

# THE SEMANTICS OF BEING NEGRO\*

S. I. HAYAKAWA

**L**ADIES AND GENTLEMEN: It would seem the utmost effrontery on my part to speak to you on the subject of the psychological problems of being Negro. I am not a Negro, and never have been. Hence, if any of you want to raise loudly the question, "What do you know about being a Negro?" all I could do is to answer meekly, "Nothing." Then I could sit down and you could go home.

But perhaps it is the temerity of a non-Negro offering to speak on the subject of being Negro that arouses your curiosity. So, since you are polite enough to continue sitting there expectantly, I shall present my credentials and explain why I venture to speak on a subject about which you know so much more than I.

While I am not a Negro, I am a member of a minority group—one that has been the victim of a certain amount of discrimination and prejudice—sometimes even persecution. I personally have led a sufficiently sheltered life so that I have encountered no persecution—and, compared to the Negro population of the United States, little discrimination. Nevertheless, I have had to wrestle with some of the same problems the Negro must confront, although no doubt in attenuated form. I was advised in my youth, for example, that there were many jobs and careers I could not hope to aspire to because of my race. Especially during the sensitive years of late adolescence, I met social rebuffs (or imagined rebuffs) which caused me at least some of the inward torture that Negroes in a mixed society must suffer. In later years, after I had decided to be trained as a writer and a teacher of English, I saw what I thought were dozens of people with smaller abilities than my own getting jobs while I cooled my heels in the graduate school waiting for an opening, and wondering if I was being discriminated against. So, I can lay claim to some first-hand acquaintance with minority group psychology; and even though I was not sent to a Japanese relocation center during the war years, I felt intensely and personally the meaning of that relocation.

Certainly the minority group identification must have been strong in me during the first months of the war, because when, in November 1942, I was invited to become a weekly columnist of the *Chicago Defender*, I accepted with

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pleasure. I kept up that column until the end of 1946, and during that time I acquired an emotional identification with the Negro world, which I still retain. Much of what I shall say tonight revolves around what I felt and saw among my Negro friends and acquaintances in the course of the professional and social life I led in the Negro community from the moment I began to work for the *Defender*.

But I have one other claim upon your attention, in addition to the fact of being of a minority group and the fact of having worked on a Negro newspaper. This claim I believe transcends the others. It is the fact that for the past fifteen years I have been a close student of the new psychological discipline known as general semantics—a discipline which has thrown for me an enormous amount of light upon the problems that all of us, of whatever race, have in achieving adjustment and self-realization in this extremely complex and rapidly changing world of the 20th century.

I NEED not give you a formal definition of general semantics, except to say it is a systematic study of how we form our attitudes, and how our attitudes help to create the kind of world we live in. And in order to explain what I mean by this, let me pitch right into the explanation of a semantic principle: the self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>1</sup>

A self-fulfilling prophecy is one that fulfills itself as the result of the behavior of the person who makes the prophecy and believes it. Suppose we hear a rumor that the bank in which we all have our money is about to fail. Suppose that we all believe the rumor *and act upon it*, so that we all rush to the bank to get our money out. This is exactly what often causes bank failures. Or, take another example: here let us say is a young man, just out of jail, who is looking for a job. Let us suppose that no one in town will give him a job because of his past record. In other words, those who refuse to employ him are making a prediction that since the young man has offended in the past, he will offend again. Ultimately the young man, unable to get an honest job anywhere, returns to crime; when he is caught again, people are likely to say, "See? It's a good thing we didn't give him a job. A criminal is always a criminal." But the doubt remains, was it not the unanimous prediction that he *would* return to crime that caused him to return to crime?

But the self-fulfilling prophecy has its benign aspects as well as its unfortunate ones. An acquaintance of mine, upon his release from prison, got a job as handy man in a very elegant shop in Chicago. The second day he was on the job his

<sup>1</sup> On the subject of predictions affecting outcomes, see Anatol Rapoport, "The Criterion of Predictability," *ETC.*, II, 129-151 (Spring 1945), and Robert K. Merton, "The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy," *Antioch Review*, VIII, 193-210 (Summer 1948). Dr. Rapoport also deals at length with a similar concept, "the self-realizing assumption," in his forthcoming book, *Operational Philosophy*, which I have had the pleasure of reading in typescript.

employer gave him \$800 in cash to take to the bank. In other words, the employer was making the prediction, "This man can be trusted." I have seen my friend frequently in the three years since this happened. He is still working in the same store, but he is a new and different man. He is not only a responsible man; he is accepting more and more responsibilities. His employer's prediction is being fulfilled twenty-fold.

