

Semantography Series No. 268

A MASTER THESIS ON TRAFFIC COMMUNICATION
BY SYMBOLS AND HOW THE BLISSYMBOLS ARE
MUTILATED

In March 1964 I received the following letter

Bliss Institute,
2 Vicar Street,
Sydney

31 March 1964

Dear Sirs,

I am a graduate at Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, U.S.A. and presently working on my Master thesis which pertains to the use of signs and symbols to provide more efficient movement of people within cities, whether on foot, in public transportation, or as drivers of cars.

While reading a recent issue of Print, I came across an article by Rudolf Modley entitled, "Is Writing Obsolete." In it, particular mention was made of the Mr. C.K. Bliss' Semantography. I would be very much interested in obtaining additional information about this system, if available.

If such information is available at no cost, I would appreciate receiving all available literature. Upon completion, I shall donate it to the Graphic Arts Library here at Princeton for the use of all students. If a charge is involved, a return letter with description of contents would be appreciated so that I might determine what I can afford within my limited budget. My interests are immediate however, since I am in the midst of my research, and I am sure that the time lag involved in obtaining the literature through University sources would come close to defeating my reason for writing.

Awaiting your reply, I remain

Sincerely,
Russell P. Nystedt
Engineering Quadrangle
Civil Engineering Department
Princeton University
Princeton, New Jersey U.S.A.

I answered immediately

Lt. Russell P. Nystedt

Engineering Quadrangle, Civil Engineering Department,
Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, U.S.A.

Dear Lt. Nystedt,

Received your interesting letter today and am despatching within hours what you need to know for your work. Within this letter I enclose the issues No. 157 and 198 of the Semantography Series, which (if you read them carefully) will give you a fair idea of the scope of my work. Indeed, there is no field of human interest and thought which I have not subjected to the rigorous application of my tests, namely whether or not only 100 symbol elements are indeed sufficient to express even complex ideas in science, religion and philosophy. However, I have shown in my large volumes, that though it is impossible to reduce every meaning to its meaning elements, it is sometimes advisable to use auxiliary pictorial symbols. And this is especially the case with road warning signs in which you are especially interested.

With the same airmail, but second class I am sending you some issues of my Series and also the pages 357 to 366 of Volume II on Semantography, because this is the chapter dealing especially with the road warning signs. Unfortunately, the University of Princeton has never responded to my letters for the acquisition of my books and the Series. Other universities for instance Harvard, Columbia, the M.I.T. and others have given a standing order for all my future publications. I have only a few sets left of the three volumes, reserved for universities only, and if you use issue No. 157 (enclosed in this letter, and directed to the librarians) perhaps you could persuade your library to give an order for the 3 volumes, which however, must also include an order for the 163 issues (already bound, more in the near future, as the series has reached the 240 mark). The price for these 5 large volumes is \$32.70, and I hope that you would be able to induce Princeton University to order my work. In the meantime, if you want to see for yourself the extent of it, you may do so at the universities mentioned above, should you have an opportunity to go there. They are also at the Public Library of New York.

Now, I am sending you all the papers gratis, not only because you are a university student (as I was a long time ago) but also because my only hope is the new generation of men of vision. For 22 years I have approached thousands of educators and professors with dismal result. A man with a new idea must be dead first, until his work will be appreciated. Or in the words of Max Planck, a new idea does not gain ground by convincing the old opponents in the universities, but rather as time goes by and the old men die out. I am already 67 and I shall not see the fruits of my labour. I have spent thousands of dollars in my approaches to the learned men, until I went almost broke. Today my earnings are very limited, and I am spending almost everything on this work. For this reason, I shall appreciate if you would reimburse me only for the postage stamps I have to buy to send you everything by airmail. I shall calculate the sum at the end of this letter, when I have posted the big parcel at the post office and ascertained the amount in dollars. Please send me the equivalent in 10cent postage stamps of America, which I use when I write to scholars. I have found that sometimes the only way to get an answer is to include a postage stamp.

Sometimes however, some educated educators pocket my stamp and ignore my letter.

From your private address on your envelope I see that you are a military man and then you might be interested in my approaches and wrangles with the men in the Pentagon, with the Air Force Research Men and with others. It's all laid down in some issues. I see that you are married, and your wife may be interested in my applications of Semantography for a happy homelife not marred by words which may hurt. I mention all this only to show you the extent of my work, and the many possibilities it offers.

