Blissymbolics: Path to the Future

by

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I first came across Blissymbolics in the mid 1990s while browsing through books at the local public library. The symbols were in a medical book discussing brain disorders. I was instantly hooked on Bliss. The symbols were so clear, so transparent. I felt at the time, they could even be enlightening.

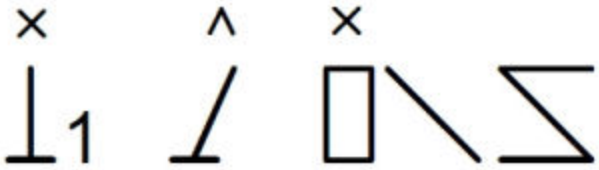
During the years leading up to that moment I fashioned myself an amateur philosopher of sorts, really just a reader of philosophy, not a writer. After trying to digest books about various schools of philosophy and various "theories of everything", I felt I still knew nothing since I was unable to write any cohesive ideas of my own. I felt it must be hopeless for me to ever truly understand reality in a profound and yet simple way. Then, while reading about a certain philosophy of language, the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis", it occurred to me that my native language, English, may be limiting the depth to which I will ever be able to delve into the truth of things.

I spent three years creating a pictographic language of my own, called Pictobabble, to explore whether a pictographic form of language could reach areas of thought I was so far unable to fathom. In all honestly, it didn't get me anywhere, but it did begin this "symbol hobby" of mine which has now become a paying career for me. And my symbol hobby made me hungry enough to appreciate Blissymbolics when I first saw samples of it in that medical book. I felt that surely no symbol system could ever be devised that would surpass Blissymbolics' ability to express human thought with such clarity and simplicity.

I still feel that today, but I am less sure that an effective, easy way to compose significant literature can be designed. But we must try.

What Bliss needs most of all is a body of literature to entice new users with the promise of a new kind of literary adventure in return for the effort of learning the language. And this literature itself could be one of the best foundations to help guide users in the proper use of symbols.

If Bliss could someday boast that a large body of literature is available for those who learn the language, this would be a major selling point over other systems like Rebus, PicSyms and other relatively simplistic picture systems.



We need Significant Literature in Blissymbolics

Now back to that day in the mid 1990s. Having stumbled across Bliss quite by accident, I set my sights on finding philosophic literature to read in Blissymbolics to see if knowledge received in this manner would lead anywhere. I so wanted to be a philosopher. But there were no significant writings to be found. So I set my sights on a new goal. Create an easy to use Bliss font so others will use it to write Bliss documents that I would then get to read. I was too naiive to know what a daunting task it would be. Will it ever be possible to compose a Bliss document as quickly and easily as it is to type with these twenty-six roman letters? I hope so, but I now know the task is far beyond my current abilities.

For centuries, perhaps millenia, writing was solely the province of scribes, carefully writing each letter by hand for the benefit of the learned classes. Each stroke of the pen was like a prayer that the form would endure. The scribes being well trained, the letters could hold their standardized shapes over significant regions of geography and time. But only a relatively few libraries of books could be produced in this manner, and only for a fortunate few.

It seems this is where we are today with Bliss. And that is being generous. Great effort is required to compose even short documents. In the time it takes me to type one Bliss sentence, I could have typed a whole page in English. But then, Bliss has not yet benefited from what we could call a Gutenberg moment. In that moment when Johannes Gutenberg conceived his design of movable type, all the barriers to the spread of letters fell. And the threat of chaos creeping into alphabetic writing utterly disintegrated in that moment.

Protecting and Liberating Bliss

Today, we still struggle to train and dispatch our Bliss scribes to the schools to prevent our cherished language from falling into chaos. But what we need is to start the kind of self-perpetuating fire that the printing press once started for alphabetic writing. After the printing press, standardized alphabetic writing spread like wildfire throughout whole continents without any need to worry about the letters being transcribed consistently.

