

***GENERAL SEMANTICS AND  
PUBLIC SPEAKING:  
Perspectives on Rhetoric Comparing  
Aristotle, Hitler, and Korzybski***

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THERE ARE MANY WAYS of looking at human behavior. As a result we may have “many psychologies,” rather than “one psychology.” The same is true of geometry. Euclid’s way of looking at the patterns and forms of measurement is but one along with the geometries of Lobatchevsky and Riemann. Similarly, there are many “philosophies.” One has merely to mention the names of Plato, Leibniz, Dewey, and Croce. In this paper I shall be urging that rhetoric or the art of public speaking is not to be evaluated from one point of view only, but from many. In doing that I shall try to show simultaneously where and how general semantics contributes one other way of looking at the purposes and functions of speechmaking.

In the attempt to describe what it is that students of public speaking and general semantics are trying to do, using the method of contrast, I shall focus on three orientations or perspectives of rhetoric as they appear in three books:

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Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, and Alfred Korzybski's *Science and Sanity*. I take the third book as the most complete statement of general semantics and its relation to rhetoric.

Let me begin with Adolf Hitler. There is no special chapter on public speaking in *Mein Kampf* but in the sections on Propaganda in the Reynal and Hitchcock edition there is a host of specific, rule-of-thumb injunctions for the speaker which grow out of Hitler's assumption that in a world of weak men the role of the leader is the basis of politics and all human affairs. The major tenets of Hitler's art of public speaking might be summarized this way:

That you must always exaggerate your claims, even if fantastically; that you must never concede the slightest justice to your opponent's cause, else men will begin to doubt yours; that your platform, once formulated, must remain fixed; that you must hammer away always at a single idea; that the continued iteration of it will finally induce belief; that there is nothing so likely to be believed in the end as the daring and the unimaginable. (1)

But if these are Hitler's strategies, what is his over-all view of their use? What is this art to be used for? He has been quite explicit and I quote him [Hitler] directly.

Propaganda's task is ... not to evaluate the various rights, but far more to stress exclusively the one that is to be represented by it. It has not to search into truth as far as this is favorable to others, in order to present it then to the masses with doctrinary honesty, but it has rather to see its own truth uninterruptedly. (2) The more modest, then, its scientific ballast is, and the more it exclusively considers the feelings of the masses, the more striking will be its success. This, however, is the best proof whether a particular piece of propaganda is right or wrong, and not the successful satisfaction of a few scholars or 'aesthetic' languishing monkeys. (3)

His Minister of Enlightenment, Herr Goebbels, has perhaps best summed up the position in these words: "*Propaganda should not be in the least respectable; nor should it be mild or humble; it should be successful.*" (4) There is no point here in telling you what this attitude towards rhetoric has accomplished; there is relevance only in an attempt to characterize it.

This is the Rhetoric of Power. We have here the bald statement of one who thinks of public speaking in terms of those tactics, strategies, maneuvers which will get the user what he wants. It is the utterly practical attempt to organize whatever means exist to mobilize the 'minds' of the audience. *Mein Kampf* can thus be conceived as a "ready reference" for those "conscious ways of making

the speaker's position more efficient," (5) of those modes of approach which will command acceptance for one's own doctrine. This is the Rhetoric of Power in which only the end-result is of importance.

When one leaves "the crude but effective magic" of Adolf Hitler for the *Rhetoric of Aristotle*, one is struck by certain similarities. Thus, Aristotle in three places suggests the value of repetition; there is no mention of slogans, but there are five pages on maxims; in two places Aristotle argues the necessity of recognizing the limited capacities of the "masses;" and there are forty-one pages on the means of stirring the "emotions."

Now, if one considers the *Rhetoric* as a whole, it is clear that it is designed as a handbook of the ways and means of obtaining the speaker's purposes. As Rowell put it:

The main concept from which Aristotle proceeds is the idea of persuasion. This term 'persuasion' defines for him the general aim of oratory. He uses it in the inclusive sense which makes it embrace all the elements involved in the speaker's effort to influence his audience. (6)

And in these respects the *Rhetoric of Aristotle* is similar in orientation and purpose to that of Adolf Hitler.

