

**The Language of Change:
General Semantics and Malcolm Gladwell's
*The Tipping Point***

Daxton R. "Chip" Stewart, J.D.
Instructor, University of Missouri-Columbia School of Journalism

"You cannot step into the same river twice; for other and yet other waters are ever flowing on."
– Heraclitus, c. 500 B.C.

To Wendell Johnson, Heraclitus was 2,000 years ahead of his time. Johnson, a general semantics scholar, emphasized the fluid nature of reality and stressed the importance of the way people handle change. "No other fact so unrelentingly shapes and reshapes our lives as this: that reality, in the broadest sense, continually changes, like the river of Heraclitus," he wrote. "But change, however all-pervading and rapid, need not be terrifying."¹

And yet change, in many situations, can be both frightening and difficult to understand. In spite of centuries of application of the scientific method, scientists sometimes resist changes in dominant paradigms², and social acceptance of such changes can take years. In the world of business, companies and individuals can be quite innovative in terms of products and services, while still holding onto the business practices of previous generations – leading to inefficiencies and potential financial failure.

How people deal with change has been the subject of many authors, ranging from philosophers and social scientists to popular psychologists. The bases of these works are the same: change is inevitable, so people must learn how to adapt. But exactly how people have adapted in the past, and how they could do a better job of adapting in the future, is open to the broadest interpretations, and the widest use of language. For example, Thomas Kuhn, one of the most widely recognized philosophers of change, used some of the political language of "revolution" to frame the shifting paradigms of scientific change and rethink the scientific method in his masterpiece *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.³

General semanticists suggest that change, like any other situation, should be handled rationally and scientifically. Johnson urged that people should see reality as a process and be ready to adapt to our ever-changing world. People must subject "The Word to the test of experience and to revis(e) it accordingly, no matter how old The Word may be or who defends it," he wrote.⁴

The scientific method is placed on a pedestal by followers of general semantics as a way of embracing a fluid reality. "Science is flexible and nondogmatic," wrote Albert Ellis, commenting on why the methods of science should be applied in one's personal life. "It sticks to fact and reality (which can always change) and to logical thinking (which does not contradict itself and

¹ Johnson, Wendell. People in Quandaries: The Semantics of Personal Adjustment. Harper & Row: New York (1946), 24.

² See Kuhn, Thomas S. The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago (1962).

³ Id.

⁴ Id. at 31.

hold two opposite views at the same time). But it also avoids rigid all-or-none and either/or thinking and sees that reality is often two-sided and includes contradictory events and characteristics.”⁵

In spite of science, society often shows a resistance to change. S.I. Hayakawa called this a “cultural lag,” which can be caused by many factors, including ignorance and fear.⁶ To overcome these obstacles, Hayakawa suggests that public issues and attitudes toward change should be viewed as matters of “institutional adaptation,”⁷ to make progress and avoid “institutional inertia.” Fear and resistance to change makes humans’ ability to adapt to an ever-changing world a struggle; both Hayakawa and Johnson suggest it can lead to psychological disorders and maladjustment. Viewing such changes through the lens of general semantics, though, makes it easier for people to avoid two-valued debate and the status quo and come to a new understanding of things that more accurately reflects the changing world around them.⁸

But change isn’t an easy thing to understand. As relativity theory and quantum theory have shown, according to P.W. Bridgman, “the world is not constructed according to the principles of common sense.”⁹ Changes in those theories, Bridgman suggests, do not necessarily follow the same patterns as in other natural sciences. They are much more difficult to grasp. Edward T. Hall described change as “a complex circular process,” shifting between levels of formal, informal and technical understanding.¹⁰

As in any other social situation, the language and framework used by those who study change can shape the way people understand the world around them. As such, the study of change is an important issue for general semanticists. Those who study change are drawing maps to make it easier to navigate the past and possible future of our understanding of change. But as general semanticists like Hayakawa and Johnson emphasize, those maps aren’t the territory – change may not be so easy to understand, and the symbols, metaphors and abstractions used by those who set out to explain change are certain to alter the way people view changes in their own world.

In modern business, change has proven to be a best-selling topic. But how authors writing about change, applicable to both business and personal life, can easily fall into the traps that general semantics would have them avoid. Two books published in recent years on change – one by a doctor, the other by a journalist – have piqued my interest and are ripe for a general-semantics analysis. The focus of this essay will be on one of those books, *The Tipping Point*, by prize-winning business journalist Malcolm Gladwell.

But first, I’d like to begin with a brief analysis of one of its predecessors on the non-fiction bestseller lists: *Who Moved My Cheese?*

⁵ Ellis, Albert. “How to Think Scientifically About Yourself, Other People and Your Life Conditions,” *Etc.*, Summer 1990, 135.

⁶ Hayakawa, S.I. and Alan R. Hayakawa. Language in Thought and Action, Fifth Ed. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers: Fort Worth, Texas (1992), 204-205.

⁷ Id.

⁸ Id. at 205-207.

⁹ Bridgman, P.W. “Science and Common Sense,” in Mary Morain, ed., Bridging Worlds Through General Semantics. International Society for General Semantics: San Francisco (1984), 15.

