

# The Semiotics of Typography in Literary Texts

## A Multimodal Approach

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This article explores from a multimodal perspective the extent to which the visual aspect of printed verbal language is meaning-making in its own right, and how it interacts with other modes of meaning in a complex process of semiosis. To this end, the article deploys and examines the approach to multimodal discourse proposed, for instance, by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) and Baldry and Thibault (2006), and, more specifically, the multimodal approach to typography suggested by Van Leeuwen (2005b; 2006), in order to sketch out a methodological framework applicable to the description and analysis of the semiotic potential of typography in literary texts.

*Keywords: typography, multimodality, distinctive features, icon, index, discursive import.*

### *I. Introduction*

Typography is absolutely central to the Gutenberg Parenthesis – to printing, the book, the novel. Nevertheless, there is a general tendency in literary criticism to disregard the semiotic potential of typography in literature by focusing monomodally on word-meaning only. This, of course, is not to say that typography has been completely ignored in critical works on literature (see, for instance, Levenston 1992; McGann 1993; Gutjahr & Benton 2001), yet if measured against the enormous output of literary criticism altogether, typographical issues clearly do not take up a very prominent position. Furthermore, the failure to appreciate the meaning-potential of typographical features in literary texts is time and again reflected by choices made in the technical production and distribution of works of literature. Thus, for instance, the wish to produce cheap paperback editions of Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story* (1979) overrules the fact that a central layer of meaning is created by the coloured

typography of the novel which vacillates between narratives in red and green. While still available in the bookshop, most current editions of Ende's novel are set in black type only. Similarly, the meaning of typography is completely disregarded in the recent first publication of Kerouac's original draft of *On the Road* (*On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 2007) which reproduces the original wording of the first draft of the novel, but is set in the typeface of Iowan rather than in Kerouac's original typewriter font. In the spirit of the Gutenberg project – with its focus on the materiality of print production and reception – the present article wishes to acknowledge and explore the meaning-potential of the visual aspect of printed verbal language in literature. It will do so from a multimodal perspective, which will be introduced very briefly in the following. For more comprehensive introductions to multimodality, see, for example, Van Leeuwen (2005a), Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) and Machin (2007).

In *Multimodal Discourse*, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) present a view of communication that invites us to view all types of communication as involving more than one semiotic mode. Clearly, much contemporary communication consists of a complex interplay of different modes – such as sound, gesture, music, visual images, written and spoken language – yet in Kress and Van Leeuwen's view, even printed verbal discourse is multimodal and ideally should be analysed accordingly. The aim of the work done within the field of multimodality is hence to develop a systematic analytical methodology and descriptive apparatus that accommodate the interplay of different semiotic modes and recognise the multimodal complexity of all meaning-making. According to Machin (2007, x), what is special about the multimodal approach to communication is 'the idea that all modes need to be considered with the same kind of detail, as semiotic systems in themselves, whose potential choices, patterns and grammar can be described and documented' – an idea that should consequently also be pursued when it comes to the analysis of typography. In his own treatment of the visual side of verbal language, Machin acknowledges the increased attention given to typography today in the design of film posters, newspapers, advertising, websites and the like, yet calls attention to the fact that in much analysis of typography there is 'still a tendency to move quickly onto affect rather than actual detailed

description' (Machin 2007, 89). To counter what he sees as a tendency towards interpretation based on impressionism, Machin calls for systematic description and analysis of typographic meaning-making.

Pursuing these lines of thought, I shall in the following explore the applicability of a multimodal framework for the analysis of typography in literary texts. Particular attention will be paid to the concepts of 'distinctive features', 'index', 'icon' and 'discursive import', while the texts selected for analysis extend from typographically fairly conventional literary texts to literature that deliberately experiments with typography and thereby more emphatically invites a multimodal approach.

The concept of typographical meaning employed in this article is relatively broad, extending from handwriting via calligraphy to printed type. The rationale behind this approach springs from Lupton's observation that 'typography is what language looks like' (Lupton 2004) and a firm belief in line with multimodal thinking that a number of common semiotic principles are at play when it comes to decoding the visual side of language, whether written by hand, calligraphed or printed. That handwriting, calligraphy and printed typography may be seen as visual signifiers in a continuum rather than as separate semiotic systems is supported historically by the development of printed typography from handwriting via calligraphy. While calligraphy may be seen as a refined version of handwriting, the so-called humanist typefaces are, in turn, closely related to calligraphy, displaying 'reminiscences' of the movement of the hand such as curvature and the contrast in thickness of the different strokes that make up the letter. Such 'traces' of bodily motion were later eliminated by typefaces that employ more abstract forms, reflecting a mechanical origin rather than a human one (cf. Lupton 2004; Mosbæk Johannessen 2008). Altogether, the visual side of verbal language may thus be seen as one continuous semiotic system stretching from strokes whose origin is that of bodily motion via gradually more stylised versions of the same movements (calligraphy and humanist typefaces) to strokes displaying no remnants of manual acts of sign-making.

