

# THE INSTITUTE FOR SEMANTOGRAPHY

A Non-Profit Institution for the Promotion of Semantics and Semantography

5 Maroubra Bay Road, Pagewood, Sydney, N.S.W., Australia

FOUNDER and DIRECTOR: C. K. BLISS, B. Sc.



SEMANTOGRAPHY SERIES NO. 61

## TWO ARTICLES ON SEMANTOGRAPHY IN THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

As original copies of the newspapers are not more available for further distribution the articles are typed down here below. However, the original articles are to be found in a number of Libraries, notably the Library of Congress Washington, Harvard University and prominent Sydney libraries.

### Note:

Following the lecture which Professor Oliver L. Reiser of the University of Pittsburgh gave before the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Philadelphia on December 30th, 1951, the Herald brought the following article on January 1st 1952.

### SYDNEY MAN DEVISES A PICTURE LANGUAGE

From Our Staff Correspondent

NEW YORK, Dec. 31 - Professor Oliver L. Reiser, of the University of Pittsburgh, said yesterday that a universal picture-language which a Sydney chemist had devised offers literacy to millions of people who could not otherwise communicate with each other.

Mr. C. K. Bliss, who devised the system, is an industrial chemist at General Motors.

He calls the system "semantography," because it contains a simple semantics, or the theory of meaning.

Professor Reiser said in a paper which he read to the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, at Philadelphia, that peasants in any country could soon understand semantography.

"Indeed, since natives engulfed in superstition are not able to adopt improvements in agriculture, hygiene and the like without literacy, the Bliss system makes available a powerful aid to President Truman's four-point programme (now the U.N.'s technical assistance programme).

"Widespread use of a system of universal symbolism, toward which Mr. Bliss's system is only a first step, would eventually result in the elimination of abuses of language by which dictators and their ministers of propoganda periodically unbalance our democratic social systems."

### "Heroic Work"

Professor Reiser pointed out that the invention and use of a unified symbolism would not automatically produce world understanding.

"Nevertheless, Mr. Bliss's heroic work is certainly headed in the right direction," he added.

Professor Reiser, who is a doctor of philosophy and a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, is author of "The Promise of Scientific Humanism," "World Philosophy", and "A New Earth and a New Humanity".

End of article.

This article was accompanied by 2 lines of symbols taken from the leaflet Semantography Series No. 15 expressing the meaning: I and you and he and she, we correspond happily.

On the very same day I was interviewed by a special correspondent of the

Sydney Morning Herald and next day there appeared a larger article on the leader page of the Herald, January 2nd, 1952.

SIGN LANGUAGE MAY OVERCOME ILLITERACY OF BACKWARD PEOPLES

Yesterday brought important news for Mr. Charles Bliss, 55, of Pagewood. A cable reported that Professor O. L. Reiser, of the University of Pittsburgh, speaking at Philadelphia to a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, had enthusiastically praised the universal picture-language which Mr. Bliss has invented, and which he calls "Semantography."

The Bliss picture-language, according to Professor Reiser, has great possibilities from two points of view. It could be used to educate millions of illiterate people in backward countries. In advanced countries it could lead to more logical habits of thought, so that people would be less easily duped by the slogans of dictators and propagandists.

Mr. Bliss is a short, thick-set man, Austrian by birth, a qualified industrial chemist. After the Nazis invaded Austria in 1938 he was imprisoned for more than a year in the Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camps.

He escaped from Austria before the war, went in 1940 to Shanghai, where he was joined by his wife, and lived there for six years. He came to Australia in 1946 and is now employed as a factory hand at the General Motors- Holden works.

He began to develop his language system in 1942, and it took him seven years to work it out. He has expounded it in a three-volume book of 500,000 words entitled "Semantography," which he produces himself (except for the binding) at his home on a typewriter and duplicating machine.

He has sold about 100 copies mostly to university libraries in Britain, the U.S.A., India and other countries.

Not for Profit

On his pamphlets and publications, his Pagewood address is described as "The Institute of Semantography, a non-profit institution for the promotion of Semantics and Semantography."

Mr. Bliss admits that his language system is a consuming passion, on which he spends all his spare time and nearly all his spare money. "I'm broke," he told me yesterday. "My system has taken possession of me." He talks about it in a torrent of expository eloquence, rises from the chair and waves his arms, then apologises for being carried away.

He emphasises that Semantography is not meant to be a substitute for the languages already in use, because it is only a written, not a spoken, means of communication. It is an auxiliary language, reduced to pictorial elements so simple that (he claims) the most primitive people can understand it.

The possibility of a symbol language for the purpose of clarifying thought was first suggested by the great mathematician and philosopher Leibnitz (1646-1715), one of the two inventors (Newton was the other) of the differential and integral calculus. Mr. Bliss believes that his system is the fulfilment of Leibnitz's prophecy.

Pictorial symbols, he points out, are already in practical use to a limited extent. The plus, minus, and other signs used in mathematics are examples. Another example is the symbol of the Red Cross.

The Bliss system aims to extend this kind of symbolism to cover all kinds of objects, ideas, and statements. Its basic elements are about 70 simple symbols, some of which are shown on the accompanying diagram. These, in turn can be combined in various auxiliary symbols.

