

## **Typeface classification** Catherine Dixon

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*As a direct copy of the script this text contains prompts for the reader: bold numerals in square brackets refer to slides and an asterisk simply a pause.*

**[1]** I would like to start by saying how pleased I am to be speaking at the conference of an organisation dedicated to the support of the St Bride Printing library. I owe this place a very great debt in terms of the resources made available to me throughout the course of my research and I take this opportunity to thank all the staff for the support they have shown.

### **Introduction**

Ok, to type classification or as it has been described by Jonathan Hoefler, ‘the Holy Grail of typography’.<sup>1</sup> **[2]** A fair comment, I think. The classification of typefaces has certainly become one of the great ‘perennials’ of typographic debate.<sup>2</sup> It is an enduring preoccupation and curiously attractive topic of discussion for both those who deal professionally with type and those simply interested in it. Curiously attractive that is for those enticed by the lure of the idea of the perfect classificatory solution but maybe just tiresome for those who haven’t and who cannot understand why people continue to go on about it.

In talking today it is neither my intention to perpetuate myths of classificatory perfection nor add still further to the existing catalogue of abstract discussion. Classification or more accurately perhaps, the description of typeforms, has indeed become my preoccupation but not because I am a believer in an absolute classificatory truth, nor out of a sense of being tidyminded for the sake of it, not even for reasons of wanting to outwit typophiles around the world. Rather I came to this field in response to a practical problem with very real implications on the way we write about and teach typographic history and in particular, our ability to provide structures for ordering our types and for making accessible to students some understanding of the very great diversity of typeforms now available to them.

So what you will hear in this talk is a very individual journey through some difficult issues. My purpose is to share the results of my experiences in developing a new description framework for typeforms – and here I should say Latin typeforms – with a view to prompting feed-back and a future pooling of knowledge so these ideas can be refined still further. And, while my interest really lies in the ongoing development of a practical structure for describing typeforms for the c21st, the origins for such structures are an essential part of the typographic development of the c20th.

### **[3] BS 2961 & typeform description in the c20th**

**[4]** I am going to start with the British Standard for typeface classification and nomenclature, BS 2961 from 1967. Because, as for some others here, it was my introduction to typeform description.<sup>3</sup>

In 1995 I began work on a cataloguing programme for an archive **[5]**, the Central Lettering Record, which is based here in London at Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design **[6]**. I was busy updating the archive, particularly in terms of its representation of typeface design **[7]** and set about collecting examples of type design from the previous 10–15 years or so **[8]**. This material then had to be catalogued alongside the older historical typeface material for input into a newly created database.

The database required a series of descriptive fields for typeforms – new and old – and that is when I first encountered BS 2961. Common practice determined that the generic

description of typeforms should utilise the category terms borrowed from classification schemes. And while it may seem strange to have turned to a system then nearly 30 years old, either the BS or the Vox system upon which it is based were used in **[9]** McLean's *Manual of typography* 1980 (reprinted 1988), Carter (*c20th type designers*) 1987 (revised 1995) and Blackwell (*c20th type*) from 1992 (revised 1998).<sup>4</sup>

But another reason for focussing upon the BS in the first part of this presentation, is that in addition to marking my introduction to the field of type classification, it also marked something of a departure point for my own work on typeform description.

The BS tells us a huge amount about attitudes towards the description of typeforms in the c20th, against many of which, my work can be seen as a direct reaction. For the purposes of this talk I am going to focus upon just three essential aspects of the BS: its reliance upon a so-called 'top down' approach to categorisation; its embodiment of a set of values determining that some types are more deserving of detailed description than others; and then what it tells us about recent attitudes towards classificatory change.

First, the reliance of the BS upon a 'top down' approach to categorisation. As I've already acknowledged, the BS system was a very basic interpretation of the earlier classificatory proposals of the french typographic historian Maximilien Vox. These proposals, put forward in 1954 were really quite sophisticated, far more so than Vox is now often given credit for. **[10]** Offering at first a ten-part classification, Vox revised his original proposal within months to a more compact nine-part scheme.<sup>5</sup> The 'Classification Vox' or 'Classification de Lure' as it was also known, can be seen as Vox's attempt to reflect his understanding of the 'reality' of a complex and entangled field in which types were 'living' and as such susceptible to stylistic-interbreeding.<sup>6</sup> His response was to address the similarities between types and also the possibility for their individual differentiation. His system thereby combines a 'top down' classificatory approach whereby type content is divided across a ready-built infrastructure with a 'bottom-up' approach whereby the set category terms could be more fluidly used in combination in order to cater for those typefaces exceptional to the established norms. His intention was not therefore a system confined to nine categories, rather one which could offer nine x nine, or still further multiples, if required.<sup>7</sup>

