

IRVING J. LEE: 'THE SEMANTIC MAN'

Sanford I. Berman*
The School of Speech, Northwestern University

AUTHOR'S PREFACE: Many individuals have asked, 'What kind of a man was Dr. Lee?' They had heard about him due to his national reputation as a teacher, extremely popular lecturer and one of the nation's leaders in general semantics and communication. There were many who wanted a closer acquaintance with the man they had heard lecture or read about. And so, this essay was written to fulfill two desires. On the one hand, it attempts to present a brief picture of Irving J. Lee and secondly, it attempts to convey Dr. Lee's own description of what a 'semantic man' would look like if he were to apply the principles of general semantics to his own behavior. The following, then, is a profile of Irving J. Lee: 'The Semantic Man'.

Only a few of those individuals who had the honor of working with Irving J. Lee will know what a truly great man he was. For here was the embodiment of the principles of general semantics - of extensionalization - to the fullest we have known. Irving J. Lee not only understood Alfred Korzybski's principles as few scholars did, but even more, he applied them to his own behavior in dealing with individuals, situations, problems, and in gaining a deeper insight into the world around him. The 'semantic man' is the creation of his own assumptions; he is both the sculptor and the marble.

What is a 'semantic man' (or woman) like? If a person were to apply the principles of general semantics to his own behavior what kind of an individual would he be? What will he do, for he will not only understand the principles of extensionalization intellectually but he will have internalized these principles in terms of behavior. How, then, shall we draw our profile of the 'semantic man'?

These are some of the questions raised by Irving Lee. But they did not go unanswered by

him. It is the forte of a 'semantic man' not only to ask meaningful questions but to look for the answers. So the answers to these questions are those of our semantic man about 'the semantic man.' While I am sure Dr. Lee did not look upon himself as the perfect semantic man, he saw in this profile the operations to be performed in order to achieve a closer resemblance to this mythical person. For Dr. Lee was conscious of the fact that this 'semantic man' was a fiction, a mythical creation nowhere to be found in the world of reality. But if he had taken a closer look at himself he would have seen himself as others saw him - as the best example of the 'semantic man' we have had.

What, then, is this ideal man like? How does he behave? What will he do in approaching problems, situations and in dealing with others?

The semantic man will tend to do a good deal of listening and querying - of asking questions. He wants to know what the other fellow means, not what words mean. For he is continually conscious of the fact that words don't mean, people mean. He knows of the tremendous ease of oversimplifying the process of communication, and the misvaluation of projection which results whenever people stop this process of communication too soon. He knows of the many conflicts, confusions, arguments and disagreements which result when people pay more attention to words than they do to the people using words. He realizes that words can be used in many different ways according to the experiences or even whims of the user, and in order not to close the channel of communication one must understand the meanings in people, not in words.

Before making an important decision the semantic man will want more facts. In his speaking, listening, reading or behaving he knows of the simplicity and ease - and also the dangers - of acting on too few facts. So he is constantly looking for new facts upon which to base his

*The author would like it to be known that he wrote his paper before he had heard about the plan for this commemorative issue of the Bulletin. According to Mr. Berman, 'the term semantic man is Dr. Lee's.' And he used it in teaching general semantics as synonymous with a 'fully extensional man' when he talked about the characteristics such an ideal man would manifest in his behavior. (His usage implied that the opposite term was intensional, and emphatically not 'unsemantic' - an indefensible usage as many workers in the discipline have taken pains to point out.) Dr. Lee's description of his mythical semantic man does not appear in his published writings. Mr. Berman based his essay on the description he heard Dr. Lee give in his classes. --Ed.

evaluations. But while he is conscious of other variable factors which might come into play in any situation, he understands that he must act on whatever factual data he has. He knows of the folly of waiting until 'all the facts are in', for this is not only an impossibility but it will lead toward indecision, procrastination and non-productivity.

This ideal extensional man will more likely note rather than dismiss any novel or unusual ideas. He knows of the many cases in the history of ideas or scientific advancement where people were too prone to 'pooch-pooch' or criticize ideas which later turned out to be important in man's advancement. Irving Lee realized but could not always understand why some highly intelligent professors (and others) were so prone to criticize and attack certain ideas without the requisite knowledge upon which to base a scholarly criticism. He invited scholarly criticism based upon accurate knowledge. But he saw around him too many examples of the proclivity of dismissal of novel or unusual ideas. He felt that the new or the novel should neither be accepted nor rejected but tested. Only after adequate testing or scrutiny should the new and the novel be judged.

