



Semantography Series No. 164

S E M A N T I C S A N D P S Y C H I A T R Y

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Paper read at the AUSTRALASIAN MEDICAL CONGRESS held in Sydney, Australia

20th to 27th August 1955

SEMANTICS is more than the science of meaning. It is the art of clear thought. That is why I would like to stimulate your interest in it.

ORIGINS OF SEMANTICS

Philosophy

Philosophers have argued over word meanings since speech began. Hegel analysed all experience and all concepts into dimensions of I, ownself, space and time. Modern science would probably re-classify these as space-time, mass-energy, life and mind.

Classical Psychology

Korzybski (1933), the pioneer of General Semantics, groups together terms referring to concrete phenomena (referents) for example: a sheep. His next stage of abstraction comprises terms referring to sensory impressions of these phenomena (percepts) for example: appearance or sound of a sheep. The third level of abstraction is made up of names of categories in which the original phenomena are included (concepts) for example: sheep in general, mammals, et cetera. Further abstractions allot to this category various attributes, for example, woolly, white, stupid et cetera. As Bliss (1949) stresses, the prior experience of no two minds is the same, so the attributes of this sheep in general will vary for different observers, (cf Fig 1, see end of paper).

These attributes are often mistaken in common parlance for the basic concept. While such confusion of abstraction levels causes much misunderstanding, worse confusion results from the widespread use of terms which embody complex attributes. For example, a hundred persons asked to define 'Nazi' give a hundred definitions, although all agree the referent is a human being. Misunderstanding is the basis of most psychopathology and social pathology, which are increasing problems in medicine. Chase (1938) criticises psychologists, philosophers, politicians, economists, theologians and jurists for their misdirecting of human effort including their own, attributing many tragedies to semantically undisciplined speech. His catch-cry was "find the referent". The 'Democrats' in Western Germany include several former 'Nazis'. Therefore the only agreed referent of either word is 'human being'. Bliss has reduced Korzybski's levels into three types of meaning elements of all terms, referring respectively to objects, events (both recordable by photographys) and mental evaluations. The last group are the source of all misunderstandings. They include simple adjectives like big, red, and their derivatives (magnitude et cetera). Bliss of course realises the many levels of abstraction. Red (the colour) is a low-level abstraction; it involves little neurological integration; it is close to physical reality. Red (meaning communist) is a high-level abstraction; it involves much subjective evaluation.

Language Studies

From their study of word meanings Ogden and Richards (1936) devised Basic English with under a thousand words classified as picturables, operatives, directives and qualities, plus a group of mixed terms. Bliss has made some use of their work.

In passing I would like to make some remarks on the study of word structure. Zipf (1936) showed that in the course of language evolution words broaden in meaning and shorten in structure. The resulting abbreviations eventually clash with other existing words. A new term must then arise to cover more particular meanings as well as novel ones. If we create new terms or strive to make modern technical concepts available to the man in the street we should have some working knowledge of these principles. As Chisholm (1946) has stressed, such education of laymen is a particular responsibility of psychiatrists. Saint (1955) has appealed also for a semantic bridging of gaps between psychological and other medical jargons.

Paget (1930) showed how the Babel of tongues probably arose from a common gesture language. The study of this sorry source of world problems should be more fruitful, along with semantics, than the declensions and idioms of unfamiliar lands and ages.

Statistics

Symbols (which include terms) gain acceptance by repeated usage. Statistical norms of usage are the only reliable test of current meaning of words. Because most terms may be taken to include various limiting cases we can assume there is an implied norm every time a term is used, so that however accurate the usage, the "mental evaluation" component can never be wholly excluded. The term 'human being' may or may not include ova at various stages of fertilization, fetuses at various stages of birth, components of twin monsters, teratomatous twins, embryos accompanying hydatidiform moles and corpses at varying stages of dying or decomposition. The fact that this term is precise in most usages does not mean that it refers to a simple concept. It is just that the situations in which it is mostly used are so common in spite of its complexity.

We should take a lesson from this fact of clarity increasing with common usage, and seek with the founders of the Royal Society "a close, naked, natural way of speaking". It is tragic that new knowledge is often couched in roots from a fossil language which are an affront to the statistical harmony of current word economics. This pedantic tradition is furthered by many conscientious workers who are rightly humbled by a respect for their predecessors and conscious of their debt to pioneers. All too often the modern pioneer is shunned if he is not expert in juggling the dead bones of failures in the evolution of the world's languages. Gould in the original preface, quoted in modern editions of his Medical Dictionary, describes the sorry and wasteful result of word coining by those who are expert at something else and whose terms are therefore respected and nurtured by their colleagues.

