

By Don Ranly

APPENDIX C

The Lessons of General Semantics

"'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.'

"'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'

"'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master—that's all.'"—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

By now, you know good writing when you see it. You know how to achieve it. But do you know why it's good? Many writers don't really know why one word is preferable to another, why one description is clearer than another, why one sentence communicates more effectively than another. You'll be a better writer if you know.

This appendix will help. It will help by showing you what words do to people and vice versa. Research has shown that the nature of language itself dictates what effective writing is. To find out why some uses of language communicate better than others, you need to look more closely than most writers do at the words you use.

General semantics does that. By studying its principles, you can develop a deeper appreciation of language and its effects. You can come to understand something of the theory that underlies the practice of good writing. If, in addition to knowing *what* works, you know *why* it works, you can choose your words more carefully.

This appendix won't make you an expert in general semantics, but it will introduce you to principles you may find helpful. You may be surprised to discover that such a seemingly esoteric subject has intensely practical applications.

General semantics is the study of how language affects human behavior. We are using the phrase general semantics for a purpose. Semantics, the study of words and what they mean, is related to

linguistics. It studies how words come to be what they are and how they came to mean what they mean to various people at various times.

General semantics is neither the study of words nor the study of meaning. It does not concern itself with the correct meanings of words. In one sense, it teaches you just the opposite. General semantics demonstrates that words have many meanings, or more precisely, that people have or bring many meanings to words.

This is not to say that words are unimportant. On the contrary, words are so important that we must constantly evaluate what they do to us. Spoken and written words have a physical reality, and they have a physiological effect on us, not just a psychological effect. Words affect our nervous systems physically. They can trigger joy, fear, anger, even violence.

Because words are so important, Alfred Korzybski, the founder of general semantics, hoped to train people to use and to evaluate language more effectively. Effective communication, he wrote, is necessary for human cooperation, human survival and human sanity. Korzybski taught not only to use words carefully but also to avoid reacting to them automatically. He urged us to delay our reaction to words. He called for a calm, mature, reflective approach to language.

His advice is particularly valuable to the reporter, and every writer must first be a reporter. We must pay attention to what people say, yes, but we must go beyond that. We must ask, what did the person mean by those words? Korzybski wanted us to realize that how people use words is often as important to communication as what words they use.

What he was asking for was a scientific approach to the sane use of language. Toward that end, he published "Science and Sanity" in 1933. It is the scientific approach to language outlined in this book that is so important to the writer.

□ THE WRITER AS SCIENTIST

The methods of science are useful long before you choose the words you are going to write. First, look at the world the way the scientist does. The scientist recognizes that everything is in the process of change. The world of moving molecules and atoms only confirms what the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said long ago: You never step into the same river twice.

Scientists hold that no two things are the same, that no one thing is ever the same twice, that everything is in a state of flux. As an

observer gathering information, you would do well to recognize the same principle.

Don't be one of those who say that if you've seen one, you've seen them all. Scientists do not begin by looking for what is the same in things; they look for differences. Only when they can find no differences do they categorize, classify or make general laws. To an untrained or inobservant person, things look the same when they are actually different. Sometimes, of course, when things look different, you should pay attention to their similarities.

Look for similarity among differences and for the differences among things that look the same. Look for the new, for the different, for what others do not see, because what is new and different is also usually interesting.

The semanticist Wendell Johnson writes that the scientist is a "master of discrimination." Scientists are adaptable; they test everything, expect things to change; they are expert at changing their minds. Imitate their approach. Dissect and assemble; analyze with synthesis. Set aside what is insignificant, and get to the core of things. Ernest Hemingway once said that the most essential gift for a good writer is a built-in, shock-proof crap detector.

If you want your writing to be interesting, start by being a careful, flexible, interested observer. The scientist, writes Johnson, "has a nose for the new, the exceptional, the fine shades of variation in the world about him and in himself and his social relationships." He could have written the same about the writer. The scientist is skeptical, cautious, not easily taken in, distrustful. The scientist looks twice. "The children of science," Johnson writes, "are from Missouri."