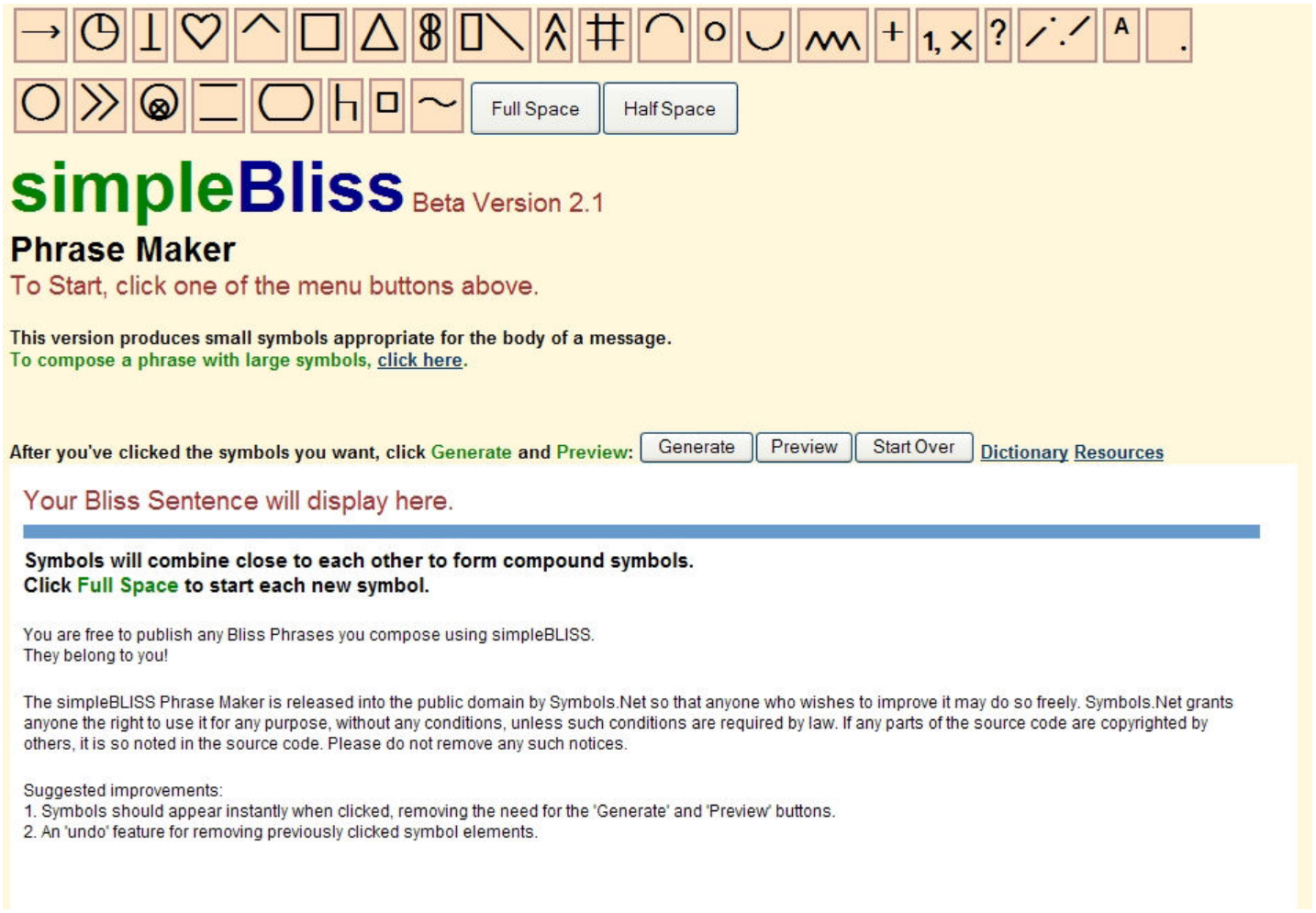
Perhaps what history can teach us, is to let the software do the work of standardizing the appearance and use of Blissymbols just as the printing press did for alphabets. Beyond that, let each user make some mistakes. A relatively small percentage of users making a few errors in composing Bliss documents is not going to bring the whole thing down.

