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**CRAZY TALK, STUPID TALK — REDUX**

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In the 1970s, I worked as a junior high school counselor in New York City. The students at my school didn’t want to be in the building, the teachers felt burnt out, and the administrators seemed bewildered about how to improve the situation.

Fortunately, I came across a book that helped me to understand what was going on, Neil Postman’s *Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk* (Delacorte, 1976), one of the best self-help texts ever written. Postman, a former editor of *ETC*, was the founder of the media ecology program at NYU. In *Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk*, he presents a philosophy of everyday language and he describes many important varieties of dysfunctional communication. He also shows how using general semantics can improve the way we think and talk.

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examples he used to illustrate his linguistic philosophy. One of those examples, a quote from Goethe, appears on the first page of his book:

“One should, each day, try to hear a little song, read a good poem, see a fine picture, and, if it is possible, speak a few reasonable words.”

Neil Postman, who died in 2003, made a career of speaking and writing reasonable words. This article presents some of those words, in the form of key points from Postman’s exceptional book.

**Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk — A General Framework**

Postman defines *stupid talk* as talk that has (among other difficulties) a confused direction or inappropriate tone or a vocabulary not well-suited to its context. It is talk that does not or cannot achieve its purposes. “To accuse people of stupid talk is to accuse them of using language ineffectively, of having made harmful but correctable mistakes in performance. It is a serious matter, but usually not dreadful.” A road sign that reads *No crossing the median divider* is an example of stupid talk, since it has the potential to confuse some drivers (the phrase “median divider” is the problem).

Postman asserts that *crazy talk* is almost always dreadful. “... (it) is talk that may be entirely effective but which has unreasonable or evil or, sometimes, overwhelmingly trivial purposes. It is talk that creates an irrational context for itself or sustains an irrational conception of human interaction. It, too, is correctable but only by improving our values, not our competence.” Vandals who paint a “3” into an “8,” so a road sign will read *Speed limit 85 miles*, are practicing crazy talk.

**Semantic Environments**

In Postman’s view, human communications takes place in “semantic environments.” Such environments include four elements: people, their purposes, the general rules of discourse by which such purposes are usually achieved, and the particular talk that is actually being used in the situation. Science, religion, politics, commerce, war, sports, lovemaking, and lawmaking, among others, can be considered semantic environments. Let’s take a closer look at two: religion and science.

The semantic environment of religion serves, at its best, to minimize fear and isolation and to provide a sense of continuity and oneness. Religious language achieves these purposes by creating metaphors and myths that give con-
crete form to our most profound fears and exaltations. Religious language offers a set of principles to give ethical purpose and direction to people.

In the semantic environment of science, one finds sentences that are mostly descriptive, predictive, and explanatory. Scientific language centers not on discovering true beliefs, but on detecting those that are false. Scientific language provides a method for working with technical problems and problems related to everyday living.

**Purposes**

There can be differences in the purposes of specific individuals in a situation and the purpose of the situation itself. For example, Charlie Brown, in a "Peanuts" cartoon, is screaming at Lucy because she made a stupid play in their baseball game. "You threw to the wrong base again!" he cries. "There were runners on first and second and you threw the ball to first! In a situation like that, you always throw to third or home!" Lucy considers his advice and replies, "You're destroying my creativity!!" The problem is that such creativity works against the purposes of baseball. For social order to be maintained, individuals need to follow the rules of structured environments.

Another source of conflict over purposes can occur when stated purposes do not match actual purposes. For example, a business leader says that he believes in honest competition and then he tries to win monopoly status for his company, or a politician says he is an advocate of tight budgets, but votes for tax cuts and more government spending.

A third source of conflict, somewhat similar to the above, can appear when the purpose of a semantic environment subverts the purpose of a subsystem within it. For instance, religion, in a broad sense, has as an overriding purpose the "connectedness" of all people. Yet many religious practices, rituals, and institutions are motivated by the idea that people are morally different — some will have access to eternity and others won’t. Much religious conflict stems from the idea of exclusiveness, while, paradoxically, "true" religious sentiment promotes the idea of inclusiveness.

