Author’s Note: This article was presented as a paper at the World in Quandaries Symposium, held at Fordham University, New York City, on September 8, 2006. The symposium marked the 60th Anniversary of the publication of Wendell Johnson’s People in Quandaries, along with the 60th Anniversary of the New York Society for General Semantics, and the 8th Anniversary of the Media Ecology Association, and I would like to thank Allen Flagg, President of NYSGS for making the event possible. Neil Postman, who formally introduced the term “media ecology” in 1968, was known to remark that “media ecology is general semantics writ large.” People in Quandaries was required reading in the doctoral program in media ecology that Postman founded at New York University in 1970, no doubt because it provides an accessible and comprehensive introduction to general semantics (not to mention scientific method). I assume that he did not introduce his students to general semantics by assigning Korzybski’s Science and Sanity even though it is the original source because he thought that the book was too hard. I also assume that he did not introduce his students to general semantics by assigning Hayakawa’s Language in Thought and Action even though it is the most popular general semantics work ever written because he thought that the book was too soft. In other words, my Goldilockean conclusion, if you can bear it, is that Postman thought that People in Quandaries was just right.

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THE STORY of the Trojan Horse is a well known tale of deception and betrayal, but it is also a classic example of the disastrous consequences of mistaking a symbol for reality. Clever Odysseus, that great manipulator of symbols, knew that the war-weary Trojans would interpret the meaning of the wooden horse intensionally, that is, in accordance with their own needs and desires. They would therefore be eager to see the horse as a sign that the Greeks had abandoned their decade-old quest to sack their city, and had set sail for home. The horse was the sacred symbol of the sea-god Poseidon, and Odysseus knew that the Trojans would revere it as a holy icon, and not suspect that it was a false idol. Had the Trojans adopted an extensional orientation and engaged in reality-testing, they might have discovered that the Greeks had not sailed across the Mediterranean, but were merely hidden nearby. This in turn might have led them to investigate the horse itself, and determine its true nature as a false front. But after ten years of living with a siege mentality, the last thing the Trojans wanted to do was to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Of course, there were a few Trojans who questioned the symbol of the wooden horse, and the inferences that others had made about its meaning. One of the skeptics was the tragic seer Cassandra, who had the gift of true foresight, but had been cursed so that no one would take her seriously, and most thought her insane. Another was the priest Laocoön, who issued the warning to “beware of Greeks bearing gifts.” But Poseidon, who sided with the Greeks, sent serpents to kill him and his sons, and the Trojans took this as a sign that his suspicions concerning the totem were not only incorrect, but also downright blasphemous. And so it came to pass that those who questioned the Trojans’ reaction to the symbol, their definition of the situation, and their construction of reality were labeled as being either mad or bad. And so, for want of a general semanticist, or media ecologist, the kingdom of Troy was lost.

Over three millennia after the fall of Troy, another set of visionaries warned us to beware of Greeks bearing gifts. Their names were Alfred Korzybski, S. I. Hayakawa, and Wendell Johnson, among others, and the particular Greek that concerned them was not the cunning ruler of Ithaca, Odysseus, but the equally intelligent philosopher from Athens, Aristotle. Aristotle’s Trojan horse was symbolic logic, a mode of expression and cognition that misrepresents reality at the same time that it opened the door to most scholarly and scientific investigation. I should note that no one considered Aristotle to be either mad or bad, or an enemy. In fact, Wendell Johnson wrote that if Aristotle were alive today, he would not be an Aristotelian. Instead, he would acknowledge that the time had come to replace his old approach with one that Korzybski had named general semantics; Korzybski characterized general semantics as a non-Aristotelian system, following the example of mathematics, where non-Euclidean geometries had been introduced,
and the example of physics, where Einstein’s theory of relativity had ushered in a non-Newtonian view of the universe. These three developments are in fact related to one another, and stand in contrast to an older Aristotelian-Euclidean-Newtonian worldview, a worldview in which “things” are solid, discrete, and independent of one another; where reality is static and unchanging; perfect order reigns over chaos and entropy; where species of life are eternal, neither evolving nor becoming extinct; numbers never become irrational, geometries don’t go fractal, and mathematical systems do not have to be incomplete if they don’t want to be; it was a worldview in which rationality rules the mind rather than unconscious impulse; space, time and truth are absolute, not relative; and meaning and logic are never fuzzy. In contrast, a non-Aristotelian, non-Euclidean, non-Newtonian worldview is one that emphasizes change and growth, complexity and uncertainty, nonlinear processes and dynamic interactions, interrelationships and interdependence. In other words, it is an ecological worldview.

Korzybski, Hayakawa, and Johnson were engaged in ecological thinking when they explored the relationship between human beings and their symbols, and between symbols and the reality they are thought to represent. They therefore could be placed in the same class as the 19th century zoologist Ernst Haeckel, who was concerned with the relationships between organisms and their natural environments, and who coined the term ecology. Another member of this class would be Albert Einstein, whose theory of relativity replaced Newtonian absolutes with a focus on the relationships among physical phenomena. This class would also include the philosopher Martin Buber, who wrote about the relationship between human beings and God, the psychologist Carl Rogers, who emphasized the relationship between therapists and their clients, the educationist Paolo Friere, who argued for the importance of the relationship between teacher and student, and the communication theorist Paul Watzlawick who explained that interaction is more about establishing and maintaining relationships than it is about exchanging content. And this class includes media ecologists such as Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, and Neil Postman, as well as others such as Lewis Mumford, Susanne Langer, Harold Innis, and the late James Carey. I have provided an overview of this intellectual tradition in Echoes and Reflections: On Media Ecology as a Field of Study (Strate, 2006).

Formal systems of ecological thought, such as media ecology and gener- al semantics, are a relatively recent phenomenon, but ecological thinking itself has been with us throughout our history. Odysseus was an ecological thinker, as was his countryman Heraclitus, a pre-Socratic philosopher who lived not far from where the Trojan War had been fought by his ancestors; his well known statement that you can never step into the same river twice, is quoted with approval by Wendell Johnson in People in Quandaries (1946), who writes that “Heraclitus was
over two thousand years ahead of his time. The notion which he so aptly expressed has about it a distinctly modern flavor. It is one which Einstein might heartily endorse. It is the basic notion of science, and science as we know it is not as old as Heraclitus — far from it” (p.23).

What Johnson (1946) meant by “science as we know it” was not so much the science of Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton, but the science of the twentieth century. Johnson describes the modern scientist as “a master of discrimination,” explaining that “differences are his stock in trade, and differentiation is the operation by which he performs his wonders” (p.38). “A similarity,” Johnson explains, “is comprised of differences that don’t make any difference” and “when a scientist says that two things are similar, he is saying … that certain differences between them do not serve to make them different one from the other, for certain purposes” (p.38). Similarities, according to Johnson, are never absolute. Consequently theories and generalizations, which are based on perceived similarities, must always be tentative and open to refutation and falsification. Along these lines, Johnson describes the method of science as consisting of:

(a) asking clear answerable questions in order to direct one’s (b) observations, which are made in a calm and unprejudiced manner, and which are then (c) reported as accurately as possible and in such a way as to answer the questions that were asked to begin with, after which (d) any pertinent beliefs or assumptions that were held before the observations were made are revised in the light of the observations made and the answers obtained. Then more questions are asked in accordance with the newly revised notions, further observations are made, new answers are arrived at, beliefs and assumptions are again revised, after which the whole process starts over again. In fact, it never stops. Science as method is continuous. All its conclusions are held subject to the further revision that new observations may require. It is a method of keeping one’s information, beliefs, and theories up to date. It is, above all, a method of “changing one’s mind” — sufficiently often. (pp. 49-50)

Johnson (1946) goes on to observe that much of what he has described as the method of science has to do with the way that language is used, from which he concludes that “the language of science is the better part of the method of science” (p.50). He then adds that “the language of sanity is the better part of sanity” (p.50), by which Johnson means that the goal of general semantics is to adapt the language of science for use in everyday life. To this we might add that the goal of general semantics is to encourage ecological thinking in everyday life.
We might further add that the goal is to encourage media ecological thinking, for as Johnson explains about the structure of language:

On the one hand, it plays a role in determining the structure of our culture, our society, our civilization. On the other hand, it serves as the chief medium or means whereby the individual acquires or interiorizes that culture structure. Thus, a study of language structure leads both to a deeper understanding of our civilization and its problems and to a keener insight into the basic designs of individual lives and personalities. It is as though mankind had spun an enormous web of words — and caught itself. (p.18)

Media ecologists tend to view language as a medium, and often understand media to be technologies and techniques. Consistent with this approach, Johnson (1946) views language as both medium and technique:

Before we can change our language, it is essential that we develop a certain kind of attitude toward it — the attitude that language is to be viewed as a form of behavior and that, like other behavior, it is to be evaluated as technique. … we evaluate a technique by asking what it is designed to do, how well it does it, and with what consequences. (p.269)

Media ecologists also understand media to constitute environments, in one sense webs that we create, inhabit, and find ourselves imprisoned by. Accordingly, Johnson (1946) introduces the term “semantic environment” (p.412; see also pp.417-426), which we can understand in relation to the larger media environment that includes all of our modes of communication, all of our codes and symbols systems, all of our techniques and technologies. Accordingly, we can could define general semantics as the study of semantic environments, and even refer to general semantics as a semantic ecology.

Johnson, like Korzybski before him, understood that the structure of language as a medium, technique, and environment, is not neutral, but has an inherent bias. Fundamentally, language is a means by which we impose a sense of order, stability, and predictability on an otherwise chaotic, volatile, and uncertain world. It is a method for reducing differences down to a manageable number by directing our attention to similarities. It is a way to gain a sense of control by giving us the power to impose names and labels on phenomena. Language allows us to step into the same river twice, at least symbolically. The bias of language is the bias of identity, and identity is a relationship that exists only in symbols systems. There are no identity relationships in physical, chemical, or biological systems, where no two
things or phenomena are ever exactly alike. But language allows us to make identity statements such as one plus one is two, the sky is blue, Pluto is not a planet, war is peace, freedom is not free, ignorance is bliss, and a rose is a rose is a rose.

The bias of identity allows language to function as a kind of informal science, a way of knowing the world, a form of theory-building. And there should be no doubt that the bias of identity has had enormous survival value for our species, serving as a shortcut for making evaluations and predictions about our environment, and helping us to alter our environment to enhance our own survival. The bias of identity is also vital for maintaining social cohesion, inducing cooperation among individuals, and facilitating collective action, without which human survival is impossible; this is why Kenneth Burke (1969) argues that the primary function of rhetoric is identification, not persuasion. The bias of identity is therefore not a problem in and of itself, and in fact constitutes an evolutionary advantage that has much to do with the success of our species. The problem with identity, I would suggest, is the problem of too much of a good thing. It is the ecological problem of losing a healthy balance. How does this happen? First, we need to recognize that while the bias of identity may be characteristic of language in general, different languages may differ in the degree to which they exhibit this bias. As Johnson (1946) contends, it is possible to reduce the level of this bias in English and other languages. By the same token, the level can be raised, perhaps deliberately by the propaganda techniques George Orwell described in 1984, but also accidentally, as the unintended effect of other types of changes. And the most significant change that has affected human language is the invention of writing (Goody 1977, 1986; McLuhan, 1962, 1964; Ong, 1967, 1982).

As a speech pathologist, Wendell Johnson would certainly agree that human language is essentially speech, and he would appreciate the distinction between the spoken word on the one hand, which has been with us for perhaps one hundred thousand years or more, and the written word on the other hand, whose first awkward appearance was only about five thousand years ago. He might even note that the fact that we say that a written word is a word, rather than saying that it stands for or represents a word, reflects how deep the bias of identity extends to writing. Writing is a secondary symbol system used to symbolize the primary symbol system of speech. And as a medium, technology, and environment, writing has its own biases, which in turn act on and alter speech and language. One of these effects has been the intensification of the bias of identity. The classicist, Eric Havelock (1978), has demonstrated this change by studying the effects of the alphabet on the ancient Greek language. In the Greek colonies on Asia Minor, the same region where the Trojan War was fought, the alphabet was used to transcribe the oral tradition concerning those events, which we know as the Iliad and the Odyssey. The content of these poems is essentially preliterate, and as Havelock explains, the language is
one of dramatic action, of agents performing acts, rather than statements of static
description. The verb “to be” is not used to identify or equate in the language of
the oral epics, but begins to be used in this fashion as more and more literate works
are produced, that is, its use increases as we move from Homer to Hesiod, through
the pre-Socratics, to Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle’s logic, which says that, if A equals
B and B equals C then A equals C, is in fact a by-product of the ABCs.

The alphabet was first developed by the Semites, and the Greeks learned about
this technology from the Phoenicians, which is why they referred to it as Phoenician or
phonetic writing. From another group of Semites, the Israelites, came the God of the
alphabet, the eternal, all-powerful and unchanging God whose name is represented by
four Hebrew letters Yod Hay Vav Hay (YHWH), commonly rendered in English as
Jehovah. These four letters are translated as, “I am that I am,” a statement of absolute
identity that stands as the foundation of monotheism, of the Abrahamic religions of
Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And it was paralleled by the sacred written texts that
when copied with care, could be duplicated with little or no variation. Along the same
lines, in the Greek colonies on Asia Minor, an oral tradition consisting of countless oral
performances over many generations, each one different and unique, was transformed
into a fixed text, encoded by means of alphabetic writing; the result was that the ex-
temporaneous and improvisational singing of tales was replaced by a new practice
of verbatim memorization and recitation. The variation that was taken for granted as
a characteristic of oral tradition has suddenly been thrown into sharp relief by the
alphabet, and had come to be seen as corruption, while identity became associated
with authenticity (Kirk, 1962).

In the kingdom of Lydia, bordering the Greek colonies on Asia Minor, the
alphabet effect led to the minting of the first coins, establishing the idea that all
goods can be reduced down to the same monetary units, just as all speech could be
reduced down to the same set of twenty-odd letters. Is it any accident that the Greek
colonies also gave rise to the first physicists, natural philosophers who introduced
the idea that all of the universe could be broken down into identical, indivisible
units they called atoms (Logan, 2004). Heraclitus is often counted among them,
although he was unique in his emphasis on change and therefore his resistance to
the bias of identity. The pre-Socratics laid the groundwork for Aristotle’s logic,
not to mention Euclid’s geometry, while further to the east, the Hindus, who also
adopted the alphabet from the Semites, used it to develop the numerical notation
that we are all familiar with, and with it higher mathematics (Logan, 2004). All of
this culminates in Newtonian physics, and the Aristotelian-Euclidean-Newtonian
worldview.

We should further acknowledge that the Semites also introduced the concept
of law, the earliest examples being associated with the Babylonian Hammurabi,
and the Israelite Moses (Logan, 2004). And with formal, written law came the idea
that we are all equal and identical before the law. The Greeks, in turn, introduced
the concept of democracy, that citizens are the atoms of society, each having an
equal say in making political decisions. From these seeds emerge the modern
idea of individualism, and with it the declaration that “all men are created equal.”
The ideal of equality associated with the founding of the American republic and
the European Enlightenment presupposes identity relationships among citizens,
at least in the symbolic realms of politics and the law, leading to further demands
for equality in our social, educational, and economic systems. While modernity was
associated with equality through uniformity, contemporary postmodern culture
seems to instead favor equality through diversity, the idea that we are all identical in
being equally different from one another.

Identity is not just a symbolic affair, as the technologies of mass production
have given us a multitude of seemingly identical products. Mechanization begins
to take command in the monasteries of medieval Europe, where the invention of
the mechanical clock produced the first multiple, identical units, in this case hours,
and later minutes and seconds (Mumford, 1934). It continues its march during the
fifteenth century in a shop in Mainz, Germany, where Johann Gutenberg starts the
printing revolution by producing multiple, seemingly identical copies of the Bible
and other texts (Eisenstein, 1979). And it completes its takeover with the Industrial
Revolution that begins in the late 18th century and culminates in the early 20th
century technique of the assembly line. Mechanization and industrialization also
give us the media of mass communication, newspapers and magazines, movies and
recordings, and especially broadcasting. These powerful technologies made pos-
sible the creation of the mass society, a society in which a mass of individuals are
identical in their anonymity and apathy, equal in their alienation and impotence,
and all the same in their indifference (Ellul, 1965). This was the moment that Ko-
rzybski introduced his non-Aristotelian system, having witnessed the first use of
weapons of mass destruction during the First World War. And Wendell Johnson
gave us People in Quandaries following the even more massive and indiscriminate
destruction of the Second World War, in which whole populations were identical in
being subjected to concentration camps, gas chambers, aerial bombardments, V-2
rockets, and atomic bombs. It may well be true that every war dating back to the
Greek assault on Troy is a war of (or for) identity (McLuhan, 1976), but the two
World Wars were wars of mass identity, while the Cold War ended with a massive
identity breakdown on the part of the Soviet bloc.

If terrorism and the war on terror represent a different kind of warfare, one
fought with new weapons and with the aid of new technologies of communication,
they remain conflicts over identity relationships. And our present-day identity
politics is just identity war by other means. Along the same lines, electronic
technologies have reversed some of the characteristics of mass society, but we
have gone from mechanical reproduction to an even more perfect form of digital
reproduction, from printing to photocopying to computer-based copy and paste
operations. Our new media continue to extend the bias of identity into new
realms. And then there is the biotechnology of cloning, which opens up a new
universe of identity relationships. The bias of identity has mutated since the time
of Aristotle, but if anything, it has resulted in an identity crisis of unprecedented
proportions. And that is why, sixty years later, we still need to read People in
Quandaries.

In that book, Wendell Johnson wrote about the IFD disease, which stands for
Idealization, Frustration, and Demoralization. The IFD disease is a disease of
language, brought on by the bias of identity. It begins when we idealize a word,
such as love or success, or freedom or democracy. As goals, these vague ideals
are unobtainable, no matter how hard we strive for them. And because they
are unreachable, we wind up frustrated, and ultimately demoralized. Johnson’s
solution is to use the language of science, define our terms in a clear, precise, and
concrete manner, specify the context in which these terms will be used, and specify
the operations and procedures related to these terms. Johnson presented the IFD
disease as a quandary, and general semantics as a solution. I want to add a footnote
to the IFD disease with the 4 Qs that make up the title of my talk, Quandaries, Quarrels,
Quagmires, and Questions (I believe that Johnson, as a specialist in speech, would
appreciate the alliteration, as well as my particular emphasis on the peculiar quality
of the letter Q). Beginning with Johnson’s key term of Quandaries, my intent is to
emphasize not just the personal maladjustment that was Johnson’s focus, but the
interpersonal and social maladjustment that can also occur. To use the example
of the Trojan War, which begins when Helen, the wife of Menelaus, runs off with
Paris to Troy, the quandary in this case had to do with the idealization of terms
such as love, and marriage, both of which remain quandaries in need of operational
definitions to this very day. But in this instance, the quandary led to a quarrel,
specifically the Greek assault on Troy. The quarrel then resulted in a quagmire,
as ten years go by with no resolution to the conflict.

Now, as I mentioned earlier, Odysseus was an ecological thinker. He therefore
recognized that the Greek efforts to push through the walls of Troy, coupled with the
Trojans resisting by pushing back at the Greeks, had resulted in a stalemate. In effect,
the Greeks and Trojans together had created a homeostatic system (Postman, 1976;
Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967; Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). The
Greeks would try to change that system by fighting harder, but this would result in
the Trojans fighting back with greater effort, so that the initial change within the
system would result in no real change to the system. As an ecological thinker, Odysseus was able to ask the right questions, questions being the fourth Q, and the way out of the quandary. He was able to ask questions about why the Greeks’ strategy had failed, and what new strategy might succeed. And he was able to ask questions about how changes within the system differ from changes to the system itself, and how changes within the system might fail, and changes to the system might succeed. And so, Odysseus was able to step outside of the system, instructing the Greek forces to appear to fall back instead of continuing to push forward. The result was that the entire system of Greeks and Trojans stuck in a quagmire experienced system-wide change of epic proportions.

Wendell Johnson stressed the importance of asking good questions, and that is why I have highlighted questions as the means by which we may escape our quandaries, quarrels, and quagmires. In other words, questions are the answer. As Johnson wrote in People in Quandaries (1946), “in the meaningful use of language it is a cardinal rule that the terminology of the question determines the terminology of the answer” (p.52). Media ecologists of course recognize that this is another way of saying that the medium is the message. Johnson goes on to explain.

One cannot get a clear answer to a vague question. The language of science is particularly distinguished by the fact that it centers around well-stated questions. If there is one part of a scientific experiment that is more important than any other part, it is the framing of the question that the experiment is to answer. If it is stated vaguely, no experiment can answer it precisely. If the question is stated precisely, the means of answering it are clearly indicated. The specific observations needed, and the conditions under which they are to be made, are implied in the question itself. As someone has very aptly put it, a fool is one who knows all the answers, but none of the questions. (pp.52-53)

General semantics and media ecology have many good questions, questions about differences, about what differences make a difference, and what differences may be safe to ignore. Questions about how symbols represent reality, how words stand for and point to things in reality, how maps depict territories, and how media extend us outward into our environments. Questions about what symbols fail to say about reality, what words cannot express about things, what details maps leave out, and how media insulate us from our environment. And questions about the nature of symbols themselves, about what a word is and is not, about how maps are made, about the meaning of meaning and the biases of technologies, about how the medium is the message, and how media, by separating us from our environment,
become our new environment. All of these questions are not only good questions, they are ecological questions. They are questions about our relationships with ourselves, with each other, with our symbols and tools, with our semantic environments and media environments. Ultimately, they are questions about achieving sanity on a personal and global level, they are questions about what it means to be human and especially what it means to be human in a technological age, and they are questions about our place in a universe that is 14 billion years old.

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