

HOW IMPORTANT IS THE TERMINOLOGY OF KORZYBSKI'S GENERAL SEMANTICS?

Editor's Note: As the two letters introducing it indicate, the paper which follows is fourteen years old. Nevertheless, when its author offered it (with some diffidence), we jumped at the chance to publish it. The editorial staff's consensus was that it was very much needed in the present day, for two reasons: It discusses David Bourland's ΣEOS formulation, which inserts the Sign (Σ) level to precede the Event, Object, and Symbol levels, and which remains an active "non-Korzybskian" challenge; and it chastises what in general discourse is still a prevalent – and perhaps increasing – sloppiness in the use of special terminologies.

The courtesy of Mr. Bourland in typing and sending an article he must have strongly disagreed with, and Professor Read's letter thanking him, are models of the rare combination of candor and civility that we enjoy seeing in general-semantic disputes.

March 15th, 1980

Professor Christine Nystrom ...
New York University ...

Dear Professor Nystrom:

Following the suggestion on the back cover of the the Winter *ETC.*, I'd like to propose a paper that I wish to give at the Conference in Toronto next August 11-14. The title is as follows:

HOW IMPORTANT IS THE TERMINOLOGY OF KORZYBSKI'S GENERAL SEMANTICS ?

In the first place I would want to distinguish between a genuine concern for appropriate terminology and the mere "pet hates" of the shallow attacks on finalize, hopefully, etc. Terminology that reflects structure is important; therefore mentalistic terms like mind, idea, thought, create misleading effects. Was Korzybski justified in his strong objection to the word concept? A common sentence like "Words have meaning" makes the word meaning seem to represent an entity, a lump, a blob; and yet a different wording would not mean that "meaning is ignored." The term semantic reaction is fundamental, as it avoids the body/mind dualism. Even the psycho- compounds, as in psycho-linguistics, often (even usually) reflect a hidden belief in a "psyche." On the other hand, we must avoid an appeal to "word magic," claiming that terminology can solve our problems, for structural relationships remain the basis of a sound scientific analysis.

I hope that this proposal will fit into your projected program.

With best wishes,

Allen Walker Read
Columbia University

October 11, 1993

D. David Bourland, Jr. ...
Wichita Falls, Texas 76302

Dear Dave:

I wish to apologize for my long delay in replying to your letters of June 19th and August 15th. I think the reason is this: I wish ever so much that I could be warmly friendly with you, but I am so turned off by what I consider your misunderstanding of Korzybski's teaching, that I find this difficult.

I am very grateful to you for typing up my paper given at the Toronto conference in 1980. You are quite right in thinking that I would have difficulty in finding it. I'm sure it is buried somewhere or other, since I do not throw manuscripts away, but I can't imagine where it is. You are very welcome to refer to it or to reproduce it. I still like it, I must confess, so I am tempted to see if Stuart Mayper would be willing to use it in the *Bulletin*.

Are you planning to come to the AK lecture later this month? I remember that you have come in previous years, so I may see you there this year.

Have you dipt into the recent book by Randy Allen Harris, *The Linguistics Wars* (Oxford Univ. Press)? I find it very unpleasant, as the author has a contemptuous attitude toward Bloomfield. Like you in your exposition of "ΣEOS," Harris is an incorrigible dualist, and has no understanding of AK's NON-ELEMENTALISM.

With the hope that you are enjoying life,

Sincerely yours,
Allen

HOW IMPORTANT IS THE TERMINOLOGY
OF KORZYBSKI'S GENERAL SEMANTICS?

by

Allen Walker Read
Columbia University

My title, "How Important Is the Terminology of Korzybski's General Semantics?" is in the form of a question, and I'm sure that you expect only one answer from me – Yes, the terminology is very important. With that duly said, we can pass on to a consideration of the effect that appropriate terminology has on our formulating.

A warning is in order that terminology by itself will not solve our problems. To make such a claim would be an appeal to "word magic". Thus we must keep our attention focused on structural relationships.

Of all the re-formulations entailed by Korzybski's general semantics, the most fundamental, it seems to me, is what he called "non-elementalism". At first acquaintance, this is, admittedly, a bit of jargon, but it deals with the age-old splitting between the so-called "physical realm" and the "mental realm". This is the dualism that has entrapped thinkers for many centuries. Korzybski postulated a single realm that encompasses all phenomena – everything that is going on.

What has been attributed to the "mental realm" is for the most part explained by the process of abstracting. Nothing is left out of account, but the phenomena are re-allocated to different parts of the system.

This insight into the monistic nature of "what-is-going-on" is difficult to achieve, and has eluded a number of alleged students of Korzybski. As an example, I may take the formulating of David Bourland [the preceding speaker], in his paper of 1974 entitled "Semantic Factors in the Research Process." He wrote as follows:

I have found it useful to draw distinctions between events and occurrences allocated to two abstract "spaces": those which occur in the "outside world" and which require geographical and temporal considerations, I allocate to "metric space," while those dependent primarily upon human evaluations and representations, I allocate to "semantic space." Problems of consequence then obviously arise pertaining to the ways certain aspects of metric space and semantic space interact.¹

It would be hard to find anywhere a more outspoken statement of dualism. "Metric space" is a fancy new name for the physical realm, and "semantic space" names the mental realm. This is thoroughly Cartesian; and from the Korzybskian point of view any formulations based on it are bound to be erroneous and unproductive.

