
FROM THE ARCHIVES

EDITOR: STEVE STOCKDALE

SNOOPING AROUND THE TIME-BINDING ATTIC, Part 2

***Wendell Johnson, Francis Chisholm, Russell Meyers,
Ray Bontrager, Irving Lee, Samuel Bois***

STEVE STOCKDALE*

II N THE FIRST INSTALLMENT of this series, I related some items of historical interest regarding Alfred Korzybski and the establishment of the Institute of General Semantics. I also provided two short excerpts from transcripts of Korzybski's early seminars in which he talks about what general semantics "is," what it may be considered to be "about," what it concerns itself with, etc.

Now, each one of us can — and, no doubt, does — hold our own opinions and perspectives about these same questions. Anyone can read Korzybski's *Science and Sanity*, Hayakawa's *Language in Thought and Action*,

* Steve Stockdale serves as Director for Programs and Archivist for the Institute of General Semantics. He recently established The Dallas-Fort Worth Center for General Semantics (www.dfwcgs.net), which houses the Alfred Korzybski Research and Study Center. In this series of articles, he relates some of his 'discoveries' with hopes that students of general semantics might find in them something informative, interesting, applicable, etc.

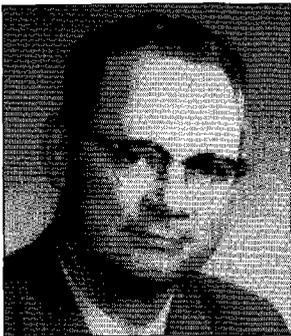
Johnson's *People in Quandaries*, or any book or article that deals with the subject, and then talk in terms such as, "This is what general semantics is about." And, one hopes, the talker will demonstrate an awareness of *to-me-ness*, *non-allness* and the *etc.* in his/her talking that follows.

However, while we each may possess the *right* to an opinion, I would maintain that not all opinions are necessarily *right*. Some opinions reflect more understanding, more insightful interpretation, than others. Therefore, I *opine* that, especially for those of us who consider ourselves students of general semantics, it's important to continually seek to broaden and modify our own evaluations regarding *what general semantics is about*.

As a step toward this objective of ever-widening our perspectives as to *what general semantics is about*, I offer here some excerpts from six men with especially credible views on the subject. Each of these men not only read what Korzybski wrote, but knew him (and each other) with some degree of intimate familiarity. Each read Korzybski, listened to him lecture, asked him questions, talked with him "off-line" in social situations, in private conversations, etc. Each then took his own evaluative perspective of *what general semantics is about* and applied it, developed it, wrote about it, and taught it in his own unique manner. Therefore, "credible" seems to me an appropriate term to apply to the 'opinions' expressed by Wendell Johnson, Francis Chisholm, Russell Meyers, Ray Bontrager, Irving Lee, and Samuel Bois, on this particular subject.

These excerpts come from materials found in the Institute's archives and, so far as I know, have not been previously published.

Wendell Johnson



Wendell Johnson, Ph.D., author of People In Quandaries, Your Most Enchanted Listener, Because I Stutter, and dozens of published articles about general semantics, taught speech, general semantics, and performed clinical studies at the University of Iowa. The following excerpt comes from his opening lecture to his general semantics class in the fall of 1956. The entire course was broadcast live by the campus radio station, WSUI, and, thankfully, recorded on tape.

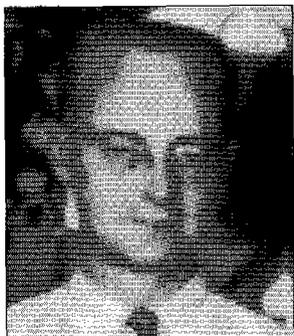
This is a course which deals with the part that our use of words, designs — symbols of all kinds — tends to play in the development of our individual personalities, our institutions, and our human societies. So we shall be concerned in the course with the disorders of our symbolic processes, which is to say the language of maladjustment — the language which *reflects* maladjustment and which tends to *produce* maladjustment. We shall be even more concerned with the kinds of language which we are able to develop or cultivate which tend to be very effective, which tend to be conducive, to what we call “*normal adjustment.*”

Now, I am not too happy with this word “*adjustment.*” I do not mean by it some kind of self-satisfaction, some sort of blind acceptance of things as they are, but something much, much more dynamic and helpful than that. I mean by “*adjustment,*” by healthful adjustment, something that we might call the “*realization of our own individual potentials for development.*” I don’t mean being like somebody else, like the average man, or like the mold, but being oneself as fully as possible.

