**Slab Serif**

**Basic Classification/Terminology**



Font/Fount: Material entity as distributed by a type producer (*type foundry*)

- E. g., computer file with glyphs and metrics of a type family or a type shape
- In earlier times: (wooden) box with metal letters

### **(Document) Design**

“Document design is the act of bringing together prose, graphics, illustration, photography and typography for purposes of instruction, information, or persuasion.” (Schriver 1997: 10)

“Designs are (uses of) semiotic resources, in all semiotic modes and combinations of semiotic modes.” (Kress/van Leeuwen 2001: 5)

### **Modes and Multimodality**

“We have defined multimodality as the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event, together with the particular way in which these modes are combined [...]” (Kress/van Leeuwen 2001: 20)

“Modes are semiotic resources which allow the simultaneous realisation of discourses and types of (inter)action.” (Kress/van Leeuwen 2001: 21)

### **Multimodality**

“All texts are multimodal. Language always has to be realized through, and comes in the company of, other semiotic modes. When we speak, we articulate our message not just with words, but through a complex interplay of speech-sound, of rhythm, of intonation; accompanied by facial expression, gesture and posture. When we write, our message is expressed not only linguistically, but also through a visual arrangement of marks on a page. Any form of text analysis which ignores this will not be able to account for all the meanings expressed in texts.” (Kress/van Leeuwen 1998: 186)

## **2 Functions of Text Design**

### **Text Organization**

1. Text organization: How are texts *structured* and readers are *guided* by means of graphic design?
2. Text styling: How does graphic design influence to the *interpretation* of texts?

#### *Questions:*

- How do specific typographic elements help to organize a text (e. g., emphasis, selection of type faces, page layout, combination of text and image, footnotes, headings, paragraph alignments)?
- How does graphic design influence the ‘readability’ of texts?

#### *Fields of Research:*

- textual comprehensibility research, text linguistics, media linguistics

(Cf. Spitzmüller 2017)

## Stylistic/Contextualizing Functions

### Questions:

- How does text design frame/influence interpretation?
- To which degree does design evoke genre expectations?
- To which degree do graphical elements signal group membership?
- Which emotions and appeals are evoked by design elements?

### Fields of Research:

- Linguistic stylistics, social semiotics, linguistic research in advertising
- Language historiography (esp. Historical Sociolinguistics)

(Cf. Spitzmüller 2012)

## 3 (Typo)graphic Variation as Social Practice

### Style and “Social Visibility”

“Style is a means to increase social visibility.” (Assmann 1986: 127, my translation)

### Social Significance of Variation

“In general, we can say that *every difference in language can be turned into difference in social value* [...]” (Blommaert 2005: 69)

“[...] there are in fact many points within writing systems where variation can occur, and *where there is variation, there is in practice always social meaning.*” (Sebba 2009: 39)

### Social Meaning of Microtypography

“I received a letter from a representative of the [German] designer association inviting me to join a committee.

The letter had been set in 10 point Avant Garde, justified, very long lines, huge white space between words, no leading. I rejected immediately.” (Willberg/Forsman [1999] 2001: 78, my translation)

### Knowledge

“[...] the use of the word knowledge (*savoir*) [...] refers to all procedures and all effects of knowledge [better translation: understanding; J. S.] (*connaissance*) that are acceptable at a given point in time and in a specific domain.” (Foucault [1990] 1997: 60)

### Graphic Knowledge

“Sets of beliefs concerning the use and ‘meaning’ of graphic elements which are held to be ‘given’ – or are ‘acceptable’ Foucault (1997 [1990]: 60) – by a specific social group (at a specific point in time) under specific communicative conditions.” (Spitzmüller 2013: 203, my translation)

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