

THE RELATION OF SEMIOTICS TO GENERAL SEMANTICS[†]

ALLEN WALKER READ*

ALFRED KORZYBSKI (1879-1950) built a methodological system with semiotic considerations at the heart of it. He thus stated his central teaching (*Science and Sanity*, 1933:76): "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." And again (1933:77): "We constitute a symbolic class of life, and we cannot cease from being so, except by regressing to the animal level." His special contribution was the recognition that symbols are effective because the use of them springs from deep within the nervous system. He made frequent use of the term *neurolinguistic mechanism*, and foreshadowed the neurolinguistics that was developed many decades later. Morris, in *Signs, Language and Behavior* (1971) has rightly said of Korzybski's work, that it is "psychobiological in orientation . . . aiming to protect the individual against exploitation by others and by himself."

Korzybski, from a Polish landed family, trained as an engineer and came to America in 1915, learned English, and in a burst of creative energy produced *Manhood of Humanity* (1921) and *Science and Sanity* (1933). The first of these developed the formulation of "time-binding"—the capacity to build on the accumulated achievements of humankind. In the second book he presented a fully rounded system which he described as "non-Aristotelian," because he introduced postulates beyond those of Aristotle. He denied the so-called "first law of thought," that "A is A," since change, a Heraclitean flow, is ever-present. This led to the principle of "non-identity"—that there is never absolute sameness in all respects. He emphasized the unified, holistic nature of the universe, in keeping with the Einsteinian world outlook—drawing together space-time, mind-body, intellect-emotion, etc. This dropping of untenable dichotomies he called "non-elementalism."

*Allen Walker Read, Professor Emeritus of English at Columbia University, is a past president of the Semiotic Society of America.

†Dr. Read was asked to contribute an entry on "General Semantics" to a reference work on semiotics. This will appear in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok, at the Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies, Bloomington, Inc. (Berline: Walter de Gruyter & Co., in press).

His name for the methodology supporting his system was "general semantics," not to be confused with "semantics," the study of verbal meaning in linguistics. The fundamental holistic term "semantic reaction" refers to the organism-as-a-whole response to features of the environment.

Especially important is the key term "abstracting," which refers to the perception of the natural ordering of ongoing processes. A training model to illustrate this is the "Structural Differential," usually presented as a diagram, but it can be three-dimensional. It begins, going either up or down, with the "event level" (process, silent, nonverbal), containing all features or characteristics of the universe. Those features that are perceived, with many left out, lead to an object level (still nonverbal), 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, which incorporate generalizations, inferences, theories, etc. These must be checked regularly with the "event level," thus illustrating the circularity of human knowledge.

The resulting "consciousness of abstracting" tends to develop an extensional orientation or "extensionalization," by which statements and theories are checked with the data of the process world.

As a training design, Korzybski also introduced what he called the "extensional devices," which modify the structure of language in accordance with the process nature of existence. These are (1) *indexes*, a numerical subscript indicating the uniqueness of every event, together with chain-indexes, (2) *dates*, emphasizing change over time, (3) *etc.*, indicating that further characteristics have been left out, (4) *quotes*, reminding that terms like *reality* and *truth* are inadequate, and (5) *hyphens*, indicating interconnectedness, as in *space-time*. Even when unspoken, these lead to reorientation of one's world view. As Korzybski said, "The abuse of symbolism is like the abuse of food or drink: it makes people ill, and so their reactions become deranged" (Korzybski 1933:84).

In 1948, two years before his death, Korzybski expressed his ardent belief that had motivated his life work—That "the extensional methods and devices of General Semantics can be applied to all existing languages, with deep psycho-logical effects on the users and through them on their countrymen." In world affairs, this would lead to "inter-communication, mutual understanding, and eventual agreement" (1948:x).

Korzybski founded the Institute of General Semantics in 1938, in Chicago, and it has continued, after his death in 1950, at Lakeville, Connecticut, giving seminars and making publications in the field available. Further expositions are found in the writings of Irving Lee, J. Samuel Bois, Marjorie Swanson, Charlotte Schuchardt Read, Robert Pula, and Allen Walker Read.