## *II. Distinctive features*

To most readers, it does not really matter whether a novel is set in Times or Palatino, in fact most of us probably fail to notice the typeface at all, yet

when, for instance, black-letter type is used for the chapter headings in Kostova's novel *The Historian* (2005), typography is clearly semiotic in its own right in that the visual appearance of the text here constructs the meaning of 'archaic' and 'gothic' and hence adds visually to the gothic contents of Kostova's vampire novel. Due to the varying degrees of interpretational attention that different typefaces appear to spur, the following questions are pertinent in the analysis of typographical meaning in literature: *When* – and to what extent – is the typography of a given text meaning-making in its own right? *What* is the meaning created by the visual aspects of letterforms? *How* is it created?

In the attempt to answer these questions, the logical choice would be to turn to the field of typography. From this well-established field of expertise, with a long and proud history, the literary critic may delve into excellent works on the design and history of different typefaces, the anatomy of individual letters, the legibility of different typefaces, and so on. Thus a detailed descriptive apparatus is set out and explained in a large number of books on typography and graphic design in terms of the letter's different constituent parts – such as *ascenders*, *descenders*, *baseline*, *x-height* (see e.g. Felici 2003; Lupton 2004) – which will ease description and ensure precision for those who wish to include the visual side of printed verbal language in their analysis of the literary text.

Describing letterforms in terms of their constituent parts does not take us very far in the description of the more specific physical qualities of a given typeface, however; nor does it contribute much to considerations about the meaning-potential of a given typeface – that is to say, of the semiotic *how* and *what* of typography. Lamenting the general reluctance to acknowledge the communicative potential of the visual side of written verbal language outside the specialist field of typography, Van Leeuwen (2005b) calls for a 'grammar' of typography. He accordingly develops a system of distinctive typographical features (Van Leeuwen 2006), which in his view 'opens up a potential for "grammar", for formulating syntagmatic rules, rules of inclusion ("both ... and") and exclusion ("either ... or")' (p. 152). The distinctive features are listed and exemplified in figure 1, while their semiotic potential will be discussed later.

Thus in addition to being described in terms of its constituent parts, a given letter, and typeface, may also be described in terms of its characteristic features – features that set it off from other typefaces,

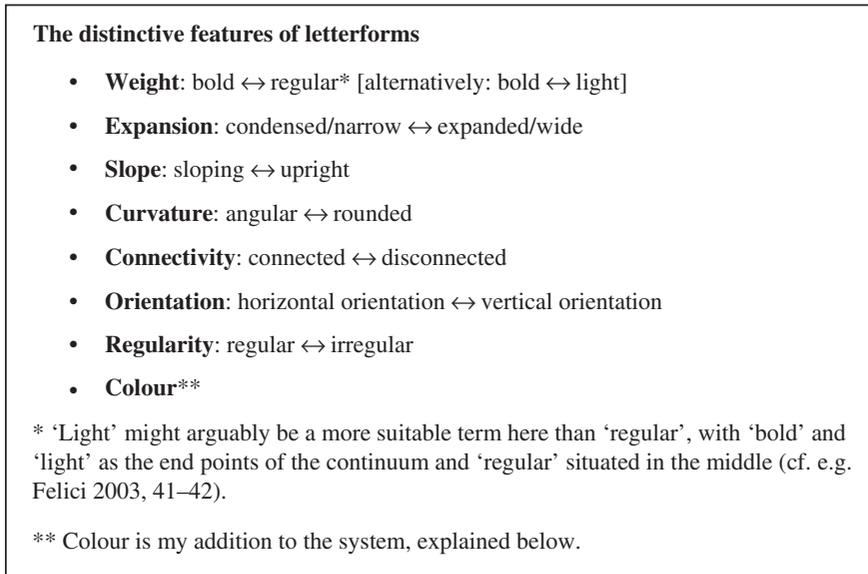


Figure 1: The distinctive features of letterforms (based on Van Leeuwen 2006)<sup>1</sup>

encompassing different semiotic potentials (cf. the sections on *index*, *icon* and *discursive import* below: IIIa, b, and c). The distinctive features combine in different ways so that one typeface will be described as bold, expanded, sloping, rounded, connected, oriented towards the horizontal dimension and regular, whereas the combination of distinctive features will be quite different for another typeface. With many of the features, the contrast (bold ↔ regular, condensed ↔ expanded, etc.) is not binary but gradual, so that, at least in theory, we may have degrees of, for example, boldness and expansion, but as producers of text we are often only presented with a binary choice such as either 'bold' or 'regular' (cf. Van Leeuwen 2006, 148).