Can Science reframe Speech?

The scientific method is often thought of as an appeal to objective data. Yet, the first function of the scientist is subjective and is applied to isolated data from which he frames a hypothesis, an experiment and means of interpreting his experiment. It is only when confirmatory experiments are undertaken that objectivity appears in the main activity.

In interhuman relationship all sorts of assessments of other people have to be made, and in these it is surely the function of psychiatrists to educate humanity which, in the field, excels only at mass murder. In personal contacts and in politics fateful decisions hinge on judgement of intelligence with or without expert aid, interpretation of praise and criticism, appraisal of character and temperament and attribution of motives to others on the basis of fragmentary observations, second-hand reports, biased rumours or subtle concealed propaganda. We can point out the difficulties which expert psychologists have in deciding these everyday problems and the public will have a more profound respect for our statements, if they are simply put, than they have for those of politicians. Therefore someday the politicians must curb their war-mongering and families live more serenely, if we make our language clear and direct it well. We have to bring home to every schoolchild the psychology of convictions on religious, sexual, political and other social conventions. We have to bring home, by contrast, the practical benefits of tolerance, by discounting childhood fears which are the root of prejudice.

STANDARDIZING PSYCHIATRIC TERMS

Translation

Psychoanalytic literature has bridged language gaps apparently to good effect. Yet terms which seem identical to the theoretical translator may have different emphasis

on particular aspects of their definition in different countries. This leads to independent evolutions of concepts and terms in different languages. Compare delirium and délire, cretin and crétin.

Need of Terms for Research

Even 'the same' term "mental defective" means something vastly different for some patients in different countries. Diagnostic compartments in the Kraepelin tradition are not fairly comparable between neighbouring hospitals nor even between colleagues in the same hospital. This imposes often insuperable barriers to the collection of adequate series of cases to assess the relative merits of different treatments.

Behaviour Rating Scales.

Psychometrists have standardized scales of personality, vocational interest, neurotic trends and so on, using standard tables for subjective scoring of listed items. It should not be hard to assess psychotic behaviour similarly with sufficient detail and consistency between different observers for research purposes. For example, under the item "Dress" might be the assessment: Bizarre, Conspicuous, Neutral, Subdued, Drab. This clearly overlaps another classification "Cleanliness" with the ratings: Obsessive washing, Fussy, Fair, Grimy, Incontinent. In each case there might be five or seven grades, the middle representing the normal, the first and last representing more or less opposed extremes. This would discipline the observer to align his categories of expression with particular subheadings to the exclusion of overlapping headings and also with a series of four or six other adjectives.

This type of standardisation illustrates well the interdependence of the two disciplines of semantics and statistics.

Total Clinical Picture Schema.

Symons (1955) has suggested a classification of epilepsies according to a five column table. Changing this slightly we can show all clinical syndromes in a systematic way under 6 columns labelled respectively: Cause, Site, Mechanism, Symptoms, Signs, Treatment response. Under these headings we can subdivide our criteria according to physical, psychodynamic and social dynamic processes in time sequence. This should give more objective synoptic definitions of psychoses which could be analysed according to their ingredients as epileptic (paroxysmal), schizoid, cycloid, defective (amentias and dementias), with some further headings to embrace perversions and neuroses, psychopathies and delinquencies.

Reconciling psychodynamic schools.

Psychodynamic terms, as this name itself suggests, are metaphors which enable subjective phenomena to be described in terms of the only common denominator of experience between observers, namely objective events. Freud's 'repression' and especially its German equivalent referred originally to dynamics in the physical world. Lewin's 'Field' Theory of personality derives its name from the 'fields' of mechanical and other forces. All schools of psychology are full of such examples.

Social Dynamics

Dax (1955) has grouped patients according to their degree of social integration. He has created social situations as incentives to recovery. In this and other studies of social and cultural groups the social scientist may have to evolve a set of metaphors like those of psychodynamics. In this social dynamics (or, as Reiser (1955) would say, "social physics") rating scales will again probably be needed for attributes of groups and of techniques.

Semantics in Psychology

Following on the work of Freud, Lewin and others who attempt a graphic portrayal of psychodynamics we can evolve some geometric symbols and physical metaphors from common English words to describe, to gadget-minded adolescents, as well as book-worms, what "makes them tick." Freud's scheme is well analysed by Alexander (1944).

