



ANN MARY BURCHARD'S LECTURE ON
SEMANTOGRAPHY BEFORE CALIFORNIAN TEACHERS
IN LONG BEACH 1955

Ann Mary Burchard lived during the war years in Shanghai and did not know of me who lived there too with my wife Claire. She learned of my work only through an article in the Christian Science Monitor of Boston (see Semantography Series No. 63). She got my address from the Editor and a lively correspondence came about which is to be found in my correspondence files. She was so fascinated with my work that she gave a lecture to Californian teachers in a Women's Club in Long Beach where she taught in a high school. Herebelow is the text of this lecture which she sent to me.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wonder whether some of you may be familiar with one of my favourite books: "The Wisdom of Living" by Lin Yutang, the contemporary Chinese philosopher and writer who has been living in this country for many years.

In one of the chapters he tells about two Chinese philosophers who take a walk in the country and were surprised by a torrential rain. They had to take shelter in a small temple and, spending there two days and nights, they passed the time in telling each other about the happiest moments of their lives - reaching the high number of 33 such "happy moments" which included everything from cutting a juicy water melon on a hot summer afternoon to welcoming a long missed friend with a cup of fragrant tea.

I am happy to be here tonight and share one of my happiest 33 moments with you: it is my meeting with SEMANTOGRAPHY, an international sign-writing system, consisting of a hundred basic symbols, with which the whole universe can be expressed, and which several billion people, - all the inhabitants of this earth could learn to read and write in a short time and so to understand each other.

It all started back in Shanghai, where my husband and I lived from 1940 - 1948.

One day we were walking, together with a Chinese friend, on one of the busy streets of Shanghai. Suddenly we saw two Chinese standing at a corner and gesticulating silently, without uttering a word. Our friend explained to us, that these two men must be from different provinces of China: their languages (wrongly called dialects) are so different that they cannot understand each other. So they find a way out of the dilemma by writing the Chinese characters out in the air: the written language being the same all over China, they suddenly can communicate and confirm with smiles and happy nodding of the head that now they understand each other.

We talked a lot about this strange experience at home and wondered at the fact, that the written Chinese is understood all over the giant country, and even through the ages: for the reading of old Chinese documents does not need a special preparation like for us the studying of old Anglo-Saxon or Middle Age German. The Chinese children at school can read the classics from 1000 years ago without difficulty, whereas the spoken language has split up to a degree, which makes communication impossible among the members of the same country and race.

This was my first meeting, not yet with Semantography, but with the necessity for it.

I did not know then that in the same city lived a man who had seen similar scenes as I, but who had attacked the problem practically and was working day and night at a universal picture language, which would help not only Chinese to understand other Chinese, but an Eskimo, a Zulu Kaffir, a Javanese, a Swede and a Frenchman as well.

Years later, in this country, I happened to run into an article in the Christian Science Monitor, entitled: "Bliss and Semantography".

It told of a research chemist in Australia who, stimulated by the universality and simplicity of chemical symbols - and musical symbols as well - had started to design a universal pictorial language, which he called "Semantography" (Greek graphein, to write: sema: sign), that it was based on a hundred simple symbols which could be combined in innumerable combinations - like the Chinese root-characters - and that he had tried them out on children who deciphered his letters without English translation or text.

Well, I became interested and wrote to the Editor. I got Mr. Bliss' address. Then it took me another couple of months to find the energy and really sit down and write that letter to Australia.

I got an immediate answer, and it turned out that Mr. Bliss had lived in China, in Shanghai, at the same time as we. Almost for seven years - without ever meeting each other. He is from Austria, Vienna, where he got his degree at the University of Technology in Vienna.

He sent me all the material, including his three-volume work on Semantography, for which he could not find a publisher yet, but which is painstakingly mimeographed and illustrated by himself.

Then I started the study of Semantography - and though, as a busy schoolteacher, I don't get around to it as much as I would like to, I learned some, if by far not all of the things it has to offer.

The basic idea is: this is not meant to be another spoken language, like Esperanto or Volapuk. It is not a phonetic representation of words.

It is a picture writing, which may be accompanied in the mind of each individual by the sounds of his own language.

Physical things are represented in outline:

Non-physical things in geometric symbols which analyse their significance.

Is even a written language possible without grammar - things like nouns, verbs, adjectives?

Not entirely - but Mr. Bliss solved even this problem in a pictorial way.

As a chemist he based his grammar on the following assumptions:

All languages are used to describe the phenomena of our physical world.

