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KORZYBSKI AND GENERAL SEMANTICS

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of Alfred Korzybski's major book, 'Science and Sanity - An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics'. (1) For me it is also the 20th anniversary of obtaining that book, and 10 years since my first visit to the United States, during which I attended the 30th Annual Seminar - Training Laboratory in General Semantics. The coincidence of these dates has precipitated much reflection on the important influence for good that general semantics (GS) has had on my personal and professional life. This short essay thus honours Korzybski and gives thanks for his work; if it also stimulates others to explore what value GS might have for them, so much the better.

Korzybski (1879-1950) was a Pole who was trained as an engineer and a mathematician; he also studied mental illness in association with the famous Dr. William Alanson White in Washington D.C. General semantics is the result of both his scientific and psychiatric studies, from which he inferred that the orientations of science and the orientations that result in sanity are very similar - hence the title of his book.

G.S. is the study of the relations between language, thought and behaviour: between how we talk, therefore how we think, and therefore how we act. The term 'semantics' is somewhat misleading in this context and I want just briefly to relate G.S. to the other 'language' disciplines.

Grammar deals with word-to-word relations. It embodies rules about how to put words together into sentences, and it is not concerned with how sentences are related to each other or how sentences are related to facts. **Logic** goes further. To a logician, sentences are assertions and he is interested in relations between assertions ("if this is true, then that is true"). But for the logician words need not have any meaning except as defined by other words, and the assertions need not have any relations to the world of fact. **Semantics** goes further than logic - to the semanticist, words and assertions have

meaning only if they are related operationally to referents in the world of nature. The semanticist defines not only validity (as the logician does) but also truth. **General semantics** goes furthest - it deals not only with words, assertions and their referents in nature but also with their effects on human behaviour. For a 'general semanticist', communication is not merely words in proper order properly inflected (as for the grammarian) or assertions in proper relation to each other (as for the logician) or assertions in proper relation to referents (as for the semanticist), but all these, together with the reactions of the nervous systems of the human beings involved in the communication.

Thus Korzybski spoke of 'neuro-semantic' and 'neuro-linguistic' reactions - holistic terms for the functioning of the 'human organism - as-a-whole-in-an-environment', with hyphens deliberately used to indicate interconnectedness. Readers of this magazine may now recognize a link with Neurolinguistic Programming, a recent development described in 'The Structure of Magic, 1 & 11 - books about language, therapy, communication and change. The authors - John Grinder, a linguist and Richard Bandler, a gestalt therapist - indicate their familiarity with Korzybski's formulations by quoting him and citing Science and Sanity. The two 'wizards' they cite by name, Virginia Satir and Fritz Perls, have acknowledged a debt to Korzybski.

Indeed it is in the field of 'gestalt' that the influence of Korzybski's work will be most familiar to participants in the human potential movement, although they will be mostly unaware of it. Bernard Basescu of the New York Society for General Semantics has written an excellent paper (2) on the use of G.S. in his profession of gestalt therapy and he makes the point that "those who associate general semantics with the study of language, and those for whom gestalt work means non-verbal expression (body feelings, tone of voice, posture, etc.) are missing much of the richness of each". Fritz Perls' methods seem to be his fruitful integration of at least four separate streams of development - the psychoanalysis of Freud, the gestalt psychology of Kohler and Goldstein, the psychodrama of J.L. Moreno and the linguistic insights of Korzybski - the whole being more than the sum of the parts!

It is impossible to give here more than a personal experience. A useful starting point might be few 'inklings into the scope and power of G.S. as a way of evaluating Korzybski's emphasis on the human process of abstracting i.e. we abstract from our experience only a fraction of the totality, and that fraction is not 'random', but depends on our particular nervous system, our physical state at the time,

our needs and objectives, etc. Thus what I see, hear, feel on any occasion is particular to me and will not be exactly the same for anyone else at the 'same' time and place.