¹⁰ Hall, Edward T. *The Silent Language.* Anchor Books: New York (1990), 93.

I. Who Moved My Cheese?

Spencer Johnson, a doctor and the author of the best-selling *One-Minute Manager*, took a simple idea about change, specifically tailored to business but also applicable to one's personal life, and turned it into a publishing sensation and cultural catchphrase that has reached iconic levels.

In 1998, after years of using the idea in lectures, Johnson wrote *Who Moved My Cheese?*, a slender volume that rose to the top of at least three nonfiction bestseller lists in 2000¹¹ and has remained on the *Publishers Weekly* best-seller list for more than three years.

Who Moved My Cheese? is structured around the antics of two little humans named Hem and Haw, and two mice named Sniff and Scurry. The action takes place in a maze, where cheese has been readily available for both mice and men for a long time. One day, however, the cheese isn't where it used to be. As their names imply, Hem and Haw become frustrated, angry and confused, and keep coming to the same spot where the cheese should be, rather than adapting and taking a new course. On the other hand, the mice follow their instincts and go out and look for wherever it is the cheese has moved.¹²

The moral is that the mice are the more intelligent creatures in the maze. Rather than complain about change, they quickly modify their activity, improvise and make the best of it.

Some of the advice in the book includes such phrases as "Smell the Cheese Often So You Know When It's Getting Old" and "It Is Safer to Search in the Maze Than Remain in a Cheeseless Situation." In other words, prepare yourself for inevitable change, and don't be afraid of change. This is a fundamental lesson of general semantics – as Wendell Johnson said, "Change is terrifying only to those who do not expect it, only to those who, in planning their lives, leave it out of account."¹³ In Spencer Johnson's terms, this awareness of change is good – people need to be ready to "move with the cheese." Southwest Airlines and Mercedes Benz bought their employees copies of the book, and Procter & Gamble CEO Durk Jager recommended it as reading to the company's employees.¹⁴

The book has also had its share of critics. *Time*'s Andrea Sachs referred to it as "this year's ubiquitous insta-scripture."¹⁵ Tom Ehrenfeld of *Fortune* wrote, "Some business books stink from the moment of conception, like those purporting to extract management wisdom from children's literature or Star Trek episodes (or both). That said, it is no impressive feat to identify a business book that is merely stupid or badly written (see *Who Moved My Cheese?* by Spencer Johnson)."¹⁶

¹¹ Sachs, Andrea. "The Cheesy Industry: What Began as a Thin Self-Help Book Has Grown into a Major Business. Is The Rat Race Really This Simple?" *Time*, April 3, 2000, 69. The book topped the *Wall Street Journal*, *Publishers Weekly* and *USA Today* bestseller lists that month.

¹² Johnson, Spencer. *Who Moved My Cheese? An A-Mazing to Deal With Change in Your Work and in Your Life*. Putnam: New York (1998).

¹³ Wendell Johnson at 24.

¹⁴ Maryles, Daisy and Donohue, Dick. "The Big Cheese." *Publishers Weekly*, Jan. 17, 2000, 19.

¹⁵ Sachs at 69.

¹⁶ Ehrenfeld, Tom. "Trash These Books: Looking for Management Wisdom? You Won't Find a Shred of It in This Critic's Hall of Shame," *Fortune*, July 9, 2001, 136.

The simplicity of this message is reassuring to readers, and the phrases and lingo are repeated throughout the 98-page book. One analyst ran a study and found the simple language, large print size and numerous illustrations made *Who Moved My Cheese?* suitable for readers who have completed five or six years of education – that is, not quite at the level of Harry Potter readers.¹⁷ *Who Moved My Cheese?* is eminently more readable than *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, but at a price.

In spite of what the millions of people who have enjoyed *Who Moved My Cheese?* might think, change isn't as simple as mice in a maze looking for cheese, and humans need to do more than act like little furry animals following their instincts when their environments change. Spencer Johnson drastically oversimplifies the complexity of change, and without clearer definition, it has become abstract beyond the point of being useful or understandable. Further, the book is devoid of context – in indexing terms, no distinction is made between change1 and change2 – rendering the message of the book difficult to apply to any but the most general or obvious situations.

Spencer Johnson falls into another simple trap – of abusing metaphor. It's easy to compare rodents and humans; even Hayakawa cited a researcher who studied how rats handled changes in environment, and noted that “rats and human beings seem to go through pretty much the same stages.”¹⁸ But mice are not people, nor are people mice, and one doesn't behave exactly like the other, regardless of how much researchers like to compare them.¹⁹ As Wendell Johnson once said, “To a mouse, cheese is cheese; that's why mousetraps work.”²⁰

Nevertheless, the book is still a pop culture phenomenon (it has sold more than 4 million copies), and it led numerous other simple-but-supposedly-brilliant business books that tapped into the *Who Moved My Cheese?* market. But it was another book from another business outsider that created a pop phenomenon that has reshaped the way culture, especially business, frames the way it understands change – *The Tipping Point*.