Its main manifestations can be classified into:

Matter, Energy and the Life - or Mind Force.

He represents matter as a square:  to indicate a material crystal.

Energy is movement, action like the thrusting up of a volcano cone: 

Mind Force is indicated by the outline of the upper skull:  and Mind

Evaluation by a  indicating valere, value.

Note by Bliss: There is no need to draw here the symbols as Mrs. Burchard drew them on the blackboard. Hence, only the words are given to show what symbols were demonstrated by her.

Man - Woman - to man - manly

That takes care of nouns, verbs, adjectives.

Plural: multiplication mark:

Personal pronouns: 1, 2, 3.

Past, Present and Future of verbs:

Examples of such relatively simple and practical symbols:

eyes - to see - visual

ear - to hear - auditory

nose - to smell, olfactory

mouth - to speak - verbal, language

hand - to touch - tool - telephone - translation

earth - sky - sun - moon - winter

day - night - Thursday - May - year

water - lake - ocean - steam

fire - stove - electric stove

time - watch - wrist watch

roof - house - to dwell

street - backyard - village - town - post office

money - vessel - business - business man - bank - cheque

man - citizen - couple - married couple

birth - parents - father - mother - son - daughter - marriage -

engagement - divorce

wings - bird

fish

animal

insect

All these are rather concrete things.

How to express abstract concepts?

emotion - reason - conscience

happiness - sadness - doubt - interest

good - bad (rational)

good - bad (moral)

apology

Life. Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness

Fear - hope

Some Science Symbols.

chemical - chemist - chemical analysis -

measure - measuring movements - physicist

gravitation - pressure - mixture

Agriculture

knife - plough - grain - harvest
 medicine - doctor

Religion

creator - nature - science - scientist

You got a general impression on how Semantography works.

The question remains: is it just a pleasant past time, a kind of game doodling - or does it have a deeper purpose in our confused age?

In the middle ages the small world had a universal language in Latin, used by the Church and Schools all over Europe. Every educated Spaniard could speak it as well as his English, French, Italian or German colleagues. This gave a common cultural background at least to the thin layer of educated Europe.

But times changed, the world became larger, more people, more problems, more misunderstandings, less cultural unification.

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz, the great German philosopher of the 17th century, felt the necessity of a common means of communication. He wrote in his "New Essays concerning human understanding":

"....a universal characteristic very popular might be introduced if small figures were employed in the place of words, which would represent visible things by their outlines, and invisible by the visible which accompany them."

This was said more than 300 years ago. Mankind is sometimes slow in grasping latent possibilities, the pressure of necessity has to become strong enough. The principle of steam as an agent of motion was discovered about 300 B.C. by Heron of Alexandria. But nothing much came of it. Only under the pressure of the social economic problems in the 19th century was the steam engine invented. Mankind invents what it needs-at just the right time and place, directed by the great Spirit behind all history.

Is Semantography today a necessity?

In my opinion the answer can only be positive.

Last night the big flight from here to Denmark and vice versa was accomplished in 24 hours. So close have we come in time and space - but how close are we in understanding?

An engineer, who is sent from this country to an underdeveloped area in India is faced with the problem of 46 different languages existing side by side in India. Should he learn them all? Would he gain much by even learning 2, 3 or 4 of them?

In the United Nations speeches are made in about 7 different languages. Interpreters are feverishly at work in translating them immediately and the translation is received by earphones by the different language groups. Can you imagine what it would mean if every representative had a schooling in semantography - which can be achieved in about 2-3 months of intense study - and the text of every speech would be projected on a screen in semantographic symbols, read by everyone in the assembly at the same time and mentally transferred into the words of his own language?

One of the most hopeful things in our time is the movement "Atomic Power for Peace." An international school is to be founded in this country where scientists will pool their knowledge. Again: how much would the technical language difficulties be eased if Semantography could be used as a tool?

Compared with these large issues, some other issues seem small - but imagine what it would mean in the field of international traffic, telegraphy, - cultural, agricultural, scientific and commerce exchange if the world would learn to communicate and to understand each other in the simple way the two Chinese at the street corner in Shanghai did????

It seems to me that Semantography is an answer to the age-old problem of the Tower of Babel. And I am thankful that you gave me the occasion to talk about it for a while. Being a schoolteacher, I cannot help giving tests. So, at the end, I will write something on the board - the beginning of the Book of Creation from the Bible - and we will see whether you are able to translate it after this short hour of instruction.

The End.