



SEMANTOGRAPHY SERIES NO. 108

A NEW METHOD TO BRING GENERAL SEMANTICS INTO PRIMARY SCHOOL EDUCATION

(See the Summary in the foregoing Issue No. 107)

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

The science of Semantics may seem to many as being superfluous. We appear to be familiar with the meaning of words and if we do not know the meaning of a certain word, then we look up the dictionary.

This seems simple enough for simple meanings like a table for instance, but there are complex meanings which are described in dictionaries in words which in themselves are complex in meaning. Moreover, various dictionaries may give different definitions. We may ask 100 people about the definitions of the following meanings and we might get 100 different answers. Such words are for instance - democracy, strong government, self government, government by the people, pressure group, superior race, living space, Reds, Nazis, Jews, Roman Catholics, etc. etc.

We must realise that such words as the ones mentioned above are dangerous and inflammatory and they have threatened and wrecked the peace of the world a number of times. Let us realise that the German nation, a group of 80 million people, hard working, and intelligent, have been "poisoned" by words used by Hitler and his propagandists and this in turn has brought death to many millions and misery the world over.

You may say that the war is over and Germany may not rise again. Well then let us look at the present situation. In Greece, Greek people are fighting Greek people. This is a poor country and they are poor people. Why do they fight and kill each other? Apparently those who fight for communism in Greece are exhorted by many words and many promises.

Again you may say that this concerns Europe only and Europe is very far away from Australia. Let us have a look at Australia. We have peace here and no harsh differences in political opinions. But look at the title of the last Forum of the Air "Can Democracy Survive without a strong Government?"

Now I suppose many of you listen to the weekly Forum of the Air. I have often wondered how many listeners must have got completely bewildered by the pro speakers who present very good reasons FOR and by the con speakers who present very good reasons AGAINST.

'Who then is right?' many listeners must have asked themselves. There is a story of 2 men who listened to the Forum of the Air. The first man is very much impressed by the pro speaker. "He is right" he said to the second man. When the con speaker had finished, the first man said "He is right too". "Say," the second man said, "both cannot be right." "Why," said the first man, "you are right too."

Now the 4 speakers in the Forum "Can Democracy Survive without a Strong Government" brought for the following arguments -

- (1) Democracy cannot survive without a strong government. Pressure groups in this country will destroy democracy.
- (2) Pressure groups are part of the people. The Government must mediate and reconcile the divers opinions of the population. If we make Government stronger, democracy will die on an overdose of strong Government.

- (3) I do not see why we must make Government strong in order that democracy should survive. I think democracy has survived wonderfully. We do not need any strong Government.
- (4) Government has already too much power. It has encroached upon the democratic rights of the individual. If we want democracy to survive we must take away power from the Government.

We can well imagine that even intellectuals could become bewildered by those 4 different opinions, all well argued and all opposing each other. Surely the bewilderment of simple people must be far greater, but the simple people are the ones which go to the polls and elect the Government. To-day we have prosperity in Australia, but if a depression should come with jobs and bread difficult to get, those different opinions mentioned above, could take on a dangerous meaning and could even bring civil war. We cannot imagine this happening here and let us hope it will never happen, but exactly this situation is happening every year in a number of countries and consequently there are riots, bloodshed, over-throw of the government, dictatorship and much misery.

You may again counter that I am painting the situation too black. Surely, I do so with regard to Australia, but again we read the papers and we know that the violent happenings which I have mentioned before are occurring daily in a number of countries.

But let us forget about war and civil war and political strife. Let us imagine a country where peace reigns as for instance Australia. Are the people here really happy? They have their daily bread, their job, their home etc. Apparently most of us are miserable for quite a time, although enjoying peace and prosperity. Why is it so?

The answer is, that although we may not have any immediate financial worries, we have other worries. Someone in the family has hurt us at the breakfast table. We go to the office and someone is hurting us again and we may hurt somebody else. Now by "hurting" I don't mean physical harm. We are hurting ourselves with words and the "wounds" which we are inflicting upon one another do sometimes hurt more than any physical injury.

Let us then realise that words are poisoning the relations between human beings. "You are lazy"... "you neglect me"... "you are a fool"... "you are stupid"... "you are a failure"... "you are a pig"... "a bastard," and so on and so on.

When we realise the misery which human beings inflict upon each other with words, we might begin to imagine how wonderful a tool could be by which most of those hurting words could be made harmless. Imagine that we would have a discipline which would be taught in the primary school and the secondary school. Children would learn not only not to be hurt by such words, they would realise how nonsensical it is to use such words which are in fact falsehoods. Imagine that no one is quarrelling to-day that $2 + 2 = 4$ or perhaps it is 5? We do not quarrel, because we have learnt to operate the mathematical symbols and we know what they mean. Imagine now a new mathematics, by which harmful words, as the ones mentioned above, could be written down in some new symbols. Operating these symbols children would realise the falsehood in such equations as "you are a fool"... "you are a failure"... "you are a pig" etc. Should such a school discipline be available we may realise that it would be of prime importance to teach children the operation of this algebra of thought. We could well dispose with other school items which are not so important.

