GENERAL SEMANTICS
AND MEDIA ETHICS
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THIS TALK is based on a chapter in Journalism Ethics: Philosophical Foundations for News Media (1997), John C. Merrill’s comprehensive and well-written book on journalism morality. The title of the chapter is “Korzybski to the Rescue.”

In the early part of the twentieth century, Alfred Korzybski, a Polish polymath with a keen interest in the relationship of words to facts, proposed a general system of evaluation to help people make more accurate assessments of themselves and the world. He labeled his system “general semantics” (GS).

Since language provides the means and the environment by which we evaluate, much of general semantics involves studying the effects of language (and other symbol systems) on our behavior. Merrill notes that such study should have particular relevance for journalists, as words are the fundamental tools of their craft. He specifically states, “An orientation to general semantics will raise the linguistic consciousness of journalists, bring them to a higher level of sophistication, instill in them a recognition of the weaknesses and the power of words, and generally help them overcome the enslaving tendencies of language.” (1) In this talk, I will examine eleven basic ideas of general semantics and four GS observations that led Merrill to his aforementioned conclusions.

I. Eleven Basic GS Ideas and their Relevance to Journalism and Media Ethics

The word is not the thing: General semanticists say, “The map is not the territory.” The symbol is not the object or event that is symbolized. For example, when we describe a “flower” we should be aware that the “real” flower is an ever-changing process that entails air, light, water, and soil. When using words, we should not fool ourselves into thinking we are fully describing an actual flower. The word is not the thing. This principle is even more important when we are discussing abstract terms like freedom, justice, patriotism, democracy, and responsibility.

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My article titled “Democracy Here is not Necessarily Democracy There,” which appears in the April 2006 issue of ETC, illustrates this point. The concluding paragraph reads “President Bush believes that ‘democracy,’ in the way we use that term, can move the Iraqi people to have happier and more productive lives. Maybe it can. But maybe people who have been conditioned to accept orders from authorities such as clerics have a different conception of democracy. Maybe they believe, like America’s founding fathers and the citizens of ancient Athens, that it is within proper democratic bounds to restrict the rights of women and other groups. Only time will tell which definition of democracy will prevail.” (2)

*Stay low on the abstraction ladder:* In communicating with others, don’t use abstract terms when you can use more meaningful — more specific — ones. For example, when expressions like pornography, good Christians, arrogant government officials, fundamentalists, or concerned voters are used in a story, it is helpful for the journalist to explain them. If possible, the journalist should give specific examples of what the subjects do or what they believe, in order to clarify a story’s meaning.

*Make clear distinctions: reports, inferences, and judgments:* Reports are based on observable data and verifiable. Bill Smith, age twenty-five, was sentenced last week to fifteen years in prison. Inferences are assumptions made from known data. Bill Smith will soon be in prison. Judgments are conclusions made from inferences. A judgment: Bill Smith is an evil and dangerous individual. Journalists frequently confuse or mix reports, inferences, and judgments, which is unfortunate, as flawed inferences or flawed judgments can have a negative impact on “objective reporting.”

*Recognition of non-allness:* One can never completely describe anything. Certain characteristics are always left out. For example, a report may say, “He is a New York attorney.” But he is a great deal more (a husband, a Baptist, an alcoholic, an ex-military man, etc.). Journalists, when using language, must leave out much significant information. Ethical reporters (ethical in the sense of dedicated to “truthful, accurate, and objective reporting”) must avoid intentionally biasing their story by what is omitted, and they should be aware of the omissions.

*Delay your reaction:* A hunter lived with an infant in a cabin, guarded by his dog. One day the hunter returned from the fields and saw the cradle overturned and the baby nowhere in sight. The room was a mess. The dog had blood all over his muzzle. The hunter, enraged, shot the dog. He then found the baby, unharmed under the bed, and a dead wolf in the corner.

