

Chapter 6 Symbols

When note-taking is mentioned in the context of consecutive interpreting the first thing that student interpreters ask about are symbols. You have already seen or come up with a number of them in Chapter 4. Although it is true that knowing a reasonable number of very useful symbols can make our lives much easier, please don't forget that symbols are relatively unimportant when compared to all of what you have read in the first five chapters of this book. The note-taking system described here, variants on it and other note-taking systems work with or without symbols, but if you don't have a sound, consistent and meaningful note-taking system then no amount of symbols is going to help you.

In this chapter we look at some of the guiding principles that should govern your use of symbols in consecutive note-taking.

What is a symbol?

A symbol doesn't have to be a picture. It also can be a short word, pair of letters or a single letter. What is important is that it represents something. What does it represent? When noting with symbols it is the underlying meaning of a word or expression that is important to us, rather than the actual word or expression chosen by the speaker to represent that meaning (e.g. *suggest*, *propose*, *put forward*). We will call this underlying meaning *concept* here. So a symbol represents a concept, not a word. This is often what interpreters mean when they say "note the ideas [concepts], not the words!". (See Chapter 2, page 36).

Example

- B You can use a capital *B* to represent all contradictions, so not just *but*, but also, *however*, *nonetheless*, *on the other hand*, etc.
- An arrow can be used to represent consequence. A leads to B. *Causes*, *therefore*, *as a result*, etc.

Why use symbols?

Symbols... ... are quicker and easier to write than words.
... are easier to read on the page than words.
... represent concepts not words, they are not one-to-one translations so they help us avoid source language interference when we interpret.

What to note with symbols

i) Concepts that come up again and again

In all sorts of speeches there are concepts and expressions that are the stock and trade of every speaker, things that come up every time. e.g. verbs like *agree*, *decide*, *discuss*, *propose*, or *consider*. Symbols for these concepts will be used again and again, every time you work in consecutive mode.

Exercise (MacShane 1)

Look at the speech below. Which ideas or synonymous expressions come up most often? And which would you expect to find in other speeches as well?

I am delighted to be back here in Sofia. The first time I came to Bulgaria was 20 years ago and then I never dreamed I would return as a UK government minister.

Let me explain. In 1980 and 1981 I was heavily involved in supporting the independent Polish Union, Solidarność. In 1982 I was arrested and imprisoned in Warsaw when taking money to the underground activists of the union – men and women who today occupy high places in the national life of Poland.

When I was released I was declared persona non grata by the communist government. I could not get a visa for Poland. My friends struggling for Polish freedom could not travel to the West. But we could both travel visa free to Varna. So on the sands of the Black Sea, the contacts were re-established, and over a glass of the wonderful wine that Bulgaria has the genius to produce, my footnote in the history of Europe's liberation from communism continued to be written.

Now I am glad to be back in Bulgaria as a new generation of Bulgarian and British European citizens prepare to shape a new Europe. I am especially pleased to be speaking to you under the auspices of the Atlantic Club.

The concept of "pleased" comes up three times in this section alone *delighted*, *glad*, *pleased*. And it will also come up many times in other speeches regardless of their content. It is worth having a quick symbol for all the expressions that mean "pleased". For example, ☺. Concepts like *imprisoned* or *arrested* are going to be rare in most contexts, so don't bother coming up with a symbol for it as you will only forget it through lack of use. Concepts like *support* or *government*, though, might come up in many other speeches.

Now do the same with other speeches in this book, or speeches you have worked with recently and complete the table below. Put frequently occurring words and their synonyms in the left column and a symbol for them in the right hand column. Remember you want one symbol for a group of more or less synonymous words and expressions, NOT one symbol per word.

Frequently occurring groups of more or less synonymous verbs

<i>speak, say, announce, declare, tell etc.</i>	"

Frequently occurring groups of more or less synonymous nouns

<i>support, backing, endorsement</i>	5

Many of the above may appear as both nouns and verbs. You will find that in this note-taking system you can use the same symbol for both verb and noun without any confusion. Below are a few examples of what you might have arrived at...

Frequently occurring VERBS

<i>speak, say, announce, declare etc.</i>	"
<i>want, wish, desire, hope for,</i>	♥

<i>think, consider, hold the view, be minded to, be of the conviction,</i>	$\tilde{\circ}$
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<i>propose, suggest, put forward, move to, nominate.</i>	>>
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Frequently occurring NOUNS

<i>support, backing, endorsement, etc.</i>	S
<i>consequence, result, end-effect, ramifications, repercussions,</i>	\rightarrow
<i>problem, difficulty, hindrance, hurdle, stumbling block</i> (which gives us this symbol),	$\wedge\wedge\wedge$
<i>country,</i>	
<i>politics, policy,</i>	Π
<i>money,</i>	$\$$
<i>Industry</i> (this symbol represents a chimney with smoke coming out of it),	Γ

Verbs or nouns

Some words, concepts and their symbols may function as nouns or verbs, but with the SVO layout on the page you cannot confuse their grammatical function.

