

A NOTE BY M. KENDIG: Reflections on the State of the Discipline, 1968¹

I would very much go along with many negative evaluations I have heard in regard to the 'general semantics movement' as exhibited in the journal ETC. (2), and in the writings and teachings of many persons who call themselves 'general semanticists'. In my lexicon, 'movement' falls in the class of pejorative terms. Such has been the course of 'popularization' (pejorative) of the discipline during the past 20 years (1947 to date) that the last thing I would call myself is a 'general semanticist'. I haven't the vaguest notion what the term represents to a person who uses it. I would have to question him/her in a rather thoroughgoing way.

After 34 years of study, training and self-training, editing, and teaching, I feel only mildly secure or justified in labeling myself a 'Non-aristotelian' or, to make it more limited, a 'Korzybskian'. So far as my experience goes, I would guess that I have known about 30 individuals who have in some degree adequately, by my standards, mastered this highly general, very simple, very difficult system of orientation and method of evaluating - reversing as it must all our 'cultural conditioning', neurological 'canalization', etc., (legitimate all I believe on deeper levels of analyses).

Learning to un-learn to learn, for me, best describes the process of learning the discipline theoretically (verbally) and organismically. It is a very tough continuous 'fight' to maintain a high degree of conditionality, against identification. So far as I know, this mechanism functions for the survival of all types of organisms except humans, i.e., a symbolic class of life. But here I must stop or I'll be involved in explicating dimensionality as used in time-binding theory, etc.

To me the great error Korzybski made - and I carried on, financial necessity - and for which we pay the price today in many criticisms, consisted in not restricting ourselves to training very thoroughly a very few people who would be competent to utilize the discipline in various fields and to train others. We should have done this before encouraging anyone to 'popularize' or 'spread the word' (horrid phrase), in societies for general semantics, by talking about general semantics instead of learning, using, etc., the methodology to change our essential epistemologic assumptions, premises, etc. (unconscious or conscious), i.e., the un-learning basic to learning to learn.

Yes, large numbers of people do enjoy making a philosophy of general semantics. This saves them

the pain of rigorous training in a methodology so simple and general and limited that it sounds obvious when said, yet so difficult. The more you struggle to use it, the deeper the difficulties become, and the more you become aware of them so are more able to deal with them. Also I would like to say for myself, the greater the exhilarating feelings of liberation you may experience, discovering as it were, an aptitude for happiness which comes with second order certainty of first order uncertainty.

Here's one example of a 'general semanticist' who 'knows all about it'. He might say, to put words in his mouth: 'Because I am a scientist - a mathematical biophysicist, a researcher and all that - I don't have to train myself in such baby stuff.* Poor old Korzybski is out-of-date, but his stuff is good for the ignorant man in the street, and my do-gooder friends are democratically helping such by philosophizing about g. s., and making it easy by saying it all in 'everyday' language, etc.' That summarizes some attitudes this scientist might exhibit in his talkings and writings regarding general semantics according to my long observations.

Now what are we talking about when we speak of Korzybski's non-aristotelian system and general semantics? We are talking about the principles of non-elementalism and non-identity; we are talking about training in non-identity, that is, consciousness of abstracting, the orders of abstractions, the mechanism of multiordinality, the use of the 'operators' called the extensional devices/techniques, etc. I believe that these terms stand for what we may call Korzybski's originations. (Otherwise, as he clearly says over and over, his work is not original, it depends on, is drawn from, the work of many many men of many many generations - one could say sweepingly all the 'thinkings' of the West, the Indo-Europeans, i.e. time-binding.) Korzybski synthesized and systematized some of this wisdom and 'knowledge', past and present, for his purposes. But I'm 'fighting' a different battle here, though not unrelated to my example.

Neuro-linguistically-evaluationally, Korzybski based his system on the denial of the validity of the IS of Identity as a form of representation ('and' its electro-colloidal correlates in our nervous system). 'The map is not the territory' we use it to represent. And here I have to repeat ad nauseum

*See Korzybski's 'Letter to Co-Workers, September 1934.' In 'Supplementaries,' Alfred Korzybski: Collected Writings, in preparation.

that in non-aristotelian general semantics we treat, or speak of, the IS of Predication as a special case of the IS of Identity.

The map analogy applies not only to language as such, but includes what we call our perceptions, our thinkings, our conscious and unconscious reactions, all goings-on in our nervous system or, better, the totality of our organism-as-a-whole reacting/interacting electrodynamically with environments. This complex whole we call the silent un-speakable levels - the territory. Thus Korzybski's crisp summary - 'Whatever you say something is, it is not.'

