

GENERAL SEMANTICS IN THE CLASSROOM*

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THERE is no dearth of material dealing with general semantics, yet little experimental work in the field of educational methodology has been done.² The colleges have been far more enterprising in this respect. Whether or not semantics is formally incorporated into the body of the established curriculum, no teacher of English can do his job for any length of time without encountering questions and quandaries that call for the application of semantic methods. In short, teachers of English are semanticists without knowing it. They may be poor, hit-or-miss semanticists, but the point is that they can no more divorce general semantics from the study and use of language than they can separate the body from the mind.

Practically every English teacher must at some time or other have listened to, or even been involved in, classroom controversies based on poor logic as well as verbal confusion. I recall the case of a girl who argued—quite cogently, accord-

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² See *Language in General Education: A Report of the Committee on the Function of English in General Education for the Commission on Secondary School Curriculum* (New York and London, 1940); and Holland D. Roberts, Walter V. Kaulfers, and Grayson N. Kefauver (eds.), *English for Social Living* (New York and London, 1943).

ing to her definition—that there was no such thing as altruism. Why? Well, every action human beings performed was motivated by some form of selfishness. The philanthropist who donated a million dollars to charity was no more altruistic than the man who refused to give anything. The one who enlists in the Army is fundamentally as selfish as the one who stays at home; each one does what is 'good' for himself.

It was difficult to straighten out this tangled skein of categories. First of all, there was a mad mistake in logic. The student began with the initial assumption that 'all people are selfish.' By giving the same name to qualitatively different actions, she brought them under the deceptive rubric of identity and thus arrived at the amazing conclusion that Dr. Stockmann was no more altruistic than Al Capone.

The teacher tried the device of 'indexing.' Selfishness (1), the act (say) of a mother sacrificing herself economically for her son is equal to selfishness (2), the action of a person on a lifeboat drifting at sea who steals from the scanty provisions which are meant for the sustenance of all. Are these two the same thing? Are they equal? Suppose we call the first plus and the second minus. Can we make a true equation? Let us see: plus equals minus. It doesn't make sense. Is there, therefore, any warrant for calling

such radically different actions by the same loose term?

Such discussions almost invariably bring up the puzzling question: How did language first arise? How do names begin? How do words get the meaning they actually have? ³ While students usually find it interesting to listen to the various theories that attempt to explain how language probably arose in the remote past, it is wiser as a rule to avoid such high flights and stick more closely to the facts of the linguistic situation. What do we do when we talk? Language is not only a means; it is also definitely related to the life we lead, the ideas and attitudes we hold. It is an integral part of human behavior and must be studied as such. It is indispensable, among both primitive and modern man, for the facilitation of any kind of concerted human action. Speech has no meaning unless it is brought in relation to the practical activities that call it forth.

If the students can be led to accept this

³The reliance on the dictionary as the final arbiter of meaning, regardless of other important considerations, is being replaced by a more sensitive awareness of the functional role of context. Connotative nuances are born of the relation of the word to the rest of the passage in a given universe of discourse. The tone, the intention of the writer or speaker, must be borne steadily in mind if the full meaning is to be grasped. A promising step in this direction—an innovation that is bound to have fruitful educational implications—is being taken by Allen Walker Read, who is compiling a dictionary, based on semantic principles, which will emphasize context rather than etymology or fixity or meaning (see "The Lexicographer and General Semantics, with a Plan for "A Semantic Guide to Current English,"" in *Papers from the Second American Congress on General Semantics*, ed. M. Kendig [Chicago, 1943], pp. 33-42; see also Charles I. Glicksberg, "The Dynamics of Vocabulary-building," *English Journal*, XXIX [March, 1940], 197-206).

pragmatic conception of language, they can gradually be taught to interpret the meaning of each utterance not in isolation but within its context. If the word 'altruism' is placed within an actual social situation, it ceases to be a unitary and detached concept. It is an experience which we share, an action in time-and-place. From such empirical instances the world of concepts can be reconstructed, given a flesh-and-blood habitation as well as a name.

Those teachers who are still skeptical of the practical value of semantics should try to recall and reflect upon some of the searching questions, often highly metaphysical in nature, which students have had occasion to ask them. Unfamiliar with the postulate of symbolic logic—that it is illegitimate to ask a question for which there is no conceivable answer—they persist in the hunting of the snark. I recall some of the puzzling queries that students have addressed to me both privately, and in class: 'What is truth?' 'What is the best definition of love?' 'Does God exist?' 'What is race?' "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty"—what does this really mean?'