Now, let's get down to brass tacks. Besides trying to inspire a little, I'd like to give my opinion of a practical way forward for the successful flowering and spreading of Blissymbolics into wider use beyond it's limited user base at this time.

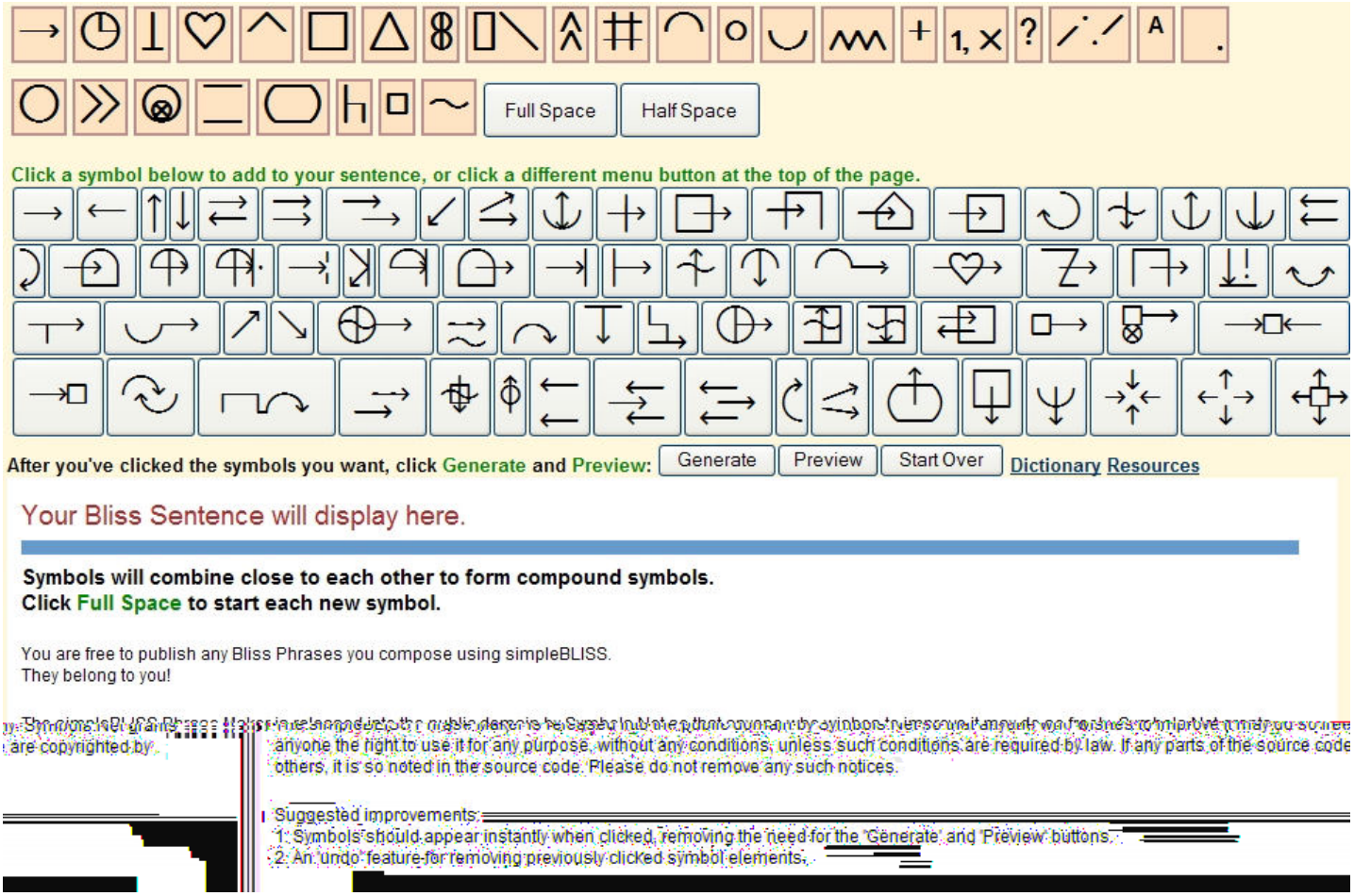
The key to success, and indeed the most difficult problem to solve will be the user interface which allows Bliss writers to input Blissymbols into a computer for publishing. Since, as with Chinese, there are thousands of Symbols which must be chosen from while typing a message, we must find a way to make virtually all these symbols available with a minimum of clicks or keystrokes. Standard keyboards are clearly inadequate for this, so it seems the best approach is selecting symbols on a screen using the mouse.