But there are differences that should be underlined. Speaking of Aristotle's fundamental position Lane Cooper says, "*the emphasis is always upon the nature of the person to be persuaded, and the means by which it is possible, and just, to persuade him.*" (7) There is here reference to the *moral purpose* of the speaker. That is, Aristotle recognizes that Rhetoric is a neutral instrument, a "faculty" which can be used for good or evil, for the "greatest blessing" or the "utmost harm," for "sophistical speaking is made so, not by the faculty, but by the moral purpose." (8) In short, rhetoric is a useful art which should be "rightly and honestly" practiced. In addition, Aristotle would urge the study of this art not only as an instrument of persuasion, but also as an instrument to be used against an exploiter, and to "prevent the triumph of fraud and injustice." (9)

The difference here can be underscored by asking whether Hitler would be willing to permit his methods to be used against him.

There are other differences. First, is Aristotle's analysis of nine sham enthymemes, those forms of argument "that look genuine, but are not." (10) And immediately following is his analysis of the methods of refutation, by means of which one may answer statements which though illegitimate may from force of statement pass as legitimate. (11) It is important, then, to notice that Aristotle indicates (as Hitler does not) that a speech may be successful even though it is unjust in its purpose, and spurious in its argument.

To summarize this statement thus far, I should say that the rhetorics of Aristotle and Hitler are concerned with the means of making discourse effective, with the art of organizing statements for the settled purposes of the speaker. Each is concerned with telling the speaker how to “get across” his notions. But Aristotle’s position is without the crassness of Hitler’s. It is rather softened and leavened by the sense of moral purpose. It is thus that Aristotle’s rhetoric can be characterized not as a Rhetoric of Power, but as a Rhetoric tempered with notions of Ethics.

Now there remains a question which neither of these rhetorics undertakes to raise. It has to do with determining whether or not what a speaker says properly evaluates the situation with which he deals; whether or not what he says is an adequate representation of the actual facts or happenings of which he speaks. This may be clarified by an analogy.

Let us take some actual territory in which cities appear in the following order: San Francisco — Chicago — New York, when taken from the West to the East.

If we were to build a map of this territory and place San Francisco between Chicago and New York thus:

Chicago — San Francisco — New York

we should say that the map was wrong, or that it was incorrect, or that the map has a different structure from the territory. If, speaking roughly, we should try in our travels to orient ourselves by such a map, we should find it misleading. (12)

Similarly, we should be disturbed if the movie *The Return of Mr. Moto* were to throw on the screen the events of *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*. And again, we do not expect that a letter addressed to Henry Adams of Chicago will find its way to the Grand Llama of Tibet.

In short, we expect our maps to represent their territories, our film titles to indicate the appropriate films, and our letters to reach the designated persons. In like manner, we expect our weather vanes to point to the way the wind blows, our thermometers, pressure gauges, and scales to register the degrees of heat, force, and weight that exist at any moment. If these instruments, indicators, or signs fail to perform their function of representing adequately the phase of ‘reality’ to which they are assigned — we should hurry to replace them. In the same way, should we not expect that our language, our words be used, so that they adequately represent the facts, feelings, happenings, etc., to which they are intended to refer?

It is in the effort to achieve this map-territory, this language-fact correspondence that general semantics and Alfred Korzybski make their contribution to a

linguistic analysis of rhetoric. General semantics must not be thought of as a branch of philology or as an instrument for popular debunking, but as a natural science concerned with the *problems of values* and so of *interpretation, i.e.*, with the whole process whereby men [and women] in speaking evaluate properly the happenings, objects, feelings, labels, descriptions, and inferences with which they are dealing. Put another way, the book, *Science and Sanity*, is an attempt to anatomize our linguistic usages to find wherein they falsify 'reality' and mislead us, and the means whereby this falsification may be corrected.

