

THE CONUNDRUM OF KNOWING WHAT I DIDN'T KNOW
(The Relevance of General Semantics to a Student)

To be conscious that you are ignorant
is a great step toward knowledge.
--Disraeli

Or, "I thought I was a better than average communicator until I became conscious that I am ignorant." My only consolation is that Disraeli considers my newfound awareness a "great step". As a student at Alverno College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, I have found the concepts and frameworks in my first general semantics course fascinating, and I have come to recognize the need for improvement in my communication skills.

For the course, I was given an assignment to write about the relevance of general semantics to me. I needed to find and then incorporate articles from the journal, *ETC.*, that could help me develop and focus my ideas. As I read articles by Paul Johnston and Martin Levinson, it became apparent my communication skills were not as refined as I had thought. The realization was humbling, and I felt disappointed as I reflected on my past communication experiences.

Other than when I am sleeping, I cannot imagine a situation in my life where general semantics doesn't have relevance (unless I talk in my sleep). I believe that understanding and implementing the models and principles of general semantics will help me to become a better student and has the potential to enrich my personal and professional relationships as well.

I suppose I was originally drawn to the professional communication major at Alverno College because I thought I was already a good communicator; but just a little knowledge of general semantics creates questions--as it should. First of all, what is *good* and whose definition should I use? What criteria will I apply and how and when will I know if I'm good? Perhaps, unconsciously at the start, but consciously now, my objective is to become a *better* communicator by using my new linguistic tools.

Awareness creates its own tension. Now that I have some insight into general semantics principles, there is no turning back for me. I am not a person who easily disregards newly acquired, pertinent information, especially when the concepts and frameworks seem so apparent. I could try to ignore or minimize what I know now, but not without feeling guilty.

In particular, I can use general semantics to reduce the isolation I sometimes feel as well as the alienation of others. In the fall 2001 issue of *ETC.*, Martin Levinson wrote an article, "A General Semantics Approach to Reducing Student Alienation." From December 1978 to April 1979, Levinson did a study of New York City junior high school

students who were disruptive, verbally abusive, doing poor academically and experimenting with drugs (pp. 259-273). The purpose of the study was to determine whether practicing general semantics by the students would have an effect in reducing their alienation and behavioral problems. Some of the philosophies and problem-solving methods the students studied and practiced were 'delayed reactions', distinguishing facts from inferences, the dangers of negative self-inferences, and the WIS ("what I say") is not equal to WIGO ("what is going on") formula.

The result of the study was that using general semantics principles did seem to reduce the problem of student alienation. If practicing general semantics had a positive effect on rebellious, New York City junior high school students, I would imagine that the effects would be equal to or greater for a mostly non-disruptive, drug-free, respectful college student such as me.

From a theoretical perspective, I believe using the 'delayed reaction' technique would facilitate my listening skills which could lead to making more effective evaluations and decrease snap judgments. I use the term *theoretical perspective* because while I have been thinking about delaying my reactions, I have not fully integrated this general semantics technique--yet.

To make effective evaluations and decisions, general semantics supports the use of 'delayed reactions.' This technique, which involves the human ability to consciously engage one's higher brain functions and delay reacting in order to evaluate appropriately a situation before one acts, tends to produce much better results than reacting quickly or impulsively in most situations (Levinson, 2001).

Levinson writes about the benefits in "most situations". I fully agree that the payback would not be limited to my interactions in an academic setting. As students at Alverno College, our communication does not have scholastic boundaries. In our team projects, small group discussions and extracurricular activities, the advantages of utilizing general semantics extends to our professional, social and personal relationships. When I become experienced at delaying my reactions, I believe my effectiveness as a student group leader and a participant in the classroom will be greatly enhanced.

To find the needle of meaning in the haystacks of nonsense that the other fellow is talking is to learn something, even from the apparently prejudiced and uninformed. And if the other fellow is equally patient about looking for the needle of meaning in our haystacks of nonsense, he may learn something from us. Ultimately, all civilized life depends upon the willingness on the part of all of us to learn as well as to teach. To delay one's reactions and to be able to say, "Tell me more," and then to listen before reacting... (Hayakawa, 1991, pp. 146-147).

Last semester I expressed to Professor of Philosophy, Donna Engelmann, my frustration with some of the "ridiculous" statements and observations made in class by other

students. My question was, “Why would she say *that*?” Dr. Engelmann recommended another way of framing the question as, “*Why* would she say that?” The first question is judgmental and assumes I know all there is to know about “that”. In the second example, emphasizing “why” shows that I am more open and looking for that “needle of meaning in the haystack.”

