

STUART CHASE:  
SEMANTICIST EXTRAORDINARY

ROBERT WANDERER\*

STUART CHASE brought out *The Tyranny of Words* in 1938, just five years after Korzybski's *Science and Sanity*. In 1969 he wrote *Danger – Men Talking!*\*\* Thus, he has written both the first and one of the latest of the "popularizations" of general semantics.

Chase is a rugged New Englander, now in his eighties, who has written thirty-two books, various pamphlets, and a great number of magazine articles over his long career as a professional writer. He started as a certified public accountant before World War I, spent five years investigating the meat and packing industries for the Federal Trade Commission, was one of the founders and a longtime director of the Labor Bureau, Inc., a nonprofit research corporation, and served as consultant to various governmental bodies in the 1930's and 1940's.

*Your Money's Worth*, which Chase and F. J. Schlink wrote in 1927, is credited with starting the consumer movement in the United States. It outlined for the first time the consumers' view of the Alice in Wonderland world of business and advertising and merchandizing. It was a Book of the Month Club choice, and the subsequent response was so great that Chase got a foundation grant in order to answer the flood of letters. He helped organize and was the first president of Consumers Research, the pioneering organization which tested products for the consumer; some time later, after he had left it, a group split off and formed Consumers Union, now dominant in the field. Incidentally, one of the major recommendations in *Your Money's Worth* was that government publish its findings of the research it does into the products it buys – a proposal still frequently advocated by Consumers Union.

\*San Francisco.

\*\*Not to be confused with *Danger: Men Talking*, a collection of William H. Schneider drawings, many of which had appeared in *ETC.*, published by Random House in 1965.

Chase's books ranged at first over economics, government and current problems, then later more into human relations and global issues. In the process of researching and writing these books Chase became an internationally-known figure. Russian writers, severely critical of semantics, have blasted Chase as much if not more than any other writer in the field; I once looked through the index of a Russian-language book attacking semantics and found more entries under "Chase, S." than under "Korzybski, A." So upset were the Russians that they threw all of Chase's books, no matter what the subject, out of a library in Leningrad.

Chase describes his first involvement with general semantics in the foreword to his latest book, *Danger — Men Talking!*:

I had brashly written a dozen books before a friend urged me to read *Science and Sanity* by Alfred Korzybski. My friend said it was good medicine for writers, and so I found it — sometimes bitter but good. Korzybski's work made me look at my words, and those of others, in a wholly new light.

He wrote *The Tyranny of Words* as a result, followed with *Power of Words* in 1954, and "applied the semantic approach to the writing of other books and articles, to lecturing, and to serious conversation. Among other virtues, it taught me when to stop talking and listen."

But why, you might ask, call Chase a "semanticist extraordinary," when only three of his thirty-two books are "about" semantics, and when he is not a scholar who has brought new theories and ideas to the discipline? Furthermore, Chase does not particularly consider himself a semanticist; to him, "I took general semantics in the same way as I took Veblen, cultural anthropology, John Maynard Keynes, group dynamics, and cybernetics — as a discipline which would throw more light on human relations generally, and on communication in particular."

I think of Chase's works as "semantics in action." He uses the techniques of general semantics and of other relevant fields (one of the operating principles of a good semanticist is that he seeks out relevant material wherever it may be) and invariably communicates a coherent whole that gives his readers a feeling of thorough research, objective evaluation, and clear exposition.

Further, Chase is a generalist in a world of specialists, a man who draws on related specialties to develop ideas and collections of information that might be overlooked otherwise — something like the way

general semantics itself is a kind of interdisciplinary method that cuts across many fields.

*A selected bibliography of Stuart Chase:*

*Your Money's Worth* (with F. J. Schlink) (1927). A study in the waste of the consumers' dollar, including many points still valid.

*The Tyranny of Words* (1938). The pioneering book in the ways words are misused in our world. Now in paperback.

*The Proper Study of Mankind* (1948, and later revisions). A compendium of new developments in the social sciences. Now in paperback.

*Power of Words* (1954). A good basic text in general semantics.

*Guides to Straight Thinking* (1956). An everyman's book on logic and reasoning, examining common fallacies.

*Some Things Worth Knowing* (1958). A wide-ranging collection of facts from many fields.

*Live and Let Live* (1960). A guide to America's current problems.

*Danger – Men Talking!* (1969). Designed as a basic book in semantics and communication for children, but an excellent introductory for anyone.

SPACE POEM

A fly has landed on the moon!  
He just told me, his buzzing  
has changed from bzzzz to bzbz bzbz.

Quite a trip for a fly.  
I'm very proud of him.

I think I hear the bzbz changing to bzzzzz.  
What a trip!  
What wonderful things he'll tell  
when he lands  
on the lobe of my left ear.

DAVID IGNATOW  
*East Hampton, New York*