It should be noted that Van Leeuwen explicitly calls his work 'a first attempt at identifying the distinctive features of typography' (Van Leeuwen 2006, 147) and that the list does not provide an exhaustive description of typography. A feature that could well be added to the list – and has been here – is that of 'colour', as will be demonstrated later. However, the inclusion of colour automatically opens up for the inclusion of further choices such as 'colour saturation', 'colour modulation', 'hue', and so on (cf. Kress & Van Leeuwen 2002) and complicates the system, as

would the inclusion of features like ‘surface’ (glossy ↔ matt) and ‘edging’ (straight ↔ blurred or shadows ↔ no shadows). In spite of the provisional nature of Van Leeuwen’s system, and the many possible expansions with consequent increases of detail, the categories set out in figure 1 would seem to form a useful and operational basic descriptive apparatus which may have to be extended to capture specific aspects of specific typefaces, yet seems to embrace the most significant meaning-making features of typography which will be needed for typographical analysis in literary texts. Rather than slavishly commenting on all the distinctive features listed in figure 1 when analysing a given typeface, it will usually suffice to focus on the most salient features of the typeface in context.

### *III. Index, icon and discursive import*

In a special issue of *Visual Communication* devoted to typography, Van Leeuwen (2005b) presents what he sees as two key semiotic principles involved in the creation of typographic meaning: connotation and metaphor. According to Van Leeuwen, connotation involves the ‘discursive import’ of typographic signs into a context where they did not previously belong. The meaning created thus stems from an import of associations from the domain to which a given typeface originally belonged to the domain into which it has been imported (p. 139). In the analysis of the meaning-potential of this kind of typographical import we must ask ourselves where the signs come from and what associations they carry with them into the new domain where they are employed.

The second semiotic principle is that of metaphor (cf. Van Leeuwen 2005a, 29–36, on which the following brief account of metaphor is based). Like metaphor proper, typographical metaphor is based on a principle of similarity. While metaphor proper – as exemplified by, for instance, ‘My love is a rose’ – transfers meaning from one domain, ‘rose’, to another, ‘my love’, with the implications that my love has some of the same qualities as those of a rose, typographical metaphor is based on a principle of similarity between the visual form of the signifier (the letterforms) and the signified. In describing how this metaphorical typographic meaning comes about, Van Leeuwen furthermore talks about the experiential meaning-potential of typography: ‘The idea [...] is that a material signifier has a meaning-potential that derives from our physical experience of it, from

what it is we *do* when we articulate it, and from our ability to extend our practical, physical experience metaphorically, to turn action into knowledge' (Van Leeuwen 2006, 146–147). In Van Leeuwen's use of the term, typographical metaphor hence appears to cover and combine two somewhat different principles: the similarity between the typographical signifier and the signified, as well as meanings to do with the material origin of the signifier.

While largely inspired by and indebted to Van Leeuwen's approach to typography and his ideas about typographical metaphor and connotation, I shall in the following argue for a slightly different approach to the categorisation of typographical meaning for reasons partly stated here and partly illustrated by analyses below. Since connotation is a very broad principle which is at play in many contexts – amongst others as an important inherent feature of metaphor – Van Leeuwen's alternative term of 'discursive import' appears to be a more apt and precise term for capturing the kind of meaning that is at play when typographic signs are imported into a context where they did not previously belong. In a literary context, Van Leeuwen's choice of 'connotation' and 'metaphor' as coordinate principles of meaning-making may seem particularly confusing because of the already central status of the terms in literary criticism where connotation is seen as a principle involved in, and hence arguably subordinate to, metaphor.

In order to distinguish between the two principles at work in Van Leeuwen's concept of typographical metaphor, Peirce's concepts of 'icon' and 'index' (e.g. in Chandler 2002) would seem a functionally more adequate choice of categories. In the case of iconicity, the signifier resembles or imitates the signified, while the meaning-potential of the index resides in a basically physical and/or causal relation between the signifier and the signified, as in the archetypical examples of the relation between smoke and fire, and between a footprint and the person who made the footprint. Typographically, the same kinds of meaning occur when a typographical signifier either looks like that which it signifies (icon), or invokes the material origin of its own coming into being (index). Although at times interacting in typographic meaning-making, these two types of meaning seem so differently motivated that they are best treated as different semiotic principles. It should be noted that altogether index, icon and discursive import are not mutually exclusive semiotic categories, as

will be demonstrated in the analyses below. Nevertheless, their application in the analysis of typographical meaning appears to provide the analyst with more distinct categories than those of connotation and metaphor.

