

we are what we say and how we say it: language as vital culture

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introduction

Graphic design itself is a form of language; a living, fluid, visual encoding of cultural ideas, relationships and possibilities that have the power to transform and question, a process more vital now than at almost any other point.

Often, an outsider viewpoint of the global context is critical for the understanding and discussion of any language: the ever-changing world we live in is having a major impact on its natural, authentic and indigenous cultures and languages, the value and necessity of which we can neither underestimate nor ignore if we are to continue to live, or even survive, in a rich, sophisticated and living world.

I am not a qualified linguist, but, as a designer in visual communication, I am constantly navigating and negotiating the way we view, design, and interact with the world. What I have come to understand through this is that, by its very nature, language is *political*, and consequently open to a positive as well as a negative influence on our lives.

Our languages and cultures are *living* entities, and must be dynamic and evolutionary, not fixed; adapting and initiating appropriate change and new ideas to countenance the increasing prevalence of globalised control mechanisms.

Korea's King Sejong (1397–1450) fully understood this. Hangeul was at that time a spoken but not written language, and had no mechanism to be communicated visually. The only written language allowed to be used then was Hanja, a localised and colonial version of Chinese, particularly prevalent amongst the aristocracy and ruling class, consequently rendering vast swathes of the Korean population illiterate as a result. By inventing and designing a completely new alphabet and language structure for Hangeul from scratch, he initiated a cultural and social revolution by creating a democratic and accessible means to share literature, community, commerce, culture, identity and even power. This he then insisted on as something everyone in Korea should learn. Consequently, more than in most language scripts, we can trace in the development of Hangeul a living embodiment and depiction of Korean history and cultural lineage.

context

We are all essentially indigenous beings, having evolved our legacies and heritage through tribal and social independence as communities, at root the result of nomadic exploration and isolation.

We need to posit an idea of what *is* an indigenous culture or language. Alongside conventionally-understood categories such as artistic and spiritual expression, culture can be stated as the social behaviour,

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Thanks to Ahn Sang Soo and Ahn Byung Hak.

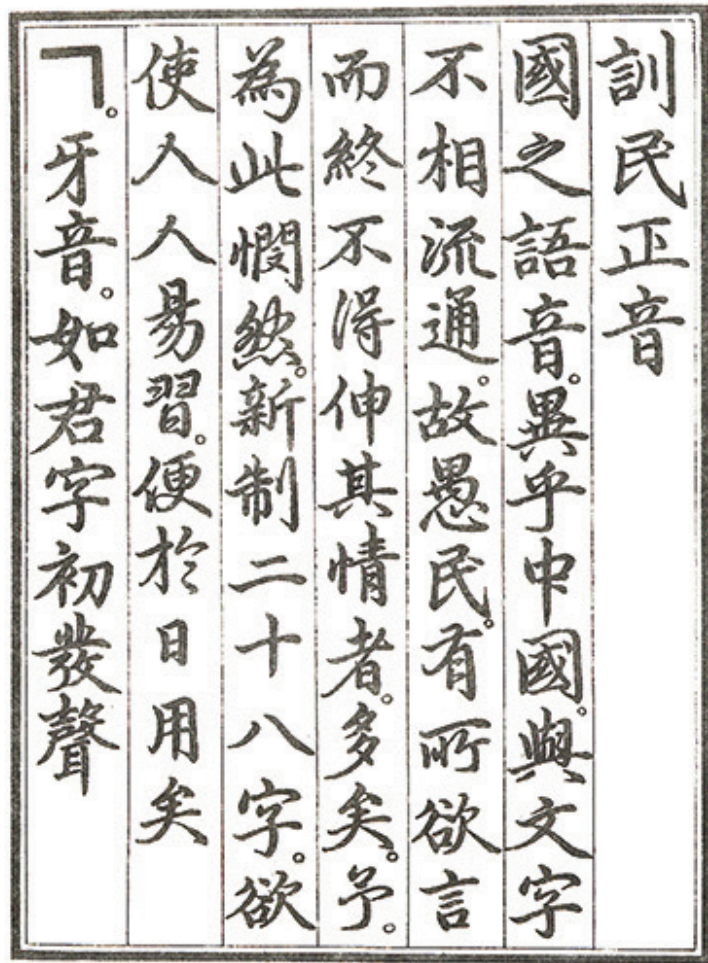
Images courtesy Ahn Sang-soo.



