

# Reinterpreting the Semiotics of Glagolitic


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*Abstract.* In my contribution I am addressing current usage of an archaic Slavic writing system, Glagolitic, in Croatia. Created in the 9th century in the course of Slavic Christianization, *glagoljica* gained traction in mediaeval Croatian territories early on, followed by further independent developments. Although the script historically never gained the status of a persistently widely used system for writing and reading in Croatia, and today apart from small academic circles, hardly anyone can actually read and write it, it is celebrated as a very specific visual sign for national culture. Croatian society however uses the Glagolitic script not for ‘representing’ the language or the spoken word respectively itself, but rather for expressing and marking a specific cultural and ethnic sense of belonging, which I will exemplify by a case example from soccer. *Glagoljica*, I argue, has recently undergone a reinterpretation of its semiotic means. Despite a lack of current referential function as a system for writing and reading, Glagolitic has been conventionalized as an autochthonous national heritage, as a specific sign of Croatian cultural, and thus also national identity. I therefore propose that Glagolitic as a writing system in toto may be grasped as a ‘sign’ and not so much as a system or set of constituent signs, e.g., graphemes, and that it became as such part of a Croatian ‘national knowledge’.

## 1. Introduction

In autumn 2022, on Sunday, September 25, the Croatian national soccer team played against the Austria national soccer team in Vienna’s Ernst-Happel-Stadion. It was a UEFA Nations League soccer match, Croatia won 3-1, and reached the finals, while Austria was relegated. But why open a paper on Grapholinguistics with soccer? How could this sport be probably related to script, writing, graphemes? I initially watched the game at random, but eventually wanted to see it through the end. And while watching the match, I was not at all interested in the game tactics, the Austrians desperately trying to score a second goal, or the Croatian

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players actually doing so. What caught my eye where the dresses of the Croatian players, where I spotted graphemes and number characters reminding me of the Glagolitic script, an archaic writing system that has been used in parts of Croatia throughout history. But as the players ran and tumbled on the pitch, it was difficult to focus the dresses properly and in detail.<sup>1</sup> At first glance, I was therefore afraid of *Déformation professionnelle*. But with a second glance, strongly focusing on the Croatian team's outfits, I saw that I was right. Croatian midfielder Mateo Kovačić with shirt number 8 did not wear the numerical character <8> on his back, but a Glagolitic <Ѣ>, representing the phoneme /i/ and numeric value 20. Defender Dejan Lovren, who scored the third goal for Croatia that evening with a diving header, wore his number <6>, that Slavic trained eyes will recognize as a stylized Glagolitic <Ѧ> for /r/ and 100. The stylized numerical grapheme was turned upside-down for Andrej Kramarić's back number 9. The first letter of surname of assist to the second goal, winger Ivan Perišić, was not a Latin <P>, but a borrowed Glagolitic <Ѣ>, originally with the phonetic value /n/. <B> in team members surnames such as Brozović, Barišić and Budimir, was replaced by a mirrored Glagolitic <Ѣ>, the grapheme for /o/. Several other graphemes on the players backs reminded of Glagolitic letters, and the designed font for the dress was clearly inspired by the angular Glagolitic script generally. Whoever watched the 2022 FIFA World Cup might have seen this specific font on both the white (home shirt) and blue (away shirt) tricot of the Croatian national soccer representation, too.

What can be detected here, could be approached with an idea of the Berlin based art collective Slavs and Tatars, regularly expressed in one of their lecture performances, "Translitative tease": the desire for an emancipation of sounds from their script (Slavs and Tatars, n.d.). As much as Slavs and Tatars—focusing on Turkic languages in the former Soviet Union—explore the potential of the conversion of script as a part of identity politics, I claim that we can exactly in the Croatian context find such a script, that from the vantage point of the present has emancipated from sounds, where graphemes not long represent phonemes in the first place: Glagolitic in Croatia. We can rather observe identity politics through using an archaic script, with letters emancipated from their initial representation of sounds (or numerical value), as Glagolitic graphemes are transposed in their phonemic value by drawing on the visible similarity with Latin graphemes and therefore becoming a "translitative tease," teasing expected transliterations. Moreover, Glagolitic developed from a set of graphemes to common knowledge, to also pick up the overarching theme of the Grapholinguistics in the 21st century conferences. In the following elaboration, I will dis-

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1. Details on the game can be found on the UEFA Nations League Homepage (UEFA, 2022).