**[11]** Vox's proposals provided a focus for classificatory ideas like no others before and so by the time Britain came to publish its own national standard, adoption of the basic Vox categorisation schema was almost inevitable.<sup>8</sup> **[12]** But that was just it, what was adopted in Britain, as in so many other countries, was the basic nine category structure. Tidymindedness prevailed. Most of Vox's intuitive strategy for being able to respond to the needs of individual typeforms through the multiple use of his category terms was lost, if not in direct translation then certainly in implementation. And Vox's basic nine category structure without his intuitive application was really nothing more than nine descriptive buckets in which types could be placed. More than that though, Vox's simple nine category structure as followed by the BS, was itself the product of a much earlier age, this basic schema being traceable to the very earliest typeface categorisation structures.

And this brings me to the second main point I want to make about the BS and that is the way it can be seen to embody a set of values determining that some types are more deserving of description than others.

The categorisation of typeforms grew out of a changing climate in production, when, during the c19th, printers experienced a broadening in the range of typefaces at their disposal. Types were being introduced which were intended for setting at large display sizes **[13]** as well as for book work. Type styles were also being deliberately 'revived' from earlier historical periods.

**[14]** Here we see the Troy type as used by Morris at the Kelmscott Press from 1892 and **[15]** Dove's roman used by the Doves Press from 1900]. However, as these various typeforms were being introduced there was little consistency between type foundries in the terms used to describe them. **[16]** Sans serif types, for example, were variously

marketed as 'grotesque', 'sans surryphs', 'gothic', 'doric' and even 'egyptian' even though the latter term is more familiarly associated with typeforms with slab serifs. As the numbers of these new and 'new-old' types increased in circulation, so it became necessary to find a way of ordering type; to ease communication between printers and clients, and as an organisational aid within the printing industry.

**[17]** By the turn of the new century two new publications offered typeform classifications: Southward's *Practical printing* from 1898 and De Vinne's *The practise of typography; plain printing types* from 1900.<sup>9</sup> Written for the benefit of printing practice, by printers, each classification very much took its lead from practice, utilising terms then in common use.

The typefounders themselves were quick to join the printers in taking up the classificatory challenge. **[18]** In 1903 the French typographer Thibaudeau devised a system for the historical material of the Peignot foundry and between 1911–12, H L Bullen **[19]** worked on a similarly analytical system for the library of the American Typefounders (ATF).<sup>10</sup> Both systems also introduce a new consideration of presentation making good use of diagrammatic illustration to reinforce their underlying rationales, an idea I shall return to later.

**[20]** And then, there followed the scholarly surveys. There was a need in the early c20th to consolidate the different strands of historical research being undertaken following the interest in reviving early types for contemporary use which resulted in texts such as D B Updike's *Printing types* of 1922 (based upon his earlier lecture series from 1911–16), Morison's *On type designs past and present* from 1926 and A F Johnson's *Type designs* from 1934.<sup>11</sup> Within these historical overviews, the basic principles of typeface categorisation are still at work, although perhaps in a less explicit way than self-titled 'classification' systems. The morphological evolution of typefaces is used as an organisational structure, each key stage in the development of typeforms being summarised by a category and typically a chapter.

Implicit in all these early systems, and especially in the latter and most influential historical models was an evaluation of typographic history and current practice now nearly 100 years old. Yet, it is their common category structure which has continued to inform the underlying schema – if not the exact nomenclature – of most later systems.

For example, early c20th evaluations of both historical and contemporary design practice favoured roman types over display for reasons of both aesthetic and commercial expediency. **[21]** (There is no time here to expand upon these reasons other than to refer you to amongst others, the views of J H Mason, Harry Carter and the very informative account of early c20th Trajan orthodoxy in lettering circles provided by Nicolette Gray in her book *Lettering on buildings*).<sup>12</sup>

Accordingly in the early categorisation structures developed, a descriptive bias is typically afforded to roman types at the expense of display. **[22]** This basic premise remained largely unchallenged. It can be seen to inform the basic Vox categorisation and in turn that of the BS. Both systems demonstrate an inconsistent level of descriptive focus across categories which is out of keeping with a quantitative evaluation of the field. **[23]** So, if you consider the BS, humanist types are formally distinguished from galalde, even though the formal differences are only very subtle and even though such a distinction is only appropriate for a very few types. **[24]** But, a common distinction often used to differentiate between large numbers of slab serif types is not made with clarendons or ionics (that is bracketed slab serifs) and egyptians (that is square-ended, unbracketed slab serifs) simply grouped together.