I am not saying that such prophecies always fulfill themselves, because that would be a manifest absurdity. But what I am saying is that *your own beliefs about the outcome of any social situation of which you are a part are a factor in the outcome*. You have heard the white people who say, "If Negroes move into our community, there is bound to be trouble." You know that, although such people sometimes believe they are stating an objective and impersonal fact, there is an enormous subjective element in such statements; in other words, you sense that they themselves are going to help make that trouble. But the mechanism of the self-fulfilling prophecy works the other way, too. If a Negro goes into mixed company with the prediction inside him, "People are going to be unpleasant to me because of my race," they may very well be unpleasant to him. Later, he will say, "I told you so," and regard himself complacently as a realist who was able to predict accurately the situation.

There is the consciously uttered self-fulfilling prophecy, such as "We will achieve our sales quota!" and "There'll always be an England!" which, if believed in with enough ardor, enables people to achieve their quotas or to save England. But even more important from my point of view tonight are the prophecies *unconsciously* made which reveal themselves in ways of which we may be completely unaware. To cite some extreme cases, the dog that has often been kicked reveals, in the very way it slinks down the street, the fact that it expects to be kicked again—so that some of us feel an almost irresistible temptation to give him another kick as he goes by. Similarly, the aggressive drunk at a bar reveals in his every word and gesture that he expects trouble—so that again some of us feel a real temptation to give him the trouble he seems to be looking for. Or, to take still another and happier example, the laughing little child in the park whose cheerful and outgoing manner reveals that she expects kindness and love from everyone; everyone gives that child at least a kindly smile.

**N**ow the expectations we have of life—in other words, the conscious or unconscious prophecies we make about how other people are going to treat us—are the combined product of our experience, our education, and our mis-education. We have all had vast amounts of assorted experiences; we have all been subjected to vast amounts of assorted education and miseducation, from our parents, teachers, newspapers, preachers, movies, radio, literature, and drama, all of which purport to tell us something about life, or segments of life. Also, our experiences are filtered through our education or miseducation, so that out

of the same events, different people learn entirely different things: for example, from similar experiences with pretty and avaricious women, one man may learn never to have anything more to do with *that particular woman*; another man may learn never to have anything more to do with *any* women; still another man may learn nothing at all and go back for more. Hence, the kind of persons we are today reflects not only our experiences, but also what we have learned from them.

All the foregoing are, perhaps, psychological truisms, and there would be no special point in bringing them to the attention of this audience were it not for the fact that in this dynamic period of *changing* race relations, all sorts of attitudes once perfectly sensible have suddenly ceased to be altogether realistic. Furthermore, personal sets of expectations—personal attitudes—on the part of both Negroes and whites have recently assumed an altogether unprecedented importance. Fifteen or twenty years ago, many white people had little or no contact with Negroes, many Negroes had little or no contact with whites. People really lived in a more severely segregated world than we now do in urban centers north of the Mason and Dixon Line. Therefore the expectations Negroes had of whites or whites of Negroes, whether favorable or unfavorable expectations, had less practical effect at the level of day-to-day relationships than they have today. With the steady decrease in segregation that is going on today—and you have seen it happening in St. Louis as we have seen it happening in Chicago—the number of daily contacts with people of another race is increasing—in school, in public transportation, in business, at sports events, at factories, and in social life. With this steady increase in daily inter-racial contact, the importance of personal attitudes increases.

