GENERAL SEMANTICS AND THE CASE METHOD

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This article will appear in a book tentatively entitled The Case Method of Teaching Human Relations and Administration, and will be published in 1952 by the Harvard University Press. The text is taken from the preliminary mimeographed edition issued by Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration, Autumn 1951 (pages 70-79), and is one of 18 chapters. We are grateful to the editor of the volume, Kenneth R. Andrews, for permission to reprint this article in the Bulletin. By way of explication, we are including here the 'Editor's Note' by Professor Andrews which preceeds Dr. Lee's chapter in the Harvard volume. -- MK

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Editor's Note: Professor Irving J. Lee of the School of Speech at Northwestern University is the author of Language Habits in Human Affairs and editor of The Language of Wisdom and Folly. He came to visit the Business School for a time in 1951. His remarks thereafter about the intersection of his work in general semantics and ours in administration were to us very illuminating. His observations are free from the biases and loyalties which doubtless color the opinions of the local staff.

The contribution of semantic studies to the interpretation of field data and to the study of communication in organization has been very great indeed. Persons newly interested in problems of communication will appreciate Professor Lee's summary of Korzybski's work for its own sake. The observations which general semantics has equipped Professor Lee to make about the educational processes he saw in motion here will interest newcomers and old hands equally.

It is better to watch than to read about the case method. An observer should devote all his time to observation for a period of weeks and if possible months. Through this means he will be able to see firsthand how his own studies and his own life work interact with the case method of instruction. Only the unique observations thus made possible can provide genuine insight into the functioning of the method. Visitors like Dr. Lee leave us more than they take away, but what they take away is likely to be an assessment of the potentiality of the case method much more useful than any we can furnish ready made.

Shamed by my golf scores, I had arranged for some lessons with a pro. He explained that the swing of the club was related to such fundamentals as grip, stance, and position of elbows and head. He believed it more important to think about where the ball is, rather than where it is sup-

posed to go. He suggested that I ought to give more consideration to a method designed to establish contact between club-head and ball, and less consideration to swinging the club in a way I found comfortable. He intimated that my previous practice had not made anything perfect, but had perpetuated some bad habits. He had me watch him. He held my arms. And so on with remarkable patience in the face of manifest ineptness.

This experience was illuminating in another way. It helped me to see the talking process in the golf pro's severely practical and functional terms.

One learns to talk. The use of a language is related to a whole complex of functions, including perceiving, thinking, feeling. Along with a sense of the proprieties and taboos a speaker develops a set of unnoticed habits, some useful, some detrimental. How am I going about it, is subordinated to how am I doing? Is the ball going into the cup? Am I saying what I want to say? Sometimes a swing ends in a hook or a slice. Sometimes an utterance leads to conflict, confusion, or misunderstanding. Tension and noncoordination in the bodily elements mean extra strokes. Distortions and disorder in describing, inferring, and concluding mean waste motion and trouble in human affairs.

The analogy seems to hold so well that this question is inevitable: Should not a man who thinks it sensible to look to a golf pro to fix up his game similarly set out for a communication pro when his talking activities are marked by disaffection and disagreement?

There is just one hitch. Communication pros are scarce and they are not always agreed

on what needs correcting in the talking process. In what follows I shall try to summarise one man's opinion about it.

Alfred Korzybski was certainly not the first person to think about the things a communication pro would look for, but he may well have been the most diligently wide-ranging one. In a sense the last 30 years of his life were spent setting up a course of study for future practitioners.

He systematised a great deal of scattered knowledge about talking difficulties and the way to go about correcting them in a discipline he called General Semantics.* He nowhere presumed to be creating something where nothing existed before. He was in the main explicitly stating and emphasising anew an ancient set of necessities.

He is not easy reading -- partly, I believe, because he was asking us to look at something most of us already have conclusions about and partly, because he was trying to get us to look at something we were busy doing at the precise moment we were supposed to be looking at it. He was asking us to swing a mashie and take a look at the swinging mechanism at the same time. This was not only difficult but disconcerting.

There is another reason. He build his systematisation quite unsystematically. He never wrote in the fashion of the textbook or scientific article. Those of us who were accustomed to tidy statements of a problem, presentation of the available findings, and neat marshalling of conclusions were appalled at the repetitious and disjointed character of his essays. He rarely dealt with one of the talking difficulties at length. He mentioned it, went to something else and returned to it again pages later. (This was a way of showing how interrelated everything is.) His illustrations were too few and too fugitive. (He thought readers could supply them.) His pages abound in exhortations about the importance of avoiding confusion even before his readers had time to grasp the character of what was to be avoided. (He was trying to say that he thought his notions something more than intellectual acrobatics.) He was less interested in clarity than in stating the factors which prevented it. (He was not a very good golfer himself.) And he never sought the kind of clarity which compromises the complexity of the facts involved. In short, busy students were often unprepared for

the amount of creative cooperation he required.

