

GENERAL SEMANTICS AND HUMAN RELATIONS

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RECENTLY I was making a several hundred mile drive back to St. Louis. As my car rolled along at about sixty five miles an hour, I had the radio tuned up loud. Though I heard all the words and music, very little registred other than the comforting sound to keep me from getting too lonely on the road. It wasn't until I heard the narrator quoting from the life of Francis Bacon that I really got intersted: "The real prisoners are not behind iron bars," he said, "but are those whose minds are closed."

I pulled over to the side of the road and made a quick note of the expression. Here, I thought, was the essence of what the general semanticist is trying to achieve: Unlock the mind; let the people out of their verbal and nonverbal prisons; open their minds as well as their mouths. It seems to me that all around us every day we see evidence of the imprisoned mind – the mind that accepts opinion for fact and then proceeds to argue or act from it, the mind that confuses the word for the thing and then proceeds to act as if they were the same. Violation of these principles causes confusion, hurt, damage, disturbed personalities, etc.

This paper is not intended to be a learned discourse on general semantics, nor is it intended to announce any new or startling principles. It is rather a plea to make more general use of what little we do know in our daily lives, to learn from experiences in bad human relations how to turn them into better human relations, for ourselves and those with whom we come into contact daily.

Those of us who believe in general semantics ought to be to some extent evangelists in this field. I'm not, however, suggesting that we become obnoxious, boring, or demanding in our suggestions, teachings, or examples (I already know too many who are all of these things); but there are many people who need to be saved from themselves. I for one don't intend to save them by committing personal *hari kari* everytime I discuss general semantics, though the temptation to do so is almost irresistible on many occasions.

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Just a few days ago I read an interesting item in my Sunday paper on the subject, "Vacations: Helpful or Harmful?" I won't discuss the article other than to refer to one portion that made me want to call the author to get the name of an industrial psychologist who was quizzed and quoted on the subject. I wanted to tell him about the difference between the *word* and the *thing*, in case he didn't know, and suggest a whole list of good books before he destroyed more than he could repair or build in the field of human relations. Here is the portion that excited me: "Where has the idea of vacationing gone astray?" the author inquired. "One industrial psychologist thinks he has the answer. To find out what's wrong with vacations, let's look in the dictionary. Webster says a "vacation" is a "rest." How many fit that definition?"

Here, if ever I heard it, is putting the mind in a mental straight-jacket! And by an industrial psychologist. Look how simple it all is. Read Webster, and what he tells you the word is, accept it and act accordingly! I hate to think of the results of everyone accepting the idea of a vacation being just a "rest" — and all because Webster said so. I can only say that Webster's word is not my vacation; no matter what he says it is, my vacation is not going to be just rest. That would drive me just as nuts as overwork. My point is that the tragic acceptance of the dictionary word for the thing itself serves to lock the mind, and here is a prime example of how.

I once saw two old friends almost come to blows over a misinterpretation of words. It happened after one of our discussions on human relations with a group of foremen in a large steel mill. As the men were walking out, one foreman addressed another: "Say, Joe, how is your little girl?" The second foreman responded bluntly, "I don't have a little girl." This caused Foreman 1 to stop in his tracks, saying loudly, "Did I hear you right? Remember me, we have been friends for twenty-five years. I know damn well you have a little girl. Who are you trying to kid?" Foreman 2 began to get pretty excited: "I tell you I don't have any little girl!" Foreman 1: "Who the hell are you trying to make a fool of? I know you have a sixteen-year-old daughter, and don't try to tell me I'm crazy! She was over at our house last night." "Oh," said Foreman 2, "If you are talking about our young daughter, that's different. Why didn't you say so?" They both calmed down, though the poor foreman who had asked the simple question had a hard time figuring it all out. "Little girl" to Foreman 1 was obviously not "little girl" to Foreman 2, although equally obviously they were talking about the same person.