II. The Tipping Point

Malcolm Gladwell, a staff writer for *The New Yorker* after years of business and science reporting for *The Washington Post*, was a freelance writer when he came across the basis for *The Tipping Point* in 1996. Like the premise of his book, the idea was one that started small but took off. In an article Gladwell wrote that ran in *The New Yorker* that year, also entitled “The Tipping Point,” he tackled the issue of what it was that caused a dramatic drop in crime rates in New York City in the mid-1990s.²¹

¹⁷ Kay, John. “Simplicity has a price: Why are so many business books written in a style appropriate for 10-year-olds?” *Financial Times*, May 7, 2002, 16.

¹⁸ Hayakawa at 199.

¹⁹ Malcolm Gladwell exhibits a clear understanding of this in *The Tipping Point*, at least in the context of nicotine addiction studies: “Humans, obviously, aren't mice, and drinking nicotine from a bottle in a cage isn't the same as lighting up a Marlboro.” Gladwell, Malcolm. *The Tipping Point*. Little, Brown and Co.: Boston (2000), 237.

²⁰ Quoted in Hayakawa, 201.

²¹ Gladwell, Malcolm. “The Tipping Point,” *The New Yorker*, June 3, 1996. All page excerpts cited hereafter are from the Web version of this article, at www.gladwell.com/1996/1996_06_03_a_tipping.htm

After introducing the situation – homicides cut in half in the city from 1990 to 1995, for example – Gladwell suggests a new way of thinking about crime, one that “has begun to attract serious attention in the social sciences: the idea that social problems behave like infectious agents.” Gladwell asks whether social change could possibly mirror the activity of epidemics – “What if homicide, which we often casually refer to as an epidemic, actually is an epidemic, and moves through populations the same way the flu bug does?”²²

In this article, Gladwell laid the groundwork for *The Tipping Point* by viewing social change as following the same patterns as disease. He uses the language of epidemiology, studying the patterns of a flu outbreak during Christmas time in Manhattan and the growth of AIDS in the United States since the late 1980s. “Every epidemic has its tipping point, and to fight an epidemic you need to understand what that point is.”²³

But Gladwell notes that epidemics don’t necessarily follow common sense; they don’t behave how we think they will behave. “Epidemics aren’t linear,” he wrote, noting that humans prefer to think in linear terms. “Improvement does not correspond directly to effort. All that matters is the tipping point.”²⁴ As such, small changes can have big effects – “it all depends on when and how the changes are made.”²⁵

Social scientists, Gladwell writes, were beginning to apply the framework of epidemiology to human behavior – a view that social problems are contagious. He makes it clear that the analogy isn’t perfect, that “not all crime behaves like infectious disease.” But in the proper context, he argues, the analogy is useful.²⁶ For example, in New York, the North Brooklyn and Seventy-fifth Precinct, law enforcement had begun focusing on smaller, quality-of-life crimes (street corner loitering, stopping more cards, confiscating more weapons) rather than trying to wage open war against homicide. The changes were minor and non-linear, but they apparently worked. Violent crime had “tipped” and was happening dramatically less often. To Gladwell, these police departments had found “the tipping point.”²⁷

The article was a hit, and it landed Gladwell a job at *The New Yorker* under then-editor Tina Brown. It also helped to establish his reputation as one of the most respected magazine writers in the profession and led to much greater things for his career.²⁸ While writing for *The New Yorker* and *Talk*, Gladwell continued research on the idea of tipping points. Within five years, his book was completed, and this journalist was on his way to mainstream best-selling success.

In 2000, *The Tipping Point* was published, with the subtitle “How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference.” It quickly became noticed in the business community, and by the end of the year it was a “Notable Book” selection in *The New York Times* as well as a hardback best-seller; the hardback version spent almost two years on *Business Week*’s best-seller list for business books. More importantly for its success, though, was that it became a business bible; it may not have

²² Id. at 2-3.

²³ Id. at 3.

²⁴ Id. at 4.

²⁵ Id.

²⁶ Id. at 7.

²⁷ Id. at 8.

²⁸ Gladwell’s profile of Ron Popeil, “The Pitchman,” which ran in *The New Yorker* on Oct. 30, 2000, won the National Magazine Award for best profile in 2001

sold as many copies as *Who Moved My Cheese?*, but “the tipping point” became a catchphrase used by leaders of industry and culture – including former President Bill Clinton, who used the phrase at a White House press conference in 2000.²⁹ The book has caught on as a learning tool in much the same way Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* did; at The University of Texas, for example, *The Tipping Point* is required reading among first-year Composition and Rhetoric students.³⁰

The premise remains the same – that social change may follow the same trends as epidemics. However, Gladwell probes deeper into the kinds of people that can make trends “tip,” as well as the kinds of situations that can facilitate change. Gladwell, as a writer, is well-known for using scientific studies and the words of experts to illustrate his points, and he does so in grand fashion in *The Tipping Point*.

But he goes further than just illustrating how trends in the past have “tipped.” Gladwell uses his epidemic theory to create a framework that can be used to try to make social change happen in the future: his goal is to provide a self-help guide for those who want to make something “tip,” rather than just to explain how the things he has studied have “tipped.” It is this aspect that has made it one of the most popular business books on the market; since coming out in paperback last year, *The Tipping Point* spent more than five months on *The New York Times* nonfiction best-seller list, and has remained on the *Business Week*’s paperback best-seller list for business books for 15 straight months.