Now here is the list of all publications which you get in two airmail letters. Pages 357 to 366 of Volume II Semantography dealing with Road Signs

No. 1 of the Semantography Series, the first leaflet

No. 2 the list of basic symbols, their derivations and combinations, as registered for copyright in Washington. I give you permission to show my symbols, provided you do not alter them, or if you make symbols of your own, please state so. Otherwise if my symbols are shown altered a new Babel will result.

No. 41. my lecture on Semantography for Technology

No. 62. an article on Semantography by a friend of mine Mr. Heaney

No. 150. the brochure containing two papers by Professor Reiser, the most comprehensive publication for the study of my work

No. 157. a short leaflet on Semantography for the librarians

No. 163. the catalog of publications, but this is superseded by the list of publications in No. 198 (included in this letter)

and later No. 7, 8, 43

Now one last request, In the past I have suffered agonies through reviews of men who did not take the time and trouble to examine carefully my work. Hence, I found a lot of critics. Had they asked me the questions they had in mind I would have answered them one by one and they would have dropped their adverse criticism born out of ignorance. So please here is my request in return for my gratis offer of these publications:

If you have praise for my work, and if you help to propagate it and make it known, be blessed and thanked for. But if you have criticism to offer, by all means do so, but tell me first of your criticism in a letter, before you put it in your thesis. Hear my answers, and when they do not satisfy you, go ahead and criticise, but be fair to me, and give my answer to every one of your criticisms, so that a reader may form his own opinion. This I think is not asking too much of you, and I hope you will agree and comply with my request.

And now one last thought. If I am still alive in 1965 I intend to get the money somehow and go on a lecture tour through the most important universities in the U.S.A. Could you inform me whether there is a special agency at your university which arranges such lectures. I do not ask for a cent and no admission prices. All is free, as I am going to pay for all my own expenses. I have already some invitations from universities, and naturally Princeton is high on my list. If you could give me some information, I shall be grateful, and maybe we would see each other next year.

And now God's speed to you, and all my best wishes for a successful thesis and for a rewarding reading of my writing. Best regards also to your wife.

Yours sincerely,
C.K. Bliss

When I did not receive any acknowledgement I wrote after 7 weeks on the 11th June and received at last a detailed answer together with that part of his thesis which deals with my symbols. Here is his first letter

Dear Mr. Bliss,

17 June 1964

I received your letter of 11 June today as I was gathering my last bit of material and books from my study room where I have spent many hours in the last three months striving to finish my thesis in time to graduate this month.

I met my goal and am now preparing to depart for my next duty station, which is in Hawaii.

I am very sorry that I was not more business-like in acknowledging receipt of the material that you sent me but your guess as to my reason for not writing was absolutely right. Work was so pressing that I was not able to deliver my thesis to my adviser and department representative until the morning of graduation (which was yesterday). At any rate, I will now fill to the best of my ability your original requests.

First, I was advised by the Assistant University Librarian that it would be advisable for you to write to Professor William C. Moulton, 124 Dickinson Hall, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, for more information about lecturing at Princeton on your proposed tour in 1965. Professor Moulton is in the Linguistics Department and a recommendation by him to the committee which selects visiting lecturers would increase your probabilities of being selected as one of the guest lecturers.

I also submitted information found in your letter to the University Library (that concerning the fact that Harvard, Colombia and MIT have a standing order for your publications) but found that they were still not interested in receiving your work.

My original statement concerning the fact that I would give all material to the University after completing my thesis still holds. Tomorrow or the next I shall deliver the literature that you sent me, along with that received from Otto Neurath and Dr. Andre Eckardt (who has developed a world writing system called SAFO). I will not be able to comply with your suggestion that I have the work bound since the sizes of each booklet or pamphlet differ so that no workable solution to binding all of them together could be found. My thesis commitments do not allow me to attach my thesis to your work either. However, let me say that I did use your suggestions for traffic signs as an illustration in my text and I am including a copy of Chapter VIII which included this information. As you can see, the contents of my chapter only brings to the attention of those engaged in developing sign standards other possibilities or avenues of study which might prove fruitful in bettering the signs available to their users. I have not attempted to evaluate the sign symbols.

Finally, enclosed you will find several dollars worth of stamps to aid you in continuing your correspondence to American addresses. I have added a little to make up for some of the inconvenience that I caused you in having to address another letter to me and for the fact that you were so willing to provide me with the information that I requested to begin with.

Sincerely,
Russell P. Nystedt.