The question now is whether semantics as a science is so far advanced that it can be taught in the primary school. The answer to this is no. Unfortunately the books about semantics available at present are written in a high-brow language which the common man cannot understand, least of all school children.

I maintain that I have evolved a semantic method which can be taught in the primary school. The "expert" may smile and he may say that I am not competent enough. After all, I am not a linguist, but a chemical engineer only. However, I maintain that just because I am a chemical engineer I am

more competent to invent such a method than a linguist. Firstly, we engineers talk differently from the other high-brows. We talk, not for talking sake but for doing something and we do it. Besides this, we chemists have evolved a "language" which is totally different from all other languages. We write in chemical symbols. They have not only the same meaning in all languages, but they provide mathematical operations by which truth and falsehood with regard to material things can be found out.

Furthermore, I am not only a graduate of a University, I am also a graduate of the German concentration camps and I have seen what words used as labels can do. The prisoners of the camps were sorted out according to different labels, Reds, Jews, Catholics, Monarchists etc. and they were treated, not according to their differences as human beings, but according to their wholesale label attached to them. I have seen senseless killing and murder and it is a miracle that I am alive to-day. Yes, I have seen what words can do to human beings and this experience has driven me on to evolve a method to teach semantics in the primary school. I would say it could be taught even in the kindergarten.

I am speaking to-day to people who belong to the Society of General Semantics which has been founded by Korzybski in America. We have read together his book "Science and Sanity" and you will remember that it makes no easy reading. We have all learnt to handle Korzybski's structural differential, by which we have realised that various words are abstractions being on different levels. For instance, we could take as an object a table. From this we can go to the meaning of timber, another level of abstraction. From there we go to the meaning of timber industry and then to the plight of the forest worker. All these meanings are according to Korzybski on different levels of abstraction. Or we can go from the meaning of table to furniture then to furniture industry, then export trade, currency problems, national wealth. Again words on different level of abstraction, according to Korzybski.

Well, I have learnt to handle the structural differential but it has not got me far. We could disagree on any of these different levels of abstraction without our various pro or con arguments being settled one way or another. In short, much more is needed to dissolve futile arguments. Moreover, we need some rules which are so simple that even children can apply them.

Before I explain my system, let us realise the confusion which to-day exists in the meaning of words. In spite of all the well-meaning dictionaries or rather because of them. As you know, when you look for a word in a dictionary, you find that it has not only one meaning, it may have 10 different meanings or more. Here are only a few examples.

We may have different words for the same man and his activity. We may call him a farmer or a peasant, or a food-grower, an agronom, an agriculturist. We may have the same word and mean different activities of different persons. A hostess in a private home or an aeroplane or a night club are different persons and do different activities. Yet all they do is to serve and this again has a very wide meaning for very many different activities. Let us take the law-breaker and let us realise that this word has a very wide meaning. It may mean a man who commits a murder or one who just crossed the street when the red light was on. Then we may have the same word, meaning different things and different activities altogether. For instance a scale may mean a balance, a ladder or a musical tone sequence. Even the very same word may have different meanings in different countries. We know what a table is, but in Japan the tables are so low that we would name them a stool only.

Coming now to translations we know how much misunderstanding can be caused and has been caused by translating a word which has a number of meanings. We may well use a different meaning in the translation and thus change the meaning of the whole sentence. There is one proverb for instance which we took over from the Romans and which the linguists have especially taken to their heart. This proverb goes: Exceptio probat regulam. This Roman proverb has been translated into English in the following words: The exception proves the rule. Now, proves has two meanings. The exception proves the rule may mean (1) that the exception is an affirmation, a proof of the rule. This means that the rule is correct because of the exception. But prove has also another meaning and this is exactly opposite to the first meaning. A proving ground for motor cars is a place where motor cars are tested. To prove in this respect means to probe.

and what the Romans actually wanted to say with the abovementioned proverb is that every exception to a rule tells us that we should probe into the rule and see whether the rule is to be altered or abandoned. In short it means that every exception is a warning sign for abandoning the rule. This is the contrary of what the first translation means.

Now I remember the German translation very well. In German the Roman word of probat is translated in the first sense, namely "the exception affirms the rule."

"Die Ausnahme bestatigt die Regel."

You see that the German word means affirmation. It does not mean probe or proving any more. And the German word "bestatigt" has now only one meaning, the exact opposite of what the Romans wanted to say. Nevertheless, we must realise that this false translation is also rampant in English countries where it is believed that the exception is a proof for the rule, although it should be just the opposite. Every rule is a rule only when it has no exceptions. It is quite understandable that linguists have taken to this proverb. In grammar there are exceptions to every grammatical "rule".

Other bewildering situations are created by different words which express the same meaning, yet create a different impression. We can call a certain institution a prison, a reformatory, or an Institute for social rehabilitation. And it may mean the same prison house all the time. In certain countries the War Ministry has been renamed Defence Ministry, though everything, the men and their actions are going on as before.

