
Comments by Kenneth G. Johnson

What do a sorcerer's apprentice and a general semanticist have in common? A great deal, according to The Structure of Magic, subtitled "A Book about Language and Therapy."

The authors began with the premise that the 'magic' of therapeutic 'wizards' has a structure that can be observed, described, and taught. Regardless of the therapist's theoretical orientation, the observable part of the transaction involves communication, much of it (but not all) in the form of language.

To John Grinder, a linguist, and Richard Bandler, a Gestalt therapist, the meta-language of transformational grammar provides a meta-model for therapy. Although their language and model differ somewhat, their procedures look a great deal like general semantics applied to therapy.

A quotation from Korzybski and citations of Science and Sanity indicate that the authors are, indeed, familiar with general semantics. And the two 'wizards' they cite by name, Virginia Satir and Fritz Perls, have acknowledged a debt to Korzybski. Their choice of a transformational grammar (TG) meta-model instead of a general semantics (GS) meta-model may simply reflect their area of expertise, or the TG model may have distinct advantages. I will attempt to evaluate their choice later in this commentary.

At the risk of oversimplifying, let me outline, using paraphrases and quotations, the authors' rationale for the use of transformational grammar as a meta-model for therapy:

1. We do not operate directly on the world in which we live, but rather create models or maps of the world and use these maps to guide our behavior. These maps necessarily differ from the territory by the three universal processes of human modeling: generalization, deletion, and distortion.

2. People who come to therapy block themselves from seeing options open to them because these options do not exist in their models of the world. "In coming to understand how it is that some people continue to cause themselves pain and anguish, it has been important for us to realize that they are not bad, crazy, or sick. They are, in fact, making the best choices from those of which they are aware, that is, the best choices available in their own particular model." (p. 14) "Impoverished models imply limited options for behavior." (p. 41)

3. Effective therapy implies some change in the way that a client represents his experience.

4. While the techniques of various therapeutic 'wizards' differ, they all bring about changes in their clients' models of the world. Each of these wizards has a map or model for changing his clients' models -- i.e., a meta-model.

5. Transformational grammarians have developed a formal model of our language -- a model of our model of the world -- or, simply, a meta-model for enriching and expanding therapeutic skills.

6. Language is a form of rule-governed behavior. Native speakers who may not 'know' the rules nevertheless have consistent intuitions about well-formed sentences in their language.

7. "When humans wish to communicate... their experience of the world, they form a complete linguistic representation of their experience; this is called Deep Structure. As they begin to speak, they make a series of choices (transformations) about the form in which they will communicate their experiences. These choices are not, in general, conscious choices. Our behavior in making these choices is, however, regular and rule-governed. The process of making this series of choices (a derivation) results in Surface Structure -- a sentence or sequence of words which we recognize as a well-formed group of words in our language." (p. 35) The sequence could be diagrammed:

   The complete linguistic representation (Deep Structure)
   The (communicated) representation of the complete representation (Surface Structure)

   [Comment: Whether a "complete linguistic representation" (Deep Structure) must precede Surface Structure, as implied here, seems debatable to me. Indeed, the procedures the authors suggest for getting at the presumed Deep Structure indicate that the client may need considerable help in formulating a 'complete' linguistic representation of his experience. Perhaps with their focus on language, linguists have overlooked or minimized the role of imagery.]

8. "The first step is for the therapist to be able to determine whether the client's Surface Structure is a complete representation of the full linguistic representation from which it is derived -- the Deep Structure. At this point in time, therapists either have a highly developed sense of intuitions based upon their experiences or they may use the explicit Meta-model to recover the missing pieces." (p. 41)

9. "While Deep Structure is the fullest linguistic representation, it is derived from a fuller, richer source -- the sum total of the client's experiences. Not surprisingly, the same universal processes of human modeling which give us a systematic way
of assisting the client in going from an impoverished Surface Structure to a complete linguistic representation -- the Deep Structure -- provide a way of systematically connecting the linguistic representation for that person to the set of full experiences from which the full linguistic representation is derived." (p. 44)

10. "For the therapist to challenge the Deep Structure is equivalent to demanding that the client mobilize his resources to reconnect his linguistic model with his world of experience. In other words, the therapist here is challenging the client's assumptions that his linguistic model is reality." (p. 46)

To summarize: The transformational grammar meta-model provides a way of moving from what the client says (Surface Structure) to the client's 'complete' linguistic representation of his experience (Deep Structure) to the set of full experiences from which it was derived. The therapist can then challenge the client's assumptions that his linguistic model represents 'reality'.

'Surface Structure', as Bandler and Grinder use the term, seems to correspond roughly to 'higher order abstractions' and 'Deep Structure' to the related 'lower order abstractions'.

A comparable general semantics meta-model would provide a way of moving from higher order abstractions to lower order abstractions. The therapist could then challenge the client's assumption that his maps fit the territory of experience. Korzybski described this model in Science and Sanity and it has been used by many general semantics oriented therapists and teachers. (In 1972 I presented a paper at the Conference on General Semantics in the Prevention of Mental Illness in which I discussed general semantics as a meta-linguistic system with specific applications to therapy. A revised version of that paper was recently published in the Journal of Communication Inquiry, Winter 1979, under the title "Self-Reflexiveness in Therapy and Education.")

Let me illustrate the similarities between these two meta-models in practice:

When the authors describe "three features which are common to all human modeling processes: Deletion, Distortion, and Generalization," they deal with what Korzybski called the process of abstracting.

To fill in deletions (the 'missing pieces') the therapist is instructed to ask such questions as: To whom? About whom? For whom? About what? Compared to what? With respect to what? Obvious to whom? In general semantics terms this involves moving from higher to lower orders of abstraction, indexing, challenging allness statements. The simple sentence, "I said that I would try," for example, has two deletions: Said to whom? Try what?

Important generalizations from a therapeutic point of view are those that set limits on the client's model of the world. Sentences that begin "I have to" or "One must" or "It is necessary to" immediately suggest the question "Or what?" Such cue words as "can't," "impossible," "unable," etc., suggest limiting statements that can be challenged with questions like: "What prevents you from....?" The process involves challenging assumptions about the relationship of map and territory.

One form of distortion the authors call nominalization -- turning an ongoing process into a fixity by changing from a verb form to a noun form -- has been called objectification by some general semantics writers, nominalization by others. Reversing nominalizations helps the client "...to see that what he had considered an event, finished and beyond his control, is an ongoing process which can be changed." (p. 74) Note that Bandler and Grinder define events as "things which occur at one point in time and are finished," a more static definition that that used in general semantics.

"Check noun arguments that have no referential index" corresponds to the general semantics notion of indexing (Who? Which one?)

"Check verbs. Connect generalizations to experience" provides a way of moving from higher to lower orders of abstraction, of relating maps to territories.

When the authors advise "Look for presuppositions," they are suggesting that the therapist identify the assumptions in a statement.

What they discuss as "generalizations of the form X or Y" looks very much like the two-valued orientation (either/or).

"Mind reading" corresponds to uncritical inferences.

The 'lost performative' (person not recognizing his model as such) corresponds to a lack of consciousness of abstracting.

They also deal with questioning cause-effect assumptions, double binds, self-reflexiveness, and self-fulfilling prophecies, topics well known to most students of general semantics. An appendix gives a brief outline of transformational grammar.

While the meta-models have much in common, they differ in significant and interesting ways.

The primary advantage of the transformational grammar meta-model, as presented by Bandler and Grinder, lies in the detailed, explicit, step-by-step procedures it provides. However, its use depends, at least to some degree, on an understanding of trans-
I was intrigued, but I was also profoundly disappointed. The authors do not suggest that it be taught teachable, that does not make it easy or exciting to learn. The authors warn that "This book is not a novel, and we recommend that you not attempt to read it as a novel. This book is a manual to teach you a set of tools which will increase your effectiveness as a therapist. As with any manual, it should be read and reread."

A therapist using the TG or the GS meta-model would do very similar things. The models complement each other. A general semantics oriented therapist or teacher could learn a great deal from the examples and exercises presented here and would, I believe, find it easy to 'translate' from one system to the other. The authors warn that "This book is not a novel, and we recommend that you not attempt to read it as a novel. This book is a manual to teach you a set of tools which will increase your effectiveness as a therapist. As with any manual, it should be read and reread."

The Structure of Magic II, subtitled "A Book about Communication and Change" has already been published (Palo Alto, California: Science and Behavior Books, 1976). It deals with other representational systems (visual, kinesthetic, auditory, gustatory and olfactory), incongruity, fuzzy functions, and family therapy.

The authors now offer workshops in 'Neuro-linguistic Programming,' based on these two volumes. The term 'neurolinguistic' is borrowed, I believe, from Korzybski, who used it in Science and Sanity. Daniel Goleman describes these workshops in "People Who Read People" in Psychology Today, July 1979: "While acknowledging that virtually all of the skills described in their models are borrowed from others, Bandler and Grinder believe their own contribution is to describe and teach these techniques. They held their first public training seminar in 1975, and by the next year, they were working at it full time. By 1978, they estimate that more than 25,000 people had received some form of NLP training, which now includes courses for lawyers, doctors, sales people, managers and therapists. At a typical 10-day workshop in February of this year, 150 students paid $1,000 each to be trained by the NLP founders themselves at a luxurious beachside condominium south of Santa Cruz, California. And in May, Bandler and Grinder began franchising their trademark, asking for a percentage of profits in return for training, certifying, and supervising NLP leaders."

Apparently, that's gold in them thank Deep Structures.


Comments by Stuart A. Mayper

What did this title, the subtitle "The Language of Wisdom and Judgement", and the publisher's puff sheet, lead me to expect? "... a methodology to help persons evaluate situations, and become skilful in utilizing an interdisciplinary approach for making decisions ..." I suppose I had visions of general semantics and transactional psychology working with game theory and statistical decision functions or multi-valued logics to help us choose our perilous path through the crises of public or private life.

No such thing in this book: no magic formula, no formulas of any kind; nary a diagram, not even any case studies showing how the effective decision maker might approach a problem differently from the hot-headed bungler. There are just blocks and blocks of rich prose about what the author has read, and thought, and written. I should have observed the puff sheet's warning: "This is not a recipe book full of do's and do not's ... but those searching for an alternative perspective and a process which will enable them to design their own direction will be intrigued." I was intrigued, but I was also profoundly disappointed.

Dr. Williams is Associate Professor at the School of Public Administration, University of Southern California. He has written General Semantics and the Social Sciences (Philosophical Library, 1972); Uncommon Sense and Dimensional Awareness; Epistemics: Personalizing the Process of Change; and several articles in a periodical his bibliography calls "Journal of the International Society for General Semantics, etc."

The sloppiness of this bibliography is symptomatic of what I find wrong with the rest of the book. One title is listed under the authorship of both "Pitirim, Sorokin" and "Sorokin, Pitirim A." Numerous names are misspelled, and there is one strange middle name, Benjamin Lanzugie Whoef. Many writers quoted in the text as having influenced the author are completely missing from the bibliography: Chomsky, Mouzelis, John K. Williams, Putney and Putney, Bunker, Menninger, Whitehead and Russell, Adelbert Ames, and Herbert Shelton.

How did this happen? The book is a product of