FIGURE 1. Andrej Kramarić wearing his dress with number 9, a stylized variation of the Glagolitic grapheme <Ѣ> turned upside-down and Mateo Kovačić with shirt number represented by Glagolitic <Ѣ>. (Details from official HNS graphics online published on November 28, 2022 on the Facebook-page of HNS (Hrvatski nogometni savez, 2022b))

cuss the reinterpretation of Glagolitic, and I propose to grasp this specific writing system in the Croatian context as a cultural icon (Tyran, 2024) and as a visual reminiscence of national identity. Clearly, nations are imagined communities referring to invented traditions in claiming a common identity (cf. Anderson, 2006; Hobsbawm, 1984). A similar approach regarding the constructedness of icons and iconic notions was presented by Eco, who questions similarity as the main feature of icons, as described by semiotics. He argues for a stronger contextualization in a cultural and historical framework (cf. Eco, 2002, p. 197-230). In my contribution, I approach Glagolitic exactly as such a constructed icon for Croatian national identity, as this grapheme system today proves to have a widespread impact on many areas of everyday culture and material culture. Glagolitic is enshrined in the common knowledge of Croatian society as a marker for national consciousness and identity, and omnipresent: from soccer to universities, from schools to newspapers, from salami and wine to cravats and dresses, from tattoos to awards—Glagolitic graphemes can be found in numerous contexts (cf. Meyer, 2015; Nazor, 2004; Oštarić, 2018; Tyran, 2019). My approach to Glagolitic is on the intersection of Grapholinguistics and linguistic approaches to writing systems following Coulmas (Coulmas, 1981), Spitzmüller (Spitzmüller, 2013), and Dürscheid (Dürscheid, 2016), who highlight writing as a visual tool for communication besides language, together with the concept of iconicity of script and writing as proposed

in art history by Mersmann (Mersmann, 2015). Based on Derrida's post-structural grammatology and the Iconic Turn, it aims to account for the fact that writing and script point beyond language and can thus no longer be studied merely as a linguistic model of communication, but as an iconic medium of proposing new modes of interaction. Mersmann argues for a stronger integration of the cultural context in order to overcome the idealization of alphabetic writing systems as mere representation of sounds. (Mersmann, 2015, p. 13-20; 95ff.)

Such approaches help to better integrate the visual representations of writing and respective meaning to be conveyed. This for sure is important in the context of Glagolitic in present-day usage. It truly is not the only ancient script we can find in contemporary use, I however state that this case is specific as it functions on a national level and both as indexing boundaries to related languages and neighboring nations and strengthening national identity on the inside. And as present as it is in contemporary use, one might argue, it has never been before.

