

• DISCUSSION •

SEMANTICS AND COMMUNICATION

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As I see it, any specialist living in a democratic republic who has had the privilege or opportunity to collect information that is uniquely different from and potentially useful to others has the obligation to present such information so that anyone can and will understand it.

My topic is a semantic approach to communication. There are many ways of talking about semantics. The word itself comes from a Greek root that has to do with "signification." Sometimes we say that semantics is the search for the significant, the relevant, in contrast with the superficial. If someone were to ask you, "What is the most significant unsolved problem of our time?" I wonder what reply you would give? I would say man's inhumanity to man.

In a narrow sense semantics has to do with the study of meanings. In a broader and deeper sense we talk about it as the study of human evaluation, which means we study the human being as an organism which handles information. We also study the nature of the information—particularly our symbolic system (i.e., the world of words) which the organism uses to handle that information. Even more importantly, we are now beginning to study how information, once it has been internalized, determines our very reality—the ways in which we think, and feel, and behave. This information, early acquired and internalized, we call our *assumptive knowledge*.

In the past few years I have been studying the dynamics

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of human insult, and I find that much of human insult comes when one person questions, doubts, or criticizes the assumptive knowledge of another person. For instance, if you believe in God, and someone asks you why, or doubts the value of your belief, or is openly critical of such a belief, how do you react? Or, if someone asks you if you believe in free enterprise, in the democratic process, or more controversial issues, such as desegregation, the test ban treaty, interrupting the conceptual process by other than natural means, how quickly may you be insulted!

One of the useful bits of information about human nervous systems is that one's assumptive knowledge (which we call secondary nature) is indistinguishable from primary nature (our sensory and apperceptive processes) in determining the nature of reality.

LET ME discuss now three different ways of talking about an experience; or, I might say, three different assumptions we can make about the nature of reality: the absolutistic, the relativistic, and the transactional. These represent roughly three stages of man's growing sophistication about the nature of himself and his cosmos. They could represent beliefs about reality that we might classify as pre-science, early science, and modern science, respectively. For purpose of demonstration, I sometimes distribute to my lecture groups bits of paper which have been dipped in phenyl-thio-carbamide, a harmless chemical which tastes bitter to approximately seventy per cent of the participants, but tasteless to the remaining thirty per cent. The papers are prepared by dipping a sheet of typing paper into the solution, drying it, and cutting it up. The result is that each person gets, comparatively speaking, the same amount of the substance. I then make a statement of fact about this event: "There is no taste in the paper," which is valid for me. Then I ask what is the thinking of the group, and get such responses as "You're wrong," "You've a different paper," "You're crazy," "Your taste buds are faulty," and the like. The accumulated scientific information: whether or not you taste the paper is determined by your inherited genes. The

insult patterns started, however, are mostly because of the *assumptions* about the event; for instance, one being that if we are having the same experience we must be reacting in the same way "or else someone must be wrong" (or deficient, or what not).

Let us look again at the three different assumptions that predominate man's thinking on this kind of event—whether it is through taste, sight, hearing, or other sensory modalities.

- The assumption of the "absolutistic" person is that "the taste is in the paper" (i.e., qualities are in things).
- The assumption of the "relativistic" person is that "the taste is in me" (i.e., qualities are in me; for instance, color is determined by the cones in my eyes); some taste it, some do not, "so who cares?"
- The assumption of the "transactionist" is that there is a transaction going on between what's in the paper and what's going on in me. Some people react to the transaction in one way, some in another. All I can talk factually about is *my* reaction to the transaction, and then make inferences or inquire about yours.

With this assumption of modern science, based upon our knowledge about human nervous systems, I am neither defensive about my reactions nor critical of yours. We may react alike, or differently, and thus learn from one another. We can learn what we have in common, and respect each other as to the ways that we are different.

**I**N a similar way, we can talk about not only the similarities and differences in primary reactions, but also differences in feeling, in judgments, in standards, values, qualities, morals, meanings, which are based upon our individual and cultural collections, our secondary nature. This holds as well for our beliefs. If we find someone who has a belief or assumption about the nature of the cosmos which is different from our own, whether monotheistic, polytheistic, atheistic, pantheistic, or agnostic, the reaction is change from one of insult to one of interest, inquiry, and sharing.

An important reminder for some people is the fact that

once I understand that your reality and mine may be different (by reality meaning the way we look at things, feel about or value them, think about them) it *does not* destroy *my* reality, my values, my preferences; but it *does* make possible a respect for *your* reality. When my behavior becomes influenced by this modern assumption about the nature of reality, something in the manner of reciprocity begins to develop, simply because of the diminishing of insult, and the natural concern of homo sapiens for the survival of his own species. And please note: those who operate by the assumption of modern science respect the coexistence of those with other assumptions, while searching for still other assumptions more meaningful, more applicable to mankind. And while searching for these new assumptions, a self-revising process is going on.

My contention is that until we understand the assumptive level of human knowledge, until we learn something about the nature of nervous systems, and the evaluative process, the best that we can do is learn to be tolerant of others who have different assumptive knowledge. This usually means putting up with others until they learn how things "really are," and until they are "more like us," which is, of course, the right way to be. (This is, of course, a series of assertions that is based on obsolete, absolutistic assumptions.)

Once understood, and once applied, modern assumptions can clarify such diverse subjects as: morality, law, education, ethics, politics, or religion. They can increase the potential of organizational structures from the simple to the complex. They can ease relationships within the family, or within the family of nations. They can operate more effectively on the job, in the home, within, between, or among the multiple institutions of man.

A key to diminishing man's inhumanity to man (the same key to improving communication as I see it) thus lies in the direction of the dissemination of knowledge about human evaluation, how brains establish and maintain reality; how assumptive knowledge may act as a barrier to effective communication, whereas knowledge *about* assumptive knowledge can open the gates to deeper understanding and can increase our capacity to be human beings.