And now follows his Chapter VIII titled

NEW IDEAS FOR SIGNS AND THEIR SYSTEMS

Note: There are a lot of footnotes with biographical references, all numbered by the numbers 1 2 3 etc., in the text. These references will be typed at the end of this chapter. Unfortunately, by mistake the footnotes were typed twice. Furthermore Lt. Nystedt refers to colours for city and land maps, and shows such examples in black and white with colour notations for the Map of the Greater Boston Business Area. As this part is of no special interest with regard to my symbols I shall not reprint his writing, which is to be found in the originals of the Semantography Series under the number SS No. 268. I regret that there will be a break in the writing, but the serious researcher can always get the complete text from Princeton University or the Australian National Library.

And now here is his relevant text of his chapter VIII Pages 78 to 79.

CHAPTER VIII

NEW IDEAS FOR SIGNS AND THEIR SYSTEMS

If the technical details of sign construction and location have been properly fulfilled, then it appears that the usefulness of signs is wholly dependent on the ingenuity with which their basic features are exploited. Literature covering the field of traffic signing indicates that progress in finding better ways to present information to users is limited, and new approaches are non-existent. The National Joint Committee on Uniform Traffic Control Devices is slowly changing the U.S. Manual to include symbols found on International road signs.¹ Several major cities in the United States have incorporated the use of still others.² But because the highway sign system now found in Europe is all but completely developed,³ it appears that when American system had adopted whatever portion it considers useful, the process of change, at least major change, will stop. Rather than accept this perhaps overly pessimistic estimate of the situation, the following paragraphs introduce several variations to present.

1. Parking area and pavement-width transition signs are two examples. The first uses a larger letter "P", just as found in many European cities, but follows it with small letters "arking", only one fifth the size of the first letter. Eventually, these last, already ineffective letters should disappear.
2. The City of New York is experimenting with the International "Do Not Enter" sign which consists of a red circle with a white horizontal bar across it. The City of Honolulu uses International roadway signs extensively.
3. There has been little change on the basic symbols used on European highways since publication of the 1931 European Conference on Road Traffic in Geneva. (Based on study of sign systems found in article by Anthony Froshaug entitled "Roadside Traffic Signs", Design, No. 178 October 1963, pp. 37-50) thinking that perhaps could be adapted and refined for use in developing a better sign system and thereby provide more information and better orientation to its users.

In the field of City Planning, maps indicating the primary function of each part of the city (housing, industrial, business, etc.) are used as visual aids for both representing the existing conditions and determining the schemes for future land development. The functional areas are differentiated from one another usually by the use of a pattern or color code. Code-function relationships are not nationally standardised as yet, but the variations in use are so minor that official adoption will cause few changes in current practices. A recently published study which suggests a standard was prepared by the North Carolina section of the Southeast Chapter, American Institute of Planners.⁴ Suggested land use classification and identifying code are listed in Table II.

Now the text from the pages 84 to 89. However, I shall not redraw some of the Isotype signs on page 85 of the thesis and the Table 12 on page 88. I shall however draw all the semantography symbols, not as they are mutilated but as I draw them, and shall discuss these mutilations by Lt. Nystedt (which have occurred also with other draughtsmen and designers in other publications to my intense unhappiness) at the end of this issue.

The feature of signs more susceptible to change is legend. The usable and distinct variations possible in language are innumerable compared with color and shape. But, as mentioned earlier, most changes are now confined to adopting or modifying current International traffic sign characters.

There are other sources from which to develop an international sign language. The one most discussed is Esperanto, which could be used world-wide. But it has already been determined, as described in Chapter VI, that symbolic signs are recognised at greater distances, and since distance is both a safety and convenience factor, a universal word language would do little to solve sign problems.

There are also a number of symbolic languages which have been developed and could possibly have some application. The best known but most limited language is called Isotype. It was developed by Otto Neurath⁶ and is in education, business, advertising and on traffic devices to depict such things as ships, men and cars. It is wholly pictorial and its scope is based on the following philosophy:

"Frequently it is very hard to say in words what is clear straight away to the eye. It is unnecessary to say in words what we are able to make clear by pictures."

Fig. 38 Isotype Pictures Used for Road Signs to Inform Drivers to Switch Driving Lanes. (not shown)

The chief points, or perhaps limitations, of the Isotype system are described by Mr. Neurath as follows:

"A picture which makes good use of the system gives all the important facts in the statement it is picturing. At the first look you see the most important points, at the second, the less important points, at the third, the details, at the fourth, nothing more -- if you see more, the teaching-picture is bad."⁸

It is apparent that Isotype could not provide the new idea necessary to revolutionise the legend of signs. The symbols used would have to be more universal.

