

Bringing Some Core AAC Issues and Blissymbolics together

Abstract:

Access to core vocabulary, AAC and literacy development, AAC and development of language; these are three main themes in the AAC research and practice which importance has been stressed repeatedly and increasingly while the field has developed towards maturity. Seen from the perspective of those of us using Blissymbolics, this may sometimes appear somewhat ironical, as all these aspects have been so central from the very start of applying Bliss in AAC in the 1970s. While Bliss was largely pushed aside by pictorial image libraries these three fundamental aspects were also partly lost, and have again had to be re-introduced in the AAC practice. This said, there are good reasons to scrutinise the situation regarding all the three themes in the current state and practices of Blissymbolics.

Blissymbolics and core vocabulary

Since Blissymbolics (or Semantography) was conceived and developed by C. K. Bliss in the 1950s to 1970s [1], it was intended to be a simplified but comprehensive semantic and graphical written language for bridging between any spoken and written natural languages. As such, when picked up and applied as AAC by Shirley McNaughton et al in the 1970s, it was from the beginning offering good coverage of most fundamental aspects and parts of speech and language. This was in fact the incentive for adopting Bliss as an extension to pictures picture based symbols, as a path to full language and literacy [2]. This of course included good coverage of “core vocabulary”, i.e. the most common and relatively limited number of small function words and basic concepts that constitute up to 80% of typical spoken and written communication [3] [4].

These and other qualities of Bliss provided a good foundation for early and successful integration of Bliss and Minspeak in the 1980s and 1990s in Canada and Sweden (unfortunately not maintained in later years) [5].

So is everything then just excellent and problem free with Blissymbolics and core vocabulary since then and to date? Not quite so. While the situation was good from the start, most efforts in extending the authorized Bliss lexicon have been devoted to special and fringe vocabulary. In fact, dedicated follow-up to insure efficient access to core vocabulary has gained too little focus in recent years. Even though core vocabulary is typically a quite stable part of language, there is definitely room for improvements of coverage in Bliss. A few examples:

- Very common mini phrases, like contractions of pronouns and auxiliary verbs, or negations of the auxiliary verbs, e.g., “I’m”, “it’s”, “you’ve”, isn’t, haven’t etc. in English, are typically included in core vocabulary lists, but not generally effectively accessible in Blissymbol AAC set-ups. This could and should be provided.
- The Blissymbolics authorized lexicon has now grown to a size of around 5500 basic lexical entries or concepts. This of course provides coverage of a much larger number of synonyms or close synonym words, and inflection forms. A larger lexicon is important and convenient for lookup, but it also creates problems for finding the most basic and important parts of the vocabulary. Work has now been initiated to structure the lexicon in order to provide good help for users to easily find core, basic, extended basic, and special parts of vocabulary to support efficient communication on different levels and for different purposes.

- Continuous analysis and follow-up of optimally efficient access to core and common vocabulary should be performed.

Blissymbolics, literacy and language learning

In the adoption and practice of Blissymbolics for AAC, the development of language competencies and aim at developing conventional literacy have from the start been central [2]. As the pictorial symbol libraries became dominant in AAC, and the presence of Bliss was in many areas becoming insignificant, these basic aspects were often also lost. Repeated efforts and campaigns have since then been going on to bring them back into focus. This has been both a frustrating and encouraging experience seen from the perspective of Blissymbol using parts of the AAC communities. The often superficially claimed differences in “simplicity” of pictorial symbols and “difficulty” of Bliss, tends to fade away when the ambition level is raised to real language learning and literacy development, rather than basic labelling and signalling of basic needs and requests. Recent reports of successful application of Bliss to support literacy learning for children with learning difficulties in multilingual settings in South Africa [6] highlight the potential of including Blissymbolics in different settings, as part of a multi-modal language learning environment.

Providing access to the full potential of Blissymbolics for AAC and other users

Due to the qualities of the system [7], well supported Blissymbol AAC users have from the start had access to a substantial degree of expressive power and freedom, both in low-tech and SGD set-ups. It is however a fact that no users of Bliss to this date have actually had access to writing and communication tools that realise the full potential of Bliss as an auxiliary written language. No communication or writing tool for Bliss has so far provided convenient and well supported access to the full character set of Bliss, enabling the user the freedom to efficiently find all words in the lexicon, as well as composing their own new Bliss-words as needed.

A number of development projects around the world are currently investigating paths to realise such tools. These includes the fundamental effort of establishing a standardised Unicode font for Bliss [8]. The appearance of such resources for application both in AAC and for other purposes, can be envisaged to create qualitatively new and interesting conditions for the use of Blissymbolics, as well as studies of its potentials and effects.

Current situation and future perspectives for Bliss in and beyond AAC

Despite the decline of the application of Blissymbolics in AAC in many countries, there are now also signs again of a renewed interest in Blissymbolics world-wide, including countries like the U.S., Spain, but in particular in eastern and central Europe (based on statistics of the BlissOnline service (www.bissonline.se) and requests to BCI). This is also the case for application outside of AAC, and can probably be attributed to the growing interest in language and literacy issues in many areas of the “globalised” world of today.

Declaration of interest: The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content.

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