

General Semantics and Non-Verbal Awareness

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Wishing to talk about Zen philosophy, a professor visited a Zen master. As they sat together the Zen master poured tea. He kept on pouring as the tea overflowed onto the floor. “Stop!” said the professor, “you have filled the cup, no more will go in.” The Zen master replied, “You are like that cup, full of your own ideas and speculations. If you wish to know Zen, you must first empty your cup.”

Like Zen, an important aspect of general semantics (GS) training involves guided practice in “emptying your cup”: looking, listening, tasting, feeling, experiencing, etc., at what Korzybski called “the silent, un-speakable level”. This includes an attitude towards living that involves an awareness of yourself as an organism-as-a-whole-in-an-environment.

Some people who come to a GS seminar-workshop expecting to learn about language use and word ‘meanings’ are surprised by this. However, GS is not about ‘semantics’, understood as the study of linguistic ‘meanings’. Rather, GS involves a practical and personal study of what we call our semantic or *evaluational reactions*. Evaluational reactions include non-verbal as well as verbal, ‘thinking’ and ‘feeling’ responses to any events, not just words and symbols. Our focus is on internalizing some notions that can benefit our personal lives beyond the level of verbal, intellectual understanding alone.

Multiple Amphibians, Multiple ‘Worlds’

Aldous Huxley pointed out, “Every adult human being is a multiple amphibian, the inhabitant, simultaneously or by turns, of several worlds” (1972, 419). These ‘worlds’ do not occupy metaphysically separate realms. Rather, I interpret the term ‘worlds’ as metaphorically referring to important, differentiated but not entirely separate, aspects of the universe that we participate in.

The first of these ‘worlds’ is the physical ‘world’ as postulated by natural science. Theoretically, we can understand our functioning as physico-chemical organisms within complex ever-changing physico-chemical environments. What we know about ‘world’₁ is inferred, i.e., not directly known in our immediate experience. We know about it through scientific theorizing tested through experimentation and observations. Scientific methods provide more or less reliable information about ourselves and our surroundings. Korzybski referred to the theoretically understood physical ‘world’ as the “event” level of existence and represented it as a parabola in his structural differential model (s.d.).

The second ‘world’ is that of sensations/perceptions which we abstract (select-construct) from events within and around us. As infants we experience ourselves fully in this sensory-

perceptual 'world'₂ which includes tastes, smells, sights, feelings, etc. Korzybski referred to this 'world' as the "silent, un-speakable, objective" level represented in the s.d. by a circle. What we know at this level is not theoretical and has a direct aesthetic value.

As we mature, we enter the third 'world' that we function in as 'multiple amphibians': language. Korzybski referred to 'world'₃ as the "verbal level". Language allows us to further abstract from or symbolize our 'world'₂ sensory experiences. The 'world' of language contains within it many successive levels: everyday conversation about particulars, as well as the higher-order abstractions of science, mathematics, philosophy, etc.

We can easily become entranced by this third 'world' of language, to the neglect of our senses. Our education system seems to put an undue focus on the verbal, symbolic realm to the neglect of the non-verbal one. Even when we exercise or play sports, we can become dominated by fixed, symbolic ideas of self-improvement or competition that prevent us from experiencing the present moment. Consistent with GS goals, Huxley called for an education aimed at developing ourselves in the non-verbal as well as the verbal realms. How do we proceed to develop this potential within ourselves, 'to empty our cups'?

Consciousness of Abstracting and Non-Verbal Awareness

Together, 'world'₂ and 'world'₃ constitute the realm of consciousness. As conscious humans, our nervous systems select-filter from 'world'₁ events occurring inside, on and outside our skins in order to construct 'world'₂ (sensory-perceptual) and 'world'₃ (verbal) 'maps' of what is going on. This brain operation of 'mapping' experience makes up the process of abstracting.

Consciousness thus involves abstracting. We select something(s) to notice and filter out others. We give our attention to some aspect of a given situation with a concomitant neglect of other aspects. By *becoming conscious that we abstract*, we develop a greater ability to *choose* what we abstract: what we attend to and what we neglect. Such consciousness makes it less likely that we become fixed in our present set of abstractions (perceiving, labeling).

Remembering that we abstract gives us evaluational (semantic) flexibility and can help us to stay in better touch with what is going on in all of the 'worlds' or levels of so-called 'reality'. This flexibility is fostered by remembering the difference between what you say ('world'₃) and your non-verbal sensory-perceptual experience ('world'₂). In this way you can leave the verbal, intellectual realm at times in order to more fully experience the non-verbal realm of your senses.

Pinch your ear lobe! Do it now. Now keep on pinching it and say "I'm pinching my ear lobe." Now stop pinching your ear lobe and say "I'm pinching my ear lobe." (You will not get any benefit from this, if you don't actually do it. Words will not suffice!)

This experiment illustrates that the territory of the non-verbal experience of the pinch is not the same as the word-maps you use to describe it. Whatever you say about your experience, for example, "ouch!", "it hurts!" or whatever, is *not* it. This may seem like "baby stuff". So why do I mention it?

