

I rejoiced when I read Karl F. Ross' most valuable and excellent contribution to the idea of interlinguistic symbols for bridging the language barrier. I am delighted to see that he has developed independently similar symbols as mine, and I am glad to accept his contribution into the Semantography Series which is collected by great public and university libraries. The Series contains also the contributions of other symbol designers. One day, when my dream will become a practical reality, all contributions will be evaluated - and may the best symbols win and be used by mankind.



M⇒M The Symbol System of Karl F. Ross. U.S.A.

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SIGN LANGUAGE

COM-MUNICATION

Karl Ross

The author, a New York patent attorney, is associate editor of the American 'Mensa Bulletin'. He is also a linguist (active languages include German, French, Italian and Serbo-Croat) and an occasional translator of German poetry into English. When not travelling, he can be reached at 5121 Post Road, New York, NY 10471, USA.

A motorist driving in Europe is expected to memorize a set of pictorial traffic signs designed to guide him in his travel through countries whose language he cannot read. It is not a difficult task. Most of the symbols are self-explanatory: a black arrow bent clockwise means "turn to the right"; the same arrow in red, crossed by a line, signifies "no right turn". And you do not have to know a word of the local language to understand that the picture of a cow means "cattle crossing", or that a showing of children carrying books marks the proximity of a school. Even where the symbols are arbitrary, they are usually backed by logic which makes them easier to remember: A square (four corners) at an intersection shows that you have the right of way, whereas a triangle (three corners) admonishes you to yield.

If international co-operation and a bit of imagination can overcome the language barrier in the field of highway travel, could not the same type of ingenuity devise a similar system to cover other situations? Apart from areas (such as music, mathematics, chess) where specific symbols are internationally recognized, might not an organization such as Mensa develop a language-independent set of simple rules which would enable persons with a modicum of graphic talent to communicate to one another such everyday concepts as "grandmother has been ill", "I shall pass through your town next week" or "Mary and Bill are expecting a baby"?

For centuries the Japanese and the Chinese have expressed their thoughts by mutually intelligible ideograms without either of them understanding the spoken word of the other. Yet though the oriental characters — like the Egyptian hieroglyphs — evolved from pictorial representations, they can be deciphered only by trained readers.

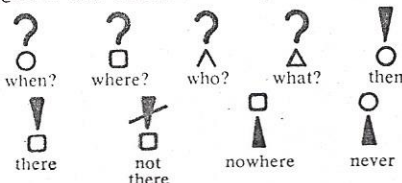
An international communication system, if it is to gain general acceptance, must be (1) universal and (2) intelligible. The first condition requires independence from all linguistic connotations (which is where international languages, such as Esperanto, have failed). The second condition means that at least the basic symbols should be readily identifiable by any person of average or above-average intelligence.

Almost anyone can draw a recognizable picture of a house, a table, an animal, a part of a body and a wide variety of other objects. Just as easily one can depict certain activities such as walking, swimming, sitting, seeing, hearing or — with a little imagination — thinking (brain waves). In this age of the photocopier, the reproduction of such pictures for record-keeping or other purposes

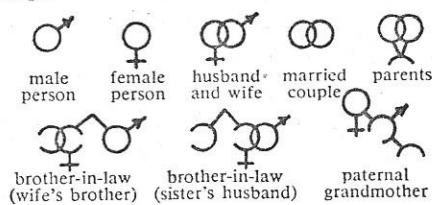
hardly creates a problem. Most nouns (including, as we shall see, abstract concepts and figurative expressions) may be represented in this way, along with many verbs and a number of prepositions (replaced by postpositions in some languages). Other parts of speech require more or less arbitrary symbols; of these there should be as few as possible, and they should have a basis in intuition and/or logic. Letters of the alphabet should not be used except for proper names. In chemical and similar scientific notation, and as universally recognized symbols (such as the Mensa M).

We may start with two of the simplest conventional signs: the question mark and the exclamation point. Let a large question mark signify "why" and let a large exclamation point mean "yes". Inverted, they will then spell "why not" and "no", respectively. Laid on its side (halfway between its normal and its inverted position), the exclamation point says "maybe".

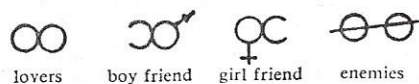
Let us now, replace the points of these signs by other, small symbols: a little circle, denoting time (watch dial); a little square, signifying space (open door); a little inverted V, representing man (walking legs); a little triangle, meaning inanimate object (rock). We can then form a whole series of interrogative and demonstrative pronouns:



Next, we may call on two well-known biological symbols — for male and female — to express a variety of family relationships:



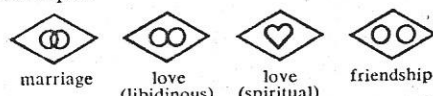
and, by extension,



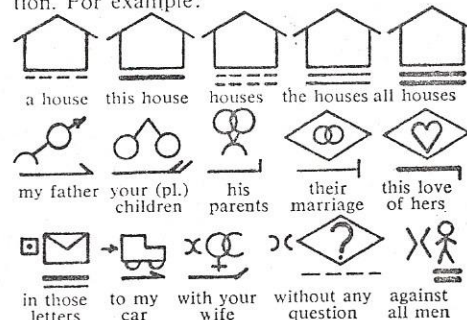
As shown above, the meaning of any symbol can be negated or converted into its opposite by an oblique line through it.

Other (including less conventional) relationships can be expressed with equal facility.

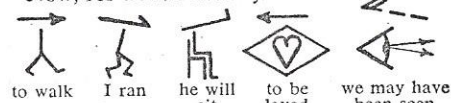
Another useful symbol is the diamond-shaped frame — suggesting a mirror which separates the real world from the imaginary one. We can now represent the following concepts:



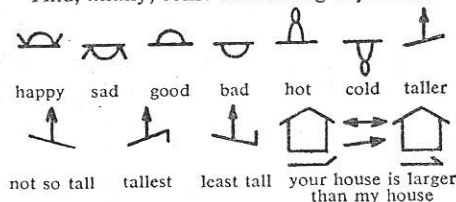
Here, we should agree on some symbols to identify a given image as a noun, a verb, an adjective or just a particle. Let us adopt a mark below the image as indicating a noun, a mark above the image as denoting a verb, and a mark at middle level — next to the image — as characterizing an adjective. For the noun, the mark may be a broken line (indefinite article), a solid line (definite article), a pair of lines (plural), a heavy line (demonstrative), or any combination thereof. For the verb, the mark may be a straight line (present), a rising line (future) or a sinking line (past); moods may be indicated by wavy and/or broken lines. In both instances, hooks or other appendages can take the place of an accompanying pronoun. For the positive form of an adjective or adverb, the diacritical mark may be a straight line with the ideogram directly above or below it to connote either a desirable or an undesirable trait; the comparative form may be represented by a line sloping upwardly (more) or downwardly (less). Any symbol not so marked is to be regarded as a particle, i.e. a preposition or a conjunction; numerals can be expressed by conventional arabic notation. For example:



Now, for a little activity:



And, finally, some contrasting adjectives:



These, of course, are but a few illustrations of the potentialities of such a pictorial communication system which could be fully developed only through the co-operation of interested persons from a variety of cultures. The writer will welcome suggestions (in any language) from readers with constructive ideas on the subject which could be fitted into the framework outlined above.

The name of the game? Let us tentatively designate it by the symbol M ⇒ M. You may pronounce it any way you want to, e.g. coM-Munication (with two distinctly sounded M's), Multilingual Message, or Mensa Media.