Bliss has pointed out that Freud, Pavlov, the man in the street and the rest are agreed on two kinds of subdivision of mental functions. Firstly, there is a

division into "levels" which are often portrayed one above the other in diagrams and which are labelled from above downwards as

- (1) moral or society-regarding self.
- (2) rational or physical-world-regarding self.
- (3) emotional or primitive species-preserving self.

The second kind of subdivision is one of "depth", and some difficulty has been experienced by Freud in portraying this dimension concurrently with the "levels". However, Freud's diagram suggests that we can represent "depth" by vertical lines.

These will correspond to the concentric boundaries of Lewin's Field Theory. We may adopt the convention that, as we write from left to right, we will place the first-developed mental functions in the extreme left-hand column. This represents inborn tendencies, and for Jung includes elements of the highest "levels" with a personal awareness of a higher being. The second column corresponds to early acquired, but now repressed, complexes (or trends). The third column represents pre-conscious (more readily recalled) influences. The fourth represents the present focus of conscious attention. The fifth represents sensory and motor contacts with the environment, and the sixth stands for environment (Fig. 2)

Psychodynamics can then be illustrated by the use of arrowheads, and lines leading to and from them between the eighteen minor schematic subdivisions. For example, Freud states that the Ego represses unconscious trends at the level of the Id at a signal from the Super-ego when the last is warned by some shift in the focus of conscious attention, which in turn may be caused by any combination of other influences. Repression then can be shown as a small arrow from the conscious rational compartment to the preconscious moral compartment relaying to a larger arrow sweeping down to the emotional level and turning back to the division between preconscious and unconscious (Fig. 3). Most complex psychological concepts, Freudian or not, can be similarly shown. An effect of a complex is simply an arrowhead. When placed in the environment column, emotional level, directed outward, the complex is a sentiment - and so on. It may be objected that those who would escape the consequences of their behaviour would point accusingly at a small arrow (leading from the environmental column to a large arrowhead in the column for the repressed) which former, they will assert, is the 'prime' cause of their wrong-doing. Apart from correcting their relative emphasis on the arrows, and drawing attention to lots of other arrows which are continually to be assumed, part of the answer to this lies in what I have earlier called social dynamics. A few arrows can be drawn in some tabular scheme representing society, and the patient shown how his acts create social repercussions, including punishments, which have repercussions to the benefit of society and of himself. For example, part of the treatment of alcoholics and psychopaths may be graduated restriction of their social privileges, with social situations created to motivate them towards emotional maturity, somewhat as Dax has done for psychotics. Jail locks etc. are then just as 'just' as asylum locks, etc. medically as well as socially.

Semantics in mental Hygiene.

Semantics should benefit mankind by producing tolerance. It should control the blight of self-criticism and lighten the burden of guilt which, according to Chisholm (1946), is the main cause of psychiatric illness and of war. It may help in teaching appreciation of the arts, especially literary and dramatic arts. I find it helps in appraisal of scientific and technical material and of sociodynamic processes (journalism, history, law, economics). Korzybski (1951) and U.S. Army psychiatrists quoted by him found that it helped insight and lay self-help in neurotic difficulties. It should be most useful in communal mental hygiene centres which could develop in conjunction with psychiatric rehabilitation and child guidance clinics and adult education projects before becoming finally integrated into general school curricula.