Since thousands of symbols will not fit on the computer screen at once, we obviously need a relatively small number of symbol buttons on a screen which when clicked, make groups of symbols available for direct input into a document. We must avoid menus within menus, that is, requiring multiple clicks before symbols can be added to a document. So that writers can establish a confident rhythym while typing, the pattern should always be, "one click to open a menu of symbols", then "one click to add the symbol to the document". Never more than one click to open a menu of symbols.

To see if this were possible, to have for example, 3000 symbols available while never more than one level deep in the menu structure, I put together a prototype Phrase Maker called "simpleBLISS". In the screenshot below, you can see that there are only 29 menu buttons on the screen with room to increase this to about 40 without adding an extra row, that the buttons are large enough to easily see and click them, and that there is still sufficient room on the screen to see the Bliss Message coming together:



And in the following screen shot, you can see that there are 71 symbols available under the selected menu. 40 x 71 = 2840, so this layout can give us approximately 3000 symbols with never a need for more than one level of depth in menu structure:



If a symbol cannot be found under one of the menu buttons above, symbol elements are available for dragging together.

Here is the crux of the matter, our software must be as fast as our train of thought, or nearly so, as is the case with alphabetic text on a keyboard. Otherwise we lose our train of thought while searching for a symbol to click.

I lack sufficient knowledge and experience with JavaScript to develop "simpleBliss" fully into Web 2.0 software, but I feel strongly that Web 2.0 is the way to go. That is, an online application requiring no download because it is designed to load into a standard browser.

Symbol Formats

Three methods for displaying symbols are likely to be with us indefinately:

Image Files

Fonts

Vector Graphics

While it can be tempting for any of us to think one is "better" than the others, each has advantages over the others, and also disadvantages depending on the project you are working on.

Image files may be old fashioned, but they are reliable and durable. If you publish web pages using image files, you can rest assured that your work can endure long into the future of the internet.

But if you are developing software which needs all existing Blissymbols built into it, then either Fonts or Vector Graphics would be better depending on the purpose of the software. If your purpose is to send Bliss emails, then vector graphics such as VML or SVG may be advantageous if you would like to be able to embed symbols into a stand-alone HTML page for sending through email to someone who may not have Bliss fonts already installed on their computers. I've already demonstrated at Blissymbolics.us that VML can achieve this. But the Internet Gurus say the future is SVG. The problem is Microsoft is not yet supporting SVG. So for now, the best way to be sure we're not wasting our time and money in software development is to use fonts in our software projects. Would BCI be willing to allow independent software developers to incorporate its unicode font into their software projects, perhaps just tentatively, reserving the right to see the finished product before granting the right to distribute the software? It might be cheaper than paying professional developers.

Regardless of how symbols are displayed in a software application, each application can and should offer several options for outputting the symbol documents:

Image Files... which can be trusted to display properly on any machine.

HTML Pages... which can be emailed to someone who has fonts already installed.

Perhaps, Bliss software could even be designed to automatically output PDFs like this one you're reading now.

The Open Source revolution on the internet has truly been just that, a REVOLUTION in the way new software products can be developed. As the Internet itself has indeed been a revolution the effects of which we can't yet even fathom. If only Charles Bliss were here to see the technology which actually makes his dream possible. I know, it will never happen, right? This great big world will never notice a little thing we call Bliss.

