



Report

The obverse-reverse paradox: reading flags differs fundamentally from reading texts

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Abstract

The author suggests two new standards for describing a flag. A flag image should always include the hoist, and revised terminology should be used to identify the two sides of a flag. New pictograms may be added to replace and extend those in Whitney Smith's International Flag Identification System.

A flag is a three-dimensional object with a top, bottom, fore edge (closest to the hoist or flagpole), rear edge (furthest from the hoist), and two large flat sides that carry the image.

The two sides of the flag have no fixed written descriptor. The first side can be identified as *obverse*, *main* or *front*; the second as *reverse*, *other* or *back*.

Flags are often displayed in print and online without an indication of the hoist, which – in accordance with the left-to-right reading direction of Western texts – is assumed to lie to the left of the image.

In printed flag publications originating in the Western world, this convention provides sufficient information to interpret the flag correctly.

In the current digital age, however, the situation is very different. An image can develop a life of its own in cyberspace, divorced from its original context.

People in the Middle and Far East, for example, read from right to left so might see the flag of the Irish Republic as that of Côte d'Ivoire. (Although these flags have different ratios, we should always remember that not everyone is a vexillologist!)



Is this the flag of the Irish Republic or Côte d'Ivoire?

For this reason, we need to integrate the hoist within every flag illustration. The hoist gives vital context about a flag design.

This current – almost standard – practice of displaying a flag image to be decoded in the left-to-right reading direction of text has not always been the case.

The exhibition staged by the Rotterdam Maritime Museum during ICV25 in 2013, for example, included a chart showing flags depicted left to right and right to left. A number of visitors either did not notice this or did not mind.



*ICV25 delegates interpret an old flag chart.
Maritime Museum, Rotterdam, July 2013*

This is no surprise. Flags are always viewed, or should I say read, from the flagpole outwards. This clarifies the colour sequence and offers an instant understanding of a flag's design. Whether flying left or right of the flagpole, the flag of the Irish Republic remains green-white-orange.

The rules for reading text do not apply to decoding flag images. As long as we know the position of the hoist in relation to a flag, we can read a flag from left to right or right to left and interpret that flag correctly.



*Reading from the flagpole outwards,
either viewer will recognise the
flag of the Irish Republic*

If the two sides of a flag each bears a different image, they are conventionally displayed in print and online in an order determined by the reading direction of Western text, with the 'more important' obverse on the left, and the reverse on the right.



*Flag of Oregon: left, the 'more important' obverse;
right, the reverse*

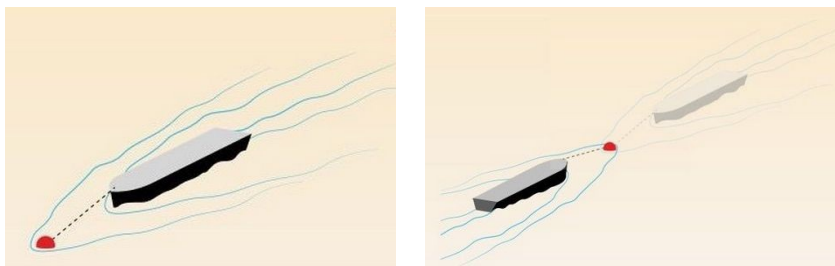
However, a chart of 1713 displaying banners captured by the Dutch takes a novel approach. The two sides of one banner are displayed on a single pole. This is a very clever idea. It applies visual logic and is worth pursuing.



*Chart of 1713 showing captured French and Bavarian colours, standards etc;
right, detail of a central flagpole showing both sides of a cavalry standard.
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam*

To describe a flag, we use terms such as *hoist*, *fly*, *top* or *canton* that allow us to accurately describe one side or the other. But if a flag has an image on each side – like that of Oregon – how do we distinguish between the two sides. If we have an illustration that shows the hoist, this is not a problem. If we are relying on a written description alone, however, we need a standard terminology.

Let me take you to a tidal river where a ship is moored to a single buoy.

