

A LANGUAGE APPROACH TO PREJUDICE

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IT is no great revelation that if one wishes to analyze the insidious causes of racial prejudice he would do well to begin such an investigation by analyzing his language. For example, black things in our language are associated with sin, death, germs, dirt, and disease. The "bad guy" in our westerns wears the black hat, rides the black horse, and has a black moustache. We are all too aware of terms such as "blacklist," "blackballed," the Black Plague, not to mention black cats. On the other hand, the "good guy" wears a white hat, rides a white horse, and doesn't even tell "white" lies. Among the things we associate with white are purity, cleanliness, virginity, and honorable professions, as in "white-collar worker."

All this is not new; it has been explored by Ossie Davis and others. But if our language is perhaps an insidious cause for the perpetuation of racism, can it not also become the vehicle which propels us out of the mire of prejudice and hatred?

As a graduate student in language courses of Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, as a reader of S. I. Hayakawa, Wendell Johnson, and Irving J. Lee, I began to question my own prejudices. I rearranged my own verbal maps to fit the territory. I became convinced that no one who acted as though he believed the principles of general semantics could also pre-judge or hate others because they belonged to a certain ethnic group. So, armed with Catherine Minteer's moral support and with financial support from Harry Maynard's General Semantics Foundation, I launched the attack against the windmill and undertook to test my convictions by my doctoral research.

The purpose of this study was to determine whether instruction in general semantics would reduce ethnic prejudice in high school students and to create a course of study in general semantics that would cause such a reduction of ethnic prejudice. The rationale behind the study was that prejudice is the result of a faulty cognitive process

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which, in turn, is the result of an unhealthy semantic environment. In other words, prejudice results when something happens to the way people think because they have allowed words to use them instead of their using words. This theory is discussed in Gordon Allport's *Nature of Prejudice*, among other works.

But prejudice is complex and hard to measure. Therefore, it was decided to measure correlates of prejudice, namely: social distance (how close people will get to other groups), ethnocentrism (a dislike of aliens — "My ethnic group is the in-group, yours is the out-group"), and authoritarianism (a personality type that favors domination-submission patterns in human relationships, found commonly in highly prejudiced persons). The basic theory that was tested by this study, then, was that the learning of general semantics would result in a decrease in social distance, ethnocentrism, and authoritarianism, with a subsequent decrease in prejudice.

The test school was Evander Childs High School in the Bronx. Subjects of the experiment were eleventh-year students matched for age, sex, intelligence, and ethnic background. A general semantics group numbered 113 students, an anti-prejudice group numbered 83, and a regular English group, 81. Average age of the subjects was sixteen years, and the average I.Q. was 100. The total number of students in the study was 277.

Four English teachers from the high school's English department served as the personnel for the study. The same teacher taught one class of regular English, one class with anti-prejudice lessons from *Probing Our Prejudices* by Hortense Powdermaker, and one class with lessons in general semantics, many of which were adapted from *Words and What They Do to You* by Catherine Minter. The experiment took six weeks.

Before the experiment began, the students were given the Bogardus Social Distance Scale, the California Ethnocentrism Scale, and the California F Scale, a measure of authoritarianism. The students were also given a general semantics test to determine if any of them had previously learned the principles of general semantics. After the experiment was over, the students were again given the same test battery. To determine whether the semantics group had indeed learned the principles of general semantics, the general semantics test was repeated. The students in the semantics group were also asked to give their reactions to the course.

The results of analysis of variance of the data were as follows: On the battery of tests for correlates of prejudice, the average scores of

the general semantics group decreased *in every instance*, showing a decrease in social distance, ethnocentrism, and authoritarianism. At the same time, average scores of both the regular English and the anti-prejudice groups *increased*. Also, the anti-prejudice group increased in prejudice more than the regular English group in most cases.

In the complete research report, several theories that explain why the levels of prejudice increased in the regular and anti-prejudice groups are discussed at length, along with a discussion that attempts to explain why the anti-prejudice group increased in prejudice. However, the important thing here is that the general semantics group did not increase in prejudice, did not remain the same, but did instead decrease in every correlate of prejudice tested. On the basis of the results of the test battery, the basic theory was accepted, and it was concluded that the study gave strong evidence that the teaching of general semantics is indeed worthwhile as a method of reducing prejudice.

Moreover, the questionnaire returns were wholly consistent with other studies in general semantics in that the students and teachers felt that, finally, they were involved with something relevant. Every one of the 113 students comprising the general semantics group found something valuable in his studies. All four of the participating teachers enthusiastically recommended that general semantics be included in the language arts curriculum.

As with other studies in general semantics, this research will also be ignored unless the "powers that be" decide that there is perhaps some truth behind the studies presenting strong evidence that general semantics does allow the student to reap a harvest of increased critical reading ability, increased critical thinking ability, increased writing ability, increased creativity, and now increased capacity for tolerance and understanding of one's fellow human beings. There is enough evidence regarding the educational benefits of general semantics to entice administrators, supervisors, and teachers to "give it a try," and judging from the alternatives and general state of the union, there is not much choice — or time — left.

Therefore, this study adds the voice of the author to the crescendo calling attention to general semantics as a method of putting substance and relevance into the language arts curriculum. As one of the participating teachers said, "It is not comfortable to have one's values questioned or challenged; it is not comfortable, but it is the stuff of education."

REFERENCE

Black, John A. The effect of instruction in general semantics on ethnic prejudice as expressed in measurements of social distance, ethnocentrism, and authoritarianism. Doctoral dissertation, New York University, 1971. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms.