



SPELLING
GRAPHICS



In globalised urban spaces, visual graphics are often designed as a 'universal language' - seemingly able to communicate across cultures without the need for text or translation. However, is this really the case? Through the intervention and translation of a series of public visual symbols, this project reveals the boundaries of graphic 'recognisability', pointing out that its meaning is not embedded in the image itself, but rather constructed in a complex network of contexts, experiences, language and behavioural disciplines.





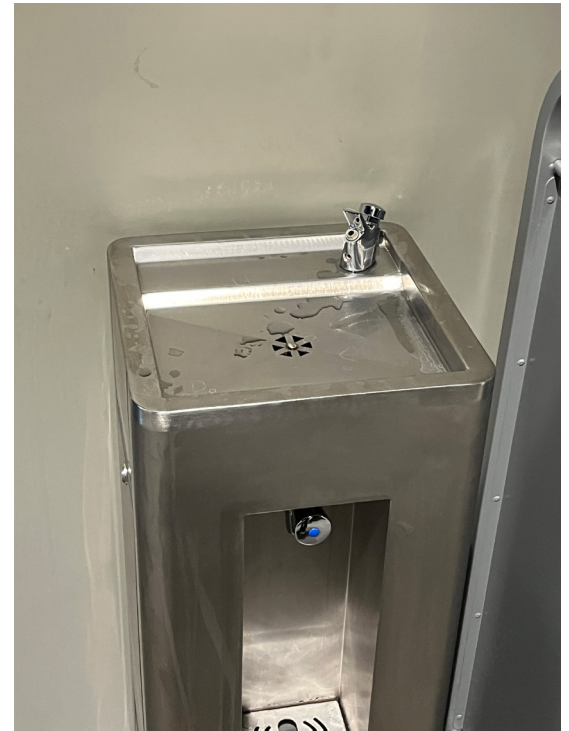
This image posted on a wall in a public place is a typical 'graphic-text' signage system. It uses a combination of simple visual symbols and text to communicate the message 'Toilets and Drinking Water' to audiences of different backgrounds. The three icons represent: men's, women's, and accessible toilets; a drinking water icon; and an arrow pointing to the right! The first time I saw the three 'toilet' icons, I immediately realised their significance - they were a steady match to the icons I had long been exposed to in my public space experiences. I didn't even need to resort to

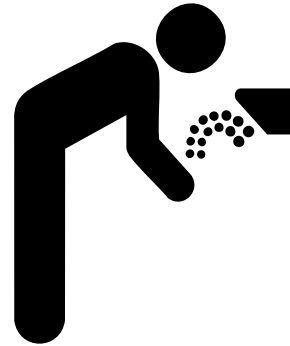
language to make a sound judgement. This cognitive speed comes from a visual grammar, a kind of 'mother tongue of images,' that was repeated frequently in my upbringing.

But the drinking water icon made me hesitate; it was both unfamiliar and unclear. My first thought was 'washbasin' or 'person engaged in some activity.' Fortunately, the text 'drinking water' next to it provided a timely semantic anchor. This is a classic case of graphic complementarity: the icon doesn't convey all the information, and the text becomes the 'translator.' At this point, I began to realise that the icon is not a completely independent visual language system here, but a kind of 'speech marker' that provides pronunciation cues for the text.

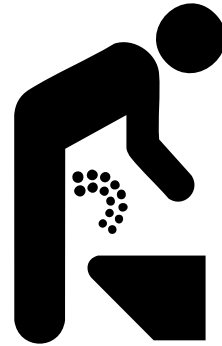
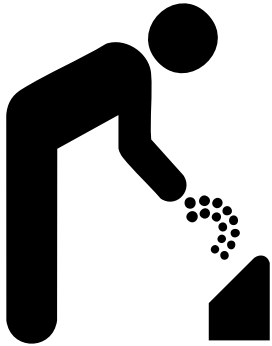
Think about this situation, if you don't speak English, and you see this icon, would you be confused? If we know English, does it matter what the icon is here? I started to think, what is the meaning of an icon if it doesn't convey the meaning efficiently and accurately, and it needs to be annotated with words? In this case, I belong to a cross-cultural group, so where are the boundaries of what it can say?

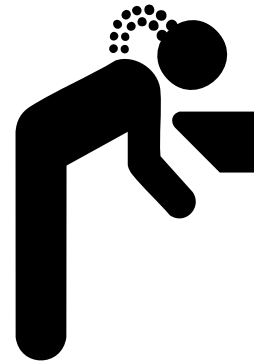
At the semantic level, graphics are often designed as highly abstracted 'iconic symbols' - they should transcend language, culture and experience and become a set of 'linguistic alternatives'. It should transcend language, culture and experience as a set of 'linguistic alternatives'. However, what makes a graphic 'understandable' is the result of the constant 'translation' that we do when we read: we call on language, context, and behavioural experience to supplement the meaning of the graphic.