What Was Korzybski Getting At?

It may be helpful to describe Korzybski's focus in relation to other areas of study, even though I risk oversimplification in every sentence.

How was his interest related to what was in the texts on Logic? Logicians are concerned with the conditions of necessary inference. Given all the varieties of assertions, what conclusions can be derived from them without contradiction? If this is true (or false), and if that also is true (or false) then what follows? What conditions must be preserved or achieved in order to make valid inferences?

Korzybski never called either the deductive or inductive process, as such, into question. He was interested in the statements and the assumptions behind them. He asked this question: Under what conditions were the assertions themselves (not the inferences from them) acceptable?

He did not stop there. He moved into the bailiwick of the psychologist. The literature of psychology contains descriptions of and theories about what happens in the presence of stimuli, about phenomena labeled _attending_, _perceiving_, _feeling_, _learning_, _thinking_, etc., and their interactions, variations, and clinical control when a man is alone or in a group. Korzybski set out to exploit a tangent. How was a man's behaving, thinking, knowing, feeling reflected in or linked to his ways of talking? What habitual ways of orienting oneself 'psychologically' were reflected in what modes of talking? Korzybski looked not at the linguistic performance as isolated from the behaving-responding, but as they interpenetrated and affected each other.

Korzybski also caught himself up in the work of mathematicians. They, too, were engaged in symbol-manipulating activities. His father had something of an amateur's interest in the subject and the boy had been exposed very early to mathematising processes. And again his perspective was pinpointed. He cared little about formal problems -- solving equations or proving theorems. He was fascinated by the unique behavior of mathematicians -- how they achieved rigor and precision, how they tried to uncover

*His basic writings include the following: Manhood of Humanity (1921) (Lakeville, Connecticut: Institute of General Semantics, 1950); Time-Binding: The General Theory (Two papers, 1924-1926) (Institute of General Semantics, 1949); Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics (1933) (Institute of General Semantics, 1948); with M. Kendig, 'The Foreword,' A Theory of Meaning Analyzed, General Semantics Monographs, No. III (Institute of General Semantics, 1942); 'General Semantics' in The American People's Encyclopedia (The Spencer Press, 1948), Vol. 9, p. 352-362; 'The Role of Language in the Perceptual Process' in Perception: An Approach to Personality, edited by R. R. Blake and G. V. Ramsey (Ronald Press, 1951).

their hidden assumptions, how they revealed the implications of an hypothesis, why they were able to include all the particulars in their abstractions.

He spent 1925-1926 visiting St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, D. C., where he read widely in psychiatry, and observed the behavior of the 'mentally' deranged. These patients talked. But as he listened to their outpourings he was struck with a difference. He heard none of the search for consistency with fact which would interest a physical scientist, little of the mathematician's effort to analyse assumptions. Here were men talking, but matters of accuracy and fitness to fact were of no moment. He learned how to spot the varieties of talking in which the language and the facts were in disordered relationship.

Add to all this a more than passing familiarity with a number of the languages spoken in Western and Eastern Europe, and the accompanying awareness that what could be said explicitly in some tongues could only be approached circuitously in others, that a person talked about things in partial fashion in one and in unitary modes in another, that one predisposed the speaker to distinctions neglected in another.

Here was indeed, an intellectual stew. Korzybski had a conceptual scheme with which to talk about human affairs, but it could fit in no one place in any conventional academic departmental organisation. He had evolved a set of notions about man's talking-assuming-thinking-perceiving-behaving which merged into a discipline which cut across and around the traditional subject-matter areas. In his first two papers he called it 'The General Theory.' Only later (when he realised he was in the middle of problems of human 'meanings') did he call it General Semantics.

The General Semantic Point of View

One could find certain patterns of emphasis in Korzybski's writings. What was known about the structure of the world around and in us? Did our ways of talking take that structural knowledge in account? Or did they impose categories that were distorting? What habitual patterns of response tended to keep men from or dispose them toward an awareness of the structure of the world?

One can consider General Semantics in terms of a number of unifying perspectives. From the many I choose one -- Identification, considered as any act of perceiving-assuming-feeling-talking in which one thing is seen as something else, one kind of statement made as if it were another, one linguistic form given the properties which belong to another. A man is not responding

adequately and sensibly when he shows unwittingly any of the varieties of Identification. (Of course if he knows what he is doing and insists he is doing something else he is perpetrating a fraud.)

