DynaSyms Symbols
A Visual Language System

DynaSyms is short for Dynamic Symbols. They were originally designed by Faith Carlson for use on DynaVox communication devices. DynaSyms was based on a hand drawn communication symbol system called PICSYMS first published in 1985. Faith Carlson, who was a Speech-Language Pathologist, developed PICSYMS during her work with children and adults at Meyer Children’s Rehabilitation Institute, University of Nebraska Medical Center.

DynaSyms is a system of visual language symbols that was designed to represent spoken and written language. Each symbol grouping has its own color and shape designations to make it easier to understand. For example position words are blue open box shapes with black dots. See the symbol for on in the illustration above.

The DynaSyms symbols were created for two purposes:
1. To use as AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) symbols for individuals who could not use speech as a primary means of communicating.
2. To provide a visual structure for promoting language development or recovery.

The DynaSyms are meaning, concept or semantically based. They are grouped into categories based on the meaning (positions, attributes, actions, etc.). The categorical arrangement of the symbols makes it possible for individuals who cannot read the printed word to locate a symbol from a compilation of symbols.

The DynaSyms were created on a transparent background. This makes it possible for a developer to combine more than one symbol to form a new representation. There are also DynaSyms forms for things like cereal boxes, cities, etc. The developer can place an additional symbol on these forms to create new DynaSyms and give them a new label such as Cheerios and Chicago.

This document further details the symbols, the symbol categories and their use.
Language can be thought of as a way to categorize the world going on inside us and the world we observe and experience around us. Within each language these categories are symbolized verbally, visually or motorically. The symbols are used as a means of communication between individuals of each language such as Spanish, English, written words or Sign Language.

Individuals learn the symbols for a language by pairing symbols for what they see, hear, or feel with an appropriate experience. An object that has a seat and back that is intended for sitting becomes a chair and sad becomes the symbol for a low feeling inside the individual.

Languages also have ways to modify symbols to expand their meaning. By adding a plural indicator to chair it is possible to communicate about a larger number of chairs. A greater degree of sadness is denoted by adding a superlative indicator symbol to communicate saddest. This makes it possible to communicate more efficiently with other individuals. Imagine having to communicate chair fifty times to communicate about 50 chairs.
If an individual communicates with unorganized lists of symbols, it is difficult to understand the precise intent. By putting symbols in a formal sequence there is a match with the communication intent within a language community. The same words can be arranged in different sequences for varying meanings. This makes it possible to communicate more with fewer symbols.

The ordering of the symbols leads to understandable phrases and sentences. This makes unique communications possible using the limited symbols available in any language. It is then possible to communicate an accurate world of concepts and experiences.

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- The position box is in blues with the position ball in black.
- Pronoun people are dressed in lavender and purple.
- Relationship people are dressed in brown and yellow.
Special Symbols

Abstract symbols: There are a few abstract symbols that are used alone and within other symbols. The representation of these symbols is derived from ways in which it is possible to teach the concepts they represent.

**Thing:** This jagged edge symbol is a stylized version of paper crumpled around an object. The concept of thing (as well as object, item or noun) can be introduced by using a piece of paper to crumple around objects.

Things can be wrapped up with the paper, however concepts like actions or attributes cannot be wrapped in paper. Attempting to wrap up the act of walking or smiling as opposed to wrapping a ball or key can demonstrate the difference between things and other concepts.

The individual needs to learn the difference between the object itself (a ball) and the actions (bounce or roll) of the object and the attributes (big or red) associated with it. It is possible to wrap the ball itself in paper, however, it is not possible to wrap the act of rolling or to isolate and wrap the red of the ball.

Wrap up a number of things, like a ball (see right.) Compare these wrapped items to the symbol for thing so the individual develops a visual map of the concept thing. Then try to wrap up the red (attribute) of the ball (or other object) the rolling (any action) of the ball. Do this until the individual gains an understanding for the concept of thing.