**Relationships**

People tend to be highly sensitive to the rules of role-structure. When such rules are broken, the consequences can be severe. For example, Postman recounts that when he was in the army all passes were cancelled at his base one weekend. A private in the barracks pleaded with the lieutenant to grant him a pass to see his girlfriend. The officer denied the request. The private then sug-
gested that the soldiers in the unit vote on the matter and that he would go along with the result. This suggestion, which was sincerely offered and delivered in modulated tones, led to additional punishments for the private. (Another example of role-structure naiveté: Lecturing an IRS agent who is reviewing your income tax returns as if he was a child.)

The tendency of semantic environments to maintain their role structure is quite important, since it provides us with a basis for predictable continuity in life. But it can also be seen as the source of cruel behavior. The famous Milgram experiment, in which people followed the orders of the experimenter to administer what they thought were electric shocks to others, is a case in point. (At the end of his study Milgram remarked that relationship overwhelms content — what people do is not as important as the “role” which asks them to do it.)

Content

The words that comprise a semantic environment are not so much about a subject as they are, in a sense, the subject itself. “Subtract all the words that are used in discussing physics or law or theology, and you have just about subtracted the subject itself,” said Postman. If there is nothing to talk with there is nothing to talk about.

Words are the content of our thoughts. As Ludwig Wittgenstein put it: Language is not only the vehicle of thought; it is the driver. Discussing what words to use in describing an event is not a matter of “mere semantics.” It is about trying to control the perceptions and responses of others (as well as ourselves) to the character of the event itself.

This point is illustrated in the story of the three umpires. The first umpire, a man of little knowledge about how meanings are made, says, “I calls ’em as they are.” The second umpire, knowing a bit about human perception and its limits, says, “I calls ’em as I sees ’em.” The third umpire, a student of Wittgenstein, says, “Until I calls ’em, they ain’t.”

What you call something depends on how well and widely you see. If you are “locked into” a particular vocabulary of a subject, you will not be able to imagine alternative ways of conceiving it. You will thus be at the mercy of someone else’s names and the purposes that such names imply. The more flexible you are in conceiving alternative names for things, the better you will be able to control your responses to situations.
Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk — Particular Characteristics

Fanaticism

Fanaticism is the internalization of words to which we are so attached we have made them immune to criticism — not only by others, but by ourselves, as well. Put another way, fanaticism is what happens when we have no will to refute. Thus, our protection from fanaticism is to develop and maintain our will to refute.

Karl Popper, a philosopher of science, has advanced a rational approach for refutation. He calls it “fallibilism” — a notion which presumes that all people and their ideas are fallible and that it is not possible for anyone to know if they are in possession of the “truth.” Popper suggests we apply “critical rationalism” to our beliefs by subjecting them to constant criticism in the hope of reducing the extent of their error. In Popper’s view, the history of science is the history of detecting false beliefs, not the history of finding true ones.

Role Fixation

Stupid talk is the most characteristic symptom of role-fixation — a condition in which a person cannot move from one semantic environment to another, (e.g., the professor who always lectures in conversation, the comic who is constantly “on,” cynics who never allow themselves to be awed, or let anything be revered). People who are fixated in roles may think they have “strong characters,” but they can also be seen as single-dimensional individuals lacking the courage to try out new roles.

Postman argues that health implies a capacity to grow and that semantic health cannot be acquired through mastering simple formulas for a single way of talking. While semantic flexibility has its limits — we probably don’t want to be as chameleon-like as Woody Allen’s Zelig — one measure of our ability is our competence in a wide range of semantic environments or social roles.

The IFD Disease

The IFD disease, a term coined by Wendell Johnson in his general semiotics classic People in Quandaries, describes a condition in which high ideals combined with continued frustration can lead a person to become demoralized (IFD specifically refers to an individual going from Idealization to Frustration to Demoralization). It is a form of crazy talk because glorified ideals, such as
“true happiness” or “real success,” are vague standards that have no objective referents in the “real world.”