Well, there is a way to use language which tends to encourage this sort of development. Then there is a way to use language — there are probably many, many ways to use language — which tend to make it *difficult* to develop one’s full potential, and so we will be concerned with these kinds of language. This means we’re going to be concerned with things like speaking, writing, listening, reading, designing, and figuring with the pictures we make in our heads. We’ll be concerned with the talking we do to ourselves that we recognize as thinking, and feeling, and imagining, and wishing, and regretting, and so forth.

We’re going to be concerned especially with the language we use for talking ourselves *into* trouble, and that which we use for talking ourselves *out of* trouble. We are going to be concerned — because we’re concerned so much with the language that is *effective* for the solving of problems and for the realization of potential self-development — we’re going to be especially concerned with language in its most effective forms for the purpose of *solving problems.* This means we will be especially interested in the language used by scientific research workers, and also by others — outstanding novelists, poets, any of the users of language who are very effective in the solving of human problems.

Francis P. Chisholm



Francis P. Chisholm taught at State Teachers College in River Falls, Wisconsin. Perhaps best known for his Introductory Lectures on General Semantics (1945), he shares a distinction with S. I. Hayakawa as the only two men to present seminars sponsored by the Institute while Korzybski was alive. This article from 1949, "Positive Training for Maturity," was perhaps included as a special mailing to Institute members.

Certain formulations of general semantics are extremely important in training maturity and sound mental health. It should be remembered that the aim is to get people to use these principles habitually in making their own evaluations. In other words, the aim of exercises suggested by these principles is to train ourselves and others in the integrating delayed-reaction order of response (scientific method in everyday situations).

Children especially should be taught to talk, behave, etc., *as if* they understood the following propositions. They should have practice in talking about situations in terms which reflect these scientific insights and what they say should be systematically re-stated to make this kind of description habitual.

1. The world is in process. Our descriptions, etc., (i.e., "maps") should be *dated*, and changed as the territory changes. People, things, etc., change, and cannot be treated exactly alike from day to day. No evaluation of myself is permanent. "I dislike what Carl does today," is better than "I hate Carl."
2. The *differences* between similar things are as important to us as the similarities. We should evaluate specific men or women, for example, more in terms of their individual characteristics than in terms of generalizations about "men" and "women."
3. Scientific method in action means training ourselves to think in a definite *order*. Proper order involves these habits:

Observation *before* talking.
 Description *before* evaluation.
 Facts *before* opinions.
 Understanding *before* judgment.
 Etc.

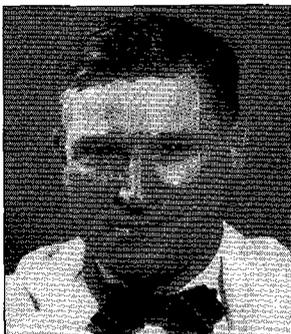
4. Language (map) is about events (non-linguistic territory). We should check from "what I think the situation is" to the situation itself *before* action.
 5. No description can tell *all* about the situation described. Every description is an *abstraction* from the situation. What else is there to say?
 6. We give ourselves positive training in maturity by distinguishing carefully between:
 - Hopes and predictions;
 - Reports and inferences;
 - Descriptions and feelings;
 - Fantasy and report;
 - Legend and history;
 - Etc.
 7. Predictions are never certain; they are more or less probable.
 8. Explanations and hypotheses are not established by argument or intensity of belief; the scientific test is predictability in the territory.
 9. The qualities and values (i.e., "sweet," "sour," "bravery") that we see in things are values that we see there by our own nervous system's activity. We should be *conscious* of this projection. "The sea looks blue *to me* this afternoon." "What he did seems heroic *to me*."
 10. Maturity is not any one set of opinions, but a way of evaluating situations. Immaturity is shown by:
 - Egocentricity
 - Two-valued (black and white) extreme evaluations
 - Compulsive speech
 - Internal insecurity
 - Violent mood changes in response to slight changes in the situation
 - Dogmatism and sureness of opinion
 - Undue regard for tokens of approval, titles, etc.
 - Etc.
- Maturity is shown by:
- Zest and interest
 - Flexibility and relative efficiency

Internal balance
 Social responsibility
 Etc.

11. Maximum transfer of learning occurs when the student understands the *structure* of a successful or unsuccessful reaction. When a student uses delayed reaction in a given context, he should understand the way in which he has used his nervous system for a successful result.
12. Generally, shock and frustration result from following maps which are unlike in structure to the situations they represent.
13. You cannot impose "values." To change "values" you must change people. If you try to impose "values," you make only fear.
14. Parents and teachers should distinguish between:
 - Protection and protectiveness
 - Area of child responsibility (within which he must stand on his decisions) and area of parent responsibility
 - Etc.

Under present world conditions, you cannot, in detail, tell your children *what* to think; but you can train them *how* to think and trust them to make better solutions than you have made. Etc.