A contemporary evaluation of typographic history and current practice would or should, I think, reveal that roman types are no longer a central concern. **[25]** Display types have not only encroached upon the scholastic exclusivity that roman enjoyed, but also upon the commercial monopoly that they once held in book printing. Distinctions between text and display are now increasingly irrelevant, with the greater subtlety that

has been introduced into sans serifs and slab serif designs [26], leading to a wider application of such types for text purposes. (Unfortunately, Ionic and the film outputter didn't see eye to eye, hence you see Courier here instead). This situation has been compounded by the need for types to satisfy new functions dictated by technologies and environments beyond 'hot-metal' and print (the screen being perhaps the most obvious of these) [27]. No longer the preserve of a select few, skilled in their craft and operating within the established foundries, type design has, with the advances made in digital programming, been made accessible to anyone with the necessary software. Reduced overheads combined with improved ease and speed of both production and distribution have resulted in a significant rise in the number of smaller scale manufacturers [28] and the types available. In such a competitive climate, where traditional roman text faces are already so widely available – it seems that every manufacturer now has its version of Bodoni and Baskerville – the emphasis in the market-place has shifted from roman toward ever greater novelty in form [29].

Yet, the shifts just described in the approach to type production have not been matched by a similar shift in the approach taken to typeform description. And here's to my third main point about the BS; what it tells us about recent attitudes to classification.

The BS was published in 1967 and while scheduled for revision in 1981 has remained unchanged.<sup>13</sup> Yet, to try and implement the BS within current contexts is hopeless. My own experience of using the BS within the CLR certainly found it to be inappropriate for the purposes of satisfactorily differentiating between the necessary breadth of forms represented by examples from contemporary typeface design practice – too much recent material could only be accommodated within the 'graphic' category. [30] This is defined as being for those, 'typefaces whose characters suggest that they have been drawn rather than written, for example [31] *Libra*, *Cartoon* and *Monotype Old English*'.<sup>14</sup> Yet this purposefully open-ended definition which allows the category to act as a classificatory 'catch-net' makes little visual sense of the diverse range of typeforms caught. While accommodated or classified here, typeforms are not actually being described [32].

Thus far though, the ease of continuing with the familiar, if faulty, schema has outweighed the upheaval any changes would necessitate. Alternatives to the existing systems have been put forward, but while these proposals have found admirers, they have struggled to find the support and following required for wider implementation. [33] The authors of a recent study of types, for example, praise the classification work of Gerrit Noordzij as offering a more intelligent approach than the German equivalent of the Vox system but in finding it hard to apply, continued to persevere with the DIN despite recognising its limitations.<sup>15</sup>

And it can be no coincidence that the classificatory impulse has been at its lowest ebb at a time when the outworkings of post-modern philosophy resulted in a resurgence of interest in hybrid forms [34], with designers intentionally avoiding existing pigeon-holes and plundering and reconfiguring elements from an ever-widening range of sources [35, 36] with varying degrees of subtlety [37]. It is only in the past 5–7 years as the initial enthusiasm for such experimentation has peaked, that the difficulties of describing what has been happening or the organisation of material in catalogues has even begun to be really considered.

For some, it seems acceptable to retain classificatory structures that exclude this new dimension of practice. And here classificatory apathy, combines with the idea of classificatory censorship to explain the inadequacies of many of our existing systems. [38] The direction in the pursuit of formal novelty has sometimes proved so controversial as to call into question whether such types should even be acknowledged, let alone afforded descriptive attention.<sup>16</sup>

From a personal point of view, working within the broad collection remit of the CLR, I could not indulge such a qualitative view. But nor would I have wanted to. The fracture within type design discourse which such a descriptive bias has led to is unhelpful. The

limitations of the existing systems affect not only the accessibility of types in sales catalogues but, more fundamentally, the way that the history of typeforms is discussed. More recent developments are generally omitted from the broader view and considered in isolation, if at all.<sup>17</sup> [39]

Failure to incorporate such types within historical surveys has created an artificial end-point in typeform history, with much contemporary practice entirely dislocated from that of the past. [40] Alexander Lawson's *Anatomy of a typeface* from 1990 refrains from discussing more recent types. But it is the unrevised publication in 1998 of Geoffrey Dowding's *Printing types* originally from 1961 that best epitomises this stagnation in historical accounts of type design.<sup>18</sup>

But where to start. It is perhaps here with this question and the prospect of the sheer enormity and difficulty of the situation where we find the overriding reason for so little classificatory advancement in recent years. Certainly the situation seemed one in which there were more questions than answers. In defence of his use of the open-ended term 'decorative' (effectively in place of 'graphic') Lewis Blackwell acknowledges that [41],