I list a few of the patterns of Identification:

1. A partial coverage of a situation is given the preferred status of a full one.

2. An ambiguous statement (one that is too meaningful) is dismissed as if it were meaningless, or when an ambiguous statement is asserted as if the values were fixed and clear.

3. A statement which segments a situation is presented so as to imply that the segment has an independent existence.

4. Undesignated interpretations are assigned terms by speakers, and listeners assume that their assigned interpretations are necessarily those of the speakers.

5. A complicating, dynamically emergent interaction is presented in terms which catch only the static and additive factors.

6. Interrelationships between men, and between men and things are glossed over by statements which highlight the separateness; the interrelations are then denied by implication.

7. Recurring, invariant relationships are classified as unique ones (and vice versa) without concern for the difference.

8. Problems are discussed in high-order abstractions as if higher order abstractions necessarily permitted the rigor which belongs to lower order abstractions.

9. Limiting conceptions are permitted to impose their restricting pictures as if they did not.

10. Statements based on how one 'feels' about a thing or person are confused with statements referring to more publicly verifiable matters, and statements which involve both are treated as if one were absent.

11. The declarative form of assertions is allowed to cloud the distinction between statements based on observation and those which involve inferences and the latter are made as if they had the status of the former.

And so on for about 40 more.

It seems necessary to say that Korzybski's

primary objective was explication, to describe
the mechanisms of confusion and indicate how
they might be avoided. He was not creating the
kind of positivistic doctrine which said that a
man had to speak factually, accurately, precise-
ly. If one wished to speak ambiguously, vaguely,
or in terms of phantasy, Korzybski would not
wish to stop him. He wanted only a recognition
that the one mode was not the other, and that
the one should not be palmed off as if it were
the other. He urged the development of a method
of discrimination so that a man would know where-
of he spoke, so that if he wished to do differ-
ently the means would be at hand. If a man
wanted to hook or slice he ought to know the
means whereby, along with the probable con-
sequences.

He was perfectly aware, for example, of the
value and necessity of both higher and lower
order abstractions. Without the latter rigor and
precision are extremely difficult. Without the
former we should be unable to state either prin-
ciples and rules of action, or generalisations
based on samplings. Without higher order ab-
stractions we would be unable to write a consti-
tution or a set of by-laws or instructions which
provide for both administrative control and free-
dom. Korzybski's objective, in short, was an
understanding of the varieties of assumptions and
assertions along with their uses and shortcomings.

What Has General Semantics
To Do With the Case Method?

My answer is of the most tentative sort.
During the spring of 1951 I had the pleasant pri-
vilege of sitting in on some 100 hours of classes
in Human Relations and Administrative Practices
at the Graduate School of Business Administration
in Harvard University. I read the cases,
listened to the discussions, and talked to the
teachers and at some length to 46 students out-
side of class. I now believe that again as much
time for observations and interviews would be
more than doubly valuable. Looking and listening
with the perspective of a student of General
Semantics, I had a number of impressions.

Many of the varieties of arrogance and
know-it-allness are leavened under the inter-
acting scrutiny of students who are free to
question and encouraged to enlarge their un-
derstanding of real problems.

Several of the patterns of impatience and
impulsiveness seem modified in a situation
in which each man knows that it is better to
be sure, than sorry he opened his mouth too
soon.

The case itself seemed to be a continuous
brake on certain of those free-wheeling over-
verbalised tendencies in discussions which

fill the air with sound rather than in-
sight, and which make for talk around
rather than on the issues.

The continuous effort on the part of in-
structors to pursue the details of the case
prevented and modified the oversimplifying,
easy-answer impulses of those eager to dis-
miss or get done with the problem.

The interest (not approval) of the in-
structor in what each man said manifested
by his eagerness to help the students ex-
plore their own evaluations again encouraged
a look at the case as well as reflection on
what was being said.

The students 'loved' it. I have never
talked with graduate students so unhesitat-
ingly eager to discuss their class discus-
sions and so sensitive to the values of
what they were doing.

I had never before observed teachers who
themselves were so teachable in the teaching
situation.

In a word, the atmosphere was one which dis-
couraged a number of the attitudes which predis-
pose men to Identification.

Nevertheless, my notebook contains a record
of several of the ordinary semantic lapses:

Students got away with declarations
which sounded factual but which were mani-
festly inferential.

They assumed a 'substance' behind cer-
tain words which often was only in them.