Each of these questions reveals a neglect of the basic principles of general semantics. Removed from their living context, the key terms are meaningless. There is no such universal abstraction as truth or race or God or love. For example, truth, like love, is a matter of degree. Bertrand Russell suggests that 'people who speak with reverence of the "Truth" would do better to speak about Fact. . . .'⁴ A working knowledge of how abstractions are born and operate within a given linguistic environment, as well as of their contextual roots and

⁴'Philosophy of the Twentieth Century,' in *Twentieth Century Philosophy*, ed. Dagobert D. Runes (New York, 1943), p. 235.

ramifications, might have saved these students from tracking down the unicorn to its metaphysical lair. Consciousness of abstracting induces a realization not only of the multi-valued character of words but also of the relativity of values.

It is problems like these, coming unexpectedly out of the blue, which often prove more stimulating and educationally fruitful than formally prepared lessons on general semantics. With one senior class I spent more than two periods discussing the principles of semantics. The results were discouraging. I came away from the experience a chastened and a wiser man. Semantics cannot be 'discussed' and 'taught' by rote.⁵

After this fiasco of a lesson had been happily forgotten, the class one day became engaged in the discussion of the race problem. When is a man colored? Why, when his skin is colored. But there are many Negroes in the United States who 'pass' as white. What, then, is the percentage of colored blood that makes a man a Negro? Various states in the Union differ in their interpretation on this point. When this discussion was followed by the reading of the pamphlet entitled *The Races of Mankind*, the concept of 'race' as a fixed, unalterable, scientifically validated category was destroyed.

Another instance: one day last term a class was assigned the task of copying down the Bill of Rights. The student had to explain in his own words what each amendment to the Constitution meant and how it actually applied to the life we lead today. The forum that was held the next day was an illuminating experience both for the students and for the teacher.

⁵ The class had been assigned to read the essay, "The Tyranny of Words," by Stuart Chase, in *Panorama*, ed. Harold T. Eaton (New York and Chicago, 1940).

What started out as a Fourth of July celebration of our democratic ideals turned rather quickly and without the foresight or intention of the teacher⁶ into an exercise in semantic discrimination. First of all, there was the reading difficulty: the problem of getting the plain meaning of the constitutional language. Then there was the even harder problem of determining how this meaning actually functioned, to what in their life it could possibly apply. They had come into class convinced that they knew what 'democracy' was. But some of the Negro students in the class proved a thorn in the side of the one hundred per cent patriots, whose loyalty was verbal rather than critical. One Negro girl wanted to know: 'What is democracy?' There was an embarrassed period of silence. Everyone thought he knew; no one could formulate it convincingly in the face of this skeptical challenge.

One lad finally hazarded the opinion that democracy means equal rights. From the rear of the room came the disconcerting Socratic query of the Negro girl: 'Equal rights for whom?' Again there was a tense silence; for this the students did know, this was part of their everyday experience: that the Negro was the victim of racial discrimination. One could almost read the perplexed state of their mind: if democracy did not grant equality of opportunity to all people, if it discriminated against one-tenth of the population, then what did 'democracy' mean? Hitherto it had seemed to possess a concrete, definite, and assured meaning; now it had become bafflingly complex, a bundle of contradictions, a problem to be thought and lived through rather than a formal idea to be accepted on faith. Obviously, the social reality did not correspond with

⁶ The forum was led by a student chairman.

the picture in their minds. This did not mean, as was pointed out, that democracy as a whole had failed; it simply indicated that democracy was an unfinished business, that, like every precious ideal, it must constantly be striven for, redefined, repossessed.

During the same session another lad declared with conviction that in the United States, as compared with Germany, you could say anything you pleased, without fear of punishment. By this time the class was in no mood for verbal evasions. A number of dissenting voices charged that this was nonsense. No one could say *anything* he pleased. Certain expressions in our society—in practically every society—are taboo. Who, for example, reveals everything that is in his mind? Much in the course of a conversation is left unspoken, and it is well for social accommodation that it is so. 'Free' speech is free within limits. The significance of what is said depends on when it is said, to whom, for what purpose, in what social context. 'When you call me that, smile,' said the Virginian, who was a semanticist of sorts.

