

How the Symbols Are Important for Dementia Patients and How They Are Used for Their Benefit and Treatment

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Abstract: This study presents a semiotic analysis of selected articles addressing the role of symbols in supporting dementia patients. Drawing upon the principles of semantics and semiotics, the research explores how visual, verbal, and multimodal symbols function as cognitive aids, facilitating communication, orientation, and emotional connection for individuals with dementia. The study examines how these symbols—ranging from pictograms and signage to symbolic narratives—are employed in therapeutic contexts to enhance memory recall, reduce confusion, and promote autonomy. By analysing the symbolic systems described in existing literature, this research highlights the ways in which carefully designed semiotic interventions can improve quality of life and foster social inclusion for dementia patients. The findings underscore the significance of integrating meaningful symbols into dementia care practices and offer recommendations for healthcare professionals, caregivers, and designers seeking to create supportive communicative environments.

Keywords: Semantics, Semiotics, Dementia, Symbols, Cognitive Support, Therapeutic Communication, Visual Aids, Memory Recall, Care Practices.

Introduction: Dementia is an umbrella term for a range of progressive neurodegenerative conditions, including Alzheimer's disease, vascular dementia, Lewy body dementia, and frontotemporal dementia, which collectively affect millions of individuals worldwide. According to the World Health Organization over 55 million people are living with dementia, with nearly 10 million new cases emerging each year (Organization 2021). The condition is characterized by a decline in memory, cognitive abilities, reasoning, problem-solving, and communication skills, often accompanied by changes in mood and behavior. As dementia progresses, affected individuals face increasing difficulty in comprehending and producing verbal language, interpreting environmental cues, and engaging in everyday social interactions. These impairments contribute to frustration, confusion, disorientation, and, in many cases, social withdrawal,

which negatively impact overall quality of life (Heisterman, Williams et al. 2012).

Communication breakdown is one of the most significant challenges faced by people with dementia. In the early stages, patients may compensate for verbal deficits by relying on context or familiar cues (Smith, Broughton et al. 2011). However, as cognitive decline advances, reliance on non-verbal forms of communication becomes increasingly important. Here, symbols—which may be visual, verbal, or multimodal—emerge as crucial tools for bridging communicative gaps. Symbols can provide meaningful cues for understanding, navigating environments, recalling memories, and fostering emotional connections. They can range from simple pictograms and environmental signage to more complex symbolic narratives in art, storytelling, or music therapy.

The effective use of symbols in dementia care draws heavily on the principles of semiotics—the study of signs, symbols, and the processes by which meaning is created and interpreted (Black, Rubinstein et al. 2018). Semiotics, rooted in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, provides a framework for understanding how signs function in human cognition and communication. Saussure's dyadic model emphasizes the relationship between the signifier (the form a sign takes) and the signified (the concept it represents), while Peirce's triadic model categorizes signs as icons, indexes, or symbols, depending on their relationship to the object they denote. In the context of dementia, these theoretical perspectives help explain why certain types of symbols—such as highly iconic images that resemble their referents—are more easily recognized and processed than abstract representations.

The field of semantics, which focuses on the meaning of words, phrases, and symbols, complements the semiotic perspective by examining how meaning can be shaped, preserved, and retrieved in dementia care (Mick and Oswald 2006). As verbal comprehension declines, semantic memory—the store of general world knowledge, including the meanings of words and symbols—can be leveraged through visual and sensory cues to enhance communication. Research has shown that visual symbols, color coding, and environmental cues can serve as cognitive scaffolds, supporting memory recall, aiding orientation, and promoting autonomy for individuals with dementia (Wiener and Pazzaglia 2021).

In practical terms, symbols are integrated into dementia care in multiple ways. Environmental signage in care homes, such as restroom or dining hall pictograms, helps residents navigate independently and reduces confusion. Color-coded objects—for example, brightly colored plates or utensils—can encourage food intake and make tasks more manageable. Reminiscence therapy often employs symbolic items like photographs, music, or personal artifacts to stimulate long-term memory and foster emotional well-being (Lazar, Thompson et al. 2014). Even digital technologies—such as tablet-based applications with image-based prompts—are increasingly being used to create personalized symbolic communication systems for patients.

The importance of these interventions extends beyond

functional support. Symbols can also play a central role in emotional and social well-being. Familiar signs and visual cues can evoke positive memories, reinforce identity, and provide reassurance in otherwise disorienting circumstances. For example, a photograph of a patient's childhood home, placed in their bedroom, may trigger comforting recollections and strengthen their sense of belonging. Similarly, symbols embedded in shared activities—such as group storytelling or music sessions—can promote social inclusion and maintain interpersonal connections even as verbal skills deteriorate (Skjørten 2007).

Despite their demonstrated benefits, the systematic use of symbols in dementia care remains underexplored in some contexts, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where resources for specialized interventions are limited. Additionally, cultural differences in symbolic interpretation can pose challenges. Symbols that are easily recognized in one cultural context may not hold the same meaning in another, emphasizing the need for context-sensitive design and application (Vieira, Tedesco et al. 2011).