We called the entire group back into session to discuss the misunderstanding further. It happened that the "little girl" or "young daughter," whichever you wish, was an only child who had been pampered and babied to such an extent that as she grew older she was treated — and acted — as if she were still a little girl. Consultation with the family doctor resulted in the suggestion that not only should this girl no longer be babied but she should under no circumstances be again referred to in such words as "baby" or "little girl."

Recently I attended a party at which some very distinguished persons were present. One, a college professor, made the flat statement that "all newspapermen are crooks, intellectually dishonest, and not to be trusted." The wife of a former newspaperman in our company overheard the remarks. There was quite a heated discussion. The distinguished gentleman who said "all newspapermen" finally found that the only way out of the argument was to admit, reluctantly, that only some newspapermen fell into the category in which he had lumped them all. If he had followed some simple principles of general semantics, he could have saved himself considerable trouble in the first place. If what he meant was "all the newspapermen I know," or "in my opinion, newspapermen are. . .," or if he meant "only some newspapermen," there would have been very little cause for aroused emotions.

My first encounter with "opinion versus fact" was not in any book on general semantics; as a matter of fact, at the time I had not even heard the term. During World War II, when I was assigned to the office of the air surgeon, I met a Dr. Karpovitch who taught at the School of Aviation Medicine at Randolph Field, Texas. Dr. Karpovitch was an authority in the field of physical medicine, and I was assigned to write a handbook on physical exercise for combat casualties. This brought us together frequently. I recall a conversation on one of his periodic visits to the Pentagon Building; it was something like this:

I asked, "Dr. Karpovitch, why do athletes, particularly those who have gone into strenuous professional athletics such as football, always die young?" Karpovitch replied, "You have proof of this statement?" I said, "Everybody knows that this is true. You read about it in the papers all the time." Karpovitch lectured me: "Young man, there are several tomes written on this subject. I am probably the only man who has read all of them. Each of them disagrees with the other. But now, you tell me everybody knows!" I backed away from my statement, mostly to calm the doctor down, and said, "What I really meant was — it is my opinion that professional athletes die young." Whereupon

Karpovitch said, "Ah, this is your opinion! With opinions I cannot argue. Only with facts do I argue." That did it!

This was my first real map/territory lesson. I found out that because I said something was so, I didn't make it so. From that point on, Karpovitch and I got along beautifully. His simple statement, "With opinions I cannot argue," served to unlock what might have been a semantic block for me, one which could have kept us arguing interminably.

Recently August A. Busch, Jr., president of Anheuser-Busch and the St. Louis Cardinals, was summoned to appear before a United States Senate committee in Washington. The bill being considered was one by Senator Edwin Johnson of Colorado who, it was stated, was trying to drive Mr. Busch out of baseball or out of the brewing business. Either would have suited the senator, who called Mr. Busch some really bad names on the senate floor. "Gussie" Busch saved himself a lot of mental anguish, and incidentally made quite an impression on the senators, when he differentiated between Senator Johnson's opinion of him and the facts. Here in part is how Mr. Busch did it:

When Senator Johnson said that baseball was to me a cold-blooded, beer-peddling business and not the great American game which sportsmen revere, he was of course entitled to his opinion, and I would not waste the time of this committee arguing about it. But when he is quoted as saying, "We give away baseball and take a nice fat tax deduction in doing it," that is something else again.

Either Senator Johnson is not completely familiar with the tax laws which govern, or he has been given inaccurate information about us. In any case, he is in error, and the statement completely distorts our situation. A sworn statement to this effect from our tax counsel has already been given to the chairman of the committee. I am attaching a copy of this statement, marked exhibit "A." I believe that we are entitled to have the facts clear and unmistakable; and I am sure you gentlemen will want them so.

When Busch finished his presentation, all of which was along these lines, Senator Langer, in an unprecedented act for him, leaned over and shook Busch's hand, telling him he was the best and most forthright witness ever to appear before the committee, on which the senator had been a member for almost fifteen years.

