NEW TECHNIQUES OF AGREEMENT*

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IF WE define semantics as the study of the ways in which human beings interact through the use of linguistic and other symbols, our first task is to distinguish between the kinds of interaction that result from linguistic processes. To start out with an extremely broad distinction, there are those linguistic processes that result in human cooperation, and there are those that result in conflict. As the result of some kinds of verbal interchange, friendships are created, affections or loyalties are nourished, social order is created, and there is established, through the long and patient refinement of linguistic means, that precise coordination of human effort required in all socialized human activity: government, science, industry, and commerce. However, in certain other kinds of verbal interchange, such as in misunderstandings, name-calling, bickering, quarreling, and doctrinal disputes, the result, if the interchange continues long enough, is the cessation of linguistic processes altogether, and there is resort to non-linguistic means of settlement, such as fisticuffs, riots, lockouts, strikes, wars.

Of course, human beings have been concerned with this problem of cooperation and conflict since time immemorial. If the student of semantics has anything new to contribute to the discussion, it lies in the emphasis he places upon the linguistic aspects of cooperation and conflict. Both cooperation and conflict, on the scale in which these matters concern us socially, involve innumerable verbal exchanges before they are manifest at the subverbal level. For example, in a mass production industry, the elaborate apportionment of tasks, the coordination of the efforts of thousands of men and women, and the bringing together of all that division of labor into a unity of product, requires that a constant stream of thousands upon thousands of verbal communications a day, both written and oral, be issued and understood. An equally impressive amount of wordage, although of a different kind, is required to arouse the resentments, the fears, the moral and patriotic passions necessary to have a war. Innumerable fists have to be pounded on tables; scores of diplomats must stamp out of conferences to dramatize the intended cessation of linguistic processes; millions of words at cross purposes must be issued over press and radio in the rival nations, before the shooting begins. Without this wordage we might well have the condition

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imagined by the little girl who asked, 'Suppose they gave a war and nobody came?'

Some linguistic processes, then, lead to cooperation (or at least to a willingness to live and let live, which, although it is an agreement to disagree, is an agreement none the less) ; other linguistic processes lead to increasing bitterness and conflict. If the student of semantics has a task to perform, it is that of laying bare some of the mechanics of controversy and the techniques of agreement. I believe that we have today at least three (there are certainly more) bodies of theoretical and practical knowledge which have not been available to past students of agreement and conflict, and it is with these three that I shall concern myself today. The first is the nondirective counseling techniques of Carl Rogers and the theories and speculations to which they have given rise; the second is the experimentation in group dynamics largely stemming from the example and inspiration of the late Kurt Lewin; the third is the general semantics of Alfred Korzybski, which is a system purporting to describe and to prescribe for wider application the linguistic assumptions underlying science—science being in his view the outstanding example of successful, large-scale organized human cooperation.

Before proceeding to these three topics, however, I should like to call attention to the fact that in the question, 'How can people be made to agree?' there are always two little words omitted which ought to be there. The question ought to read, as we ordinarily understand the expression, 'How can people be made to agree *with us?*' For each of us has his own little private conviction of rightness, and, almost by definition, the Utopian condition of which we all dream is that in which all people finally see the error of their ways and agree with us. And underlying practically all our attempts to bring about agreement is the assumption that agreement is brought about by changing people's minds—*other* people's. Most of the verbs describing an agreement successfully and ideally arrived at are transitive: I persuaded him, I convinced him, I sold him on the idea, I educated him, I straightened him out, I cured him of his delusions, and so on. The almost invariable assumption is that somebody *does something to* the misguided individual in order to bring him to a realization of the truth. Hence the importance in Western civilization of the arts of rhetoric and persuasion, nowadays debased into the arts of salesmanship and how to make friends and influence people. Hence, too, the emphasis throughout our culture on propaganda and educational campaigns whenever anyone feels the need of doing anything about anything. Not that I am opposed to education or propaganda as such. I simply wish to call attention to the underlying assumption of all such endeavors: That something is done to someone in the educative and persuasive process. In the public relations profession, where these matters are discussed at a more sophisticated level, people talk of the 'engineering of consent.' Here too the same assumption is at work.