Special teaching symbols (see left) have been created to help make it easier to learn the concept of thing using the symbols themselves. The act of wrapping up things can be simulated by using the thing frame and thing fade symbols (see left.) First frame an object symbol like leaf with the thing frame, next put it under the thing fade. Later place it on the thing symbol. Eventually put a grayscaled leaf on thing and lastly fade to thing only. See below.
**Negation:** The slashed circle is taken from the international symbol used for negation on signs like no parking. It is used by itself or as part of another symbol. Individuals can also use the negation form to create a new symbol by placing it over an existing symbol to form one not in the system.

The concept of negation can be introduced using the negation form itself.

Draw a negation symbol on a transparent sheet. Gather two or more small objects that would fit under the transparent sheet. Place or tape this sheet over one of the objects. Give the individual instructions that can be carried out using the items, include one negative statement. Vary the activity until the individual understands the role of the concept “not…” without the transparent barrier.

**Word:** This symbol uses a sign shape like a street sign (without the post) and pretend lettering to represent word. This simulated lettering may be in white or light gray. The light gray was chosen so an actual name could be written over the faux word where needed.

The make believe lettering was chosen so that it can symbolically represent any word or name rather than be specific. It also makes it possible to use the symbols to represent multiple languages. Teachers also like the fact that the symbols do not cue answers when an individual using symbols is taking a test.

Introduce the individual word symbol (see word above) by pairing it with brand name, street signs and other things that have labels. Compare multiple word symbols like sentence to the text in books.

A good way to acquaint an individual to the word symbol in names is to have people around them wear name tags or the badges worn at work.
Types of Symbols

**Actions:** The action symbols are illustrated with the objects, people and body parts related to the action. Arrows are used to indicate the direction of the action. The people figures are dressed in black with black hair and black outlines. Objects are grayed or outlined in bold black (see blender below.) The green arrows with black outlines indicate the direction of the action.

**Body, Hand, Head, and Thing actions:** Introduce these actions by cutting out a series of green arrows. Have someone carry out the action and use the arrow to follow the direction of movement. Follow a runner with a straight arrow. Use a curved arrow next to someone holding something. Move the arrows away from the head to show what happens when you forget something. Move curved arrows in a circle near the blender that is running.

To be verbs: The to be verbs such as *is, are, was* and *were* are statements of existence in time. These verbs use a black and white version of the time symbol and the green action arrows to clarify the concepts.

Amounts: An upright rectangle filled with varying quantities of small black circular shapes are used to indicate specific amounts. For specific numbers the rectangle is divided with a line like a domino. For smaller numbers the fingers of the hands are also used to indicate the number. A beaker of similar size to the rectangle filled with varying degrees of a gray solid is used for such amounts as *quart or half.*
Articles: A pointed sign shape and thing symbols are used to represent articles. The symbol for the is the sign pointing to one of a group of symbols for thing, but the symbol for a is a smaller sign pointing to a single thing.

Attributes, descriptors and feelings: The red and yellow circular shape of the happy symbol seen to the right is used throughout the attributes, descriptors and feelings symbols.

Feelings are facial expressions with objects placed within or overlapping the circle where needed.

Sensory attributes have an eye for visual, a nose for smell, a mouth for taste, a hand for touch or an ear for sound at the edge of the circle combined with representational objects.

Colors are available in three versions to meet individual needs. The first version is a color filled attribute circle. The second is an attribute circle with a crayon overlaid; both crayon and circle are color filled. The third has a crayon and an object of the appropriate color in the circle. This version can serve as a memory cue (jay blue or apple red.) Because of the object this version also works in grayscale.

Brand names: Brand name logos have not been represented in the symbols. Instead a generic drawing of a product or place is used to represent packaged goods and places of business.

A sign with a symbol for the food served represents a Burger Place.

Brand name chips are represented by pretend lettering. In addition there is a picture of the product on the face of the bag.
Buttons or keys: There are a series of buttons or keys that have symbols for electronic device functions on them. Many of the buttons may be appropriate for navigating through communication displays or notebooks. There are also keys or buttons with the letters, numbers and signs found on computer and calculator keyboards. Most are available in both dark on white and white on dark keys to accommodate various visual needs.