When I come to communicate about that experience the complexities increase, because I will use my stock of words and phrases, which won't mean exactly the same to anyone else and which will not exactly match the experience I want to refer to. There are many references to this difficulty in the literature - for example, "Any communication is a problem of translation, which involves, in its broadest sense, not so much finding words to match other words as finding experiences to match other experiences" (Anatol Rapoport) and "Any model of communication is at the same time a model of translation, of a vertical or horizontal transfer of significance. No two historical epochs, no two social classes, no two localities use words and syntax to signify exactly the same things, to send identical signals of valuation and inference. Neither do two human beings" (George Steiner).

The problem of the matching of words to things, events and experience is tackled by Korzybski's use of an effective analogy, in which he considers language as a kind of 'map' of the 'territory' of reality. In the same way that a good map has a structure or shape similar to that of the actual territory, language will be accurate to the extent that its structure parallels the things and ideas spoken or written about.

Certain very important relationships are illustrated by the analogy:

1. Just as the map **is not** the territory, the word **is not** the thing.
2. Just as the map cannot **represent all** of the territory, words cannot **say all** about anything.
3. Just as we can make a map of a map, we can make a statement about a statement, and use words about words.

We grow up and live in a world comprised, in large measure, of the verbal maps inside our heads. For many 'territories' we have only 'maps', no first-hand experience. In other cases we are conditioned, and often prejudiced, by 'maps' long before we ever experience the 'territory' (The link with Transactional Analysis is easily seen here).

We very frequently ~~mistake~~ ~~our~~ 'maps' (words and ideas) for the world 'out there'. We eat the menu, as it were, rather than the meal. And the danger is that, for many reasons, including some referred to below,

the maps are often quite inaccurate. How do we come to make inaccurate maps? Korzybski would say as follows:-

1. We live in a world of process, change and dynamic structure, yet we map it with static words. The same word may stand for a person or thing or activity year after year, whilst what it stands for may change, grow and transform. We do not name the process, the development, the flux - we speak in static terms and learn to perceive and think that way. Bernard Shaw remarked that "the only man who behaves sensibly is my tailor; he takes my measure anew each time he sees me, whilst all the rest go on with their old measurements and expect them to fit me".
2. In life there is 'non-identity' - no two things are identical. Yet our verbal maps consist largely of categorical labels, which stress similarities and allow us to neglect differences. Terms like 'trade union' obscure the fact that trade union₁ is not trade union₂. We live in a world of uniqueness that is mapped by a language of categories - and some of us suffer from hardening of the categories!
3. The world is frequently about 'gradations', about probabilities and about degrees of intensity. But our Aristotelian, two-valued logic leads us into evaluating in terms of polar opposites, of "either - or" structures. Thus we have for/against, in/out, win/lose, etc. - exclusive positions that lead to many problems.
4. In the world there are 'fields of influence' and inter-relationships. Language, however, encourages us to make statements in isolation - for example to think and speak of **the** reason or **the** cause, when there are often many interacting factors. Our subject-predicate forms may also mislead by implying one-way action only e.g. "I hate him" does not suggest that the hating may also be doing something to me.
5. The world is complex but our language leads us to 'split' with words what exists 'as-a-whole'. As Benjamin Lee Whorf (3) wrote, "We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages . . . the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organised by our minds - and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organise it into concepts, and ascribe significances"

6. Sometimes we go in the opposite direction and create 'verbal wholes' or 'maps' for which it is difficult or impossible to find a satisfactory territory. The word 'nature' provides an example. referred to here by the Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa:-

"I saw that there is no Nature,
That Nature does not exist,
That there are mountains, valleys, plains,
That there are trees, flowers, grasses,
But that here's not a whole to which this belongs,
That any real and true connection
Is a disease of our ideas
Nature is parts without a whole.
This perhaps is that mystery they speak of"

Perhaps the struggle to find 'exact' meaning in some of the synthetic expressions we use is akin to looking at this 'triangle' diagram - each part is O.K., but 'the whole is a nonsense.

