

☆ EDITORIAL ☆

Semantics, General Semantics Again

THERE HAS BEEN considerable criticism on the part of a few readers of *ETC.* concerning the use of the term 'semantics' and 'general semantics' in these pages. It is charged that often the two terms are indiscriminately interchanged and that the failure to make a sharp distinction adds to confusion about both semantics and general semantics.

The fact of the matter is that contributors to *ETC.* quite frequently fail to make the distinction between 'semantics' (a kind of blanket term referring to many kinds of logical, philological, anthropological, psychological, and other inquiries into language and symbols) and 'general semantics' (the system originated by Alfred Korzybski and presented in *Science and Sanity*). Ever since *ETC.* began publication, the Editors have been on guard against this confusion, and have inserted the word 'general' before 'semantics' whenever the context revealed that it was Korzybski's system that was being referred to.

No doubt some instances of this confusion escaped the vigilance of the Editors. Granting that this and other confusions result from our terminology, is there a remedy? 'Defining one's terms,' as every student of general semantics knows, can help, but it is not the magic road to understanding that those with aristotelian habits of mind believe it to be. Indeed, the general semanticist more than any one realizes that 'defining terms' is at best a verbalization of the abstract-

ing processes that go on inside the definer. Only if a cooperative communicative process already exists between the individuals involved will definitions be of further value in maintaining that communicative process. If no such process exists, both parties to a dispute can keep on 'defining terms' endlessly, getting very angry doing so, with no discernible progress in establishing communication.

But since, among students of general semantics, an environment exists in which 'defining terms' can further the communicative process, what shall be the basis for the most fruitful definitions? There are no 'inherently' *correct* meanings in the terms themselves. In fact, one of the most important achievements of semantics (the old linguistic kind) *and* of general semantics is the demonstration of the non-reality of 'inherent meanings' and the resulting blanket dismissal as meaningless of all questions in the form, 'What is so-and-so *really*?' People who approach the problem in this way (What is semantics *really*? What is general semantics *really*?) can never get satisfactory answers to these questions, because the only people who could conceivably give authorized answers (semanticists and general semanticists) will undoubtedly dismiss these questions as meaningless.

The need for definition has arisen, it appears to us, from the fact that Korzybski's general semantics has been so influential as to affect those areas of study formerly subsumed under such names as

'significs,' 'psychology of language,' 'biolinguistics,' 'semantics,' 'semiotic,' 'logical analysis,' etc., and to unite them, both in scholarly and popular apprehension, as related fields, which, at the next higher level of abstraction, may be regarded as one field, namely, 'semantics.'

The fact that 'semantics' was formerly used in a special philological sense does not deprive present workers in the field of the right to use the word in an extended sense to apply to orientations, methods of evaluation, etc. We offer, as is customary in scientific lexicography in discussions of this kind, the following illustrative quotations:

Identification may be considered as the remains of pre-human, or primitive, or infantile, one-valued *semantics*, which establishes, or results from, *semantic* states, by which the essentially infinite-valued facts of experience are not differentiated or evaluated properly, and so the many values of these facts are identified into a single value.¹

But among humans we cannot avoid training, through the mechanism of language and its structure, in some, most often unconscious, *general semantics*, and so a great deal depends on what kind of *semantics or methods of evaluation* we impose on our children.²

A language of 'true' and 'false' involves *two-valued semantics*; the introduction of adverbs or their equivalents introduces modality and so *three-valued semantics*. The introduction of indefinitely many degrees between the 'true' and 'false' leads finally to *infinite-valued semantics*.³

¹ A. Korzybski, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics* (2nd edition), p. 462.

² *Ibid.*, p. 462-3.

It is in the sense illustrated in the above quotations that Hayakawa used the terms 'semantics of identification' and 'semantics of non-identification,' with which Dr. Guila F. Beattie takes issue in her letter to the editors, printed in this issue of *ETC.*, (p. 286). It is to be remarked that in the second of the above quotations, Korzybski uses the expression 'general semantics' to refer to over-all patterns of evaluation and/or orientation derived from *any* kind of education. In order to avoid confusion, it has been a rule in the editorial offices of *ETC.* not to use this expression in this broader sense, restricting its use in the text to refer to the non-aristotelian system formulated by Korzybski.