By delaying my reactions before I speak, as well as withholding judgment when I listen, I might be viewed as less intimidating and, therefore, more open-minded and approachable. I would probably feel less isolated and more in control. By delaying my reaction when I listen, I manage the impulse to immediately focus on my response, and instead I concentrate more on understanding the speaker's words. This could also extend to controlling my unspoken communication, i.e., body language. As my mother often said, "Wipe that look off your face," and my response would be, "What? I didn't *say* anything."

The premature reaction, verbal or nonverbal, conveys an expectation and pre-judgment based on my prior experiences and indicates I think I know all there is to know. After studying general semantics, I know that there is always more that can be learned or added (or in g.s terms, the extensional device of ‘etc.’).

Expectations can act as pre-judgments of unfolding situations or events. Such prejudice hinders you from an appropriately responsive evaluation of the specific event in the living present...overly high expectations may lead to harmful shocks to the nervous system, what you would call disappointments (Johnston, 2001).

Expectations may lead to disappointment in more than one way. I may be disappointed when my expectation is not realized, or conversely it can be equally disappointing when an expectation *is* met. No matter, either way, an expectation usually originates with an inference, as defined by Hayakawa (1991) as, "a statement about the unknown based on the known" (p. 24). Inferences are neither good nor bad (Johnson, 2003), but the conclusions drawn from them can lead to inaccurate evaluations.

...the common characteristic of inferences is that they are statements about matters that are not directly known, made on the basis of what has been observed. Generally speaking, the quality of inference is directly related to the quality of the report or observations from which it stems and to the abilities of the one making the inference (Hayakawa, 1991, p. 25).

The relevance of this quotation to me is that I need to consider the accuracy of my sources and maintain a healthy level of skepticism in my efforts to make more accurate, meaningful evaluations. I also need to reflect on my own inference-making abilities and appreciate that I can be the receiver of information as well as a sender. My pursuit of precise observations and appropriate responses will be never ending. I *do* know that the more I know, the more I realize how much I don't know. From that observation, I will infer that I am taking a step toward knowledge.

I can offer a personal example of the non-application of general semantics. This embarrassing disclosure includes slant, bias, inaccurate maps, snap judgments, *etc.* At the time of this confrontation, I didn't know about the extensional device, *etc.* If I had taken general semantics a semester earlier, I could have saved myself a lot of grief (hopefully).

A little over a year ago, I started attending the Thursday, lunchtime roundtable discussions at Alverno College. At that time, the controversial topic was the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Thinking that I knew a lot and eager to participate, I voiced my opinions on the horrific actions of the suicide bombers. I also had the viewpoint, historically speaking, that when a country "wins" a war against another, they shouldn't be expected at some future time to give the land back to them. After all, they won. With very little research or information, I definitely aligned myself with Israel.

At the discussions was a group of loud, emotional Palestinian students, one of whom was in my science class. After class one day, I asked Sadiqa, "Why are you so upset by what is going on in Israel and don't seem concerned about the murders of Muslims in India?" At that time, huge numbers of Muslims were being slaughtered by Hindus in India. She walked away from me saying, "You don't know what you're talking about. The situations aren't anywhere at all the same. The situation in India is about religion. Our issue is about land being taken away and the suffering of our people under the occupation of the Israelis. I'm not even going to talk to you about this."

A short time later, Sadiqa decided she *did* want to talk to me. Our discussion entailed her screaming at me in the cafeteria and my yelling back while a number of her friends stood by her and chimed in. Eventually, I was reduced to tears and couldn't understand why we were all so upset.

Why does one person tell me one thing *is* fact, or truth or right, and another tell me exactly the opposite?" This is one of the questions Paul Johnston asks in his article, "Escape from a Frozen Universe: Discovering General Semantics" (1989). His article intrigued me because I have struggled with similar issues regarding truth and knowledge. He writes, "Lacking reliable information, how can one negotiate a complex society without making mistakes?" *That* was my Oprah "a-ha" moment.

I have reflected on the aforementioned situation before, but not with the understanding and clarity general semantics provides. My first mistake was to accept everything I read in the newspapers or saw on television as *truth*. My second blunder was to think I had acquired all the information that was available about either side of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. I was responding intensionally when I presumed that I knew all I needed to know and accepted some aspects of the United States' televised and print versions of truth as fact. "*If objective truth does not exist, we view the world subjectively. We negotiate the truth. The most powerful negotiator wins,*" writes Johnston (1989). Or as I think of it, the most powerful *truth* wins whether it's true or not.

Knowing what I know now, I would have tried to keep my mind open by thinking, “There must be more information about this, and I need to have more knowledge about both sides.” Or I could have reframed my smug question to Sadiqa and asked if there were connections between the two groups of Muslims. Understanding some of the concepts of general semantics and knowing more (but not all) about the conflict, I can grasp why Sadiqa had such an emotional reaction.

