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General Semantics

of Alfred Korzybski

What do these four men have in common?

Count Alfred Korzybski—a Polish swordsman of note who survived several duels. Trained as a mathematician, he served on the Russian intelligence staff during World War I and then defected to the United States where he studied mental health. Although he wasn't on the faculty at the University of Chicago, he lived near the campus and gave lectures to students.

Wendell Johnson—a severe stutterer at a time when therapists thought that the disorder arose from speech directed by the wrong hemisphere of the brain. He wore a cast on his right arm for two years in an attempt to become left-handed and right-talking. He later headed the Speech Clinic at the University of Iowa.

S. I. Hayakawa—as acting president of San Francisco State University, he confronted a student mob that was trying to shut down the school. A picture of him ripping wires out of the demonstrators' loudspeaker catapulted him to national fame and a seat in the United States Senate.

Irving Lee—an immensely popular teacher of speech at Northwestern University. He focused on what made group discussions turn crazy.

These colorful figures have been the leading spokesmen for general semantics, a movement dedicated to clarity of speech as the key to psychological well-being. Korzybski came up with the initial tenets, but the others interpreted and popularized his ideas.

A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE

Korzybski believed that the ability to communicate is the essence of being human. He advanced his belief by contrasting what he regarded as the distinctiveness of plants, animals, and people. Vegetation has the capacity to transform energy from the sun into an organic chemical nutrient. Because plants can photosynthesize, he labeled them "chemical binders."

Animals can improve their situation by moving from place to place. Since they are not planted in one spot, he called them "space binders."

Human beings have an additional capacity to use symbols to pass on the accumulated experience of the past. We can tell our sons and daughters how to

grow food, which snakes are poisonous, and the best way to find a job. Since language has a high value for survival, Korzybski saw a moral imperative for human beings to exercise their language ability and referred to us as “time binders.” Communication is a solemn obligation; we ought to do it well. According to Korzybski, we don’t.

He and his followers picture us spinning enormous webs of words and then getting caught in our own symbolic nets. It’s not that we’re careless, irresponsible, or mean. Rather, the very structure of language leads us astray. As the fox in Antoine de Saint Exupéry’s *The Little Prince* warns, “Words are the source of misunderstandings.”¹⁸ Not only do we possess a unique capability to bind time, we’re also the only creatures who can talk ourselves into trouble.

Wendell Johnson said that many men and women do just that. He surveyed people in all sorts of quandaries and concluded that, despite the diversity of their maladjustments, they shared a common inability to articulate their situations clearly. Is it possible, Johnson wondered, that the tyranny of words is responsible for their emotional distress—that language is the “crazy-making” agent? Korzybski believed so. The title of his epic tome, *Science and Sanity*, reflects his thesis that a careful, scientific use of language will guard against the confusion and unreality that words tend to produce. He agreed with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that language molds our thoughts.

English teachers often remind us that dictionaries don’t tell us how words *should* be used; dictionaries merely reflect how words *are* used. Traditional semantics focuses on the *is* rather than the *ought*. General semantics departs from this descriptive stance by urging us to alter the structure of language so that our word usage matches the clarity of scientific inquiry in mapping out reality. This quest is not so much a theory as it is a methodology to ensure that language more clearly mimics reality or a perspective to show the limitation of words.

THREE PRINCIPLES OF GENERAL SEMANTICS

Just as I began this book with the analogy of communication theories as maps, Korzybski saw language as a partial map of reality. I’ll use his metaphor to introduce three main principles of general semantics.

PRINCIPLE 1: THE MAP IS NOT THE TERRITORY

For Korzybski, words are only maps of reality; they are not the territory. He called this the principle of nonidentity. The word is not the thing it refers to. He contrasted his assertion with Aristotle’s classic formula of identification: $A = A$.¹⁹ Korzybski felt that Aristotle’s formula was wrong.

Let you think the identification of a word with its referent is a trivial problem, consider references to acquired immune deficiency syndrome. Just the word *AIDS* has a chilling effect on many who hear it. Consider the plight of the manufacturer of a dietetic candy called *Ayds*. Because the name of the candy

sounds like the medical condition, sales fell 50 percent and the manufacturer was forced to change the brand name of the product.