Nondirective Counseling

SOME YEARS ago Dr. Carl Rogers, then at Ohio State University and now at the University of Chicago, worked out a technique of psychotherapy which has proved remarkably efficacious. He found that his patients (or clients, as he prefers to call them) could counsel themselves much better than he could counsel them. While much of his technique will sound familiar to many psychotherapists since Freud, he made a radical innovation in making a central therapeutic principle of *not* giving the patient (or client) *any* orders, advice, interpretations, censure, or praise—indeed, refraining even from guiding the channels of the patient's conversation—in short, being completely *nondirective.* The therapist is simply the sympathetic listener extraordinary—and the more skillfully the therapist listens, the more does the patient get insight into his own problems by his efforts to formulate them in words. How little the role of listening is understood in our over-verbalized culture, and how little appreciation there is of the disciplines and skills required to listen well, is indicated by the fact that Dr. Rogers' method has been scornfully called the 'uh-huh' technique, on the fictitious grounds that all the therapist does is to sit there and say 'uh-huh' to the patient now and then.

An impressive literature of the results obtained by Dr. Rogers' method is being accumulated. What appears to happen in the nondirective counseling situation is that, when there is a completely sympathetic and skillful listener, the patient utters more and more freely his beliefs, opinions and attitudes; then, finding his opinions and attitudes *accepted and understood,* the patient becomes free, for the first time, to *examine* his attitudes instead of just *having* them. The giving of advice or criticism of his attitudes usually results in his defending them, rather than examining them. In the course of being warmly and fully understood in the permissive environment which the therapist creates for him, the patient ultimately comes to ask revealing questions about himself, such as, 'I wonder why I feel this way?' In other words, he gradually ceases simply to react to his problem world of wife, children, parents, employer, or whatever. He goes beyond this and begins to become conscious of the fact that it is his way of evaluating his situation that helps to make it the problem that it is. Needless to say, the therapist throughout this process is entering imaginatively into the patient's situation, trying to see it as the patient sees it. Finding himself completely accepted, the patient becomes dissatisfied with his own formulations of his problem, and step by step begins to improve them. As he progressively improves his reformulations of his problem, he ultimately *restructuralizes* them completely; the original problem is no longer there; the problem as *restructuralized* usually turns out to be capable of solution. Confident now of being able to solve his own problem, the patient departs.

The importance of Dr. Rogers' experience and writings to students of semantics is obvious. He and other psychologists of the nondirective school have

used the wire-recorder extensively; hence they have been studying and analyzing, to a degree not hitherto possible, the mechanics of the ways in which people interact in counseling and group therapy situations. The kinds of response that encourage further communication and those that arouse hostility and defensiveness are analyzed and compared. These psychologists are able now not only to affirm, but also to produce wire-recordings that demonstrate, the mechanisms of personal interaction in situations in which words are exchanged. What has been discovered in these analyses has been put together into a body of coherent theory regarding human personality and the conditions under which it changes towards greater integration. In short, a simple and coherent account has been rendered of the conditions under which people change their minds or refuse to do so.

Broadly speaking, what appears to be the case is this: A change of attitudes is necessarily self-induced. The transitive verbs mentioned earlier, implying an actor and someone acted upon, 'persuade,' 'convince,' 'teach,' 're-educate,' are false to psychological fact. The therapist does not 'cure' the patient; he can only create the conditions which enable the patient to re-educate himself. By 're-educating himself' I mean that the patient confronts reality more fully and squarely than he had been able to do before. The therapeutic interviews in which he is, perhaps for the first time in his life, genuinely and understandingly listened to, appear to be the agency that gives him the strength to face reality. When I say that the therapist does not 'cure' the patient, I mean that the patient has not been forced or persuaded or cajoled into accepting the therapist's definition of reality. The patient is more familiar with the reality he has to face than the therapist can ever be. It is his own real situation—his own reality—that the patient ultimately comes to terms with.

D R. ROGERS feels that the principles of nondirective counseling have enormous implications outside the therapeutic situation. As he says in his booklet, *Dealing with Social Tensions* (New York: Hinds, Hayden & Eldredge, 1948):

> As we have seen from the clinical illustrations [given earlier in his text], the 'cure' for a husband's suspicion of his wife, or a union leader's bitterness toward management, lies not in some more powerful psychological pressure which can be brought by others, but within the individual himself, through the release of constructive forces by procedures we are already beginning to understand. It also appears possible that the 'cure' for hatred between Jews and non-Jews, between Negro and white, lies not in external psychological forces which can be brought to bear, but lies within the fearful and antagonistic groups themselves. It is within the situations in which we find discord and bitterness that we may also find the positive and creative and integrative strengths which may be released through a catalytic type of therapy to bring about the resolution of conflicts. This is the note of hope which we feel is justified by our experience with a client-centered therapy in individual and group situations.

