

What's the Matter with Kansas?

An Application of General-Semantics

to Contemporary Midwest Politics

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Abstract

In *What's the Matter with Kansas*, historian and economist Thomas Frank outlines how conservative Republicans challenged and eclipsed the state GOP's traditionally dominant moderate wing for power. His premise: that they persuaded voters that liberalism is responsible for the state's economic and cultural decline when the more likely culprit was Republican efforts to dismantle price supports for family farms and redistribute the tax burden from the wealthy to the working class. Although he speaks the language of economics and Marxist theory, his observations fit into the framework of general-semantics. This paper aims to answer these questions: How can the principles of general-semantics be employed, in an examination of *What's the Matter with Kansas*, to analyze voters' maladaptive decoding of campaign messages and political actors' distortion of reality? And how might the electorate inoculate itself against the signal-reaction triggers set up by politicians, using principles of general-semantics?

Thomas Frank marvels at how much Kansas has changed politically since its founding. A cauldron of liberalism during the anti-slavery fight of the antebellum years, it was the home of John Brown and abolitionist militias that battled pro-slavery settlers from Missouri in the prelude to the Civil War.ⁱ Women had partial suffrage in Kansas' 1861 constitution and attained full suffrage in 1912. Pro-farmer, anti-industrial Populists at the turn of the 20th century made the state fertile territory for the rise of *Appeal to Reason*, a Socialist newspaper whose nationwide circulation reached 760,000 in 1912.ⁱⁱ But now, Kansas is one of the most staunchly conservative states in the Union. Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas* asks how that change happened. Although he speaks the language of economics and Marxist theory, his observations fit into the framework of general-semantics.

This paper aims to answer these questions: How can the principles of general-semantics be employed, in an examination of *What's the Matter with Kansas*, to analyze voters' maladaptive decoding of campaign messages and political actors' distortion of reality? And how might the electorate inoculate itself against the signal-reaction triggers set up by politicians, using principles of general-semantics?

A key concept in Frank's book is issue congruency, the political principle that a rational voter would cast his or her vote according to whether the candidate's views on the issues are congruent with those of the voters. The underlying assumption is rationality, and Frank demonstrates the irrationality of an electorate that would vote so squarely in opposition to its own economic interests. Vance Packard instructs in *The Hidden Persuaders* how this puzzling behavior might happen, pointing out that perceptive advertisers and marketers recognized three truths about consumers:

1. You can't assume people know what they want.ⁱⁱⁱ

2. You can't assume people will tell you the truth about their wants and dislikes even if they know them because their answers will seek to project a self-image as intelligent, sensible and rational — in spite of what they may genuinely think.^{iv}

3. It is dangerous to assume that people will behave rationally.^v

Similarly, it is dangerous to assume that politicians will assume that people will behave rationally; it is appeals to irrationality and exploitation of liberals' and Democrats' disregard for the power of affective language that have given Republicans control of all three branches of government, and they gave conservative Republicans control of the Kansas Legislature. George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" is just as instructive in considering politics in the 21st century as when it was written in 1946:

The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish spurting out ink. ... All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia.^{vi}

A deliberately conjured fog has descended upon public discourse, one in which it is easy for the electorate to confuse what is good for itself with what is good for moneyed power, and Frank writes convincingly that the two most often are mutually exclusive. Although Packard devotes most of *The Hidden Persuaders* to the marketing of products, one chapter focuses on the marketing of candidates. He might not have been able to envision the extent to which the electorate has become consumerized in this era of the perpetual political campaign, in which presidential campaigns begin a year after the last election was completed and salvos crisscross the non-election-year airwaves on contentious public policy matters.

A number of tools must be employed to understand Republican Kansas' shift from the moderation of President Dwight Eisenhower and Sen. Bob Dole to the religious conservatism of Sen. Sam Brownback, a member of the conservative Catholic group Opus Dei, and Rep. Todd Tiahrt, the Boeing factory manager who upset a pro-choice Democratic incumbent. The latter was swept onto the national political scene by a tide of anti-abortion activists who began organizing to take on Kansas' moderate political establishment after the 1991 Summer of Mercy. That year, Operation Rescue flooded Wichita with anti-abortion protesters bent on shutting down the city's abortion clinics. The first of these tools is to-me-ness, which Wendell Johnson also calls consciousness of projection. The idea is this: "We express our awareness of the degree to which our thoughts or statements are projections of our own internal condition, rather than reports of facts about something else, by such words as 'it seems to me.'"^{vii} It's important, however, to add a twist to this: Rather than passively assuming, "The political message necessarily applies to me," the receiver should ask, "What do these words/signals/images mean to me?" Voters must recognize that a message's meaning to one receiver may be different from its meaning to the sender or all other receivers. The lack of critical to-me-ness on the part of the receiver and subsequent signal reactions lie at the heart of the problems illustrated in *What's the Matter with Kansas?*

