

THE NIETZSCHE-KORZYBSKI- SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESIS?

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THERE ARE A NUMBER of intriguing, sometimes amusing formulative reverberations between Nietzsche and Korzybski. They are not to be overstated, however; indeed, even a casual reading of both authors (if that's possible) will show more differences than similarities. Nevertheless, there are some resemblances; in this essay I will call attention to one strikingly similar formulation having to do with what Korzybski eventually called, in the title of his last paper, "The Role of Language in the Perceptual Processes." (1)

Before doing that, let me recall that Korzybski often protested, when misquoted or misunderstood, "I say what I say; I do not say what I do not say!" Similarly, Nietzsche, in the Preface to his *Genealogy of Morals*, wrote: "Above all, do not mistake me for someone else!" Walter Kaufmann, the foremost Nietzsche scholar, said, "...Nietzsche asked to be read with consideration for context in order to avoid misunderstanding." (2) In Nietzsche's case that plea was made necessary by his often cavalier, sometimes brutal, way with words. As E. I. Allen forthrightly said, "...there is no excuse for the language Nietzsche at times permitted himself to use." (3) Korzybski's disclaimer seems to have been generated by (at least) a combination of the rigor of his prose and its revolutionary, challenging character. Both, too, expected their

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readers to read them. Nietzsche: "...assuming — as I do assume — that one has first read my earlier writings and not spared some trouble in doing this." (4) Korzybski: "From a time-binding point of view, and in fairness to the efforts of others, I coined the term 'General Semantics,' on the assumption that intelligent laymen will be able to discriminate between 'semantics' and 'General Semantics,' as mathematicians are able to discriminate between the cartesian system and the vector, tensor, etc., calculus as different disciplines..." (5) And: "Most 'philosophers' who reviewed this book made particularly shocking performances." (6)

Korzybski was not influenced by Nietzsche, except perhaps in a negative way. He was certainly not a Nietzsche scholar or student, although, as Charlotte Read told me, "He probably read him in German." That's very possible since Nietzsche's works were having a great impact in Poland when Korzybski was in his twenties, being available in Polish translations. We know, too, that when Korzybski traveled through Europe as an itinerant scholar, he attended lectures at German universities. Charlotte Read further suggests that "...he probably relegated him to those philosophers who didn't do their job." I know of no references to Nietzsche in Korzybski's publications nor in recordings or transcriptions of his lectures. Given Korzybski's scrupulosity in crediting those who "...have greatly influenced my enquiry," (7) we can conclude that the Nietzschean formulation mentioned earlier is an example of a profound insight arrived at independently by both men. Sometimes that happens.

Here it is:

The strange family resemblance of all Indian, Greek and German philosophizing is explained easily enough. Where there is affinity of languages, it cannot fail, owing to the common philosophy of grammar — I mean, owing to the unconscious domination and guidance by similar grammatical functions — that everything is prepared at the outset for a similar development and sequence of philosophical systems; just as the way seems barred against certain possibili-

ties of world-interpretation. It is highly probable that philosophers within the domain of the Ural-Altai languages (where the concept of the subject is least developed) look otherwise "into the world," and will be found on paths of thought different from those of the Indo-Germanic peoples and the Muslims: the spell of certain grammatical functions is ultimately also the spell of physiological valuations and racial conditions. (8)

Walter Kaufmann notes other statements in a similar vein:

Nietzsche was also an influential poet and offered many interesting remarks about language — for example, "epistemologists who have got stuck in the snares of grammar (the metaphysics of the people)" (*Gay Science*, 354); "language...talks of opposites where there are only degrees and many refinements of gradation (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 24); "the misleading errors of language (and the fundamental fallacies of reason which have become petrified in it, which understands and misunderstands all activity as due to an agent, a 'subject'" (*Genealogy [of Morals]*, I, 13; the parentheses show where Nietzsche differs from many analytic philosophers). Other remarks may be found in *The Will to Power*, 16f.; and the chapter "'Reason' in Philosophy" in *The Twilight of the Idols*, especially Section 5, which ends, "We are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar." (9)

Nietzsche was one of the least systematic of philosophers, often tossing off brilliant realizations as aphoristic throw-aways, so it's not surprising that he did not build an imposing neurolinguistic structure.