At least two existing symbolic languages lay claim to being complete and universally adaptable. The first, called Safo, has been developed by Dr. Andre Eckhardt.⁹ The second, known as Semantography, was invented by C.K. Bliss.¹⁰

The work of C.K. Bliss is particularly interesting because he has developed traffic signs, including their shapes, with his language.¹¹ The similarity of Semantography sign shapes to those already existing on highways is worth further discussion.

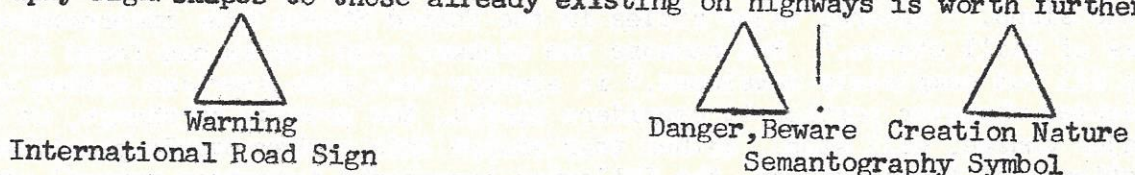


Fig. 39. Comparing a Current Road Sign Shape to a Symbol in the language of Semantography.

Three examples are used to show the derivation and meaning of Bliss sign shapes. The International road sign for warning, or safety, is a triangle. Semantography uses the triangle to mean creation, creature, or nature. The addition of an exclamation mark following the symbol means danger, or beware. If this language was a universal standard, a triangular shaped traffic sign would carry a deeper meaning than now exists. The driver seeing it would not just recognise the sign because of a distinctive shape: he would "read" the shape as meaning Danger! Beware! to all forms of creation. The derivations of other sign shapes follow similar reasoning. The danger sign, which is similar to the International stop sign,¹² and the square shape for mandatory compliance, which approximates the shape of the U.S. regulatory signs, are shown in fig. 40.

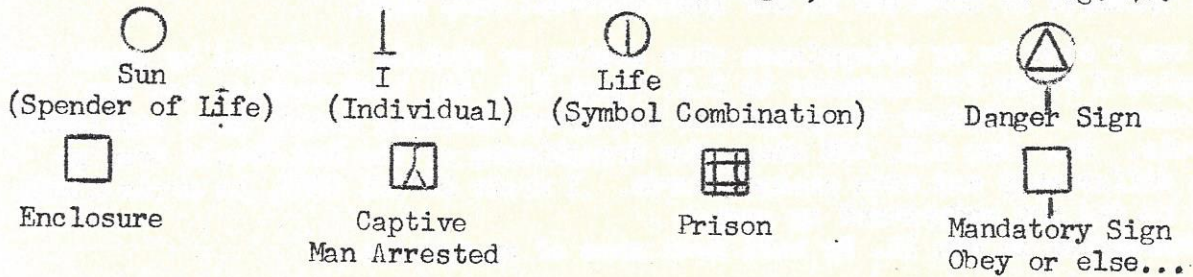


Fig. 40. Derivation of Road Sign Shapes (Circle and Square)
Using Symbols Found in the Language of Semantography

The traffic sign shapes that would be used based on this symbolic standard are therefore similar in some respects to those found in both of the current road sign systems. The reasoning used in their derivation obviously appears weak because it has no real meaning to anyone but an advocate of Semantography. The one perhaps useful item developing from this discussion would be increased clarity of a sign system that used the additional distinctive shape suggested by Semantography. Table 12 compares the basic sign outlines of the U.S. and International standards plus a composite, originated to take advantage of the increased clarity of a new shape. (not shown)

A new sign legend incorporating the symbols of Semantography would rely on the arrow even more than would the current standards. Figure 41 illustrates some of the Bliss recommendations. (the parking signs mentioned below are on p. 496 of my book 2nd edition)

Fig. 41 Illustrations of the Possible Uses of Semantography on Traffic Signs:
(1) Entrance (2) Exit (3) Stop (4) Keep Right (5) Dead End (displayed at right angles to Dead End Road Entrance.) (6) Parallel Parking on Right Side (7) Parallel Parking Both Sides. (8) No Parking Either Side (9) Parking Between Signs (other sign ahead, assuming driving on right/side of road) (10) Parking Time Limit (details given on explanatory sign below).

