

## ☆ DISCUSSION ☆

### SEMANTICS, GENERAL SEMANTICS: AN ATTEMPT AT DEFINITION\*

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**S**EMANTICS. (1) *The branch of historical linguistic study that deals systematically with the changes in the meanings of words, as the lexicographer understands 'meaning'; semasiology.* (2) *The study of human responses to linguistic (and other) symbols; the study of human behavior with, and under the stimulus of, symbols, including the linguistic; significs.*

Since the publication in 1923 of *The Meaning of Meaning* by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, interest in and controversy about semantics have become so widespread that it is possible now to speak of a 'semantics movement.' The term 'semantics,' in spite of its original use by Michel Bréal to designate historical inquiries into changes in the meanings of words, is now used more frequently to refer to the kind of inquiry initiated and encouraged by Lady Viola Welby under the name 'significs.' Significs was to her 'the science of meaning or the study of significance, provided sufficient recognition is given to its practical aspect as a method of mind, one which is involved in all forms of mental activity, including

that of logic.' The study of 'significance' was to her far more than the study of words, it was also the study of acts and situations; 'significance' itself was more than lexical 'meaning' or 'finding the referent'; it included both insight into motives and moral judgment. The object of her study, then, was the total interpretative act, the reaction of the individual to signs and sign-situations. Out of such study, she urged, would develop general principles of interpretation and evaluation, a 'method of mind.' This 'method of mind' should be applied generally in all intellectual endeavors and especially in education, in order to escape the 'hot-bed of confusion,' the 'prison of senseless formalism,' and the 'barren controversy' which are the result, first, of the defects of our inherited languages ('The leading civilizations of the world have been content to perpetuate modes of speech once entirely fitting but now grossly inappropriate') and secondly, of defects in our habits of interpretation. She proposed, therefore, systematic revisions in both.

One of the central points in 'significs' was that many crucial problems which have disturbed both practical men and philosophers for centuries are essentially linguistic, that is, they are the accidental result of the particular set of linguistic

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conventions one happens to inherit. They may also be the result of unconsciously held assumptions about language and its relationship to whatever words stand for, these assumptions being in turn the result of ignorance of the functions performed by language. Support for Lady Welby's contentions (which, of course, had been anticipated in part by many philosophers from Francis Bacon to Jeremy Bentham) has gathered from many and unexpected quarters since her time, and the word 'semantics' is now generally used to indicate the speculations and findings in many fields of knowledge which throw light on the problems she raised. One group, the mathematicians and philosophers of 'logical positivist,' 'empirical rationalist,' and 'physicalist' points of view, by making sharp discriminations between the various functions of language, has demonstrated, at least to its own satisfaction, that metaphysical problems, being by nature incapable of empirical solution, had best not be discussed at all. Other problems, they maintain, are translatable in 'analytical' form, and when translated they reveal themselves not to be problems of 'reality' at all, but merely problems of vocabulary. That is to say, the 'necessary propositions' of logic and mathematics give us information not about the universe but about our use of words. In the light of an adequate theory of signs, or *semiotic*, we shall have a basis, according to leading members of this group (Otto Neurath, Rudolph Carnap, Bertrand Russell, C. W. Morris, Leonard Bloomfield, etc.), not only for the solution of problems previously held to be insoluble, but also for the unification of knowledge, by the discovery of the relationship of the languages of the various sciences to each other, and the relationship of the languages of ethics and poetry to that of science.

C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards were enormously influential in advancing semantics, or, as they called it in *The Meaning of Meaning*, the science of symbolism. They addressed themselves vigorously to the problems Lady Welby had regarded as fundamental, and pointed out that since 'New millions of participants in the control of general affairs must now attempt to form personal opinions upon matters which were once left to a few,' we must cease to look upon linguistic inquiry as 'purely theoretical,' but must rather 'raise the level of communications through a direct study of its conditions, its dangers and its difficulties.' They welcomed the work of the empiricist philosophers and boldly attempted to show the linguistic difficulties, the unconscious intrusion of verbal superstitions, the unconscious belief in word-magic, that underlie many of the problems of esthetics and philosophy. Their basic distinction was that words may be 'symbolic' (referential) or 'emotive.' The kinds of meaning poetry communicates and the difficulties they offer the reader have been the special concern of I. A. Richards, who now regards words as much more complex.

