Characteristics of Blissymbolics
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Several studies from early decades have evaluated the translucency or transparency and complexity of the Blissymbols often in comparison with other systems like Rebus, CyberGlyphs, other iconic systems and lexigrams (Alant, E. et al. 2005, Burroughs, J.A, et al. 1990, Huges, M. J.1979, Luftig, R.L. et al, 1985, Hurlbut, B. A. et al.1982., Mirenda, P. et al. 1989). Methods have often been strictly matching symbol - picture, or indicating a picture or symbol after auditory input. Most researchers have concluded that Bliss is the least transparent system, and the most difficult to learn. This reputation has probably been one of the reasons that the use of Blissymbolics decreased in the 80s in favor of pictures for AAC. Concrete pictures may be easy to name and recall but cognitive and linguistic ability leads far beyond the concrete pictorial level to an abstract level for thinking and expression. When choosing a graphic communication aid these aspects have to be considered.

In my presentation I have chosen to present characteristics of Blissymbolics from three different perspectives

• The structure of Blissymbolics
• The generative possibilities of Blissymbolics linked to language development in children
• Observed characteristics in the use of Blissymbolics
The structure of Blissymbolics.

- Each Bliss - character has a specific semantic meaning,

  e.g., house 🏡, plant 🌿, boat 🚤, chair 🧔.

  Other examples may need more explanations:

  medicine 🍓 represented by the snake around Aeskulapius’ stick. Aeskulapius was the Greek God of medication and his snake around the stick is internationally often used as a symbol for medicine.

  person 🏃, which is a person standing on a piece of ground,

  and container 🍼 which is a bowl shaped character showing that it is something you can put things into and fill up.

- Bliss - characters can be superimposed or sequenced to represent new meanings:

  A car inside a house is a garage 🏡 🛒,

  a flag on the ground represents a country 🏳️.

  The superimposed characters of liquid, mouth and a piece of the ground (meaning the surrounding) is a drink 🍹, as a drink is liquid we put in the mouth originating from the surrounding.

  A house with plants is a greenhouse 🏡 🌿,
a person with a boat is a sailer  

drink and fruit is fruit-juice

and a room for playing is a playroom  . The sequence of characters meaning play is: activity (the small volcano shape), feeling and up (= happy) thus play is an activity which makes you happy.

In a Bliss-word including a sequence of characters the first character is the classifier telling what type of concept we are looking for, thus in the examples above: a type of house, a type of person, a type of drink and a type of room. Characters following the classifier are specifiers, specifying the meaning of the classifier.

Bliss-characters are symbols. Most of them are pictographic in the way that once you have had them explained to you they are quite easy to recognize and remember, but without an explanation most of them are not transparent. They are symbols for a concept and not depicting pictures, e.g., bed, table, car, legs and feet, and animal are represented by , , , , .

In spoken languages many concrete concepts also have an abstract meaning. In English for example a chair is something to sit on as well as a leader of a meeting, a character is both a letter and a personality, an office is a room and a position. In Blissymbolics similarly to spoken language many of the characters have both a concrete and an abstract meaning as well. The most frequent meaning of the shape of a roof of a house is protection referring to the function of a roof .
of the shape of a heart is feeling \( \heartsuit \),
of the shape of the skull is mind \( \bigcirc \).

Time is always represented by the shape of a mirror. When it is turned backwards it reflects the past \( \leftarrow \), and turned forward the future \( \rightarrow \), present time thus \( \land \).

The shape of a volcano is the symbol for action \( \bigtriangleup \). Charles Bliss meant that the activity of the volcano was the origin of all activities. When the past and future and the action symbols appear in smaller sizes, they still always represent past time, future and activity. (i.e \( \rangle \) = ago, \( _{1} \) = then, \( \bigtriangleup \) = activity, above a Bliss-word indicates an infinitive verb form.)

To use the concrete meaning of these Bliss-symbols, a small square indicator is placed above the Bliss-character e.g., heart \( \bigtriangleup \).

- **The shapes of the Bliss pictorial characters are very general.** This makes them less transparent than ordinary pictures. On the other hand they can represent a whole group of something, e.g., \( \overline{\bigtriangleup} \) is any four legged animal while pictures of animals always represents specific animals e.g., . To make specific animals in Blissymbolics, specifiers enhancing distinctive features are added,
e.g., monkey  ₪ ₪ ₪ ₪ . A monkey: an animal with four legs (a mammal),

almost the same as (will be described later) a person. Elephant  ₪ ₪ ₪ ₪ is an
animal with a long nose. Another example of the importance of emphasizing the
distinctive features of a concept in a graphic symbol is when you want to use the
words in an unusual context. In Blissymbolics the (electric) lamp swings is

while in Pictogram  should give the same

meaning. This exemplifies some of the difficulties in using pictures in graphic
communication.