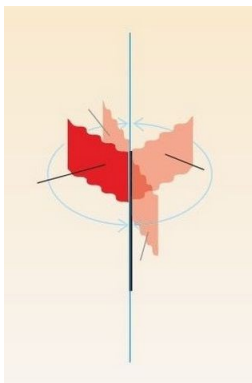


*A moored vessel pivots with the tide, so a watcher on the bank sees
first its left (port) side and then its right (starboard) side*

When the tide is in flood, the vessel points upstream and lies to the right of the buoy. When the tide turns, the vessel points downstream and will lie to the left of the buoy. From the same viewpoint on the bank, a watcher will see first the left side of the vessel and then the right.

Each side of a ship has its own name – *port* and *starboard*. When looking from the stern (rear) to the bow (front) of a ship, the left side is *port* and the right side is *starboard*. And these names are fixed: they also apply when looking in the opposite direction from bow to stern.

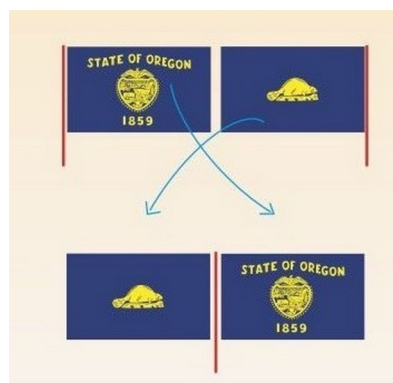
Similarly, a flag is attached to a fixed point (the flagpole) and its orientation to that point varies according to the direction of the wind, so a watcher may see either of its two sides.



Flags pivot around a fixed axis point, so the concept of obverse and reverse is redundant; referring to a flag's left and right sides removes all confusion

By establishing this we can allocate a fixed term to each side of the flag. I suggest that, reading from the flagpole (hoist), these terms should be *left side* (for reverse) and *right side* (for obverse). These designations remove any confusion as to reading direction and can also be used on a worldwide scale. Surely every language will have words for left and right.













A flag like that of Oregon will be easy to describe, leaving no room for error.



Flag of Oregon: top, an added hoist left or right identifies the flag's two sides; below, placing a 'shared' hoist between them gives a more logical display – reading from the hoist, the flag has a left side and a right side and can be decoded in either direction

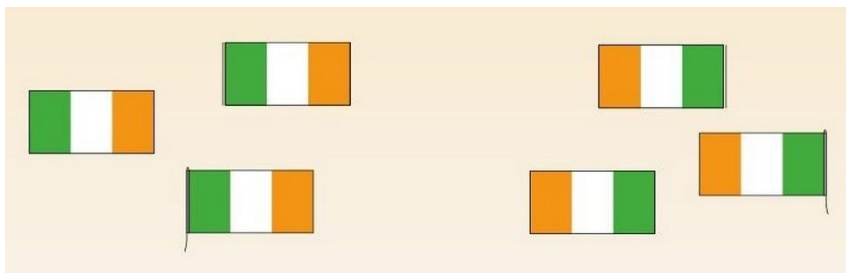
The reading direction of flags rather than the reading direction of Western text now forms the basis for the notion of a left side and a right side.



Whitney Smith's Flag Identification Symbols System	Replacement symbols for Smith's Flag Identification Symbols System (Theun Okkerse)
<p>TWO SIDES Flag has different designs on its obverse side and its reverse side.</p> 	<p>TWO SIDES Sides of the flag differ</p> 
<p>REVERSE Design shown in reverse side of flag.</p> 	<p>RIGHT and LEFT sides</p> <p>Right side of the flag</p>  <p>Left side of the flag</p> 
<p>SINISTER HOIST The obverse or more important side of the flag is seen when the hoist is shown to the observer's right.</p>	<p>Right side of the flag is more important</p>  <p>Left side of the flag is more important</p> 
	<p>banner front</p>  <p>banner back</p>  <p>banner both front sides (back to back)</p>  <p>banner right side</p>  <p>banner left side</p> 



*Proposed additions to Whitney Smith's Flag Identification Symbols:
new symbols (right) replace Smith's original symbols (left)
and are shown in practice with reference to the Oregon flag*



*The hoist can also be indicated without using symbols by
adding halyards or by using a heavy or double line at the hoist*

Acknowledgements

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