Anthropological researches have further contributed to semantics. Bronislaw Malinowski, in his study of primitive languages, finds that 'to regard (language) as a means for the embodiment or expression of thought is to take a one-sided view of one of its most derivate and specialized functions.' Language is rather a 'mode of behavior.' Linguistic events are therefore not to be studied in isolation in terms merely of their lexical content or logical coherence, but in their relationship to the social institutions, activities, and rituals of which they are a part. In short, linguistic events are explicable only in terms of their non-linguistic context.

Malinowski's suggestion that this contextual approach be applied toward the study of the utterances of civilized man has been carried out, notably by Thurman W. Arnold, with results that are at once amusing and provocative. Anthropological linguists (e.g., B. L. Whorf) studying languages outside the Indo-European family have performed a further service to semantics in showing the enormous variety of structures that languages may possess, and in so doing have demonstrated that 'laws of thought' are by no means as 'universal' as they were believed to be.

The 'operationalism' of P. W. Bridgman, who holds that the 'meaning' of scientific statements resides in the 'operations' involved in testing their validity, has done much to eliminate unconscious metaphysical assumptions from scientific thought. Excellent semantic observations have also been contributed by social psychologists and students of propaganda (Lasswell, Doob, etc.), by psychologists (Piaget, Koffka, etc.), while the literature of psychoanalysis is crowded with information about human linguistic and symbolic functioning that must eventually be understood by semanticists and absorbed into their discipline.

'Adherents of mentalistic psychology,' says Leonard Bloomfield, 'believe that . . . prior to the utterance of a linguistic form, there occurs within the speaker a non-physical process, a *thought, concept, image, feeling, act of will*, or the like. . . . For the mentalist language is the *expression of ideas, feelings, or volitions*.' This mentalist position, widely held not only by the lay public but also by many scientists, philosophers, and literary men, is the principal barrier to the understanding of semantics. The mentalist's contention is that if people's 'ideas' are straightened out, language will take care of itself.

Pre-occupied with the correction of 'ideas,' he is extremely attentive to words, propositions, and their internal order and coherence ('logic'); he is likely to regard as irrelevant, therefore, all the non-linguistic setting and consequences which, according to the semanticist, give to linguistic events whatever significance they may possess. For this reason, the mentalist does not concede the existence of any special 'semantic' problems other than the necessity, here and there, of changes or improvements in vocabulary to 'eliminate confusion.' The semanticist, on the other hand, regards the study of such at present generally ignored matters as our unconscious attitudes toward language, the place of symbols in human behavior, the influence of the structure of our inherited tongues, and the non-linguistic contexts and consequences of linguistic events as indispensable in the emancipation of humanity from superstition and idolatry.

**GENERAL SEMANTICS.** The most ambitious attempt to synthesize and made usable such scientific and linguistic findings as are here called 'semantic' is the work of Alfred Korzybski, Polish (now American) mathematician and engineer. In his *Science and Sanity* (1933) he proposes a system of 'general semantics,' which discards 'theories of meaning' (which he regards as leading inescapably to verbal and terminological hair-splitting) in favor of a study of 'evaluations,' i.e., the responses of the human organism-as-a-whole to signs and sign-situations. Underlying our 'evaluations,' or 'semantic reactions,' says Korzybski, are neurologically channelized epistemological and linguistic assumptions. These assumptions, when infantile, primitive, or unscientific, lead not only to confusions

and perplexities in discourse and discussion, but also to misevaluations in everyday life: misevaluations which, when serious enough, require the attention of psychiatrists. Such misevaluations are, furthermore, systematic and widely shared; education and social institutions may be built upon them; in such cases (and he cites our present plight as an example) cultures, like individuals, may be compulsively driven into a persistence in those very acts or policies most certain to bring about their destruction.

