Lesson One: An Introduction to Blissymbols

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It is easier to learn to read and write in blissymbols than it is to learn to read and write in your own native language. I hope to prove this to you in this first lesson.

But first, raise your right hand.

hand

Examine the blissymbol √ (hand). There is a long vertical line that represents the fingers, and a short diagonal line that represents the thumb. This is the simplest possible drawing of a hand, yet it is recognizable and memorable. This memorability is what makes the language easy to lean. The simplicity of this blissymbol makes it easy to write, particularly when compared to pictographic languages like Chinese or Egyptian Hieroglyphics. Indeed, this blissymbol is easier to write than most of our letters.

You have learned your first blissymbol: √ (hand). You will never forget it. You will remember it every time you look at our own hand.

Many of the blissymbols resemble children's drawings. Again, that means that they are recognizable, easy to remember, and easy to write.
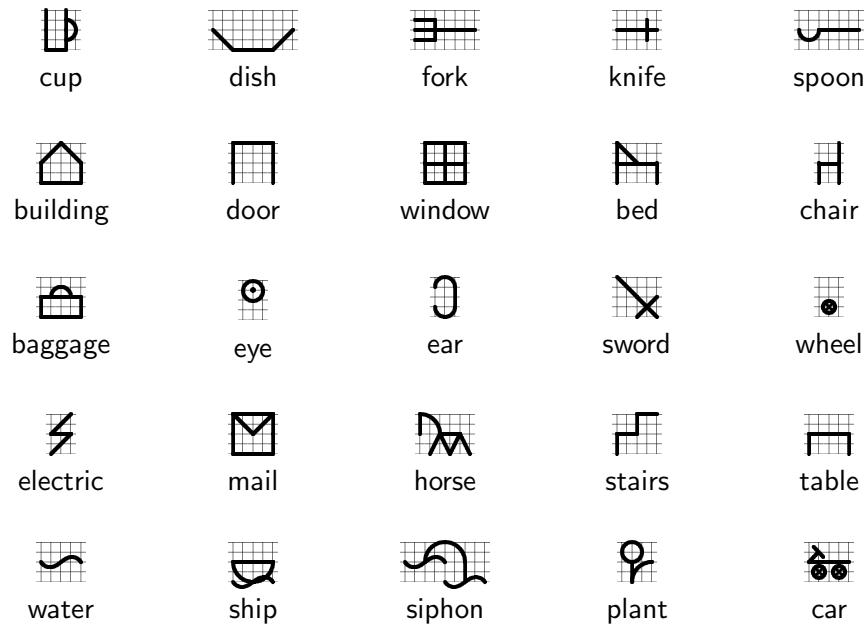
sun   moon   star   tree   fire

cup	dish	fork	knife	spoon

building	door	window	bed	chair

baggage	eye	ear	sword	wheel

electric	mail	horse	stairs	table

water	ship	siphon	plant	car

Each blissymbol can be learned more quickly than a word of a foreign language. Even so, a huge set of unique symbols could be overwhelming. That is why Blissym reuses symbols. For example:

| hand	finger	thumb	wrist

You just learned the blissymbol √ (hand). Knowing that, you can learn the blissymbols for features of the hand with no effort. You might even have guessed them.

point	touch	handclasp
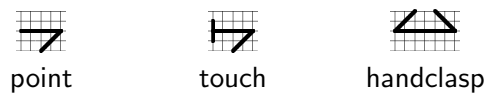
We can form new symbols by rotation.

namaste	clap	applaud

2

We can put our two hands together. The ! (exclamation point) suffix intensifies the symbol. (Remember the ↓↙!! symbol. You will need it later.)

forward catch throw
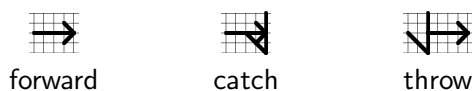
The → (forward) arrow is a very important symbol in Blissym. We can use it to show the action of something coming to the hand ⇥ (catch) and something leaving the hand ↓→ (throw).

open close open hand fist

The blissymbol ⊔ (open) looks like a box with the lid removed. Knowing ⊔ (open), it is easy to guess the blissymbol □ (close). We can combine □ (close) and √ (hand) to make ⧄ (fist).

