

## **GENERAL SEMANTICS AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION<sup>†</sup>**

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**S**EVERAL YEARS AGO, while conducting some research in my neighboring country, Korea, I heard from an influential Korean journalist about a little incident in Seoul.

At the grand opening of the Lotte Department Store, which is a joint venture of Japan and Korea, Korean sales clerks bowed deeply, Japanese-style, to greet Korean dignitaries. In Japan, department stores train their employees very carefully to treat customers in the most polite fashion; the Japanese managers had trained the Korean employees accordingly. The dignitaries and invitees at the opening felt very strange to see Korean sales clerks bowing deeply in Japanese style. The sight struck them as artificial and distasteful since it was not the Korean way. On the following day in the newspapers, there was a big write-up headed, "CULTURAL INVASION."

Upon hearing this information, I was surprised to learn that the Koreans do *not* bow deeply as a formal greeting at an initial meeting with dignitaries. Since Seoul is only two hours away from Tokyo by air, the Japanese never dreamed that their way of bowing deeply would appear strange to the Korean people.

When I saw the newspaper headline, "CULTURAL INVASION," I felt hurt. To me it was simple ignorance on the part of the Japanese managers, far from a "cultural invasion." I am confident that Japanese business people try to maintain a sincere attitude toward joint ventures in Korea.

Why was I hurt by the newspaper headline? At the moment I forgot to apply one of the basic principles of general semantics: "The map is not the territory." The words "cultural invasion" are just words (a map), not to be confused with the intentions of the Japanese people (the territory to which the words refer).

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† Excerpted from a speech delivered at the United Nations meeting of NonGovernmental Organizations in 1985.

These words did not represent the Japanese managers' intentions. Because I carelessly and quickly identified the map with the territory, my feelings were hurt.

It is our task to differentiate words from nonverbal facts, the map from the territory. If we have awareness, we can observe more accurately, report more objectively and less emotionally. Our knowledge of general semantics principles can help us engage in healthier, saner communication. Had the Korean journalists some knowledge of general semantics, they might have avoided their early conclusion and chosen words other than "cultural invasion."

Fortunately, the Korean telling me of the incident seemed to believe that the Japanese were sincere but just didn't know the Korean culture. At the same time, he indicated that the newspaper headline was a consequence of ignorance of another culture.

How do we react when other people display ignorance of our culture? Usually by feeling unpleasant, disgusted or sometimes a bit hurt. I have found that a knowledge of general semantics principles can play an essential role in understanding and improving intercultural communication.

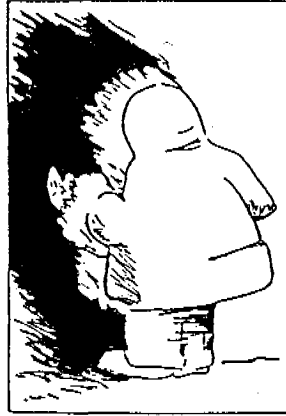
The first basic principle of general semantics—the map is not the territory—means that the verbal world cannot be equated with the nonverbal world, with its complex structures so diverse, heterogeneous and multifarious. Remaining aware of this principle helps insure successful communication at the intercultural level.

Another principle needing emphasis is that the map does not cover all of the territory. The map, "cultural invasion," could not show us all of what the Korean journalists meant. Looking back to the historical relationship between the two countries, there is much to consider. Remembering that the conclusions we reach, the decisions we make, are based on only part of the relevant evidence will help us keep open-minded, better prepared to discover and accept additional information.

In our age of intercultural communication, the role of listener is very important—just as in baseball the catcher is as important as the pitcher. Listening to people with different cultural backgrounds is not only hearing and evaluating what they say. Intercultural listening means making an effort to understand what we do not understand.

In *Handling Barriers in Communication*, Irving J. Lee tells us how to avoid other possible errors. Instead of searching for what "words mean," look for what "people mean." Instead of "words are containers of meaning," assume that "people are containers of meaning." He emphasizes that it is a mistake to assume that the speaker is using words the same way the listener would if the listener were doing the talking. Words, according to Lee, are just pointers used by individuals because people perceive differently.

Here are some examples that have been used to illustrate individual differences in perception:



In the first figure, some people see a duck, some people see a rabbit, and others alternately see a duck and a rabbit. In the second picture, some see the profile of an Indian while others see the back of an Eskimo walking away, and still others alternately see both.

From responding to these pictures, we can gather that people *see differently* and *evaluate differently*. Such an understanding helps form the basis for successful intercultural communication.

I have learned that what may strike us as the peculiarities of a culture are often the most beloved and precious properties of the people immersed in that culture. They become peculiarities, strange experiences or shocking phenomena to outsiders only when outsiders are not prepared to accept and tolerate them.

In dealing with members of another culture, extensional devices can be used to help enable the listener to distinguish and react to nonverbal realities instead of verbal expressions. The five such devices briefly mentioned below are useful aids in keeping our minds open when listening and speaking.

Use "et cetera" as a reminder that people cannot say or know all about anything; use indexing to show that no two things are identical; use dating to show that no one thing is ever twice the same; use quotation marks as a reminder that a word is not being used in its usual sense; and use hyphens to unite elemental terms to produce non-elemental terms. This summary of extensional devices draws from *General Semantics: An Outline Survey* by Kenneth Johnson.

Using these devices will help improve mutual understanding in intercultural communication.