Missourians say, "Show me." You should do that, first, in your observation and preparation, and then in your writing. Perhaps the best advice ever given to writers is this simple sentence: "Don't tell me—show me!" But you cannot show your readers unless you have the information, unless you have observed, unless you have asked the right questions.

The scientific method begins by asking clear and answerable questions. That means that scientists must have some idea of what they are looking for. They continually refine their questions because they cannot find clear answers to vague, general questions.

Before you write, find a clear, answerable question. If you do not, your story will lack focus. Just as clear questions direct the scientists' observations, so will they direct yours. Scientists observe calmly and without prejudice. Their observations must be reported as accurately and objectively as possible so as to answer the original questions. Any

preconceptions or assumptions must be revised in light of new observations.

Another semanticist, Kenneth Johnson, says the writer must imitate the anthropologist. Stand apart, stand back, observe, question and record.

The process, of course, does not stop. The scientific method is continuous. The reporting and the revising go on and on. Reporters, like scientists, are forever changing their minds.

Even so, always proceed with clarity. In the scientific method, clarity is paramount because without clarity there is no validity. Clarity comes by means of words. As Korzybski wrote, all science is ultimately verbal.

General semantics, then, urges a scientific approach, first of all, to the universe. This approach will help you to gather information for your stories. General semantics also teaches a scientific approach to the words you use to describe that universe.

□ THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF GENERAL SEMANTICS

Scientists see everything as changing. We must look at words the same way. Korzybski says we must never think that words can be identified with what they represent. He states three versions of one principle:

1. The symbol is not the thing symbolized.
2. The map is not the territory.
3. The word is not the thing.

A symbol is something that represents something else. It has an existence and an identity of its own, but its purpose is to signify something. A country's flag, for example, reminds people of their country and of all that their country stands for. Treating the flag with respect is a sign of one's respect for his or her country. Many have tried to make it a crime to burn the flag, so closely is the symbol tied to the thing symbolized.

For many during the 1960s, the peace sign was a warm, human symbol of an international movement for peace. That same sign for many others was a symbol of an unpatriotic, un-American acceptance of defeat in the Vietnam War, perhaps even representing a leaning toward communism.

Some signs, such as the Nazi swastika or the cross, are so closely identified with what they symbolize that just displaying them can cause strong emotional reaction. West Germany has had a law for many years banning the display of the swastika. The American Jewish Congress has been urging U.S. toy makers to halt production and sale of war toys bearing Nazi insignia. Interestingly, the leader of one motorcycle gang said members wore swastikas to show their contempt for fascism. The same symbol can mean different things to different people. Obviously, then, the symbol is not the thing symbolized.

Always be aware that, as semanticist S.I. Hayakawa says, "The symbolic process permeates human life at the most primitive and the most civilized levels alike." Be conscious of symbols, and don't be misled by them. What people wear often symbolize their occupation or affiliation. But because a woman on a college campus wears Greek letters on the seat of her pants does not necessarily mean that she is going to college or that she is a member of that sorority. Symbols, like everything else, mean different things at different times. Beards and long hair no longer symbolize protest. Wealthy people used to avoid the sun to show that they were members of the leisure class. Now they get suntans to look like the leisure class.

Obviously, we often need and use symbols to tell us how to react to various situations and circumstances. Road signs warn us about a curve or an intersection. Road maps tell us how to get some place. But even the best maps have shortcomings, sometimes even mistakes. A map is not the territory. Certainly, a map is not the whole territory. A map does not contain everything that is in the territory. What is more, we can have maps of maps.

You may have heard a conversation like this:

"This can't be the road."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not on the map."

The person here identified the map with the territory. What the person may have had was an incomplete map. Your job as a writer is to draw accurate maps, maps that are clear and easy to follow, maps that measure reality with precision and care.

Look at this example of how a writer draws a map that describes how laser fusion creates energy:

The main laser bay is in a giant clean room two stories high and nearly the size of a football field. To take the analogy a step further, a single low-power laser beam begins at one end zone, is amplified, and is divided by mirrors into six separate beams. Each beam is then

amplified further and directed through one of six long tunnel-like chains of optical components. Just beyond the 50-yard line, each beam is divided again, this time into four beams, and all 24 are directed toward a four-foot stainless steel sphere right about where the opposite goal line would be.