An understanding of the semantic breakdown in constituents' interpretation of political agendas, as well as the voters' lack of introspection concerning their needs and whether they overlap with the ideas of politicians, could help correct the maladaptive workings of the political process that lead the electorate to vote against its economic interests under the banner of social

values. “Values may matter most to voters, but they always take a backseat to the needs of money once the elections are won,” Frank writes.^{viii} He outlines how this happened through what he calls conservative sleight-of-hand. He tells of the prosperity of Mission Hills, a Kansas City suburb populated by wealthy Republican businessmen and old-money heirs, and the story of how meatpacking and Wal-Mart have stripped western Kansas of its natural resources, sapped its downtowns’ vitality and driven small merchants out of business. It is the Mission Hills Republicans who profit from the corporatization of enterprises in western Kansas that were once locally run, Frank contends.

The abstracting process and the two-valued orientation

The notion that the United States may be divided into red states, which voted for the Republicans, and blue states, which voted for the Democrats, provides a prime example of the two-valued orientation. The selection of these colors implies a solidity of political purpose. That may seem accurate when looking at the bluest of the blue states, Wyoming, which favored Bush with 68 percent of the vote in 2000. But a look at electoral maps shows an overwhelmingly Republican nation when Bush actually lost the popular vote to Vice President Al Gore. The two-valued red-vs.-blue narrative, Frank writes, helped conservatives create the narrative of “the latte liberal,” or “the suggestion that liberals are identifiable by their tastes and consumer preferences and that these tastes and preferences reveal the essential arrogance and foreignness of liberalism.”^{ix} In reality, however, it may be well-off conservatives who are more likely to buy that shameful foreign beverage. Viewed as an isolated phenomenon, the rhetorical tactic of renaming French fries as “freedom fries” may have seemed to be just a bit of partisan silliness. Taken as a tactic in

the game of politics, however, it provided another link in the rhetorical chain the Republicans wrapped around the Democrats, and the purpose of that chain was to bind the term “elitist” to the Democrats by association with France, which was portrayed as a playground of “the rich,” “the overeducated” and “the liberal.” When some Democrats ridiculed the term “freedom fries,” they were simply taking the bait and, in the process, reinforcing the non-liberal perception of Democrats as feeling unjustifiably superior to everyone else.

The conservative Republican use of adjectives to malign Democrats provides an example of the is-of-identity trap employed as campaign tactic. By associating Democrats with the entertainment industry, and by associating Hollywood with a downward spiral of excess and un-Christian living, Republicans create a guilt-by-association link and emphasize the extent to which Democrats are *not like you*, how they *don't share your values*, and therefore *are not worthy of your vote*.

The trick to appealing to a broad range of people is to stay high on the abstraction ladder. Not all agree on the meaning of all symbols,^x although at the lowest, most concrete levels it is more difficult to mistake meanings. Don Fabun points out that words cannot have meanings; only people can have meanings.^{xi} He explains how this works: “We perceive in wholes or composites of things the things we desire, need or have been thinking about at the moment we experience something, or perhaps the first part we focus on.”^{xii} By staying highly abstract, a politician can avoid being pinned down to a specific meaning. Therefore, more people can infer, perhaps mistakenly, that the politician is on their side, that his stands are congruent with their beliefs.

Indexing, and the lack thereof

Because government accountability plays a critical role in representative democracy, indexing should be vitally important to the people of Kansas. That certainly was true in the early 20th century. Frank writes that historians have attributed the dissolution of the early Populist Party to its “failure to achieve material, real-world goals.”

