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Overheard: Connecting Verbal Language to Visual Meaning

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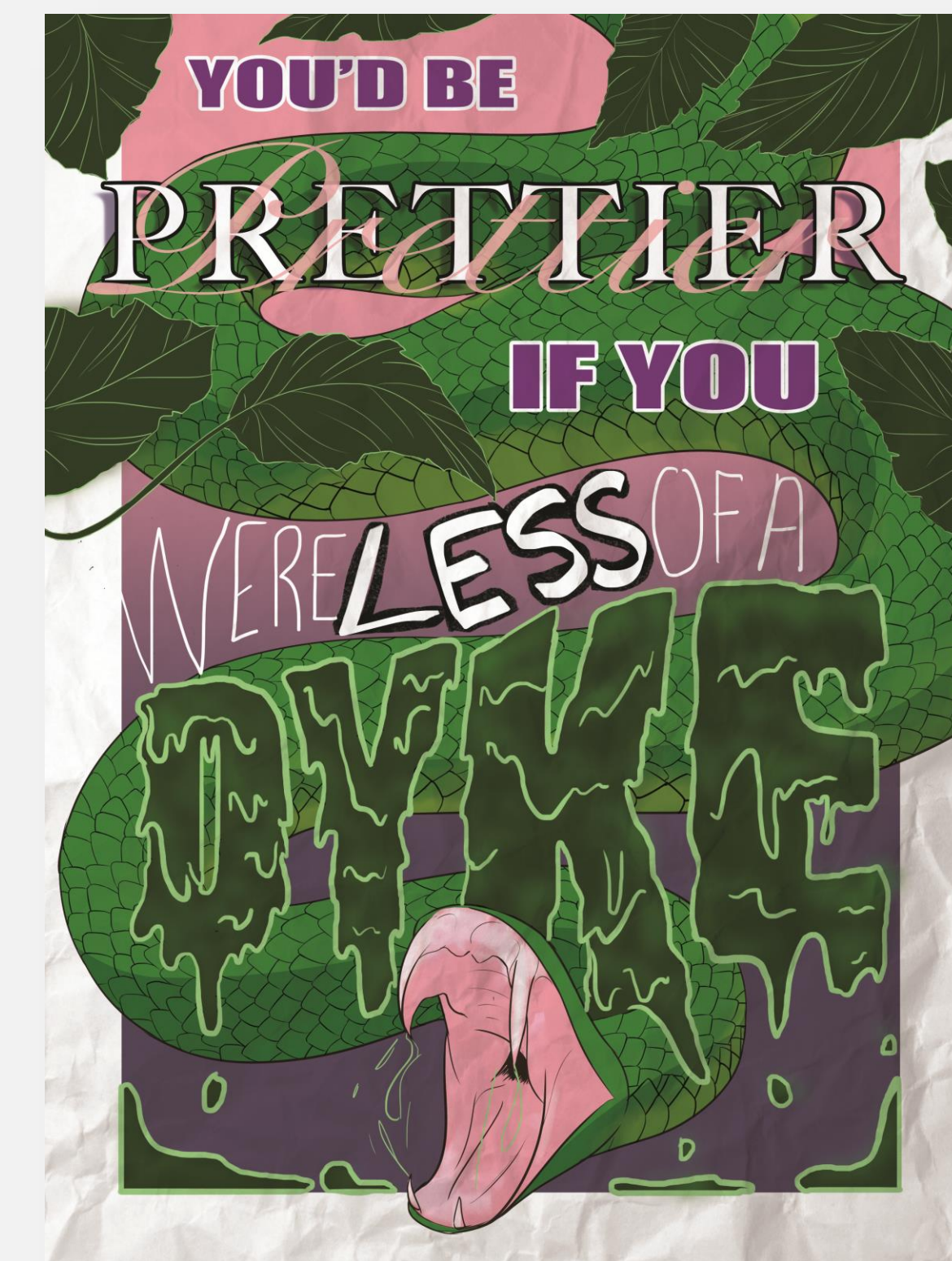
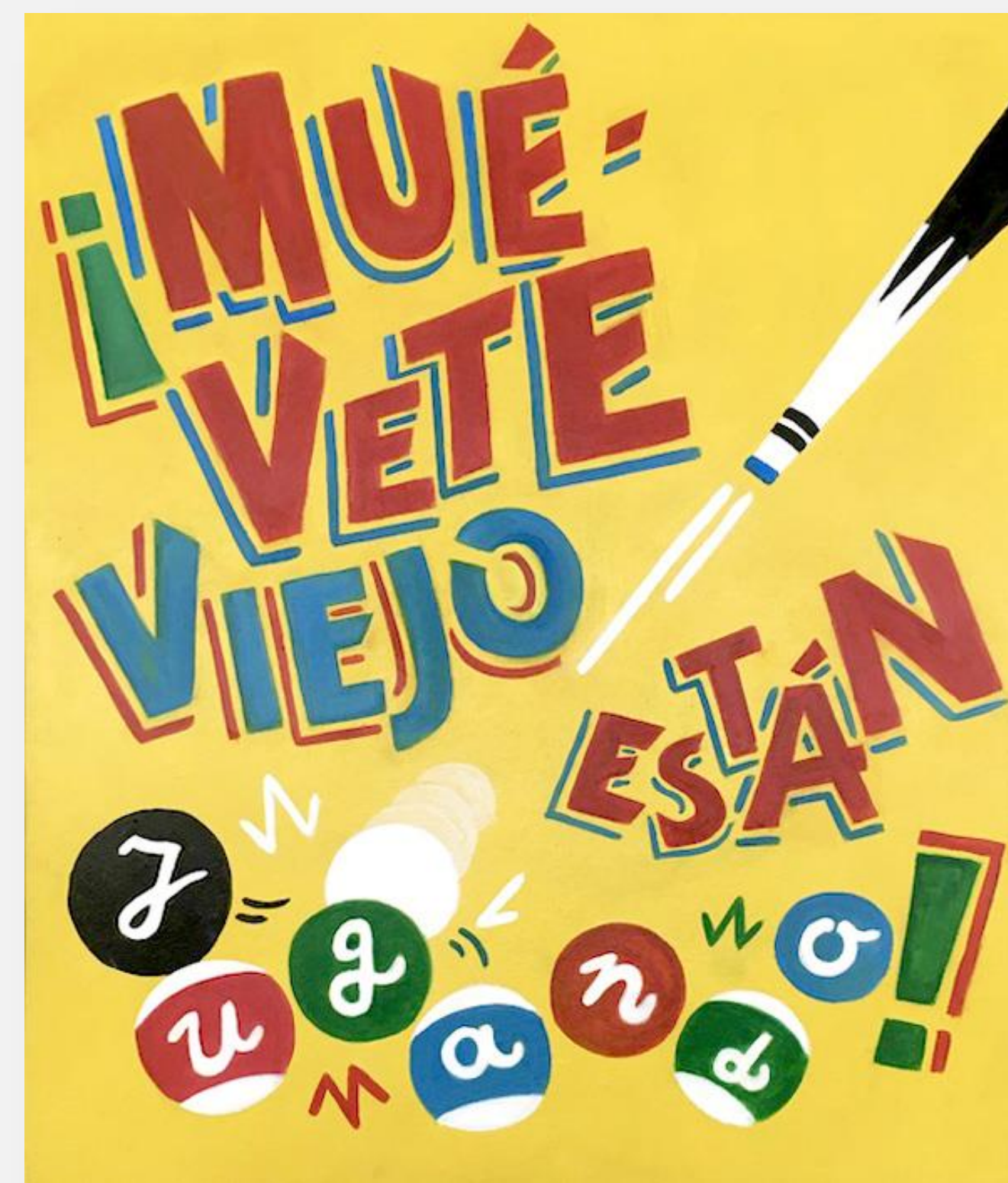
Resources

The concept behind the project is a combination of work by myself and that of my colleague Mark Addison Smith, Associate Professor of Graphic Design and Visual Communication at the City College of New York. We both address the use of verbal language in public spaces and the impact words can have on those who hear them.