Hayakawa cautions against the “one word, one meaning” fallacy. Dr. Seuss’s elephant, Horton, was well-intentioned when he insisted:

I meant what I said
 And I said what I meant...
 An elephant’s faithful
 One hundred percent!²⁰

But words don’t have a single meaning or an official interpretation. To wonder what a word means is to ask the wrong question. Better to ask what the person who said it meant. Words don’t mean things, people do.

The map can’t possibly be the territory because nature is in constant flux. Day melts into night, summer blends into fall, caterpillars become butterflies. Einstein’s formula, $E = mc^2$, established that matter once thought to be unchangeable can be transformed into awesome quantities of energy. Wendell Johnson cited Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher, to illustrate the fact that no event is ever repeated. “One cannot step in the same river twice.”²¹ British author George Bernard Shaw stated the same truth when he claimed that the only sensible man he knew was his tailor, who measured him every time he entered the shop.

Contrast the dynamic of reality with the static freeze-frame effect of language. Korzybski noted that there simply aren’t enough words to go around, and, even if there were, the ground would quickly shift beneath them. Imagine that you are introduced to your roommate’s divorced mother at a restaurant, and she in turn introduces you to her “friend” Johnny who makes it a table of four. In your mind you struggle to figure out the relationship. Are they sleeping together? (Note that this term has its own multiple meanings.) Do they share similar interests? Will he pay for the meal? You and your roommate are “friends” too, but you’re not at all sure you would answer these questions the same way as Johnny. Somehow the term *friend* seems like a large circus tent that covers too many things going on all at once.

Ways to Avoid Equating the Word with the Thing. Korzybski and his followers have a number of recommendations to ensure a heightened awareness that the map is not the territory. They urge adding a mental “et cetera” on the end of each sentence to remind ourselves that there is always more to say. This advice is reflected in the title of the official journal of general semantics: *ETC*. General semanticists caution against the use of inclusive terms like *all*, *always*, *every*, and *entirely*. They argue that these terms push language to the extreme by implying that we know everything. They even suggest beginning and ending each story with the word *and*. (Many public speakers follow

this practice, but probably due to lack of preparation rather than adherence to principles of general semantics.)

Korzybski also borrowed the scientific practice of indexing to represent change over time. The junior senator from California (Hayakawa₁₉₈₀) is not the man he was when he first wrote about semantics (Hayakawa₁₉₄₉). Subscripts attached to the word *friend* might help differentiate the various relationships referred to earlier. There's nothing wrong with choosing the term to designate a lover, or a benefactor, or a confidant. But the scientist in us needs to ask how the word is being used this time. Is Johnny a friend₁, friend₂, or friend₃?

PRINCIPLE 2: THE MAP DEPICTS ONLY PART OF THE TERRITORY

Aristotle claimed that a thing either is or it isn't. That seems to make sense. But Korzybski said that all-or-nothing thinking which excludes the middle ground is responsible for a large portion of life's miseries. He saw language as cementing us into an unhealthy two-valued system.

Words promote categorical thinking. They lead us to set up false distinctions between body and mind, rational and emotional, time and space, us and them, good and bad. Think how easily these either-or judgments roll off our lips:

You're either for me or against me.
 When you've seen one, you've seen them all.
 You're either part of the problem or part of the solution.
 Don't trust anyone over thirty.

Perhaps you can understand how the simplistic arrogance of students who wanted to impose their either-or thinking on an entire university prompted Hayakawa to pull the plug on their sound system.

Old dichotomies die hard. Even noble attempts to be open-minded are couched in language that urges us to see both sides of the question, an appeal which suggests two options rather than a hundred. Korzybski's principle of "non-allness" reminds us that the map describes only part of the territory. Contrary to the claims made in the Budweiser commercial, we've never said it all. Words lock our gaze on a few features, causing us to ignore the others. Because many features are left out, verbal description makes reality seem more cut and dried than it really is.

Remedies for Absolutist Thinking. Korzybski offered a number of suggestions to shake us out of language-induced absolutes. They might be considered ways of increasing cognitive complexity so as to better approximate the halftones of the real world.

He encouraged the liberal use of hyphens to connect concepts that seem to

be opposed in language but are inseparable in nature. Poets do this by linking seemingly incongruous images. Those of us who are less creative can bridge the rational-emotional, body-mind, time-space dualities through this simple tool of punctuation.