Students generalised with ease and as-
surance from instances presumed but not
demonstrated to be typical; demonstration
might not be so easy.

Individuals in the discussion 'pegged'
a person or situation in the case in
terms which shut off further consideration,
as if having classified him or it no other
way of looking at him or it was possible.

Students consumed precious time defend-
ing either-or patterns of analysis as if
the notion of graded variation belonged
only in textbooks.

Students talked of 'solutions' as if
these had a unitary character, as if they
did not range from the approximate to the
impossibly complete.

They dealt with statements involving
variables as if they were one-valued, that

is, they sought to establish the truth or falsity of statements which should have been considered ambiguous.

Speakers missed a nice distinction: 'The edges of the distinction between "feel that" and "think that" are not hard. Feeling that something is the case slides into thinking that it is the case; and we often use "feel that" instead of "think" as a sort of polite hypocrisy.' [From Gilbert Ryle, 'Feelings,' The Philosophical Quarterly, April 1951, p. 186.]

I should be quite misleading if I gave the impression that statements involving these and other semantic lapses outnumbered the statements which adequately evaluated what was involved. In the classes I attended they did not. An Identification-Index, which gave the ratio between the statements which could be presumed to evaluate properly and those which misevaluated, would show, I believe, that these students were performing with a maturity not found, say, in a random sampling of radio discussion programs. This does not mean, of course, that the case-method is _the_ causative factor. I did, nonetheless, find that when the lapses occurred they were not without effects. They tended to turn the talk away from the issues involved. They forced efforts at clarification which took time. They oversimplified matters which had to be reconsidered later anyway, or when neglected led to feelings of confidence about the analysis not necessarily justifiable.

I can only wonder about what might have happened in a number of disagreements and analytical impasses had members of the class sought to uncover the evaluational-linguistic mechanisms at work. Would it make a difference in the discussion of a case if the participants had been sensitised ahead of time to the kinds of conflict and confusions which are rooted in semantic mechanisms? What if a communication pro had been present to call attention to what the speakers were inadvertently doing? These questions should be considered invitations to research. It would be presumptuous to suggest anything more.

What Values Might the Case Method Have For Students of General Semantics?

Again, I write in tentative and hypothetical terms. It is possible to teach and study General Semantics as a kind of 'philosophical' subject, one about which there can be discussion only. Or it can be approached as a set of norms in terms of which a man's behavior may be appraised. In this view, one should not ask, 'Is Mr. Black able to discourse on the rules?' but 'Does Mr. Black exemplify them in his talking, listening, reading, writing?' Not can he talk about the theory of symbolic inadequacy but can he recognise examples of it -- and more important does he evince symbolic adequacy in his interchanges with others?

Let me consider this as a teacher. And let me assume that I have been able to bring to my classes all the directive-didactic methods available for the task of imparting a knowledge of the principles of General Semantics. Let me assume that my students are of the most faithful, receptive, and homage-bearing variety. And finally let us suppose that they pass in superior fashion all the kinds of quizzes I can devise. They will then, as Elton Mayo has so sharply reminded us, have knowledge _about_ the rules. We shall know little of their capacity to put that knowledge to work. In Gilbert Ryle's words, 'A soldier does not become a shrewd general merely by endorsing the strategic principles of Clausewitz. He must also be competent to apply them.' At this moment I know of no single procedure or technique which can so readily test students in application as can the case method. What will these students of mine do with the case and will their verbalised knowledge become operative when they discuss it? It may be wise not to expect too much. Or it may be that the case itself will serve as the proving ground on which their understanding of the principles moves from pronouncement to the penetration that comes with performance. Whether or not I overstate the case for the use of cases must await experiments.

There is yet another test which teachers and students of General Semantics might face. We start by believing that with Korzybski's formulations a host of communication and evaluating difficulties can be made explicit. We have believed that once oriented in terms of these formulations we become sensitive to facets and nuances in human relations that we had hitherto missed or that we had been mistaken about. It should be possible to test these beliefs. Would any of us see anything in any of the Harvard Business School cases ordinarily neglected by the candidates for the MBA? Would, say, four teachers of courses in General Semantics meeting together find anything in a particular case which four teachers of sections in Administrative Practices might pass over, which findings would add a worthwhile dimension to an understanding of that case? Again we must await some doing.

Men were using the case method long before there was a course in General Semantics. But teachers in both of these areas of interest share a common goal -- the development in men of skills which go beyond the specialisms to the widest possible application in human affairs whether in the home, office, playground, ship, or heavy bomber. The skills of listening, questioning, analysing, differentiating,