

- An effective way of overcoming language ignorance in strange lands.

## COMMUNICATION BY SIGN

The roads signs have inspired a very interesting attempt towards the simplification of language — the creation of a silent sign language. This initiative was taken by a United Nations committee in charge of facilitating communication for whatever citizen in whatever country. The signs would represent significant symbols, like an arrow to represent movement, a broken glass, fragility, two crossed knives a restaurant. Already this type of signs is being used widely in crossroads where citizens of different countries meet, like international airports or the bigger airlines. The railways are beginning to adopt the same hieroglyphics.

It is a glaring paradox that the impediment of language barriers is most felt in our travel-and-communication oriented times. Short of speaking five or six principal languages, it is impos-

sible for a citizen of any country to be able to converse with a citizen of a distant country who knows only his native language. Nevertheless it is some times necessary for the two to communicate. What to do then? Of course everybody knows how to express a desire to eat. But how does one say what he wants to eat, how he wants it cooked? The language of gestures is easily exhausted. How does one ask for the location of toilets without risking embarrassment?

Let us imagine a Frenchman arriving in a small town in a Japanese province where no one speaks European languages. He leaves the train station and finds himself in a strange world. He will hardly know the way to a barber shop. And all his moves would require a great waste of time.

That is why the United

Nations wish that the need for exchanges between countries, so violently demonstrated since the last war, should not be frustrated by language difficulties. The objective is for all foreigners to be able to find all their elementary needs by themselves. It would be sufficient to look at the signboards for the needed information. To be sure, this kind of writing is not new. It is the same as that discovered on the walls of prehistoric caves. It was signwriting which allowed personal communication between peoples of the old Middle-East civilizations and in times when the Greeks and Romans started their commercial activities.

Cicero, Cato, Plutarch and Seneca were among the most ardent protagonists of signlanguage. Alchemists of all countries communicated their formulas and discoveries only by conventional signs. Most of the chemical compounds including metals, were represented by crudely drawn signs. Today many sciences have an international language based on signs. Biologists represent the sexes by

the sign of Mars for the male and the sign of Venus for female.

Electricians and electronics have established a voluminous code of signs and crude drawings. Atomic scientists have adopted the black, yellow or red ring with three breaks.

An international symbol has been finally adopted to designate the post office — it's the hunting horn of the Swiss post offices. The choice of symbols is an extremely complex work. For example, it was proposed to the United Nations to use as symbol for fragility a broken egg. After days of discussion it was admitted that in certain communities like the polar regions, they may not be able to understand the meaning of this broken egg sign, because they don't eat eggs in that region. It was therefore the broken glass which was assigned to express the idea of fragility.

We are only at the beginning of this important revolution in the communication between different countries and continents. Different groups of specialists work simultaneously for the

establishment of this sign language. An International Council of Organizations for Graphic Communication is doing its best to coordinate the different researchers undertaken here and there. The basic quality of a language of signs is simplicity. The maximum of symbols should be able to be learned with the minimum of difficulties. Hence the necessity of choosing highly significant symbols, completely devoid of ambiguity. The choice of the drawn object is not enough. It must be so designed as to be immediately

comprehensible. For example, a single knife does not necessarily suggest the idea of eating and consequently, a restaurant. On the other hand, two crossed knives make one think invariably of a table service. The second arrangement was therefore retained.

The vocabulary of signs will probably be definite in three months time. We will then have at our disposal in all cities, signboards of our modern hieroglyphics to help us set foot in the still inaccessible regions of our own planet.

## SURPRISE!

A friend of mine in the island of Guernsey one day settled down in a small, deserted bay to read, hidden behind a sand dune. Presently two young girls came along and seeing no one, undressed and stretched out to sun-bathe. Soon a parson appeared carrying a camera, and believing himself alone, left his clothes on the beach and swam around the neighboring headland.

Out from behind their sand dune stole the two girls to where the parson's clothes lay, picked up his camera and each snapped a picture of the other. After which they replaced the camera containing these candid portraits and returned to their hiding place.