He discouraged appeals to habit, tradition, or constancy. Knee-jerk reactions perpetuate error, but a delayed response gives an opportunity to handle each situation as unique. A behavioral rationale that includes "It's always been done that way" leads to greater rigidity. Consistency is the mark of small minds.

Korzybski and his followers are suspicious of any claim to personal authority. They would applaud the sentiments of the book by Sheldon Kopp entitled *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him!*²² Its thesis echoes the general semanticists' conviction that people who think they have a lock on the truth can be hazardous to your health. Human claims of omnipotence need to be met head on. ("Who died and made you king?")

When presenting inferences that go beyond scientifically observable facts, Korzybski and others in the field suggest a number of devices to guard against dogmatism. Put the word *truth* in quotes to remind everyone that knowledge is always relative. Preface conclusions with phrases that reflect less than 100 percent certainty: "It seems to me..." "I find it probable that..." "As I see it..."

Avoid categorical statements about personality. General semanticists cringe every time they hear the verb *to be* applied to people. ("Cheryl is stingy.") Because the word *is* makes us think in terms of immutable character traits, they'd like to banish it from our interpersonal lexicon. If we must use the verb, they encourage us to qualify our judgment by saying, "*My* Cheryl is stingy." The result may sound possessive, but it is more precise than the typical blanket judgment. For general semanticists, tentativeness is in, absolutes are out.

PRINCIPLE 3: MAPS OF MAPS CONDENSE THE TERRITORY

A European mapmaker could consult forty-eight individual state maps and then produce a credible map of the continental United States without ever having set foot in America. Korzybski refers to the process of drawing a map based on other maps as "self-reflexive." But the secondhand map can't possibly reflect the richness of the territory the cartographer would observe if he were actually on site.

Korzybski described language as similarly self-reflexive. It's possible to use words to talk about words. The process involves recognizing similar features among things that are unique while ignoring their differences. It can be helpful to abstract the common element of fear from skydiving, a job interview, and losing your wallet. But there's a danger that you or your hearers will forget that the fear is different in each case.

Each of the leading figures of general semantics presents a pictorial model to show how abstract language leads to misunderstanding. Figure 5-1 is Hayakawa's abstraction ladder, the one most commonly used to illustrate the loss of specific detail that comes with overgeneralization.

Language enters the picture on Step III. Using the peculiarly human capability of labeling, we describe the object of our attention as “Bessie.” We share the perceptual rung with the bull of the herd, but the giant step up to labeling can only be negotiated by time-binders.

Step III is the only verbal rung that refers to a specific animal in time and space. “Bessie” loses her individuality on the next higher level in which she becomes one of a class of objects, a cow. There’s an advantage and a drawback to this further abstraction. By lumping Bessie together with similar creatures, we’re able to focus on characteristics that have special meaning to us such as milk production, the number of nine-ounce sirloin steaks we can get from a hindquarter, or the net cost per pound. But we’re moving further away from observable fact, and at an accelerated rate. What comes to mind when we say “cow” may bear little resemblance to the specific animal mooing, chewing, and pooping in an actual pasture.

Hayakawa says that there comes a point on the abstraction ladder where the speaker and listener no longer have a mental image of what they’re talking about. Their high-level inferences masquerade as rock-solid truth, but the concepts are so far removed from each other’s reality that it’s hard to know if they are using a word the same way.

A “hardening of the categories” sets in when people cling to the upper rungs of the ladder. The rhetoric of politics is particularly onerous to general semanticists. Leaders sling abstract terms like justice, democracy, and patriotism around without any attempt to check the solid territory to which the words supposedly refer. Their sweeping generalities are long on emotional flavor but short on content, and the result is a dull flatness that bores all but a few enthusiasts. The vague generality of the words also blurs the sharp differences that exist in the world.

Stepping Down from Vague Generalities. Ambiguity is abhorrent to general semanticists. Korzybski’s mission in life was to raise both the speaker’s and listener’s consciousness of faulty assumptions that underlie abstract words. Awareness of the disparity between abstract words and reality is the first line of defense against semantic error. The next step is to descend the abstraction ladder in order to get closer to life on the nonverbal plane.