Group Dynamics

EQUALLY important for our purposes in studying the kinds of linguistic inter-
action that result in cooperation or conflict is the kind of research which
has been going on for some years in what is called 'group dynamics.' The Re-
search Center for Group Dynamics, now at the University of Michigan, was
founded at Massachusetts Institute of Technology by the late Kurt Lewin. It
was his conviction, and it is that of his successors in the work, that 'it is possible
to undertake experiments in sociology which have as much right to be called
scientific experiments as those in physics and chemistry.' It is this conviction
that animates the research (in which again the wire-recorder is indispensable)
now being carried out on such topics as the following: the importance of group
membership as a source of security and insecurity in individuals; the relation-
ships between group identification and individual beliefs; the effects on the in-
dividual of multiple group membership; the effects of hierarchic structure in
determining the character of groups; the channels of communication within
groups and the effects of success and failure in intra-group communication; the
kinds of leadership there are, and the effects of various kinds of leadership on
group functioning and structure; the conditions governing the relationships
between contiguous or interacting groups.

How do individuals in a group situation such as a conference change their
minds? The mechanics appear to be somewhat as follows. Each individual in
a group situation has at least two levels of motivation. First is the surface or
public level of motivation: the justifications of his position which he utters
without hesitation; the prepared statements he may release to the press; the de-
mands he will urge and dramatize and argue for. The second is the unacknowl-
edged or private level of motivation: the things he knows and doesn't say be-
cause he thinks the other fellow already knows them; things he knows and
doesn't say for fear of possible loss of face; the things he knows and doesn't
say for fear of the advantage which that knowledge might give to the other
fellow; finally, the things he knows but which he is not ready to acknowledge
to himself, let alone to others.

Out of the researches in group dynamics arises an extraordinarily useful
generalization, namely, that in group problem-solving, once a social atmosphere
is created in which unacknowledged motivations can be openly acknowledged,
once people begin to say the things it hadn't occurred to them to say or were
afraid of saying, entirely new factors are brought into the problem *which pro-
foundly alter the problem.* The protracted dispute over wages turns out to be a
misunderstanding on the part of one party or both of the terms of a contract.
The mutual accusations of conspiracy and defamation of character flung at each
other by a shop supervisor and the chief repair man turn out to be a result of
an imperfect system for the channeling of orders. Once the unsaid and the un-

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acknowledged is brought to light, the original problem is often not there any more. Another, more readily soluble, has taken its place.

Research in group dynamics, then, has been research into the conditions under which people move, or fail to move, in their group conference situations, from the public levels of acknowledged motivations to the deeper levels of previously unacknowledged motivations. Group discussions and group work under different conditions and styles of leadership have been systematically studied and compared. From such studies, two general conclusions emerge. The first is that on the whole ten heads are better than one, and a hundred better than ten. The solutions arrived at by successful group intercommunication are usually different from and better than any of those proposed at the beginning by any one individual, even the most brilliant among them. Furthermore, the decisions arrived at by groups have a more lasting effect than those imposed by authority. The second conclusion is that certain social skills are necessary in a leader or chairman before an environment can be created which permits collective decisions to take shape and become crystallized. These skills are capable of being learned and transmitted. Shop foremen and employers and office supervisors have been shown to be capable of acquiring techniques and skills that result in more harmonious and more effective group functioning.[1]

But successful leadership, as Kurt Lewin says, is a paradoxical kind of thing. The leader who produces the most lasting and thorough changes in group behavior is he who apparently does the least pushing around and 'leading,' just as in non-directive counseling that therapist appears to be best who does the least 'treating.' One is reminded of the paradox of Laotse who said over 2,500 years ago that the greatest leader is he who seems to follow.