Bourland's fundamental dualism causes intolerable dislocations in his formulations that follow. The Σ EOS that we have just heard about is an outstanding example. The structural differential, as Korzybski presented it, would be knocked into a cocked hat. Bourland is obliged to postulate another level in addition to the Event, Object, and Symbol – namely, the Sign level, which is represented by the sigma in Σ EOS. This [the Sign level] lies in his "semantic space" rather than in "metric space", and it has the prime position, because he says that the Event level (I quote) "represents an abstraction from the Sign level." This is a more modern-sounding version of the dictum of St. John: "In the beginning was the Word." This is the very negation of extensional orientation, and without the primacy of the Event level an extensional orientation cannot be achieved.

The dualistic nature of this formulation is very apparent in the diagram in his monograph² where two structural differentials sit side by side, with the Sign level marked by dotted lines, to indicate its insubstantiality. Bourland's Sign level is a superfluous intrusion necessitated by his retrogression to a Cartesian dualism.

¹ D. David Bourland, "Semantic Factors in the Research Process," in *Research Designs in General Semantics*, ed. Kenneth Johnson (London: Gordon & Breach, 1974), p. 224.

² D. David Bourland, *Σ EOS Theory: Epistemological Foundations for a Non-Korzybskian System* (privately issued) January, 1979, p. 33.

Bourland's shortcomings in formulation are even more apparent in his misunderstanding of the process of abstracting. He defines abstracting as follows: "the process of proceeding from one level or order (of abstraction) to a higher one by leaving out characteristics."³ When he limits abstracting to "leaving out" only, he has a rather negative situation. As he says, "it does not allow for the equally human function of injecting characteristics and hence supplying more detail."

As a remedy, he has postulated what he calls "semantic construction." This he defines as "A process of changing from one level or order to another by supplying characteristics."⁴ But where can these supplied characteristics possibly come from except from the Event level? It is the case that so-called "semantic construction" is utterly superfluous and unnecessary to anyone who understands the process of abstracting in its richness and fulness.

"Abstracting" is not a mere leaving out, but it is a selecting of features that are useful and relevant to survival interests. Whatever is not selected is perforce left out, and we need constant reminders that our selecting leaves much behind.

The saving mechanism is something that Bourland does not mention at all – namely, circularity. At any point we can check our abstractings by going back to the Event level (just as fast as the electrochemical current of the nervous system can jump the synapses), and we begin abstracting over again, hoping for better results in our selecting. It is this circularity in re-abstracting that makes Bourland's "semantic construction" quite unnecessary.

It is a small point, but Bourland's hostility to the term *semantic reaction* is remarkable. To me and to others, this term is fundamental in its non-elementalistic implications. It unifies the human reactions sometimes called "emotional", "feeling", "spiritual", etc., with the intellectual. Its closest synonym is *evaluative*. But Bourland captiously says that "Korzybski's classical definition" in his opinion "has undeniably elementalistic roots."⁵

He supports this strange opinion by quoting a passage discussing the term *semantic reaction* in which Korzybski includes the words "in connection with their meanings" (note the plural) and "the psycho-logical reactions ... become meanings and relational configurations."⁶ Bourland then goes on to say: "It does not seem to the writer too extreme to say that this elementalistic term [*meaning* – AWR] vitiates the whole definition." Then he goes on to make the reduction "semantic reaction = meaning reaction", and hence, he says, "semantic = meaning."⁷ This he regards as taken, as he says, "directly from Bréal (1900)." Korzybski had no interest whatever in Bréal. Bourland's ridiculous reduction is made in spite of the fact

³ *Ibid.* p. 11.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 29.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 30.

⁶ Korzybski, *Science and Sanity* (1933), p. 24.

⁷ Bourland, 1979, pp. 16 and 17.

that Korzybski's very next sentence is this: "It is of great importance to realize that the term 'semantic' is *non-elementalistic*, as it involves conjointly the 'emotional' as well as the 'intellectual' factors."⁸

Bourland speaks blithely of "the elementalistic term 'meaning' ", as if Korzybski's context and orientation made no difference. Bourland so dislikes the term *reaction*, which he calls "behavioristic", that he proposes to substitute the term "semantic process". Bourland should take into account that Korzybski's theories grew out of the behavioral movement that sprang from Pavlov's conditional reaction, and he found in Pavlov strong inspiration. Korzybski did, it is true, hold himself aloof from the behaviorists of his time, but he had the advantage of their change of paradigm from Cartesian dualism to the unsplit unity of all phenomena into one domain.