**N**ow the fact which emboldens me to speak to you about Negro attitudes at all today is one which may come to some of you as a surprise, but which nevertheless is noticeable everywhere if you look for it anywhere in the North—and perhaps even south of the Mason and Dixon Line here and there. The fact is that the white world, once quite sure of the Negro's "proper place," is no longer sure. The prejudiced are many still, of course, but they tend on the whole to be defensive or apologetic about their prejudices. They know that the force of official opinion is no longer on their side. Hence the kind of individual who used to "put the Negro in his place" with self-assured arrogance is getting to be relatively scarce. Meanwhile, those who, with varying degrees of insight or enlightenment, would like to see Negroes get a somewhat better deal are enormously on the increase. All this reflects, among other things, an increasing awareness on the part of the white world that the stirring words about Democracy uttered in answer to Communism now and to Fascism during the last war would sound a lot better if they were given a little more extensional meaning. It reflects, too, a growing prosperity at all levels of the population, and an awareness that

a large minority living under substandard conditions of opportunity and self-expression constitute a drag on the whole economy. It reflects, too, an increase in ethical sensitivity, especially among the young. And of course it reflects the fact that the earnest work of the exponents of racial equality—the Urban League, the N.A.A.C.P., the Negro press, the churches, and many others—has been enormously effective. Whatever the causes of the changed attitudes among whites, they are real; the result is that many white persons, either because they are no longer sure of their position or because they are coming into contact with Negroes for the first time or for both these reasons, are often quite unsure as to how to behave towards the Negroes whom they meet.

Consequently, an unprecedented power has suddenly been put into Negro hands. More and more often, as segregation breaks down, a Negro finds himself alone among a group of whites. Since many white people are nowadays uncertain how to behave in an interracial situation, they unconsciously look to the Negro for guidance. In other words, the Negro, to a degree never possible before, can set the tone of social or business intercourse by the clues he gives, in his speech and behavior, as to how he expects to be treated. If he acts obsequiously, as if he expected to be stepped upon, he will find plenty of white people who will gladly step on him. If he acts nervously and self-consciously, so will the white people with whom he is talking. If he is over-assertive and arrogant, they may respond with equal rudeness or cold silence. If he acts naturally, they will, in nine cases out of ten, act naturally too, and be happy and relieved that meeting a Negro was not the ordeal they thought it was going to be. But however he acts, the power to determine the atmosphere of the meeting lies with him, although he may not know it.

Now as you listen to these words, each Negro here is no doubt thinking of a dozen instances out of his own experience where "acting naturally" did no good. I am perfectly ready to grant that there are situations in which it will do no good. But I also wish to offer a counter-challenge, namely, *how do you know you acted naturally?* This brings me to the crux of the theory of the self-fulfilling prophecy.

**W**HAT does it mean to "act naturally?" Let us put this expression back into the context of a living situation to see what it means. Let us say that you have entertained at your home some extremely exalted or famous person—maybe a famous movie star or the Prime Minister of England. Let us say that this person proved to be an altogether pleasant guest, who made himself so much one of the family at your home that he put everybody at his ease. Your way of expressing your pleasure would be to say, as I would say, "He just seemed like one of us, he acted so naturally!" And another way of stating this fact would be something like this: your distinguished guest, instead of constantly reminding you that he was a famous movie star or the Prime Minister of England,

and demanding special consideration on that account, reacted without affectation to you, your home, your friends, your children, so that you felt at ease with him. If, on the other hand, he hadn't "acted naturally"—if he had constantly reminded you of his special position and his great fame—you would have said after he had gone, "Well, I'm glad *that's* over!!" The secret of acting naturally, if you are a famous movie star or the Prime Minister of England, is to forget that you are a famous movie star or the Prime Minister of England.

What I should like you to see is that being a Negro in a mixed society is exactly the same kind of problem. Can one forget the fact of being Negro when among a group of whites? If you are a biochemist and expect to be treated as just another biochemist among a group of people interested in biochemistry, the self-fulfilling prophecy will operate, and people will in all likelihood treat you as just another biochemist. If you are a parent and expect to be treated as just another parent at a Parent-Teachers Association meeting, people will in all likelihood treat you as just another parent, learning meanwhile that the problems of Negro parents are no different from those of white parents. But if you are a biochemist or a parent and expect to be treated as a Negro, people are going to treat you as a Negro—whatever that means to them. Hence, it is of utmost importance in race relations to stop thinking about race relations, and to think instead about biochemistry or P.T.A. problems, or contract bridge, or stamp-collecting, or the dry-cleaning business, or supermarket display techniques, or whatever your special line of interest may be.

But, you will say, that is more easily said than done. How can we forget the fact of being Negroes when the white world keeps reminding us over and over again, with Jim Crow signs, with job discrimination, with special forms of rudeness, and even with special forms of exaggerated politeness? How can we forget in the light of our life-long experiences of being Negro and suffering the special conditions which this fact brings in its wake in our nation? And again I grant readily that the questions are just. It is not easy to forget.