But consider this. Our world is now torn by strife the likes of which we have never seen. It is not getting better. Understanding between people is not increasing, it is on the verge of vanishing. Nations are thinking of security at the expense of, well, everything else.

But economic Globalization is progressing regardless, and just as the European Economic Community became the European Union, our world is now becoming a World Economic Community and will of natural consequence move toward World Union.

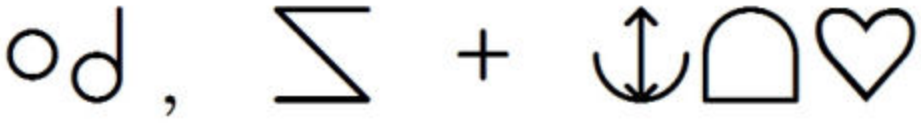
Now, we must ask ourselves, do we wish for a world unified by a common understanding between people, or a world held together by computer integrated security forces. Because this world is going together one way or the other.

Some people say an interlingua is no longer needed because of computer translation technology. But this only helps computers understand each other, not people. If I use AltaVista to translate a document into French to send to a French business associate, I may be able to close the business deal, but I have gained no understanding or feeling for the French way of thinking since I composed the message in English. Likewise, my French business associate reads the message in French, composes a response in French, then pushes a button to translate it into English, thus gaining no understanding or feeling for the English way of thinking.

I know I may be preaching to the choir, since many of you love Bliss more than life itself.

But I would like to see all of us believe in our Bliss more deeply than ever, and not underestimate it. Thanks to Shirley McNaughton, Bliss has already proven that it can reach areas of the brain which ordinary language cannot. Alphabetic text is so limited to and dependant on Broca's area of the brain (the place where alphabets are stored) for decrypting its messages that when this area is damaged by stroke or other illness, the alphabetic messages can no longer be decrypted.

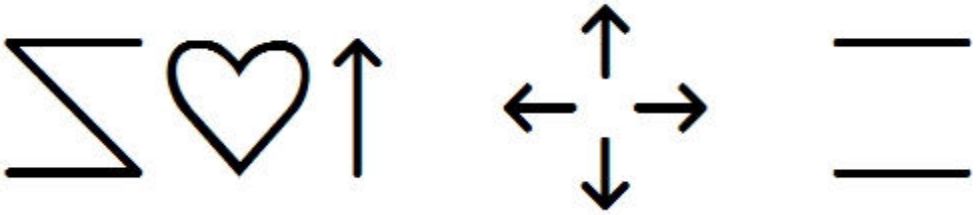
The simple scientific fact is that the many languages of the world function from different areas of the same human brain. Music and Art reach all these areas, and Bliss does too because its glyphs resemble natural objects.



Music, Bliss and Understanding

Forgive me, but I must say boldly and without reservation, that Blissymbolics is a higher form of communication than alphabetic text just as music is also. A foreigner watching a Musical Performance or a Play on video feels the same joys and sorrows as anyone who watches the show in the native tongue. And they gain genuine understanding of the plot of the show even if they ignore the subtitles. Music, Art, and Natural Scenes do not require the decryption which alphabetic text is so dependent on.

And again please forgive me, but I must say boldly and without reservation, your brain is encrypted and so is mine. You and I share common decryption software which is stored in Broca's area of our brains. But an Arab or Chinese person has different software operating from Broca's area. Medical Science has already demonstrated that Bliss bypasses the decryption software in our brains. And so it has proven it can reach diverse areas of foreign brains and bring them together.



Let us all work together to spread Bliss throughout this world, to every kind of user group, to every kindred and tongue, whether for people who like Bliss as a hobby like Esperanto, or as a philosophical tool which is why I got into it, or as AAC. The nice thing is, all the diverse user groups will be able to enjoy each others work, using Bliss to expand their horizons.

And if someday the politicians get interested in fostering understanding between people, we will have already demonstrated that Bliss is up to the task.

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