On this occasion I shall refrain from dealing with Bourland's program of E-Prime, which I find full of faults, as I intend to give a later paper entitled "A Blast Against E-Prime." I will only say now that E-Prime falls into the pit of word magic, by concentrating on a particular word, *to be*, rather than upon structural relations. Under E-Prime it is not allowed to say, "He is a failure", but it is perfectly proper to say "He remains a failure."

Regrettably, the misguided program of E-Prime has brought general semantics into disrepute, although it is not accepted by the more serious students. I have just come away from a two-week seminar of the Institute of General Semantics, and so far as I know E-Prime was not mentioned even once, except for an attack on it in a lecture of my own.

I regret that my remarks about Mr. Bourland (our old friend Dave to many of us) might be construed as a personal attack upon him. It is not, but I feel that his attempts at re-formulating Korzybski's teachings are wrong-headed. What he calls non-Korzybskian is a retrogressive attempt to re-instate the outlook of the Cartesian era.

A few moments ago I mentioned the word *context*, and this should be at the forefront of our consideration of terminology. It is a finding of linguistics, accepted by nearly all schools known to me, that words do not have intrinsic meanings. When some students of a non-linguistic background come to recognize this, they go to the opposite extreme and say that a word can mean anything you choose it to mean.

This is not so either, because language is a social product, with constraints established by interpersonal relations. We still have before us many choices, depending on the degree of rigor that we may strive to reach. In an older, traditional terminology, many good things of a Korzybskian nature can be presented, especially when first introduced to a popular audience.

But one cannot go very far before realizing that an appropriate terminology, strict in implications, is necessary. Sometimes this is called a jargon, and it becomes self-defeating if it is too jargonistic. The most fundamental term in the whole field of Korzybski's general semantics, it seems to me, is *semantic reaction*, because it avoids the body/mind dualism.

The many *psycho-* compounds are open to grave suspicion. In the field of linguistics, I have detected a lamentable unsoundness in the area called "psycho-linguistics". The sound parts of it should appear on the one hand in "socio-linguistics", and on the other hand in "neuro-linguistics". Studies in neuro-linguistics

⁸ Korzybski, p. 24.

have been burgeoning amazingly in the last few years. This re-enforces Korzybski's usage, when he so frequently used *neuro-linguistic*. Fortunately we hear nothing at all about "the psyche" in Korzybskian formulation. The term has been revived in the writing of Dr. Harold J. Morowitz, professor of molecular biophysics at Yale University. In a recent study he has proclaimed: "The human psyche is part of the observed data of science."⁹ This is a curious use of the word *data*. Out of the observed data some formulators may mistakenly interpret them by constructing an entity called a "psyche". We may recall that Dr. Russell Meyers, in talking before our seminars, often criticized the people who believe that a little-man-in-our-heads directs our behavior.

Korzybski's insistence that the nervous system is the mechanism that guides human behavior has a strong bearing on his terminology. I cannot see any useful place for a word like *ratiocination*. I remember a discussion I had a few years ago with a professor of psychology at the University of South Florida. He assured me that he was talking about "pure mentation", and not about the brain or the nervous system. I never was able to figure out how his "mentation" took place.

Of somewhat higher status are words like *mind*, *idea* and *thought* because of their frequent use in philosophy and popular discourse. The use of these words usually causes misleading effects, as they reflect a structure of the world not in keeping with sound scientific analysis. I subscribe to what the linguist Charles F. Hockett has said about them:

Other social scientists use terms such as *mind*, *concept* as common-vocabulary words; the linguist must not, for part of his task is to investigate the operational definition of these terms and attempt their translation into more fundamental behavioristic language.¹⁰

Korzybski himself was so strict as to favor a complete ban on the word *concept*, a word that is hard to get along without, but he felt that other words, like *formulation* were less elementalistic. I once submitted some writing to him in which I used the word *conception*, which I considered more general than *concept* and less entitizing, but he marked even *conception* as needing replacement. It is getting easier to give up *concept* as it is becoming devalued as a vogue word. William Safire has attacked it in one of his prescriptive pronouncements. As he said: "Of late, academics who had a good thought, or even the makings of an extensive idea, dressed it up as 'a concept,' or even as part of 'a conceptual framework.'"¹¹

There is a rather fuzzy line here between these and the thoroughly useful abstract words like *plan* or *blueprint* or even the more colloquial *hunch* or *notion*.

May I say again that what is important is the structural relationships that our terminology attempts to get across. We do not want to get bogged down in battles of words, but we will constantly be experimenting, with as much rigor as our listeners can take, with ways of representing the structural relationships that our analysis forces upon us.

⁹ Harold J. Morowitz, "Rediscovering the Mind", in *Psychology Today*, August, 1980, p.17.

¹⁰ Charles F. Hockett, "Biophysics, Linguistics, and the Unity of Science", *American Scientist*, 36 (1948) p. 572.

¹¹ *New York Times Magazine*, March 9, 1980, p. 10, col. 3.