Inside the hollow sphere, all the beams converge on that single thermonuclear fuel pellet barely visible to the naked eye, and . . . pow! In that small fraction of a second, the hydrogen isotopes within the fuel pellet are fused together by an almost incredible amount of instantaneous energy—6.6 trillion watts to be exact.

It is an accurate and effective map. By using the analogy to football, the writer draws an accurate picture of the laser beam's path. To use Korybski's metaphor, the author's verbal world stands in relation to the real world as a good map does to the territory it is supposed to represent.

But even so, the map is not the territory, and the word is not the thing. General semantics teaches us not to identify words with the things they signify. That sounds so simple, but this identification is a difficult habit to break. Not breaking it will hurt you as an observer because you will not think to ask more questions. It will hurt you as a writer because you will not be specific enough in your description and word choice.

The habit of identifying words with what they represent began way back when we began to speak. If you pointed to Bessie with a "What is that?" look, your mother told you Bessie was a cow. If there were other cows around, you may have learned immediately an important semantic principle: cow1 is not cow2 is not cow3. Cows are not all alike. As a matter of fact, one cow is vastly different from any other cow. Not only does it have a different psychological framework and disposition (some cows are better-natured than others), but every part of the cow is a different size and a different shape. If you were to take pictures of cows' stomachs, for example, you would find no two of them exactly alike.

Obviously, to get along at all in this world, we need to be able to identify a cow when we see one. We need, therefore, to generalize and to categorize. But it is equally important to realize that things are not what we say they are, and that one thing is not the same as another, even though we give both of them the same name.

For example, in all of this discussion about cows, if you are like most people, you probably had a picture in your head of a milk cow or a dairy cow. Actually, any animal of which the male is called a bull has a female that is called a cow. We could have been talking about a cow moose, or a cow seal or a cow alligator. If someone told you she saw a cow walking down Main Street, would you think to ask what

kind of cow? And when you wrote your story, would you bother to indicate what kind of cow it was?

Much, of course, would depend on the context. In some stories or in some circumstances it may not be necessary to describe what kind of cow it was. The fact is, words have meanings only in context. You as the writer must always supply that context. Remember, words have no meanings; people bring meanings to words. To state it in another way, what we know is a joint product of the observer and of the observed. What we see is not what we look at; what we know is not what we know about. When we observe things and give them a name, we take them out of their context. We separate them from their environment. When we observe, we abstract; that is, we leave things out.

Usually people leave out the things they do not want to see. Sometimes they even put in things they want to see. Be aware of this in your own perception of things and in the way your readers perceive what you write. Just as you see things only in the context of your own experience, so will your readers. Provide that context, and that means that you must try to know who your readers are. Too many writers pay no attention to their audience.

Notice how writer Jim Scott relates a scene to what is familiar to his audience:

Suddenly, the geese rise simultaneously from the field, like a congregation at the motion of a minister's hand. They tilt their gray wings at the same angle and, sounding like a thousand schoolchildren at recess, cross the pale, blue sky.

The geese didn't rise "all at once." They didn't rise "together." They rose "like a congregation at the motion of a minister's hand." No one has trouble imagining either that or the happy, spontaneous racket of schoolchildren at recess. By comparing the sound of the geese to what we all know, Scott helps us all hear what he enjoyed hearing.

Too many writers do not include color and context. Too many writers are content to be vague and abstract. Use examples, specifics, cases, data, descriptions, anecdotes, similes, metaphors. Always be conscious of your level of abstraction.

□ THE ABSTRACTION LADDER

One of the prime purposes of general semantics is to make people conscious of their acts of abstracting. Every word leaves something out, even a concrete word like Bessie. But Bessie is more specific than

cow, and cow is more specific than animal, and animal is more specific than organism. Semanticists say that when we get more abstract, we are climbing the abstraction ladder.

When you use words carefully, you are aware of their level of abstraction. The further down the abstraction ladder you go, the more concrete you become, and the more easily you are understood.

Notice the difference between these two statements:

I spend a fortune each year on the food I buy for my pet.

I spend 75 cents a day on catfood.

The second sentence has six fewer words and much more information.

