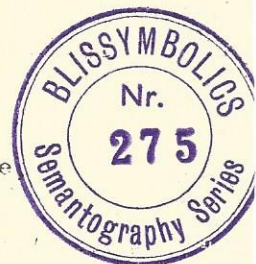


SEMANTOGRAPHY

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Abridged from Chapter 9, "Sign Writing for Today"

From a soon-to-be-published book, **Signs and Symbols Around the World** By **ELIZABETH S. HELFMAN**



There have been a number of attempts to create a complete world writing system with signs. This is not the same thing as an international language, which can be spoken as well as written. . . .

Symbols for world writing have recently been devised by an Australian, C. K. Bliss. He calls his system "Semantography," a made-up word that means "writing for meaning."

Semantography is a workable system once it is learned. It does not depend on the sounds of spoken words, and for this reason it can be used by people everywhere, whatever their language. Most of the symbols in Semantography are made up of lines that follow the outlines of real things. This makes them easier to learn than symbols that do not look like anything at all. Specific things are represented by simplified pictographs. There is  for "tree,"  for "sun."

Ideas are harder to relate to real things, but this problem has been worked out, too. Semantography is more than just picture writing. Almost anything that can be written can be translated into Semantography, though it would be difficult to translate complicated ideas precisely. This is difficult in our everyday language, too.

Semantography can be read in all languages. If you speak English, for instance, you would translate Semantography into English as you read, putting the words into the order you are familiar with. If you speak French, you would translate Semantography into that language, arranging the words as they are normal spoken in French. And so on.

The lines that make up each symbol are simple straight lines and curves, with the same lines repeated in different arrangements. They can, in fact, be typed on a specially adapted typewriter. For general use,

the symbols would be the same size as regular print. Here, to show them more clearly, they are somewhat larger.

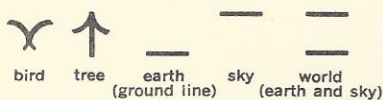
Semantography is not meant to take the place of any real language. It cannot be spoken. In any case, no one would want to give up speaking and writing the comfortable language he was brought up with. Besides, the languages we speak have more meaning than any invented language, spoken or written. They are composed of words that have lived and changed for thousands of years as people used them.

The greatest advantage of a symbol writing like Semantography is that it can be written and read by people who speak different languages. It can make communication possible across the world.

If you were to use Semantography as a real tool for writing, you would have to practice writing the symbols until you could remember them and write them easily. This is not as hard as you might think because the symbols make so much sense.

You already know some of the symbols. Semantography uses the numerals and mathematical signs $+$ $-$ $\times$: (for "divide") and $=$. (These and a few others are the only symbols in Semantography that are not related to real things.)

Here are some other symbols you might learn at the beginning:



These are all *things*. But things are sometimes active; they move. How can sign writing indicate action? Semantography does it by placing an action sign above a symbol: . (This sign suggests pushing up, as the cone of a volcano pushes up, a sort of "growing" action.)

Let's see how this works: Here is Semantography for "legs and feet":



And here is Semantography for action with your legs — "to walk," "to go," and so on:



(The ancient Egyptians used this sign for "legs." When they wanted to indicate "walking," they used the same sign, meaning the *idea* of moving with your legs.)

Here is more Semantography:



Now let's combine some of these signs:

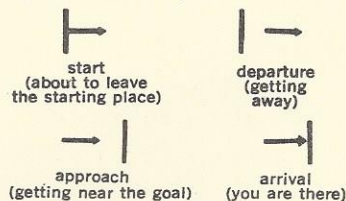


There is not space here for a full lesson in the writing of Semantography. But we can look at a few more samples, to see how the symbols are worked out.

Signs for "coming" and "going":



The last two of these could be used in public buildings.



