

"In birding, as in other areas of life, just saying something doesn't make it so, no matter how much you want it."

THE WORD "IS NOT"

THE BIRD

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DO YOU REMEMBER a moment when you really "got" the general semantics formulation that "the word is not the thing?" I remember vividly one such experience. I had just spent 30 minutes creeping around under a tree in my back yard, trying to identify a bright and cheery warbler feeding in the branches above my head. With binoculars in one hand and my Peterson guide in the other, I methodically applied the scientific method to determine the identity of this tiny creature as it searched leaf after leaf for its bug dinner. Occasionally it opened its little beak wide and produced a wonderful and very memorable 8-noted song, which has since become one of my favorite signs of spring.

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As I eliminated first one and then another possibility, I narrowed the field to the only *possible* choice. In the course of one breath, my thinking went through three distinct stages. First triumph — I said to the bird, "I KNOW you! You're a Black-Throated Gray Warbler!" Next, less than a heartbeat later, chagrin — I said, this time to myself, "What? You don't KNOW this bird, you know a NAME. You just learned something about TAXONOMY, not about *this bird!*" And finally, hilarity — I laughed 'til I cried, at how I had tricked myself into this seductive but silly confusion of abstractions.

Birding has provided me with any number of similar GS life lessons. At the same time, I think my experience with general semantics has made me a more effective birder. To track down and identify these elusive, wary, and profoundly three-dimensional life-forms, I find many aspects of general semantics training valuable and even essential. I think many birders "practice" GS formulations without even knowing it.

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For example, birders talk about the "jizz" of a bird, a certain undefined quality that aids an experienced birder in the identification of a species. I think of jizz as the "organism-as-a-whole" for a bird. In a single concept, we can refer to the bird's location, habits, general family, and feeding preference and then abstract from that the species to which it likely belongs. While beginners sometimes mistake the application of this concept for arrogance on the part of the expert, in fact, experience and observation do increase a veteran birder's ability to extract more meaning from a shorter glimpse than those just starting out.

In birding, observation must take precedent over verbalization. If I enter an area having already told myself what birds I will see, I have a much greater tendency to miss a lot of birds. If I name a bird based solely on a brief peek, my precipitous leap to the verbal level might blind me to additional characteristics that would point to a different species or family altogether. And if I don't take the time to look carefully at a given bush, stick, or riverbank, to listen to the tangled tapestry of forest sounds, to consciously employ my senses, I might assume that "there are no birds here" when in fact, they have simply blended into their surroundings as a natural defense against intruders like me.

Most birders prefer to bird in the company of others. This increases the odds of spotting and identifying more species — four eyes see more than two, so to speak. When birding with others, I find my verbal skills challenged in several interesting ways. If I spot a bird in a tree and I want to direct my companion's attention to that bird, I must use very precise language to help him zero in. I cannot just say, "It's in that tree there." Instead, I might say, "Do you see the three oaks, two close together and one about three feet to the right? The middle oak branches twice, first about ten feet up, then again about three feet higher. Follow the top left branch until it crosses the trunk of the ash tree behind it. Just where they cross, you should see a Pileated Woodpecker peeking out. Watch. There, it just peeked. Did you see it?"

This requires *observation*, to see more than just "trees," *categorization*, to distinguish between "oaks" and "ash trees" and *precision*, to lead from one logical landmark to the next. With some effort and a little luck, my companion finds the bird quickly enough to observe it before it moves on. Without this kind of precision, birding with friends can deteriorate into driving home with enemies.

Another challenge to language skills, not to mention tact, comes when I believe a less experienced birding partner has erred in the identification of a bird. I cannot simply say, "No, you are wrong." For one thing, we might just end up in a *t'is-tain't* dilemma, especially if the bird has left the premises already and we cannot refer back to the source. For another, one cannot rely absolutely on one's longer experience to guarantee accuracy. Better to take a diplomatic and factual approach. I have learned to say something like "Gee, a blue-footed booby, really? You think so? That would cause a bit of a stir around here. Can't remember the last time we had such a thing here in Portland You know, I thought I saw a flatter bill than this picture in the guide. And I completely missed any blue feet. Any chance we saw this somewhat similar Mallard instead?" Drawing my companion back to the book, with its pictures, descriptions and maps, usually draws her back to reality and results in a judicious rethinking of the claim. In birding, as in other areas of life, just saying something doesn't make it so, no matter how much you want it.

Of course, birds move around a lot. Not only can they fly, giving them an added dimension for travel not available to the flightless birder trying to follow them, but a lot of them also change homes on a regular basis, moving from a summer territory to a winter territory and back as seasons change. I find dating and indexing essential birding tools. Knowing some-

thing about the habits and preferences of various species, and armed with a little bit of meteorological information, one can base a birding foray on the knowledge that swallow₁ "is not" swallow₂. You can go to Capistrano in March and undoubtedly find many swallows of some kind, perhaps of several kinds. But, if you have seen all the violet-green and barn swallows you can handle, but would really like to see a cave swallow, a little research will show that you must travel to southeastern New Mexico, during cave swallow breeding season in June.

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At the base of my enjoyment of birding lie two important and repeated lessons, one about the internal world and one about the external. When I concentrate all of my senses on the world outside my head, as I must do to observe birds with some degree of accuracy, I have to quiet the verbal internal motor. This exercise on the object level renews my perspective on my existence relative to that level and improves my sense of contentment and comfort, like meditation for a monk or sleep for an insomniac.

And when I observe a bird in its natural environment, going about its usual business and surviving and thriving, if I pay close attention to it instead of to my words about it, I learn again the difference in abstractions between "cute little fluffy Tweetie-bird" and an adult non-human individual, functioning as competently in its environment as I do in mine. This puts me in my place, a good thing to have happen now and then, in my opinion.