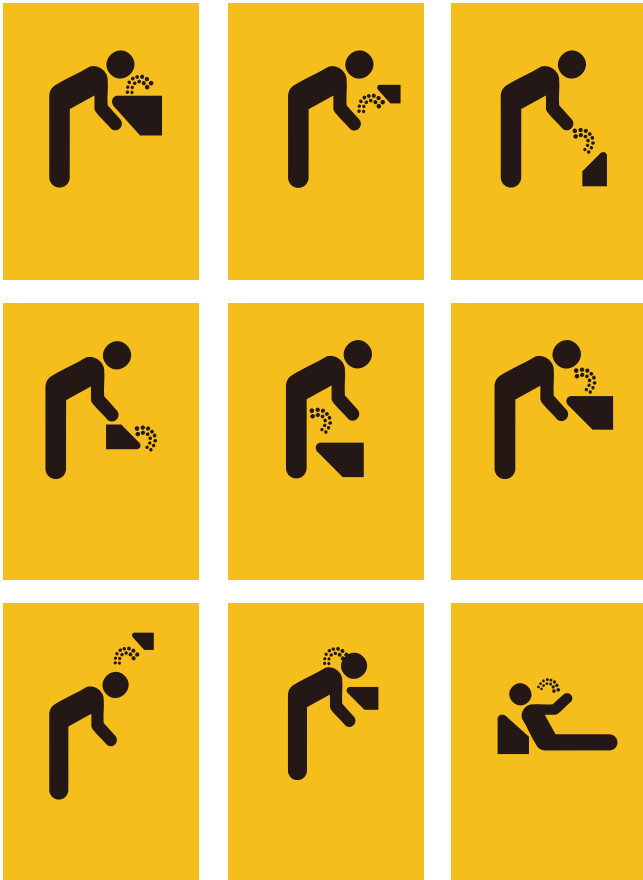











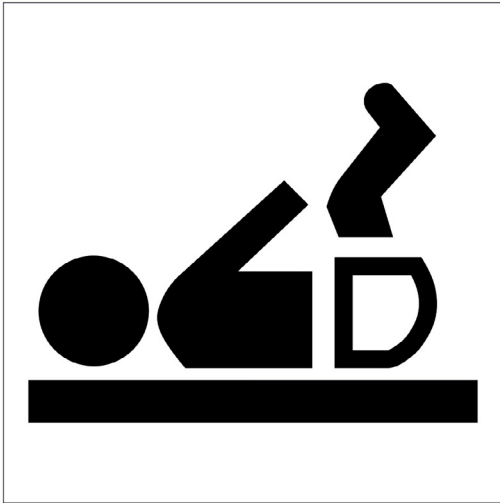


<p>The spatial clues of the scene, the forms we remember having seen before, and even the behavioural gestures of others. We are no longer 'reading' a figure, but 'putting together' an experience.</p>		<p>These seemingly clear meanings do not come from the icons themselves, but from the common contexts we have learnt long ago. Icons are not the end of language, but the compression of experience.</p>
<p>When it is removed from familiar textual cues or placed in unfamiliar contexts, its original meaning begins to blur. This is not because the graphic itself is 'poorly designed', but because its meaning as a symbol is activated by 'reading' it.</p>	<p>Vomiting</p> 	
	<h1>Icon Blur</h1> 	<p>GRAPHIC LANGUAGE IS NOT FLUENT. It stutters. It borrows context. It mimics speech. It waits for confirmation.</p>

Vomiting



Visual legibility is not a natural property of the graphic itself, but a cognitive collusion constructed by the context of use, linguistic nesting and behavioural expectations. This drift of meaning mechanisms also confirms the translational nature of visual semantics: graphics need to be 'translated', and this translation process is often not controlled by the viewer, but rather by invisible environmental and cultural rules.