The book and the phrase have also been widely applied by journalists and researchers to explain social phenomena. A few examples of the way Gladwell’s “tipping point” framework has been used include:

- **The war in Iraq:** Donald Rumsfeld has repeatedly used the phrase “the tipping point” to describe the time at which the Iraqis will realize that Saddam Hussein’s reign has come to an end. In one story, Rumsfeld is quoted as saying, “I can’t say we’re at a tipping point...I think that there won’t be a single point.”³¹
- **SARS:** One reporter wrote, “Applying Gladwell’s example to Toronto and SARS, the geometric progression -- that dreaded tipping point where a virus becomes first an epidemic and then a pandemic -- has not occurred. The spread appears to have been contained, which explains why Toronto officials and politicians are livid about the WHO label.”³²
- **British politics:** House of Lords member Tim Bell used *The Tipping Point* to create new direction for Tory leadership and a strategy to oust Prime Minister Tony Blair in a popular election. “Should you find yourself chatting with almost any member of the shadow cabinet, it is a fair bet that before too long the words ‘tipping point’ will have been discreetly dropped into the conversation,” wrote one commentator for *The Economist*.³³

²⁹ Overell, Steven. “Crazes That Capture the Office,” *The Financial Times*, March 13, 2002, 13.

³⁰ Confirmed by Madison Searle, a friend and instructor in the Division of Composition and Rhetoric at The University of Texas-Austin.

³¹ Whittle, Richard. “Despite successes, U.S. says Iraq war hasn’t reached ‘tipping point,’” *The Dallas Morning News*, April 8, 2003.

³² Milke, Mark. “It’s Much Too Soon to Breathe Easy: Determining the Tipping Point of SARS,” *The Calgary Herald*, April 28, 2003, A13.

³³ Commentary: “The Tipping Point,” *The Economist*, Jan. 4, 2003.

- **In-house lawyers for employment issues:** In what may be the most ill-applied use of *The Tipping Point*, the authors of this article for *Texas Lawyer* use the phrase “tipping point” 20 times in 13 paragraphs to explain how in-house employment lawyers can prevent future litigation. Some of the abusive and non-sensical usage of the phrase are lines like, “Well, try this tipping point,” and “A tipping point strategy would have been to tell the jury that it was tough to let people go, but the company did it fairly and with the desire to keep the best person for the job.”³⁴
- **The Princeton basketball offense:** An article in *Sports Illustrated* used the idea of influential people (which Gladwell divides into connectors, mavens and salesmen) to explain how Pete Carril’s old-school, backdoor-screen basketball offense spread to college programs across the nation that were looking for a way to slow down games and handle more talented opponents from larger schools.³⁵
- **College drinking:** Two Kansas State researchers used *The Tipping Point*’s example of influential people to find out if such people on the Kansas State campus were playing a role in the drinking habits of their peers. They identified 55 such students through what they called a “tipping point experiment” in which students were polled about students who have extraordinary “verbal skills and charisma.” The researchers intend to talk to these 55 influential students about how their behavior can be better used to influence other students.³⁶
- **Chitlins On-Line:** In possibly the most bizarre use, one *Washington Post* reporter commented that proper marketing and attention to detail, a la *The Tipping Point*, could make even the most unappetizing foods sell. “I’m thinking of chitlins online,” he wrote. “How, I wonder, could an IRS statistician from D.C. build a national business selling buckets of pig intestines?”³⁷

The book that is shaping the way society views change is ripe for analysis through the use of general semantics. In the following section, I will examine the book’s fundamental premise, that social change follows the patterns of epidemics, as well as the personal and contextual support that Gladwell provides for that premise.

IV. Analysis

A. Social change as epidemic

Gladwell’s premise is a use of simile and metaphor on a grand scale. When he writes, “Ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread just like viruses do,”³⁸ he is merely using a simile. Social change is not a virus, of course; it just seems to act like one.

³⁴ Maslanka, Michael P. and Gegen, Theresa M. “It’s The Small Things That Save Us: In-Housers Need to Find Their ‘Tipping Point,’” *Texas Lawyer*, May 6, 2002, 10.

³⁵ Wahl, Grant. “It All Starts Here,” *Sports Illustrated*, Feb. 17, 2003, 56.

³⁶ Newton, Doug and Newton, Fred. “Student VIPs at Kansas State University: Utilizing the Concepts of the ‘Tipping Point,’” *Kansas State Counseling Center Annual Report*, 2001, 6-7. To see the entire report, go to www.ksu.edu/counseling/annual2001.pdf.

³⁷ Merida, Kevin. “Gut Instinct; Chitlins On Line Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time. And it Still Does,” *The Washington Post*, May 5, 2002.

³⁸ Gladwell at 7.

