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Athraitheach: Who Do You Think You Are?

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athraitheach: who do you think you are?

yours / mine / express / fluid /
story / you / make / social /
y / land / shifting / there /
den / fluctuating / exist /
community / mine / theirs / now /
capture / serve / fiction / align /
/ language / obscured /

chánais

Athraitheach *adj* changeable; changing; fluctuating; shifting; varying.¹

Conceptually informed by, and materially embedded in, the latest technological developments and innovation in typeface design, this project, ‘Athraitheach: Who do you think you are?’, takes the form of a ‘variable font’² that, via the visual representation of language, aims to capture and engage with current public discourses around linguistic diversity and national, cultural and social identities active in the jurisdiction of Northern Ireland.

It also aims to demonstrate how language and identity can, within particular contexts, become inextricably bound together, often being absorbed into, or constitutive of, the process of community and identity construction³. By focusing, in this instance, on ‘Irish’ and ‘British’⁴ cultural, social and political identities as mediated through the material aspects of language via typography and lettering⁵, the project hopes to initiate a discussion on the identities (and shades of therein) that may be revealed or activated by a less fixed, or fluid, approach to the substantiation and representation of these languages and identities.

The project utilises a responsive, variable typeface design, Athraitheach (the variable characteristic, in this case, being cultural rather than visual) that moves between the alphabetic forms of the Irish character—which, in the Northern Irish context is typically, but not exclusively, associated with an ‘Irish’ cultural, social and political identity and the Irish language, and the Roman character—which is more usually, but again not exclusively, associated with a ‘British’ identity and the English language⁶. By harnessing the technology of the typeface as a tool, it hopes to question and interrogate to what extent these identities are actually fixed, permanent or indeed polarised. It also aims to reveal the hybridity,

¹ De Bhaildraithe, T (1959), <https://www.teanglann.ie/ga/eid/athraitheach>

² <https://blog.typekit.com/2016/09/14/variable-fonts-a-new-kind-of-font-for-flexible-design/>

³ Ó Huallacháin, C Fr., O. F. M. (1994), ‘The Irish and Irish – a sociolinguistic analysis of the relationship between a people and their language’ Dublin: Assisi Press, p58

⁴ The authors acknowledge the presence of Ulster Scots and the languages of various ethnic communities within this context and would hope to address this in a future iteration of the project. For this iteration we have focussed on the specific languages under discussion (Irish and English) in Economic, Social and Cultural Issues of The Northern Ireland Peace Agreement, 3: ‘All participants recognise the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic communities, all of which are part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland’. Department of the Taoiseach, Government of Ireland, *The Northern Ireland Peace Agreement, The Agreement reached in the multi-party negotiations 10 April 1998*, p20.

⁵ <https://www.atypi.org/events/istype2013mono-talk-divided-by-a-common-typeface>

⁶ <https://blog.typekit.com/2016/09/14/variable-fonts-a-new-kind-of-font-for-flexible-design/>

fluidity—and the syncretic nature—of a number of active, yet hidden, or obscured identities that exist along the spectrum between the two poles of 'British' and 'Irish' identities alongside their corresponding languages, through the transformation and mutation of the visual characteristics of the typeface itself.⁷

The outcome, Athraitheach, is a prototype for a variable font that delineates and visualises these discourses in the form of a typeface that ranges, in its design, from a letterform designed in the Irish character reflecting the discourse that the Irish language and identity can only be ever be fully expressed using the Irish character or 'Gaelic' lettering, to a roman letterform expressing the equivalent discourse around British identities (within the context of Northern Ireland) and the English language.

By playing and interacting with the variable font on screen (through the inputting of text of the user's choosing on a keyboard) and then selecting the form of Athraitheach that most aligns with the user's sensibilities, he or she will be able to explore and identify the variety of positions on this spectrum that they either resonate or feel comfortable with. In turn, they will become exposed to the inherent possibilities with regard to their own social and cultural identities, opening up a dialogue with other users and audiences that may be previously un-encountered or new to them. The user (or viewer) will then be prompted, via an on-screen dialogue box, to submit each iteration of their interaction/s with Athraitheach, thereby capturing and accumulating a preliminary survey and record of where users (or actors) perceive or tentatively align themselves in relation to the subject of identity within the context of Northern Ireland.