The implications of the idea that leadership is a skill appear to me to be of great importance. A certain defeatism and fatalism has invaded many of us in recent years. Cultural anthropologists have shown how our social problems are deeply rooted in patterns of culture, and they have done this so well that it has sometimes seemed as if our problems are insoluble — for how does one go about changing an entire culture? A similar fatalism invades us when people of both a psychoanalytic and pessimistic turn of mind tell us that the world's problems are due to profound neurotic needs from which none of us is free. If, however, the task of leadership is conceived of as a skill in creating those group environmental conditions that enable fuller communication within and between groups, and if it is true that such communication often restructuralizes

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[1] It is held by students of group dynamics that the leader needs more than 'skills' and 'techniques'; he needs to have (or to develop) a certain kind of nonaggressive, sympathetic, and flexible personality. Since social processes are processes of interaction, it appears that the successful practice of group dynamics 'skills' gradually influences the personality of the practitioner in the direction of greater sympathy, warmth, and imaginative insight into the problems of others.

problems that formerly appeared insoluble, then the training of leaders so oriented offers us a hope of an increasing number of groups capable of arriving at working agreements in spite of inherited patterns of culture and the universal Oedipus complex.

Such leaders are emerging, of course, not only from training in group dynamics, but also from training in applied anthropology in industrial relations such as is reported by R. J. Roethlisberger, Burleigh Gardner, and many others. Also government conciliators in labor relations are evolving, under the pressure of urgent need, techniques of agreement that are often remarkably successful. (We don't hear often about the successes, because it is the failures that make the headlines). Many business leaders, sometimes with and sometimes without benefit of psychological or sociological assistance, have worked out techniques of lasting agreement that keep their industries operating without strife. This wide-spread interest in group relations, of which group dynamics is only one of many symptoms, gives real promise, I believe, that as time goes on more and more will be discovered regarding the conditions of human agreement and of human conflict.

General Semantics

NEXT, I should like to call attention to the general semantics of the late Alfred Korzybski, author of a much-debated and little-read book, *Science and Sanity* (1933). General semantics is an extraordinarily provocative study of the act of interpretation, or, as Korzybski prefers to call it, the act of evaluation. Whatever impinges on us from our environment, whether things or events or symbols or words, we interpret or evaluate; sometimes our ways of evaluating and verbalizing our evaluations lead to quarrels, conflicts, vicious circle controversies; at other times our patterns of evaluation lead to successful problem-solving. Korzybski was impressed with the fact that the same human intelligence which is capable of extraordinary feats of cooperative problem-solving in such areas as science and technology is, in other areas, such as philosophy, politics, and human relations, constantly embroiled in controversy and dispute. What he undertook to do was to try to lay bare the differences between the successful methods of science and the unsuccessful or prescientific methods of problem-solving so common in other areas of human activity.

The following are some of the contrasts which he delineated, and while it is admitted that he is neither the first nor the only one to point out one or another of the specific items of contrast, he was certainly the first to bring them together into a systematic theory of agreement upon which to base a theory of education.

Scientists, Korzybski says, often create, for purposes of explaining and ordering phenomena, heuristic fictions, but insofar as they remain scientists,

they treat their fictions as fictions. Those of prescientific habits of mind also create heuristic fictions, but treat them as real entities. So doing, they people their minds with gremlins, plogglies, and other such verbal hobgoblins. This is an instance of treating words as things.

Scientists often make inferences and hypotheses in proceeding from the known to the unknown; those of prescientific habits of mind, like the editorial writers who have figured out with impressive finality that President Truman is trying to establish a police state or the paranoiac who believes that he has been institutionalized as the result of a vast international Jewish conspiracy, also make inferences and hypotheses, but treat them as established facts.

Scientists, finding a question insoluble, re-examine the question; they try to reformulate it in such a way as to become capable of yielding an answer, or, if it is not susceptible to such reformulation, they abandon it to the philosophers. Those of prescientific habits of mind, finding a question insoluble, select answers that meet their emotional or economic or political needs and fight for them.

Scientists check their statements against experience and controlled experiment; those of prescientific habits of mind stick to their statements against the evidence of experience or experiment.

Scientists are deeply aware of the fact that their statements about reality are not reality itself; they are always conscious of the fact that language, far from being a transparent medium, is one which, in the very act of reporting reality, imposes a structure upon it. Scientists are always seeking, therefore, languages of new structure, such as novel mathematical languages, in order to formulate their observations in more fruitful ways. Those of prescientific habits of mind take their language for granted; they therefore think, feel and act in terms of the philosophical and scientific assumptions of our primitive linguistic ancestors such as lie embedded in our everyday speech.