In general semantics, writing with metaphor and simile are accepted ways of abstracting – that is, of thinking on a different level to make it easier to understand the statements at hand. As Hayakawa noted, objecting to a statement on the grounds that they are “based on metaphor or on ‘metaphorical thinking’ is rarely just. The question is not whether metaphors are used, but whether the metaphors represent useful similarities.”³⁹ Metaphor and simile are powerful uses of affective language, and may eliminate the need for new words and phrases to describe a new situation.⁴⁰

But metaphor and simile may be abused, and should be used with care when writing about culture. “Far more than we are aware, the way we use language determines what the social philosophy of our society will be,” wrote general semantics scholar Weller Embler. “When we take figurative language literally, we are in danger of behaving as if something were true which is manifestly not true *unless we proceed to make it so*.”⁴¹ Embler used examples such as thinking of a city as a jungle, or identifying modern life with the myth of Sisyphus, which would have people as “absurd heroes engaged in ‘useless and hopeless labor.’”⁴² Such uses of metaphor, if taken literally as a statement of fact rather than as a comparison, has the ability to “(change) the character of civilizations.”⁴³

Furthermore, using the language of disease as a metaphor comes with its own problems. Susan Sontag, in her essay “Illness as Metaphor,” suggested that people have too often used disease (particularly cancer and tuberculosis) as metaphors for other things, from art and literature to politics.⁴⁴ Sontag concluded that “modern disease metaphors are all cheap shots...Only in the most limited sense is any historical event or problem like an illness.”⁴⁵ For example, she wrote, the language of cancer is that of slow and painful death, which can be used (and abused) in describing negative social and political situations; with the “evil” connotation, this has led to revolution.⁴⁶ Sontag viewed epidemics used as “a common figure for social disorder...Feelings about evil are projected onto a disease. And the disease (so enriched with meanings) is projected onto the world.”⁴⁷ On the contrary, Gladwell uses the language of epidemics to reveal order instead of disorder, but the positive feelings of the way he describes social change are certainly projected onto the epidemics he cites – even his examples of syphilis outbreaks in Baltimore and suicides of young teenage boys in Micronesia seem to gleefully fit in as good examples of “tipping points.”

In some places, Gladwell pushes the change-as-epidemic metaphor too far. At one point, to explain the role of context and the “stickiness” of a particular message, he uses a “well-known principle of virology” that sometimes epidemic agents are transformed, making them more

³⁹ Hayakawa at 80.

⁴⁰ Id. at 79.

⁴¹ Embler, Weller. “Metaphor and Social Belief,” in Mary Morain, ed., Bridging Worlds Through General Semantics. International Society for General Semantics: San Francisco (1984), 239-240.

⁴² Id. at 241-243.

⁴³ Id. at 237-238.

⁴⁴ Sontag, Susan. Illness as Metaphor. Vintage Books: New York (1977).

⁴⁵ Id. at 82.

⁴⁶ In the political philosophy of the 18th century, Sontag said that the disease metaphors were more commonly used as calls for rational response from leaders, at least until the inflammatory language of the French Revolution. Id. at 76-78.

⁴⁷ Id. at 58.

dangerous (or, in terms of positive change, more likely to “stick” with the intended recipient).⁴⁸ Messengers are seen as people who “infect” others with the message: “When we are trying to make an idea or attitude or product tip, we’re trying to change our audience in some small yet critical respect: we’re trying to infect them, sweep them up in our epidemic, convert them from hostility to acceptance.”⁴⁹

But epidemics are rarely a matter of choice – as Sontag noted, disease is not a good thing, and epidemiologists are generally working to prevent the spread of disease rather than promoting it. The negative language usually associated with epidemics doesn’t quite work as well when considering positive notions of epidemics.

Gladwell recognizes that the metaphor is not perfect, even in reflecting on his examples. “In everyday life, however,” he writes, “the problems and situations we face don’t always embody the principles of epidemics so neatly.”⁵⁰ But still, some of the case studies he uses to illustrate this messy link are ones that he says fit perfectly into the epidemic frame he has created: the popularity of Airwalk skateboard shoes (which he says had advertising based “very explicitly on the principles of epidemic transmission,” without justifying that statement at all with any example that the minds behind the advertising campaign knew about “epidemic” marketing models)⁵¹ and the power of rumors (which he refers to as “the most contagious of all social messages”).⁵²

Ultimately, while Gladwell makes a number of valid points using the epidemic-as-change metaphor, but he takes it far too literally, thus pinning him (and his readers) within a narrow framework from which to view how to make change happen. Social change is no more an epidemic than humans are mice; Gladwell too easily avoids the general semantic notion of “non-allness” – “All epidemics have tipping points,” he writes⁵³ – to make his metaphor far more literal than Hayakawa or Sontag would advise.

B. “The Law of the Few” – People Who Make Things Tip

If social change is like an epidemic, then one of the ways to make an epidemic “tip” is the people who carry it – in Gladwell’s words, “the people who transmit infectious agents.” For example, he describes three of the men who were found to be early carriers of HIV and infected dozens of other people with it.⁵⁴ These super-transmitters were uniquely suited, by virtue of their personalities and connections, to spread HIV. “Social epidemics work in exactly the same way,” Gladwell writes. “They are also driven by the efforts of a handful of exceptional people.”⁵⁵

Gladwell calls the carriers of social epidemics “messengers,”⁵⁶ and in his examples he comes up with three particular types of messengers: Connectors, Mavens and Salesmen. They are the

⁴⁸ Id. at 22.

