INTERVIEW

Ed MacNeal —
General Semantics
Then and Now

E D MacNEAL held the position of executive secretary of the International Society for General Semantics in the late 1940s, works as an aviation consultant, and has written several notable books, including *The Semantics of Air Passenger Transportation*; *Mathsemantics: Making Numbers Talk Sense*; and *MacNeal's Master Atlas of Decision Making*. This interview took place during March 2000.

Interviewer: Jeremy Klein, Editor of *ETC*.

Jeremy Klein: How did you become interested in general semantics in the first place?

Ed MacNeal: A friend gave me a copy of Hayakawa's *Language in Action* in December 1941, the year *Language in Action* appeared. I was 16.

Was your friend interested in general semantics?

Not that I ever knew of. He was an older man with whom I'd had an argument, over what I don't remember. When he gave me the book he remarked pointedly that it might help me think better, or something to that effect, which I believe he took from the copy on the dust jacket or perhaps from the Book-of-the-Month-Club brochure.

So you read it anyway?

Oh, yes. No reasonable gift refused. Dad had talked about Stuart Chase's *Tyranny of Words,* which appeared a few years earlier, so I was primed, you might say, for *Language in Action.* I found it fascinating, perhaps the most fascinating book I'd read up to that time. It revealed that people had already explored areas that had interested me. I reread it in army camp in 1943-44. That I took the book seriously you can see from the passages I underlined and my marginal comments. That it had an effect on me you can tell from the fact that never again did I mark up a book in ink. I switched to pencil, a flexible medium more in keeping with changing abstractions in a changing world.

Then when you left the army you went to the University of Chicago during the legendary Hutchins era. Did the environment there at that time seem especially congenial to those with an interest in general semantics?

Yes, in several ways, to me at least. Let me explain. I'd started in 1943 at Harvard but in 1946, after two and a half years in the army, I regarded Harvard's approach as unnecessarily narrowing, for two reasons. First, because I'd had to start with sequence courses (English composition, calculus, French poetry, mechanics, and American history) that simply followed from my previous schooling, and second, because its social structure was elitist east coast. Chicago, on the contrary, immediately put me into survey courses in fields (such as sociology, biology, and philoso-

phy) in which tests showed I had the biggest gaps, and its social structure was less confining. Therefore, I found Chicago especially congenial to broader views of intellectual and social development.

Early in 1946, before starting at Chicago and before the Institute of General Semantics moved to Lakeville, CT, I'd taken a seminar with Korzybski near the Chicago campus, and visited with Hayakawa, who lived nearby and taught at Illinois Institute of Technology.

On arriving at Chicago that fall, I posted a sign in Burton-Judson dormitory inviting anyone interested in general semantics, etc., to a meeting. About a dozen students came and within a year we had perhaps the largest student organization on campus. We had regular meetings. Anatol Rapoport, from the department of Mathematical Biophysics, spoke often at the regular meetings and also at special lectures. We underestimated the drawing power of Wendell Johnson, so that some students ended up sitting under the blackboard and others on the wide sills outside the second-floor windows to hear him. We formed the largest single contingent at the Society's annual lecture-series downtown. A 1951 conference sponsored by the International Society and held on the Chicago campus drew several Chicago professors, including Charles Morris, author of *Signs, Language, and Behavior*.

So I would say that the environment was congenial.

Of course I knew that not everyone connected with the University of Chicago — witness Martin Gardner's *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science* — held general semantics in high esteem. I knew many people who didn't agree with my high assessment. I took this as normal difference of opinion. If anyone at Chicago discriminated against me because of my interest in general semantics, it certainly fell below my level of political-correctness sensitivity.

You served as the Society's executive secretary during part of your time in Chicago. Have you any interesting anecdotes

regarding the administrative side of the organization in those years?

I think the most interesting anecdotes on that score relate to the utterly normal way that the early general semanticists behaved in organizational matters. For example, some people at the Institute and the Society had grievances against each other, on the basis of which still others formed prejudices. General semanticists in meetings could squabble like anyone else. They could also reach foolishly incorrect results after deliberation. So did I, of course. For particulars, see my accounts in various *ETC* articles, such as "When Does Consciousness of Abstracting Matter the Most?" [vol. 43, no. 1], which relates the sink-slop mess and the chapter-criteria disagreement, the latter also noted in "Grokdueling" [vol. 56, no. 2], or look in *Mathsemantics*, say at my postage-due fiasco [pp.48-49].

Did your interest in general semantics affect your career plans?