**H**OWEVER, difficult as forgetting is, it is precisely the problem that must be tackled. The reason for this is that the standard complaint of Negroes is, as a student of mine expressed it in an essay, "I'm tired of being regarded as something special. I'm tired of being 'colored' or 'Negro.' I'm tired of being a symbol of a whole race. I'm just me and I want to be treated as such." But notice here again the operation of the self-fulfilling prophecy. If you want to be treated as "just me," you've got to think of yourself as "just me" and not as "me, a Negro." So in reply to the Negro who says, "I'd be glad to forget if only they'd let me," I would say, "Most of them would just as soon forget, too, but they must learn from you how to do it."

The difficulty of "forgetting," however, is mitigated considerably by the fact that neither "remember" or "forget" are absolute terms. It is no more

necessary to forget absolutely than it is to be haunted all day long by the fact of being Negro. What is necessary, with society and social conditions as they are today, is to remember only when one has to remember, and to forget the rest of the time. And what is important to keep in mind is that the occasions on which one has to remember are constantly being reduced—for that is exactly what non-segregation means. In more and more situations today, in public transportation, in theatres, in applying for many kinds of jobs, in dining cars and in restaurants, you can forget all about being Negro and relax. And the more often this happens, the easier it is for everybody the next time. I speak in these homely terms because integration is not a pattern drawn up on Washington or in the New York offices of the N.A.A.C.P. It is the daily, uneventful business of Negroes and whites sitting beside each other in a street-car or a work-bench or a lunch-counter without thinking anything of it. It is in just such situations that one can observe the self-fulfilling prophecy at work in a benign and wholesome way.

I am talking as I am because I want to emphasize the fact that times are changing, faster than most of us realize. It is hard to realize the rapidity of the changes, because *at the level of words*, the white Southern quasi-liberals and reactionaries are writing the same kind of speeches they have uttered for the past twenty years about "the unalterable traditions of the South"; and on the other side the N.A.A.C.P. and the Chicago *Defender* and all the Negro spokesmen, with their attention fixed on how much farther there is to go rather than how far we have come, continue also to give the same angry speeches and write the same fiery editorials that they have been giving out with for the past twenty years. At the level of words, I repeat, things sound pretty much the same as they did twenty years ago. But at the level of facts, things are different—they are changing not only from year to year, but from month to month and week to week.

Let me underline this difference between the level of words and the level of facts. As I said, at the level of words, things *sound* unchanged. But at the level of facts, hundreds of thousands of ordinary people, white and Negro, who twenty years ago used to lunch separately, are now eating together in factory lunchrooms, school cafeterias, hamburger stands, dining cars, and other places of public refreshment. Now the trouble with an uneventful lunch at which whites and Negroes manage to get down their blue-plate specials without having a riot on the subject, is that *it can never get into the papers*. It is, in a curious way, a wordless experience—people simply eat their lunches and pay their checks, and neither the national offices of the N.A.A.C.P. nor the Ku Klux Klan get any word of it. Across the country, thousands of white and Negro students are helping each other with their homework, thousands of white and Negro housewives and their children are meeting at common playgrounds and talking with each other, thousands of white and Negro men and women are working together

in committees, in factories, and in offices, who, twenty years ago, would not even have come in contact with each other. Very little of this gets into the papers, because of a fundamental journalistic fact: if 9,999 automobiles make a safe journey home after a Fourth of July week-end, it is only the 10,000th car which smashed up that gets into the news.

It is necessary, then, especially in cities like St. Louis, Chicago, New York, San Francisco, St. Paul, for all of us who are 40 years old or more, to take a fresh look at the present situation. Granted that there is still a long way to go, how far have we come?

**T**O REMEMBER that one is a Negro, to take pride in the fact, to accept the tragic responsibility for the fact, has been and to some extent still remains a necessary step in the long and bitter history of American race relations. But what I am suggesting tonight is the possibility that the time is almost ripe—perhaps already ripe—for the next step forward, namely, the step at which, instead of defensively asserting the equality of the Negro, you take that equality so much for granted that you can relax, and thereby help everybody else to relax.