Portrait of King Sejong the Great (15 May 1397–8 April 1450), painted by Kim Kichang, 1973.

First page of "Hunminjeongeum", aka Hangeul design manual, 1446. These original instructions for using the newly-designed alphabet for Hangeul are in Chinese, the only permissible written language in Korea up to that point. The Korean language was widely used in spoken form in Korea, but had never taken written form before King Sejong designed the new alphabet. The first character here is the first character in Hangeul, a consonant.

The text translates as *Because the speech of this country is different from that of China, it [the spoken language] does not match the [Chinese] letters. Therefore, even if the ignorant want to communicate, many of them, in the end, cannot successfully express themselves. Saddened by this, I have [had] 28 letters newly made. It is my wish that all the people may easily learn these letters and that [they] be convenient for daily use.*



social structure, and fundamental beliefs of any society which then act as lenses through which they perceive the world, and through which in turn they are perceived.

Culture is *not* the collection and curation of physical artefacts. It is to be found in the *being* of a culture, in how that culture is *lived* and how artefacts are in fact intrinsically connected to their social and societal functions as utilities. An authentic or indigenous language is by its very nature a relevant and *living* one, evolving, adapting, serving, and acting not only as a tool but as a dedicated vessel for communal history and identity.

This cultural description is not only true of civilizations as defined through geographical location or religious belief, but, as a consequence of the ubiquitous presence of technology, can no longer be described in terms of physical boundaries. A 23-year-old today will likely inhabit

an interest community which is more a part of a global, non-sovereign world hewn out of social media, video games, and brand messaging.

In this space, we seem to be moving relentlessly at an accelerated pace towards a global monoculture, a kind of homogenous existence, where the majority of differentiated identities are melded together into a homogenised single-culture society.

As such, we are all experiencing existential challenges that are hiding in plain view, ones that will significantly impact the way we live, in terms of our identity, power and possibility in ways that will increasingly disrupt, redefine or deplete the meaning we hold as individual beings.

condensation

We are living in an age that can be defined as one of *condensation*: the condensing of cultures, peoples, industries, finance, ownership, politics and identity, which are all consequently gathered, as if they were commodities, into distinct blobs or batches.

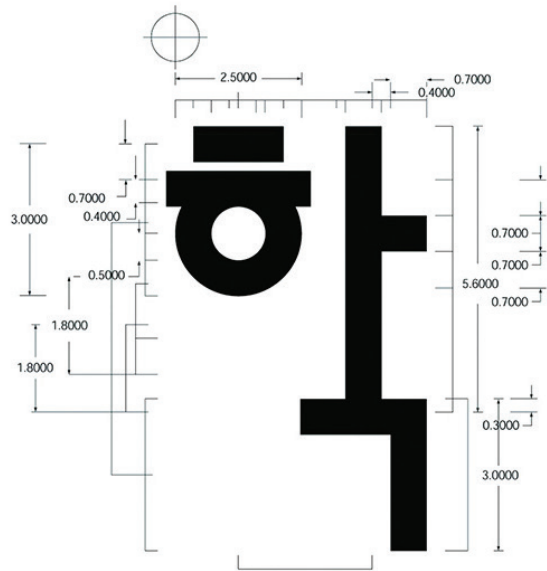
This constant scaling up of what a 'unit' entails delivers and supports an increasingly unequal ownership model, one where the flow and ownership of influence, control and benefit is concentrated into fewer and fewer hands. This model can be thought of as one akin to the process of *entropy*, where sophistication and individuality give way to a uniform and clustered disorder, where a real sense of uniqueness is dissipated. This can be best seen in the relentless charge of globalisation, where any complexity is treated as a glitch, not a quality, and localised cultures are reduced to manageable sets of codes, where languages are treated as forms of DNA for sequencing and splicing.