This study seeks to address these gaps by conducting a semiotic analysis of selected articles that explore the role of symbols in dementia care. By synthesizing theoretical perspectives from semiotics and semantics with practical applications documented in the literature, the research aims to clarify how symbols function as cognitive aids, therapeutic tools, and social connectors. The study also intends to highlight best practices and provide recommendations for healthcare professionals, caregivers, and designers to create supportive communicative environments tailored to the needs of dementia patients.

Ultimately, integrating meaningful symbols into dementia care is not merely an adjunct to medical treatment; it is a fundamental strategy for enhancing quality of life. By facilitating understanding, orientation, and emotional engagement, symbols can empower individuals with dementia to maintain a degree of independence and preserve their dignity, even in the face of cognitive decline (Tranvåg, Petersen et al. 2013).

Literature Review

1 Dementia and Communication Challenges

Dementia is a complex syndrome characterized by the progressive deterioration of cognitive functioning,

memory, reasoning, and language abilities. Among the most common forms are Alzheimer's disease, vascular dementia, and Lewy body dementia, each presenting distinctive yet overlapping communication challenge (Karantzoulis and Galvin 2011). As dementia advances, patients often experience difficulty processing verbal instructions, understanding abstract concepts, and engaging in conversation. These challenges can result in heightened anxiety, social withdrawal, and diminished independence. Research indicates that the use of visual cues, environmental markers, and symbolic representations can significantly improve comprehension and reduce stress for individuals with dementia (Karantzoulis and Galvin 2011). By simplifying and contextualizing information through symbols, caregivers can enhance both orientation and emotional comfort.

2 Semiotics in Healthcare Communication

The study of semiotics offers a useful theoretical framework for understanding how symbols can aid communication in dementia care. Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist theory conceptualizes a sign as composed of two inseparable elements: the signifier (the form of the sign, such as an image or sound) and the signified (Krampen 1987). Charles Sanders Peirce further refined this by introducing a triadic model—icon, index, and symbol—which categorizes signs according to their relationship to the object they denote. Icons bear a physical resemblance to their referent (e.g., a drawing of a cup), indexes have a causal or direct connection (e.g., smoke indicating fire), and symbols rely on learned cultural associations (e.g., a red cross denoting medical assistance). In dementia care, these distinctions are crucial: iconic signs are often more easily recognized by patients with declining abstract reasoning, while culturally familiar symbols can reinforce a sense of identity and belonging (Featherstone, Boddington et al. 2020).

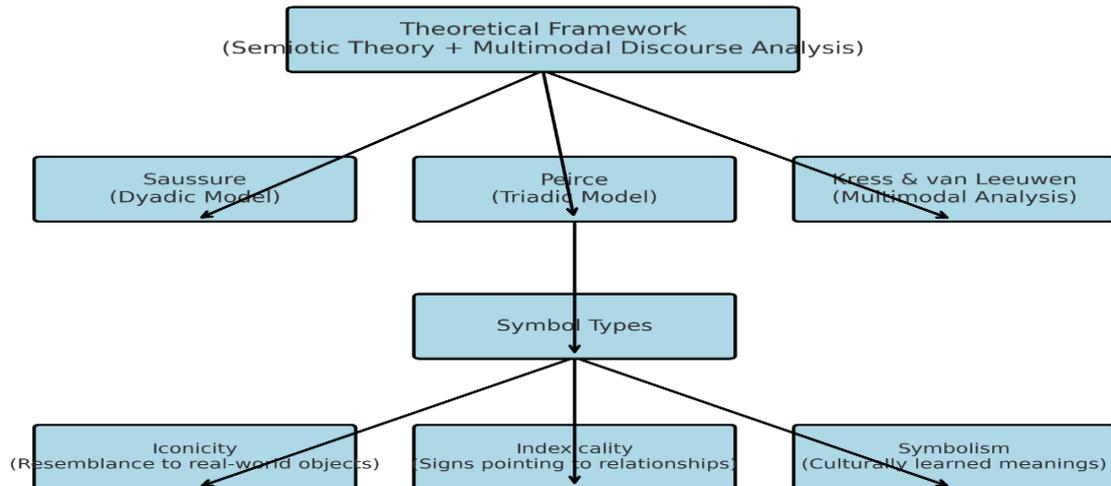
3 Symbols in Dementia Therapy

Symbols play a versatile role in dementia therapy, serving as tools for navigation, memory stimulation, and emotional expression. Environmental interventions—such as pictograms for restrooms, dining rooms, and personal spaces—aid spatial orientation and foster autonomy (Smith 2025). Color-coded cues, like contrasting tableware, have been shown to encourage food intake by improving visual contrast and recognition. In addition, symbolic narratives—storytelling, visual art, music, and personal memorabilia—provide opportunities for reminiscence therapy, allowing patients to reconnect with meaningful life experiences. Research emphasizes that such activities not only enhance mood but also sustain cognitive engagement and social interaction (Lehtinen, Vauras et al. 1995). The integration of symbols into both structured therapy and everyday care environments thus represents a practical application of semiotic principles, supporting patients' functional abilities and emotional well-being.