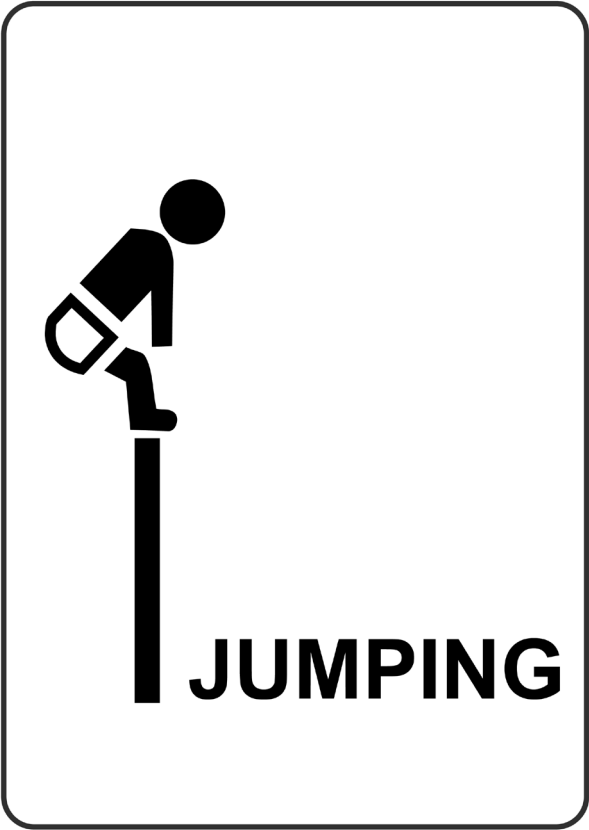




**STAIR
CLIMBING**



**SLIDING
BOARD**





BABY CARE



SIT DOWN



IN THE TOILET



SLIDING BOARD



STAIR CLIMBING



ROLL UPS



JUMPING



TURN OVER




DEAD LIFT

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Semiotic Drift



Graphics itself is not self-contained semantically; it is merely a mediating container for semantic generation. Our understanding of it relies heavily on the negotiation of language and the guidance of the environment.

The recognisability of a visual symbol is not really the ability of the graphic itself, but the density of my experience with it.



SLIDING
BOARD



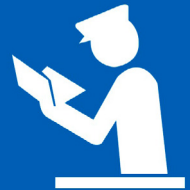
Dogs on a
lead allowed



Accessible
Toilet



Facilities for
the visually
impaired



Passport
control



Hospital



Customs



Tourist
information



Soap
dispenser



This collection of signage explores a rarely questioned component of public graphic systems: the role of symbolic punctuation. The exclamation mark in blue and the checkmark in green function less as conveyors of concrete meaning, and more as visual tone markers. Like intonation in speech, they reinforce the emotional or directive force of the message—urgency, affirmation, warning—yet lack referential meaning on their own.



From “Wash your hands before commencing work” to “Please wash only hands here”, or “Now wash your hands”, the icon performs less as an independent communicator and more as a semantic placeholder, waiting to be ‘filled’ by instruction.

In this sense, the image does not function as a self-sufficient sign but as a syntactic fragment—a kind of visual verb stem that requires linguistic conjugation. Its gesture is general, not specific: it shows the act of water meeting hands, but not why, when, or how. This ambiguity only becomes resolved when paired with precise language. The icon alone cannot establish temporal, behavioural or conditional nuance.





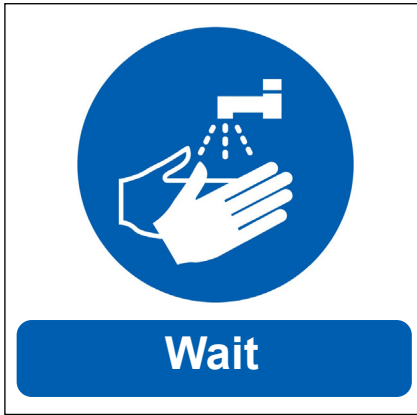
Please place your hands under water released by this illustrated faucet-like object, as shown.



Holy Bless









Unlike images, which are ambiguous or require empirically supported paths of interpretation, text has a natural formal 'controlled authority' through spelling, grammar and linear structure. It tells you what, where, and what to do, leaving no room for linguistic ambiguity. But because it is highly 'precise', it is also highly dependent on the ability to speak the language itself. If you can't read, don't understand the language, or lack contextual knowledge of some of the words in the instructions, then the marking will be completely ineffective. Instead of generating misunderstandings, it will simply become meaningless visual noise. Unlike images, words cannot be 'guessed' in unfamiliar contexts, nor do they have any autonomous pictorial meaning. Images are 'attached' to language, but language can also be 'lost' due to cultural barriers.

As samples of real-world applications of visual language, they reveal the mechanisms by which graphics and text co-construct meaning. The 'clarity' of these signs is not conferred by the graphics themselves, but is shaped over time by institutional norms, cultural experiences and visual conventions. As a footnote to the research, they complement and respond to the central question of the project: graphic legibility has never been a self-contained linguistic structure, but rather a visual agreement based on social consensus.



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