In order to safeguard ourselves against the false notions about the world inevitably conveyed by linguistic systems and response patterns inherited from our savage ancestors, in order to force our nervous systems to take into account the necessary 'refraction' of the linguistic medium, in order to prevent the useful beliefs and slogans of one age from becoming, under changed circumstances, the obstacles to progress in the next, Korzybski offers a set of 'semantic devices,' which are designed to enable one to overthrow the tyranny of prescientific habits of evaluation. These devices are intended to serve both ends deemed necessary by Lady Welby, namely, the revision of language and the revision of our systems of response. One of these devices (and they are all simple) is 'indexing.' Traditional education and social habits, based on Aristotle's first 'law of thought' ( $A$  is  $A$ ), incline men to respond to similarities, ignoring differences. Hence, 'meaning' being a matter of neuro-semantic conditioning, one tends to react to *all* cases of  $A$  uniformly, disregarding the differences between the word  $A$  and the thing  $A$ , between  $A_1$  and  $A_2$ , between  $A_1^{1941}$  and  $A_1^{1942}$ , between  $A_{1\text{in-context-}x}$  and  $A_{1\text{in-context-}y}$ . The addition of these indexes, according to the rule  $A_1$  is *not*  $A_2$ , trains one in differences *as well as*

similarities; it compels one to take heed of contexts; hence it automatically makes for the better adjustment of the individual to the situation at hand.

What Korzybski hopes to perform with his 'indexing'—and this is only one of several such devices—is to replace, by education, old orientations based upon aristotelian (and earlier) 'laws of thought' by a 'non-aristotelian orientation': one that will free man from his crippling dogmas and superstitions and enable him to bring to bear the attitudes of modern science upon problems hitherto approached by debate, dialectics, and incantation. (By modern science is not meant nineteenth century 'materialism', the 'materialism' *vs.* 'idealism' controversy being itself one of the barren disputes produced by the imperfections of language.) The needed 'non-aristotelian orientation,' with its flexibility, its freedom from dogmatism, its profound recognition of the neuristic character of terms, its habit of seeking structural relationships rather than 'things-in-themselves,' Korzybski finds already manifest in many branches of science: in non-Euclidean geometry, in non-Newtonian physics, in quantum mechanics, in psychosomatic medicine, in the topological psychology of Kurt Lewin, in the axiomatic biology of J. F. Woodger, etc., as well as in many branches of modern art and literature. In characterizing this orientation as 'non-aristotelian,' he specifies the goal; in 'general semantics' he offers a method whereby it may be generally achieved and universally applied. Human ignorance, he declares, is not nearly as serious a barrier to progress as the inability to utilize knowledge already available.

Those who agree with James Harvey Robinson that the greatest problem confronting civilization is to 'overcome in-

veterate natural tendencies and artificial habits of long standing' and to 'create an unprecedented attitude of mind to cope with unprecedented conditions, and to utilize unprecedented knowledge,' have followed Korzybski's work with interest, have experimented with his methods, have begun inquiries into the practical and theoretical implications of

his system. Some have been enthusiastic, others less so; but most have conceded at least that he has dealt with problems of fundamental importance. On the other hand, those who feel that civilization can only be saved by the resuscitation of earlier systems ('classical,' medieval, etc.) have found in general semantics little to recommend.

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ACCOUNTING AND BUSINESS:  
MAPS AND TERRITORIES

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MODERN accounting can properly be classified as a special form of mathematics. It is the systematic organization of numbers and accounts in double-entry bookkeeping that enables managers of industrial and social enterprises to draw pictures, 'maps' of the events changing each day. We often tend to isolate the system in our minds. *Sometimes we find ourselves considering the system as some-*

*thing having intrinsic value in itself.*

Many textbooks of accounting often start with certain 'fundamental' definitions. Students are not told about the 'territory' which these verbalisms are to represent. From these basic isolated definitions a system of accounting is built up, and it appears to be entirely independent of the happenings of the world in which the student lives. Since he does not visualize the territory which the figures represent, the figures have little concrete meaning for him.

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