<i>support, backing, endorsement, etc.</i>	S
<i>decide, decision,</i>	\emptyset
<i>change, reform, overhaul, rework, redraft, amend,</i>	Δ

Links belong to this category and will come up again and again in all speeches. See Chapter 4, page 60, for symbols for links.

ii) Ideas that will recur on a given day

In any one meeting certain terms or concepts will be particular to that day's subject matter. This is a more practical point. If you are preparing to work at a meeting on competition in telecommunications services, it might be useful

to have a symbol for "unbundling" or "last-mile" as these longish to write and may come up dozens of time in a debate on the subject. After the meeting has finished though, you may not need to use them again for weeks or even months as they will only come in the context of a discussion about telecommunications and interpreters work in many different subject areas.

Example

In the continuation of the speech above (**MacShane 1**) we have a good example. Denis MacShane, we know, is speaking to the Atlantic Club, in Bulgaria, about Bulgaria. The interpreter would be well advised to have considered this in advance and have prepared symbols for these two things in advance as they are likely to be mentioned repeatedly. Look at the example below.

Now I am glad to be back in **Bulgaria** as a new generation of **Bulgarian** and British European citizens prepare to shape a new Europe. I am especially pleased to be speaking to you under the auspices of the **Atlantic Club**. Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, my friend the NATO General Secretary George Robertson, Mikhail Gorbachev and the Dalai Lama have all spoken here. It is an honour to follow in their footsteps, just as it is an honour to recall the memory of Major Frank Thompson, the poet and brother of one of England's greatest historians, E. P. Thompson. Frank Thompson parachuted into **Bulgaria** in 1944 as an SOE operative but was captured and executed. He sacrificed his life for **Bulgaria** and I recall his name tonight.

The **Atlantic Club** has of course played a key role in pushing **Bulgaria** towards NATO accession. As the date of accession draws ever closer, I wonder however whether it is time for the **Club** to adopt a new slogan.

The symbols need not be pictorial and even something as simple as **AC** (Atlantic Club) and **Bu** (Bulgaria) will be clear and save you plenty of time.

How to use symbols

Symbols must be...

- **clear and unambiguous.**

- **quick and simple to draw.** You can categorize symbols by the number of strokes of the pen required to draw them. More than three is probably too slow.

- **prepared in advance,** and instantly familiar to you. Don't improvise mid speech.

- **consistent**, if *E* is *energy* today, make sure it stays *energy* always and find yourself another symbol for *environment* and *economy*. Otherwise you will mix them up and make some terrible mistakes.

- **organic**. See below for an explanation of organic symbols.

...and they must...

- **mean something to you**. Copying symbols from other people can be a good idea, but symbols work because they create associations in the mind, in your mind, and the human memory prefers you to understand those associations yourself. So don't blindly copy symbols you see here or elsewhere if they don't create the right associations for you, if they don't "click" for you.

Organic^s symbols

"Organic" means that one symbol should be the starting point for many other symbols. A group or family of symbols will grow from a common root. In this way you will reinforce your recognition of the symbols you know and by having a smaller number of "basic" symbols you will tax your memory less. Both of these things will free up mental resources and help you interpret better.

Let's look at some examples. One of the most commonly used symbols is a simple square which denotes "country, nation, land, state", depending on the context. It has been borrowed from Japanese, where a similarly shaped character means "country". Using our square as a starting point, and by adding a couple of letters we can arrive at a whole range of symbols, with no extra effort required.

Nation, country, state = 

 *al* national (adjective)

 *ally* nationally

 *ze* to nationalize

 *rn* nationalisation

 *o* national (noun), citizen

The arrow

The arrow is the most versatile and arguably the most useful of all the symbols. You can do pretty much anything with arrows and below is a very limited selection.

	return, come back, reverse, regress
	rise, increase, grow, climb etc.
	fall, decline, slide, slip, drop, shrink,
	exchange, relations,
	lead to, consequence of, therefore
	continue,
	...

The last two can mean many things. What is important is that, if you use them, that meaning is clear to you.

