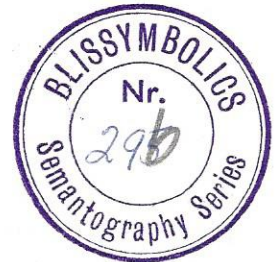


Toward an International Symbol Language

By Soichi Kato

*Herein a progress report on efforts
being made to provide a system
of pictorial signs that will be
understood by everybody everywhere*



Editor's Note: A great international event like Expo 67 conjures up a cozy and pleasing picture of world togetherness; yet the fact that Expo has had to devise a system of pictographs in order to enable visitors from foreign lands to find their way about easily and confidently, reminds one that a major hindrance to world togetherness—or even meaningful contact among nations—is still the language barrier.

This basic and troublesome problem of communication is of special concern to the Japanese-born author of this article. As executive director of the International Committee for Breaking the Language Barrier, his goal, and the goal of his organization, is to—well, break the language barrier, or at the very least get around it by providing a basic visual language which would be accepted and instituted by all countries.

In his article, which describes the Committee's efforts in achieving its objective, Mr. Kato points out that various groups around the world have already created international sign languages of their own. To stimulate our readers' thoughts on the subject, we present here examples of the symbols devised by several of these groups to designate certain common expressions (see chart on following two pages). Included are some of the

pictographs designed by Paul Arthur & Associates for use at Expo 67, as well as examples of symbols submitted to Mr. Kato's organization and presently under evaluation.

In an age when man will soon be walking on the moon, isn't it strange that his travel on earth is still hindered—and even endangered—by the barrier of language? How many businessmen traveling abroad, for example, are able to understand the signs below—any of which could spell the difference between life and death?

Fara

Hatari

Berbahaja

危険



French or English translations help only a limited number of travelers. The goal must be to help everyone. Based on this belief, a Japanese group head-

ed by the late Yasaburo Shimonaka initiated plans, in 1958, to create an international organization which would devote itself to this urgent need for better human communication.

The result was the International Committee for Breaking the Language Barrier (ICBLB), founded in New York in 1962. At the Committee's first international conference, experts in the fields of communication, travel, business and science adopted a resolution advocating the promotion of pictorial signs (or glyphs) as an international language.

In order to enlist worldwide support for the project, the Committee contacted over 500 organizations, among them UNESCO and other United Nations agencies; the International Union of Official Travel Organizations; the International Chamber of Commerce, and the International Organization for Standardization. In March, 1964, the International Cooperation Year Committee issued a statement urging cooperation in expanding the use of symbols to facilitate communication.

Besides gathering information about symbols now being used in science, industry, traffic control, etc., the Committee for Breaking the Language Barrier conducted a worldwide survey in 1965 (the International Cooperation Year) to establish a list of expressions most in need of pictorial representa-

tion. The following 37 expressions appeared with sufficient frequency in the survey to form the basis for the initial phase of the symbol project:

Toilet	Gasoline station
Men	Hotel
Women	Restaurant
Exit	Pharmacy
Emergency exit	Currency exchange
Entrance	Arrival
Elevator	Departure
Information	Gate-Platform
First aid	Tickets
Police	Baggage-Check
Danger	Baggage-Claim
Don't smoke	Passport control
Don't enter	Customs
Wet paint	Fasten seat belt
Airport	Telephone
Seaport	Post
Railway station	Telegram
Bus	Travel agent
Taxi	

The Committee has been soliciting symbol design recommendations for these 37 expressions from experts throughout the world. All recommendations submitted are evaluated by means of a 10-point selection standard:

1. Design of symbols should be as universal as possible, taking into consideration not only diverse cultural, religious and ethnic factors, but also the effect of time on these factors.

2. Words and letters should not be used unless wordless symbols cannot be found.

3. Symbols should be used together with the local language until the public has learned the meaning of the symbols. Initially, then, the symbols may not always be self-explanatory.

