RESPONSE TO
CHARLES COURSEY’S
COMMENTARY

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In the years since a doctor told me I had Apserger’s Syndrome (AS), I have learned something about the features of this syndrome. During the same period, I discovered and began to study general semantics (GS). So even before reading Mr. Coursey’s commentary, I had suspected that AS may in some way tend to produce elements of what in GS we call an extensional orientation.

At least one well-known expert on AS, Dr. Temple Grandin, who herself has a more severe autistic condition, has come to a similar conclusion. In her best-selling 2005 book, Animals in Translation, she compares and contrasts the neurological/cognitive functioning of persons with AS/autism to the functioning of ‘normal’ people without these disorders, and to the functioning of animals. Dr. Grandin concludes that people with AS/autism lack, or avoid, the widespread human tendency to abstractify, as she calls it.

By abstractifying, Dr. Grandin means basing one’s thinking on generalized verbal categories or abstractions, rather than attending to ‘concrete’ sensory or

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experiential data. In other words, when we abstractify, we give priority to the verbal environment rather than the non-verbal environment: a person who indulges in abstractifying tries to force non-verbal experiences to fit the pre-established verbal conditions.

According to her research and observations, people with AS do not easily abstractify, while ‘normal’ people abstractify constantly. As she sees it, ‘normal’ people assume that everyone can and should operate by means of this abstractification process. In general semantics, we refer to this “word first” mode of thinking as the intensional (with an s) orientation, which has limited usefulness and is the cause for much misevaluation.

From my own experiences with GS and AS, I believe that practicing GS can help those of us with AS overcome at least some of the less desirable effects of our condition. To give one example, when I (and others I know with AS) describe an object, event, situation, sequence of events, etc., I feel I must include every possible detail. I feel compelled to do this in order to produce a completely truthful report. I don’t see how to leave observable details out of a description — I don’t regard leaving things out as permissible or even as possible.

So when I learned from reading Wendell Johnson and other GS authors that one cannot not leave things out of a description — no matter how Aspergerishly-detailed one attempts to make it — this came as a wonderful discovery. When I learned that different levels of detail can exist and co-exist, this enabled me to purposefully not strive to cram every observable fact into a verbal description of those facts. To some extent, this has also helped me become more willing and able to communicate with those who do not tend to put in as much detail as I do.

Had someone carefully and explicitly taught me such lessons earlier in my life, especially in my early school years (or perhaps even earlier), I would not have had to wait until age 40 to discover what most ‘normal’ people seem to know by instinct. And as a result, I would have led a far less difficult and far more productive early life.

Mr. Coursey suggests that ‘normal’ people might consider becoming more “Asperger-ish” by adopting desirable traits such as transparency and honesty, by paying closer attention to the non-verbal ‘concrete’ environment. I would likewise suggest that those of us with AS should strive to learn what S.I. Hayakawa called the “conceptual roller coaster” — the ability to move easily from the concrete (object level) to the abstract (verbal levels) and back again, as circumstances and purpose demand. People without AS seem to me to have this ability, to some extent, as “part of the package.” From my experience as a person with AS and one who has studied it, I believe that those with AS do not
easily “ride the roller-coaster” from concrete to abstract and back again. We do not recognize, unless someone explicitly informs us and convincingly demonstrates it, that the difference levels exist.

For me, learning GS provided that demonstration and the “key to the roller-coaster” that I must ride in order to live in a world of people born with the mental circuitry that makes “roller-coaster riding” easy and natural.

Most people, with or without AS, would probably want, if possible, to possess the beneficial aspects of more than one human state or condition — the “best of both worlds.” I understand Korzybski referred to this as the “coveted consciousness of abstracting.” Becoming increasingly and explicitly conscious of how one thinks, and thus becoming increasingly able to change one’s point of view, may not only give those of us with AS the “key to the roller coaster,” it may even show those without AS how to “get off the roller coaster” when they want or need to return to solid ground.