It is not possible in this paper to tell of the fertility and scope of this analysis of 'significance,' as it might be applied either to the teaching or practice of public speaking. I can merely hint at a few of its relevant topics. Thus, for example, in 1776, in his *Principles of Rhetoric*, George Campbell included a very 'modern' chapter entitled, "What is the Cause that Nonsense so often escapes being detected both by the writer and by the reader?" The question might be answered this way: just as one can draw a map that refers to no existing territory, so too, one can *talk*, without having that talk represent actual facts and events; for example, I can say that the "sun *rises* in the East;" I can say that coffee and brandy are being served where you are, even though you look in vain for them. In his little book, *The Standardization of Error* (13), Vilhjalmur Stefansson reveals that though we can *talk* about an ostrich who sticks his head in the sand when danger approaches, no human being has ever seen or photographed the actual event, and thus, when we talk about reference to observable facts our talk may prove to be nonsense.

Then, too, Korzybski has discovered a way of protecting us against those "debaters" who would confuse an approximate description of the world with a complete description of it. Fundamental in language-fact relations is the realization that one can never make a statement that will give the total details of any event — that there never can be a speech or newspaper story that "tells all," because "*we see what we see because we miss all of the finer details.*" (14) And that, above all, a consciousness of such omitting (i.e., *abstracting*), an awareness of the 'partial' character of our statements is the beginning of sanity in expression. (15)

Again, Korzybski has called attention to the fact that the search for the absolute 'meanings' of words is fraught with disillusion because words carry a multiplicity of 'meanings,' no one of which can be nominated the only interpretation, and 'meanings' depend upon contexts, verbal, psycho-logical, situational, etc.; additionally some of the most important words are multiordinal, i.e. their 'meaning' in any context, depends on the level (order) of abstraction, etc. (16) This point can perhaps be somewhat clarified by pointing out that we use symbols (words) much as we do vessels, which can be filled variously. Just as a cup

will hold water, sand, or any other liquid or solid — so too, any word can be filled with many contents, in many contexts. Even the word “is” has in common use at least four well-differentiated senses. Confusion arises in discussion when one implies that a word ‘means’ this or that only, when a speaker assumes, for example, that words like *education*, *propaganda*, *persuasion*, *discussion*, *truth*, *reality*, etc., mean only what he says they mean — when the speaker forgets that there are no absolute ‘meanings.’ It is helpful in this connection to remember that the dictionary is merely a record of word usage, and not a legislative device.

Further, Korzybski has shown that too often we “split verbally what empirically cannot be divided,” that though we ‘know’ that any organism must be treated as a ‘whole,’ that there is integration of function we, nevertheless, talk of body *and* mind, reason *and* emotion, thinking *and* feeling, heredity *and* environment — as if each were a separate entity. (17)

But I intended only to hint at some of the array of findings that come from the notion that the very structure of our ordinary language may distort what we wish to convey, mislead ourselves, and others, and actually restrict our horizons of investigation. (18) There is nothing esoteric or mystical in *Science and Sanity*, for as Korzybski himself says:

Curiously enough, the principles involved are often childishly simple, often ‘generally known,’ to the point that on several occasions some older scientists felt ‘offended’ that such ‘obvious’ principles should be so emphasized. Yet my experience, without exception, was that no matter how much these simple principles were approved of verbally, *in no case* were they *fully applied in practice*. (19)

And he is clear in what it is he believes that general semantics must do. In his words:

All our doctrines, institutions, etc., depend on verbal arguments. If these arguments are conducted in a language of wrong and unnatural structure, our doctrines and institutions must reflect that linguistic structure and so become unnatural, and inevitably lead to disasters. (20)

I shall conclude with a comparison of the three perspectives.

Pavlov said that “men are apt to be much more influenced by words than by the actual facts of the surrounding reality.” (21) It seems perfectly ‘obvious’ to say that “the map is not the territory, that words are not the facts to which they refer, that, symbols are not the events which they are supposed to represent.” Yet it is just as ‘obvious’ that men do react to the maps, words, or symbols *as if*