We have been considering some of the problems arising from distorted relationships between 'maps' and 'territories'. Yet the potential for error does not stop there - the relationship between the map and the mapmaker is important, and the latter may bring other distortions in creating his or her 'meanings', especially in interpersonal communication.

For example, we 'project' - that is we tend to see our own perceptions, feelings and evaluations as being 'in the world out there' rather than in us. This is partly linguistic in origin, as when we say "the office is noisy" or "the job is monotonous". And whereas a person reacts 'as-a-whole' in a situation, our language structure leads us to think and speak 'elementalistically' (as Korzybski would say) in terms of thoughts **and** feelings **and** actions. Of course, the thought, the feeling of embarrassment and the blush occur together, not as separate elements.

We create symbols, including words, then we tend to deal in 'word magic', to confuse the words with the things or relationships they

represent. We pin on labels - like 'failure' or 'militant' - and react to these maps as though they were the territories. In this way we may generate self-fulfilling prophecies.

So - where does all this lead us? Did Korzybski suggest that we cease writing and talking; that perhaps we need a new language, or that we must rigidly define all our terms? Most certainly not - language has a life of its own, as it were, and it will not be pinned down by some central authority. And it is not so much the traps in language that are the problem, as it is our ignorance of them.

But there are some things we can do; we can work much more effectively with language if we:

- become more aware of what we and others are doing when we use words and other symbols to communicate
- regard 'communicating' as a process in which the speaker and listener, or writer and reader, constantly fight against the forces of confusion
- expect to be misunderstood
- expect to misunderstand others

How can we achieve this rather different approach to communicating, this somewhat different 'view of the world'? What does it involve in terms of behaviour including thinking, speaking and writing?

One of the difficulties we face is the fact that our language is, in a very real sense, an integral part of ourselves. It is 'built into' our nervous systems from infancy and we may be as little aware of it, as such, as we are of breathing. The process of making sense of our surroundings is complex and creative, involving seeing, hearing, etc., and actively relating these stimuli to memories held in some way in our brains and bodies. Our 'word associations' and our tendency to 'identify words with things' are integral with these processes of perceiving, thinking, judging, etc. Bringing about new orientations to 'linguaging' and evaluating must therefore be an active pursuit, in which a person becomes aware of how he is performing now and has an opportunity to change. There is an important phase of **unlearning** to be gone through before new behaviour can develop.

For most people, this 're-orientation' is very difficult or impossible to achieve by reading articles and books (including *Science and Sanity*) or being 'talked at' in lectures. Perhaps some difficulty in making sense of this essay illustrates the point! It requires participation in activities - for example, working with visual perception exercises; discovering and examining our processes of making assumptions and inferences, again by exercises; learning about map/territory relationships using actual maps; and most of all by associative free discussion in a group of fellow explorers, facilitated by a leader who is sensitive to the sometimes radically different viewpoints that emerge and that provide learning opportunities for all. G.S. provides various simple but effective devices and processes to help in this learning. The effects of the various experiences are cumulative, and 'meaning' often cannot be assigned to events until subsequent happenings enable that individual to complete a pattern or gestalt.

The Institute of General Semantics, of Lakeville, Conn., U.S.A., has mounted a seminar/laboratory each year since 1943 to bring G.S. to many people from a very wide range of professional backgrounds. These events are usually held residentially in a school or university campus in the country, and besides scientific and linguistic inputs the learning goes into non-verbal areas such as music, painting, bio-feedback and sensory awareness. Many of the 'experiential learning' techniques of today were applied - indeed, developed - in these workshops of up to 40 years ago.

To conclude, and picking up a point touched upon earlier, the specific 'language' dimension is now too often relatively neglected in personal growth activities, in favour of a largely non-verbal focus. And yet the 'problems' of so many of us are rooted in our inadequate or false verbal 'maps', which need to be identified and worked on. As someone put it so nicely, we have too many experiential immersions without enough conceptual rub-downs. Fifty years on, Korzybski's formulations have still an immense contribution to make in our progress towards sanity.

Biographical Note

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References

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