⁴⁹ Id. at 166.

⁵⁰ Id. at 195.

⁵¹ Id. at 196.

⁵² Id. at 201.

⁵³ Id. at 12.

⁵⁴ Id. at 20-21.

⁵⁵ Id. at 21.

⁵⁶ Id. at 92

ones who are the most sociable, knowledgeable and influential among their peers, respectively.⁵⁷ Gladwell's interpretation of connectors, mavens and salesmen – and the role they play in change – certainly shapes the way he sees change occurring; it also further tears away from the neatness of the epidemic metaphor.

Connectors, mavens and salesmen are some of Gladwell's examples of how small things can make a big difference. He creates a rule (one of three "rules of the Tipping Point") called "The Law of the Few" to describe their roles in making things "tip." Gladwell's notion is that mass advertising may miss the point, because word of mouth is "still the most important form of human communication."⁵⁸ And connectors, mavens and salesmen are crucial to making a word-of-mouth epidemic tip.

First, the words he uses and the ways he defines them are troublesome. "Connectors" – the people who have "a special gift for bringing the world together" – are people who know lots of people and can keep in contact with acquaintances.⁵⁹ But Gladwell presents them in a language of machinery – of people with a "Connector impulse" as a personality trait – that link up social circles. To Gladwell, they are like walking, talking Rolodexes.⁶⁰ "Mavens" – the people who are knowledgeable about everything – borrow a phrase from economics researchers who seek people keenly aware of the market. It also borrows from Yiddish slang without the most positive of connotations: an expert or connoisseur, "often specifically a self-proclaimed one."⁶¹ Mavens also get a machine-metaphor definition: They are "data-banks."⁶² "Salesmen" – the persuaders – are much easier to understand, at least in terms of business and advertising. They sell the message; however, they don't have to be "men." Gladwell's poor word choice – "salesperson" would have worked just fine – adds baggage and connotation that he certainly doesn't intend for the word to have.

Also confusing is the fact that a person can be all of the above, some combination of the above, or none of the above. Paul Revere, who Gladwell says was in charge of the most famous word-of-mouth epidemic in history, was a combination of connector, maven and salesman.⁶³ While he insists that you must have all three to make a word-of-mouth epidemic "tip," it is hard to grasp that all three can be contained in just one person. Or at least two people – he says mavens aren't persuaders, which means mavens may not be good salesmen. In the language of general semantics, Gladwell has a problem of non-identity and non-elementalism. He explains the three roles as fragmented characters, when really any one person may contain parts of all three, or may be well-connected, knowledgeable and influential enough without qualifying under Gladwell's definition of connector, maven or salesman.⁶⁴ He is certainly aware of the problems non-identity pose – in a later chapter, he says of how we understand character traits: "All of us, when it

⁵⁷ Id. at 21.

⁵⁸ Id. at 32.

⁵⁹ Id. at 38.

⁶⁰ Though he makes a more confusing analogy, that connectors are "social glue" that somehow spread messages. Id. at 70.

⁶¹ From Webster's New World Collegiate Dictionary, 4th Ed. IDG Books Worldwide: Foster City, Calif. (2001), 889.

⁶² Gladwell at 70.

⁶³ Id. at 32.

⁶⁴ People may very well be "innovators" (which may also be a maven, connector or salesman) or "translators," other categories Gladwell creates for people who play roles in social change. Id. at 199-200.

comes to personality, naturally think in terms of absolutes: that a person is a certain way or is not a certain way...But what (researchers) are suggesting is that this is a mistake.”⁶⁵

Unfortunately, in the context of connectors, mavens and salesmen, Gladwell makes the same mistake.

Although it may be helpful for people seeking social change to seek people with the characteristics of connectors, mavens or salesmen, Gladwell goes too far when he suggests that any word-of-mouth movement is doomed to fail without them. “If you are interested in starting a word-of-mouth epidemic, your resources ought to be solely concentrated on those three groups,” Gladwell writes. “*No one else matters.*” (italics added)⁶⁶ The examples he gives are nice – in one, a woman seeking to teach black women in San Diego about breast cancer fails when trying to teach after church, but succeeds when she instead goes to beauty salons (recognizing hairdressers as the connectors and mavens of the culture)⁶⁷ – they merely illustrate his points rather than establish their truth.

C. Stickiness and Context – How Circumstances Affect Change

Gladwell includes two other rules besides “The Law of the Few,” and it is in these rules that he shows a keen awareness of some of the principles of general semantics. Because general semantics examines the way people understand the world through the use of language, the field is explicitly concerned with what makes messages work, and how context shapes the way we understand those messages.

