

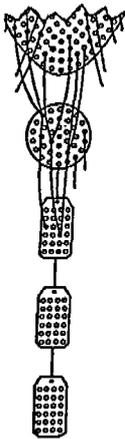
# ***SOUND BITE VIRUS AND GENERAL SEMANTICS IMMUNOLOGY***

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**I**N THE 1988 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN, the chief communication device used by the Bush handlers was the sound bite. The candidate was furnished with a cunningly calculated succession of topics, each compressible into a 10-second exposure. This was a package that could be easily handled by TV. TV exists by combining advertising and entertainment in a format adapted to an audience with a short attention span.

It is also an audience trained to believe that the word *is* the thing. One of the topics chosen by Bush's handlers was the pledge of allegiance issue. One basic assumption implied that reciting the words and being patriotic were identical. This assumption is based on the more general assumption that the word is the thing, that the words and what the speaker is talking about are the same, completely identical. The continual reiteration of this sound bite, followed by a departure of the candidate completely shielded from reporters' questioning, made about as great a separation of map and territory as was possible. Even if people in the audience had wanted to question the truth or accuracy of the sound bite, they were not given the opportunity.

Korzybski created the structural differential as a sensory device for showing visibly the word-thing relationships. As we visualize it, we remind ourselves of the relation of words and their thing referents, of the relations of words on different levels of abstraction, and of the relations of words to our perceptions.



the "unspeakable" world

our perceptions of the world

our reports of our perceptions

our inferences based on our reports

our evaluations and symbolisms

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To communicate reliably we must be able to plug back from any level into the parabola, that is, to relate to something in the "unspeakable" world. The carefully contrived false-to-fact 10-second sound bites constituted a deceptive and misleading mode of communication. Training in general semantics would have helped insulate voters against the virus of false reports, inferences, and evaluations. It would have helped provide the media with an audience that demanded a presentation at least somewhat related to the real world.

Besides using the structural differential, I have found meditation and writing haiku valuable in interiorizing the general semantics orientation. Zen-type meditation ideally shuts off all verbalizing. Writing (and reading) haiku limits verbalizing to the report level. One gets a reflex feel that the word is not the thing. One also gets the stress-reducing feel that a straight report differs greatly from a mare's nest of subjective evaluations and symbolisms.

In meditating (at least, in the Zen way), one exists in a state of processing sensory input without verbalizing. As Korzybski used to repeat explosively, whatever you say it is, it isn't. Words and what they represent differ fundamentally. The word is not the thing. The limited rectangle is not the indefinitely extending parabola. In ceasing to form words, either to others or to oneself, one comes into direct contact with the universe, the universe of which one is simply a part. Performing this act builds up an awareness that what you say about the world consists of what your limited senses and your parochial linguistic cultural background permit you to say about the world. Since what you say is so limited, it never can represent the world with complete accuracy. This awareness opens you to the possibility of having broader, fresher, truer, wiser perceptions.

In the Institute of General Semantics seminars, Charlotte Schuchardt Read would take a small group of us to a secluded spot. There, she would have us sit quietly and just listen, achieving as near a nonverbal state as we could. This helped some of us, at least, to interiorize what the structural differential displayed by the parabola being separate from the circle and both being separate from the rectangles. We found that each of us had unique sensory inputs. We also found that we couldn't describe our sensings completely. We had to fall back on one of the most revealing of Korzybski's safety devices: *etc.* We were forced to realize that the part of the world we were experiencing was more than and hence, to some degree, other than what we said about it.

In writing haiku, one must, of course, use words. But these words are typically on that verbal level which is nearest the perception level (the circle) and thus, of all the verbal levels (rectangles), nearest that which is being perceived (the parabola). This structural situation rules out any symbolic interpretations and evaluations. The words simply describe the event that triggered the original experience. The original experience consisted of a nonverbal, psychosomatic, body-mind reaction to the event. It is up to readers of haiku to create some such reaction in themselves by imagining themselves reacting to the event described in the words of the haiku.

From my experience and from reports of others, achieving a nonverbal state can tax to the utmost one's powers of mental control. Writing (and creatively reading) haiku seems to be a more accessible way of having nonverbal states than is meditation.

The experience of writing haiku has been used by Zen-trained people for centuries. Here are two examples of haiku written by Zen-trained Japanese.

The short night; Upon the hairy caterpillar,  
Beads of dew.

R.H. Blyth, who translated this haiku by Buson, adds this commentary: "The association of ideas here is subtle. The shortness and evanescence of the summer night is felt in the frail, precarious drops of dew on the hairs of the caterpillar."

She has put the child to sleep,  
And now washes the clothes;  
The summer moon.

In his work, *Haiku*, Blyth says, "The mother has got the child asleep and begins to wash the clothes outside the house. Feeling an unwonted calm and freedom from the cares of the day, she gazes at the moon, not so much in poetic rapture as in feeling its soft light upon her breast. You may ask, where is the poetry here? If it were necessary to justify the ways of Issa [the poet] to men, we could say that the sleeping child, the washing of the clothes in the water, glittering and dark by turns, the round, lovely, thoughtful moon, the soft, earnest face of the young mother—all these are united in a higher unity, without losing their individuality but rather having them enriched. And what is poetry but this?"

Notice that the words of these haiku are represented on the structural differential by the rectangle nearest the parabola. They name what exists "out there" in the "unspeakable" world. The haiku writer does not, typically, go to other verbal levels of generalization, of explanations of significance.

Haiku readers may experience some insight, which they may or may not be able to put into words. But they retain an awareness of the difference between their experience and the writer's and hence between their experience and the event that the writer described. Something was going on in the real world at that moment. What meaning can I, the writer or the reader, make of it? Whatever I say (rectangle) is not what went on (parabola). As Lao Tzu said (Bynner's translation):

Existence is beyond the power of words to define.  
Terms may be used, but are none of them absolute. . . .  
If name be needed, wonder names them both. From  
wonder into wonder, Existence opens.

Thus, the haiku experience, whether of writing or reading, short-circuits the usual implication of verbal communication—that the writer's words have one meaning, a meaning that is identical with what they describe and that is

identical with readers' interpretation of them. In general semantics terms, the haiku experience corresponds with the principle of nonidentity. The word is not the thing, the rectangle is not the parabola, and neither one is the circle.

People trained in the discipline of general semantics by practices of nonidentity will not be likely to fall victim to the practitioners of 10-second sound bites.

Want to try your hand at reading haiku creatively? Here are some that I wrote.

Orion sinks in the west;  
The sky lightens in the east.  
The clock ticks.

Three crows sit,  
Shrugging their shoulders,  
Mirrored in the smooth river ice.

In the early morning sun,  
Each tiny pebble  
Casts its own shadow.

In the petunia for nectar  
The bug fell  
Into a raindrop.

In the dark of night  
Against the tall pine's black silhouette—  
One firefly.

Coontree Creek talks to itself  
Around rocks—  
Whether I am here or not.

