

THE SEMIOTIC ASPECT OF ALFRED KORZYBSKI'S GENERAL SEMANTICS

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IN 1933, ALFRED KORZYBSKI published a book of 798 pages entitled *Science and Sanity*, setting forth a methodological system, both theoretical and practical, dealing with all of human life. As a "system builder," he had trouble finding a good name for his work. His favorite for a long time had been "science of man," but he settled upon "general semantics," in order to emphasize the evaluational aspect of his outlook. He was drawing upon the Greek verb "to mean," as used by Polish logicians, and he was not aware that this would confuse speakers of English, for whom the word *semantics* refers to the senses of words and their changes. This confusion has hampered the acceptance of Korzybski's work.

Korzybski's system is based upon a set of assumptions that are in accord with the orientation of modern science. Chief of these is that we live in a dynamic, changing, process world. This supports a Heraclitean rather than an Aristotelian outlook.

The effect of this outlook on attitudes toward language is especially drastic. The very words we use cannot yield us certitude. Leonard Bloomfield expressed the finding of modern linguistics when he said: "Every utterance of a speech-form involves a minute semantic innovation." (1) In my own words, we are obliged to accept as true the following statement: *No word ever has the same meaning twice.* As Korzybski stated this principle, "We see that a large majority of the terms we use are names for infinite-valued stages of

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processes with a *changing content*. When such terms are used, they generally carry different or many contents." (2) The very words we use are shifting and ever-changing.

Does this outlook plunge us into "meaninglessness"? But that word may entrap us. Korzybski wrestled with this problem in the following passage:

The problems of meaninglessness . . . establish a most important semantic issue; namely, that what is "meaningless" in a given context on one level of analysis, may become full of sinister meanings on another level when it becomes a symbol *for a semantic disturbance*. (3)

During the time that Korzybski worked out his system, in the late 1920s, up to his publishing date of 1933, the word *semiotics* was not yet in vogue. It was brought into use about that time in writings of Charles Morris, who got it from the newly printed works of Charles S. Peirce. Korzybski would have found great inspiration in Peirce, but unfortunately he knew only one of his works, the *Chance, Love, and Logic* of 1923. From it he quoted this passage:

It is terrible to see how a single unclear idea, a single formula without meaning, lurking in a young man's head, will sometimes act like an obstruction of inert matter in an artery, hindering the nutrition of the brain, and condemning its victim to pine away in the fullness of his intellectual vigor and in the midst of intellectual plenty. (4)

Even without the word *semiotics*, Korzybski drew heavily upon such principles. He made the following outstanding statement: "Man's achievements rest upon the use of symbols. For this reason, we must consider ourselves as a symbolic, semantic class of life, and those who rule the symbols, rule us." (5) He emphasized how the manipulation of symbols governs our lives. On a later page he continued: "When we say 'our rulers', we mean those who are engaged in the manipulation of symbols. There is no escape from the fact that they do, and that they always will, rule mankind, because we constitute a symbolic class of life, and we cannot cease from being so, except by regressing to the animal level." (6)

He recognized that symbols have to be evaluated carefully. This is closely related to the issue of sanity referred to in his title, *Science and Sanity*. He made the following exposition of the evaluation of symbols:

A symbol may stand for: 1) Events outside our skin, or inside our skin in the fields belonging to physics, chemistry, physiology, [etc.]. 2) Psycho-logical events inside our skin, or, in other words, for s[emantic] r[eactions] which may be considered "sane," covering a field belonging to psycho-logics. 3) Semantic disturbances covering a pathological field belonging to psychiatry. (7)

One of the fundamental assumptions of semiotics — the importance of structure — was also basic to Korzybski's general semantics. Throughout *Science and Sanity* are strong statements on this subject. Early in the book we find this: “. . . we discover that all possible characteristics found in this world are due to *structure*, and so can be expressed in terms of structure, relations, and multi-dimensional order.” (8) Then, 200 pages later, he said: “. . . the only possible content of knowledge is structural, as given in terms of relations and multiordinal and multi-dimensional order.” (9) And then after another hundred pages: “. . . structure is *the* only possible *content* of science and of all human ‘knowledge.’ ” (10)

The word *structuralism* has been used in many ways in recent decades, but there are good grounds for calling the Korzybski of 1933 a “structuralist.” The name then came to be applied to Leonard Bloomfield's brand of linguistics, which later was strongly attacked by Chomsky; and yet it is very common to call Chomsky himself a “structuralist.” One must tread warily among epithets.

Korzybski's continued emphasis on structural issues led him to the position of what is now commonly called the Whorfian hypothesis. A strong statement of that hypothesis is set forth in the following passage:

We do not realize what tremendous power the structure of an habitual language has. It is not an exaggeration to say that it enslaves us through the mechanism of s[emantic] r[eactions] and that the structure which a language exhibits, and impresses upon us unconsciously, is *automatically projected* upon the world around us. (11)

Korzybski did not know Sapir's writing; and Whorf's writing was still to come; but they do not have any statement about the Whorfian hypothesis that is clearer or more cogent than Korzybski's.

Equally fundamental to Korzybski's general semantics is the notion of “abstracting,” a key term in his system. Out of the dynamic processes that make up our environment, we “select,” by neurological mechanisms, what is necessary for our survival. This abstracting takes place on many levels. Awareness of the levels of abstracting is specially important.

This brings to our attention the natural ordering in the process world. Our perceptions begin with the lower orders, and by selecting and summarizing and generalizing, we can pass on to higher orders. Our human capacities allow us to continue indefinitely into the higher orders.

In order to make his system clear for students, Korzybski developed various models and devices. Best known of these is what he called the “structural differential.” Such a model is of course an

over-simplification, but it has been found to be an effective teaching device.

This "structural differential" postulates an "event level" (in the process world, silent, non-verbal), containing the unlimited number of features or characteristics of the universe. Those features that are perceived, with many left out, lead to an "object level" (still non-verbal), and selected features from that lead to the "labels" that are part of language. These labels are also in levels, giving greater and greater abstractions. This layering of abstract levels is fundamental in semiotic analysis.

The present director of the Institute of General Semantics, Charlotte Read, has written as follows concerning the abstracting process:

Humans, unlike animals, are not only able to abstract on indefinitely many higher orders in their generalizing, inferring, etc., but can know that they do so, can build theories and test them in practice, write books, can "think about thinking," etc. Generalizations of higher orders are acknowledged to have important benefits for economy and simplicity in building theories, and for the transmission of knowledge. They may also be dangerous if not checked with "facts" (May I note that the word *fact* must be put in quotation marks!) or related to consequences. Inferential knowledge, when consciously accepted as inferential, forms the hypothetical knowledge of modern science and ceases to be a dogma. The "as if" character of our knowledge can be applied to our ordinary living. Consciousness of our processes of abstracting and projecting is connected with the basic premises of general semantics. (12)

The structural differential is usually presented in a two-dimensional chart. At the top of such a chart is a broken-off parabola, with its arms going upwards indefinitely. This represents the "process level," or "event level," consisting of the sub-microscopic dynamic "characteristics" that are inferred but not yet perceived on that level.

A circle below the parabola represents the object, as perceived by the senses, still silent, without the intervention of language labels. The question has troubled me for a long time as to whether we can say that there are objects in nature. I rather believe that Korzybski thought not. In *Science and Sanity* he stated: "In fact, even objects, as such, *could* be considered as relations between the submicroscopic events and the human nervous system." (13)

Thus, whatever we perceive as objects are creations of the nervous system in its interactions with the process, event level. They are personal creations and may differ from culture to culture. In reading a light English novel, I found the following incident: A certain city

child had never seen a horse by itself but always drawing a wagon or cart. When it looked out of the window and saw a horse alone walking down the street, it called out: "Look, Mother! There's a broken horse!" The accustomed entity had been destroyed, and consequently something was "broken." (14)

In the diagram, the third level is where language enters, in applying labels and descriptions to what we perceive. These can go on indefinitely in higher and higher orders of generalization. (Parenthetically, you will notice that "up" and "down" are used indifferently, for the lower we go the higher is the order of abstraction.)

As we go farther, we get to inferences, theories, and doctrines, and by them we get our understanding of the inferred process level. Therefore, the labels swing around and can be attached to the event level. This is a neat representation of the circularity of knowledge.

Strenuous efforts are made in the teaching of general semantics to have a deep influence on the functioning of the nervous system, because talking the theory is not enough. In fact, the result should be the re-structuring of our habitual reactions. Korzybski regarded his work as a system of evaluation, and hence appropriate ethical behavior should be the result.

This turns off some academic people, who do not want their characters re-structured. It is "respectable" to stay only on an intellectual level, but a healthily integrated personality is not satisfied with that. This aspect of general semantics has aroused criticism. For instance, Eugene Nida, in an analysis of semantic elements, has said: "People like Korzybski have made many valuable observations but have tended to make of semantics a kind of ethic, while some 'devotees' have come to regard it as almost a religion." (15)

Inasmuch as Dr. Nida is Secretary of the American Bible Society, he ought to know what "religion" is, but I'm afraid that his use of the term is sadly devaluated, as in such popular sentences as "Baseball is his religion" or "She does her embroidery religiously every day." I myself am strongly secularist and try to seek out ethical behavior without the blighting effect of religion. Korzybski certainly did point out a "way of life," but it was wholly non-religious.

Will anyone ever criticize semiotics for being a religion? So far as I know, this has not yet happened. But its insights are so profound and so all-pervasive, sharing a great deal with Korzybski's general semantics, that a re-structuring of character could well be the happy result.

The field of semiotics will not have its proper impact until it is realized, following Korzybski, that the semiotic insights are not intellectual alone, but involve the whole of the personal organism,

thus shaping evaluative, ethical behavior. Korzybski anticipated and presented systematically much of what is now called semiotics. His system can be useful to semioticians in sharpening and developing their discipline.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
4. Charles Saunders Peirce, "How to Make Ideas Clear," in *Popular Science Monthly*, January, 1878, reprinted in his *Chance, Love, and Logic* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1923).
5. Korzybski, *op. cit.*, p. 76.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 260.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 348.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
12. Charlotte Schuchardt Read, "General Semantics," in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science* (New York: Marcel Dekker, Inc., 1973), Vol. IX, p. 214.
13. Korzybski, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
14. Susan Goodyear, *Cathedral Close* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1936), p. 208.
15. Eugene Nida, "A System for the Description of Semantic Elements," in his *Exploring Semantic Structures* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1975), p. 102.