Let me next explain, then, what I mean by taking equality for granted and some of the means of achieving this frame of mind. In order to illustrate the principles, let me quote again from a student paper. The student complains bitterly about such incidents as the following. First, a white salesman in a clothing store, impressed by my student's good English, asked if he was a doctor. My student was incensed and replied angrily, "I want you to know that Negro doctors and professional men are not the only Negroes who talk intelligently!" Again, my student expresses himself as infuriated by such remarks on the part of whites as, "I've always felt very kindly and sympathetic toward your people." He writes, "That remark, well meant, I know, usually spoils life for a few minutes and makes me feel as if I'm at someone's funeral. At other times my feelings reach the other extreme and I have the urge to shout, 'Who the hell are my people?' " My student also is bitter about the kind of person who asks, "You don't happen to know Wilbur Atkins, do you?—a real nice fellow—used to be porter at Walgreen's Drug Store on 53rd Street?"

It appears to me that if one takes equality for granted, there is nothing especially offensive in any of these remarks. They reveal ignorance and naiveté on the part of the whites who make them. They are, nevertheless, as my student admits, "well meant"; they are clumsy and graceless attempts to establish some kind of contact. Lillian Smith says that on the subject of Negroes, most white people are ignorant, blind, and sick. Many Negro writers have said the same thing. Hence, in reply to my student I must ask in turn, why get angry with these poor, ignorant, sick people who are trying to be friendly? Why not give them a C-minus for effort and pass on to other topics? How much enlightenment do you expect from white people with the kind of education on the subject of

Negroes that most of them have had—education in terms of the clichés of minstrel shows, bum vaudeville jokes, movie and radio and newspaper comic stereotypes, and superstitious folklore? If you expect too much of them—if you expect all white people to be intelligent and sensible on the subject of Negroes—you will be running into daily disappointments. If, however, your expectations are realistic—in other words, if you expect four out of five white persons to be pretty ignorant on the subject—then you will be delighted when the score for a given day turns out to be only three out of five.

Alfred Korzybski, the Polish-American scientist who was the founder of general semantics, used to talk about "minimum expectation" as the basis of happiness. The following is my own example of the principle. I used to notice the differences among motormen on the Indiana Avenue street-car line in Chicago—a street often blocked by badly parked cars and huge trailer trucks backing into warehouses and maneuvering in everybody's way. Some motormen seemed to expect to be able to drive down Indiana Avenue without interruption—hence every time they got blocked, they would get all steamed up with rage, clanging their bells and leaning out of their cars to shout at the truck drivers. At the end of a day these motormen must have been nervous wrecks; I can imagine them coming home at the end of a day, jittery and hypertensive, a menace to their wives and children. Other motormen, however, seemed to expect Indiana Avenue to be heavily blocked—a realistic expectation, because it usually was. They could sit and wait for minutes without impatience, calmly whistling a tune, cleaning their fingernails, or writing their reports. In other words, confronting the same objective situation, some motormen lived a hellish life of anger and nervous tension; other motormen had a nice, relaxing job, with plenty of time for rest.

Now to expect complete enlightenment from the white world appears to me an absurd expectation. We shall not see it in our lifetime. But what we can accomplish in our own lifetime—indeed, at any time we want to take the trouble—is a thorough assessment and evaluation of our own evaluations, in order that we shall avoid wastefully expending our emotional energies. The road ahead towards full integration is too long and too difficult for us to waste our energies in needless frustration and resentment.

SO LET ME go back to my earlier theme of forgetting that one is a Negro, not only for one's own sake, but in order that, through the terms of the self-fulfilling prophecy, other people may also forget so that we shall all be able to "act naturally." I want to suggest—indeed, to urge—the lifting of what I shall call the "Jim Crow of the mind." Physical Jim Crow is imposed by others—by fences, barricades, "white" and "colored" signs painted over drinking-fountains; these barriers can and are being gradually removed by law. The energetic attempt to break down these barriers must, of course, go on. But the barriers I am speaking of are not those imposed by head-waiters, railroad companies, employ-

ment agencies, real estate agencies, or the police. They are the barriers within one's own mind that limit one's perspective to the Negro world.