'It sounds like a loose term, and it is – but how do we describe the rapidly increasing number of fonts that do not draw on one particular historical tradition or form of production, but are distinguished by being sports that draw on the varied visual culture of their time'.<sup>19</sup>

#### [42] A new response

Classification had once again become an issue of practicality and was no longer the hobby horse of the 'typographic devotee' it had been perceived for so long.<sup>20</sup> In this renewed spirit of practicality a number of new proposals had been made. And interestingly, it was the prompt of the increased individuality of form within type design over the 1990s to which many seemed to respond. Within these systems, such is the emphasis upon the individual typeface, however, that formal description can tend towards the abstract.<sup>21</sup> [43, 44] \*

Certainly within my own description remit none of the more recent proposals were either timely or appropriate. Here, appropriateness is key. I am not saying that any of these recent systems or even the BS and Vox systems are wrong *per se*. As Robert Bringhurst observes, 'no system of classification is flat-out correct', and by extension, no one system of classification is flat-out incorrect.<sup>22</sup> Rather, a number of systems may be useful with the measure of usefulness being entirely dependent upon what it is you want a given system to do. I wanted:

[45] to provide a description framework able to overcome the fracture prevalent in contemporary discourse and make sense of what was happening now in terms of previous type design practice;

[46] that is to say, a framework able to consistently describe the formal character of all typefaces across an approximately 550 year production period. In very broad terms, the formal character of a typeface can be understood as being how the punchcutter or designer intended it to be seen in use.

[47] And it was also important and in keeping with the pedagogical interests of the original CLR environment that a new framework be able to communicate type description information in a non-abstract way facilitating accessibility for users both familiar and unfamiliar with type; in part this was a response to the abstraction of more recent description attempts but also in recognition of the fact that the mathematical encoding of digital types is in itself a kind of formal description.

Given these objectives, none of the systems discussed were useful. My particular gripe with the BS is that while in one sense my requirements are very specific, they are not without wider appeal or application. The idea that a national standard should provide a means of describing in greater detail a wider proportion of contemporary type design practice than it presently does is not, I think, unreasonable.

An alternative response was needed and my work began. Badly. My own start was determined largely by early project time constraints. And so perpetuating the ‘make do & mend’ philosophy which had come to dominate the classificatory field I returned to the BS, and adopted the simplest strategy of trying to modify the existing basic categorisation schema. The contents of the overloaded ‘graphic’/junk-box category were accepted as given and dispersed across a series of newly added categories. **[48]** These ideas were summarised and published along with a working proposal for a revised set of categories in *Eye*.<sup>23</sup> But trying to modify only one category led, in the end, to failure. The problems of the old system were not confined to one part, and the instability of the whole, only became more obvious in the process of trying to add to it. Of no lasting value in itself, this early proposal did come to represent a turning point in the design process. It also launched me into my PhD.

Two key areas for re-evaluation were highlighted: first, the role of categories as a mechanism for describing typeforms; and second, the role of visual presentation in the communication of typeform description.

The work on extending the existing schema showed that categorisation, certainly a similarly ‘top down’ approach, could not provide a long term solution to the existing description difficulties posed by the ever-broadening range of sources utilised by type designers. The extra categories initially proposed scarcely scratched the surface of the problem. Yet to increase the number added would lead to an unwieldy system: too many categories each with too few typefaces. Acceleration in the field of typeface design/production means that to keep a system up-to-date would anyway be impossible. **[49]** Even an ambitious and in many ways admirable system such as the one used in *Rookledge's international typefinder* (designed by Christopher Perfect & Eichii Kono), has, without the means of regular revision, become quickly outdated.<sup>24</sup> The inevitable shortfall in categories leaves typeforms beyond classification, and so the original problem remains.

Nor could categorisation offer a practical or sustainable response to the hybridisation of form characteristic not only of much recent practice, but as was later discovered, of c20th type design practice more generally. Although in part fuelled by what Bringhurst describes as a ‘surfeit of historical awareness and self-mockery’ symptomatic ‘of the phase we call postmodernism’, the lifting and mixing of formal elements from other letters or sources within type design is neither transitory or new and should not be dismissed as such.<sup>25</sup> **[50]** In her study of c19th display types Nicolette Gray reveals the origins of this ‘new freedom’ in the introduction of the continental Latin-Runic typefaces, **[51]** commenting that, ‘although so far no very drastic changes have been made, categories are becoming blurred and classification complicated; a new era has begun’.<sup>26</sup>

Gray’s location of the introduction of the process of eclectically reconfiguring existing formal ideas in the nineteenth century, helps, to explain the shifts in typeface design into and through the c20th. **[52–5]** \*

As Gray intimates however, the infinitely variable possibilities promoted by this reconfiguration process are singularly at odds with a means of describing typeforms that uses only a limited number of headings. Even the combined application of category terms as suggested by Vox could not introduce enough detailed flexibility to cope with the increased emphasis on individuality within type design.