(Source: C.K. Bliss, Semantography, Semantography Publishing Company).

The examples shown obviously present designs not found on road signs today. Some are very descriptive and bear further study. But evaluation of their possibilities for use is outside the scope of this study. The important point to be made is that there are other avenues to consider when designing the signs which are used to inform and regulate.

The suggestions in this chapter represent the result of research into changes that would greatly affect the features of signs and their use in a system. Coupled with ideas developed and discussed in previous chapters, and the practical background provided by interviews and correspondence with traffic engineers, city officials and interested individuals, the next chapter consolidates and concludes this study by suggesting the form and features that a sign system should have to effectively inform and direct travellers.

Now follow the footnotes with the numbers in the text above. (typed again)

1. Parking area and pavement-width transition signs are two examples. The first uses a large letter "P", just as found in many European cities, but follows it with small letters, "arking", only one fifth the size of the first letter. Eventually, these last, already ineffective letters should disappear.
2. The City of New York is experimenting with the International "Do Not Enter", sign which consists of a red circle with a white horizontal bar across it. The City of Honolulu uses International roadway signs extensively.
3. There has been a little change in the basic symbols used on European highways since publication of the 1931 European Conference on Road Traffic in Geneva. (Based on study of sign systems found in article by Anthony Froshaug entitled "Roadside Traffic Signs", Design No. 178 October 1963, pp.37-50).
4. A Proposal for a Standardized Land-Use Classification System, prepared by the Land Use Classification Committee, North Carolina Section, Southeast Chapter, A.I.P., and published by the Division of Community Planning,

Department of Conservation and Development State of North Carolina, Raleigh, N.C. (undated).

6. Isotype Institute, 68 Oxford Street, London W1, England.
7. Otto Neurath, International Picture Language (London: Basic English Publishing Co.), pp.26-7.
8. Ibid, p.27.
9. Dr. Eckhardt is located in Bavaria, Germany, 33 Possenhofenerstrass, Starnberg/See.
10. Bliss Institute, 2 Vicar Street, Coogee, Sydney, N.S.W. Australia.
11. C.K. Bliss, Semantography, Vol. II (Yellow Springs, Ohio: Semantography Publishing Co.) (This is the old address and not more valid. Only 2 Vicar Street Coogee as above)
12. The Triangle is inverted in the International Stop Sign.

And now I come to my unhappiness when seeing my symbols mutilated by other men. As examples I refer for instance to S.S. 7, and S.S. 61, both samples how the draughtsmen of the Sydney Telegraph and the Sydney Morning Herald have mutilated my symbols. See also S.S. 198 where the draughtsmen of the Sun Herald drew my symbols differently and even changed words. I wrote DETOUR LEFT, he wrote RIGHT because he did not understand my symbol.

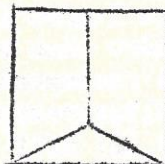
And herebelow is how Lt. Nystedt drew some of my symbols.

On page 5 of this issue Lt. Nystedt shows my symbol for life as showing mainly the circle of the sun, and tells of my suggestion that all warning signs at hazards which could endanger life should be on a circular disk to resemble the life symbol.

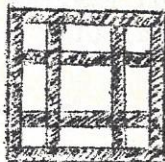
Underneath he shows my suggestion for a mandatory sign - "Obey or else you go to prison". But whereas he could not fail to draw my circular sign for life correctly, he failed to copy my correct symbol for a prison. On page 5 I have drawn the symbol for prison and for man imprisoned correctly, but look how Lt. Nystedt has drawn it. I shall show both versions much enlarged in the same size as Lt. Nystedt drew them. And whereas I prescribe that the thickness of the lines should be 1/10 of the width of the regular square, Lt. Nystedt drew the lines much thinner.



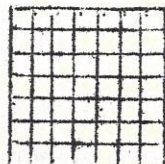
my design for man in enclosure (imprisoned)



Lt. Nystedt's drawing



my design for prison (prison bars on window)



Lt. Nystedt's drawing

Similar misrepresentations have occurred in other publications, and have made me so embittered that I have reformulated my copyright conditions, demanding that the symbols must be photographed from my drawings in my book "The Invention and Discovery that will change our Lives", and also shown in S.S.280 Universal pictorial Blissymbols for the International Traveller. My new copyright conditions are to be found in the above mentioned book on page 413 and repeated in S.S.242.

The End