Most brands today fundamentally believe they need to be limited in their cultural lexicon in order to successfully and efficiently distribute their services, products and ideologies as widely as possible. A complicated model is neither an effective nor efficient form of manufacturing or distribution. In this case, local complexity, and the elements that render it authentic, are frequently assimilated, eliminated and replaced with a homogenised menu of choices.

In the need to distribute produce to ever-larger markets, audiences are mainly treated as one. To do otherwise is seen as challenging economically and difficult to resource, requiring willpower and an army of cultural guardians.

As the growth and sophistication of technology, global platforms and mass brands enable the extension of communication outwards and inwards, reaching every part of the known world and beyond, this process of entropy increasingly takes hold, and complexity procedurally dissolves into its smallest component parts.

The impact of this process is inevitably one of simplification and standardisation, in which complexity, difference, or opposition are flattened out to their lowest common denominator, a homogenisation that distils out unevenness and creates an average or mediocre world in which small, frequently insignificant differences become paramount.



ahn.sang-soo 1985

'Ahn Typeface' Hangeul, Ahn Sang-soo, 1985, right
 'Hak'. The upper left character is the final consonant in Hangeul, and represents 'H'. The upper right character is a vowel, 'A', and translates as 'Study' or 'Crane' (bird). The lower part of the character is the consonant 'G', the first character in Hangeul, pronounced like K. Together they form a syllable.

'Ahn Typeface' Hangeul, Ahn Sang-soo, 1985, left
 There are 24 core characters in Hangeul; 14 consonants and 10 vowels, between them forming 11,172 syllables. Ahn Sang-soo revolutionised the Hangeul written form by designing a more geometric, simple and modern set of forms that made it more modern, scalable and practical.

This sifting and batching ultimately leads to a state of universal *dichotomy*, a diametrically polarised world. We can vividly see the outcome of these tendencies in the politics of today. As the nature of our social communication platforms becomes less complex, and the user-audience increases, the consequence is more and more one of dualistic opposition. Currently-increasing levels of populism directly parallel these decreasing levels of complexity.

The hashtag, meme, emoji or phrase takes hold. 'Make America Great Again, Brexit, #metoo, Black Lives Matter, BTS' – these are all highly effective organisational mechanisms. The danger here is in the reductive focus of these symbols, in that any nuance, questioning or doubt is rarely tolerated, and a polarised outcome is inevitable.

For or against. Black and white. You versus me. In this world of oversimplified messaging and shallow difference, civil war itself becomes a real possibility.

The danger here is that difference, diversity, nuance or questioning are no longer deemed acceptable. Expertise and true risk-taking creativity are largely untrusted and viewed as dangerous, and formulated entertainment then fills the space with comfort and a false sense of ease and security. In some cases, however, this process of simplification can be consciously turned to positive effect.

Similarly, in this world, counter-cultures have a highly significant role to play. Identity-politics, diversity and inclusion are a social necessity born out of the response to the homogenisation of populist culture, where frequently the celebration of the items that stand-out on our social media platforms ironically thrive on consensus and the elimina-



'H (Hieut)'; Ahn Sang-soo, 1985
Updated and redesigned for contemporary use and aesthetics, the final character in the Hangeul alphabet, montaged alongside the most renowned statue of King Sejong, in Seoul, Korea.

tion of difference. Authentic identity and truth in this space have always been treated as luxuries and as controlled commodities. We need to reclaim them. True street culture was always viewed as a threat. Now, codified absorption of these cultures, in fact, of any indigenous languages or cultures, has become a well-rehearsed formula that feeds successful commercial or political interests with artificial authenticity. Mirror images are difficult to challenge, or even recognise as such, and, ultimately, they replace the very cultures that they hijack, which are now converted into clichés and stereotypes.

language

Everything we see or do as living beings is subject to a form of *language*. By embodying and organising the encoding of *signs*, it frames, it enables, and it determines our interactions and our understandings of the world, and consequently our ability to navigate and negotiate it.