No, not directly, in any event. I'd taken a master's at Chicago in planning even though I knew I didn't want to work for a governmental agency. I looked into more than thirty job possibilities, mostly with consultants and mostly in New York, and went to work for a transportation specialist, James C. Buckley, whose reports struck me as thorough and reasonable. I later discovered that his quality-standard for recommended actions required their defensibility against all alternatives. I find that a terrific standard, and one that Buckley probably wouldn't have adopted if he'd studied general semantics — at least not the all-alternatives part — which I guess comes off as a knock on general semantics. Anyway, he hadn't studied general semantics, and it didn't interest him, but he had no objection to my interest in it.

Well, then, how did your interests in decision making and mathsemantics develop?

My interest in decision making has a longer history than my interest in general semantics, much too long a history to cover here. I know, because I get into it in a new book I'm drafting on the evolution of decision making. That's not the evolution in me, but the evolution in general.

Just as I later liked Wendell Johnson's article on "You Can't Write Writing," but must write about something to somebody for some reason, I immediately liked Korzybski's clear insistence in *Science and Sanity* on taking action — making something happen, rather than just talking about it. I wouldn't have made a good abstract philosopher. I had long thought about action, but at that time, 1946, I didn't categorize these thoughts as decision making. That came in 1947, and general semantics helped me develop the theory that has now appeared in *MacNeal's Master Atlas of Decision Making*.

And what about mathsemantics?

That grew out of my work in aviation. It started with the recognition, back in 1952, that what people call a "passenger" represents an action, not a person. Getting this straight, which I attribute to the go-beyond-the-words outlook of general semantics, makes the difference between sound analysis and gobbledygook. Later, in 1969, when I had to hire people for my consulting office, I set up a quiz on everyday math confusions that ultimately led to my coining the word "mathsemantics." You can find this in the book of that name.

Do you have witty, illuminating, "unusual" stories about such prominent individuals as Hayakawa, Lee, Wendell Johnson, etc.?

Both wit and illumination depend on context, don't they? In the right context, that of the Evil Japanese Empire, the "damned Japs," I think that going to a Chinese restaurant in 1946 with Don Hayakawa might qualify. He told me after we'd ordered that he wanted me along as an obvious Caucasian because he loved

Chinese food but didn't feel safe by himself in a Chinese restaurant.

Similarly, in the context of a stroll with Wendell Johnson in 1951 after my just giving a paper on decision making, which he said made him so nervous he had to leave, the following might qualify as illuminating. He asked me what I expected to do for a career. I said I didn't know, that I hated to specialize, to narrow myself. He then told me how he had started out specializing in his own disability, stuttering, only to find himself led into psychology, physiology, physics, and even into politics now that the President had appointed him to a committee on the handicapped, which took him to places he'd never dreamed of. "If you go deeply enough into anything," he said, "it seems to lead everywhere."

Irving Lee switched the labels on the faucets in the bathroom. If you trusted the labels, you could wait forever before the water from the "hot" faucet got warm and you could get a momentary hot shock from the "cold" faucet. As an unexpected consequence, I suppose, if new guests said something about this, they'd probably washed their hands. If they said nothing, of course, it might have been from tact or something else.

In general I found general semanticists had oddly delightful senses of humor.

Any myths you'd like to punctuate regarding general semantics history, personalities, organizational politics, conferences, moves, etc.?

Most of all I'd like to lay to rest the mistaken practice of identifying the actions of the early Society with the actions or wishes of Don Hayakawa. This practice not only represents a bias, it fails to do justice to the others who took part: Wendell Johnson, Irving Lee, Russell Meyers, Elwood Murray, Frank Chisholm, and many others whose names have faded from most memories because they didn't write much if anything about general seman-

tics. For a few more particulars, see my recent letter in *ETC* [vol. 55, no. 4, pp.429-433] regarding the early days.

Looking back, do you have any broad judgments, conclusions, or predictions regarding general semantics you'd like to declare in this interview?

Oh, wow! I've said so much already in so many articles. David Hewson once published some research on who had written articles in *ETC*, skipping the earliest years, in which he said that I had the most. I have so much interest in so many aspects of general semantics, I fear to begin.

Ah, I see a way to summarize it. Off the top of my head, mind you, I'd like to see less concern about 'classic' general semantics and more emphasis on its extension, especially through practical use. I don't mean attempts to prove its efficacy. I mean its use and extension in a deeper way in specific subject matters, as I've attempted in my aviation practice, in mathsemantics, and in decision making.

There, I hope that does it.

For now, yes. Thank you, Ed MacNeal.