Think of the commodities trader in Chicago’s Mercantile Exchange buying or selling five hundred head of Bessie and her kind. Chances are he’s never been face to face with a Holstein steer. Korzybski and his followers think he would be well served by occasionally walking through a pasture, and taking in the sights, sounds, and smells. Firsthand observation of the “assets” might keep the trader from perpetuating error when he starts to talk about abstract bottom-line economics. He constantly needs to revise his map through periodic return to the territory.

General semantics asks every listener to develop a scientific sensitivity. The movement suggests we can cut through the semantic smoke screen of abstract claims by asking three questions:

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1. What do you mean?
2. How do you know?
3. What did you leave out?

Specific answers create a kind of verbal pollution-free zone.

CRITIQUE: MAPPING THE MOVEMENT

Despite the rather bizarre roots of general semantics, its adherents have pulled together an impressive cluster of observations about the use and misuse of language. Many of these are not new. But it took Korzybski and his followers to convince a wide audience to abandon the notion that words mean things and to accept the fact that the map is not the territory.

Scholars who make no claim to be part of the movement write essays which advocate general-semantics principles. Organizational consultant Jack Gibb's often reprinted article, "Defensive Communication," is a case in point.²³ Although not an avowed follower of Korzybski, in his article, Gibb describes a nonauthoritarian approach to group leadership that could easily have been written by general semantics' interpreter, Irving Lee.

Yet the term *interpreter* gives a clue to one of the problems of the movement. Although there have been numerous explanations of Korzybski's ideas since the appearance of *Science and Sanity*, there has been little development or refinement of the basic principles. General semantics₁₉₃₇ = general semantics₁₉₉₀ is a serious criticism for an approach which champions scientific progress.

Throughout the chapter you've probably noticed the use of terms like *mission*, *cause*, and *movement*. These are strange words to appear in a book which catalogs objective theories of communication, yet they appropriately describe the zeal with which general semanticists enlist others in their goal to change the structure of language. All good communication theories have an applied side. But most theories of language are concerned with describing what *is* rather than urging what *ought* to be.

In their quest to win converts for the general semantics perspective, its true believers abandon the very objectivity which they so strongly advocate. Comedian Dick Gregory said the same thing about those who shove democracy at others. "Anything good, you don't have to force on people. They will steal it."²⁴

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Richard Budd, "General Semantics: An Approach to Human Communication," in *Approaches to Human Communication*, Richard Budd and Brent Ruben (eds.), Spartan Books, New York, 1972, pp. 97–119.

Original source: Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity*, 3d edition, International Non-Aristotelian Library, Lakeville, Conn., 1948.

Interpretation₁: Wendell Johnson, *People in Quandaries*, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1946.

Interpretation₂: S. I. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 5th ed. New York, 1990.

Interpretation₃: Irving Lee, *Language Habits in Human Affairs*, Harper, New York, 1941.

Readings from et cetera₁: Mary Morain (ed.), *Bridging Worlds Through General Semantics*, International Society for General Semantics, San Francisco, 1984.

Readings from et cetera₂: Mary Morain (ed.), *Enriching Professional Skills Through General Semantics*, International Society for General Semantics, San Francisco, 1986.

Critique: Lee Thayer, "Editor's Preface," *Communication: General Semantics Perspectives*, Lee Thayer (ed.), Spartan, New York, 1970, pp. vii–xviii.

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- 18 Antoine de Saint Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, San Diego, Calif., 1943, p. 67.
 - 19 Richard W. Budd, "General Semantics: An Approach to Human Communication," in *Approaches to Human Communication*, Richard W. Budd and Brent Ruben (eds.), Spartan Books, New York, 1972, p. 100.
 - 20 Dr. Seuss, *Horton Hatches the Egg*, Random House, New York, 1940, p. 16.
 - 21 Wendell Johnson, *People in Quandaries*, Harper, New York, 1946, p. 26.
 - 22 Sheldon Kopp, *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him!*, Science and Behavior Books, Palo Alto, Calif., 1972.
 - 23 Jack Gibb, "Defensive Communication," *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1961, pp. 141-148.
 - 24 Dick Gregory, "Greg" (tape recording of speech delivered at Univ. of Alabama, © 1969), Educational Research Group, Inc., Tucson, Ariz.