Any language is essentially a contract between any number of parties or entities. At its most basic level, we agree that a limited set of identifiable components or building blocks, when assembled in a certain order, deliver a particular meaning. The resultant script or alphabet, with its ensuing lexicon and syntax, acts as a kind of glue that both enables and fixes our communities. As an authentic, living mechanism, it effectively evolves from, and creates, a fluid, codified version of our very being.

In doing so, language can be seen as essentially *transactional*, in that it acts as an interface between parties to enable transactions: transactions of instructions, of emotions, of relationships, of values, of data, and of ideas. It also enables a form of *maintenance*, in that it embodies and acts as a *repository* or guardian for cultures, philosophies, values and belief systems. We identify and recognise ourselves through our cultures as encoded in our languages.

If existence is at root *information*, and we perceive that information through these signs and symbols, then the mechanisms that we use to capture, convey and communicate that information have an intrinsic, inseparable, and significant impact on our perceptions.

Information in itself is not, in fact, *fact*, but is the way that we are *informed* about a fact. The role of language is to convert intangible ideas and phenomena into tangible objects.

In this process of translation, this distribution mechanism inevitably influences the interpretation of the actual object or concept being communicated. Therefore, our languages in their various multimodal forms, be they visual, iconic, written, spoken or behavioural, inevitably control and primarily manipulate how we should receive and understand these embedded ideas.

All human communication is in fact *rhetorical*, with its phrasing, structure and intonation. How you *tell* a story *becomes* the story, and is inseparable from it.

As we are fundamentally controlled and conditioned by our languages, they become susceptible not only to manipulation, but, through an editing process due to a perceived need for efficiency and streamlining, to a form of censorship.

This means that any individual idea can both be framed and restricted by the very language(s) used for it to be distributed or shared. Language in this sense can be seen as a framework and mechanism that enables the sharing of thoughts, and can simultaneously be viewed as a limitation that potentially controls our thinking and culture.

However, as we have seen already, with good intent language development can also be utilised as a constructive strategy, and can catalyse positive shifts in society.

The invention and consequent dissemination of Hangeul intentionally brought literacy and enablement to the masses, as did the shift from Latin to English in Britain, helping to level the elite and to democratise culture and commerce. Similarly, accessibility languages, like sign language or road signs, are tailored specifically for positive purposes.

Language can also be seen as a device that can *extend* our cultures and creative possibilities. I am highly interested in the exploration of ideas beyond conventional languages. By inventing new forms and building blocks of language, that can be combined in different ways to create new meanings, we can begin to release the invisible limitations we can experience through our dependence on traditional languages, and to realise new thoughts, possibilities or experiences.

Originally published in 1991, *FUSE*¹ was an experiment in alphabetic form and structure enabled by developments in digital technology, exploring and democratising ownership of our languages. What *FUSE* did was to explore and reveal how our languages, and the way they are designed or presented, can act as symbols for schools of thought, experience or belief.

1. Launched by Neville Brody and Jon Wozencroft in 1991, *FUSE* was the groundbreaking publication that took design and typography into radically new and unforeseen spaces. "Edited by Brody and Wozencroft (with sparring partner John Critchley), *FUSE* became a platform where the digital font format could be explored beyond its functional role as a carrier of alphabets and icons". Middendorp, J., "Postmodern jam session", *Eye*, 83, 2012, <https://www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/postmodern-jam-session>.

symbols

In fact, our civilisations are fundamentally based on signs and symbols – mechanisms or instruments that convey knowledge, assembled in particular ways in order to convey meaning. By enabling our understanding of the world, they form the basis and origins of our languages. Ultimately, a symbol is both a codified object and an *instruction* of a particular action, belief/confirmation, idea/thought or reaction. As such, it also possesses a *value*, and is therefore transactional or ownable, imbuing power.

