

AVOIDING THE DANGERS OF SEMANTIC ADOLESCENCE

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RECENTLY I was talking with a colleague from another college, whose point of view seemed enough like mine to make me hope that he too was sympathetic toward general semantics as a basic educational method. To my disappointment, he was not. He admitted that he had not studied it thoroughly himself. However, he said something that struck me as a challenge. He said that although it sounded good, he was not pleased with the end result of general semantics in the students he had seen. He had found many of them to be more smug, or more cynical, more difficult to deal with. He wasn't sure that it was an altogether healthy point of view to give young people.

Now, if his objection had been theoretical, I would have left it to the philosophers. But the end product as seen in the lives and language habits of young people is my business. I am in the work of training teachers — young people who will go out and teach thousands of other younger people. It is highly important to me that they should have a wholesome point of view. And as I said before, this man's education philosophy was enough like mine to assure me that he and I wanted the same end results. He was criticizing the method I use to achieve these results.

During the years since I first started using the semantic approach in my teaching, not all has been perfect, of course. But there have been results in changed attitudes and changed habits such as I had never had in my work before. These desirable results have constantly filled me with wonder and a sense of humility and gratitude to the various pioneers in semantics — most especially to Alfred Korzybski — for a discipline that has made such results possible. Students have said and have demonstrated in their actions such things as the following: "I don't get angry and argue the way I used to. I stop and analyze the language the other fellow and I are using"; or, "I begin to see how my comments on people of other races reflect old assumptions that are not based on facts"; or, "I get along with other people better than I used to."

However, in talking to my colleague, I did not satisfy myself with a verbal defense of my philosophy and method. It is not enough to prove that we have good results. It is necessary to discover what different factors the other person abstracts from the total situation. Only then can we judge the validity of our own procedures and conclusions. Where we are in error, where our method is weak or clarity of interpretation is lacking, we can correct our procedure so that

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our results will be more satisfying. I often think of a quotation from Alfred North Whitehead in his *Science and the Modern World*: "In formal logic a contradiction is a signal of defeat; but in the evolution of real knowledge it marks the first step toward a victory."

Therefore, I welcomed the frankness of my critic, for it forced me to stop and analyze my work. I had a definite problem to solve: What caused the undesirable results that he saw? We have all seen such manifestations as he objected to — possibly even in ourselves in our earlier days. I remember a paper by one of my college freshmen that began this way:

During the early days of this course, results seemed to indicate that I was learning How to Lose Friends and Alienate People. Whenever I tried to put into practice the things I was learning, I always seemed to antagonize people. I knew this wasn't right, because the purpose of the course was to help us use language to get along better with other people.

The freshman girl was right. One purpose of general semantics is to help people achieve more successful human relations. It is a discipline that attempts to make the individual more consciously *aware* of himself and his language.

BECOMING aware is a process of maturing, and it is not always accomplished without awkwardness. We know how it is with the teen-ager as he begins his physical maturing. In some cases, fortunately, the transition of adolescence takes place smoothly. But in others, the adolescent passes through a stage that is awkward and confusing to himself and to those who must live with him. He must let go his childish dependence upon those he loves and establish his right to stand independently as a man. In so doing, he often wounds those whom he loves; for while rejecting them, he still leans upon them.

So often it is with individuals who attempt to achieve semantic maturity. They sometimes pass through a period of what may be called "semantic adolescence," in which they become generally obnoxious to people around them. Unwittingly they give critics of general semantics just cause for criticism. At the meeting of the Speech Association of America in New York in the winter of 1950, Dr. Irving Lee mentioned three stages of semantic maturity. First, the individual is able to recognize in others the marks of semantic immaturity. Second, he is able to recognize these marks of immaturity in himself. And finally, he is able to apply his knowledge toward his own more extensional orientation or semantic maturity. It is the first of these that is most obvious in semantic adolescence — when he begins to recognize the marks in other people. For the learner, it may be the most exciting and over-verbalized phase, because it is the beginning of awareness. But for his associates it is hardest to bear.

But let us not think that this condition exists only in those who are students of general semantics. P. W. Bridgman found a similar problem when he demanded "operational thinking" in daily life as well as in the laboratory.

Operational thinking will at first prove to be an unsocial virtue; one will find oneself perpetually unable to understand the simplest conversations of one's friends, and will make oneself universally unpopular by demanding the meaning of apparently the simplest terms of every argument.

But in spite of this, Dr. Bridgman goes on to say, he has faith that the final result will be good. Probably the reason a similar difficulty is noticed more frequently in students of general semantics than in others is that general semantics urges people to apply the scientific method of thinking to the language and evaluations of everyday life. And it is in the language of everyday life that these irritations are noticed.

BUT WE must not leave our students in this raw, adolescent stage without help. Teachers of general semantics — and that includes all who would practice and recommend its disciplines — must know the dangers and must caution and counsel the beginner, just as the trained counselor helps the boy or girl avoid stress as he passes through his adolescence. From my years of working with students of college level and older, I have noticed several dangers of which our students need special warning. I shall mention *eight* of them.

1. Beware of accepting the disciplines of general semantics as a panacea, or — which is equally annoying to the listener — speaking of it with such "allness" of enthusiasm that it sounds like a panacea. It is true that there is an intense excitement accompanying a discovery that realigns our old knowledge into a new configuration. This is true in all life, not only in general semantics. One of the best classical examples is the story of Archimedes, who, while lazily floating in his bath, perceived one new fact which suddenly threw his old ideas into a new configuration. In his excitement, it is said, he ran naked into the street, shouting, "Eureka! Eureka! I have found it!" There is no record yet that any student of general semantics has displayed quite that degree of enthusiasm. However, I remember a nineteen-year-old girl who, in the midst of class discussion, raised her hand, face radiant and eyes shining, and exclaimed: "Oh this is wonderful! Now, how can we use it to save the world?" The teacher need not lose his own enthusiasm, his zest and conviction of the value of the subject; but he should warn that the student who tries to force his enthusiasm on others who have not shared his experience is likely to be labeled a fanatic.