I am sure you are familiar with many examples of what I mean, but let me give you one from my own experience. In an English literature class I once taught, there were three Negro students among a group of twenty-five. These three sat together, although no one told them to. If there was a Jim Crow section in that classroom, they created it themselves. But their self-imposed segregation went farther than this. When I asked the class to write term papers, selecting topics out of the entire range of Modern English and American literature, one of the Negro students offered to write on Paul Laurence Dunbar, another wanted to do a paper on Richard Wright, and the third chose Langston Hughes. I asked them if they were especially fond of these authors. They said no, they hadn't read them yet; they were going to for their term papers. (Incidentally, I tried to break that up. I assigned Dunbar, Wright, and Hughes to three white students and asked the Negro students to select other topics. Then, in my column in the *Chicago Defender* that week, I wrote on "Self-Imposed Jim Crow," telling the story of my three Negro students. I was happy to find the three of them seated at opposite ends of the classroom the following Monday morning.)

But these students are by no means unusual. Let us look at the community of educated, upper-middle-class Negroes. Are they seriously interested in music, or do they go to concerts only when Marian Anderson is singing? Are they genuinely interested in art, or do they only go to art shows when Jacob Lawrence or Eldizir Cortor are exhibiting? Are they really interested in sociology, or only in the sociology of the Negro? (Incidentally, Negroes are not alone in this kind of self-limitation. I know of a Chinese-American professor of sociology who is an authority on Chinatowns in the United States and practically never talks about anything else.) If you look at the titles of dissertations in the graduate divisions of Negro universities, you will note the widespread existence of this Jim Crow of the mind—dissertations on Negro housing, Negro population movements, Negro journalism, Negro poetry, Negro painting, and so on indefinitely. Granted that some of these dissertations are justified by the needs and exigencies of research in particular localities, the almost total absence of topics not limited to the Negro is a depressing commentary on the one-sidedness of academic life in many Negro colleges.

I do not blame anyone for this intellectual segregation, which is the inevitable product of the tragic history of Negroes in the United States. But what is past is past. Hence the question I am raising is whether the removal of Jim Crow of the mind is keeping pace with the removal of physical Jim Crow. Is it not possible that we are carrying into the present attitudes and habits, which, while once appropriate and necessary to the Negro's morale, are now partly antiquated?

Long after a national FEPC law is on the books, long after the last segregated schoolhouse in the United States is abolished, we shall still have to reckon with Jim Crow of the mind. Hence it is none too soon for us to begin tackling this larger, perhaps more difficult, inner problem. Because it is an inner problem, it cannot be solved simply by blaming everything on the whites. Because it is an inner problem, it is for each of us a personal responsibility.

**T**HE WAY to stop being haunted by the memory of a girl who jilted you is to get a new girl. The way to stop being haunted by the fact of being Negro, which is the essence of Jim Crow of the mind, is to develop a deeper passion about other topics. Hence let me suggest some methods.

First, I believe every Negro should interest himself, not superficially but deeply, in the problems of some minority other than his own. The study of the problems of Italian immigrants or of the Jews is good for Negroes, in the same way that the study of Negroes is good for the Italians and the Jews. But there are minority groups other than ethnic to be studied: the stutterers, the physically handicapped, the blind, and the members of all sorts of other social minorities who develop their own minority group complexes. The more intensively one studies any such group, the more impressive become the similarities among all human beings. Read the history of the Irish under English oppression, and study in the light of that history the characteristic fears, prejudices, aggressions, and ancient loyalties that still distinguish many American descendants of those Irish four or five generations later. Gradually, as we pursue such studies, we begin to lose the sense of a special "Negro problem," just as I have long ago lost the sense of a special "Japanese problem," and we acquire instead a sense of the profound similarity of all human problems.

**M**Y NEXT suggestion has specifically to do with the younger generation, so I address myself specially to those of you who are students or the parents of students. I do not believe a student should give up any plans, schooling, or future aspirations simply on the basis of being a Negro. The bitter experience of an earlier generation of men who trained to be electrical engineers and had to accept employment as Pullman porters has led many Negro elders to caution young people against training for jobs beyond those which they believe a Negro can get. I think it is of utmost importance today to re-examine this point of view. There is no doubt still a job ceiling, but it is neither as low as it used to be, nor is it as rigid. Ralph Bunche is only one of thousands, at a variety of levels of employment, who have broken through previously established ceilings within the past decade.