Signs about feelings:



The $\times$ used next to any sign is the same as the multiplication sign in mathematics. In Semantography it means "much" or "many." Here is an example to show how this works:



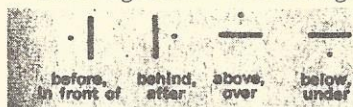


Of course, any sign system that intends to cover all of a language must offer more than symbols for people, things, thoughts, and feelings. Here is how Semantography shows time:



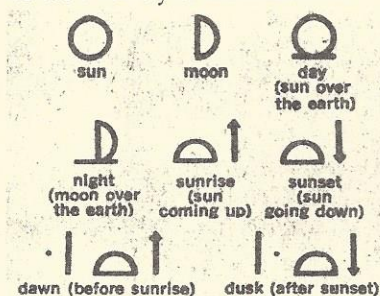
These signs represent curved mirrors. The first reflects what we have just written (in the past). The last reflects what we are about to write (in the future). The sign in the center represents the present, a fleeting moment between past and future.

These signs show where things are:



Notice how simple it is. Each meaning is shown by the position of a dot with relation to a straight line.

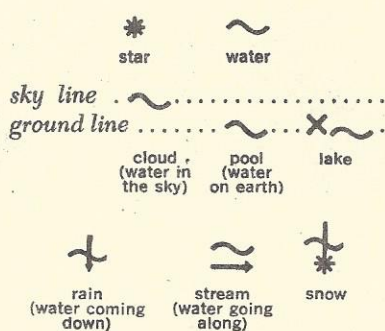
Symbols for familiar things around us use a variety of combinations:



A combination:

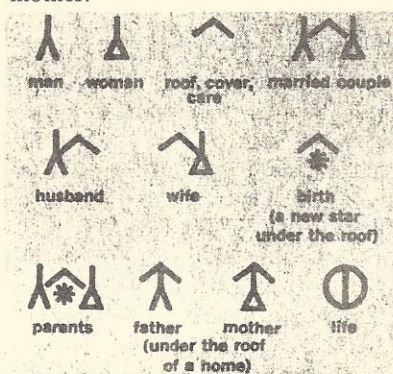


More familiar things:



According to Mr. Bliss, many of his symbols are taken from the drawings of children. Others are similar to the symbols used in the picture writings of early man. These are symbols that are likely to seem natural to everyone.

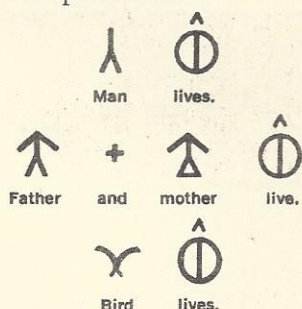
People are not neglected in Semantography. Here are signs for the family of man. The sign for "roof" means much more than that. It means "home." Its outline suggests the outstretched arms of a father and mother.



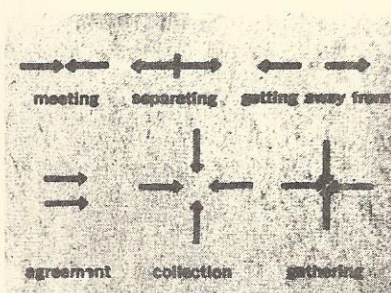
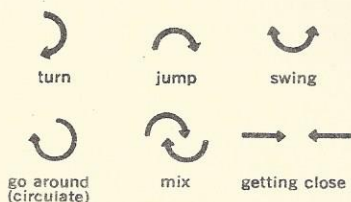
This last symbol is a combination of the two symbols for "individual" and "sun":



A few simple sentences:



See what arrows can do:



The last two of these symbols can also be used separately, and in that case each has a somewhat different meaning. The first then indicates a gathering in full swing; the second, a gathering that has just ended.

Suppose you could write letters to people anywhere in the world using a universal symbol writing. You could have friends at the far corners of the earth without having to learn any spoken language other than your own. People everywhere might understand one another as never before. This, Mr. Bliss believes, could truly become "one writing for one world." Whether Semantography will be adopted for international use, we do not know. In any case, Mr. Bliss has made an important contribution to the making of graphic symbols.

You, too, can invent a set of written signs. Start with some of the Semantography signs, if you wish. Then make signs for the things that are important to you. Try them on your friends. Unlike a secret code, your sign writing should be as easy to understand as possible. Its purpose is to get ideas across, not to hide them. Making understandable signs may prove to be more difficult than you think. Of course, not all your signs will be so clear that other people can "read" them without first being told their meaning.

Yours will not be international sign writing. It will be just for fun. No one knows, in fact, just when any system of written signs will be accepted for use throughout the world. It may take a long time.