“Stickiness,” as Gladwell calls it, is the factor that makes a social epidemic take hold – that makes us remember it and act upon it. As such, effective messages require more than just the proper messengers. “(T)he content of the message matters too. And the specific quality that a message needs to be successful is the quality of ‘stickiness.’”⁶⁸ Stickiness relies on more than just informative use of language; sticky messages are often directive, and are at the heart of modern advertising. For example, Gladwell explains the effectiveness of the Winston cigarette ad. “To this day, if you say to most Americans, ‘Winston tastes good,’ they can finish the phrase, ‘like a cigarette should.’ That’s a classically sticky advertising line.”⁶⁹ All it took was a simple grammatical error and a rhyme to make that message stick. Those are small things, Gladwell points out, but they made a big difference.

One example Gladwell gives is of how children’s television made education “sticky” through the shows Sesame Street and, more recently, Blue’s Clues. The tweaks in the way information was presented in those shows were minor – having interaction between human characters and muppets rather than dividing them in Sesame Street, or reordering the three clues in Blue’s Clues to better build suspense and keep the kids’ attention. But even though Gladwell suggests that it only takes a small change to make a message “sticky,” he makes it clear that finding that small change can require hours of work and research. Social scientists and other researchers have been

⁶⁵ Id. at 158.

⁶⁶ Id. at 256.

⁶⁷ This apparently worked – the stylists were coached on issues about breast cancer and tried to work it into their discussions. But did this somehow turn them into salesmen? Id. at 254-255.

⁶⁸ Id. at 92.

⁶⁹ Id. at 25.

deeply involved in testing shows and scenes from both Sesame Street and Blue's Clues.⁷⁰ The rational, scientific approach – research, rethink and revise – is what led to the small changes.

Gladwell also uses metaphor more properly here. A message or trend, which are abstract ideas, become “sticky” like a physical object such as glue or tape. He uses this in terms of an active verb: messages “stick” to our consciousness. While this is certainly not literally true, it is an effective use of affective language to better explain and describe a situation. However, he does sometimes confuse his own usage of the term. For example, at one point he says, “Sesame Street succeeded because it learned how to make television sticky.”⁷¹ But as the rest of his argument progresses, it becomes clear that television isn't what was made sticky – television may have “weakness as a teaching tool,”⁷² but the researchers at Sesame Street did not make the medium itself more sticky. They merely made the message more sticky, in the context of children's programming. It's a fine line, but one that Marshall McLuhan certainly would have drawn.

In addition to effective message-sending, general semanticists focus on the role of context in our understanding of messages. Gladwell also expresses awareness of the importance, the “power,” of context – it is his third rule of tipping points. “Epidemics are sensitive to the conditions and circumstances of the times and places in which they occur,” he writes. “(T)he lesson of the Power of Context is that we are more than just sensitive to changes in context. We're exquisitely sensitive to them.”⁷³ He focuses on two types of context: temporal/spacial context, and social context.

One of his illustrations for temporal and spacial context goes back to his original subject: crime in New York City. Gladwell discusses the “broken windows” theory, that fixing quality-of-life issues like minor crime, graffiti and run-down neighborhoods – by focusing on these little things – many of the big problems of violent crime can be solved. The “broken windows” theory is all about context; people behave differently in different environments.

The “Environmental Tipping Point” is just one example Gladwell gives of the power of context. The other is the social context – or as Gladwell phrases it, the “power of one specific aspect of context, which is the critical role that groups play in social epidemics.”⁷⁴ His example is of small book clubs and the role they played in turning Rebecca Wells' *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* into a publishing sensation created almost solely by word-of-mouth. The comparisons he makes are to types of people who are not necessarily connectors, mavens or salesmen, but organizers. “Methodism's founder, John Wesley, was by no means the most charismatic preacher of his era,” Gladwell illustrates. “Nor was Wesley a great theologian, in the tradition of, say, John Calvin or Martin Luther. His genius was organizational.”⁷⁵ Though he later refers to Wesley as “a classic Connector,” he does so in the context of Wesley's long travels and ability to form small groups of converts wherever he went. The tipping point for

⁷⁰ Id. at 91-132.

⁷¹ Id. at 91.

⁷² Id.

⁷³ Id. at 139-140.

⁷⁴ Id. at 171.

⁷⁵ Id. at 172.

Methodism, Gladwell suggests, was this sense of community.⁷⁶ He makes a similar point about the Ya-Ya book clubs.⁷⁷

Unfortunately for Gladwell, it is here where the change-as-epidemic metaphor again shows some weakness. In real disease, epidemics are not started by a bunch of small movements. Gladwell inexplicably refers to this as “the paradox of the epidemic: that in order to create one contagious movement, you often have to create many small movements first.”⁷⁸ In general, stickiness and context may have nothing to do with the metaphor of epidemics at all – though they are solid examples of principles of general semantics at work in the real world.

IV. Conclusion

Gladwell’s *The Tipping Point* has parts that fare well under the scrutiny of general semantics – an understanding of non-linear thinking and the potential of exponential growth much larger than humans are usually capable of comprehending, the importance of context, and some fine affective writing. But his overuse of metaphor and his readiness to ignore principles of non-identity and non-allness illustrate some weaknesses in *The Tipping Point*’s premise.