**[56]** In many ways it was the visual presentation of my early proposals in *Eye* which prompted redirection of my work and eventually the out and out rejection of a basic pigeon-holing approach to typeform description. Certainly, publication of my ideas acted as something of a wake-up call in terms of recognising how important it was to take ownership of the presentation of a classification system. Given the way a diagrammatic structure was to later play a central role in my description work such ownership has proved crucial. Now I oversee implementation of my work in other environments, thereby avoiding too great a degree of misinterpretation.

This is what happens when another graphic designer got hold of my problematic and barely mapped out collection of categories and set about some design-tidying: 'sans serif problems' was never intended to be a category, more a note to myself that this was an area needing work.

The shock of seeing this printed piece also revealed what was most unsatisfactory about the whole idea of pigeon-hole categories. It was recognised that the regimented series of uniform, immutable and insular boxes belied the complexities of the narratives being drawn out between categories in practice. While the objective of the description system was to bring order to chaos – not just reflect it – a more accurate visual presentation of these narratives would, it was felt, encourage the subtlety of description required.

The visual mapping of classificatory ideas is nothing new. As I have already shown, the very early systems of both Thibaudeau and Bullen utilise visual methods in the communication of their classificatory information. [57] Perhaps though, the most outstanding example of the use of visual mapping in the field is the contribution made by Beatrice Warde in 1935.<sup>27</sup> Building upon the morphological principles of her former ATF colleague Bullen, Warde was to develop a hierarchical model for the classification of text faces which shows categories within a visual structure explaining their formal descent. Visual presentation here is not simply a secondary illustrative device, as in the case of Thibaudeau; the basic operation of his system could have been communicated in his text alone. Rather, understanding of Warde's system is dependent upon its visual lay-out, the relative positioning of the categories to one another being an essential part of her overall thesis. With this work Warde was to establish an important precedent for visual classificatory argument. Others for whom diagrammatic presentation was key were Jan Tschichold [58 *An illustrated history of writing and lettering* 1946 ] and Rudolf Hostettler [59 *Type* 1949].<sup>28</sup> I can also recommend looking at the layout of his classificatory ideas in *Printers terms* from the same year and the interesting, though far simpler family tree ideas explored by Laurence Wallis, writing as John Wulfrun for *Print in Britain* during the late 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>29</sup>

In showing these examples, I am not suggesting that the mere use of diagrammatic representation is any guarantee of an effective system. And while my interest was in part due to the kind of obvious instant attraction possible with such representation, I was more especially interested in the way visual methods could be used not just to communicate classificatory information but to generate it as well.

So in this vein I proceeded. [60] Exercises in playing with the relative positioning of the categories led to a more formalised diagrammatic representation [61], determined by hierarchical and historical relationships. Then as it became clear that many types required a finer degree of descriptive focus, beyond that offered by categories, so the emphasis in diagrammatic representation shifted towards a visual analysis of the criteria defining these categories [62].

The result of all this analysis was a series of three description components which together form the basis of a new description framework represented within a central diagram. [63] This new framework has already been utilised by two publications; the first is the *Typeform dialogues* CD-Rom currently in-press with Hyphen. (And here I have to correct the biographical statement in your programmes. This CD-Rom is not mine. Rather, it is the outcome of a team research project representing the collective contributions of a number of individuals, not least the research fellow Eric Kindel). The second publication to use my work is the typographic primer *Type & typography* by Phil Baines & Andrew Haslam.<sup>30</sup> The material I am going to show to illustrate the new framework draws from both these publications as well as from my thesis.<sup>31</sup>

[64] Here we see a visual overview of the way the new description framework operates.

The three description components which comprise the new description framework are identified as 'sources', 'formal attributes' and 'patterns'.

[65] Sources describe the generic influences informing a typeform. Their identification

grew out of an analysis of the background to the existing categories. If you like, they were seen as a series of larger groups into which the existing categories could be ordered: roman, handwritten, [66], and as shown here, nineteenth-century vernacular, and so on.

Formal attributes, [67] are the basic individual units of description that refer to a typeface's design and construction. These were identified by exploding into individual units of description the previously grouped physical characteristics determining the categories. [68] Eight main kinds of these attributes were identified – construction, shape, modelling, [69] terminals, proportion, weight, key characters and decoration – each of these with a further sub-menu of its own. On the diagram these are located along the very top edge, above the time-line indicator.

