Other-Letter; A hybrid of Sinhala and Tamil Scripts

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Sri Lankan Society has been in an ethnic tension for last 50 years and after a 30 year long civil war the situation is not bright. Building the social structures that could dissolve the ethnic tension in the rehabilitation process is a challenge. The language was the root cause behind the political face of the problem and it acts as a barrier between two ethnicities. The project scope was to develop typography-based solution to dissolve the language barrier between the two races and communicate the message of harmony.

The project was focused on developing a new hybrid script based on Sinhala and Tamil scripts that could be read by the native speakers of both languages. Project was considered as one community seeking for a better writing system. Sinhala and Tamil are some languages they know, they will learn, teach and use the new language.

The common roots of the Sinhala and Tamil languages were explored and identified. Each letter is a combination of Sinhala letter with the Tamil letter corresponding to the same sound. The characteristics and aesthetics of both scripts were taken into account and new script/ typeface was developed to be neutral without being bias to a single script.

The characters were developed following three methods.

1. Identifying similar visual elements from letters and develop based on similarities.
2. Exploring the development of each letter and start from the basic visual concept of each letter.
3. Identifying most significant element of each Tamil and Sinhala letter and combine them together.

The process was heavily based on the user testing process. Few different options were developed for each character following the 3 methods, which mentioned before. User testing was carried out with different demographics based on their education level and fluency in each language. After initial testing it was observed that the results did not have a pattern. Each person’s ability to identify a letter was dependent on the way they learnt their first letters and how they memorize the letters. This observation changed the approach of the user testing, and each person was asked to detail their reasons for identification of letters.

The Sinhala alphabet consists of 64 characters and Tamil has 31 characters along with more than 200 compound characters. Simplifications of the alphabets were required to make the new script accessible and understandable easily. Sinhala has two characters for the sound “Na” and Tamil has 3 characters. But a simpler system with fewer characters for Sinhalese has been suggested by a group of novelists and I followed that criterion to simplify Sinhala vowel modifier system and build a simple system for the project. The new script system consists of 35 characters.

The next challenge was to avoid confusion of characters. The reader easily confused similar shapes and forms in the both alphabets. Another challenge was to maintain the visual unity of the characters. It had to express the aesthetic of both scripts while maintaining a certain level of unity. The aesthetic of the typeface was kept minimal in this case and single width stroke was used. The form and the shape of the character were given the priority.

The final outcome was evaluated with another round of user testing; this system could be used in a real system to display names, and the common words that Sinhala and Tamil share could be displayed to create the same meaning for both ethnicities. This could be used in rehabilitation process in the Nothern parts of the Sri Lanka where ethnic tension is high.

Project Url

http://la-ulu.com/afewotherkinds/