Note the specifics Jim Scott uses when he takes us on a fox hunt:

It is dusk in early autumn. Junior Garrett and Jim Sparks are driving along a narrow stretch of winding road between Englewood and Boydsville, pulling a trailer full of foxhounds behind a '69 Ford pickup. The narrow dirt and gravel road is rutted, and the leaves of the hickory and sycamore trees that border it are powdered by the dust raised by tractors and pickup trucks. Beyond the trees are undulating fields of soybeans and milo, stitched into squares by barbed wire fences.

The road is narrow and winding. Scott could have told us how many foxhounds were in the trailer, but he chose a different picture with a little alliteration: "a trailer full of foxhounds." He tells us "a '69 Ford pickup" was pulling the trailer, not a truck. He names the trees that are powdered by dust and how they got that way. Then he paints an exquisite picture of a quilt of moving milo. Scott is specific, concrete; he shows us rather than tells us.

Look at this dormitory scene at Ft. Leonard Wood, Mo., painted by Paula Shepard:

Overhead lights glare off the polished, dustless barracks floors. Beds have been tucked and folded, neat as the seal of an envelope, tight as a clenched fist.

Specific, precise, graphic.

But that's not enough. Try to do more than just pile up specifics. Tell us what they mean. In other words, you need at times to generalize and to categorize. It is not wrong to become more abstract. On the contrary, it is necessary. Hayakawa says: "The interesting writer, the informative speaker, the accurate thinker and the sane individual operate on all levels of the abstraction ladder, moving quickly and

gracefully and in orderly fashion from higher to lower, from lower to higher, with minds as lithe and deft and beautiful as monkeys in a tree."

To move gracefully and in orderly fashion up and down the abstraction ladder, the writer must first of all be aware of the process. Professor Kenneth Johnson speaks of the roller-coaster technique for writing and speaking. It involves a more-or-less systematic variation in the level of abstraction. He says if you give readers only specific information, they may ask, "So what? What does it all add up to?" They are asking for an interpretation, a generalization. If you give only generalizations, they want to know how you arrived at the generalizations. They want some specifics, some evidence.

In Paula Shepard's story on today's Army, for example, she moves from specifics about the living conditions in the barracks to a generalization about boot camp life.

Today's recruits still live in open bays, but only eight, nine or 10 sleep in each. Platoon leaders and their assistants share the privilege of a smaller, separate room. Barracks are all brick now, steamheated in winter and air-conditioned in summer. And soldiers spend their dozing hours on wide, thick beds that Katt says are far more comfortable than the thinly padded folding metal cots he remembers.

Boot camp was more rigorous all around three decades ago, he says.

The point is made. Now on to some more specifics. The insightful writer does more than look for facts and details. Look for the inference, the judgment that gives meaning to those specifics.

□ REPORTS, INFERENCES, JUDGMENTS

Usually, you are reporting information that can be verified. The language of reports is the language of science. Even though words mean different things to different people, we must and we do agree upon the names of certain things: inches, yards, meters, pounds. What we need is a reasonably accurate map of the territory.

Dictionaries, then, are useful maps, even though most of the time, context determines the meaning. Using a word in its most commonly accepted meaning is simply a common-sense thing to do, especially when we are writing.

For example, when Harper's Magazine called Clare Boothe Luce a "courtesan" in an article title, columnist William Safire and others took

editor Michael Kingsley to task. The article was an excerpt from a book by Wilfred Sheed that contained this passage: "As a bridge-figure between the courtesan and the career girl, Clare has sometimes seemed a funny kind of feminist, and the women's movement finds her a difficult patron saint."

The most common meaning of courtesan is prostitute, a particular kind of prostitute who sells sex to the high and mighty. Kingsley told Safire that he thought a courtesan was a member of a court whose role was to serve a great rich man. "The sexual connotation is only one part of it," Kingsley said.

Safire then makes this important point about English usage: "Words not only mean what you want them to mean; words mean what they mean to most people who understand them."

He adds: "That was Lewis Carroll's satiric point, as Humpty Dumpty dismissed Alice's objection to stretching words until they lost their meaning and became sources of confusion."