Scientists treat their abstractions as abstractions; they distinguish sharply the increasing orders of abstraction as when they proceed from more limited to more general statements. Those of prescientific habits of mind remain largely unaware of the selective, abstractive, and projective processes that are involved in the human acts of perception and verbalizing one's perceptions.

Scientists believe in cooperation; they not only practice and encourage the free publication and exchange of scientific information; they also seek constantly to find ways of stating their conclusions so that they can be agreed upon by the greatest number of observers. Those of prescientific habits of mind tend to be possessive and secretive about their knowledge, in the interests, for example, of commercial advantage or military security.

Scientists regard even their most hard-won and cherished conclusions as only tentatively true — as 'true so far as we know up to the present time.' Those of prescientific habits of mind live by creed, by slogan, by word-magic, by shibboleth, by dogma.

These are some of the contrasts between scientific and prescientific orientations as described by Korzybski. The unique and peculiarly engaging feature of his teaching in his conviction that scientific habits of mind can be nurtured in everybody and not solely among a special class of people called scientists. That is, any person, whether a teacher, a politician, a bus conductor, a parent, or whatever, who treats his inferences as inferences, who treats his most cherished conclusions as 'true so far as we know up to the present time,' who is relatively unsusceptible to shibboleth and slogan, who remains aware of the abstractive and projective processes he goes through in arriving at his conclusions, who is aware of the point at which his knowledge stops and his ignorance begins, is, in Korzybski's sense of the term, acting scientifically *and sanely. To be scientific, according to him, is simply to act like a sane person.* And in order to enable people to cultivate scientific orientations he summarized his description of the methods of science into a list of easily-remembered rules with which to *evaluate one's own evaluative processes.*

Consequently, as information about Korzybski's general semantics becomes more widely spread, more and more people have been applying his principles in their daily contacts of business and family and social relations. They become *better listeners.* Though evaluating their own evaluative processes, they find it possible to live their lives with fewer quarrels, fewer doctrinal disputes, fewer frictions. But the benefits of semantic study are not confined to the students themselves. Since linguistic processes are processes of social interaction, it appears that the presence in some groups of even one individual *not* given to dogmatism, *not* given to over-reacting to slogans and fighting words, *not* given to taking too literally the linguistic forms in which problems are structuralized and on the basis of which people line up into contending camps, acts as a sanative influence on the entire group. While this sort of reported personal experience hardly constitutes proof of the truth of Korzybski's educational theories, the unanimity and conviction with which the testimony is offered gives rise to the hope that more rigorous proof may soon be forthcoming and that personal training in general semantics may turn out to be another, and extremely promising, addition to our pitifully inadequate store of techniques of agreement.

I SHOULD like to close with an extremely broad — perhaps an indefensibly broad — generalization. It appears to me, as it does to other students of semantics, that we are, in the Western world at least, extraordinarily overskilled in the techniques of refutation. The skills of refutation we see abundantly illustrated on every side, in what the Republicans say about Democratic claims and in what Democrats say about Republican charges; in what Professor A says about Professor B's arguments in our journals of literary criticism and esthetics and philosophy, and in what Professor B says in reply; in what the truck driver

says to the taxi driver after a collision, and in what the taxi driver says to the truck driver. Techniques of refutation are universal, but techniques of agreement are distrusted, being usually regarded as 'backing down,' or as 'shameful compromise.' Our verbal habits are overwhelmingly aggressive, so that even those who are distressed and fearful at the appearance of 'warmongers' in our midst see no logical contradiction in urging a 'relentless fight against warmongers.'

Often I feel that we are verbally so aggressive not solely because of our neurotic needs or our 'class interests,' but also because we know so few techniques for bringing about agreement other than those which are more or less aggressive in character. Let me recall to you the transitive verbs which I mentioned at the beginning which comprise most of the words with which we describe the process of changing people's minds.

It seems to occur to us rarely, if at all, that agreement is not a matter of action *on* someone else, but of action *between* ourselves and others. We have learned, not only as individuals but as a culture, that public convenience and safety require that we drive on the right hand side of the road. Can we learn, again not only as individuals but as a culture, that public convenience and safety in verbal traffic require that we listen before we fly off the handle? If we can learn this, I do not say that conflicts will be automatically solved. But I do believe that if enough of us learn to analyze and to avoid the aggressiveness of our own verbal habits, and therefore learn to listen as we have never listened before, we shall help enormously to create the conditions under which solutions to our problems of conflict can be found.

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