Since we are close to the subject of baseball, let me cite another example of how a general semantic approach can be helpful. Eddie

Stanky, as I am reasonably sure even the learned members of the International Society for General Semantics are aware, is the manager of the St. Louis Cardinals. In a conversation with Eddie one day, I asked him how he kept from "blowing his top" with all the problems he had. Pitchers were exploding in his face, his catchers had been hurt, his batters were hitting hardly at all, etc., etc. Stanky looked at me coolly and said, "Because I don't recognize them as *problems* — concerns, yes, but problems, no!"

This distinction intrigued me. It was very much like Hayakawa's "filet mignon versus dead cow"; one makes your mouth water, the other makes you want to vomit. Or could this be a case of the lady who, when told by her doctor that she had cancer, said, "Cancer — schmancer. What's the difference as long as you're healthy?"

"What," I asked Stanky, "is the difference?" Slowly — and I thought a little condescendingly — Mr. Stanky said that to him problems are things that keep piling up. Sometimes the answers to problems are not easily found, at all. This has a tendency to cause worry, and worry is not good for a man in the baseball business. Tomorrow brings another day, another game. Now a concern, he said, that was something different. "Concerns don't pile up. It concerns me that our pitching staff doesn't seem to be able to get the ball over the plate, or our batters seem not to be on speaking terms with the opposing outfield, etc. I try to figure out what can or should be done to relieve each of my concerns, but they don't get me down. Maybe it doesn't make sense to you," he concluded, "but it works for me."

Not bad for a fellow who would probably ask you for Korzybski's batting average if you mentioned his name — because he can certainly tell you Jablonski's or Repulski's. "Doesn't make sense," he says! It made so much sense to me that I have become practically allergic to the use of the word "problem." And if that doesn't make sense to you, make the most of it!

Last March, I was assigned the task of talking to Tom Alston, the first Negro ever to play with the St. Louis Cardinals. I went into considerable detail with Tom about what he was likely to run into playing for the mid-southern city team that I suggested some of the names he might be called and discussed his possible reactions. I said that, much as he might want to control himself, it might be very hard after awhile. When he would lose his temper and react to name calling, I pointed out in my best general semantics approach, he would be confusing the "name" he was called for the "thing" he was. I said that a

man was not what he was because someone called him that. I thought I was making quite an impression.

Alston listened patiently for the thirty or forty-five minutes it took me to get the idea across. When I was through, he leaned over and said, "Mr. Fleishman, if you're trying to tell me there are people that don't like Negroes, I ought to be fair with you and tell you that I already know that. I also should tell you how I feel about them. I feel sorry for them. I really pity people who don't like other people just because their skin is a different color — don't look the same as they do!" This was one time my expounding a few of the principles of general semantics was pretty much a waste of time. Alston was way ahead of me.

Then there is the case of the hostess in an airplane caught in a bad storm. She says, "Folks, please fasten your safety belts; it will be less dangerous." She throws many of the passengers into a state of hysteria in spite of what she must think is all-out effort to calm them. "Safety" and "dangerous" she implants into their minds. But here is another hostess who urges the passengers to "fasten your seat belts; you'll be more comfortable." The reaction to "safety" versus "seat belts" and to "dangerous" versus "comfortable" is obvious and pretty easy to understand.

Perhaps these are oversimplifications of general semantics in action in the field of human relations, but in these and many other cases and situations, the principles make sense — and that's what is most important, it seems to me.

On the desk of an office executive, it is reported, there is a small card which says, "Samson was a piker! He killed only a thousand men with the jawbone of an ass. Every hour in the day, thousands of people are mortally hurt with the same weapon." How true that is!

I don't think that the damage being done to each other in our daily lives is the result of talking too much or using too many words. It is not knowing enough about what we really want to say, or believing that because we say something is so, it really is so. Applying the principles of general semantics can be helpful in our communication problems. In my judgment, it can almost work miracles in obtaining cooperation, in changing attitudes, in preventing lost tempers, endless arguments, ruffled feelings, ulcers, and sometimes actual hurt.