The new description framework operates on the assumption that the formal character of every typeface can be explained in terms of its specific configuration of these two components: sources and formal attributes. [70 Monotype Old English, talk through]

However, while providing the micro level of description so often required, too great an emphasis on differentiation tends to obscure the macro view of a given type's shared formal relationship with others. To abandon the identification of the pockets of formal coherence within groups of typefaces defeats the object of locating the particular within the wider context of type-design practice. For this reason there is a third element in the new framework. Identified as a 'pattern', it lists a recurrent configuration of sources and formal attributes.

[71 Here are the patterns as outlined in *Type & typography* which relate to the nineteenth century vernacular sources previously shown] Generally it is the most common of the possible recurrent configurations of sources and formal attributes that have been selected to be patterns. Where related forms may be recurrent, but with each representing too few typefaces to warrant an individual pattern, or where a formal trend has proved too general to be outlined by use of a specific pattern, a 'summary' is used. Reference can be made to patterns in the description of a given type, where a strong correlation can be seen between its specific configuration of sources and formal attributes and one or more of these recurrent listings. [72] So in the case of the example shown in the overview, Monotype Old English, reference could be made to the *textura* pattern which summarises the list of source and formal attributes it shares. In those instances of description where a pattern or summary is broadly considered appropriate but a given typeform deviates in some way, reference to a pattern or summary could be moderated by additional reference to the appropriate individual formal attributes.

The description framework is presented as a central description diagram. [73] Here we see a still of the digital version of the diagram as it appears on *Typeform dialogues*. The purpose of the diagram is to act as a map, showing the range and contextual relevance of each of the three main description components. Sources are shown as they might be plotted against time – located along the far left edge, these bars when live on the digital version of the diagram provide access to windows containing both textual and visual explanations of each. Formal attributes are stored in a summary area accessible from the top of the diagram. Patterns are plotted along a timeline to give a sense of time and context – here the tonal strength of each pattern bar also decreases or increases as an indication of prevalence and usage. The diagram also shows how, while patterns are key to understanding the early centuries of typeface design, from a certain point consistent relationships between formal attributes and sources dissolve amid the diversity of practice. In terms of its representation of the history of type design practice, the diagram also serves to show this more accurately as a series of parallel developments rather than a cohesive story in gradual evolution. This narrative is reinforced by three overview text areas built into the diagram which serve to explain the changing relevance of the different description possibilities on offer at what have been identified as key transitional points.

Everything about the new description framework – the organisation, utilisation and presentation of its information – enforces the intention that it should constantly reveal

how it is working. Description is not centred around an inflexible structure within which typefaces are made to fit, either conceptually or visually. Rather the problems of an individual type being obscured through containment within a larger concealing category have been overcome. Typefaces can now be brought to the framework which provides a system of reference against which they can be examined individually and a description built to the requirements of each one.

With examples of typeforms featured within the *Typeform dialogues* CD-Rom and which were used to test the new framework I will now show how in practice, when using the new framework, one of four main description approaches is generally followed.

**[74]** i) The description card for (ITC) Bodoni as programmed into the *Typeform dialogues* prototype CD-Rom. This typeform description is an example of one whereby reference can be made to a pattern card, in this case, *the Continental taste: late* pattern, with no need to list any formal attributes on the actual typeform description card itself. Here, a screen link has been opened to the appropriate pattern information as it is stored within the *Typeform dialogues* environment.

**[75]** ii) The description card for FF Disturbance. This typeform description is an example of one whereby reference should be made to a pattern card but an indication also given on the actual typeform description card of any deviation in form from the attributes listed for the pattern. Here, the proportion attributes which differ from those of the related dominant pattern the individual type is following are explained using screen-links to the formal attributes area.

**[76]** iii) The description card for Bell Centennial (bold listing). This particular typeform description is an example of one which relies upon an individually compiled list of formal attributes but may also include a helpful reference to a related summary. When reference to a sequence of formal attributes is appropriate in the description of a given typeform then these are simply listed below. As can be seen from the illustration, these are, like the pattern descriptions, ordered using the eight headings from the formal attributes area. Within *Typeform dialogues*, screen links enable cross-referencing to the main formal attributes area to help explain the use of any terms. For example, here, by clicking on the proportion attribute heading in the typeform description area, the proportion attributes have been opened up on the opposite side of the screen.

**[77]** iv) The description card for the typeface Prototype. This typeform description is an example of one which only relies upon an individually compiled list of formal attributes and for which no further reference to either a related pattern or summary is appropriate. Here, the screen link between the attributes of construction listed within the type description and the main formal attributes area has been opened to clarify particular use of the term 'sampled'.