*a. Index*

Tracing the life story of homeless Stuart Shorter, Alexander Masters's biographical novel *Stuart. A Life Backwards* ([2005] 2006) is an explicitly multimodal text which makes use of drawings, photographic images, newspaper articles, and so on, in the reconstruction of the life of its main character. As part of its meaning-making, the novel furthermore contains facsimile reproductions of a number of entries from Stuart's private diary (e.g. Masters 2006, 159–161). This is a fairly simple example of indexical meaning where the look of the writing invokes the material origin of its own coming into being. A central effect of the insertion of these visual reproductions of Stuart's handwriting is clearly the creation of mimesis, or, in multimodal terms, of *high modality* in the sense that 'what we see is what we would have seen if we had been there' (cf. Van Leeuwen's definition of modality; Van Leeuwen 2005a, 160–177).<sup>2</sup> While the original function of Stuart's diary entries was to remind himself of things to do and things done, extra (indexical) meaning is created when the diary entries are reproduced in Masters's novel, since the graphological trace of Stuart in this new context helps authenticate his existence to the readers, as do the photographic images, the newspaper clippings, and so on. As the handwriting of Stuart's diary entries gradually begins to disintegrate, an additional layer of iconic meaning seems to develop from the indexical meaning described above, signifying a possible iconic similarity between the disintegration of Stuart's handwriting and of his state of mind. This reading is, in fact, supported multimodally by means of word-meaning, through which Masters explains how the look of Stuart's handwriting is paralleled by a period of mental disturbance (Masters 2006, 159–162).

While the handwriting of Stuart's diary entries can thus be seen as authentic indexical markers of Stuart's existence, as well as iconic signifiers of his mental state, the inherent indexical meaning of handwriting may furthermore be utilised for the fictional creation of indexical (and possibly also additional iconic) meaning in literary texts where handwriting is inserted into printed text. A good example of this occurs in Jonathan

Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). In this novel, the nine-year-old protagonist Oscar, in his search for the 'truth' about his father who died in the terror attacks in New York of 11 September 2001, visits an art supplies store in his neighbourhood where he comes across a notepad used by customers to test different pens (Foer 2005, 47–49). At this point of the narrative, several pages consist of what looks like reproductions of pages from the notepad: handwritten scribbles (typically of names of colours or people), characterised most importantly by the distinctive features of irregularity and colour, but in many instances also by their often sloping, rounded and connected nature (cf. Van Leeuwen's list of distinctive features in figure 1 above). As in *Stuart. A Life Backwards*, the occurrence of handwriting within otherwise printed text creates authenticity through its high modality, even though the authenticity is here of a fictional nature, since neither the notepad nor the characters exist outside the fictional universe. The graphological signifiers thus function as fictional indices of the people who produced them. When Oscar discovers his father's name, Thomas Schell, on one of the notepads, he (and the reader with him) interprets this handwritten name as an indexical marker that his father has been there – a misconception that is later rectified when it turns out that 'Thomas Schell' is an indexical marker of Oscar's grandfather (of that same name), rather than of his father.

Interestingly, the high modality of the fictional indexical graphological meaning here appears to overrule the low modality of the remaining modes involved in the construction of meaning. In contrast to the high modality of the graphological signifiers in colour, the representation of the paper and the edges of the notepad are characterised by low modality in that the paper quality and colour are simply that of the novel itself, while a rectangle consisting of four black lines constructs the meaning of 'the edges of a notepad'. In the context of a novel consisting mainly of black printed text, however, the handwriting in colour appears to be so salient that readers tend not to notice the low modality of the other modes involved.

#### b. Icon

According to Van Leeuwen (2005b, 140) the roundness of one typeface may be seen as a visual metaphor for qualities like 'organic', 'naturalness' and 'femininity', while bold may signify 'assertive', 'solid', and so on, and

narrow typeface perhaps ‘economical’ or ‘cramped’. It should be noted that Van Leeuwen (2006, 149) makes a point of emphasising that no automatic one-to-one relationship exists between typographic form and meaning, but that the typographical meaning-potential depends on the context in which the given typographical features occur. To many, including the author of the present article, such claims about typographical meaning may nevertheless appear somewhat vague, despite the tendency among typographers to talk about different typefaces in exactly such terms (cf. e.g. Antonetti 1999; Lupton 2004). While care should be taken to avoid the fallacy of over-interpreting what Van Leeuwen refers to as the metaphorical meaning-potential of typography, dealt with as iconic meaning in the present article, the iconic meaning-potential of typography is quite obvious in some cases, as, for example, when the visual salience of letterforms is employed to convey a different kind of salience. In the following opening of a charity meeting in *Stuart. A Life Backwards*, the typographical feature of majuscules (more specifically: tall caps) is thus clearly employed to convey sonic salience: ‘A former Labour Cambridge mayor, a no-nonsense political bruiser, called the gathering to silence. “Order, order, ORDER! WILL YOU PLEASE BE QUIET!”’ (Masters 2006, 16). In addition to the iconic use of visual salience to create the meaning of sonic salience, a different kind of visual salience – that of italics – is often used to signify a different kind of salience, namely emphasis on word-meaning. In Masters’s description of Stuart’s car below, the visual salience of italics clearly adds salience to the word-meaning of the italicized words:

This Volkswagen Polo in which we are sitting is one of Stuart’s rare legal cars, in that it was *purchased* (from his sister), its transfer *declared* to the DVLA, and the fact that it has alloy wheels does not mean somebody else’s motor has been left with its axles balanced on bricks. They, too, have been *bought*. As for the rest: there is no insurance, the tax will be out of date in ten hours and seventeen minutes, Stuart shows a disappointing lack of interest in when the MOT is due, and he does not have a driving licence. (p. 127)

Here, too, the meaning-making process is best categorised as iconic.

As a matter of fact, italics appear to afford quite a number of different kinds of meaning in Masters’s novel, many of which are also employed in other works of literature. In one example, italics construct the meaning of ‘mocking accent’:

They argued. As they were shouting some students fluttered by on a punt, with champagne glasses and boaters, and started mocking their accents. [...] ‘You’re exactly like your fucking father!’

*‘You’re exactly like your fucking father!’* the students mimicked, rolling with laughter.

‘You’ve just done what you always have a go at your father for doing,’ she screamed.

*‘You’ve just done what your father done!’*

‘What you going to do, hit me now?’

*‘What you going to do, hit me now?’*

(Masters 2006, 182)

In another passage, italics construct the meaning of ‘whispering’: “*Stu – you awake?*” It was his brother Gavvy, whispering across the bedroom, half an hour after the last creak of the bed in his parents’ room as his mother turned into sleep position’ (p. 106). And in a third example, italics construct the meaning of ‘thinking to oneself’:

Stuart has been talking non-stop since 4.30 a.m. – I feel he has been talking ever since the Blinding Idea first came to him – yap, yap, yap, HIV, hepatitis C, why homeless people smell, why homeless people can’t get their heroin doses right, why homeless people never do anything except shout obscenities and shit on charity workers, why homeless people always feel obliged to make ten times the amount of noise as anyone else, why homeless people blame anyone but themselves for being homeless, yap, yap, yap.

‘Then you got drying out and foot problems. Homeless people get wet, you know.’

*Who cares?*

‘Your foot just fucking ends up mouldy basically.’

*I wish it would drop off.*

‘You know what it’s like ...’

*No, I work for my living. I’ve got a house.*

‘... if you go out and your socks get wet, you come home and your skin’s white, isn’t it? Imagine that when it’s been raining for two or three days. It’s all water and little mushrooms and no foot.’ (p. 66)

In all these examples, the visual contrast between the text in regular type and the text in italics may be seen as iconically signifying difference in terms of meaning. With the danger of overinterpreting, the use of italics

may even be seen as iconically conveying a sonic (sloping?) quality of mocking accents and of whispering (cf. Van Leeuwen's distinctive features), as well as, perhaps, of the (fleeting) quality of thoughts. Altogether, such uses of italics are fairly conventional and are hence a feature of texts that readers tend not to notice much. Nonetheless, it seems worth noting that our ability to decode these and similar instances of italics is largely due to the multimodal nature of meaning-making in these passages. Because italics may be used for the creation of many different kinds of meaning, the need for other signifiers to disambiguate the meaning of this typographical feature is obvious. In the examples of whispering and mocking accents above, the mode of word-meaning provides the information needed for us to decode the typographic salience (i.e. 'It was his brother Gavvy, whispering across the bedroom'; 'some students [...] started mocking their accents'). In the example of Masters's thinking, our decoding appears to be based on the interaction of several textual elements: on iconic contrast between regular and italics; on the typographical feature of quotation marks and their absence in the italicised sentences; as well as on word-meaning combined with our contextual awareness of politeness in discourse, according to which addressing the italicised sentences to a homeless person would be considered highly insensitive and rather unlikely.

That iconic and indexical meaning may at times be simultaneously at play in typographical meaning-making is seen in Mads Brenøe's novel *David Feldts efterladte papirer* (The Posthumous Papers of David Feldt; 1997). This novel consists of David Feldt's (fictional) diary which is left to his sister after Feldt's suicide in the prison to which he is, in his own mind mistakenly, sentenced for murder. On one of the first pages of the novel, Feldt explicitly comments on the pen he is writing with and the black colour of its ink (Brenøe 1997, 9). At this particular – early – point in the narrative, this piece of information simply seems to be a trivial detail mentioned in passing. However, later, when Feldt starts writing with an old golden fountain pen he has been persuaded to buy from the elderly owner of a second-hand bookshop, we grasp the significance of the previous mentioning of the black pen, since what he writes with the golden pen occurs on the page in blue type. The meaning thus created may be seen as iconic resemblance in terms of colour with blue typeface constructing the meaning of 'blue ink'. At the same time, however,

fictional indexical meaning appears to be at play here, too, in the sense that the blue colour of the typeface may be seen as a fictional indexical marker of the pen that wrote the text in blue.