Now we get to my example: This distinguished 'general semanticist' in the July, 1967, issue of Scientific American, (P. 50), writes:

More recently, Alfred Korzybski, the founder of the 'non-aristotelian' system called 'general semantics', based his system on the theory that a fundamental contradiction exists between language and reality. 'Whatever you say about [my italics] something,' Korzybski used to say, 'it is not.' (The Moroccan scholar's remark [above] about the diagonal of a square is in a way an expression of this attitude.)

First: Obviously (I assume), you see the difference: Korzybski said, 'Whatever you say something IS, it is NOT' - a generalized denial of the 'Is of Identity.' He is reported to have said, 'What-

ever you say about something, it is not.' It seems to me that any careful reader of the above quote would label Korzybski as pretty much of an idiot. Most people I have met, on questioning, would agree that something they were telling me about was not the happening they were describing. However, if I throw a piece of universe (I call an apple) at a John Smith and ask, 'What did I throw at you?' (provided he understands English) - maximum probability - I can predict that, in about 9 out of 10 cases, he will say 'It is an apple.'

Second: Contradiction, I do not recall Korzybski's using that word in any contexts. I believe I can safely say he did not, could not, given the non-aristotelian premises of general semantics, have spoken/written it in the sense attributed to him by this 'distinguished scientist' when he wrote 'Korzybski... based his system on the theory that a fundamental contradiction exists between language and reality' (whatever that hazardous m.o. term is used to stand for). The statement seems to me an entirely deranged interpretation of this non-aristotelian system and extensional method of evaluation. For instance, it does not allow for such vital methodological issues as different orders of abstractions (verbal and non-verbal), similarity of structure, etc., etc. explicit in the map-territory analogy that Korzybski used in relating language (or any symbolism) to whatever it supposedly represents. Incidentally, the way my dictionaries define contradiction, 'an assertion of the opposite of a statement,' would allocate and limit it, as I had felt, to verbal levels.

NOTES

1. I would like to cue readers to some of the contexts leading to our publishing my 'Note'. I wrote it in early 1968. A letter from Elwood Murray about criticisms and negative evaluations of general semantics by some academics inspired me to 'let off steam' on this familiar subject. Hence the blunt style of my writing not so much in reply to Dr. Murray as for my own satisfaction - certainly not, at the time, in anticipation of publishing and without the inhibitions that usually plague me when I do. However, much to my surprise I was asked to publish it in Communication (Spartan 1970), and agreed, provided it be labeled an 'unfinished offhand note'. (Here I take opportunity to correct two errata: In the book I'm referred to as Marion Kendig - the M. I use is for Marjorie. My BA degree from Vassar is attributed to Teachers College.) I was surprised again by response to the Note when I mailed reprints to forty or so students of Korzybski who are in teaching or administration at colleges and universities. Some took time to write thank-you's and favorable comments. For instance, a dean wrote 'just what I needed' for faculty critics blocking efforts to get general semantics taught in the graduate school. In England, Oliver Wells reproduced the Note in one of Artorga's Communications which go to a small but world-wide membership interested in Cybernetics. In view of this 'sampling' we believe Bulletin readers will

find the Note useful. In re-reading it, I felt I should make a few emendations and additions before republishing in 1971.

2. I wish to explicitly modify my mention of ETC. in this context: (a) In 1970 Tom Weiss took over as editor with avowed intent (June issue) of reshaping editorial policy to accord with purposes stated in the Society's [revised] constitution: 'To advance knowledge and inquiry into non-aristotelian systems and general semantics by publication, etc.' I applaud his standards. (b) In 1968 I felt that what Korzybski wrote in 1947 to the former editor was prophetic, and still pertinent: 'As consulting editor I protest against the editorial policy of ETC....It seems that ETC. is degenerating into "just another magazine", losing its theoretical backbone, the strongest it could have in these tragic years, when non-aristotelian general semantics is needed, not ephemeral "semantics" which does not come to grips with living problems of evaluation. My most serious students also feel this way....For reasons given in this protest my remaining consulting editor of ETC. is not only useless but misinforming to the public as to the role that this non-aristotelian general semantics may play....Harm is done the Institute and my own work when it appears as if I approve...policies which are decided without consulting me....I have therefore no choice but...resignation.'