For students to feel the power of verbal magic they must, first of all, be subjected to it and, second, practice it themselves. What's in a name? Logically it should make no difference by what name a person or a political party is designated; actually it makes a very great difference. The Communists—the most active, the most ingenious, if not always the most successful, propagandists—have at last been forced to take cognizance of the intense antagonism the name of their party evokes on the part of many Americans. There is more than meets the eye in the proposal of the Young Communist League to change its name and concentrate on the more immediate aim of winning

the war and destroying fascism.⁷ Consider, too, the recent sensational announcement by the Soviet authorities that the Comintern had been liquidated. Immediately, the Communist party of the United States decided upon its own dissolution and presided at its own interest. Mr. Earl Browder, secretary of the Communist party in the United States, made it known that 'the bogey of Communism' had been laid.

The essence of verbal magic, according to Bronislaw Malinowski, who studied the magic formulas and beliefs of the Trobriand Islanders, 'consists in a statement which is untrue, which stands in direct opposition to the context of reality.'⁸ Language thus has a double function: the magical and the pragmatic. The evil spirits residing in names still ride us hard. Though our civilization is ostensibly under the control of scientific reason, actually the mass of people are more influenced by verbal magic than by rigorous methods of critical inquiry. The symbol is personified. Everywhere people are more concerned to combat the 'menace' of 'bad' substantives than the reality to which presumably they refer.

What clinched the lesson on verbal magic was the effort the students themselves made to compose political oratory which sounded impressive but which had little relation to reality. Most of the students capitalized on their own political beliefs. These were the heart of reality, the quintessence of truth. The New Deal, for example, meant 'salvation for the common man, justice for the people, the perpetuation of democracy in its true sense, the building of Jerusalem in the United States.' But it could also be twisted to mean 'bureaucratic regimentation,

⁷ *New York Times*, September 11, 1943.

⁸ *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (New York and Cincinnati, 1935), II, 239.

'tyranny,' 'fascism'⁹—all 'bad' names.

The more difficult assignment was to teach the class the necessity of pragmatically testing each statement by the method of applying it to concrete instances.¹⁰ If the New Deal was a form of fascism, then the thing to do is to dissociate the abstraction into the component parts and examine each one of these by applying it to a given situation. How does it work out in practice? How does it affect the student personally, his family, his social relations, his community?

The other point that had to be made clear to the class was that facts to be properly interpreted must be situated in the context of time. Facts, because they occur in time, must be 'dated.' Smith in 1910 is not the same Smith of 1944. Communism in Russia or the United States in 1944 is not the same communism that prevailed in either country in 1934. The New Deal of the thirties must be distinguished from the New Deal of 1944.

The realization that words can be used to throw up a meaningless smoke screen was one the students did not readily forget. They were delighted with the success they achieved in ringing changes on sacred abstractions. Like Humpty Dumpty they came to the startling conclusion: 'When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.' Some students, to be sure, were more successful in performing these exercises than others.

In the teaching of general semantics,

⁹ One student, with a great thrill of excitement, brought in a clipping from the *New York Times* of June 28, 1944, headed 'New Deal Labeled "Fascism" by Martin.'

¹⁰ In his *Problems of Mind and Matter* (Cambridge, 1934), John Wisdom gives this as one of his central precepts: 'To ascertain the truth of a general statement apply it in all sorts of particular instances' (p. 55).

whether or not it is called by that name, it is necessary to establish 'rapport' with the students before any definite beneficial results can be secured. Before the student can be helped, the teacher must somehow manage to 'get under his skin.' In short, any constructive educational influence must be organismic, not verbal. It is difficult, however, to determine whether the learned response functions on an organismic or on a verbal level. The student sets down in words what he feels and believes, but there is as yet no educational method of determining whether his pattern of behavior has been modified.

The prime motor of semantics as an educational method is that it can act as a counterbalance to the predominant intellectualism of our times. Organic experience is the basis of learning. What is known is lived through, and it is known precisely because it has been lived through. Semantics can be 'taught' without ever mentioning the name. It is efficacious because it makes possible an extensive system of self-education. Occasional exercises in semantic analysis will not of themselves carry over into behavior, but they may in time help the personality escape from the prison of stereotypes. If applied to vital contemporary issues, such exercises should demonstrate clearly the *relativity of meaning* in language. No word has a fixed, final, binding meaning. What it means to the reader or listener depends upon a number of complex things: the past history of the reader or listener, the emotional coloring of the context, the pressure and collaboration of neighboring words, the directing purpose of the writer or speaker. Each one of us accepts a number of presuppositions which are absolutes, the assumptions of which are not susceptible of definition. In addition, such exercises

can demonstrate not only what abstractions are but how they influence the burden of meaning, how they can be twisted to serve different purposes, how dangerous they are when not checked by semantic methods. People can be oppressed in the name of 'Freedom.'