Hence, through this innovative use of variable font technology, the project will create a space, and a platform, for all audiences or users to explore their own linguistic, and in turn, social and cultural identities. Within the geo-political context of the jurisdiction of Northern Ireland this typeface acknowledges, and crucially, facilitates the full spectrum, or plurality, of identities that are activated in relation to the issue of language and cultural identity. Inherent paradoxes and ironies with regard to the hidden history of the Irish language in Northern Ireland may reveal themselves—a development that, within the current context of

⁷ The authors acknowledge the presence of Ulster Scots within this context and would hope to address this in a future iteration of the project.



engage / grow / speak / express /
fluid / history / find / future / you /
hidden / community / yours /
remembered / question / code /
reality / forgotten / alive / make /
complex / current / nowhere / me /
transform / speak / them / answer /

Storm

the collapse of Stormont as a result of the deadlock over adoption of The Irish Language Act⁸ (which would give Irish equal status with English in Northern Ireland) can only serve as a helpful and positive tool in the quest for social cohesion amongst a wide variety of constituencies.

In Northern Ireland, the Irish language is perceived by some sections of the population to be a divisive symbol of Irish national and cultural identity.⁹ One of the consequences of this identification of the language is that it overlooks the shared history of the language for Protestant and Catholic, Unionist and nationalist communities alike in Northern Ireland.

The social implication arising from this perception of the Irish language was articulated by President Mary Robinson when she stated:

*Too often, in an Irish context, Celtic or Gaelic culture has been identified with Catholicism and nationalism, which has the effect of inhibiting those of the Protestant and Unionist tradition from claiming part of their inheritance. It is surely time to insist that our past and our culture is rich, varied and complex, that it cannot be resolved into narrow, sectarian compartments and that it is open to each of us to claim what is rightfully ours.*¹⁰

Added to this, it has been acknowledged that community building is a process of both acknowledging cultural differences yet recognising ‘cultural commonalities’.¹¹

The project proposal, ‘Athraitheach: Who do you think you are?’ is a synthesis of (and collaboration between) the typeface design of Athraitheach, by Declan Behan, and PhD research being undertaken by Clare Bell¹². Behan and Bell are both members of the research and practice seminar group, Typography Ireland (GradCAM) at the Dublin School of Creative Arts, Dublin Institute of Technology.

This project originated as a variable font typeface design by Declan Behan, undertaken as part of the Visual Communication (BA Hons) degree

⁸ <http://www.thejournal.ie/irish-language-act-explainer-3851417-Feb2018/>

⁹ Mac Póilin, A *Plus ça change: The Irish Language and Politics* in Aodán Mac Póilin (ed) *The Irish Language in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Ultach Trust, 1997) pp31-32

¹⁰ Robinson, M *Signatures on Our Own Frequency* a lecture delivered at the launch of the Columba Initiative, June, 1997

¹¹ OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER, (2013) *Together: Building a United Community Strategy*, p86

¹² Written material for this submission and exhibition will be constituted from unpublished doctoral research currently being undertaken by Clare Bell at the Dublin School of Creative Arts (DSCA), DIT. (Supervisor: Dr Tim Stott (DSCA); Advisory Supervisor: Dr Ian Montgomery (Ulster University))

course 'Thesis-in-studio' undergraduate project. In its first iteration it aimed to engage with current discourses around typographic and typeface design in the Irish character. The outcome was a prototype for a variable font design that delineates and visualises these discourses in the form of a typeface that ranges from a 'neutral' form—devoid of national and cultural connotations that reflects the so-called 'progressive' discourses—to a typeface endowed with the full Irish character traits, reflecting the so-called 'conservative' discourse that the Irish language should only be ever visualised in the Irish character.

This initial iteration hoped to address the 'cultural baggage' associated with the use of type in the Irish character. The form of Gaelic type reflects the style of the early scribal hand in Ireland. Because of the romantic notions and aesthetic conservatism associated with Gaelic lettering, calligraphy and type, the form of the Irish character has not developed or evolved significantly and has remained unchanged, unlike the rest of Europe where letterforms have developed gradually over centuries. Since the mid-twentieth century, when the use of the Irish character was gradually phased out in an official capacity, the use of type in the Irish character has been set aside by many progressive practitioners, along with much explicit reference to Ireland's rich typographic heritage. Engagement in debates surrounding the use of the Irish character in contemporary graphic design practice has, in the main, subsided. As a result there remains what could be described as a significant amount of outstanding 'cultural baggage' around the issue.

A deep understanding of typographic history guides us when we design and educate, when we draw and code, and when we develop fonts destined for today and tomorrow. What came before forms the basis and foundation for our present realities and the inspiration for future possibilities. The variable font design illustrates the various discourses and shows how it is not simply a black and white question of romantic nostalgia versus modernisation. By sliding along the spectrum of the variable font the various discourses surrounding the use of type in the Irish character are visualised.

Irish
Gaelic