It never managed to nationalize the railroads, or set up an agricultural price-support system, or remonetize silver, the argument goes, and eventually voters just got sick of its endless calls to take a stand against the ‘money power.’ Yet with the pro-life movement, the material goal of stopping abortion is, almost by definition, beyond achieving. ... Their movement, however, just seems to grow and grow. The material goal doesn’t seem to matter.”^{xiii}

Frank notes that although religious conservatives have altered the Kansas Republican Party, they have gained little ground in the national culture wars, on which they campaigned for election so vigorously and with such effectiveness. Their leaders take purely symbolic stands — Brownback against cloning, against persecution of Christians overseas, against Third World sex slavery. Frank says these function only as rallying points for cultural conservatives, energizing the base.

What accounts for the split between religious conservatives and the moderates who used to run Kansas politics? Frank discounts the notion that it breaks down into rural vs. urban or ignorant vs. educated. He calls it a class war, rich vs. poor. Frank demonstrates consciousness of multi-meaning when he distinguishes it as one of economic class, not the class that pertains to taste and refinement.^{xiv} He enumerates the characteristics of the moderate Republicans: pro-choice, corporate, pro-gun control, in favor of the separation between church and state, middle-to upper-class, high in economic power. And he says they think conservatives are racist. Conservative Republicans, by contrast, have these characteristics, according to Frank: They are

pro-life, are low in economic power, are blue-collar, think moderates are liberal and therefore evil, and live in a state of anxiety.

Oddly, though, he says the moderates are the ultimate benefactors of the conservatives' efforts since they both agree taxes should be cut, but then the corporate moderates who pay for political campaigns decide mainly to disproportionately cut their *own* taxes, by pressuring lawmakers they got into office. Religious conservatives, meantime, are generally unaffected by these tax cuts because they are covered by existing exemptions. Consciousness that Republican1 is not Republican2, that promise1996 remains unfulfilled and returns as promise2004, might change the minds of the party faithful. A recognition that what's good for Rich Republican is not necessarily good for Poor Republican, might bring about a change in voting. Most of all, those who voted in their leaders might be able to see these differences if they removed the blinders that focused their attention on the straw man called "Liberal."

Affective language and the alienation of rural voters

Frank observes that Democrats, in kowtowing to yuppies, shunned working-class people by defending abortion rights while compromising on welfare, Social Security, labor law, privatization of resources that once were public, and corporate deregulation.^{xv} At the same time, he says, they let their old, class-based language atrophy while Republicans invented their own language to appeal to the working class.^{xvi} He explains:

Democrats no longer speak to the people on the losing end of a free-market system that is becoming more brutal and more arrogant by the day. ... By dropping the class language that once distinguished them sharply from Republicans they have left themselves vulnerable to cultural wedge issues like guns and abortion and the rest whose hallucinatory appeal would ordinarily be far overshadowed by material concerns. We are in an environment where Republicans talk constantly about class — in a coded way, to be sure — but where Democrats are afraid to bring it up.^{xvii}

What obscures the matter of class in this debate is how virulently right-of-center commentators criticize anyone for even bringing up the issue of class. This seems to be a tactic of rhetoric to deny the left one of the few effective weapons it might employ, but perhaps moderates want the class card out of the deck to keep the hoipolloi from abandoning a cause that prevents wealth from being reduced by the conservatives, who have strength in numbers and organizing ability. The lower-class battle is against elites — not economic elites, but cultural elites, whom they define according to their perceived authenticity. Frank says authenticity has to do with being unpretentious — humble, loyal and other qualities pundits claim to see in red state Bush-backers. The ways conservatives depict themselves and liberals (and moderates, since all who are not like them must be liberals) are as follows:

Conservative

Productive
Hardworking
Common
Common sense
Respectful
Traditional
God-fearing

Liberal

Parasitic
Comfortable
Snobs
Overeducated
Contemptuous
Permissive
Degenerate

The two-valued orientation shows in this polar breakdown of characteristics that assumes only a Democrat would drink a latte. Frank quotes Ann Coulter, perpetuating the myth of the rich liberal: “That’s the whole point of being a liberal: to feel superior to people with less money.”^{xviii} Hayakawa says it’s difficult to maintain a two-valued orientation in politics in a two-party system of government.^{xix} But it seems from reading *What’s the Matter with Kansas* that when one party takes over a state, there is, in effect, an erasure of the two-party system and the two-valued orientation becomes an overriding factor in political discourse.