### **[78] In summary**

To summarise then.

In showing you how I have approached the description of 550 years of typeface design practice we've come some way from the BS and maybe departed entirely from the idea of classification. But as I said before, I don't believe there are any absolutes in this field. To try and pin down whether or not this is or isn't classification is anyway to miss the point. This new framework fulfils the criteria it was designed to. As any other system before it, it is a product of its purposes and of its time, a summation made at point along the way of what really needs to be a continuing process.

Presenting this work here then, is not to say that there isn't still a lot to do. The new description framework is not an end in itself, nor as Walter Tracy so rightly points out, should it be.<sup>32</sup> Again to reiterate, tidymindedness for the sake of it leads nowhere. But this framework provides my students **[79]** certainly with a structure for learning more about typeforms. Yet, there is still plenty of room for improvement and development. Nomenclature is one of the most controversial areas in the field of type design. It is

certainly an aspect of the present work that is ripe for further research and review, in collaboration with practitioners, designers and writers. It is only then that the subjective bias of the compiler can be diffused and refined, so that terms and their consistency of use can be clarified at both an interdisciplinary and an international level. To this could be added expansion to address the description of non-latin types, even lettering more generally.

And then there is the fact that the formal scope of typeface design has not been determined once and for all. It is only a matter of time before new classificatory challenges will appear, and our understanding of typeforms in need of readjustment again. The new framework, while fully operational, should not therefore be considered as a complete system. I am well aware that it will need to be added to. And that is where maybe this system does depart from others before it. In trying to overcome the closure characteristic of the pigeon-hole approach to classification, a flexibility has been built into the new framework, to address this issue of change. Additional description components can simply be added, as needed, and in theory, without undermining existing content. We shall see [80].

#### Notes

- 1 The term is used by Hoefler in his article 'On classifying type' for *Emigré* 42, California: Emigré inc 1997, pp.55–70
- 2 A reference to 'Annuals & perennials', the title given to a general typographic discussion held at ATypI's annual conference of 1997 during which classification was covered and recorded in *Type, A Journal of the Association Typographique Internationale*, vol.2, no.1, Spring 1998, pp.28–31
- 3 See *Typeface nomenclature and classification BS 2961: 1967*, London: British Standards Institution
- 4 See Ruari McLean, *The Thames & Hudson manual of typography*, London: Thames & Hudson 1980 (reprinted 1988); Sebastian Carter, *Twentieth century type designers*, London: Trefoil 1987 (revised 1995, London: Lund Humphries); Lewis Blackwell, *Twentieth century type design*, London: Laurence King 1992 (revised 1998)
- 5 See Maximilien Vox, *Pour une nouvelle classification des caractères*, Paris: École Estienne 1954, pages unnumbered and *Nouvelle classification des caractères*, Paris: École Estienne October 1954, pages unnumbered
- 6 Vox, October 1954 and 'Maximilien Vox discusses his type classification' in *Printing World*, vol.159 no.6, Tonbridge: Benn Bros, 8 August 1956, p.156
- 7 See Vox 1956, p.156
- 8 Agreement at an international level was anticipated in 1963 when the Association Typographique Internationale (ATypI) broadly accepted Maximilien Vox's classificatory proposal. For a contemporary discussion of the influence of Vox see James Mosley, 'New approaches to the classification of typefaces', *The British Printer*, March 1960, London: Maclean Hunter, pp.90–6. See also the Minutes of both the Technical committee and Sub-committee for typeface nomenclature and classification from 1959 to 1967, London: British Standards Institution
- 9 See John Southward, *Modern printing: Section 1 The composing room*, London: Raithby, Lawrence & Co 1898. See also Theodore Lowe de Vinne, *The practise of typography; Plain printing types*, New York: The Century Co 1900–4
- 10 See François Thibaudeau, *La lettre d'Imprimerie*, vol II, Paris: Bureau de l'édition 1921 and 'Classification des caractères d'imprimerie' in *Manuel français de typographie moderne*, Paris: Bureau de l'édition, pp.37–109; 921 & 24. See also Henry Lewis Bullen, 'Notes towards the study of types' in *The graphic arts*: vol I no1, January 1911, pp.33–7; vol I no3, March 1911, pp.201–8; vol I no5, May 1911, pp.353–7; vol II no3, September 1911, pp.173–83; vol III no5, May 1912, pp.337–43, Boston: National Arts Publishing Co.
- 11 See Daniel Berkeley Updike, *Printing types*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 1922; Stanley Morison, *On type designs past & present*, London: The Fleuron 1926; Alfred Forbes Johnson, *Type designs*, London: Grafton 1934
- 12 J H Mason's strong and influential views concerning the role of 'fanciful' types in the corruption of the printer's art are given full account in L T Owens, *J H Mason 1875–1951*, London: Frederick Muller 1976 Harry Carter expresses a similar strength of view in his review of Nicolette Gray's [sic] *XIXth ornamented types and title pages* for *Signature* magazine, issue 10 November 1938, p.50. See also Nicolette Gray, *Lettering on buildings*, London: Architectural Press 1960
- 13 See Walter Tracy, *Letters of credit*, London: Gordon Fraser 1986, pp.19–21. While discussing the British Standard Tracy acknowledges that the classification of typefaces is an 'unresolved problem'.
- 14 *Typeface nomenclature & classification BS 2961:1967*, London: British Standards Institution, p.11
- 15 See D Sauthoff, G Wendt & H P Willberg, *Schriften erkennen*, Mainz: Schmidt, p.3
- 16 Laurence Wallis voices the opinions of a more traditional generation, when he complained, 'So much contemporary type design seems to be irrelevant, trivial, fatuous, flippant, clamorous, straining for