Where the meaning created in terms of colour in Foer's novel mentioned above involved a clash in terms of the modality of different semiotic modes (i.e. typography and visual background), a similar modality clash occurs between the different sub-modes involved in the typography itself (i.e. colour and shape) in Brenøe's novel. While Brenøe makes use of high modality in terms of colour, the meaning thus created clashes with the low modality of the shape of the letters, which is simply that of the typeface employed for the entire novel, Minion, rather than handwriting or a typeface that might resemble handwriting. In terms of colour, what the reader sees apparently resembles 'what we would have seen, if we had been there' (i.e. high modality), yet at the same time this is clearly not the case when it comes to the shape of the letters: while one aspect of the typography creates mimesis, the other seems to undermine it. Since printed typeface is what readers expect in a novel, however, the salience created by the unexpected choice of colour – and thereby also its mimetic quality – appears to overshadow the less mimetic quality of the letterforms. As readers we may consequently tend to accept the blue as the colour of the ink and ignore the inconsistency that exists when it comes to letterform.

The use of colour in Brenøe's novel interacts with word-meaning in significant ways. On its first occurrence, the word-meaning of the blue part of the narrative is apparently unrelated to that of the black part:

'How nice it is that the sun is shining so brightly, it is good to see the shadows made on the walls when the sunbeams find small irregularities, bricks that do not fit perfectly, old nails.'

The pen was incredibly nice to write with. As expected, the little curve of the holder made it fit into my hand almost by itself. As had I been made to hold exactly this pen and not other.

But then I read the text on the paper. The handwriting was mine, no doubt about that, but the words I had never seen before:

**Water she can stand, but that is all. Only water. When I realised that, I took my precautions, made sure that she would not harm herself by accident.**

(Brenøe 1997, 47–48. My translation. Brenøe's use of blue here indicated by boldface)

According to Feldt (in the black part of the narrative), the text he writes using the golden pen (printed in blue, here bold-faced) is somebody else's narrative. In addition to the unsettling nature of this lack of cohesion, the horror of the narrative grows when the (blue) narrative that comes out of the golden pen gradually turns out to be the story about a man who keeps the woman he loves prisoner in her flat and starves her to death.

As Feldt becomes increasingly absorbed and influenced by the narrative he produces with the golden pen, the experiential gap in terms of word-meaning between the black and the blue narrative decreases in the sense that the narrative no longer vacillates between what Feldt believes he is writing (in black) and what is actually there on the paper (in blue), but now consists of the (blue) narrative about the man who is starving his lover to death and Feldt's reactions to this narrative (in black). In one passage which describes a fight between the man and woman, caused by the latter's attempt to eat a dead fly to curb her hunger (Brenøe 1997, 68–69), the reader might even momentarily miss the shift from blue to black, since the exhaustion mentioned in black matches the experiential word-meaning of the preceding blue passage. Initially, the exhaustion might thus easily be interpreted as the man's physical reaction to the episode with the fly and his ensuing fight with the woman, but turns out to be Feldt's exhaustion from writing and reading about the fight. The use of colour to construct the two narratives and the increasing interrelatedness of these narratives mirror and help create a significant aspect of the meaning of the novel, namely the possible schizophrenic nature of Feldt's psyche and the likelihood that he is in actual fact the man who kills the woman by starving her to death.

### *c. Discursive import*

A good example of the semiotic principle of discursive import is provided by Owens and Reinfurt (2005) who trace the history of a particular typeface, E13B, from the technological motivation for its origin to its development into a favourite typeface used, for instance, on the cover of specific types of books. Introduced in 1958, E13B was designed as a typeface that could be read by machines and would consequently allow cheques to be handled electronically for the first time. According to Owens and Reinfurt, the typeface soon 'entered the popular imagination and

quickly became a typographic signifier of the emergent human/computer interface and the intersection of money and technology’ (Owens & Reinfurt 2005, 147). Originally, the typeface only comprised the ten numbers and four additional characters necessary for the electronic cheque accounting system, yet in 1970 type designers developed the typeface into a full alphabet, Data 70, which could then be employed in contexts extending beyond that of the banking business. Since then, the typeface has been used for book covers, film titles and music albums, among other things, to signify automated systems and computerisation.