Dr. Russell Meyers



Dr. Meyers chaired the Division of Neurosurgery at the University of Iowa and regularly participated in Institute seminar-workshops throughout the 1940s and 50s. This excerpt comes from the copious notes taken by Kenneth Johnson (later to become principal lecturer at Institute seminars, author and editor) during his first Institute seminar-workshop in August 1957.

There are two premises we must operate on whenever we try to communicate. First, we must *expect* to be misunderstood. Second, we must *expect* to misunderstand. This may seem "obvious" but too few human beings act

as if it were true. We are striving to minimize misunderstanding, not to eliminate it. This is true not only of inter-personal but *intra*-personal communication.

Communication can be competent or incompetent; it can lead to improvement or to destruction.

General Semantics is less interested in “answers” to examination questions than in personal behavior in day-to-day situations. It grew out of a comparison of the kinds of behavior that have led to adaptation and the kinds that have led to mis-adaptation.

Most of GS is unspeakable. It must be experienced and practiced over a period of time.

Concepts basic to General Semantics:

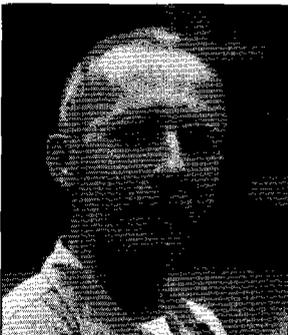
- Scientific method — generalized
- Communication
- Evaluation
- Creativity

The scientific method is not a very old formulation. As it is now taught, it dates back to about 1892 and the book *Grammar of Science*. The notion that this method can be generalized is peculiar to GS.

Alfred Korzybski compared the efficient communication behavior of scientists to the inefficient behavior of “mental” cases. He then took those kinds of adaptive behavior that could be *identified* and *taught* and generalized them for everyday use.

The aim of GS is robust psychological health, not merely correcting or preventing maladjustment.

O. R. Bontrager



Ray Bontrager, Ph.D., Professor of Education and Psychology at California State College (Pennsylvania), then later at Arizona State University, served as the primary lecturer at most Institute winter and summer seminar-workshops from 1951 through 1965. The following excerpt also comes from Ken Johnson's notes taken from the August 1957 seminar-workshop. This is a summary of Bontrager's introductory lecture that began that seminar.

Semantic reactions or, as I prefer to call it, human behavior is what we will be talking about, particularly that behavior which is uniquely human, that behavior which makes you different from your cat.

Semantic reactions are not something we can turn off and on. You are semantic reacting right now. You came here expecting something. This is a semantic reaction. How did you know what to expect? What do you expect? That's important. It's important because what you expect will determine what you get out of this seminar. Your premises psychologically channelize you. (Bontrager used silly putty to demonstrate how we may be channelized to expect something other than what happens.)

General Semantics is a new system. It is not an old one and it cannot be evaluated in terms of any other system. It is not a cure-all, not a panacea.

Some people come here to learn how to make something better and faster. They are not going to get it.

Some come expecting something on words. I'm going to say precious little about words. I'm going to talk about behavior.

Some people expect GS to be a quick course in "how to fool others." It is not.

Some come here for a quick shot of psychiatry. If that's what you want, don't come here. I need a psychiatrist myself.

Some come looking for a fight. I'm the most peace-loving man you ever met.

One man came to one of these seminars to find out "*how I can get them to listen to me.*" It never occurred to him to listen for a while.

I cannot predict your expectations or your reactions to this seminar. I will simply talk about GS as I see it. Not as everyone sees it, but as I see it.

First, I would like each one of you to write down the following statement on a small card and sign it.

I understand that I am not required to believe a single thing I hear Bontrager say or a single thing I read while attending this seminar.

All right. Now on the back of the card write your reactions to being asked to sign such a goofy statement.

(Bontrager then discussed these reactions, pointing out that members of the group are behaving right now, that their sensitivity, their defensiveness, their embarrassment or tenseness are all semantic reactions.)

Do you make mistakes? I do. We all do, and we should learn to face that fact. Trace the history of any subject and you will find a series of mistakes.

Yet when we talk we make statements and then proceed to make them sacred. Most of us cannot tolerate criticism of our statements.

Now I would like you to react to this statement:

I saw a DOG.

I would like you to write down the color and the breed. Now let's hear what some of you wrote.

(Members of the group answer, "black," "brown," etc.)

Now where did those ideas come from? Not from me, certainly. They came from you — from your nervous systems. Whenever you read or listen you are doing this same thing — you are filling in, putting meaning into words from your own nervous system. Reading and listening is like making a scenario. Try to remember that as you read and listen.