The language of reports must be clear. The writer of reports, the reporter, must deal with observable data and describe them in agreed-upon terms.

An inference, on the other hand, is a statement about the unknown made on the basis of the known. We may infer that the person standing in front of a university class is a professor. We may infer that a person holding an open book knows how to read. We may infer that the dead man with the deep knife wound was murdered.

Making inferences is essential for survival. Intelligent people try to make intelligent inferences. What is more important, they know when they are making them. So do good writers. In addition, if they make an inference, they test its accuracy.

For example, if you were told that an employee did not receive notice that his employment had been terminated until late September, you would not write that he had been fired in late September. He did not say he was fired, and second, he did not say when he stopped working.

If you were told that it took two hours for employees of the Fire Department to put out the blaze, you would not write that firefighters put out the fire two hours after it started. You would be inferring that the employees of the Fire Department were firefighters (actually, they may have been secretaries; the firefighters may have been on strike), and second, you don't know when the fire started.

You need to make inferences; you need to have hunches. But like a good scientist, you check them out. Far too many times we make inferences without knowing we are making them.

Look at this story:

The musty smell of damp sawdust rises from the floor as one of 41 horses on Alice Thompson's farm stomps his feet in the chilly barn. Birds scatter from beneath the eaves when the metal doors bang open, letting in a rush of cold air.

It seems an idyllic setting, the classic country farm.

Yet here there is a sense of the supernatural.

Here have been recorded telekinetic and extrasensory experiences for over 20 years.

Telekinesis is the power of the mind to move objects. But it is a power many scientists doubt.

When the writer says "there is a sense of the supernatural," she has made an inference. The word itself is an inference, because no one could demonstrate scientifically that the supernatural exists.

Then the writer tells us what telekinesis is, and follows with a statement saying that many scientists doubt its existence. The writer confuses fact with inference.

A report can be verified.

An inference is based on a report.

A judgment expresses approval or disapproval.

Another story begins:

Claude Christian is a skilled worker. He fixes cars, and he does it well.
But Claude is unemployed.

If Claude Christian does indeed repair cars so that they run well, he could properly be called a skilled worker. But the writer is making inferences. She does not demonstrate that what she writes is true.

Now look at this carefully drawn inference in a story about the old buildings of a state mental institution:

Bars used to surround the 3-by-7-foot pens that, during the 19th century, housed three people. There was no heat. There was no light. No beds, no toilet facilities, no cafeterias, no exercise areas—no hope.

First the writer gives concrete specifics; she demonstrates the point she's leading up to. Then comes the poignant inference—"no hope."

The point is, of course, that non-fiction writers should not ask readers to *believe* anything. Effective writers neither make inferences

unknowingly nor make them without demonstrating the facts from which they are drawn.

A judgment goes a step further than an inference. In the language of general semantics, a judgment shows approval or disapproval. A report cannot say, "It was a marvelous cruise." That is a judgment. A report would describe what the cruise cost and what specific benefits were offered.

People often make judgments when they think they are reporting facts. If you say, "Tom is a liar," you are making both an inference and a judgment. You infer that Tom often knows the truth but deliberately misrepresents it, and you make a disapproving judgment of Tom.

Many words contain or imply a judgment. They are direct expressions of approval or disapproval. For that reason these words are precarious, the most dangerous of all words. Hayakawa calls them snarl-words or purr-words. If someone says, "He always was a radical," that person is probably expressing disapproval. "She's a sweet person" expresses approval.

Look at the approval this reporter is showing in a front-page news story:

Boone County Southern District Judge Kay Roberts claimed she was new at politics, but Friday night she put on a masterful show.

By calling it a masterful show, the writer also tells us he liked what he saw. Later in the story he writes:

Yet it was Judge Roberts who stole the spotlight.

Again he shows approval. Had he written that Judge Roberts "dominated" the discussion he would have shown disapproval.

In some writing, authors are expected to make judgments. What is important is that writers recognize when they do. When you use words that imply a favorable or unfavorable judgment, your writing is said to be slanted—and "slanted" is rarely a purr-word.

Look at these example:

I am firm; you are obstinate; he is bullheaded.

We are careful with our money; they are stingy.