The 'semantic man' is interested in the important question, 'Why do we disagree?' He knows that we very often look for different things or see things differently because of a number of variable factors. And it was one of the desiderata in the teaching and life-work of Dr. Lee to look for and understand those differences. The problem confronting our 'semantic man' is how to come to agreement; not how to win the verbal fight. He is perfectly willing to look for the sources of human disagreement because he understands that disagreement might lead to agreement if we were to 'look again' or try to delimit some of the variable factors. Irving Lee recognized that some disagreements could easily be resolved once the important factors of disagreement were pointed out. But he also recognized that other kinds of disagreement were not so easy to reconcile, and that one of the follies of man is to try to solve these difficult problems too easily and too soon without getting to the heart of the disagreement. In a world of so much disagreement Dr. Lee felt that the 'principles of universal agreement' were necessary and important to teach and apply if man is to achieve a happier life.

The 'semantic man' is aware of the difference between a descriptive or factual statement and one involving an inference. He will not confuse his inferences or assumptions with statements of fact. And his behavior will be accordingly. He will be a little less prone to jump to inferences, and when he does so he will know that he did, and he will then retrace his steps. He knows that most of our lives are lived on the in-

ferential level, but wisdom and mature behavior result when one is conscious of the differences between acting on inferences as inferences, and acting on inferences as if they were factual.

So our mythical fully extensional man will continue to test himself against facts. He will not only check his inferences against the facts, but also observe whether or not he is oriented by words or by the non-verbal facts. For he has learned, not only from the wisdom of Confucius, Agassiz, Freud, Pavlov, Korzybski and others, but from experience, that man is more often influenced by words and verbal associations than he is by the facts of reality. The 'semantic man' manifests an extensional rather than an intensional orientation.

The 'semantic man' will be a little more willing to be both independent and cooperative. Irving Lee did not look upon these characteristics as being contradictory, but complementary. Besides being cooperative with others, this extensional man must also manifest initiative and the free-enterprising spirit which results in the time-binding productivity of a free and open mind. I know of no individual who was more both independent and cooperative than Dr. Lee. He manifested a non-allness independence because he recognized that individuals must believe in and act on their own convictions. And yet they must be willing to change their convictions the moment the facts are against them. He realized that the non-allness orientation did not lead toward vacillation or apathy, as some individuals wrongly assumed. The 'semantic man' has deep convictions, assumptions, values, etc., but he understands that he must not hold these with a dogmatic 'know-it-all' attitude. He is always willing to listen with an open mind to the assumptions and beliefs of others, no matter how contrary they might be to his own. He respects, with dignity, the abstracting processes of others.

Manifesting the extensional orientation, he will use his eyes and ears more than one normally does. He will do more looking and doing than reasoning and talking, for he realizes that scientific advancement and the solution of problems come only when theorizing and talking stop and experimenting begins. His motto is, 'I don't know. Let's see.' He solves problems, therefore, not by talking or verbalizing but by doing. He will keep his eyes and ears open for differences as well as similarities, for he will be far more curious about things and not limited to the similarities implied by the structure of the language he uses. Whenever Dr. Lee was asked if a certain 'idea' was worth trying or if it would work, his answer invariably was, 'I don't know. Let's see.' He was a master of putting ideas to work to see if they were worthy, for this is an important yardstick of the

'semantic man'.

Irving J. Lee was one of the most dynamic individuals who ever lived. His ability to 'get things done' with the highest standards was one of the unique characteristics of this brilliant man. Yet, in another way, he was one of the least hurried and impetuous men one could meet. He realized the importance of manifesting symbol reactions, of taking more time - a 'two second activity delay' - in dealing with life's problems. On one particular occasion a group of psychology students continually interrupted his lectures throughout the hour by asking, 'Is this Professor Evans' class?' or 'Is this Philosophy 110?', etc. Most other professors probably would have become quite exasperated at such intrusions. But Irving Lee, manifesting a symbol reaction each time, did not become irritated. He checked his assumptions until he was informed that this was a psychological experiment to see to what degree he behaved in terms of the principles he taught. Those psychological experimenters and his own students were given an example of these principles in action.

Here we find another important characteristic of the 'semantic man'. He is much more eager to inquire as to the adequacy or proper evaluation he shows when he is angry, irritated, discouraged, fearful, disliking, etc. Irving Lee often maintained that usually some kind of a misevaluation is involved in every case of irritation, anger, fear or prejudice and it is the mark of an extensional man to check himself as to the adequacy of his evaluations.

The 'semantic man' engages freely in phatic communion, fiction reading, poetry, etc., but he knows the difference between fiction and fact. He can enjoy or partake in both with equal facility, but he is quick to differentiate between the two and not act on the fictitious as if it were factual. Dr. Lee recognized the psychological importance of 'small talk' and his magnetic personality attracted countless students and others to his office for what, I suspect, very often turned out to be phatic communion. He was one of few professors who always had a string of students and adults waiting outside his office ostensibly to talk over a problem. Upon closer observation, however, one could see that they left his office feeling highly elated and that many of them did not always visit him about their school problems but just to talk with him. His was an indescribable magnetic power that drew all kinds of individuals toward him the moment they were within this orbit.