2. Beware of using trade jargon — that is, the peculiar terminology of general semantics — in conversation with those who are unfamiliar with the terms. People are generally *not* sympathetic toward a person whose language puts them at a disadvantage. This, again, is true not only in general semantics. For example, much of the difficulty Sister Kenny encountered when she first brought her method of treating polio to this country has been attributed to her use of terms not consistent with the accepted terminology of medical literature. One day a student of mine came to me in disgust. "This stuff doesn't work,"

he said. "Last night I had an argument with my mother, and when I told her she had a *two-valued orientation* on the subject, she got madder than ever." It is indeed necessary for the beginning student to be familiar with certain terms, but he must also be helped to explain his subject in language comprehensible and inoffensive to the layman. This is not easy. When in 1944, I returned from an intensive seminar straight from the language of *Science and Sanity*, I was like one who has learned a new subject in a foreign tongue. I had to translate it into simple English before my colleagues could understand me. This was especially mandatory since those colleagues included a metaphysical philosopher and a Freudian psychologist! However, please note: I am not criticizing Korzybski's terminology as such. I am speaking of aids for those in the throes of semantic adolescence. The time will come when they can use unfamiliar terms more wisely.

3. Beware of the "wiser-than-thou" attitude of applying classification labels to conversational remarks of other people. This was called to my attention by a friend of one of my students. He said that he and his friend discussed general semantics by the hour, and the thing he had against it was that it led people to put "classifications" on everything that was said. I learned that every time the two young men disagreed, my student would say: "Ah! that is an inference!" "That is a very high abstraction!" or being irritatingly proper: "That *may be classified as a signal reaction.*" Our students usually find great pleasure in their ability to recognize higher and lower abstractions in language — especially in the language of others. To make matters worse, they sometimes act as if the higher abstractions and inferences and judgments are less worthy of their consideration than descriptive statements. Students need to be helped to use their new-found knowledge with tact, to lead their companions — where possible — to reveal supporting evidence for their high abstractions without the irritating "wiser-than-thou" attitude on the part of the neophyte semanticist.

4. Beware of complacently throwing about such terms as "thalamo-cortical integration," "aristotelian logic," and "neuro-semantic environment" without fully comprehending the implications of these terms. In my work with college freshmen, I know that they have not yet been students of psychology. Thus, I assume their ignorance of it and use psychological terms very, very rarely. In fact, there is only one psychological term which we discuss in full; that is the Pavlovian term *conditioning*, without which it would be extremely difficult to discuss man's reactions to verbal symbols. On the other hand, since general semantics draws from so many fields new to students, especially from various sciences, students find great stimulation to read and study in these varied fields. Said one young man, a veteran of the last war: "The only difficulty I have with the course is that I get so interested in reading in all the related fields that I haven't time left to do the assigned work in my required subjects." But not all semantic adolescents are as wise as this young man. They often use the terms from the related fields *before* doing the reading.

5. Beware of exaggerating the use of the semantic devices to the extent of appearing ridiculous. These five little devices suggested by Korzybski — quotes, dating, indexing, hyphens, and the *etc.* — are practiced inconspicuously in the everyday language of thousands of people who make no overt reference to general semantics. For instance, I have seen many speakers use the *quote* technique very naturally to enhance the clarity of their explanations. There is no reason why our students need to exaggerate the use of this device to the point where it looks like waving antennae or fluttering wings.

6. Beware of becoming intolerant of small talk or chit-chat. As Bridgman has suggested, this is one of the most difficult problems confronting one who demands that language be meaningful. However, it is well to remind the student that non-informative language is also "meaningful," and for its function of social communion is no less valuable than scientific language. A director of occupational therapy in a tuberculosis sanatorium told me recently that one of her hardest problems with student therapists is to get them to talk light nonsense with the patients. Yet this is highly important in therapy. *Our* students must remember that general semantics does not recommend one function of language to the exclusion of others, but the *proper evaluation* of all language.

7. Beware of the pretense of nondogmatism that lies in merely adding "I think" or "It seems to me" to one's judgments. It is often nothing more than hiding self-righteously behind a formal qualifying expression. The crucial point that beginners frequently fail to notice is the difference between judgments of fact and judgments of value. To say "I think that food tastes delicious" is very different from saying "I think John is taller than Henry." Which boy is taller is not dependent on what I think but upon what the measurements reveal.

8. Beware of merely talking about general semantics without applying its principles in practice. The highly verbal individual who finds in general semantics a new and exciting philosophy is in danger of keeping it forever on the verbal level, thus increasing the very futility that its discipline hopes to correct.

I HAVE spoken throughout this paper of general semantics as a discipline. As any student of general semantics understands, this is but one aspect of the subject. However, no matter how adequately one may master the other aspects, general semantics has not served its purpose until it enters into the language and evaluative habits of the individual. It is this that concerns me as a teacher, and this that my critic challenged. Our beginners — be they young or old — need to be constantly reminded of what Korzybski said: that extensional orientation is a lifetime process. The exhilaration that comes with the beginning of awareness is not the end but only the beginning, and the growing or adolescent stage will not always be easy. But the maturity we seek is worth the effort.