## 2. The History of Glagolitic

The emergence of Slavic writing culture in the 9th Century generally is strongly tied to the apostles to the Slavs Cyril and Methodius, two brothers native to Thessaloniki, the capital at the time of the Macedonian part of the Byzantine Empire. Methodius, the elder brother, was born 812, Cyril (whose given name was Constantine) in 826 or 827. Both brothers took part in religious and diplomatic missions. Most notably, Cyril and Methodius were chosen to serve as Slavic Christian teachers for missionary work for the Moravian ruler Rastislav in 862. They translated a variety of liturgical texts, prayers and gospels into Old Church Slavonic, the first literary Slavic language which can be classified as a constructed supra-regional Slavic language, based on a South Slavic local idiom (Damjanović, 2002, p. 9-24). At the same time, in 863, Cyril supposedly created the Glagolitic script for these texts' notations (Eckhardt, 1989, p. 32). The original form of *glagoljica* is only reconstructed, first identified written monuments are dated to the 10th century. Such reconstructions assume 36 to 38 hanging and round letters, each also representing a numerical value. In regards of linguistic functionality, the Glagolitic script represents the concept of one grapheme for one phoneme properly. Originally, the script was known under different names, the term Glagolitic or *glagoljica*, as it is designated in Croatian, derives from the verb *glagoljati* (to speak). Similarly, priests using this writing tradition and liturgy in (Old) Church Slavonic tradition and language are called *glagoljaši* (Damjanović, 2002, p. 47-50).

Cyril and Methodius travelled from Thessaloniki to Moravia and later on Pannonia and spread the Old Church Slavonic word and

Glagolitic script among Slavs in these territories. This was a highly political move by that time: It was the explicit wish of Rastislav, the Moravian prince, to christen his pagan subjects in the Slavonic language in order to dilute the strong influence of the German (Salzburg) bishops. Wishing to fulfil his petition, Byzantium conferred the Slavonic apostles and brothers Cyril and Methodius with this task. Subsequently, they 'developed' the Old Church Slavonic language and simultaneously a new own script system—the Glagolitic—within which many scholars find Christian motifs, making the alphabet a *scriptura sacra*, so to speak. This proved a revolution, as it went contrary to the directive of the Trilinguum, which declared that only Latin, Hebrew and Greek could be used as liturgical languages. Being accused of heresy, Cyril and Methodius travelled to Rome, where the pope recognized their efforts and allowed for Old Church Slavonic and Glagolitic to be used in liturgical concerns. Following the deaths of Cyril and Methodius, their pupils and followers however were expelled from Moravia and Pannonia, with at least some returning to the Balkan Peninsula. This led to an expansion of the Old Church Slavonic language and writing culture into the South Slavic area (Damjanović, 2002, p.9-24). Here now, Glagolitic had to concur with Cyrillic, which had developed based on the Greek uncial from the end of the 9th century and was in use as the official script in the Bulgarian empire, with its capital Preslav. Subsequently, many texts that had been written only in Glagolitic script were transcribed into Cyrillic. In other places, however, most notably Ochrid (today North Mazedonia), scholars stuck to the Glagolitic tradition. (cf. Damjanović, 2002, p. 50-52) Yet, in the South Slavic territories of Orthodox faith and under Byzantine leverage, Glagolitic lost ground and was replaced by Cyrillic.

In Croatia, however, that was part of the *Slavia Latina*, the Glagolitic script gained traction early on, followed quickly by further independent developments, such as the transformation of the originally round form of the Glagolitic graphemes to an angular form. One of the most famous Croatian medieval written historical monuments dated to the 11th century, the *Bašćanska ploča* (the Baška tablet), is already carved in a transitional type of the round to angular Glagolitic script. The Baška tablet is a limestone of almost  $2 \times 1$  meters, with an inscription of 13 rows, and a deed of donation as regards content. This written monument in itself became a famous motif, reproduced countless times in several sizes and as several objects such as magnets or posters. Towards the end of the 14th century, we also find the development of a cursive form of Glagolitic. Over the time, however, the territory where the Glagolitic script was used increasingly shrank and was with rare exceptions limited to the Croatian coastal lands, Istria and the Kvarner Bay, here mostly in the field of liturgy and religious writing. The first printed book in Glagolitic was a missal from 1483, and Glagolitic was,

however with increasing rarity and territorial and functional limitation, used until the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century by individuals. (Eckhardt, 1989, p. 39-49; Nazor, 2004a)