Irving Lee felt that very little of what general semanticists say runs counter to the great principles of humanity, our ethical, moral, or religious codes. But he felt that in general semantics they are stated more explicitly than in

many other statements, and an operational method is given by which to achieve these ends. He believed it important that we keep looking for all sorts of convictions, faiths and goals, but he always remained aware of the 'etc.'.

The 'semantic man' is also aware of the ease of over-simplifying, the ease of attributing causes to things. He does not think in terms of a cause and effect relationship but in terms of a functional formula where an effect is produced by a number of variable factors. To him the world is not a simple additive affair where variables can be easily dissected and attributed as causes. It is, too often, a non-additive affair where complexity and multiplicity of causes more closely resemble the structure of the world. So, just as it is easy to look for the simple cause and effect relationship, it is also easy to oversimplify the problem-solution nexus by looking for the solution to the problem when there well may be more than one. Such simplistic assumptions he believes are inadequate in a world of complexity, change, variability and non-additivity.

The 'semantic man' is able to achieve degrees of specificity in his talking (when necessary) far more than is now generally done. For he realizes that there are degrees of inclusion, generality, vagueness and ambiguity just as there are degrees of concreteness and specificity, and there are times when he must index, chain-index and date his statements. Agreement and understanding result whenever individuals specify what they are talking about (indexing), at what time (dating), relative to what situation or environment (chain-indexing). Irving Lee was a master at achieving specificity in his own talking and especially in forcing (intellectually) his students to think in terms of indexing, dating and chain-indexing. One of the greatest benefits that a student of general semantics could obtain from conversing with Dr. Lee was in distinguishing between an ambiguous and vague statement (or hazy ideas) and a specific and concrete statement. Many PhD candidates had to re-examine and usually revise their ways of thinking due to the penetrating and piercing questions raised by this semantic man. His ability to see the specifics, to draw out further relationships and conclusions, was of the most brilliant kind.

To anyone, therefore, who had been associated with Dr. Lee and had the opportunity to have intellectual discussions with him, this was one of the most rewarding experiences. The ability to examine and re-examine important ideas and questions according to the general semantics discipline is a long and tedious process. But one soon learned this uncommon sense (to a degree) by example not by preachment. Dr. Lee was more interested in teaching others by

example than by preaching or by exposing the mis-evaluations of others. He knew that before an individual could teach the principles to others he must first become extensional himself. As Wendell Johnson says, 'If you want to become a genius find yourself a genius and follow him around.' So it is with the 'semantic man'. His best teaching device is his own behavior, which a semantically oriented observer might profit by. To Irving Lee, only when an individual manifests the principles of general semantics does he know them, for learning is a non-elementalistic function.

The 'semantic man' will always be willing to admit when he doesn't know. 'I don't know' becomes an intellectual motto for him. He understands the unfortunate results which follow when people assume more knowledge than they really have. The non-allness orientation, the 'I don't know' admission, becomes a stimulus to find out, to search further, to gain more facts and to lessen one's sphere of ignorance. He knows that the 'I know it all' assumption is one of the unconscious assumptions that stops learning, hinders scientific advancement and keeps a man from fulfilling his time-binding capacities. This realization of the limitation of one's knowledge can lead toward proper evaluation regarding degrees of probability in determining future action. One will then take calculated risks regarding the laws of probability, in accordance with the facts at hand, and relative to the situation being dealt with.

The 'semantic man' keeps reminding himself of the doctrine by re-reading the basic books. Irving Lee used to kiddingly say that the good student of general semantics must re-read Science and Sanity every six months - but it takes six months to read the book. Of course, this means that the student would constantly be reading Science and Sanity. He realized the importance of re-reading the basic books for, as he often stated, each time he would re-read Science and Sanity he would learn something new or gain some new insight that might have escaped him in previous readings. The 'semantic man' does not assume that having read the basic literature that he 'knows' it. He must continue to re-read, re-examine and see new relationships and applications with each reading. He realizes, also, that one does not just read Science and Sanity. One must study it, for there are many ideas, principles and relationships which are not specifically stated but too often implied or left undefined. If he had supplied examples of all the principles Korzybski said, the book would be many times larger than it already was. So much of the material was left to the wisdom of the student. As his abstractions are relative to his own interests and knowledge, and as these are constantly changing, so his abstractions from each re-reading would change, take on new relationships, and

lead toward new insights. Learning is an on-going process.