The cure for IFD disease is to connect language with real and specific possibilities. For example, happiness is a warm onion roll with cream cheese on it; happiness is being able to start your car in the morning when the temperature is ten degrees Fahrenheit. Or, if it is not these things, happiness must be something that you do or can imagine yourself doing, something specific and achievable.

**Model Muddles**

In schools, tests are given to determine how smart someone is, or more precisely, how much smartness someone “has.” If one child scores 140, and another 108, the first is thought to “have” more smartness than the other. But, people don’t have smartness. They “do” smart things and sometimes do stupid things — depending on the circumstances they are in, how much they know about the situation, and how interested they are. Smartness is not something you are, or have, in measurable quantities.

“Madness,” like smartness, can be classified in particular ways. The medical model considers it a disease, the moral model looks it as a character defect, and the social model views it as a product of a “sick society.” Each metaphor invites an entirely different view of madness and as a result can expand our understanding of the subject. In discussing madness, or smartness, or any other abstract concept, it is important to know what metaphors are being used to avoid confusion, mistakes, impotence, and bad temper that can arise from inadequate or partial models of “reality.”

**Reification**

Reification means confusing words with things. The key grammatical instrument through which it is accomplished is the verb to be, and its variants. For example, when we say “She is lazy,” or “He is smart,” we are suggesting that “laziness” is found in her or that “smartness” is found in him. That contradicts what is really going on: we are projecting our opinions concerning “laziness” and “smartness” onto other people.

Another way we confuse words with things is to believe that words have “real” definitions. A definition is not a manifestation of nature, but a tool for helping us to achieve our purposes. To quote the British literary critic I.A. Richards, “We want to do something, and a definition is a means of doing it. If we want certain results, then we must use certain meanings (or definitions). But
no definition has any authority apart from a purpose, or to bar us from other purposes."

**Poorly Reasoned Questions**

A great deal of stupid and/or crazy talk is produced by poorly reasoned questions, sometimes spoken silently to ourselves. For example, “Why am I a failure?” and “What is the meaning of life?” These questions are formed at such a high level of abstraction that they cannot be reasonably answered. Another problem arises from certain structural characteristics of sentences. For example, many questions seem to limit responses to either-or alternatives — “Is that good?” “Is she smart?” “Is he rich?”

A third source of problems with respect to question-asking language is the assumptions that underlie it. Such assumptions can lead us into accepting as fact uncertain and even preposterous ideas. Two famous assumption-riddled questions are, “Have you stopped beating your wife?” and “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?”

Finally, two people in the same semantic environment may ask different questions about a situation, but without knowing it. For instance, in a classroom a teacher may be asking him or herself, “How can I get the student to learn this?” But the student is probably asking, “How can I get a good grade in this subject?”

As children, when the teacher asked us questions, many of us were conditioned to search for the answers. A better education would have had us first analyze the questions.

**By-passing**

*By-passing*, a term coined by Irving J. Lee, is a process in which the following occurs: A says something to B. B assumes that A means what B would have meant if B had said those words in that situation to A. Thus, there seems to be no reason to ask A, “What do you mean?” B can go straight to the question, “Do I agree or disagree?”

By-passing can be disastrous. For example, let’s say A has said to B “I love you.” The meaning of that sentence depends completely on the life experience of the person using it. B may be in for a rude awakening if she or he does not spend some time observing A’s behavior and figuring out what A means when using the words “I love you.” (A general semanticist might advise B that love, is not love, is not love, etc.)
By-passing is a “natural” form of stupidity that occurs because commu-
nication is based, to some extent, on projection. We tend to become aware of by-
passing only when people’s actions are very different from what their words 
have led us to expect. A person who says “I love you,” and then dates your best 
friend, is not only hurting you, he or she is also teaching you the limitations of 
talking to yourself.

Self-reflexiveness

(A husband and wife are at the breakfast table. She places some bacon and 
eggs before him. He starts to eat.)