Theoretical Framework

This study applies semiotic theory (Saussure, Peirce) and elements of multimodal discourse analysis to examine how symbols convey meaning to dementia patients (Brookes, Putland et al. 2021). The theoretical lens emphasizes:

- **Iconicity** – resemblance to real-world objects (e.g., restroom pictograms).
- **Indexicality** – signs pointing to relationships (e.g., arrows indicating direction).
- **Symbolism** – culturally learned meanings (e.g., a red cross for medical assistance).



Methodology

A qualitative content analysis was conducted on selected peer-reviewed articles that explore the role of symbols in dementia care. Sources were identified through databases such as PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science. The inclusion criteria focused on studies that:

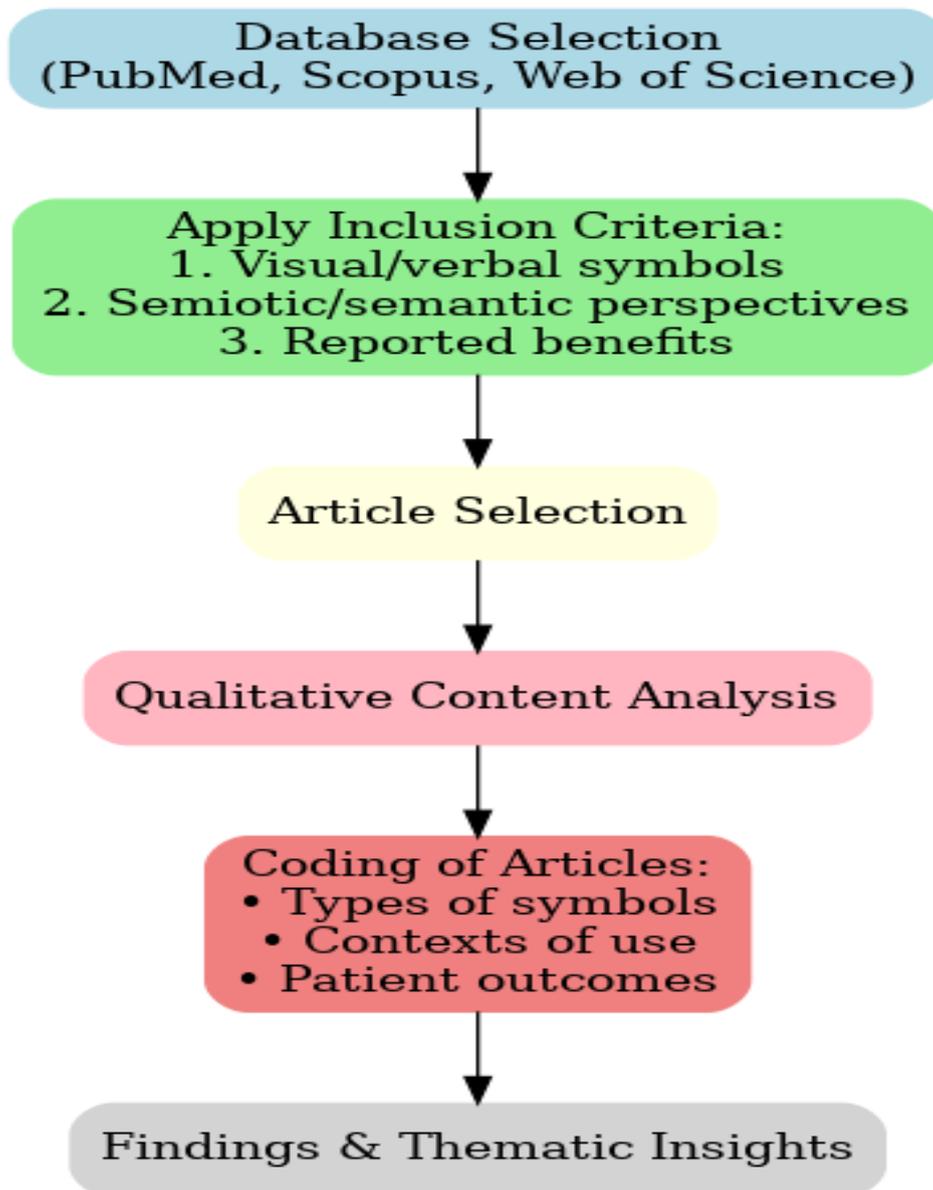
1. Investigated the use of visual/verbal symbols with

dementia patients.

2. Applied semiotic or semantic perspectives.

3. Reported measurable benefits in patient well-being, orientation, or communication.

The selected articles were coded for types of symbols, contexts of use, and reported patient outcomes.



Conclusion

Symbols in dementia care are not just decorations but meaningful tools that help patients communicate, orient themselves, and feel more comfortable in their surroundings. By applying semiotic insights, healthcare providers can design care spaces that are supportive, inclusive, and easier to understand for patients with cognitive challenges. Looking ahead, research should also focus on digital and interactive symbols, which could make care environments even more engaging and therapeutic for dementia patients.

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