I am cautious; you are timid; they are scared.

I am slender; you are slightly thin; she is skinny.

Another word for this kind of language is that it is *affective*. It contains hidden emotional content. It is difficult to believe that "that

mangy cur," "that lovable pup," "that silly pooch" and "that vicious animal" can all refer to the same dog, depending upon the emotional attitude of the person using the words.

Why is it that we often read that unions demand a pay increase, although industry requests or seeks to raise the price of its products? Here is a letter to a newspaper charging that the news media use slanted or affective language:

In nearly every reference to the desperately needed budget cuts the president has proposed, the media use words such as "axe," "chop" and "slice." With Social Security and income tax hikes, the news media have never referred to these tax increases in a similar manner. I am sure that after every tax increase every average worker feels the pain of the federal government hacking away at his take-home pay.

The writer, of course, shows his own bias, but he is not pretending to be a reporter. Here are two sentences written by a reporter in an investigative piece for a city magazine about the pornography racket:

Transactions are almost always in cash. The clientele is mostly white and mostly weird-looking.

The statements are not precise. The writer does not bother to tell us what makes someone "weird-looking." If those same people had been gathered in an art gallery or in a classroom of adults, would have they seemed "weird-looking"? Who was it that said beauty is in the eye of the beholder? The writer was not, of course, telling us how the people in the pornography store looked. He was telling us that he disapproved of the way they looked. And probably, he disapproved of them period.

□ DIRECTIVE LANGUAGE

Closely related to affective language is directive language. Directive language tries to make something happen. It tries to influence our conduct, to control future events. Sometimes directive language simply commands: "Come here!" Other times, it is more subtle: "Good athletes do not need steroids." "Responsible people don't drink and drive."

Directive language usually contains affective language, especially in advertising and in political propaganda. Sometimes it contains a good deal of wishful thinking. "Tired of paying taxes? Vote for Jeremy

Smith." The careful writer knows when to use and when to avoid directive language.

□ ALLNESS OR EITHER-OR THINKING

Beware of what some semanticists call the "allness" syndrome. This common syndrome occurs when you unconsciously assume that you have written all there is to say on a subject. General semanticists urge the conscious use of "etc." to indicate that you are aware that you cannot know or write everything about a subject. Obviously, you should rarely write "etc." into your copy, but you would do well to keep it in mind.

Remembering "etc." will help prevent you from using such words as *always, never, every, all, completely, every time, constantly*. The careful writer includes details and exceptions. Like the scientist, look for differences, for inconsistencies. It is too easy to see similarities.

Also, be careful of either-or thinking. Our language is loaded with polar terms because so much of life seems to be either-or: Life or death, day or night, land or water, hot or cold. This also appears to be true at higher levels of abstraction: induction or deduction, realism or idealism, capitalism or communism, Democrat or Republican.

It is perhaps natural then to think of things erroneously as black or white, good or bad, normal or abnormal. If you are not for me you are against me. The list goes on and on. "Reality" is not that simple. There are many levels of values, many shades of colors. Few things are either this or that. The scientist asks to what extent, to what degree, how much? Train yourself to do the same. Hayakawa tells you why: "The essential feature of the multi-valued orientation is its inherent capacity to enable us to see more deeply into reality, or to appreciate its finer shadings and subtle nuances of possibilities." And if you perceive reality in this way, you can find the right words to convey it to your readers.

□ THE NEED FOR INDEXING

One practice that may help you avoid either-or thinking and other problems of communication is what general semanticists call *indexing*. Again, this indexing will not actually appear in the writing, but it is a device to keep the writer conscious of necessary distinctions.

1. *The What Index.* No two things are the same. Remember cow₁ is not cow₂ is not cow₃. Freedom of the press in Cuba is not freedom of the press in the United States is not freedom of the press in Korea. Palestinian₁ is not Palestinian₂ is not Palestinian₃. Labor leader₁ is not labor leader₂ is not labor leader₃.

You can never learn this lesson too well. Mental indexing will help you avoid stereotyping, which always involves a prejudging. Some prejudgment is necessary. But the writer should be a discoverer. What is a "typical" farmer, a "typical" midwesterner, a "typical" teen-ager? The writer, like any other artist, sees reality freshly, differently, always for the first time. No one is just another reader.