When I visited South-Africa a few years ago and gave a short lecture about
Blissymbolics, one of the teachers pointed out, that one advantage with the Bliss-
symbols is that they are easy to draw. It is a true advantage in educational situations
in classrooms for teachers of all countries, and also a special advantage in less
technical countries. So although technical solutions are available for all persons using
Bliss as AAC, it can still be useful to be able to draw the Bliss-symbols when you teach
them or discuss their meanings or maybe writes a text in Blissymbolics.

- The logic structure of the system relates to the translucency of the system.
Blissymbolics may seem very difficult at a first glance. But when you discover the
logic you usually become very fascinated. The logic structure is visually supported
and therefore very useful in teaching situations about concepts and how concepts
are linked. The meaning of  is protection. Cloth (woven fabric)  with

the function to protect is clothes  .
A protection for the foot, (a pointer at the foot) is a shoe. The meaning of protection for hand (in hand see the thumb and the index finger) 

and for head, are then easily generated.

Another example: A person specified as medical is a doctor, so the generated meaning of and would be driver, pilot and sailor. Having understood the logic way of retrieving meaning of the Bliss-words even the long Bliss-words become understandable,

e.g., person, medical, knife is a surgeon,

and person, medical, knife and heart is a heart surgeon.

- In the grammar of Blissymbolics indicators mark the difference and the relation between noun, verbs and descriptors (adj. adv.)

- mind, brain, to think, scissors, to cut, with

- scissors, happiness, happy

Other indicators mark time, e.g., past tense, present and future, plural, possession, etc.
Blissymbolics has a simple syntax and a grammar of its own. However when Blissymbolics is used as AAC it is most common that syntax and grammar are adjusted to the surrounding language. Therefore in publications in Blissymbolics and in educational situations a large set of indicators are often used to adjust and visualize the syntax and the grammar of the surrounding language. For more information regarding the structure and grammar of Blissymbolics see the fundamental rules at www.blissymbolics.org.

- We have already discussed the role of classifiers and specifiers as part of the logic and translucency of Blissymbolics. Thus in a Bliss-word including a sequence of characters the first character is the classifier telling what type of concept we are looking for and the following characters in the Bliss-word are specifiers specifying the meaning of the classifier. Specifiers can be descriptive, describe the function, the material, or something typically, associated with the concept. In the authorized Bliss vocabulary (AV) the characters and sequences of characters of the Bliss-words have been internationally agreed on being the best representation of the intended concept.

The classifier, easiest translated as “a type of”, indicate the hierarchical grouping of concepts, e.g., a type of animal, a type of feeling, a type of activity (see the examples below). Grouping of concepts, develop in children and varies during the childhood. The hierarchical concept structure of the Blisswords is based on the adult grouping of concepts, thus the grouping we usually have in focus in language teaching. Understanding this structure of Blissymbolics (the classifiers and specifiers) has to be taught to children. On the other hand the Blissymbolics vocabulary becomes a useful tool in teaching concept formation.
Here are some examples:

A *boathouse* is a type of house, a *houseboat* is a type of boat,

an *elephant* is a type of animal with a long nose.

*Lonely* is a type of feeling (the feeling without a person)

also *afraid* is a type of feeling (a sad or bad feeling of something uncertain in the future)

To *run*, is a verb, a type of moving legs and feet forward with intensity

while to *dance* is moving them to music.

*Blissymbolics has a vocabulary to grow with.* With age children acquire a more abstract and advanced vocabulary.

Within the same logic structure also difficult concepts are included,

such as *leader* i.e., a person with the function to think forward,

*personality* i.e., the emanation from a person,
holy which is an adjective, in the shape of a gloria,

baptism is a type of event, Christian and holy (= a sacrament), here the sacrament of water, baptism.

The systematic presentation of difficult concepts make them understandable and comparable e.g., energy a combination of sun and electromagnetic radiation. Thus different types of energy are:

solar energy, hydro energy, wave energy, wind energy, geothermal energy, bioenergy.

The generative possibilities of Blissymbolics

The most important aspects of a language is to allow a person to express his/her thoughts, opinions and ideas. In a spoken language this is possible through the endless ways of reforming expressions, choosing other words, even making new words. An interesting phase during language development is when children about the age of 4 invent new words to suit their purpose when talking. Parents usually enjoy when they hear their child make up a new word and enjoy their linguistic creativity (Mellenius, I. 2004). The following examples of words are used by small speaking children: an unflower (a weed), the goes+down + trouser-s (the trousers that always slip down), to needle (to sew), ice hot (cf ice cold), lamby (something nice and soft).