There are three main theories on the origin of the Glagolitic script, that have been disputed in Slavic philology, also drawing on the symbolic implications of Glagolitic graphemes. Firstly, the exogenous theory, also known as the Taylor-Jagić-theory, arguing that the Glagolitic alphabet is a derivative of the cursive Greek script of the 8th and 9th century, with influences coming also from Coptic, Hazar, Syrian, Armenian and other scripts. Critically, this theory concludes that the Glagolitic script could only be the work of one author coming out of the Greek cultural space and knowing many languages, respectively scripts. The second theory is the exogenous-endogenous theory, which claims that some parts of the Glagolitic graphemes are taken from other writing systems whereas other parts are formed out of different, non-linguistic elements. Finally, the endogenous theory, which was supported by the work of Finnish Slavist Černohwostow, states that the Glagolitic alphabet has no precedents in other scripts. He attributes all graphemes to the Christian Symbols of the cross, circle and triangle—with Cyril creating a new script and not leaning on existing ones. (cf. Damjanović, 2002, p. 52-61; Eckhardt, 1989, p. 31-49) Scholars in Slavic palaeography, such as Thorvi Eckhardt, support this theory emphasizing that Cyril did not create the graphemes arbitrarily but rather with a strong creativity and symbolism of individual letters (Eckhardt, 1967, p. 460). Already the first grapheme representing /a/ for instance shows the shape of a cross.

### 3. Becoming National Heritage

Scholarly arguments on the emergence of Glagolitic have clearly focused on questions of originality or eclecticism, symbolic values and intentions as well as taking the lead in claiming Glagolitic as a historic legacy. The latter is specifically important for the Croatian context, where the Glagolitic script has been included in the thesaurus of national identity markers (cf. the concept of Löfgren, 1989), specifically in the course of nation-building processes as Croatia became an independent state following the Yugoslav wars and the break-up of Yugoslavia. Glagolitic has become one of the core symbols for Croatian national heritage. Although the script historically never gained the status of a persistently widely used system for writing and reading in Croatia, and today apart from small academic circles, hardly anyone can actually read and write it, you can hardly travel to or move through Croatia without spotting it in numerous contexts, as mentioned earlier. In these contemporary contexts, however, the representation of phonemes or the readability are the least important. Glagolitic graphemes have emancipated from

the sound, and the social meaning predominates the linguistic meaning of writing.

Having said this, I approach the Glagolitic script in Croatia as a recently strong visible symbol of national identity, also against the background of indexicality (Gal & Irvine, 2019, p. 18). Such indexicalization is possible due to extensive scholarly and semi-scholarly work on the Glagolitic script, respective documents, and traditions. The Zagreb-based research institution *Staroslavenski institut* (Old Church Slavonic Institute) is important to mention in this context. But also semi-academic associations such as the *Društvo prijatelja glagoljice* (Friends of Glagoljica Association) in Zagreb or the *Mala glagoljska akademija* (Small Glagolitic academy) in Roč on the Istrian peninsula are fostering the narrative of Croatian legacy to Glagolitic. Both were established in 1993; the first organizes classes and lectures in schools, libraries and museums on the Glagolitic script; the latter is regularly visited by pupils from all over the country to get the chance to become familiar with the Glagolitic script. School classes attend together with their teachers this academy in summer to learn the history of the script and the literary tradition to which it is tied. They also craft brooches, skirts, shirts and dresses with Glagolitic motifs.