Categories: The category symbols come in two forms. One is simply a group of items from within the category. The other set is a group of symbols on a file folder shape. The symbols on the file folder are useful when organizing the symbols and teaching the concept of categorization.

Conjunctions: A string shape and word symbols are used to demonstrate conjunctions. The and symbol is two word symbols tied together since the concept ties the parts of a sentence or groups of words together ideationally.

Creatures: The animals, insects, birds, fish and other creatures are drawings of each individual creature. The drawings are specific (cedar waxwing, instead of bird), not generalized depictions. Any familiar creature can be used by an individual to represent the larger group or one creature within the group.
**Environmental control:** There is an activation hand in the border of the symbol for environmental controls. Within this border is a symbol for what action is required.

- light on
- light off
- TV on

**Events:** Activities and events are in square purple frames with objects or people involved in the activity or a depiction of the activity or event itself. Weather events have an aqua frame.

- sewing
- graduation
- vacation
- blizzard

**Forms:** The forms are symbols that can be used to create additional symbols. There are containers on which a symbol of the contents can be placed. A name can be applied to form a brand name. There are store symbols with a blank sign and empty window. By adding other symbols specific new stores can be created. The many forms can be used to create many new symbol words.

- TV program form
- food bag form
- city name form
- restaurant form

**Landmarks:** A few landmarks such as Grand Canyon and Mount Rushmore are simply drawings of these landmarks and special features.

- Grand Canyon
- Mount Rushmore
**Language and grammatical elements:** Ways in which words can be changed to make new words are represented in the symbols. There are tense indicators which make use of the time symbols for yesterday, today and tomorrow plus the action arrows to point toward the past, present or future time and a variety of other grammatical elements available.

- **past**
- **present**
- **future**

The symbol for plural uses the amount form with a group of things in it.

**Parts of speech:** The parts of speech symbols such as *adjective* or *verb* make use of symbol parts from those symbol groups.

- **adjective**
- **verb**
- **noun**

**Word tags:** The word tags are used to form plurals, tenses, and make possible other word changes. The tags are a rectangle with an attached line to connect it to the appropriate symbol. Within each tag is a symbol to represent the change. For example the plural is represented by an *amount* symbol with a few *thing* symbols in it.

- **-est** (as in biggest)
- **-ed** (as in walked)
- **-s** (as in barns)

**Objects:** The object symbols are basically drawings of representational objects. Additional items are added to clarify the meaning when necessary. A bowl of *apple sauce* has an *apple* in the back ground since it does not have a unique form of its own.

- **apple sauce**
- **sax**
- **balloon**
- **iris**
**People:** General people symbols are for the most part clothed in blue. There are a few exceptions, silhouettes in flesh tones and the black silhouettes like those on restroom doors.

![Boy](image)
![Self](image)
![Man](image)
![Senior Citizen](image)

**Body parts and functions:** The body parts are simple drawings. Body functions are drawings or abstract symbols of each function.

![Heart](image)
![Eye](image)
![Tear](image)

**Nationalities:** The nationalities are represented by a gray outlined figure holding the flag of the country.

![American](image)
![Greek](image)

**Occupations and characters:** A whole person figure is used in conjunction with related objects to symbolize occupations. A uniform or prototypical clothing are placed on figures where appropriate. Fictional characters and roles are treated the same as occupations.

![Firefighter](image)
![Chef](image)
![Pirate](image)
![Elf](image)

**Pronouns:** People with purple and lavender clothing are used for pronouns. The speaker is depicted from the waist up, wearing a hat, and with the mouth open as if talking. The speaker points to the person or thing (as in the symbol *it*) to indicate the specified pronoun. The darker colored clothing indicates the pronoun being symbolized and the lighter colors are explanatory. Words that typically occur at the beginning of the sentence or phrase are to the left in the symbol (see *she*). And those that are used later in a sentence or phrase are to the right toward the end of the symbol. This promotes the left to right tracking required for reading.