4. Symbols should be simple in design both for immediate recognition and for ease of reproduction.

5. Symbols should not be designed so as to be confused with existing symbols.

6. Symbols should be designed with regard for existing international symbols (mathematics, road traffic, etc.).

7. A series of symbols should be uniformly designed and their basic elements should be interchangeable.

8. The possibility of vandalism and contamination should be considered.

9. When there is a valid reason, modification of symbols may be allowed after reporting to and consultation with the central international body.

10. The purpose of these symbols is to communicate to people who have at least elementary school level education.

Obviously, there are many problems involved in devising a set of universal symbols that will be equally meaningful and valid in all lands at all times. For example, the symbol for "Women" in Western countries might suitably be a figure in a short dress. But this symbol would not be acceptable at all in many Asian and African countries, where women do not wear short dresses. In fact, in several of these areas it is the men who wear dress-like shirts. (Even in some European countries, "skirts" are familiar male attire; Scotland, for example.)

To symbolize "Men" and "Women," faces might be used, except that these would be easy targets for vandalism. Would not the best solution, then, be to use the biological symbols for male and female? Perhaps—but are these symbols sufficiently well-known?

The use of a cross to designate "First aid" is fine in Christian countries, but would not do in Moslem areas, where the "Moon and Star" is the preferred symbol.

While "WC" is suitable to designate toilet in England, these initials are far from familiar even in Western countries. In some parts of Europe "OO" is used.

How is the term "Police" best symbolized? Police uniforms vary everywhere, and so the trick is to seek out those characteristics of a policeman's appearance that are everywhere recognizable.

While most favor the use of the symbol "?" to designate information, "i" stands for this word in some European languages. However, this mark is very similar to the trademark used by the Finnish firm, Ittara.

Partly as a result of the efforts of the Committee for Breaking the Language Barrier, there has been communication for the first time among groups and experts who are engaged in independent symbol research. These include the International Union of Railways; the International Air Transportation Association; the International Council of Graphic Design Associations; Masaru Katsumie, a noted authority on symbols and chairman of the Design Committee at the Tokyo Olympics of 1964; Rudolf Modley, Austrian-born expert on symbolism; and Charles Bliss, creator of the Blissymbols system.

Through the cooperation of our Committee with these individuals and organizations, it is possible to envision the adoption, by 1970, of universal symbols which will make it possible for everyone to travel through any city in the world safely and freely and without confusion. Many governments have already communicated to us their willingness to make use of selected symbols. At a recent conference called by the U.S.A. Standards Institute, representatives of U. S. Government agencies and various business associations unanimously endorsed the promotion of an international system of symbols.

Besides international symbols to aid travelers in foreign lands, the Committee is considering the application of symbols to machinery (stop, start, push, pull, etc.) and packages (this side up, fragile, perishable, etc.). In the 1970s, we may be able to use machinery manufactured in any country simply by making use of a universally accepted set of symbols.

As a clearing house for symbol communication, our Committee is eager to receive ideas and suggestions that will contribute to this most important international project. We welcome your participation. [Those of our readers who wish to offer ideas and suggestions on international signs and symbols may do so by contacting: Soichi Kato, International Committee for Breaking the Language Barrier, 268 West 12th Street, New York, N. Y. 10014.—Editor.]

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International Committee for
Breaking the Language Barrier

Tokyo (Olympics)

ICOGRADA (1st Prize Winner in
world-wide competition; designed by
Jan Olov Sundström and Sunniva
Kellquist, Konstfackskolan, Stockholm)

International Air
Transportation Association

Expo 67 (part of system of
pictographs designed by
Paul Arthur & Associates, Toronto)

Air Transport Association of America

Blissymbols

International Union of Railways

Note: Blank spaces indicate that no
symbol exists for that particular
expression in that particular "language."

Women's Toilet	Bus Stop	Telephone	Restaurant

Marina	Post Office	First Aid	Airport	No Smoking	Police