Johnston (1989) speaks of his search for truth and knowledge when he writes, “In my search for definitions, I had written news stories, plays, humor, essays, articles, poetry, short stories, novels. I had belonged to an institution that gave its own slant to the truth and called it news.” It had never occurred to me that the media presented anything other than the unbiased, unembellished truth (Yes, I was that naive.). If I had been aware of extensional principles such as non-allness and non-identification, I might have researched additional sources before making uninformed judgments.

If I had been using general semantics, I would have thought about my abstracting process. Before I had more information about my Palestinian-American classmates, I had originally labeled them in my head as Puerto Rican. I had “figured out” they were probably not Mexican Americans or Native Americans, but since I didn’t know what their ethnic background was, the obvious conclusion to me was Puerto Rican. They were definitely not Caucasian—their skin was too dark and their hair was black, and they sometimes spoke a rapid, clipped foreign language. And that was all the information I needed to abstract their ethnicity. I was, as Johnston (1989) would say, abstracting “*what we think we know*.” It gets worse.

When I became aware of their Palestinian origins, I clustered them together in my mind with those “crazy people who blow themselves up and don’t care who they kill including little children.” After all, all Palestinians are alike, right? In the roundtable discussions, they explained that most of their countrymen were equally appalled by these murderous acts as everyone else. While they in no way condoned the suicide bombers, they tried to help us comprehend the desperation and misery of someone who is willing to blow herself to bits because she doesn’t know what else to do. By putting all Palestinians into one group of maniacal terrorists, I certainly wasn’t using the extensional device of indexing. If I had given more thought to person(1) not being the same as person(2), my communication would have been much more *sane* as Korzybski would say.

I was also operating under an Aristotelian system of logic that meant there were only good guys and bad guys. Johnston (1989) writes about his own struggle with this. “...I had learned an Aristotelian system of reasoning with which I perceived the world in terms of opposites: a thing *was*, or it was *not*. I thought in terms of black-white, beautiful-ugly, good-bad, dead-alive and so on.” Using an Aristotelian approach, I had to be either pro-Palestinian or pro-Israeli. Johnston refers to this “on-off logic” as allowing no middle ground. Sadiqa and I were both guilty of not seeing the situation as having degrees of reality. Being on opposite sides of the *truth* was an obstacle to our having meaningful dialogue.

It has always been confusing to me that intelligent people could have such dissimilar **'realities'**. Johnston resolved this for me in "Escape from a Frozen Universe" when he wrote, "Korzybski's model of *abstracting* explained to me that people 'know' different realities as they *abstract different pieces of a vast dynamic universe*, and it explained why people of equal intelligence, education and ability hold such different beliefs" (1989).

I have always liked to think of myself as a non-judgmental person, but general semantics taught me a lot that helps make me aware of some judgmental tendencies. After I stopped putting facts last, I learned I could explore last year's situation with an improved, saner framework. Sadiqa explained to me that many Palestinians, as do many Arabs, have a tendency to be loud and emotional in their exchange of ideas. They think nothing of it when they scream at each other, so this dimension of our disagreement was not a way of personally attacking me.

As Sadiqa and I got to know each other better, both of us progressed to lower rungs on the ladder of abstraction. She realized I wasn't a militant, anti-Palestinian, but rather I may have been misguided. She took it upon herself to provide me with more information, and I was able to acknowledge that not all Palestinians think alike about resolving conflict.

Over a period of time, I began to understand her 'reality' and many of my abstractions shifted. Things probably would have unfolded differently if we had both known and applied general semantics. However, when we began to approach each other more extensionally, by not making inaccurate assumptions and appreciating that we would never know everything about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict or each other, we gained an appreciation for our diversity and developed a mutually respectful friendship.

You can't write about general semantics without the inclusion of "the map does not equal the territory" and "the word (symbol) is not the thing." The application here is that the suicide bombers are not Sadiqa. Also, Sadiqa and I, at the time of the confrontation, were not the same as we were even a few minutes later when we hugged; nor were we the same less than a year later when she invited me to become an honorary member of the Muslim Student Association.

EPILOGUE

A couple of weeks ago, there was an interfaith prayer service for the faculty, students and staff of Alverno College. It consisted of music, reflections and readings about the world post-9/11 and the struggle for peace, unity and understanding. At one point, attendees were invited to express their thoughts and feelings about their experiences. A student named Eren, who is from Turkey and a Muslim, was the first person to speak. She wanted to thank the Alverno community for making her feel safe and accepted when many Muslims had been ostracized and attacked after 9-11. Next, the student I wrote about in my paper, Sadiqa, asked for the microphone. She spoke about our relationship and how it had started off with misunderstanding, frustration and anger. She went on to

say what a valuable, cherished friend I had become and announced that I had won an award for best paper by the Institute of General Semantics based on our experiences.

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