With both a strong academic attention and initiatives in the civic sphere and school Glagolitic is construed as an index distinguishing the Croatian language from its surround, in this very case other South Slavic languages emerging after the split of former Serbo-Croatian as a common language concept. This very specific linguistic situation is the matrix for such indexicalisation, where Glagolitic refers to a certain ideology. Serbo-Croatian has been introduced as a common linguistic concept bridging ethnic affiliations and drawing on South Slavic unity in the second half of the 19th century. After phases of convergence and divergence throughout the 20th century, it eventually broke apart together with Yugoslavia from the 1990s. Since then, four standard varieties have developed out of it, Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin and Serbian, and linguists in all four respective countries intensely work on differentiation and also foster discourses on idiosyncratic language history (cf. on this topic for instance Bunčić, 2008; Gröschel, 2009; Neweklowsky, 2010; Okey, 2004; Okuka, 1998). In such discourses, Glagolitic is a possible match that has been strongly emphasized. Drawing on Assmann's concepts of writing culture as cultural memory (Assmann, 2007), there are three important interacting features that can be observed regarding Glagolitic in Croatia: Firstly, the remembering—or orientation towards the past; secondly, it is connected to questions of identity, or political imagination; and third, the cultural continuation, or creation of tradition. Scholarly institutions and academic circles are articulating the Glagolitic script as an ancient cultural legacy, with a 'storyline' dating back to the 9th century and discursively constructed as an ever

since ongoing tradition with constant continuity, and simultaneously presenting themselves as the guardians of such legacy. Such a narrative is used for pronouncing script as a politicized national symbol and marker for identity in a common political imagination (cf. for instance Nazor, 2004b).

Before returning to the soccer dresses and their Glagolitic-inspired font as one of the most recent phenomena regarding the reinterpretation and reuse of the writing system and its graphemes, I would like to highlight another initiative launched from the scholarly community to consolidate Glagolitic as such a national symbol: The introduction of a specific celebration day in support of the Glagolitic script and tradition. This was a quite recent initiative introduced in 2018 by the Institute of Croatian Language and Linguistics, together with other cultural and academic institutions. The petition successfully passed the Croatian parliament in 2019, with the official introduction of “Dan hrvatske glagoljice i glagoljaštva” (Day of the Croatian Glagolitic script and Glagolitic tradition) on 22nd of February. This very specific day was chosen as the Croatian incunabulum and first print in Glagolitic, the missal *Misal po zakonu rimskog dvora* from 1483 was printed on this very day, as the colophon of the missal shows. The missal was discursively positioned in an overarching dispositive of autochthony of Glagolitic in Croatia, and as a unique feature in Croatian history, as it is not only the first print in Glagolitic script and Croatian language, but the first missal in a European context not printed in Latin language and script.<sup>2</sup>

Analyzing the topoi and ideological substrates in statements, explanatory texts and social media posts accompanying the introduction of this specific Celebration day by the included organizations, together with associated illustrations, the construction of a symbolical value and indexicality of Glagolitic can be traced. The central and repeatedly articulated goal of this initiative is to bestow *glagoljica* a specific status in the Croatian society, even if it is no longer used as a script in proper sense—which is even stated clearly. Importantly, political leaders strongly supported the initiative and presented themselves prominently in the media and on social media platforms with products and gimmicks launched for the celebration of *glagoljica* day, such as then Minister of Science and Education Blaženka Divjak, who posed with such an umbrella in her office, and then Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, who used it at official appearances on rainy days. The umbrella shows Glagolitic graphemes jumbled on the surfaces, but no clear written message to be transmitted can be identified.

The *glagoljica* celebration day is however not a stand-alone event, but part of a newly introduced whole month dedicated to the Croatian lan-

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2. A broader analysis of this initiative can be found in my article on Glagolitic as a cultural icon, that will be published in 2024 (Tyran, 2024).



guage “Mjesec hrvatskoga jezika,” which starts of on February 21st—the International Mother Language Day—followed by the *glagoljica* celebration day and finishing of on March 17th, as on this very day, 1967 Croatian linguists, philologists and academics published a Declaration on the Name and Status of the Croatian Literary Language [*Deklaracija o nazivu i položaju hrvatskog književnog jezika*], declaring in favor of an autonomous language concept and glossonym besides Serbo-Croatian. This is the specific conceptual combination important for building up and positioning the Glagolitic script in Croatian society, as an index of differentiation, as a distinguishing feature from the neighboring legitimization and planning of new national languages out of Serbo-Croatian, which there meanwhile are now four—Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Serbian—are accelerated. National academic institutions work at high pressure on every boundary to either of the other varieties, which in regard to the Croatian language also includes references to *glagoljica* and respective writing tradition. It is exactly the strong visible recognition value of script that is beneficial, too.