The idea that little things can make a big difference is an alluring one. People want to think that there is an easier, more cost-efficient and time-efficient way to make things change. Even some general semanticists embrace the idea. Hall said change on a technical level, small changes that can work their way up to formal understanding, can happen quicker and are especially concerned with details. “Here one can introduce changes with the greatest ease without violating the norms of the other two systems.”⁷⁹ These are usually small changes – changes to details. Hall gives the example of the Manus islanders, which have a technical view of culture. When modernization and outside contact with the West following World War II, the Manus technically recreated their society. “They didn’t wait for change to overtake them gradually, or drift off in small numbers and lose themselves among the whites. They sat down and designed a society from the ground up.”⁸⁰ In *The Tipping Point*, Gladwell suggests a similar model for modern culture and business. By focusing on little details, on the technical, people can anticipate and create culture change. They can make a social epidemic “tip.”

But change isn’t always that easy, no matter how much Gladwell would argue that it is.⁸¹ If we understand reality as a process and see the world as an ever-changing mosaic of understanding and interaction, it should be clear that change cannot be pigeon-holed into any formal rules or patterns. It is easy to reflect on past change and to make some abstractions – some generalizations – about how they have happened. It is much more difficult to make society change based on how change has observably happened in the past. He even runs into problems when he tries to illustrate this. At one point, he suggests that the “tipping point” in preventing

⁷⁶ Id. at 172-173.

⁷⁷ Id. at 174.

⁷⁸ Id. at 192.

⁷⁹ Hall at 83.

⁸⁰ Id. at 84-85.

⁸¹ He refers to his notion of “focused, targeted interventions” as agents of change as a “Band-Aid” solution, but in a positive way. “The Band-Aid is an inexpensive, convenient, and remarkably versatile solution to an astonishing array of problems... The Band-Aid solution is actually the best kind of solution because it involves solving a problem with the minimum amount of effort and time and cost.” Id. at 256.

and overcoming nicotine addiction may be by treating smokers for depression, based on some studies. He dramatically sets up the reader to wonder whether this could be so – whether the “tipping point” theory will work – only to later confirm his own point by using another study, of which he was surely aware before he posited his first suggestion.⁸²

Gladwell suggests that his “theory of Tipping Points requires...that we reframe the way we think about the world.”⁸³ But the language he uses in his conclusion eerily mirrors that of less-researched treatises such as *Who Moved My Cheese?* – that positive thinking, “a bedrock belief that change is possible, that people can radically transform their behavior or beliefs in the face of the right kind of impetus,” is at the heart of making and understanding social change.

Gladwell is clearly one of the best writers in America today, and he does a superb job of gathering examples and weaving narratives from what others may see as dry scientific reports and essays by social scientists. He has a tremendous gift for affective writing and for persuading, even if his logic isn’t always completely sound. One of the greatest traps into which he regularly falls is simplifying cause-and-effect connections. “The word about *Ya-Ya* was spreading...from reading group to reading group, from Ya-Ya group to Ya-Ya group and from one of Wells’s readings to another, because for over a year she stopped everything else and toured the country non-stop,”⁸⁴ he writes, ignoring other outside factors, especially publicity such as advertising and critical reviews. The change is not that simple.

But Gladwell wants to write a book that simplifies the way we view change. Though he uses wonderful examples, they can’t possibly tell the whole story. As Wendell Johnson noted, “On the whole, once we have adopted a belief, we give particular attention to cases that seem to support it, we distort other cases in order to make them support it, and we ignore or belittle other cases.”⁸⁵ When Gladwell makes *The Tipping Point* fit every example he gives, he makes it seem applicable to everything, when it clearly isn’t. By the time his article in *The New Yorker* in 1996 had evolved to the hardback version of *The Tipping Point*, one critic noted, “Gladwell’s book breezily applied the concept to just about everything, with special focus on problems in sales, marketing, advertising, and brand loyalty.”⁸⁶ Another critic noted that Gladwell may be “the perfect mix of entertainer and educator,” but that his “elite audience is so hypnotized by his performance that they don’t notice the details he is leaving out.”⁸⁷ The process of leaving some things out – of abstraction – is of critical interest to general semanticists. There is surely much more to social change than Gladwell can ever explain in 250 pages. The choices he makes, and the abstractions he makes, shape the way he presents his argument. We only see what he wants us to see.

Gladwell, as a journalist, has been extremely influential in business and in society with his articles and now with his best-selling book. Using his own words, he has become a connector, a maven and a salesman for his idea of “tipping points,” which have taken hold as a popular notion of how change happens. But under the light of scrutiny from general semantics, it becomes clear that Gladwell may have some good advice for us, but it all must be taken with, to use a

⁸² Gladwell at 246-248.

⁸³ Id. at 258.

⁸⁴ Id. at 174.

⁸⁵ Wendell Johnson at 26-27.

⁸⁶ Wasik, Bill. “Dismal Beat: The March of Personal Finance Journalism,” *Harper’s Magazine*, March 2003, 81.

⁸⁷ Cotts, Cynthia. “Facial Profiling,” *Village Voice*, Sept. 17, 2002, 31.

hackneyed cliché, a grain of salt. Gladwell's theory is useful if understood that the epidemic metaphor is not literal, that influential people need not been connectors, mavens or salesmen, and if we keep in mind (as Gladwell urges) that context is everything.

Etc.