2. *The When Index.* Nor is that reader the same person day after day or even moment to moment. The only sure thing is change, and that is true of people as well as of things. Professor Max Otto wrote: "We dip an intellectual net into fluid experience and mistake a catch of abstractions for quivering life."

Not even Mt. Everest is the same as it was. The Ozarks were once higher than the Himalayas. Eldridge Cleaver₁₉₉₂ is not Eldridge Cleaver₁₉₇₂ is not Eldridge Cleaver₁₉₆₂. You must allow for the change in things; you must allow people to change. They do.

Reporters, who primarily are chronicling change, can never capture all the change around us. People generally want things to remain the same because that is what they are used to. But writers can help people adapt to the change around them by constantly finding it and pointing it out. After all most things change gradually, and the change is difficult to see. But all change is easier to digest when we see it happening gradually, rather than in the form of disaster, violence or revolution.

3. *The Where Index.* Geography, climate, location have an effect on things as well as on people. Persons and things change depending on where they are at the time. A blossom on a tree is different from a blossom in a vase, is different from the blossom in a vase with water. S.I. Hayakawa in California was different from Hayakawa in Washington, D.C. Former Secretary of State Alexander Haig in a staff meeting was different from Haig in the Pentagon, was different from Haig in a Senate hearing room, is different from Haig in private life.

The what, when and where indices remind us that words are static in a world of dynamic process. The things or the people about whom you are writing continue to change, even as you write about them.

4. *Other Indices.* As with the other indices, remember the following when gathering information and when writing. Most of the time you are better not to say them. But your words should indicate that you are aware of them.

a. **As Far as I Know.** We always need to be reminded that it is nearly impossible to be certain about anything in this changing, moving, shifting world. Look at these statements:

The man is not dangerous. (as far as I know)

The gun is not loaded. (as far as I know)

That cat does not scratch. (as far as I know)

Too many times reporters do not ask the next question or do not ask just one more person. Too many times we find the answer that we are looking for and record it as fact.

We must remember that when we describe something as "red," we do not actually know that it is red. Redness is in our heads, a joint product of our nervous system and of certain characteristics of the thing we have called red. Mostly, color is determined by the way light hits the object. Actually, the object is different colors at different times. The object would not be red under ultraviolet light, nor would a colorblind person call it red.

Remembering "as far as I know" will remind you to ask more questions and to record the answers more precisely.

b. **To a Point.** In the world outside our heads, things are true in varying degrees, at various levels, to a certain extent. This consciousness should help you be aware that you have not said the last word on anything—because, of course, you haven't. Note these statements:

Her clothes were out of style. (true to a point)

He didn't need the money. (true to a point)

She left school because she hated her math teacher. (true to a point)

A reporter wrote this sentence about the results of a new sewage disposal plant: "Neighborhoods with old facilities won't be bothered by those distinctive odors anymore." That may be true—to a point.

The truth is evasive, seldom simple, usually many-faceted. Demonstrate this in your writing.

c. **For Me, In My Opinion.** After all, everyone reacts to everything differently. And even that universal statement probably has some exception. The Latin expression is "De gustibus non est disputandum": Do not argue about taste. Remember, much of what people say is purely a matter of taste. Knowing this about others and about yourself will help you to be more precise in your reporting and writing. Read these statements:

This is a classic example. (to me)

The escargots had a touch too much of garlic. (for me)

That guy was really funny. (in my opinion)

Opinion, like the inference, is legitimate and useful. Do not be afraid of opinions; just recognize them for what they are.

These are some of the ways that general semantics can help you to write what you want to write in order to mean what you want to mean. To understand words and what they do to people, you must first understand what words do to you.

Etc.

QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

1. Discuss what it means to say that a writer should be a scientist and take a scientific approach to language.
2. Read the front page of a daily newspaper, and underline every inference that you find that is made by the writer.
3. Make a list of commonly used snarl-words.
4. What does it mean to take readers and listeners up and down the abstraction ladder? Why is it important?
5. Discuss the importance of indexing. Also, what are the possible pitfalls of indexing?