![I](image)
![She](image)
![Him](image)
![His](image)
Proper Names: People’s names are depicted with a head view of an individual with differing skin, hair and eye colors. The frame is gray with a gray name tag at the bottom. A variety of hair styles and face shapes are provided. There are a few faces, separate hair styles and glasses so you can create new people pictures. Since people with visual problems often have difficulty with the subtlety of people pictures, it is often more useful to place something associated with the person in or near the name frame. For beginning readers write the name in the tag area.

![Name images](image)

Relationships: The people within a relationship are dressed in yellow and brown. The figure shapes are the same as the ones used for general people. In this way a new concept is added to a familiar symbol. The relationship depicted is shown by who is holding hands. The figure(s) that are the target of the concept are boldly colored, and those that are relative to that relationship are faded. There are also background faded figures for relationship clarification. Generations are indicated by size, with the older generations being the tallest. Individuals of the same generation or age group are the same size. Father is taller than the child whose hand he is holding. The father is in bold color with the child faded. The person being symbolized is also first or to the left.

![Relationship images](image)

Places: A black frame is used to indicate places. The frame is filled with scenes from or objects found in those places.

![Place images](image)

States are a map outline with something to remind someone of that state and a small version of the U.S.A. symbol in the corner.
**Positions:** The position symbol is an open sided box with balls and sometimes a trail of dots to indicate the position relative to that box. When a front and back are needed for the concept, the box is bent to simulate a nose in front and the small of the back to the rear.

![Diagram of position symbols](image)

**Question words:** An orange question mark is used to turn other symbols into question words. A symbol for *world* with a question mark over it becomes *where* and a symbol with people and a question mark over it becomes *who*. This way the act of questioning is added to a familiar concept.

![Diagram of question words](image)

**Size and measurement:** The symbol for thing and a measuring tape are used to depict various size concepts. When introducing size concepts the size may be treated as a category. See folder illustration below

![Diagram of size and measurement](image)

A large thing like a *tree* may be placed on the folder with the *big* symbol and a small thing like a *leaf* on the folder with *little* symbol.

“**What is big like the tree?**”

“**What is little like the leaf?**”

Symbols of big and little things can be printed out to match items the individual encounters within their own environment. The symbols can then be sorted and placed in the corresponding folders. The repeated experience helps to develop a concept of size.
Social words and phrases: People figures dressed in brown are used to depict social and antisocial words. Facial expressions and hand indications are used to picture the concept. Joke is a thing symbol with social word colors. The facial expression is from the symbol for funny.

Speech mouth shapes: There is a set of mouth shapes that can be used to promote speech production. A voiceless consonant is indicated with a pictured puff of air. A voiced consonant is indicated with a sound pattern below or above the mouth. The pattern above is used to indicate nasalization of the sound. In appropriate cases the starting and ending movement of the sound is shown with two mouth positions.

Structures: Buildings, outdoor equipment, and rooms are symbolized with example drawings.

Outdoor structures: Playground equipment, fences and other structures are prototypical drawings of those items.

Buildings: Uniquely shaped buildings are represented with prototypical drawings. Since many buildings like houses and stores have a variety of shapes they are represented by simple drawings.

Rooms: An open door with a view into the room is used to indicate rooms. For specific rooms furniture and other items are placed within the room. There is a bed in the bedroom and a class in the kindergarten room. New rooms can be created using objects and a room form.
**Time:** A square like the block used on a typical calendar is used to indicate time. The outside frame is dark blue and the inside background is light blue.

![Clock](image)

**General time:** An abstract clock with the hands at 3:00 o’clock and a dot with sometimes a trail of smaller dots are used to indicate various general time concepts like soon or later. Sky items such as the sun and night sky are used in the box for general day times.

![Clock](image)

**Clock time:** Minutes, hours and seconds are illustrated by shading the space through which the appropriate hand moves.