Since E13B was created to be read by machines rather than by human beings, the focus on legibility that often governs the design of new typefaces (cf. e.g. Felici 2003) was overruled by other concerns, namely the fact that the characters must enable precise decoding by a machine. The consequent difficulty of decoding that E13B causes to the human eye is retained in the full character set of Data 70, whose most salient features in this respect are to be found within the categories of weight, curvature and

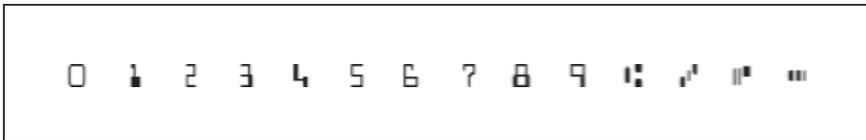


Figure 2: E13B

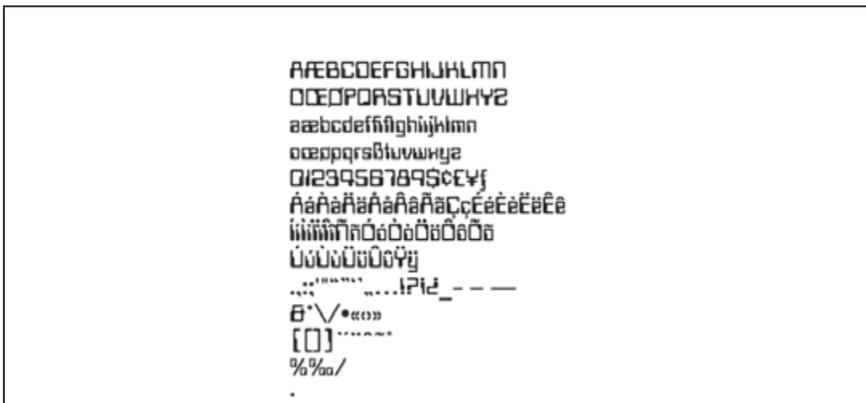


Figure 3: The Data 70 character set

regularity. First of all, all the characters are based on a small number of basic geometric shapes characterised by angularity (i.e. no or little curvature) and regularity, which make many of the characters difficult to tell from each other at a quick glance. In combination with the features of slope and connectivity, realised as upright (i.e. no slope) and separate (i.e. no connectivity), the angularity and regularity of Data 70 make it a far cry from humanist typefaces which, in Felici's words, 'draw their inspiration from hand-lettering rather than geometric forms' (Felici 2003, 306). As for the category of weight, many typefaces are characterised by contrast between thick and thin strokes within the individual letter. A significant and very salient feature of Data 70 is its boldness at unexpected places, which was originally (i.e. in the case of E13B) motivated by readability for machines rather than for human beings. Altogether, the regularity, angularity and the boldness at unexpected places make the typeface difficult to read, which, in addition to its imported discursive meaning of 'high-tech', 'computerisation' and 'space age', hence also gives the reader a concrete physical experience of incomprehensibility and alienation – of reading a text that appears not to be created for our eyes and seems somewhat beyond us.

Another use of discursive import which is often employed in literary texts is the use of Courier to signify 'typewritten' as, for instance, the first pages of Brenøe's novel (Brenøe 1997, 5–6) which consist of a letter from the prison governor to Martin Feldt's sister, informing her of her brother's death and of his leaving behind his diary. Ever since its creation in 1955, Courier has been the reigning typewriter font. At the core of the meaning created when Courier is used to signify 'typewritten' is hence the indexical meaning that this particular typeface is seen as a direct sign that the text in question has been produced by a typewriter. Since the marks thus originally produced for and by a typewriter can also be produced digitally and in printing, the Courier meaning of 'typewritten' may consequently be imported into other contexts where it is not actually produced by a typewriter. Interestingly, the meaning of the discursive import above is likely to change over time, so that while until now Courier has often been used to construct the meaning of 'typewritten', the recent ousting of the typewriter by the computer will probably see to it that in time the choice of Courier in similar contexts is likely to mean *both* 'typewritten' *and* 'old'.