Korzybski noted that we live and experience our lives on the silent, un-speakable, non-verbal level of existence. Yet talking to ourselves about our experience can seem to take up a major part of attention and consciousness. Turning down the volume of the endless chatter inside our heads and quieting down the internal noise gives us more of a chance to receive new signals and thus to learn new things about ourselves and the world. Not only can this make us more adaptable to changing circumstances; it can also make life more fun.

I am not recommending that you eschew language altogether. Talking to yourself and others cannot and should not be avoided. Our ability to talk makes us human. Yet we need to bring ourselves frequently to the non-verbal levels of experience to look, listen, observe, etc., if we want our talking literally to make *sense* — a major aim of GS training.

Remember also that our language behavior has important non-verbal aspects. For example, it seems all too easy to continue talking to oneself, preparing a response, when someone else is speaking. Practicing non-verbal awareness when listening to others involves making a decision at some point to cease rehearsing our answer to what someone says while they are talking. This means getting quiet inside and remaining open to what the other person is saying, not only to their words but also to their tone, gestures, etc.

We can also listen to how we talk to ourselves and others. Quietly observing our own speech involves another level of internal silence that can lead to useful insights about ourselves and more fruitful ways of acting.

Experiments in Sensing

There are also ways we can learn to talk to ourselves to help us experience the non-verbal level more fully. In the group sessions that I lead at Institute of General Semantics (IGS) comprehensive seminar-workshops, participants do experiments in sensing. These are mostly non-verbal explorations, during which each individual is helped to bring his/her attention to what's going on within and around him/her. This is based on the work of Elsa Gindler and Charlotte Selver as taught to me by Charlotte Schuchardt Read, who led this type of session at IGS seminar-workshops for many years. During simple activities, group members are guided toward increased non-verbal awareness by means of verbal directions, mostly in the form of questions. See my 'Sense-able Questions' paper for examples of the types of questions that can be asked.

These sessions have as a major goal that of helping each person become more awake and present to here and now events. The work emphasizes the importance of not immediately jumping in with judgements of right or wrong but rather of accepting, although not necessarily liking, what happens. Questions asked during an experiment may include: "What more can I find out in this situation?", "What do I need for this moment?"

Directions for an experiment in listening follow:

 Spend the next few minutes letting sounds from your surroundings come to you. Notice any tendency to label what you hear or talk to yourself in any other way. How well can

you put aside these labels and bring yourself back to the sounds?

After several minutes, the experiment stops and people are typically invited to share some description of their experience. Listening to the varied responses of people to the 'same' experiment provides a graphic illustration of how each of us abstracts somewhat differently from the continuum of events.

Eventually one can begin to construct these kinds of sensing experiments and ask sensible questions for oneself. There are endless experiments to do. Sensory awareness can be done anywhere, anytime: while waiting in lines, for a bus or in traffic, sitting in a lecture or at your computer keyboard, etc. When experimenting in this way you may have a concern about looking silly or childish. Remember, getting more in touch with the non-verbal world indicates that you have an admirable curiosity about what's going on. Gently pinching your ear lobe (or finger, arm, etc.) can help you to remind yourself at these times to become quiet inside.

Kinesthetic Awareness

Our musculoskeletal framework and our movements constitute a major part of our reactive mechanism as organisms-as-wholes-in-environments. Our awareness of our muscles and movements is called kinesthesia. Kinesthesia or kinesthetic awareness includes our sense of muscular tension or ease, joint position, balance and movement, and involves input from muscles, joints and the vestibular system of the inner ear.

Korzybski was aware that our evaluational reactions involve various levels of 'emotional' tension that are both affected by and affect our neuro-muscular tension levels. Through greater kinesthetic awareness, we can learn to control our tension levels and move towards greater evaluational flexibility.

Korzybski noticed that making quiet and firm hand contact could have a visibly calming effect on "jumpy" horses and people. Following this insight, he and his associates, especially Charlotte Schuchardt Read, developed a technique which they called "neuro-semantic relaxation".

Neuro-semantic relaxation involves a gentle handling of the soft tissues of the limbs and trunk in order to bring about a state of improved circulation and muscular tone. The individual learns to apply this method to him/herself. The result as reported is not so much a passive relaxation as an optimal state for activity.

In *People in Quandaries*, Wendell Johnson described how to do the procedure to your hands: With one hand you simply feel the palm and fingers of the other, holding the hand gently without pinching or squeezing it, slowly and with light pressure bending the fingers under and back again, noting how the hand feels. Is it soft, warm, and dry, or stiff, cold, and moist? Do the fingers bend readily? You hold the hand with firm but light pressure for a few seconds, then

release even this light pressure, then apply it again. Now you bend the fingers gently again two or three times. You reverse hands and repeat the process. That is essentially all there is to it. What it amounts to is simply feeling with one hand the state of tension of the other, and “loosening up” the one with the other, not so much by physical pressure and active massage as by direct manual expression of calmness, ease, warmth, reassurance. It is the semantic rather than the mechanical aspect that is important. (1946, 234)

Johnson and others reported that a dedicated application of this technique seemed to encourage the ability to delay reactions, which is an important goal of GS training.

