WORDS CAN BE STUDIED in many different ways. How does a language develop? How does English differ from Aramaic or Sanskrit? What are the peculiar features of the structure of our language? Why bother with grammar? How can words be put together so that listeners or readers will be influenced by them? What are the methods of enlarging one’s vocabulary? What is wrong with slang? How are words taught to the deaf? Can one who stammers over his words be helped? How are sounds produced? What constitutes correct pronunciation? Can a man speak words unless he has ideas? What are the elements of an interesting short story, a lovely lyric, a beautiful sonnet, a piece of sparkling prose? Why do we forget some words and remember others? How does a child learn to talk? How can one acquire the precision and modulation of a radio announcer? Why is it difficult for a foreigner to speak English without an accent?

* During his tenure as Professor at Northwestern University, Irving J. Lee (1909-1955) pioneered in the establishment of general semantics as an academic discipline. This article was adapted from his book Language Habits in Human Affairs, Second Edition, edited by Sanford I. Berman, available from the Institute of General Semantics.
These questions will receive little attention here, for the grammarians, phoneticians, psychologists, pathologists, rhetoricians, and teachers of English have dealt with them elsewhere.

But they have not exhausted the problems of language. There remain almost as many. When does language become reliable? Why do people so often misunderstand each other? How much of anything can anyone talk about? How can our language habits be brought up to date to fit the most advanced findings of science? How can language be made true to fact? What are the methods of definition? Does silence have any value? What about prophecies, prejudice, and propaganda? What uses of words breed conflict? What characterizes the speaking of men who appear cynical, cocksure, and overly certain? Is it possible to speak without bias and partiality? Under what conditions does language make for survival, and when does it make for maladjustment? How do the little words “is” and “all” often lead us to confusion? Why are we afraid of using certain four-letter words in “good company”? What are the dangers of oversimplification? How must we speak to be discriminating and critical? Is there a place for gossip, party talk, nervous chatter?

These are the questions about which this book [Language Habits in Human Affairs] is written. Somehow, they come to grips with human living. They have something to do with the problems mankind faces in the twentieth century. “The strategy of terror,” “the mobilization of minds,” “the white war,” “the psychological offensive” — these phrases suggest that wars are fought with words as well as with weapons.

In the home, the office, the conference room, talk is essential and too often marked with disaster. The snarling in strikes, the bitterness of divorce trials, the mute tragedy of suicide notes, the incoherence of nervous breakdowns — here, too, words have a place.

In hoaxes, up-country witchcraft, palmistry, handouts, patent medicine testimonials, confidence games, circus barkers’ spiels, shadowy promises — here, too, words are used.

When a teacher advises a student, when mediators help settle disputes, when men quietly deliberate courses of action, when marriage vows are made, when contracts are drawn up — here, too, words are necessary.

In the formulations of an Einstein, in the pages of Webster’s Dictionary, in a Freud case history, in the prescription of an Ehrlich, in the technical analysis of a Russell or a Whitehead or a Dewey, in the plans of a Frank Lloyd Wright, in the reports of an Amundsen or a Byrd, in the papers of a Marconi and an Edison — here, happily for us, words also serve.
Of Beasts and Men

To be concerned with language as used by living people is to bring us to the heart of things human. Try, if you will, to think of human existence bereft of speech. Imagine this world within the next ten minutes rendered dumb and mute and wordless. For without language, life suddenly takes on a humanless garb. Without language, written and spoken, the silence of the day would be broken only by shadowy forms, primitive cries and grunts, the sounds of the winds and the waves, the rustle and murmur of moving things.

Language is the unique ingredient in man, for where it does not exist, there abides little that is human. A visit to the zoo may be instructive. Observe only the animals — the cockatoos, crocodiles, kangaroos, chimpanzees, sea lions, jaguars, et al. How shall they be described? In the simplest terms, two kinds of acts mark their lives. They subsist on plants — the produce of the energies of sun, soil, and air — and the meat of other animals. Secondly, they move about in space, crawling, running, flying, swimming. Chemistry and mobility — these terms define the functioning of the beasts.

This power of movement is not unimportant outside of the zoo. Animals do not produce food; when the natural supply is gone, they die. They must find and fight for what they eat. Survival is only for the quick and the strong.

That picture of life with the animals somehow does not commend itself to the fullness of living. Something is omitted. The sense is one of flatness, incompleteness, of too few dimensions.

