

GENERAL SEMANTICS SCENE IN JAPAN

(as seen) by

Yuzuru Katagiri

In 1949, when I was a student at Waseda University in Tokyo, the first introduction of general semantics to Japan was made by the translation of S.I. Hayakawa's Language in Thought and Action. From then till 1970, the translator, Tadatoshi Okubo, was a Japanese correspondent to ETC. Through Okubo's energetic works, the Japanese public became familiar with the term 'magic of words' in advertisements and political propagandas. It seemed to me that people had been led into World War II by the magic of words. At that time, it was a great concern for the Japanese people not to have any other war again. And it seemed very important to me to avoid 'emotive use of words', not to talk about things inside one's mind, but about things outside. I thought it was the way to be 'modern', 'scientific', 'democratic', etc. "Being extensional" seemed to be the same thing as "being clear about the 'referent'" in Ogden and Richards' term. I remember very clearly that one of the professors of linguistics at Waseda said contemptuously, "General semantics even claims that it cures neurosis! Ha, ha, ha, they even cure neurosis!" How I hated him! But I had no word to return to him at that moment.

While introducing some ideas in Hayakawa's book into Japan, Okubo criticized Hayakawa and general semantics from the Marxist point of view, which made general semantics less impressive. Also the Japanese got the impression that Korzybski's book was very difficult, but that reading Hayakawa was enough to understand general semantics. In fact, Science and Sanity was almost untranslatable into Japanese. Only people who read English took interest in other books of general semantics. They were mostly teachers of English (as a foreign language) and others who had studied in the United States.

I was not satisfied with Okubo's moralistic approach to language, and I tried a more playful way in my Introduction to Semantics (in Japanese, 1965) written more under the influence of I.A. Richards' The Philosophy of Rhetoric. A book by one of Richards' students, Hugh Walpole's Semantics, gave me a model. I set all of my text in a traditional comical dialog form called rakugo, thus drawing attention to the symbol-conscious aspect of the traditional Japanese culture. The book has gone into many printings.

Some people did not like Okubo's political point of view, and tried to show off their closer relationship with Hayakawa who was becoming more conservative politically. But Mitsuko Saito, a student of Irving Lee, said nothing about Hayakawa or politics, and she worked among those people who were interested in speech communication or human relationships. In her books in Japanese, Science of Spoken Language (new edition, 1968) and A Theory of Listening (1972), many pages are devoted to explaining principles of Korzybski's general semantics. I met some people who were taught general semantics by her at the International Christian University in Tokyo where she is a professor. She is also known in the field of intercultural communication and as a teacher of simultaneous translation.

Besides Hayakawa's Language in Thought and Action, a translation of Irving

Lee's Language Habits in Human Affairs came out in 1956, and one of Rapoport's Science and the Goals of Man in 1965, but they are currently out of print. Not a translation, but an excellent adaptation of Wendell Johnson to the Japanese culture was written by Professor Kazuo Seki in his book Adaptation and Semantics (1965).

Perhaps Professor Seki's book stimulated interest in general semantics among counselors. One of the counselors' associations requires 1 unit (18 hours) of "General Semantics" or "Philosophy" to get the qualification of a counselor. I do not know where they got the idea. Perhaps they have some American model. Kosei Counseling Center found me and I have been giving lectures to its counselor training seminars for the last few years with Yumiko Sato, who attended IGS Seminars in 1980 and 1985.

Hayakawa's other book, Symbol, Status and Personality, was also translated and is widely read and favored by many people. Excerpts from Hayakawa's books and Stuart Chase are sometimes used as textbooks in classes of English as a foreign language at college level, which is often a required subject. But few people seem to take a serious interest in general semantics. Even Gaston Bachelard's enthusiasm does not help; though there is a Japanese translation from French of La Philosophie du Non which has a chapter or two on Korzybski and general semantics, the translators themselves did not seem to understand what they were translating. And this adds nothing to the understanding of general semantics among the Japanese reading public.

Changing fashions, like linguistic semantics in the sixties and semiotics lately, may give people the impression that general semantics is something old and dated. But I rediscovered it through my interest in psychedelic experience, led by Aldous Huxley. Map/territory metaphors made real sense to me. I came to the Institute Seminar-Workshop in 1974. I began teaching general semantics, and began to call my work general semantics. I saw it as a unifying principle in our disintegrating culture. Three of my friends attended the Institute Seminar-Workshop in 1979 and 1980, and more came to the Conference in Toronto. Helped by these people, I organized the first one-week workshop in the mountains of Nagano Prefecture in 1981, and founded the General Semantics Institute of Japan in 1982, which has now a membership of a little less than 100. Kosei Counseling Center co-sponsored the workshop in 1983, but the 1984 workshop was held independently by ourselves.

I was much excited to find that the map/territory metaphor was applicable to almost anything. My excitements are recorded in my book called General Semantics Seminar (in Japanese, 1983). In the process of abstracting done by other people, I find disregarded many characteristics which are important to me. By taking notice of them, I can assert myself in the Japanese society, and between cultures of East and West. But the book is unsatisfactory as a textbook, because it is too full of examples which people may find more personal and particular to me than of universal applicability.

This also involves the resistance of people not willing to come out of their specialized fields of activities. Some take my work to be so poetic that it is of little value in the theoretical world. Others take it as too scholarly to be of artistic value. I am very unhappy about people being divided in this way. I also have a similar problem in seminars and workshops where some participants are so excited about their non-verbal experience that theoretically-

oriented people tend to be kept away.

The research done by my brother, Mitsuru Katagiri, about the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant accident awakened me to the importance of the level of perception people vaguely call 'feeling', which is usually ignored by those who try to be 'objective', 'scientific', etc. Extraordinary experience is most often told in the way Anthony Guarisco, one of the atomic veterans, remembers his LST beaching onto the Island of Bikini in the summer of 1946, within 6 hours of the test explosion of an atom bomb. He noticed that the air "was just like there wasn't anything alive in it...The water in the lagoon...it was like a piece of glass. There was no wave to it...It tasted to me like as if somebody had put some dust in my mouth, like maybe dust from a foundry." It took 30 years for him to know what that 'territory' had done to him: ankylosing spondylitis.

Resistance from the pro-nuclear power people was of course expected. They do not see what they do not want to see. Naturally the mass media did not like to report those stories which might help strengthen an anti-nuclear attitude. I feel that more attention should be given to distortion of maps by the people in power. But I was more surprised by the reaction of many scientists who were in the anti-nuclear camp. Even they did not take serious interest in the strange phenomena told by natives of the Three Mile Island area, whose stories told on the 'feeling' level were not what they wanted. They stick to the 'map' that radiation is something to be sensed by machines, but not to be felt by human nerves; it is something to be discussed by scientists in their highly specialized 'objective' language, but not by lay people in their 'subjective' language of everyday living!

EDITOR'S NOTE: This paper was based on talks given in 1985, at an Institute Symposium in New York in April, and at the International Conference in La Jolla in August. For more about Professor Katagiri, see "Japanese Scholar-in-Residence" under "News from the Institute."



This publication is available
in microform from University
Microfilms International.

Call toll-free 800-521-3044. Or mail inquiry to:
University Microfilms International, 300 North
Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.