A state of neuro-semantic relaxation and an improved ability to delay reactions can be encouraged by other approaches as well. In IGS seminar-workshops after Korzybski, Charlotte Read focused more on the sensory awareness work of Gindler and Selver to accomplish this. More recently I have been influenced both by her and through my studies of the F. M. Alexander Technique, in developing the group work that I do at seminar-workshops.

The Alexander Technique

As a young actor, F. M. Alexander (1869-1955) had an increasing tendency to lose his voice during performances. Given the possibility of having to give up his career as an actor, he decided to explore what he was doing with himself when he lost his voice. By observing himself in mirrors as he spoke, he gradually became aware that he had a persistent pattern of tightening his neck, pulling his head backwards on his neck and thus depressing his larynx when he spoke. This was part of a total pattern which he came to see included gasping and sniffing for air, thrusting his chest forward, narrowing and shortening his back, tightening his legs, and gripping his feet. The summary effect was one of a general shortening of his stature and undue compression of his joints. This general shortening occurred at other times as well but seemed especially apparent during the stress of performances; it could be controlled by specific attention to the relationship of his head, neck and back.

Alexander began to develop this control when he realized that what he did with himself was very much a function of habit. Just the thought of reciting appeared enough to set off the entire fear-based pattern of tension. He realized that he needed to bring conscious awareness into this pattern. To accomplish this he began to *inhibit* or stop his immediate reaction to his intention to speak, while giving his attention to what he was doing with his head, neck and back. Specifically, he would provide himself the stimulus to speak, inhibit his immediate reaction to do so and instead give himself *directions* “to let the neck be free, to let the head go forward and up, to allow the back to lengthen and widen”.

Through persistent self-observation he realized that what he thought he was doing with himself when he gave himself these directions was not necessarily what he in fact *did* do with himself. In other words, his non-verbal kinesthetic map of his actions did not fit what he saw himself doing in the mirror. He therefore made it a point not to “do” the directions he gave himself but to use them to guide his self-observation. In time he found he could more accurately sense what he was doing with himself and undo his habitual tensions and shortening.

By breaking up an action, such as speaking, into very small steps and applying the tools of awareness, inhibition and direction, Alexander discovered a method for bringing conscious awareness and poise into everyday actions. His method of kinesthetic re-education has significant connections with GS. Its principles inform the sessions I lead in the non-verbal awareness segment of the comprehensive seminar-workshop.

GS involves the study of our evaluational reactions; our total response, verbal and non-verbal, to words, symbols, and other events in terms of their ‘meanings’, significance, etc. This response has ‘thinking’, ‘feeling’, ‘self-moving’, ‘electro-chemical’, etc., aspects that intertwine inseparably. The Alexander Technique focuses especially on the self-moving or sensory-motor aspects of our evaluative reactions while not ignoring the other aspects. Alexander’s focus on the organism as a whole, kinesthetic awareness, the relation of ‘thinking’ to activity, the role of ‘emotions’ in neuro-muscular use, etc., complement and reinforce GS concerns in these areas.

Korzybski talked about delaying our reactions as an important result/indicator of consciousness of abstracting. He noted that “Negative reactions or ‘inhibitions’ must be interpreted as the neurological foundation of ‘human mentality’...” ([1933] 1994, 356). Alexander’s application of “inhibition”, learning how to pause before and during an activity in order to observe oneself in activity and to “let the neck be free”, etc., provides a tool for directly practicing delaying our reactions on a neuro-muscular level.

Alexander Technique work provides practical experience in the physical concomitants of ‘thought’. This accords with Korzybski’s teaching of ‘thought’ as a nervous system activity of the organism. Directing my awareness especially to my head, neck and back can actually result in observable changes in functioning.

My ‘emotional’ reactions as evaluative reactions have a powerful neuro-muscular aspect that I can gain some control over by means of the Alexander Technique. Anxiety, fear, etc., have neuro-muscular concomitants that I can learn to recognize more precisely. The balanced resting state that one can learn to elicit in oneself can provide a tool for alternative reactions when experiencing some ‘emotional’ state. Of course what we say to ourselves also plays a part.

Alexander discussed an extremely important elementalism that general-semanticists should consider. In GS terms, an elementalism consists of the verbal separation of what does not in actuality exist in isolation. Alexander taught that the elementalistic separation of ends and means can lead us to focus on what we intend to do (the end) to the exclusion of how we do it (the means). Alexander highlighted, in particular, our neuro-muscular habits as important means upon which to remain focused. He emphasized that the neuro-muscular means in an activity conditions the end we achieve.

Conclusion

GS is not just about developing better language habits. We evaluate as a whole on non-verbal as well as verbal levels: ‘thinking’, ‘feeling’, ‘sensing’, ‘moving’, etc. Thus, developing more consciousness of our evaluational habits and more control over them involves developing better non-verbal as well as verbal skills. Helping each individual get a more integrated sense of

him/herself as an organism-as-a-whole-in-an-environment has constituted an important goal of GS training from the beginning of IGS seminar-workshops. If you wish to know GS, you must first “empty your cup” and thus increase your non-verbal awareness.

Works Cited

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