![Clock](image)

**Calendar Days:** The time frame has seven smaller squares toward the bottom of the frame to indicate the days that make up a week. Each individual day is highlighted with a thicker frame. Above the seven squares is a single square in which an object or event to represent that day has been placed. There are day of the week forms into which symbols can be placed to meet regional or personal preferences. The week itself has all days highlighted.

![Calendar](image)

**Holidays:** The large time square is filled with objects to represent individual holidays or special days. A birthday cake represents Birthday and a heart for Valentine’s Day.

![Holidays](image)
**Months and years:** The months of the year have a set of small squares at the bottom to represent the days of a month. At the top of the square is a rectangle where a symbol to represent the month has been placed. For May there are spring flowers and a sunny day for August. There is a month form where symbols to represent regional and personally preferred symbols can be placed. The year is represented by 12 small month symbols. To represent specific years, use the numbered year symbol and write in the year.

![May](image1) ![August](image2) ![year](image3) ![numbered year](image4)

**Seasons:** The season symbol is four smaller time squares in a row. In each square is something to represent each season. An enlarged version of an individual season represents individual seasons and the season is highlighted in the bottom row. A snowflake for winter or a sun for summer.

![season](image5) ![winter](image6)

**Weight:** A balance scale is used to represent weight. Items that would be weighed in that unit of measure are placed on the balance scale. Candy for ounces and grams and a truck for the ton measures. There is an amount symbol in the upper left corner. For metric measures there is a symbol for ten in the same place.

![weight](image7) ![gram](image8) ![ton](image9)

**Yes and No:** The yes symbol is a green, round, pleasant faced symbol with arrows to indicate the head nod up and down. The green was chosen to represent “yes, go ahead” like the green for go in the traffic sign. The no symbol is a red oval face with left right arrows for the head shake. The red for the no was chosen for “stop, do not go ahead” like the stop sign.
Symbols for Organizing Displays

There are a large number of symbols available. It is very difficult to locate a specific symbol if the communication book or display is not organized. Individual thinking and learning patterns vary when it comes to organizing and retrieving information. People retrieve information in varying patterns; for example, some use the category method and others use the subject matter strategy. The symbols can be used to cue retrieval, so the organization needs to match the individual’s thinking style.

Spoken words have consistent meaning and the symbols need to have that same consistency. Words are modified by the words around them when they are put into sentences. When using the symbol system to develop language skills, the symbols need to have the same consistency. Food is something to eat. It can be used to say “The food here is delicious.” or “The dog’s food dish is empty.” Other symbols have to be added to create these messages.

When using symbols to communicate routine messages, it is often not efficient to compose these frequently used sentences each time. A phrase, sentence or series of sentences can be written by a symbol. The symbol then means the entire message. The individual who does not read has no idea whether the symbol for food means “food” or “I need some food. I am hungry.” By putting the symbol on a sticky note symbol or other related symbol to cue the idea that the food symbol means something else now.

The DynaSym’s have a set of category symbols on file folders that can be used to help an individual organize them for locating symbols. These category symbols are not used for message composition, but to direct someone who can then turn to the right page in a communication book. By using the symbols as page tabs, they can be used by individuals who can turn pages for themselves. The tabs with symbols help the individual find the desired page quickly.

Some individuals prefer having symbols arranged so that all symbols related to an activity or situation are located together. Pages in an individual’s communication book can be arranged by topic. All symbols related to shopping, foods, money, purchasing actions, sales symbols, and amounts can be arranged together. The subject symbol (a big book) can be used in combination with a symbol relating to that topic. This new symbol can cue the individual that symbols found on the related page are arranged by topic not category.

All of these strategies for cueing the individual may be used alone or in combination for more efficient messaging. Pages or displays can be set up so that the most effective method or combination of methods can be used.
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Attention Authors and Developers

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The symbols were created in Adobe Illustrator and are Scalable Vector Graphics (SVG). They can also be reformatted to bitmap.