*these were* the territory, fact, or happening. In a recent class forty-seven out of forty-nine students thought that the word *prostitute* symbolized something unpleasant, someone who was socially 'bad,' yet a week later when the instructor introduced a young woman who spoke on "Social Maladjustment" the class of forty-nine agreed that both her person and her analysis were quite "good," in spite of the fact unknown to the class that the young woman was making a living in a nearby house of prostitution. That class responded to the *word* and not to the *fact*. (22) It is not difficult to respond similarly to the words *Communist*, *Catholic*, *Alien*, *Truth*, *Liberty*, etc., as if they were the non-verbal facts and living situations rather than mere words. It is as if one were to try to keep warm with the trunk-tag instead of the fur coat inside the trunk. (23) Yet it is the response to words and symbols without regard for the maladjustment that may result, that seems to be the objective of the Aristotle-Hitler rhetoric. Theirs is the attempt to achieve response to the utterance of the speaker — and not to the facts which that utterance may or may not represent. And the aim of the rhetorical system which you will discover in Korzybski seems to be the prevention of such "un-critical response" and the substitution of responses which more adequately evaluate the situations.

I have had no intention of suggesting in this paper that there is an antithesis or opposition between these three linguistic attitudes. What concerned Hitler and Aristotle was not something that concerned Korzybski. Each represents a difference in total orientation. If, for you, it is more important to organize the thinking of your hearers to your "modes of thought," then you will go to the former; if for you it is more important that statements are "adequate," that they fit what it is they are about, then you will go to Korzybski. Hitler-Aristotle would teach you how to use words skillfully "for effect" — Korzybski would teach you how to use words carefully for their fitness with facts, for proper evaluation.

Hitler and Aristotle start with this question: "*How can we persuade others to 'think' as we do and to act as we would have them act?*" Korzybski starts with this question: "*How can I talk about the events of this world so that my talk evaluates them properly?*"

In brief, I conceive the emphasis of the Hitler-Aristotle rhetoric to be on those speaker-audience relationships by means of which the audience becomes controlled by the speaker. The emphasis of the Korzybskian system as applied to rhetoric is on those relationships which exist between an utterance and the facts it is to represent. The one breeds a philosophy of power, the other a doctrine of adequate statement, and proper evaluation for both speaker and hearer.

## NOTES

1. Max Lerner, "Hitler as Thinker," *The New Republic*, CI (Nov. 22, 1939), p.132.
2. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1939), p.236.
3. *Ibid.*, p.233.
4. Richard S. Lambert, *Propaganda* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1938), p.153.
5. Kenneth Burke, "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'," *The Southern Review*, V (Summer, 1939), p.15.
6. Edward Z. Rowell, "Prolegomena to Argumentation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, XVIII (April, 1932), p.226.
7. *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*, ed. by Lane Cooper (New York: D. Appleton and Co. 1932), p.xxi.
8. *Ibid.*, I, 1, p.1355b.
9. *Ibid.*, I, 1, p.1355a.
10. *Ibid.*, II, 24, pp.1401a-1401b-1402a.
11. *Ibid.*, II, 25, pp.1402a-1402b-1403a.
12. Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics* (Lancaster, Penn.: The Science Press Printing Co., 1933), p.58.
13. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1927.
14. *Science and Sanity, op. cit.*, p.376
15. *Ibid.*, Ch. XXVI.
16. The test for the multiordinality of a term is simple. Let us make any statement and see if a given term applies to it, (true, false, yes, no, fact, reality, to think, to love, etc.). If it does, let us deliberately make another statement about the former statement and test if the given term may be used again. If so, it is a safe assertion that this term should be considered as multiordinal ... The main point about all such terms is that, in general, they are ambiguous ... (they) have only definite meanings on a given level and in a given context. (*Ibid.*, pp.433-434.)
17. Cf. the numerous references to *Elementalism, Ibid.*, pp.64, 87, 107, etc.
18. D.G. Campbell, "General Semantics in Education, Counseling, and Therapy," *National Education Association Proceedings*, 1939.
19. *Science and Sanity*, p.539.

20. *Ibid.*, p.59.
21. *Ibid.*, p.452.
22. Of course, the responses of the students might have been different had they known of the fact, or had they seen the young woman in a different setting. But the important point for our purposes is the realization that the setting or context affects the interpretation, and that in responding fixedly to the word *prostitute*, the students were responding to a fiction, to an 'absolute meaning,' to a symbol considered apart from the varied possible contexts in which it might be located.
23. Walter N. Polakov, *Man and His Affairs* (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins Co., 1925), p. 60.