- “You Look Like The Right Type :: The Daily Overheard Blog”, by Mark Addison Smith. <http://www.youlookliketherighttype.com/>
- “The Space Between,” by Ashley Hairston Doughty. <https://ashleyhdoughty.myportfolio.com/the-space-between>
- “Words/Meanings Zine”, by Julie Spivey. AIGA Design Teaching Resource, <https://teachingresource.aiga.org/project/words-meanings-zine/>
- “Interpreting Constitutional Amendments”, by Annabelle Gould. AIGA Design Teaching Resource, <https://teachingresource.aiga.org/project/interpreting-constitutional-amendments/>
- Graphic Design Thinking: Beyond Brainstorming, edited by Ellen Lupton, Princeton Architectural Press, 2011. p. 82–91.

Student Examples

From GRC 410 Advanced Typography, Fall 2019 (from left to right): Jacob Tolbert ('21), Jilda Cheng ('21), Sophia Arredondo ('21), Mary Sawyer ('21)



Teaching Practice

Words are symbols — visual representations of verbal language. Visual messages that use words as the primary vehicle of information are most effective when the representation of meaning goes beyond the letterforms themselves. This entails making connections between the verbal characteristics of the words (cultural meaning, dialect, inflection, etc.) and the intended meaning when the words were used. The ability to make these connections is incredibly valuable to those who use text to communicate with others, especially when unaccompanied by verbal explanations.

In order to help students better understand these complexities, they must become interpreters of the language being spoken around them. The “Overheard” project prompts graphic design students to do just that. The process involves these steps:

1. **Listen:** For a defined period of time, students keep track of interesting statements that they either overhear in public or that are spoken to them.
2. **Analyze:** Each student experiments with 1–2 statements by breaking them down word-by-word. Analysis includes: looking up meanings and synonyms, creating mind maps and association matrices, and researching historical and cultural contexts.
3. **Create:** Each student visually manipulates one of the statements to reflect their understanding of it. They must consider the target audience and how the representation of the statement might best convey the intended emotional and cultural meaning.

Benefits to Students

Unlike projects centered upon learning basic principles or developing messages for others, the project is completely reliant on the student’s perspective in order to be successful. Students come into this assignment with a broad range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, representative of the diverse population of the university. This not only presents challenges in terms of developing an effective visual message for a larger audience but also exposes students to different viewpoints on the meanings behind words and visual symbols.

As one student learned, the usage of certain words within one language can carry different meanings from group to group:

- “... It helps solidify the fact that we all experience things differently, and are exposed to different lifestyles, slang, and expressions, even when we are on the same campus ...”

Student feedback on the importance of crafting the most appropriate visual interpretation:

- “What’s important to me is to somehow show a connection through distance ... in order to maintain the timeless and ephemeral feeling I get from the sentence.”
- “Using a Spanish quote was also a challenge, I had to think about the way non-Spanish speakers would interpret the piece based on the imagery to give them context.”
- “... I want to show how a simple phrase said to you can have such a big impact, pushing you forward when you’d rather stop.”

How other UNLV teachers might adopt this practice

This project can be adapted to a short exercise to assist students in any course that involves visual presentations, including business, marketing, history, sociology, anthropology, and communications.

Examples of this exercise applied to other disciplines include:

- Marketing and communications majors analyzing logo development and branding for a minority-owned startup company
- History students describing the psychological impact of xenophobic cartoons during WWII, put into present-day terms
- A sociology assignment in which students explore opportunities for connecting members of the local community with newly-available health resources

To help your students think more constructively about how language is represented in their presentations or assignments, encourage them to answer the following questions:

- What is the goal behind this message? What do I want my audience to gain or understand?
- Who exactly is my audience? How might they perceive the message?
- What aspects of the message should be emphasized? What would be the most effective way to do so considering the desired outcome?