Consequently, as repositories for social culture, languages themselves become collective symbols for identity and our reference for authenticity, a mode which is also exposed to the potential process of mass simplification, or condensation.

We see this evidenced in our now technologically-driven universal lexicon of simplified images, symbols and icons, ones that we now can all understand and relate to, and yet have no tangible provenance, as witnessed in the increasingly-generic languages and codes of our urban spaces and digital non-realities.

In the progressively ubiquitous environment brought about by technology, from print to radio to digital, brands and public institutions increasingly utilise what are called ‘condensation symbols,’ a single symbol that can represent multiple emotions, ideas, feelings, memories, or impulses.² This is compounded by increased reach, as our visible world embraces more and more cultures and peoples at every single moment in time.

In brand culture, this can take the form of the cross-cultural instrument of the brand logo or marque. It could be a phrase, like ‘just do it’ or ‘I’m loving it’, or it could be through the more covert form of assimilated stereotypes and cultural symbols, like street culture, indigenous or tribal culture, pop-icons, fashion or music.

Interestingly, and challengingly, as graphic designers we are often placed at the heart of this process. By definition, making something *graphic*, or clear, makes it tangible, understandable and manageable. But you also make it potentially easier to assimilate. Therefore, identification can be seen as a form of exposure, a process whereby something which was intangible is converted into something which is potentially tradable.

Once done, these objectified symbols can be isolated and then swapped out for new, more global and artificial ones, part of a process of global culturalisation. This is the challenge for authentic or indigenous cultures, that by being perceived through their icons, signs, symbols and languages, they can be more easily assimilated, and in doing so can become neutralised and, effectively, rendered inert.

This displacement of local cultures by global interests potentially dissolves local heritage and identity into generic copies, and this is the danger posed by globalisation and multi-national corporations. Strategically, the only counter-solutions/tactics are ones of either invisibility,

2. With origins in psychology, sociology, and semiotic research, a condensation symbol is “a single symbol that represents multiple emotions, ideas, feelings, memories, or impulses”. Sigmund Freud first defined condensation in dreams as “fusing several different elements into one”. Edward Sapir later applied the term to linguistics along with his principle of linguistic relativity, which holds that “the structure of language affects the ways in which its speakers conceptualize the world”.

respectful appreciation, or constant evolution. The response has to be one of either ambiguity, in which the audience is an equal part of a dialogue and where the definition is not fixed, or by respect, where the brand adapts to the culture, not the other way around. Some entities have taken a more sensitive approach to the challenge of how to grow globally while respecting local cultures where possible.

Brands today are primarily manufacturers of *communication*, with everything else following in its wake. Through marketing, UX design and AI, the 'experience' is now largely pre-defined for the user and not left to chance. The user journey is designed and controlled, and no longer truly serendipitous. Apparent user choice here is actually a deception – we are allowed to 'choose' from previously-determined selections that have already been well market-researched and optimised.

Content is king, and the constant search for original or unique material is all-consuming. Brands are now *defined* by the stories they tell, and, more significantly for us, the rhetoric of *how* they tell their stories.

The language, tone of voice, typeface, approach to imagery, colour choice and narratives brands employ *become* their definition and identity. As these brands increasingly manufacture stories, not objects, how they *tell* their stories defines and models our connection to them. Brand activation is simply amplified stage presence and storytelling.

Social media, by its very nature and scalability, is itself reductive and simplifying, converting all complexity into byte-size messages and memes, easy to distribute or swipe. The reward path that elevates views, likes and followers above difference or difficulty is leading to an entropic dumbing down and de-sophistication of our cultures.

In this flattened, de-complexified space, deeper meaning slowly disappears, and small, granular, shallow variations gain maximum importance – a slightly different colour, a different font, a different singing of the same song. Not real diversity, just diversion.

The increase in speed and connectivity enabled by technological development and widening access has also had a diminishing effect on cultural endurance and longevity. As images become more iconic and attention-seeking, and ideas become increasingly transient and transitional, swiping to nowhere except more images, words are now only recognised, not read, and the 'read more' link is rarely clicked.