Let us examine this matter of job ceilings for a moment. If a group of Negro students say to themselves, there's no use studying to become an electrical engineer because we'll never get jobs, they will, by the terms of the self-fulfilling

prophecy, obviously never get to be engineers. If on the other hand they say to themselves, "We shall become electrical engineers, come hell or high water," they will at least have the training to push against the job ceiling, and some of them may break through and fulfill their own prophecies. It's a gamble, of course, and you may lose and wind up as a Pullman porter after all. But note that it is less of a gamble today than it was in 1940, and that in 1960 it will be still less of a gamble, because of the steady changes that we have all seen going on. And job ceilings cannot be broken by legislation alone, because not even an FEPC law can compel the hiring of a non-engineer for an engineer's job. So an increasing number of young men and women today must take a long chance and train themselves for positions which Negroes have never held before. Hence the basic question facing a young man or woman today in the choice of a career is not, "Is this career open to Negroes?" but "Is this career one that I care about enough to fight for?" Courageous young men and women, by acting as if there were equality of opportunity, will, by the terms of the self-fulfilling prophecy, bring about the equality of opportunity that they seek.

THE LAST sentence, I am afraid, sounds inspirational. It is all very well to tell people to be courageous—but, as a student of semantics, I know that preaching is not enough. Hence, I should like to explain in semantic terms what being courageous means.

I believe that what we call courage is nothing more than what general semanticists call being "extensional." Being extensional means constantly being on the lookout for changes and differences in events and things and people that we would otherwise evaluate as unchanged. The basic principles of extensionality are extremely simple: they are called "indexing" and "dating." Indexing means being aware of differences concealed by similarities of name; hence the rule, chair-1 is not chair-2 is not chair-3 . . . teacher-1 is not teacher-2 is not teacher-3 . . . corporation-1 is not corporation-2 is not corporation-3. This rule reminds us that generalizations about chairs, teachers, or corporations may or may not be true of a particular chair, a particular teacher, a particular corporation. The person who indexes is always on the alert for these sometimes important differences. Dating means being aware of the differences that occur in time: Mr. Jones (1940) is not Mr. Jones (1942) is not Mr. Jones (1944); Kirksville (1948) is not Kirksville (1949) is not Kirksville (1950); Supreme Court (1950) is not Supreme Court (1952) is not Supreme Court (1954). The person who maintains this fluidity of concept in terms of time is always on the alert for altered conditions, which may mean altered opportunities. He is also aware that he himself is changing from day to day, month to month, and year to year, so that he has constantly to re-assess his own strengths, abilities, and attitudes.

The extensional person is relatively courageous, then, not because he has more bravado, but because he knows that the things he has been afraid of have

changed, that he himself has changed, so that the future is always in some respects, for better or worse, different from the past. Therefore past fears inevitably have less meaning for the extensional person than curiosity about the future. Adjusted to change and difference, the extensional person seems often to walk in where angels fear to tread, not because he is a fool, but because he has been curious enough to investigate what it was the angels were afraid of—and has discovered that whatever it was, it isn't there any more. Without the habit of indexing and dating, one would not have bothered to investigate; one would simply have taken the angels' word for it. In other words, the person who indexes his judgments does not conclude, because the Snowwhite Corporation of Minneapolis refused him a job, that the Snowwhite Corporation of Kansas City will necessarily do the same. The person who dates his opinions has no airtight conclusions about the present state of affairs in the restaurant where he was refused service in 1947. For the extensional person the world is never dull—it is vivid with potentialities.

SO WE COME, finally, to the greatest of social prophecies, the prophecy of political democracy, stated for Americans in the Declaration of Independence and restated by Abraham Lincoln, whose birthday we observe tonight. It is a prophecy that fulfills itself slowly, not only because it is a huge one that takes a lot of fulfilling, but also because all of us, white and Negro and all the shades in between, have faltered in our belief in it and have lacked the faith always to act upon it. The prophecy of democracy states that if we indeed treat each other as created equal and therefore act on the principles of respect for all persons regardless of race, color, or previous condition of servitude, we shall all of us—*both the oppressors and the oppressed*—be healed of the profound emotional scars that we inherit from earlier and less just forms of human organization, and attain a full human dignity. Like all self-fulfilling prophecies, this prophecy will not realize itself all at once on the sudden dawn of a Day of Jubilee. It realizes itself from day to day, from moment to moment, as we accept its assumptions, accept the responsibilities it implies, and prepare ourselves not to fight over again the battles of yesterday, but to take our places in the changed world of tomorrow.