So far we have mostly looked at nouns. We can change symbols into verbs with a ˋ prefix.

hand finger open hand fist

manipulate tap pat, pet knock

hit poke slap punch
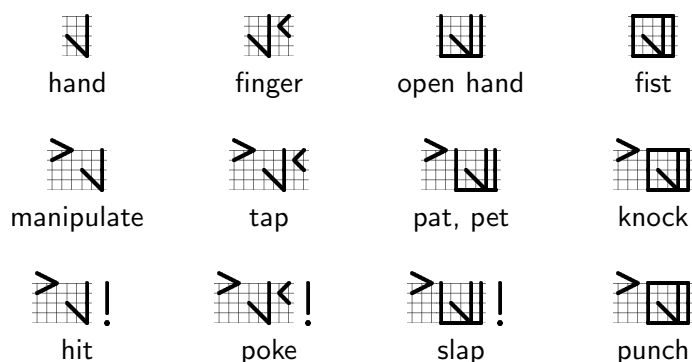
Again, we can use ! (exclamation point) to intensify the symbols.

thing tool

A small square is a □ (thing). It is an arbitrary symbol, but it is easy to remember. A □ in a √ is a ⊕ (tool). This symbol resembles a stone hand axe, one of our earliest tools. It is our

ability to make and use ⊈ that puts us humans at the top of the heap.

A picture language can be good at representing visible objects, but how can it represent things that cannot be seen, like the sky or the wind? A language must be capable of representing the unseen as well as the seen.

sky   earth, ground

The blissymbol for ⎺ (sky) is breathtakingly simple. It is a long horizontal line at the top. Its companion, � (earth), is a line at the baseline, recalling again the ground line of children's drawings.

world

We can combine ⎺ (sky) and � (earth) to make ⹀ (world). The world is where we live between the earth and the sky.

planet   Earth
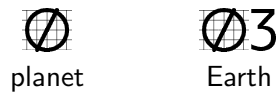
If you are uncomfortable with a flat ⹀ (world), then you may prefer to use ⊘ (planet), a large circle with a 22.5° axis running through it. We are currently located on ⊘3 (Planet Three). (Can you guess the blissymbol for the planet Mercury? Jupiter? The undiscovered planet beyond Pluto?)

gas   air   atmosphere
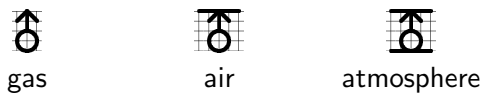
Our first experience with gas is as bubbles in water. We live and breathe in a vast ocean of air, but we are generally unaware of it. The blissymbol ⚲ (gas) suggests a rising bubble. We can combine ⎺ (sky) and ⚲ (gas) to make ⚲ (air). We can combine ⹀ (world) and ⚲ (air) to make ⚲ (atmosphere).

→	⊙→	⊙→
forward	blow	wind
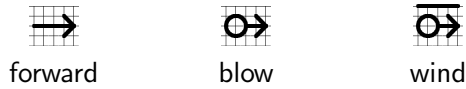
If we rotate ⚲ (gas), giving it a direction, it will ⊙→ (blow). We put it in the sky and get ⊙→ (wind), a blissymbol for something you cannot see. Blissymbols are ideograms, pictures of ideas.

We cannot see emotions, but we can feel them. How can we express emotions and feelings in symbols?

♡	♡→
emotion	love
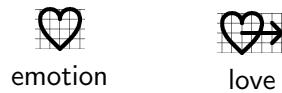
Blissym uses the familiar ♡ symbol as the root symbol for emotion. By combining ♡ with →, we get ♡→ (love), from the heart.

♡+	♡−	♡↑	♡↓
like	dislike	happy	sad
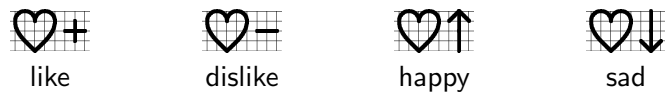
These are just a few of the emotions or feelings we can represent. The suffix (positive/negative or up/down) identifies the emotion.

We can also represent ideas and processes of the mind.

⌒	⌒!	⌂	⌂
mind	idea	knowledge	fact

The blissymbol ⌒ (mind) comes from the shape of the tops of our heads. The blissymbol ⌂ (knowledge) combines ⌒ and △ (building), the mind's storehouse.
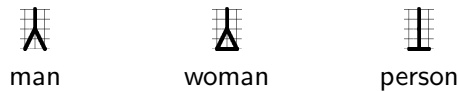
We have seen lots of things (nouns) and some specific actions like ↓! (hit) and ↓→ (throw). How do we represent action in the abstract?

legs and feet,
walk   action

The symbol ⋏ (walk) comes from Egyptian Hieroglyphics. We further simplify it, producing ∧ (action).
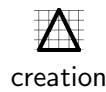
creation

We combine ∧ (action) and ⏤ (earth) to make △ (creation).

man   woman   person

Behold ⋏ (man), a standing figure incorporating the blissymbol ∧ (action). This blissymbol is based on a Chinese character.