This distinctive visible recognition value was picked up by the designers for the Croatian soccer team’s dress, as outlined in the introduction, and turned into a specific font for this purpose. As Spitzmüller has highlighted, typography is part of grapholinguistics, as the materiality of communication does have an impact on the message conveyed (Spitzmüller in Dürscheid, 2016, p. 209–242). Typography therefore is inherently a semiotic means, and for Glagolitic the semiotic value has been reinterpreted, reshaped and reframed to make it fit in current identity politics in Croatia. When Hrvatski nogometni savez HNS officially presented the new dresses on September 15, 2022, they claimed:

“Croatia is Never Done.

Introducing the 2022 Croatia National Team Collection.

The classic red checks on the Home jersey are remixed with a modern twist to reflect the energy and pride of our country.

The new Away Jersey is inspired by Croatia’s nightlife and natural beauty, with vibrant Laser Blue checks reflecting the vibrancy of our country’s fast-moving festival culture and the azure waters of our coastline.” (Hrvatski nogometni savez, 2022b)

What can be extracted here is a visual significance in legitimizing identity internally as a proud nation full of strength, and to the outside as a vibrant tourist hot spot. The media report of HNS even went further and identified the “passionate, powerful and fiery character of the Croatian nation” represented by the red cheeks on white surface, taking up the coat of arms of the Republic of Croatia, a checkerboard of red and white fields (*šahovnica*), that are interpreted as “globally recognizable symbols of Croatian pride” (Hrvatski nogometni savez, 2022a). The checkerboard pattern is also present on the away dresses, however

not in red and white, but in a lighter and a deeper shade of blue, alluding to the Adriatic Sea. The typeface for numbers and names is indicated as being inspired by the “historic Croatian Glagolitic script” and discursively related to Croatian history and tradition and joins the overarching idea of presenting Croatia in the dynamic of combining legacies of the past and energies of the present (Hrvatski nogometni savez, 2022a).

#### 4. Concluding remarks

The archaic script *glagoljica* represents in a contemporary use a visual representation and icon of linguistic and national identity in Croatia. As such, it does however not have a fixed meaning, but is a variable dependent on context, that is incorporated into prevailing discourse and ideology. Although the writing system has had a rather limited range, geographically as well as functionally, and disappeared as a writing medium for over hundred years now, it is provided with a discourse of tracing back a thousand years of history on Croatian soil. By this it is included in a national master narrative and constructed as one of the specific symbols for autochthony and authenticity in Croatian culture, and therefore also indexes difference. Initiatives such as introducing a celebration day to *glagoljica* and Glagolitic tradition in Croatia, which was thereupon integrated in a whole month dedicated to the Croatian language, strongly foster processes of Glagolitic developing from a graphemic system to what I tend to call “national knowledge”.

As such, Glagolitic apparently lost its linguistic functionality, as the primary task is not transmitting a linguistic message: Graphemes do not necessarily represent phonemes, but a visual idea of “Croatianess”. In the presented case example in soccer for instance, Glagolitic is the underlying pattern for a typographic register, and the microtypographic design level here clearly transmits a message beyond merely the name and number of individual players. The font used on the national soccer representations dresses draws on visual recognition as well as on visual similarity of specific graphemes in Glagolitic and Latin script. It therefore triggers rather association to tradition and a specific historical narrative, of an ‘age-old’ autochthonous Croatian tradition in literacy, writing and culture. It is important in delimitating boundaries in the process of identity formation by linking writing systems to particular ethnic and religious groups. In this way, script becomes a factor as important as language for symbolically expressing and marking cultural identity and affiliation, a denotatum for nation, and ethnicity, and its visualization and materialisation as well.

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