Certain words change their meaning with the time. When Captain Cook sailed to discover Australia he had some brushes with the Governor of Rio de Janeiro, who kept some of his sailors in prison. According to his diary they exchanged "memorials." Now we have many "memorials" to Captain Cook in Australia and what he meant under "memorial" we call to-day a "memorandum".

We may have the same man, doing the same action, and yet we may name him differently: a soldier, a patriot, a fighter for freedom, or a rebel, a bandit, a killer.

All words can be called "labels" for certain things and/or their actions. And these labels influence us very much in our thoughts, as the last example shows. The very same label may create different thoughts as for instance Jew, Roman Catholics, Communist, etc.

For all these perplexities, the structural differential given us no solution, except to teach us that most of these words are on "different levels of abstraction". But again, not only does this not help us; Korzybski's teaching is quite difficult to grasp, especially for simple people, and foremost for children. Although Korzybski claims that his teaching can be imparted to children, his book gives no hint how to do it. Here, I believe, that I have gone a step forward and have evolved something which can be taught in the primary school.

In order to learn to handle my device we must learn a few simple rules which should seem self-evident for everyone. Here are these rules.

No two human beings are alike. Even identical twins have some differences, especially in thought, and they may quarrel with each other because their mind actions differ.

Not two material things are alike. Not two stones are alike, not two flowers, not two blades of grass, though they all carry the same label.

Not two actions are alike. Two stones falling may show differences in falling, because the circumstances are never the same. Even if we consider the action of a machine cutting precision screws, we may find under the microscope that every screw shows tiny differences, because the cutting and the metal piece was different, however so slight. Indeed, I know that a proportion of such screws (which might be quite O.K. for certain purposes), might be unusable for certain precision instruments.

We have words (labels) for all the things and all their actions. So, my little gadget must contain a certain symbol for material THING and a symbol for physical ACTION. I have chosen the square □ to stand for THING, as it indicates a crystal, the most harmonious way in which matter presents itself to our eyes. And I have chosen an outline of a cone Δ to stand for Action. It resembles the A in the Latin word Actus, and it resembles a volcano, the first visible sign of subterranean Action on our earth.

But apart from words for THINGS and their ACTION, there is a third group which do not directly denote a THING or an ACTION. Rather do these words express an EVALUATION of certain THINGS or ACTIONS. Such words are good and bad, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, etc. etc. I call these words human EVALUATIONS and for them I have devised this symbol V. It may stand for the V in the Latin word Valere, Value, eValuation. It may also resemble a cone standing on its top ready to topple over, a situation which in physics is termed labile. And indeed EVALUATIONS are very labile, and they may topple when challenged. What we consider to-day right, other men may think of being wrong. To-morrow we may have changed our mind, though the very THING has not changed at all, and so has the word for it.

Here then is my little device for the kindergarten, the primary, secondary school and even for the university. In addition, it could stand on an office desk, or a conference table, and each time a controversial meaning comes up, the debaters may point to it. Once we debate about a material THING and/or its ACTION we may come to some agreement by measurements, as scientists do. But if a contested statement contains an EVALUATION then we may never be able to convince our opponent, if he only stubbornly sticks to his own and opposite EVALUATION. To-morrow, however, he may have changed his mind.

I have made my three symbols out of plywood and hung them on a stand. In addition, I have painted them in different colours like the colours of a traffic light. Green is the symbol for THING, something which is safe in meaning (so to speak) as we can touch a material THING, point to it, photograph it, and come to an agreement of what we mean.

I have painted the symbol for Action yellow, to indicate that we have to be on our guard and watch and observe the Action performed by a material Thing.

Then we have the symbol for eValuation, which is dangerous as other people may have made exactly the opposite eValuation. Therefore the red colour. Danger!!! These are the debatable words, and about these we must be wary. They are the ones which create opposition and misunderstanding. As said before, such words are good or bad, beautiful or ugly, etc. etc.

But I shall show now that even with simple meanings we can encounter eValuations which may create a dispute. Let us take the meaning of water. We point to the □ symbol. Water (□) is a material THING. To water means a certain Action by which water is used, as for instance to water the garden, the land, etc. But then we have the meanings of watery (V) and wet (V). They are certain eValuations derived from the Thing and its Action, but nevertheless we may differ. We may call a surface wet (V) whereas other people may deny it and say that it is only damp (V). We may refer to a certain liquid (not water) as being like (V) water, watery (v), and may find people hotly denying that petrol, or glycerine, or certain alkaline waters from certain wells are like (V) water and watery (V).

Let us take water in Action, as we see it in Rain. Then we have the material Thing rain (□) and the Action to rain. From this we derive the eValuation rainy (V). Now we may call a day rainy but other people would disagree with us, and they might say that a few showers do not yet make a rainy (V) day. Of course, in their statement we have the meaning of few (V). How few is few? And how more than few showers make a rainy day? So you see, all people would agree as to what rain (□) and to rain (Δ) means, but they might disagree as to the eValuation word derived from it.

And now give me statements to analyse with this little gadget. You must of course bear in mind, that within the short space of this lecture I could only acquaint you with my idea and with the problems with which my work and this gadget can deal. I hope however to have more opportunities to show you how my idea and this gadget works.

End of notes.