Behold ⋏ (woman), a standing figure incorporating the blissymbol △ (creation). It is important to recognize that the triangle shape is not a skirt, but is symbolic of the special role of women in the creation of new life.

Behold ⊥ (person), a man or a woman.

Here is another example of using simplification to produce abstract symbols.
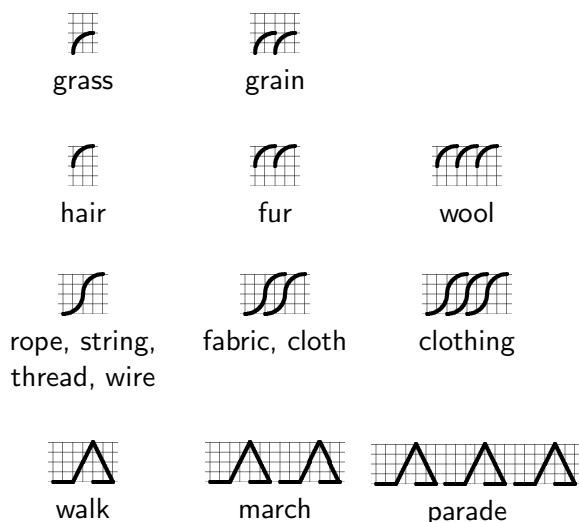
building   shelter   protection

The blissymbol ⌂ (building) can represent any building, even buildings with flat or domed roofs. We remove detail elements to produce ∩ (shelter) and ⌒ (protection). A ∩𝒮 (tent) is a 𝒮 (fabric) ∩. ⌒ has an important role in symbols about family.

couple   married couple   family

Notice that ⚥ is larger than ⚥, as the people move into important new roles. We can also replace the ⚦ and ⚦ with ⊥ (person) to make alternate, gender-independent symbols: ⊥⊥ (couple), ⚦ (married couple), and ⚦ (family).

New symbols can also be made by repetition.

⌐	⌐⌐	
grass	grain	
⌐	⌐⌐	⌐⌐⌐
hair	fur	wool
∫	∫∫	∫∫∫
rope, string, thread, wire	fabric, cloth	clothing
△	△ △	△ △ △
walk	march	parade

The blissymbols ⌐ (grass) and ⌐ (hair) look similar. The difference is that ⌐ is on the ground, and ⌐ is in the sky, perhaps closer to your head. A single blissymbol ∫ represents everything which is long, thin, and flexible.

Blissymbols are always used for their meanings, never for their sounds or for their associations with English words. For example, the word bow can have several meanings.

bow	bow	bow	bow

In English, the letters `b o w` can mean a bent standing posture, the front of ship, an archery weapon, and a looping knot. In the Blissym Language, these distinct meanings get distinct symbols.

Finally, we look at blissymbols about blissymbols.

pen, writing　　　world　　　Blissym,　　　blissymbol
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　World Writing

The Blissym Language was invented in 1942 by Charles K. Bliss. His goal was to design a visual language that could easily be learned by speakers of any language, to be used as an instrument of international peace and understanding. The symbols could be produced on a modified typewriter. While he was developing it he called it *World Writing*. That name survives in the blissymbol ⊿ (Blissym), formed by combining ╱ (pen) and ⎓ (world). That symbol is reduced in size to make the symbol for z (blissymbol).

In this lesson we saw about a hundred blissymbols. In the complete language there are thousands of blissymbols. We have not begun to look at descriptive blissymbols, nor at particles or grammar. There is still much to learn. I hope that this demonstration has convinced you that learning Blissym will be fun and rewarding.

Blissym is unique in that it is not a spoken language. It is completely visual. The elimination of ear and tongue training significantly reduces the amount of learning required for mastery. You will never be embarassed by your outrageous accent. It is a symbolic language. The symbols are simple and memorable. The grammar of the language is simple and unexceptional. Bliss called it a logical language for an illogical world.

You are not expected to have learned all of these blissymbols from a single lesson, but I am certain that you will never forget many of them. You have made a good beginning.

Now give yourself ⇊ ! ! .