Blissymbolics has various ways to modify the existing Bliss-words or make up new words to meet the need of the communicator.
Some characters placed in front of the classifier modify the meaning, augment the meaning, or make the meaning more intense. Here follow some examples:

**Opposite meaning**

\(\downarrow\) (arrows in opposite directions),

*e.g.,* opposite of broken is *intact* \(\downarrow\),

*much* \(\times\),

*e.g.,* much, much, much, much wind \(\times\times\times\rightarrow\) is a *very heavy storm*,

*almost the same as* \(\leftrightarrow\),

*e.g.,* almost the same as an airplane \(\leftrightarrow\) could be a *helicopter*.

One child spontaneously used \(\downarrow\square\) (opposite meaning of bread) to say *cake*.

If a Bliss-word is missing or not available, anyone can choose an appropriate classifier, and add specifiers according to the meaning. In order to indicate for the listener or the reader that a Bliss-word is not part of the AV, that it is a personally made up Bliss-word, the person using Bliss starts and ends the word with

\(\bullet\quad\bullet\)

a *combine indicator* \(\bullet,\bullet\). The listener or reader then knows that all characters between the two combine indicators should be interpreted as one concept, one Bliss-word.
To make a Bliss-word more precise, it is also possible to change classifiers or add specifiers, e.g., instead of just bear express daddy bear.

It is common in children’s books that a story tells about an animal family or an animal school with the owl as the teacher (the bird who gives knowledge).

I have already presented the use of indicators to change parts of words, i.e., to make verbs and adjectives out of nouns. This way of modifying the meaning to express the function or activity of a thing or to make a descriptive seem to be very close to and resembling children’s concept and vocabulary development. When you point at a picture of a book and say “what is this?” a little child may answer read and eat when you point at food. Thus the thing and the function of the thing are very close related in concept- and word-formation.

So within the structure of Blissymbolics, the examples above of the small children’s invented words could have been expressed as (un-flower), (the goes+down + trouser-s), (to needle, actually the Bliss-word for to sew), (ice-hot) and (lamby).
Observed characteristics in the use of Blissymbolics

- Many children who use Bliss as AAC have become linguistically skilled. Some express and show clearly a desire for using an advanced grammar, comparable to the grammar of the spoken language around them. They may even say that they don’t want to express/talk in a childish way. The desire of an advanced grammar has lead to the development of a large number of grammatical indicators. Teachers also express that the indicators very well serve as a visual tool to teach grammar to children in the classroom. Therefore when books are printed in Blissymbolics the grammar is most often adjusted to the grammar of a particular language. In all publications the following phrase should then be included: *This product is written in Blissymbolics adjusted to follow the grammar conventions of xxx language for the purposes of language teaching and learning.*

- An interesting development in some children is the emergent linguistic awareness. This is awareness at many different levels where the children may mix letters, Bliss-words and Bliss-word-homonyms. To express size which in Swedish is “storlek” one Swedish boy pointed at SWE: STOR (big) and SWE: LEK (play) thus homonyms of the two Bliss-words for “stor” and “lek”, but not related conceptually. Another example: To say the name of the Swedish island “Gotland” he spelled the first three letters GOT and then added which is the appropriate Blissword for LAND (country).

- Some fluent communicators show a great creativity in Bliss. They reduce the size of their vocabulary. They don’t use their binders with a large vocabulary of thousands of Blisswords. They prefer the size of a standard chart (500 Bliss-words) and become smart users of the chart with all the generative possibilities described above of Blissymbolics plus adding letters and sometimes homonyms. Some children become very fast and efficient communicators. Many children love to make up new Bliss-
words with combine indicators, challenging the imagination of the communication partner.

- **Most children who are good Bliss-communicators transfer to written language.** Some keep their old Bliss-chart for fast communication. Of course there are also those who never capture the sound based written language or just partly become literate.

  In Sweden there are some schoolbooks written in Blissymbolics and when tests have been made, they have shown that the children using Bliss capture the content by reading the Bliss-words and can thus independently acquire knowledge.

- **Also there are children who start learning Bliss for communication and who just use them as pictures,** who never reach the stage of linguistic creative and analytic processing. Some children using Bliss are transferred to picture sets after some years. It is most often unclear if the reason for this transfer is the ability of the child, the teaching methods, the knowledge or interest from the surrounding persons including the professionals or the change of schools.
References:


BCI - [www.blissymbolics.org](http://www.blissymbolics.org) News - information, Blissymbol vocabulary resources, Educational resources, International Community network, and more.


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