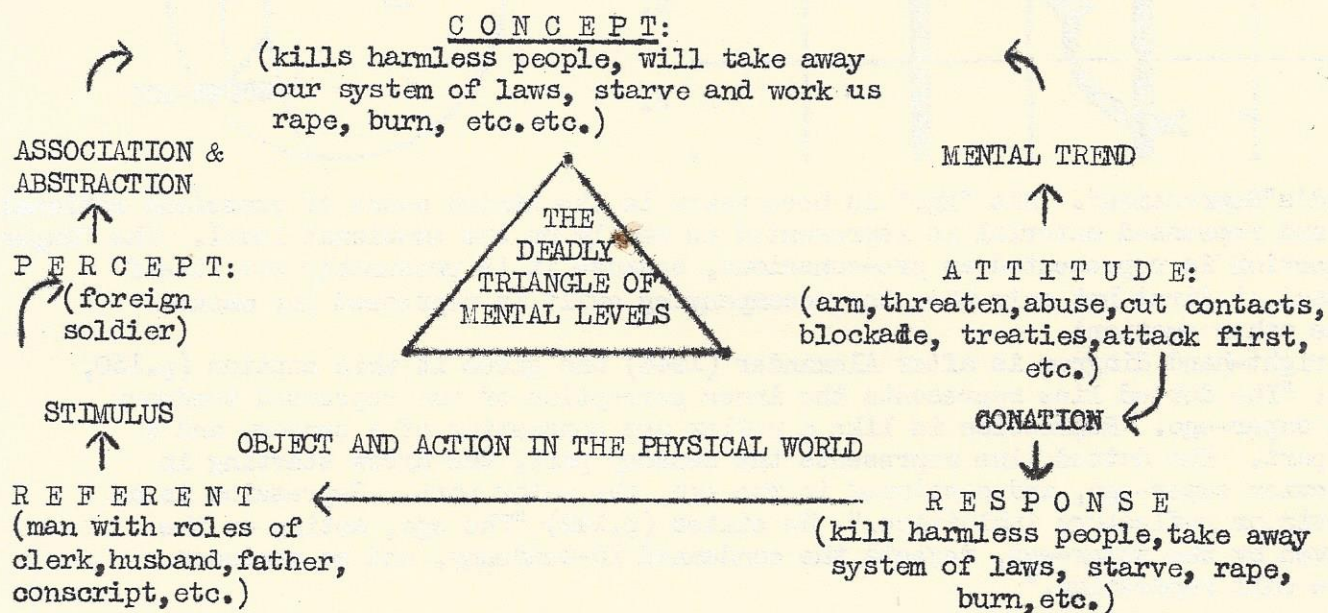
C O N C L U S I O N

Practice in semantic analysis of speech and writing, as best outlined lately by Bliss (1950) should be useful to clinicians, research workers, teachers and the ordinary citizen. It can be taught intelligibly and interestingly by Bliss's methods in pre-adolescence and can help teaching of mental hygiene at this important stage.

Illustrations to Everingham's Paper on "Semantics and Psychiatry."

Fig. 1

This is an elaboration of the psychologists S-O-R formula (Stimulus - Organism - Response), applied to the concept "enemy" as the cause of war.



The different levels on the left of the diagram are further subdivided by Korzybski according to the anatomic structures mainly concerned at each level, (sense organs, thalamus and cortex of brain, etc.) These he calls levels of abstraction.

Fig. 2

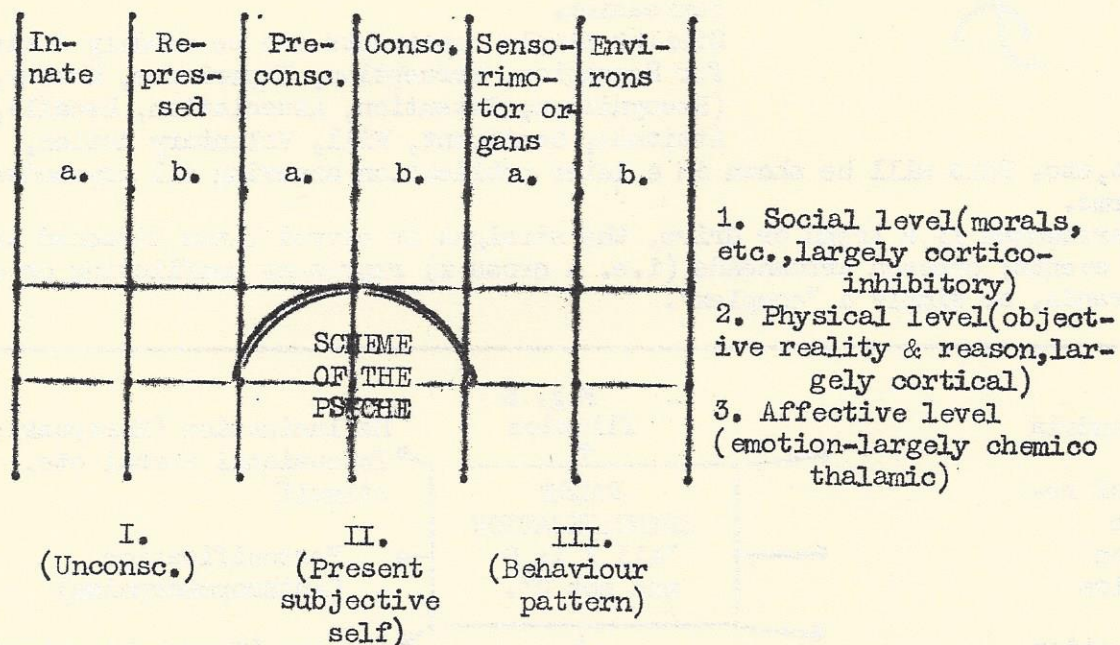
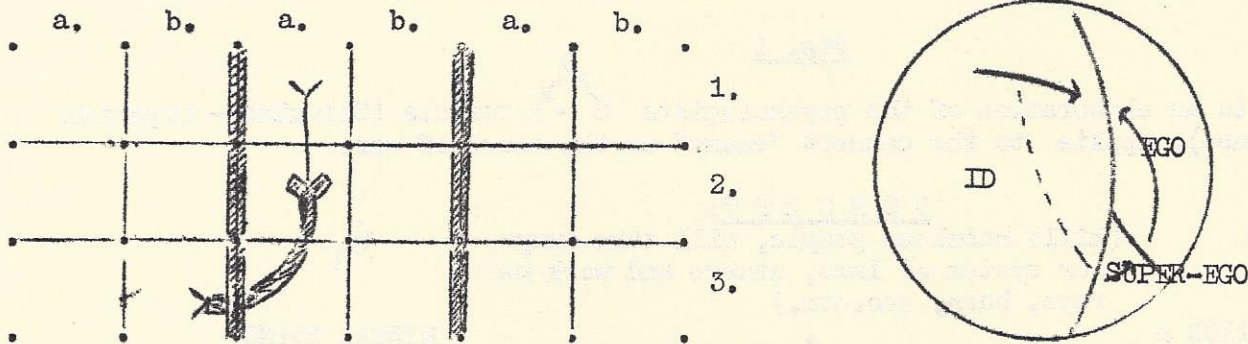