Here is Korzybski's central, succinct statement of the 'hypothesis' (which I suspect evolved to the status of 'observed data' for him):

We do not realize what tremendous power the structure of an habitual language has. It is not an exaggeration to say that it enslaves us through the mechanism of the s.r. [semantic reaction] and that the structure which a language exhibits, and impresses upon us unconsciously, is *automatically projected* upon the world around us. This semantic

power is so unbelievable that I do not know anyone, even among well-trained scientists, who, after having admitted some argument as correct, does not the next minute deny or disregard (usually unconsciously) practically every word he had admitted, being carried away again by the structural implications of the old language and his s.r. (10)

Allen Walker Read has reminded us that "...both implicitly and explicitly through *Science and Sanity* this outlook is to be found. In the section 'On Structure' Korzybski said (p. 60): '...we read unconsciously into the world the structure of the language we use.'" (11) Indeed, I see Korzybski's formulation of humans as time-binders as containing an earlier implication of language structures at variance with non-verbal structures. Having pointed to language as the tool of time-binding (*Manhood of Humanity*, 1921, *passim*), (12) he also observed that contra-time-binding disasters are *formulation-derived*, i.e., a function of language used in a particular way in a particular space-time context. In 1924 Korzybski spoke and wrote what I consider one of his most brain-catching, pithy expressions of this core notion of general semantics:

All human life is conditioned and limited, at present, by the properties of light and human symbolism. The solution of all human problems depends upon inquiries into *these two conditions and limitations*. (13)

Users of the designation "Sapir-Whorf-Korzybski Hypothesis" credit the three originators of what less careful scholars refer to as the "Whorfian Hypothesis": "...that the structure and grammar of one's language influences one's patterns of thought, perception and action." (14) Sapir was Whorf's teacher and influenced his formulation of the hypothesis; Korzybski came to his version independently in the mid-to-late '20s, a decade before Whorf published his findings, based largely on the study of Native American languages.

When Korzybski became aware of Whorf's work, his response was characteristic; he greeted Whorf's work enthusiastically, recommending it to his students and colleagues.

Whorf was invited to contribute a paper to the Second American Congress on General Semantics, August 1-2, 1941, held at the University of Denver. He submitted a paper previously published, but was prevented from delivering it by his death on July 26 of that year. It appears in *Papers from the Second American Congress on General Semantics*, published by the Institute of General Semantics in 1943. (15)

Given all of the above, perhaps we should oblige ourselves to refer to, straightening out the chronology, the Nietzsche-Korzybski-Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.

Oh, yes, one more Korzybski-Nietzsche "connection": they both claimed to be Poles, Korzybski legitimately, Nietzsche perhaps as a foreshadowing of his eventual mental pathology — or, given his self-assigned role as a scold within German culture, as an expression of his sense of humor. (16)

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Alfred Korzybski, *Collected Writings: 1920-1950*. Collected and arranged by M. Kendig. Final editing and preparation for printing by Charlotte Schuchardt Read, with the assistance of Robert Pula. Englewood, NJ: Institute of General Semantics, 1990, pp. 683-720. References for Korzybski below, other than to *Science and Sanity*, and *Manhood of Humanity*, are to the *Collected Writings*. Page numbers are to this volume, not to the original publication.
2. Walter Kaufmann, "Friedrich Nietzsche" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol 5. New York: Macmillan, p.508.
3. E. I. Allen, *From Plato to Nietzsche*. New York: Fawcett World Library, 1970, p. 181.
4. Kaufmann, *loc. cit.*
5. Korzybski, *op. cit.*, "Author's Note" to *Selections from Science and Sanity*, p. 620.
6. *Ibid.*, "Introduction to the Second Edition" of *Science and Sanity*, p. 314.
7. Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics* (1933) 4th Edition, 1958. Lakeville, CT: Institute of General Semantics, p. v and *passim*.

8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Translated, with Commentary by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1966, pp. 27-28.
9. Kaufmann, *op. cit.*, p. 513.
10. Korzybski, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-91.
11. Allen Walker Read, "Formative Influences on Korzybski's General Semantics" in Alfred Korzybski, *Collected Writings*, p. xxiv.
12. Alfred Korzybski, *Manhood of Humanity* (1921) 2nd Edition, 1950. Lakeville, CT, now Englewood, NJ, 1958.
13. Korzybski, "Time Binding: The General Theory" in *Collected Writings*, p. 59.
14. Edward Vernoff and Tima Shore, "Whorf, Benjamin Lee" in *The International Dictionary of 20th Century Biography*. New York: New American Library, p. 752.
15. Benjamin Lee Whorf, "Languages and Logic: Chemical Compound or Mechanical Mixture, A Sentence Hides Within Its Structure Laws of Thought Profoundly Important to the Advance of Science" in *Papers from the Second American Congress on General Semantics*, M. Kendig, ed. Institute of General Semantics, 1943, pp. 43-52. The *Papers* volume is out of print. Whorf's paper is available in John B. Carroll, ed., *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. New York: MIT Press and John Wiley and Sons, 1956.
16. According to Joseph Roucek, formerly of the University of Bridgeport, the following Germans were of Slavonic, specifically Polish, descent: Luther (Luty to Lutyr to Luther), Leibnitz (Labiencicz), Nietzsche (Niedzielski to Nietzki to Nietzke to Nietzsche), Clausewitz (Hlusewicz to Klusewicz to Klausewicz to Clausewitz) and others. In Nietzsche's case this seems of interest because he was self-formulated as a Pole. Indeed, as a lad he composed a set of mazurkas which he dedicated "To My Polish Ancestors." See "Germans of Slavonic Origins" in *Slavonic Encyclopedia*. Joseph S. Roucek, ed. New York: Philosophical Library, 1946, p. 394. See also William Hubben, *Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Kafka: Four Prophets of Our Destiny*. New York: Collier Books, 1962, pp. 91-92; "There had always been an apocryphal tradition in the family that the Nietzsches were descendants of Polish aristocracy, and young Friedrich used to sign his name as Nicky, or Friedrich W. v. Nietsky. When the boy once had composed several mazurkas, he dedicated the small collection to the 'memory of our ancestors.' Reminiscing at the age of thirty-nine, the philosopher wrote of himself proudly as the descendant of Polish aristocrats who