Uncritical assumptions can result in negative consequences. Ethical journalists understand this and so, following the general semantics recommendation to delay one’s reaction to more accurately assess what is going on, they do not precipitously rush when gathering facts for a story. Unlike many of us, such reporters do not take for granted the human ability to delay one’s reaction. They know the capacity to delay
reacting, and bring our higher brain functions into play, is a key characteristic that distinguishes our species from the rest of the animal kingdom.

*Reality is dynamic*: The Greek philosopher Heraclitus famously said that one cannot step in the same river twice. What he meant by this is that life is perpetually in flux, people and situations are constantly shifting. While language may impose, as Nietzsche suggested, a “stabilizing fiction” on events that transpire in our restless universe, the fact is change is ever present. Because reality is dynamic, ethical reporters will not use an old quotation, as if it were currently valid, to give someone’s views on a subject nor will they automatically assume that the views individuals hold today are the same they espoused thirty years ago.

*Person₁ is not Person₂*: The eminent general semanticist Irving J. Lee asserted that we tend to discriminate against people to the degree that we fail to distinguish among them. *Indexing*, a GS tool that involves using mathematical subscripts to break down larger categories into their component parts, is an effective technique for addressing Lee’s concern (e.g., Person₁ is not Person₂, is not Person₃, is not Person₄). The use of indexing can remind journalists that members of the same group are not the same and that it is dangerous to make assumptions about them because of their nationality, race, religion, party, or other characteristics.

*Multivalued orientation*: Aristotle’s law of the excluded middle (A thing is either “A” or “not A”) encourages us to think that every question can be answered in terms of “either-or.” The structure of the English language also pushes us in that direction. With its many polarizing terms (good/bad, tall/short, liberal/conservative, etc.), English supports reasoning through extremes rather than with gradations.

General semantics notes that either-or thinking keeps us from seeing the great diversity in the world. For example, rather than being tall or short, or liberal or conservative, most people fall “height wise” and politically somewhere along a continuum. Ethical reporters are mindful that accurate descriptions of people and events involve more than just assigning them to one of two dichotomous categories.

*Beware the “is” of projection*: “She’s a knockout.” “That painting is not art.” “King Kong was a great movie.” When individuals make statements like these they tell us precious little about what they are describing. Instead, they say something about themselves. They are projecting their ideas of what they consider to be “beautiful,” “art,” and “outstanding cinema.” They are confusing opinions with facts.

To demonstrate awareness that our thoughts or comments are products of our internal condition, rather than reports of external “reality,” general semantics advocates the use of qualifying expressions like “it seems to me,” “as I see it,” “apparently,” “from my point of view,” etc. These phrases signal to others that we are transmitting personal observations about reality, not divine truths.

*The “meaning” of words*: What’s the difference between a “freedom fighter” and a
“terrorist”? Were the victims at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq subjected to “abuse” or “torture”? Are organizations that comment on news reporting “media watchdog groups,” or are they “pressure groups”? Don’t look to the dictionary to answer these questions. Their answers depend on how people perceive things.

General semantics observes that strictly speaking, words don’t “mean;” people do. The physicist P. W. Bridgman put it this way, “Never ask ‘What does word X mean?’ but ask instead, ‘What do I mean when I say word X?’ or ‘What do you mean when you say word X?’” (3) Words do not have “one true meaning.” For the 500 most used words in the English language, the Oxford Dictionary lists 14,070 meanings. (4) Ethical journalists understand that conveying meaning is a complex and tricky matter, and that possibilities for confusion are a constant threat.

Natural penchant for partiality: General semantics recognizes that there is a tendency for individuals to select (or abstract) from reality those portions that are consistent with personal values. In reporting a story a newperson may choose what is appealing, what coincides with preferences, what gives pleasure. Ethical journalists guard against such egotistical inclinations and are able to force themselves to include information in stories that is uncongenial to them and with which they disagree.