Conclusion: A general-semantics prescription for a muddled electorate

The namesake of Frank's book is an 1896 editorial by the Republican-backing William Allen White, a Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial writer and editor of *The Emporia Gazette*, which served a small city about halfway between Kansas City and Wichita. In his diatribe, recounting the many ways Kansas was falling behind the progress of the rest of the growing West at the hands of the free-silver Populists and their loose confederacy with Democrats, he wrote:

Go east and you hear them laugh at Kansas; go west and they sneer at her; go south and "cuss" at her; go north and they have forgotten her. Go into any crowd of intelligent people gathered anywhere on the globe, and you will find the Kansas man on the defensive. ... What's the matter with Kansas? Nothing under the shining sun. She is losing her wealth, population and standing. She has got her statesmen, and the money power is afraid of her. Kansas is all right. She has started to raise hell, as Mrs. Lease advised, and she seems to have an over-production. But that doesn't matter. Kansas never did believe in diversified crops. Kansas is all right. There is absolutely nothing wrong with Kansas. "Every prospect pleases and only man is vile."^{xx}

The reference to Mary Elizabeth Lease's admonition that "Kansans should raise less corn and more hell" is analogous to the hell-raising of Kansas conservatives who ignore their economic interests in blind pursuit of a social issues agenda. And just as politics has changed, media and the media savvy of politicians have evolved. The problems of political communication that led to present-day voters supporting candidates who speak their language culturally but act against them economically after election are as varied as the actors involved. The people in power, of course, have nothing to gain from remedies for this; it's important, however, to pay attention to the tactics they have used to gain power: muddling the map with the territory is one; an intimate understanding of the culture of the electorate is another. This understanding of culture makes it easier to see the unfulfilled

needs to satisfy, and thus secure support. The press as well as the opposition would do well to point out the contradictions between message and action. And the opposition moderates and liberals would do well to pay attention to affective language, to speak to people on their own level rather than talking down to them, and to remember this wisdom from Alfred Fleishman: "Everybody wants to feel like somebody."^{xxi} Add to that the importance of being on guard against threatening another person's ego, especially in front of others.^{xxii} To do so provokes him to protect himself, appealing to the fight-or-flight instinct. Either the audience will fight you, or it will flee to those it perceives as being more like them; by definition, that means anyone who is not *you*.

Fleishman's *Sense and Nonsense* and *Troubled Talk* hold a lot of value for those who would bridge the divide between political communication and reality. He emphasizes that thinking one knows the whole truth prevents him or her from learning more truth. But what he does not state is that some people don't want the whole truth to be known. Wendell Johnson writes, "It is positively startling to imagine what might happen in future political campaigns, for example, if all the listeners in the country were to insist that the candidates leave no statement unclarified beyond reasonable question."^{xxiii} He offers three questions that could aid in this: What do you mean by that? How do you know— what is the evidence? And what is the speaker leaving out?²⁴

References

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ⁱⁱⁱ Packard, Vance. *The Hidden Persuaders* (London: Penguin Books, 1981) p. 18.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Orwell, George. "Politics and the English Language," 1946, from www.resort.com/~prime8/Orwell/patee.html, accessed March 29, 2005.

^{vii} Johnson, Wendell. *People in Quandaries* (New York: Harper & Row, 1946), p. 61.

^{viii} Frank, Thomas, *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), p. 6.

^{ix} Ibid, p. 16.

^x Fabun, Don, *Communications: The Transfer of Meaning*, (Beverly Hills, Glencoe Press, 1968), p. 19.

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} Ibid, p. 11.

^{xiii} Ibid, p. 96.

^{xiv} Ibid, p. 102.

^{xv} Ibid, p. 243.

^{xvi} Ibid.

^{xvii} Ibid, p. 245.

^{xviii} Ibid, p. 117.

^{xix} Hayakawa, S.I. *Language in Thought and Action*, (Fort Worth, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1976), p. 131.

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^{xxi} Fleishman, *Sense and Nonsense*, Chapter 1.

^{xxii} Ibid.

^{xxiii} Johnson, Wendell, "Do You Know How to Listen?" in Morain, Mary, *Bridging Worlds Through General Semantics*. San Francisco, Institute for General Semantics (1984), p. 154.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 154.