More complex ideas are conveyed by combinations of the elementary and auxiliary symbols. For example, "day" is represented by the round sign of the sun above the horizon. "Happiness" is represented by the heart sign for emotion followed by the upward-pointing arrow, which indicates an upward direction. "Holiday" is represented by the sign for "day" joined to the sign for "happiness".

### Technical Terms

Mr. Bliss has elaborated the system with remarkable ingenuity to cover a wide range of subjects. He has symbols for the technical terms of physics, chemistry, and other sciences; for the details of business transactions and documents, such as an international Customs invoice form; and for the ideas used in discussions of politics and economics.

The system, he claims, has a variety of potential uses, many of them of a strictly practical kind. Perhaps the most important is the possibility - stressed by Professor Reiser - of conveying instruction on agriculture, hygiene, and other matters to illiterate people.

Three-fourths of the world's population are in this category.

Both the United Nations and the United States - under President Truman's "Point Four" programme for developing backward countries - have been giving thought to the vast problem of illiteracy, but so far nothing much has been done about it.

Mr. Bliss believes that any people could be taught the elements of his system without difficulty. He has corresponded with the Government of India, suggesting Semantographic methods of teaching agricultural techniques to illiterate peasants, but the advice has not been taken up.

Professor Carleton Washburne of New York, a noted authority on education, urged UNESCO to try the Bliss system in backward countries, but UNESCO has not shown interest.

Mr. Bliss also claims that his system could be used for the international interchange of scientific information, which is often impeded by the language barrier.

### Use in Business

In the business field, he proposes the use of Semantography in publications and documents (such as the Customs forms mentioned above), on signs in banks and shops (for the help of foreign customers), and for directions on merchandise.

In Australia, he advocates widespread use of his symbol for "fire" on public signs as a warning of the danger of starting bushfires. Other suggested applications of the system are the "exit" symbol in theatres and the "electricity" symbol as a warning of live wires. He thinks Semantography could be used, moreover, as a means of teaching English to New Australians.

The aspect of the system which has interested a number of intellectuals is its possible use as a means of logical analysis for clarifying thought - the technique which was first suggested by Leibnitz.

Mr. Bliss has the conviction - shared by a number of students of "semantics", or the theory of the meaning of words - that most arguments on politics, morals and other abstract subjects are confused because people are unconsciously influenced by the emotional, irrational overtones of words.

He maintains that if such controversial ideas as democracy, government, and socialism were expressed in a logical system of symbols, discussion of these subjects would be more clear and fewer tempers would be lost.

For this reason, he attaches great importance to his basic symbols indicating the human mind or human evaluation or opinion - the "great variables," he calls them.

Whenever these symbols occur in the Semantographic representation of a word or idea, it is a warning that an element of human uncertainty is involved; and this, in turn, is a warning that dogmatic statements on the subject must be treated with suspicion.

He even claims that Semantography can be used to settle domestic disputes. "If you are a wife or a husband," he says, "you will realise the vagueness, the ambiguity, or the fallacy in any reproach, any accusation, any blame you want to make or have made against your partner in marriage.

"In a quarrel, in which no one will give in, you may both agree to apply Semantography to the assertion, and you may quickly find that the answer cannot be a yes or no - in fact, nobody can be right or wrong, because the assertion is a fallacy."

### Bertrand Russell

When Mr. Bliss heard that Bertrand Russell, the world-famed mathematician and logician, was coming to Sydney in 1950, he sent him a copy of his work on Semantography. While Russell was in Sydney he invited Mr. Bliss to his hotel, questioned him for about an hour on his system, and asked him to demonstrate symbols for various controversial terms and sentences, such as "God," "nature," "the Chinese are a great nation."

Russell later wrote to him, saying: "I have been looking through your system of Semantography and I think very highly of it. The logical analysis is good. The symbols are ingenious and easy to understand, and the whole is capable of being very useful."

"Any man or men who will spend the money necessary to get your work printed will, in my opinion, be performing an important service for mankind."

So far, however, nobody has undertaken to subsidise Semantography.

This article was accompanied by a few symbols showing the meaning of: man, earth, sun, emotion, human action, door, human mind, movement in a direction, holiday, governing. Unfortunately these symbols were chosen against my plea to let me make the arrangement and the explanatory notes to the symbols. A number of them were misunderstood.

I felt greatly honored by the fact that 2 articles appeared in succession and that the leader page was chosen for the second article. Moreover another honour was accorded to me insofar as the daily cartoon which appears on the leader page was devoted to my work, though in a dubious way. The cartoon carried the title "The Dawn of Learning" and showed the snow-covered wall of the Kremlin with the onion-shaped towers behind. On the wall was a plackard showing J. Stalin. Someone apparently has made a joke by painting a few letters and symbols on the wall next to the picture. The first symbol is an arrow pointing directly to Stalin, then follows the capital letters U R A and then the picture of a beer mug. This should read "You are a mug". The cartoon shows Stalin standing before the wall and being thoroughly annoyed. Underneath the cartoon is a caption - a Sydney chemist has invented a picture language which, it is claimed, even illiterate peasants can soon master.

I was a bit unhappy about this cartoon because somehow it gives a sense of ridicule to the article below. I accepted, however, the fact that who goes out with new ideas must encounter ridicule.

The communists of Sydney were not so pleased with the cartoon and one of them attacked me and my work furiously in the Communist Review calling me and my work "an obscurantist's invention" and Semantics "the latest charlatany of philosophical idealism". The part of this article referring to my work is to be found in Semantography Series No. 109.

The following Letters to the Editors appeared in the subsequent issues of the Sydney Morning Herald after the cable report from New York and the article on Semantography which appeared on the 1st and 2nd January 1952 and which are contained in the foregoing pages.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SEMANTOGRAPHY Sir, - Mr. Bliss's "Semantography" (Herald" Jan 2) is interesting and valuable, but some of the pictorial symbols you reproduce would not be readily intelligible to primitive peoples.

The heart symbol for emotion has more affinity with the naive sentimentality of Hollywood or the strip-cartoon industry than with the symbolism of backward races, and Mr. Bliss should note that Greco-Roman antiquity with some support from modern medicine and temperance advocates, favoured the liver as the seat of human temper.

One of the group of symbols illustrated seems far from self-evident. The sun on the horizon with heart going up suggest sea sickness rather than a holiday; the man-symbol in a horizontal posture might be more apposite here.

Cremorne

TROGLODYTE

SEMANTOGRAPHY Sir, - "Troglodyte's" letter ("Herald", Jan 4) on Semantography reminds me of the Oxford Don, who in conversation with another, said: "Science? I don't know anything at all about it - I don't even teach it!"

"Troglodyte" criticises what has been called "a work of genius", and "an important advance in language design" by men who are acknowledged world authorities and pre-eminent in their fields, science and philosophy.

That great mathematician, philosopher and logician, foremost authority on logical symbolism, Bertrand Russell, thought so highly of Bliss and his semantography that he wrote: "Any man who will spend the money necessary to get this work printed will perform an important service to mankind."

Brighton-les-Sands

CLIFFDWELLER

SEMANTOGRAPHY Sir, - May I say something in favour of Semantography? In late years I have seen scores of wrecks and tragedies, physical and mental, due largely to language barriers. "Hand-picked" displaced persons break down in this country about 10 or 12 times as often as old Australians.

We often forget, while talking in theory of technical aid and health missions to South-East Asia, that <sup>the</sup>babels of written dialects are likewise a cause of tragedy, hopelessness, and isolation. For illiterate millions this problem is lifelong for generations.

Let us act on the outspoken recommendation of men like Professor Reiser and Bertrand Russell, and give this new medium an inexpensive trial.

Most experts in semantics would consider UNESCO, or any enterprising governing body, justified in such an experiment.

DOUGLAS EVERINGHAM

Medical Officer, Mental Hospital, Gladesville

PROFESSOR'S OPINION Sir, - All serious students of language realize that the spoken word is more important than the written word, of one needs to contrast the two methods of communication.

Hence what every language needs is to use a script which correspond closely to the spoken word.

Some Chinese sage about three thousands year ago invented a series of symbols closely resembling those suggested by Mr. Bliss. His invention has been an immense drawback to the progress of Chinese culture, as language experts agree.

Many years are wasted by young Chinese and Japanese children in learning the thousands of signs needed in their archaic picture-writing.

In both countries much progress is being made with new phonetic scripts. Indeed

the Japanese have a phonetic script "katakana", which the writer learnt in a few hours. It is hoped that this will replace the classical Chinese type of picture writing.

Our children and many foreigners would benefit immensely from simplified spelling; but a sign language (as Bodmer demonstrates in his splendid treatise "Loom of Language") would definitely be a retrograde step for any nation to adopt."

Seaforth

GRIFFITH TAYLOR

SEMANTOGRAPHY

Sir, -

There is no doubt that a phonetic script is more useful where there is a common language, but Professor Griffith Taylor must remember that there is at present no international language.

Semantography has been devised precisely to allow people who speak different tongues to communicate by writing, and is based on the fact that most communication between countries is by written and not spoken word.

It is not intended to replace the writing which each country uses for itself. Semantography is an auxiliary, a writing which can be read in every tongue.

This was the great achievement of the Chinese pictography, that it allowed the speakers of the multitude of entirely different Chinese languages to have a common literature and an efficient medium of ordinary communication.

Even if efficient phonetic scripts could be actually introduced for each of the thousands of languages in the world, this would only magnify the "labour" of learning foreign languages.

Pictorial ideographs illustrate their own meaning, and since they can be "read" in any dialect, they can be read and used by everyone, literate or otherwise.

Finally, there is little difficulty in teaching Semantography. Bliss has reduced the symbolic elements of Semantography to one hundred, and this includes many existing international signs, such as the ten numbers, the punctuation marks, mathematical signs, the arrow for direction, etc.

Strathfield.

DAVID DONALDSON

Note: It is the practice of the Editor of the Herald to close a debate in the paper, even if more letters do come in. In the present issue the author is aware that others have written, and that the letters printed have in some cases been reduced in size.