had suffered because of their Protestant faith. [Not likely. The Reformation made significant inroads in Poland in the sixteenth century and, even though the Jesuit-led Counter-Reformation triumphed, legislated religious toleration prevented the sort of large-scale religious persecution common in the rest of Europe: RPP.] He referred to his appearance as of the 'Polish type,' recording proudly how Italians used to speak of him as 'il Polacco' and how Polish travellers had frequently mistaken him for one of their fellow countrymen. In Switzerland the German philosopher introduced himself as a Swiss to a Pole, but was again flattered by being considered Polish. But even Elizabeth, who always defended her brother's peculiarities in a fanatical and unreasonable manner, speaks of these Polish ties as a myth based on little or no reliable information." [But see Szarlitt, below]; Józef Tischner, *Marxism and Christianity: The Quarrel and the Dialogue in Poland*, translated from the Polish by Marek B. Zaleski and Benjamin Fiore, S. J. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1987, p. 222, wherein Nietzsche is identified as a "German philosopher of half-Polish origin." "Nietzsche despised both egalitarianism and absolutism (especially German), and it is ironic that his thoughts were taken up and distorted by Nazi ideologues to justify their doctrines of German superiority and anti-Semitism."; Tadeusz Jarecki, "The Most Polish of Composers" in Stephen P. Mizwa, ed., *Frederic Chopin: 1810-1849*. New York: Kosciuszko Foundation/Macmillan, 1949, p. 36: "Nietzsche, Germanized Polish nobleman, stirred by his [Chopin's] music, exclaimed: 'I am too much a Pole not to prefer Chopin's music to all other music in the world,' and declared again that Chopin had emancipated music from the German influence."; Walter Kaufmann's bio-formulational study, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*. 1950. Fourth Edition, 1974. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 284, 288: "It is well known that Nietzsche did not consider the Germans as a master race and that the following comment on the Poles represents his views on that people:

The Poles I considered the most gifted and gallant among the Slavic people; and the giftedness of the Slavs seemed greater to me than that of the Germans — yes, I thought that the Germans had entered the line of gifted nations only through a strong mixture with Slavic blood. (284)

The theme of race mixture has already been suggested by the quote at the beginning of this chapter [p. 284]: German culture originated only after a 'strong mixture with Slavic blood.' Nietzsche liked to believe — though he was probably mistaken — that his last name indicated that he was himself of partly Polish descent and thus of mixed blood. It is characteristic that he sought to give this assumption a spiritual interpretation. In his praise of the Poles, part of which has been quoted, Nietzsche spoke of 'the right of the Polish nobleman to overthrow, by his simple veto [the liberum veto, first disastrously invoked in 1652 by Jan Sicinski: RPP], the decision of a meeting,' and he added that Copernicus made 'only the greatest and most worthy use' of this privilege. In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche proposed that he had inherited the spirit of the veto from his Polish ancestors. Like Kant, Nietzsche conceived of himself as another Copernicus who had flatly contradicted all appearances by tracing the most startling genealogies of beliefs that his contemporaries had taken for granted." (288)

Finally, in Polish, Bernard Szarlitt, *Polskość Nietzschego i Jego Filozofii* (*The Polishness of Nietzsche and His Philosophy*). Warszawa/Kraków: J. Mortkowicz Publications, 1933. My thanks to Paul Tabaka of New York who sent me Szarlitt's book with translations of relevant passages. Contrary to Hubben's claim above, Szarlitt quotes Nietzsche's sister, the (notorious) Dr. Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche, in her biography of her brother, as referring to the family tradition of Polish descent and names the nobleman who left Poland for Germany "to escape a religious difficulty" as "Graf [Count] Nietzky." Tabaka's notes go on to reflect Szarlitt's detailed research which, while noting many difficulties, concludes that Nietzsche's Polish ancestry is established. Interestingly, related to Szarlitt's larger thesis, that Nietzsche's *philosophy* is "Polish," he summons the support of the famed Danish-Jewish literary scholar, Georg Brandes, an expert on Polish literature, who affirms the "Polish-noble base of Nietzsche's world-view" [*światopoglądu; weltanschauung*]. (Note, p. 93)

Well, enough for a "note" which threatens to become as long as the essay that gave it birth.