The arrow is the ultimate distillation of meaning. It can be used to note many different things and as such it leaves interpreters with more freedom to choose the vocabulary of their version than any other symbol. This was demonstrated by Rozan as follows (2003:29 [1956:32])

<i>country's ↗</i>	= a country's development
<i>↗ duties</i>	= an increase in duties
<i>↗ science</i>	= scientific progress
<i>↗ patient</i>	= the patient's recovery
<i>↗ salaries</i>	= a rise in salaries
<i>↗ living standard</i>	= an improvement in the standard of living
<i>↗ prices</i>	= inflation

People

My own personal favourite amongst symbols is based on the circle, representing a head, and by extension meaning "person". This gives us two sets of symbols, firstly for human emotion and thought.

😊	pleased. (You don't need to, and shouldn't, draw the eyes in the circle... this type face however insists.)
😢	annoyed, unhappy, unimpressed, etc.
😩	very unhappy, disgusted, etc.
🤔	to think
🌐	to know, (for me, the straight line denotes certainty, in comparison to the squiggly line for "to think".)

You can easily create more of your own symbols along these lines if need be. Imagine, for example, a symbol for "shocked, surprised".

The circle can also be used to denote a person who is associated with that symbol's meaning. This can be done by adding a raised circle to another symbol.

◻ al	national (adjective)	◻ o	national (noun), citizen
econ	Economy	econ o	economist
E	Energy	E o	energy expert, supplier,
π	Policy	π o	politician
↗	that, which	↗ o	who

Underlining

Underlining, and the different ways we can underline, belong to this category of organic symbols. If in our notes we want to show that something is important or even more important it is quicker to underline it than write out more words. It is also useful for degrees of a quality: thus *large*, *huge*, *colossal* might be notes as *big*, *big*, and *big*, respectively. Similarly if something is less clear-cut we can show this through broken underlining. It is a very useful technique and can give us a whole new wealth of concepts from a symbol or word we have noted. Let's

take a few from the lists above.

- ↗ rise (etc.)
- ↗ rise sharply, jump, soar,
- ↗ rise dramatically, leap, skyrocket etc
- ↗ faltering rise, etc

You can of course underline anything, words included. So *say* becomes *assert* and *poor* becomes *destitute*.

- | | |
|--------------------|--|
| <u><i>say</i></u> | assert, |
| <u><i>poor</i></u> | very poor |
| <u><i>poor</i></u> | grinding, crushing poverty, destitution, |
| <u><i>poor</i></u> | fairly poor, more or less badly off, |

For a further example of organic symbol construction see the section on Verbs (page 133) in Part II.

Where to find symbols

The symbols you use should have some element of mnemonic, that is they should mean something to you by association (for example my chimney stack on page 102). They should create associations in YOUR mind. This means that copying other people's symbols is not always a good idea. However, symbols can be very useful and there are already lots of them around, so don't reinvent the wheel! Use the symbols you know and "organify" them.

Look at the very incomplete list of examples below. I will not suggest any "meaning" for the symbols, but if you immediately recognize a symbol or associate it with a concept then that will be a good symbol for you to use. The rest you can (and will) forget.

Mathematics	\pm	\neq	π	$\%$	$>$	$<$	$=$	\therefore
Science	Σ	σ	Δ	E	t	∞		
Music	#	\flat	\angle					

Keyboard	% & @ © ® ™ //
Punctuation	? ! () „ [] „ :
Maps	N S E W
Short words in other languages	so hi ta ok bo ale juž ilya dejá ergo
Other alphabets	Æ Ø Ø P ß Δ Ξ Ζ Ψ Φ Σ Й П П З
Registration plates	CH D DA UK PL (beware possible confusion such as China/Switzerland or Poland/Portugal)
Currencies	\$ ¥ £ €
Chemical symbols	Fe Na Po CO ₂ CO NO ₂ H ₂ O ₂
Text messaging	L8R RU OK 2

How to practise

1. Go through the transcripts of speeches you have worked with in this book or from elsewhere and see which concepts (synonymous words and expressions) come up most often. Make a list and think up or borrow a symbol for the most common ones.
2. Go through the consecutive notepads you have been using so far. Ask yourself, "which long words am I writing out repeatedly?" Can you think up a quick and simple symbol to replace them?
3. Go through your consecutive note pads. Which words are you sometimes noting as symbols, sometimes not? Cross out the words where you have used them and replace them with the symbols you have chosen. (This exercise is not about "correcting" the notes, you may never even look at the set of notes again, but the action of crossing something out and replacing it will help anchor that symbol in your memory.) It is important to use symbols consistently and automatically.

Finally, don't worry too much about symbols. There is no right or wrong amount of symbols to use, but sticking to the rules outlined at the beginning of the chapter will make sure that, however many or few you use, they help rather than hinder. In the short term you will try out lots of symbols but in the long run symbols will pretty much choose themselves. The ones that get used, those that represent the most common concepts in speeches, will get remembered and the ones that don't get used will be forgotten. And so it should be.