Irving J. Lee

Irving J. Lee, Ph.D., taught Speech at Northwestern University and produced two of the most widely-read books on general semantics, Language Habits in Human Affairs and The Language of Wisdom and Folly. One of Korzybski's acknowledged "favorites," he died in 1955 when he was only 46 years old. Admired by many as a "master teacher," one can only speculate as to how the development of general semantics might have been different had he not died so young.



The following is taken from a transcript of his address delivered at the first conference on general semantics in Chicago, June 22, 1951, entitled "The Semantic Man."

In 1946, I had just taken off that Air Force uniform and managed to persuade Alfred Korzybski to let me pose some questions to him. I had a number of things that bothered me. I had read that "blue peril" [*Science and Sanity*] and there were paragraphs in it that made no sense even after the fifteenth reading. I wanted the opportunity to confront him with these paragraphs. I wanted to say: "Now, Alfred, what did you mean when you said this?" And he very kindly agreed to submit to some such questioning, over a period of several afternoons.

At one of these sessions, I said, "*Now, Alfred, you have been thinking*

about this stuff for a very long time. Can you tell me, in a nutshell, what are you trying to do? What is the objective of all this reading and studying and talking and sweating that you go through day after day, year after year? What are you after?" I never could call on him in those sessions without being forced to take notes. If I came without a pencil and paper, he invariably found a pad and pencil, and "take some notes" was the continuous refrain. Well, I have gone over those notes many times and in answer to that question, this is almost a verbatim account of what he said.

"Irving, we are trying to produce a new sort of man." I wish I could do it with the accent that he gave to that "new sort of man." *"A man who will have no new virtues, but we will know how to describe him and, maybe, we will know how to create him."* And, as I recall the rest of that discussion, Alfred went on to say that he thought that in the discipline that he had helped to fashion, there was a way to describe a "new sort of man." He then said, *"It will be very easy to describe him. I did it in Science and Sanity, and you will be able very quickly after you read that to know exactly what kind of man it is."* I was very much taken at the time with this point of view and someday, perhaps in 1960 or 1965, I am going to write a book with a number of chapters which will describe this kind of man. And, I have been trying to provide, or create, or draw for myself a profile, a profile of the characteristics of a man who in his behavior would embody the stuff that is in that blue book.

J. Samuel Bois



Samuel Bois, a clinical psychologist and management consultant from Montreal, attended his first seminar with Korzybski in 1945. He extended the work of general semantics in two major books, Explorations in Awareness and The Art of Awareness, introducing such notions as his "semantic transactor" model and the term "What Is Going On" (WIGO) to refer to the event level of the parabola in Korzybski's Structural Differential. The following summary of Bois' opening lecture at the 1950 summer seminar-workshop was written by Dick Brenneman, a student.

Relax ... enjoy yourself ... please, for the time, forget all of your personal problems and those tremendous world problems — forget those, too. It is impossible to absorb the methodology of General Semantics if you are tense and preoccupied with all the interminable woes of the universe.

If I see any of you reflecting the tenseness of survival problems, I will refuse to talk to you. I will say, 'Go see the expert Charlotte [Schuchardt] and relax.' After all, life's not so bad — for heaven's sake, enjoy it.

There is an old Aristotelian, traditional aesthetic view that for anything to be beneficial, it must be hard. I say, 'poof' — just wait and see.

Well, what is this GS? What was this guy Korzybski talking about anyway, eh? What sort of double-talk did he throw at us — whatever you say it is, it isn't! Where the devil did he get this name General Semantics?

First of all, we will not quibble about words! I will not stand for that. You must remember that Samuel Bois has already stood under one inquisition. He knows how insane it is to quibble over words. AK told us one thing if he told us nothing else — 'The words are not the things.'

It is our function as time-binders to improve science and civilization. If we think verbally we project the structure of our language on such phenomena as we observe and so are in a rut. How and where do we start to get out of this rut? Right at home. Don't wait for a dramatic opportunity to practice GS on the floor of the United Nations. Practice it in the prison cell, if necessary. We can and we must practice and create better methods of cooperation in whatever human group we join. So remember this, that family life is the most effective bio-cultural and bio-social training laboratory that we have available to us.

Looking Ahead

The excerpt you just read of Samuel Bois' comments comes from a fascinating-to-me "diary," or newsletter, produced by several students after the Institute's 1950 summer seminar-workshop at the Barrington (Massachusetts) School. This seminar is noteworthy in that it occurred just five months after Korzybski's death, the first of the post-Korzybski era. These students recognized the historical significance of the event, and took care to document their experiences with both words and photos. Next time, I'll provide more from this very special seminar-workshop about the staff, the students, the photos, and the fun.