Visit now a human city. Observe the elevator operators, workers with electric drills, accountants, cashiers, teachers, salesmen, actors, preachers, policemen. What marks them? What happens in their lives? They, too, eat and move about. And they do something more. They live on and off the labor and achievements of the dead and the contemporary. They can gather and use the experiences of the past as capital for their work in the present. They can accumulate. They can begin where others left off. They can learn from the agony and sweat of those who have gone before. They can produce artificially because others produced the instruments. Here, then, is a unique ingredient — the manipulation of what happens in time. Men can draw from the PAST, in and through the PRESENT, and make ready for the FUTURE. The experience of the race can be accumulated, worked over, magnified, and transmitted. This time-binding capacity marks the peculiar and characteristic feature of man.

In short, as Korzybski said in *Manhood of Humanity*:

...man improves, animals do not; man progresses, animals do not; man invents more and more complicated tools, animals do not; man is a creator of material
and spiritual wealth, animals are not; man is a builder of civilization, animals are not.

But how is this possible? In man new adjustment mechanisms, larger cortical layers, and complex associational tracts inside his skull give rise to language-using abilities. The power of symbolization gave the means by which the skill and wisdom of the race could be recorded and preserved. Our libraries serve as a gigantic memory of ideas and their fruits. And now we can use them as if they were our own.

Lin Yutang, in *The Importance of Living*, has given a sharp statement of the differences.

Man alone has invented a civilization, and this is not something to be lightly dismissed. There are perhaps finer animals with better forms and nobler structures, like the horse; with finer muscles, like the lion; with a finer sense of smell and greater docility and loyalty, like the dog; or better vision, like the eagle or a better sense of direction, like the homing pigeon; with greater thrift and discipline and capacity for hard work, like the ant; with a sweeter temper like the dove or the deer; more patience and contentment like the cow; better singers, like the lark and better-dressed beings, like the parrot and the peacock ... Granted that ants are more rational and better-disciplined beings than ourselves ... still they haven’t got a library or a museum, have they? Any time ants or elephants can invent a giant telescope or discover a new variable star or predict a solar eclipse or seals can discover the science of calculus or beavers can cut the Panama Canal, I will hand them the championship as masters of the world and Lords of Creation.

A bird builds a nest. A man builds an engine. Each used time, effort, and materials. But soon their purposes have been served. A new generation comes. The new bird builds again and the nest is little different. And the next nest not unlike it. With the new man, however, come new possibilities, new searchings, new ways of looking, new experimenting, so that when the engine is built, it is built anew. To the work of the past something is added from the present. For with the symbol-using class of life, as Cassius Keyser reminds us in *Mathematical Philosophy*, “the power to achieve is reinforced by past achievement.” In the words of Abraham Lincoln,

Fishes, birds, beasts, and creeping things are not miners, but *feeders* and *lodgers* merely. Beavers build houses; but they build them in no wise differently or better now than they did five thousand years ago. Ants and honey bees provide food for winter; but just in the same way they did when Solomon referred the sluggard to them as patterns of prudence. Man is not the only animal who
labors; but he is the only one who improves his workmanship. This improvement he effects by discoveries and inventions.

To see the uniqueness of man’s time-binding capacity is to begin to realize the significance of language. If we discover the creative uses of words, we may begin to know what it is to function humanly.

As Gustav Eckstein wrote:

Think what speech has done for man. It has given him the earth. Report of a small invention in Chicago is printed in a Tokyo newspaper, in that way it becomes added to a small invention made in Tokyo, to another made in London, to another in Rome, and an airplane in consequence is accelerated fifty miles an hour. On Thursday last a discovery is completed in the Rockefeller Institute, is telephoned to Shanghai, and on the following Tuesday in consequence a life is saved in China.

Similarly, if we learn how sometimes language is used to defeat those purposes, how the perversion of information comes about, how unconsciously confusion obtains, how misunderstanding is born and conflict generated — if, perhaps, these phenomena can be explained, we may in the very process be dealing with some of the deepest aspects of human living.

General Semantics

It was Henry James who said, “All life comes back to the question of our speech, the medium through which we communicate with each other.” Because that has somehow been felt, an interest in words is by no means anything new. From the questionings of Socrates to the present, the roster of men who have written about the problems of language and thought is a long and distinguished one. No one who would understand the depth and complexity of what is involved can afford to neglect the questions they raised and the answers they have given. Just an introduction to the literature requires a survey of this minimum list:

2. Francis Bacon, The Novum Organum.

It would take the pages of a long book to outline the kinds of problems they have defined with the data and arguments in support of their answers. We need not here decide why they chose to deal with the matters they did. Neither need we decide the value of their efforts. On one point alone shall we urge a judgment: that they did not come to grips with the problems we here find most relevant and absorbing. It is a question not of antithetical but of different interests. What we would emphasize finds expression in the writings of Alfred Korzybski, whose book *Science and Sanity*, first published in 1933, deals directly with matters which have not occupied the focus of attention of the other writers.

Korzybski was trained as a mathematician and an engineer in Warsaw. His work in the General Staff Intelligence Department of the Russian Army in World War I and intensive experience in the handling of prisoners had whetted his interest in human affairs, in the problems of human adjustment. That war had put into sharp focus the achievements of the physical scientists as compared with the failures of those who guide and advise us in our everyday living. On the one hand, we see bridges and buildings standing up, guns and airplanes working, steam shovels and dynamos functioning efficiently. When the engineers planned, they ended with structures which were reliable. When they make predictions in their specialties, things have a way of turning out as per specifications. But how about the men who govern our economic, political, and legal affairs? Too often for them “Prosperity is just around the corner,” or “Germany just couldn’t finance a war,” or “If this bill is passed there’ll be an end to drinking.” The security we have with the engineers we do not have with the social “scientists” — if we measure their achievements. We cannot be as sure that when they predict, things will so happen.

The question that Korzybski then posed was this: If both the physical structures and the social institutions are products of human nervous systems, what does an engineer do when he builds a bridge that the social scientists do not as invariably do when they go to work? He put the answer in terms of the most
easily observed activities of each — their talking. The engineer talks to himself (or calculates) in varied languages (words or figures) which are appropriate or similar in structure to the facts with which he has to deal. That is, he looks at the life facts and then makes what he has to say fit. His major effort is to make his talk, formulas, equations, etc., adequate to represent the facts. And when that is achieved, the bridges don’t break down. But what of our everyday language habits in our personal affairs, in matters of community and national importance? Do we follow the efficient patterns of the engineers? Korzybski’s investigations led him to a negative answer. In dealing with direct experience in the business of daily living, men were too frequently speaking in ways that did not fit the situations they were speaking about. If reliability was not consistently found, it was because the utterances too often did not fit the facts.

His study then moved to the practical, to an analysis of the ways of language use which were inadequate and misleading. With similarity of structure as his criterion of adequate talking, he was able to classify a host of “bad” language habits. And when these were systematized along with techniques and devices for correcting them, Korzybski had succeeded in formulating a theory and method which gave a means of proper evaluation whenever language is used. This body of data and method leading to habits of adequate language-fact relationships he called General Semantics.

One misconception may here be corrected. Korzybski’s system, concerned with accuracy, and predictability, must be considered as something different in emphasis from the pursuits of other “semanticists.” I should distinguish several varieties of semanticists: 1. those popular writers who would debunk abstraction-makers by shouting “define your terms,” 2. those students of linguistics who seek to study the history of the changes of meaning of individual words in our language, 3. the anthropologists who study the grammatical and syntactical make-up of languages of different people, 4. the lexicographers who chart the ways individual words have been used, 5. the logicians who emphasize the problems of verbal coherence and the avoidance of inconsistency within discourse, 6. the rhetoricians who work to discover the ways of using words for the effect in influencing attitudes and actions, together with the techniques of expression by which to achieve clarity, strength, harmony, melody, elegance, etc.

Another feature of Korzybski’s effort is worth noting here. If those not trained in the habits of the engineer-at-work are to “talk sense,” then the methods to be evolved must be entirely general — usable by a housewife, a sociologist, a lawyer, teacher, a psychiatrist, a journalist, the engineer-at-home, or by anyone. If predictability is what we want as a function of language use, the methods of testing for its correspondence-to-facts must be applicable wherever
speech occurs. That is to say, if he has uncovered methods of “proper evaluation,” they should be workable in testing and prescribing for as many different kinds of speech-using situations as there are. That Korzybski’s findings do give general methods is attested by reports of workers in a large number of special fields. It may be useful here to list some titles of published materials, enough to give a sense of the general applications in which Korzybski’s influence has been acknowledged:

**English**


**General Education**


2. Catherine Minteer, *Understanding in a World of Words*.

3. Mary Morain (Ed.), *Teaching General Semantics*.

4. Mary Morain (Ed.), *Classroom Exercises in General Semantics*.

Philosophy and Science

2. Antony M. Economides, *A Non-Aristotelian Study of Philosophy*.
5. Anatol Rapoport, *Operational Philosophy*.

Psychology and Psychiatry

2. Wendell Johnson, *People in Quandaries*.