II. Some GS Observations on Media Bias, Abstracting, Presentation, and Perception

Bias

In his book Language in Thought and Action, the general semanticist S. I. Hayakawa points out that when a newspaper carries a story we don’t like, omitting facts we think important and emphasizing certain facts we consider unfair, we are tempted to berate the paper for slanting the story. (5) But, he argues, we assume what seems important or unimportant to us would seem equally important or unimportant to the journalists. We make an inference about the writer of the story or about the editors. The assumption of bias leads us to believe that the editors purposely made the story misleading. Such an inference, according to Hayakawa, is not rational. It may well be that our (the readers’) bias is the problem in that the process of selection and abstraction imposed on us by our own interests and background is already slanted.

Yet there are cases when journalists deliberately slant stories. When they do this they are not giving us “good” maps of the territory — too much will be left out, and the map will tend to be one-dimensional and misleading. Ethical journalists will look at the same subject from many perspectives and will, therefore, be in a better position to draw for the reader a good map, one that is reliable.

Abstracting

Stuart Chase, the author of the GS-popularization The Tyranny of Words,
suggests that in analyzing verbal passages we try to identify abstract words and phrases that don’t have discoverable referents — and substitute a blab for every meaningless term. (6) He calls the blab a “semantics blank” where nothing of significance comes through. Journalists who use a high degree of “blab” language communicate very little.

One may take any newspaper or periodical and scrutinize a story for blab language. Merrill offers this hypothetical sentence for such analysis. “The American society today, steeped as it is in multicultural sham, has retreated into a dark abyss where every kind of verbal description is tinged with implied prejudice and other demeaning implications.” (7) Translated into blab, this sentence would read: The blab blab today blabbed as it is in blab blab, has retreated into a blab blab, where every kind of blab blab is tinged with blab blab and blab blab. Blabbing compromises truthful, accurate, and objective reporting.

Presentation

Gregg Hoffmann, an award-winning journalist and the author of Mapping the Media — a media literacy guidebook based on general semantics formulations, notes that a news story goes through a process made necessary by the organization of media businesses. “Reporters collect information by observations in the field, or from secondary sources. They must then write or produce their story to a deadline, and fit it into a designated space in a newspaper, or a time limit for a newscast. Editors may cut the length or time of the story. They will write a headline and may add photos or charts for a newspaper. They may include graphics and video for TV.” (8) Ethical reporters and editors remain vigilant to not let the process of the news business interfere with the objective of presenting fair and balanced news stories.

Perception

General semantics recognizes that human perception is not a simple matter of stimulus-response (the human nervous systems is the essential intermediary) nor is it ever complete. In their article “Using General Semantics Principles in the Basic News Reporting Classroom,” Russell and Many offer this example: Something that we would label “an event” occurs in the world. Reporter #1 comes to it and perceives it, or parts of it, and this perception is different than that of reporter #2. What this signifies is that there will always be differences in reports of the “same” news events. (9) But, say Russell and Many, “If they (journalism students and reporters) can be taught their observations are by definition incomplete, perhaps they will learn to ask even more questions and search for more sources and vantage points before concluding they have observed and reported everything.” (10)
III. Conclusion

I began this talk with John C. Merrill’s assertion that an orientation to general semantics will raise the linguistic consciousness of journalists, bring them to a higher level of sophistication, instill in them a recognition of the weaknesses and the power of words, and generally help them overcome the enslaving tendencies of language. To conclude this talk I offer Merrill’s observations on the benefits of GS training for journalists.

…most people hardly ever think about a Korzybskian emphasis. Therefore, they fall into poor language habits, that provide only a one-dimensional, inflexible world in which concepts are drawn in either-or terms and people and institutions are depicted as static, stereotyped entities. Most journalistic maps are poorly drawn; the lines are fuzzy and significant developments are left out. A new sensitivity to language coupled with a recognition of its potent impact on thinking and action, will enable journalists to be more ethical, to become more symbolically sophisticated, and to draw more progressively reliable maps of the complex and rugged territory of reality. (11)

NOTES

4. Ibid., 21.
7. Merrill, Journalism Ethics, 168.
10. Ibid., 294, 295.
11. Merrill, Journalism Ethics, 171, 172.