Finally, Irving Lee believed that the 'semantic man' doesn't talk these principles, he does them. He realizes that all that general semantics can do is to provide an attitude or a set with which to approach problems. Dr. Lee believed that one doesn't apply general semantics,* one achieves an extensional attitude, orientation and behavior - in the broadest terms - facts first, then talk or behave.

This, then, is Dr. Lee's profile of the 'semantic man'. This is what he believed such a man would look like were he to behave in terms of the principles of general semantics. But while no individual can be completely extensional at all times, Dr. Lee himself approached this extreme degree of extensionalization as few persons do. His was an unusually brilliant mind. He understood these principles and he knew how to apply them to achieve extensional behavior.

If the 'semantic man' is a time-binder, if he is a productive person who leaves more than he took, then Dr. Lee's many articles and books are a living memento to what an important contribution such a man can make to all humanity. In this day and age there is a need for men to rise above the producers of the past. There is a need to progress in geometric progression if man is to fulfill his human potentiality. Manhood of humanity can only be achieved when great and learned scholars, semantic men of the future, carry on the important work of lessening or eliminating the many conflicts, confusions, disagreements, prejudices and wars which have been a 'human' characteristic for so many centuries.

Irving J. Lee played an important role in achieving these ends, for his teaching, lecturing and writing aided many in gaining a better understanding of themselves as well as the world around them. And those who came in contact with him and profited from his wisdom held him highly with a deep and lasting reverence.

*See a report on an advanced study conference conducted by Dr. Lee, General Semantics Bulletin, Nos. 6 & 7, Spring-Summer 1951, p. 100.

Editor's Note: 1953 marked the 20th anniversary of the publication of Science and Sanity. At their annual meeting, the Trustees of the Institute discussed ways to interest more people in reading the book - especially how to expose scientists and scholars at the universities to Korzybski's formulations at first hand. Among other projects, they proposed to publish a booklet of passages from Science and Sanity that would 'give a taste of some of Korzybski's insights and might persuade [some people] to read more.' As agreed, Dr. Lee contributed a list of some of his favorite passages, and an introduction for this booklet which he called a 'Science and Sanity Sampler.' Publication plans have languished for two years. Perhaps the project will be carried through in preparation for the Korzybski Anniversary in 1958. Meantime I feel that Irving Lee's friends should have this essay. It seems to me as characteristic of his own insights, attitudes and approaches as the passages he selected are of Korzybski. --M. Kendig

'SOME OF MY FAVORITE PASSAGES IN SCIENCE AND SANITY'

Introductory Essay and A List by Irving J. Lee

Here are passages from a 872 page book. They are fair samples. They abound in no felicitous phrases, no witty profundities, no arresting stories. They share few secrets, assure few cash returns, require few commitments.

Why, then, dare I hope they will be inviting, like the smell of fresh bread through a bakery grating? Because

they are just a handful of trail markers in Alfred Korzybski's adventure to find what a man must do to make sense;

they are small sections of a large guidebook in which he defines the means whereby men might avoid the mis-evaluations and mis-interpretations which so complicate their business and professional activity;

the book, Science and Sanity, offers freely some directions by which human beings can escape some of the troublesome disagreements and worrisome confusions which so darken their personal lives.

But hasn't this sort of thing been done? One could say as Terence did, 'You sing the same old song?' One could also reply, 'Il y a fagots et fagots,' that things which look similar may be quite different.

We see things and people. We make assumptions and draw conclusions about them. We feel somehow, and we talk and act. We do all these readily, easily, continuously. Sometimes we do them productively. Sometimes we don't.

How well do we diagnose ourselves when we get into trouble, when tension and conflict arise among us, when we fail to understand others? In the broadest practical terms Alfred Korzybski has tried to tell us how to look at how we're doing and what to look for. He is saying and showing in a host of ways that when a person becomes conscious of the mechanisms of human evaluating then he begins to be ready to make those changes in his seeing-thinking-feeling-talking which make the transition from childishness to maturity, from foolishness to wisdom.

Horace long ago said, 'It is not permitted to know all things.' Korzybski agrees and goes on to ask, 'What happens, however, when a man acts as if he does know all?' 'What are the varieties of arrogance and egotism and by what means may one free himself of them?'

Horace also said, 'It is pleasant to act foolishly in the right place.' Korzybski again agrees and says, 'What if a man acts unwittingly in those same patterns in the wrong place? How does one discover the patterns by which that may be forestalled and he be forewarned?'

Korzybski does not consider he is finished when he asks the questions. He gives some answers, too. He draws from the reservoir of the basic knowledge of the great writers in anthropology, colloidal chemistry, physics, psychology, psychiatry, the foun-