In Dan Brown's bestseller, *The Da Vinci Code* ([2003] 2004), Courier is likewise employed to create a special kind of meaning through discursive import, yet here it is a slightly different kind of meaning that is imported. *The Da Vinci Code* is set in Palatino, but when Brown's protagonist, Robert Langdon, does a computer search to solve one of the many riddles he is faced with in the novel, Courier is used for the presentation of the text that pops up on the computer screen (e.g. Brown 2004, 512–513). The meaning that the passage creates through the choice of typography partly seems to be acquired through contrast. Because of their visual difference from the preceding text, the lines in Courier stand out as different, and do so to a larger extent than would many of the typefaces that are more typically encountered by ordinary users on the computer screen today. On its own, this difference does not create the meaning of 'computer text', yet in combination with the information provided through word-meaning – for example, 'the computer pinged again', 'the computer produced another hit', and so on (pp. 512–513) – this particular meaning arises as a multimodal construct. But why Courier and not a different typeface? In addition to its status as the archetypal typewriter font, the monospaced quality of the typeface made Courier suitable for data processing in computers and telex machines. It was therefore much used in the infancy of the computer and is still commonly used by computer programmers. Even though the technical side of computing which involves the use of Courier is thus typically hidden to the common user, Courier is nevertheless a typeface that many people associate with computers for the reasons just mentioned. In Dan Brown's novel, the meaning created typographically by means of discursive import hence appears to overshadow the fact that because of its poor legibility on the computer screen, Courier is actually rarely used for the user-interface of the computer today. The fact that Langdon reads the text on the computer screen might, of course, have been constructed through word-meaning only, but the choice of the Courier typeface visually reinforces the meaning of 'different text' (through contrast) and of 'data text' (by means of discursive import).

#### *IV. Conclusion*

In my treatment of typography above, attentive readers will have noticed that while employing Peirce's concepts of index and icon for the categorisation and description of the semiotic principles of typographic

meaning-making, I have refrained from including his concept of *symbol* in my descriptive framework. Characteristic of Peirce's definition of the symbol is its arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified. It might consequently seem tempting to suggest that this is the typographical kind of meaning at play in literary works consisting of conventional plain black typeface such as Palatino, Times, Minion, and so on. Because most literary texts are set in plain black typeface, typography is something we rarely think about when reading literature. This, however, does not imply that the typography of such texts does not mean anything. Instead, this particular choice of typography seems to carry the meaning of 'conventional' when it comes to the visual side of the letterforms, while the narrative in question might be unconventional in all sorts of other ways like, for instance, the highly experimental prose fiction of writers like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Through the history of print, a natural (rather than arbitrary) relation has developed between plain black typography in literary texts and the meaning of 'typographically conventional'. The answer to the question of *when* the typography of a given text is meaning-making in its own right, posed at the beginning of the present article, must therefore be answered with a categorical 'always', although some uses are clearly typographically more inventive than others.

In contrast to the infinitely changeable textuality of digital media for example, people generally regard the book as a finished stable product, yet with the focus on the materiality of the book proposed, for instance, by the Gutenberg project and endorsed by multimodal theory, the stability of the meaning of the book must be questioned. Typography is an illustrative example of this. At the level of 'design',<sup>3</sup> authors may choose whichever typography they like for their book, however at the level of 'production' such choices are typically overruled as the publisher sovereignly selects the typography for the final product. Even though more typographical experiment is obviously technically possible and financially viable today than was the case in the eighteenth century, for example, the right to have a say when it comes to the selection of typography is thus typically only granted to a limited number of authors of multimodally rather self-consciously literary texts such as those by Brenøe and Foer discussed above. While the consequent lack of authorial individuality in this respect may partly account for the small interest in and relative neglect of typography in literary criticism,

it does not make the visual side of the text less semiotic. As for a novel such as Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, different kinds of meaning are furthermore created by different editions of the book, as the cheap black-and-white paperback edition clearly differs semiotically from the edition in colour as regards the meaning created by the handwritten pages in colour discussed in section III.a above. Here factors such as 'production' and 'distribution' (cf. Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001) clearly become meaning-making factors in their own right, resulting in semiotically different products.

While still in its infancy, multimodal theory, with its interest in the multisemiotic nature of all meaning-making in context, would seem a promising approach to dealing with literary meaning beyond that of word-meaning. The aim of the present article has been to explore just a small corner of an as yet far from fully established field of *multimodal stylistics* which aims to combine multimodal theory and methodology with that of literary stylistics in an attempt to systematically take into consideration all modes involved in literary meaning-making.

#### NOTES

1. For an extensive system network of the distinctive features of letterforms, see Van Leeuwen 2006, 151.
2. Please note that in multimodal theory, 'mode' and 'modality' refer to very different concepts. While sound, gesture, music, visual images, written and spoken language, etc. are seen as different communicative 'modes' of meaning, 'modality' refers to various semiotic resources for expressing 'as how true' or 'as how real' something is represented. In verbal language, modality is typically expressed by modal verbs ('may', 'could', 'would', etc.) and adverbs ('possibly', 'certainly', 'unlikely', etc.), whereas, for example, softtone may be employed to create modality in photographic images (cf. Kress & Van Leeuwen 1996, 159–180; Van Leeuwen 2005a, 160–177).
3. Cf. Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001 on the semiotic potential of 'design', 'discourse', 'production' and 'distribution'.

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