Both Mr. Guthrie Janssen (in *ETC.*, V, 70-75, Autumn, 1947) and Dr. Beattie insist that general semantics has 'nothing to do' with semantics, and appear to regard semantics as totally insignificant. As Dr. Beattie says:

... from a careful study of Korzybski's work it becomes obvious that 'semantics' can refer to no more useful a science than could be developed by trying to build up a 'zoology out of unicorns'. . . It would be necessary to explain that it [general semantics] has *nothing* to do with semantics.

The Editors fail to see how anyone from a 'careful study of Korzybski's work' (or anyone else's work, for that matter) could come to the conclusion about the analogy between semantics and unicorn zoology. It would mean complete dismissal of the works of Bertrand Russell, Ogden and Richards, Rudolf Carnap, Charles W. Morris, Pillsbury and Meader, etc., not to speak of scores of other scholars who have not referred to semantics as such,

³ *Ibid.*, p. 463. All italics in this and the above quotation are ours (Ed.).

but have made useful contributions to the study of symbols, symbolic systems, and the relation between language and behavior (*e.g.*, Trigant Burrow, Thurman Arnold, Jerome Frank, Sigmund Freud). Nor is it apparent that general semantics has 'nothing to do' with semantics. The fact that Korzybski was not familiar with the works of Bréal, Welby, et al., does not warrant any such conclusion. The history of science is full of examples of independent parallel inquiries. Many of the present workers in the field of general semantics derived their first insights into the problems dealt with by Korzybski through the works of Welby, Allen Upward, Ogden and Richards, Carnap, Bridgman, A. F. Bentley, and others. To these workers, general semantics appeared as a powerful *generalization* of their previous, relatively limited systems—a generalization in the sense that their previous studies could achieve an altogether new significance if regarded from this non-elementalistic, psycho-logical 'point of view.' Korzybski himself has applied his psycho-logics in formulating a theory of counting (natural integers) as an example of how psycho-logics could be used in deriving a purely 'formal,' 'logical' structure. Articles in *ETC.* on art, music, literature, sociology, ethics, pedagogy, etc., have been attempts to apply non-elementalistic psycho-logics to new 'fields.'

Mr. Janssen (*loc. cit.*) and Dr. Beattie also insist that hopeless confusion results when the word 'semantics' is used in any context in which the term 'general semantics' is also used. Attention is called to the successive generalizations of the terms 'geometry,' 'algebra,' and 'arithmetic,' which accompanied the development of mathematics. Certainly the modern geometries (projective, differential, non-euclidean, etc.) are vastly more general and powerful than the *Elements*

of Euclid, and still more general than the original 'geometry' which dealt with land measurement. Yet the science did not suffer from the fact that the old modest name, 'land measurement,' is still being applied to it. It is a far cry from the old Arabian method of solving linear and quadratic equations to the modern theories of invariants under non-commutative, non-associative transformations which form the subject-matter of modern algebra. Nor is it of any importance that the ordinary connotations of algebra with those unfamiliar with modern mathematics have to do with x's and y's and with people riding bicycles from A to B. Nor does it matter that most people think of the multiplication table in connection with 'arithmetic.' People who work in the field of analytic number theory, one of the most esoteric fields of mathematics, still refer to it fondly as 'arithmetic.'

In the opinion of the Editors, the term 'semantics' will, whatever our individual wishes in the matter may be, in due time be used to include all the disciplines in which symbols *and* the inner reactions to symbols are important objects of study. It will not matter that up to recent times 'semantics' has referred to a much narrower field of inquiry. The popularity of the term (perhaps due to its brevity and euphony) has already rendered impossible the policing of its use. To be sure, a certain confusion necessarily accompanies the spread of a term beyond its strict scholarly seclusion to areas of public discussion. Such confusion is symptomatic of a lively interest in the questions raised by the studies in which the term has been employed. One need not be afraid of permanent, harmful effects resulting from such initial misunderstandings. They are inevitable and should be taken in stride.

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