- effect and novelty, illegible, gimmicky, quirky and worthless' in 'Typographic chamber of horrors', *Baseline*, no.18, Ashford: Esselte Letraset 1994, p.45
- 17 See the classification devised by Jürgen Siebert, Erik Spiekermann and Erik van Blokland in 1995 specifically for use with the FontFont range of types; a series released over the past 10 years by FontShop International. They themselves acknowledge that this system is only intended to be 'fun and effective' and 'not totally stringent from a scientific point of view'. A similar dislocation of recent practice from that of the past is presented in Heller & Fink's survey of some of the most experimental typeforms produced during the digital age, see Steven Heller & Anne Fink, *Faces on the edge*, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold 1997
  - 18 See Alexander Lawson, *Anatomy of a typeface*, London: Hamish Hamilton 1990. See also Geoffrey Dowding, *Printing types* (London: Wace 1961; British Library 1998). When originally published in 1961, this text could at least provide its audience with a more detailed consideration of display types than A F Johnson's *Type designs*, upon which it so heavily relies. But by 1998 its evaluation of the field was at least 40 years out of date.
  - 19 Blackwell 1998, p.181
  - 20 Making a case for simplicity in classification, Lawson had argued that the difficulties of classification were to be accepted and that to try and address them was a 'luxury of polemics' to be left to 'typographic devotees', Alexander Lawson, *Printing types*, Boston Mass: Beacon, p.45
  - 21 See for example Benjamin Bauermeister's system set out in his *Manual of comparative typography, The Panose System*, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold 1994. See also David A Mundie's *A field guide to the faces*, Pittsburgh: Polymath systems 1995, to be found at <[www.telerama.com/~mundie/Typography/Faces.html](http://www.telerama.com/~mundie/Typography/Faces.html)>
  - 22 Robert Bringhurst, 'On the classification of Letterforms', *Serif* 1, California: Quixote digital typography 1994, p.30
  - 23 See Catherine Dixon, 'Why we need to re-classify type', *Eye*, vol.5, no.19 1995, London: Emap Construct, pp.86-7
  - 24 See Christopher Perfect & Gordon Rookledge, *Rookledge's international typefinder*, Carshalton: Sarema Press 1983
  - 25 Bringhurst 1994, p.36
  - 26 Nicolette Gray, *Nineteenth century ornamented typefaces*, Faber & Faber 1976, p.84
  - 27 See Beatrice Warde, 'Typefaces old and new' in *The Library* (fourth series), vol XVI no.2, September 1935, London
  - 28 See Tschichold's mapping of the evolution of the Roman alphabet in his *An illustrated history of writing and lettering*, London: Zwemmer 1946 and Hostettler's classificatory map/family tree from his book *Type*, St Gallen: Hostettler, Kopley & Strehler 1949
  - 29 See Hostettler, *Printer's terms*, London: Redman and the clasificatory work of Laurence Wallis, writing as John Wulfrun for *Print in Britain* from August 1959 to February 1960
  - 30 *Typeform dialogues* (ed. Eric Kindel), London: Hyphen (in press) and *Type & typography*, Phil Baines & Andrew Haslam, London: Laurence King 2002
  - 31 See *A description framework for typeforms; an applied study*, PhD thesis, London: Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design 2001
  - 32 Walter Tracy, 'Type design classification', *Visible Language*, vol.5, no.1, Ohio: ClevelandMuseum of Art 1971, p.63