This always-heightened and never-satisfied excitement of on-screen media means that yesterday's trending stories are quickly forgotten as they scroll off-screen and are replaced by today's dramas. In the swirling sea of constant attention, sharp peaks are always followed by shallow deficits.

Ideas are rarely given the time required to fully gestate and to be nurtured. The lifetime of a thought or deeper question is increasingly shortened by the impatience of our rapidly diminishing attention spans, and we live in an environment which is less and less capable of dealing with difficulty or nuance, or with complex narratives and experiences.

studio

As noted, graphic designers are translators of invisible concepts into tangible objects, and as such have a position of social responsibility. As practitioners, we need to be constantly aware of this, and the potentially conflicting position we all hold.

Fundamentally, we need to promote, design and build sophisticated language systems for our clients and other entities, intentionally rich and complex, human, inclusive and engaging, with the built-in capacity to evolve and adapt. We shouldn't seek to over-simplify these language systems, but instead aim to make them feel more organic by internal alignment so that they become hopefully more relatable, understandable and fluid.

We focus on three core areas of activity within the development of identity and visual languages: structure, building blocks, and possibility.

constant re-invention

Nature, life, needs complexity to survive. The danger that eliminating difference and creative risk exposes us to is potentially one of *extinction*. Unlimited variation and the free process of natural selection are *vital* to natural adaptation and continuity. In our societies, the loss of cultural fauna suggests a global culture at the edge of crisis through the narrowing of its own spectrum of variables.

In this diminishing world, this flat earth, difference, complexity and individuality become absolutely vital and invaluable. The recognition and protection of existing indigenous cultures and languages becomes critically necessary, as does the need to constantly explore and develop new ones, no matter at what scale. Homogenisation destroys independent culture, and standardisation catalyses the end of natural selection and evolution.

We *can* do something to counter many of the issues that this discussion raises. It will take awareness and creativity. We need to maintain constant vigilance, consciousness, awareness, and the continual embracing of questioning, experimentation, exploration and creative risk-taking. Difficult conversations have to happen, culturally, ideologically, and creatively.

We need to protect and nurture our languages and cultures: not by freezing or preserving them, but by embracing them and allowing an evolutionary response. We can take the best of technological advancement and adapt it to *our* needs, not the other way around.

Education also plays a vital part of how we respond: we need to encourage our students, in all disciplines and at all ages, to embrace risk-taking and exploration, and to think and act beyond the confines of the curriculum.

The purpose of education is to ensure the future is a better place than the present. Empowering our students to challenge the status quo and know the right questions to ask without fear is paramount to this.

At the RCA, we have designed our courses to encourage processes of transformation and innovation. Without changing minds, we can't change cultures. This mantra is one we need to embed at all stages and forms of education.

Like an archaeological reading of sediment or the rings of a tree, Hangeul has always remained a living record of Korea's evolving history and continues to do so, rich in embodied culture and identity.

The ongoing interrogation of Hangeul evidences that – as a vital fulcrum for investigating these changes in identity, culture and ideology. And through this process, bigger questions can be asked and debated about our future, our hopes for a continued existence within it, and what that future might look like.

Creative risk and exploration are constantly and continually needed as central to a deep function of questioning, challenging and extending our worlds in order to prevent stagnation, manipulation and entropy.

It can also be the root of joy and a sense of freedom – an aliveness grounded in unrestricted creativity and imagination.

True authenticity is dangerous. It doesn't always align with our expectations. It isn't predictable or controllable. We might not like it, it isn't perfect and it isn't always comforting. Diversity is exactly that, *diverse*. We need to include *all* voices and possibilities, to speak together, not *at* each other, and let our communication systems respond organically, not through surveillance, analysis and calculation. Authenticity is the vital prerequisite for both survival and for the quality of our lives.

To create, you have to destroy. To imagine something new, you have to be conscious of what came before. Here's to the possible.