This is not to imply that we live completely in a world of fictions, that words are shadows which bear no correspondence to reality, that we must forever remain blind and deluded in a cave of projected images. It is the realm of observed facts that constitutes our base of operations, our arbiter of 'truth.'

Until semantics becomes institutionalized and forms part of our mental habits, English teachers would do well to experiment with semantic methods whenever the occasion calls for such treatment. High-school classes are not, as a rule, ripe for technical discussions of 'theory.' What students want is what they can use to advantage. If semantics can help to clarify their thoughts, facilitate their thinking, and make their discourse more smooth, precise, and expressive, it will achieve more than if we had given them a minutely outlined course on the subject. Here are some of the 'principles' the alert and enterprising teacher can bring to bear on issues that arise in the classroom:

a) Language is like a map; it should take us most expeditiously to the place where we are going. The map should prove a faithful guide to the territory of experience. Language, of course, has other uses: the emotional, the evocative, the mystical, the magical.

b) The statement of 'allness,' like the belief that life can be explained by propositions which are either true or false, should be regarded as a danger signal. Most statements of fact possess a weighted measure of probability. They correspond

more or less to the reality they attempt to describe. The question of 'truth' is thus a matter of discovering the degree of probability of any warranted assertion.

c) As important as the consideration of 'allness' is the realization that words mean what we make them mean and that it is the context, written or social, which furnishes the clue of meaning.

d) If students are to write well, it is essential that we make clear to them the purpose for which communication is to be established. All expression has a communicative purpose. Without this purpose it grows artificial and ineffective. Writing for the sake of writing does not belong in the classroom.¹¹

e) The habit of indexing and of 'dating' is of decided value. Here is the remedy for the vice of abstraction which is the bottomless pit into which many adolescent minds fall; and the memory of that traumatic 'fall' remains with them and influences their thinking and behavior for the rest of their lives. Two-valued generalizations, universal 'laws,' finalistic statements, categorical dogmas—these are caused by failure to use the indexing method and by disregard of the structure of language.

If the argument is advanced¹² that the English curriculum is already so top-heavy that it cannot find room for new methods and materials, the semanticist has no reply to make except to say that he is not interested in departmental divisions. His primary concern is with the organism of the student, and that organism cuts across all curricular boundary

¹¹ For a vigorous presentation of this thesis see Wendell Johnson, 'You Can't Write Writing,' *ETC.*, I (August, 1943), 25-32.

¹² For a sharply critical evaluation of general semantics and its place in the English curriculum see *The Training of Secondary School Teachers* (Cambridge, Mass., 1942), pp. 72-74.

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lines. General semantics is more interested in the analysis of meanings within determinate contexts than in the formal study of grammar. Meaning is what counts. There is no ground for assuming that the study of semantics will lead students to believe that formal knowledge is needless. Semanticists have been explicit on this point: there is no substitute for the mastery of subject matter. Those who fear, as does the committee that

prepared the report on *The Training of Secondary School Teachers*, that semantics may create an opening for the intrusion of special interests are guilty of conjuring up a phantom. There is no antagonism, no incompatibility, between English and general semantics. English, being a language, is part of semantics. The only question at issue is which method of study will pay the highest dividends—for the student.

If he contend, as sometimes he will contend, that he has defined all his terms and proved all his propositions, then either he is a performer of logical miracles or he is an ass; and, as you know, logical miracles are impossible.

CASSIUS J. KEYSER, *Mathematical Philosophy*

Now I claim that the Ethnographer's perspective is the one relevant and real for the formation of fundamental linguistic conceptions and for the study of the life of languages, whereas the Philologist's point of view is fictitious and irrelevant. . . . To define Meaning, to explain the essential grammatical and lexical characters of language on the material furnished by the study of dead languages, is nothing short of preposterous in the light of our argument.

B. MALINOWSKI, 'The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages' (supplement to *The Meaning of Meaning*, by Ogden and Richards).

That wretched monosyllable 'all' has caused mathematicians more trouble than all the rest of the dictionary.

E. T. BELL, *The Queen of the Sciences*

Language . . . carries the past along with it in an extraordinary way, and the errors of the past repeat themselves because of this fact.

WILLIAM ALANSON WHITE

It is not generally recognized that the more we define our terms the less descriptive they become and the more difficulty we have in using them. THURMAN W. ARNOLD, *The Folklore of Capitalism*