Husband: The bacon is a little crisp this morning.

Wife: What?

Husband: The bacon, it’s way too crisp.

Wife: I always make it this way.

Husband: Not this way. It’s too crisp. It’s almost burnt.

Wife: Well, why don’t you make it yourself? Then you can have it the 
way you want.

Husband: Really? Why don’t you go to work? Then, you can have the 
money you want.

Wife: You don’t call what I do work? If you paid me for what I do, 
you’d know it was work.

(Let’s leave our unhappy couple before the pots and pans begin flying.)

The aforementioned example, while somewhat dated, points to the self-
reflexive nature of language. Korzybski, who described this process in detail, 
says that using language is something like being in a mirrored room. The mir-
rors (like language) encase you, so to speak, in a “closed system,” within which 
you get only reflections of reflections.

Language can be thought of as a reflection of reality. When we say some-
thing about “reality” (e.g., this bacon is too crisp), our listeners become en-
cased in the “mirror effect.” They must now respond not only to the “reality” 
that our remarks referred to, but to our remarks, as well — which can include 
things like our tone, point of view, or form of address. So, they say something 
that refers in part to reality (e.g., the condition of the bacon) and in part to our 
language about “reality” (e.g., our tone). Before long, the “reality” of over-
cooked bacon has faded into the background and our comments are motivated by the nature of our comments, not by the nature of reality.

The “self-reflexive” nature of language can result in stupid talk. That was demonstrated in the above argument between husband and wife. That argument did not have to happen. For example:

Husband: The bacon, it’s way too crisp.

Wife: I always make it this way.

Husband: Really? I must be getting old or something, I never noticed.

Wife: Well, if you really don’t like it that way, let me make you another couple of slices.

To avoid unnecessary confrontations it is useful to understand that the self-reflexive nature of language can play a role in generating problems. Effective communication with another person involves more than just saying something. It involves being attentive to how we think the other person is receiving our messages and being skillful in adjusting our responses to shifting feedback.

**Sloganeering**

Slogans are intended to go beyond reasoning with the hope of eliciting signal reactions (quick, unthinking responses, also called knee-jerk reactions). They are a form of group-think that says “This is what we believe,” not “This is what I believe.” Slogans such as “Let’s go, Mets!” and “On, Wisconsin!” are fairly benign with respect to having detrimental effects on individuals and societies. That cannot be said of slogans like “Sieg, heil!” and “Death to all infidels!”

In many semantic environments (e.g., religion, sport, politics) mindless recitation in the form of slogans is encouraged. Sloganeering is, in fact, practiced ubiquitously through pledges, oaths, banners, bumper stickers, college cheers, mantras — wherever it appears desirable to ease the burden of individual responsibility for thinking things through.

Postman argues that, generally speaking, when you find yourself applauding, cheering, or chanting in public places you may suspect that your intelligence has been bypassed, and that an individual or group is encouraging your signal reaction. Knowing this you may wish to applaud, cheer, or chant because you want to “let go” or submerge yourself in a collective mood. But unless you know what is going on, and understand that you have an option to withdraw, you are taking part in a fairly dangerous exhibition of stupid talk.
Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk — and General Semantics

Postman ends his book with an “autobibliography,” — “a brief, highly personal commentary on nine books from which I have learned a great deal.” Two volumes on general semantics are included among the nine references: Alfred Korzybski’s *Science and Sanity* and Wendell Johnson’s *People in Quandaries*. With respect to Korzybski’s work, Postman writes, “Many academicians do not care for Korzybski — in part, because he is not careful, and in part, because they have no patience for genius.” As for Johnson’s book, Postman says, “I am tempted to say that there are two kinds of people in the world — those who will learn something from this book and those who will not. The best blessing I can give you is to wish that as you go through life you be surrounded by the former and neglected by the latter.” These remarks, and his inclusion of *Science and Sanity* and *People in Quandaries* in his autobibliography, show Postman’s high regard for general semantics as a useful discipline for preventing crazy and stupid talk.