Fig. 3



Freud's "Repression". His "Ego" is here taken in the strict sense of conscious rational mind, and repressed material is represented as wholly on the emotional level. The "Super-Ego" function is represented as pre-conscious, because it is presumably not itself repressed at first but only when the accompanying guilt is repressed (or masked as some other emotion).

The right-hand diagram is after Alexander (1944) who gives it this caption (p.150, Fig.4): "The dotted line represents the inner perception of the repressed tendency by the super-ego. Repression is like a reflex arc consisting of a sensory and a motor part. The dotted line represents the sensory part, the arrow starting in the section super-ego, and continued in the ego, the motor part. Repression is an automatic or reflectory inhibition." He states (p.149) "The ego, acting on the cue given by the super-ego, rejects the condemned id-tendency, and so produces what we call repression."

Fig 4.

Omitting the small arrowhead and the partition lines, and inserting Bliss' semicircle (as shown in Fig.2) for an alternative "framework of reference co-ordinates", we can draw



Shorthand psycho'dynamic' scheme for Freudian repression.
Similar simple constructs can be readily devised for Sensation, Perception, Experience, Memory, (Recognition, Retention, Association, Recall), Attitude, Sentiment, Will, Voluntary Action, Concept, etc. This will be shown in a later publication covering all psychodynamic terms.

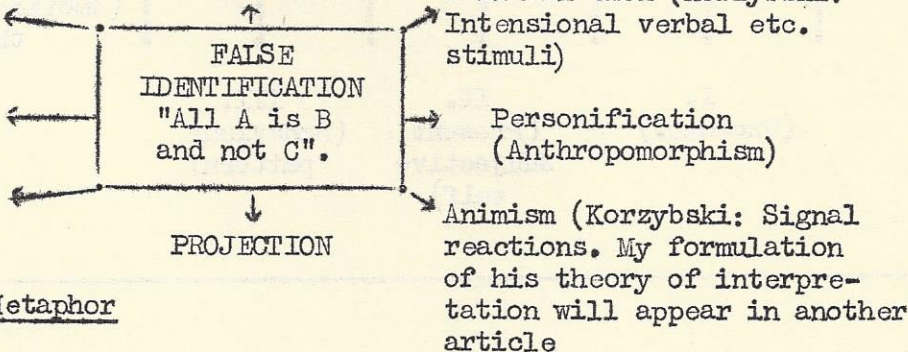
The arrowhead is a trend or drive, the straight or curved lines attached are mental events; opposed arrowheads (i.e. a cross x) represent conflicting or complex trends, or simply a "complex".

Hypochondria

Ideas of reference
Delusion.
Prejudice

Introjection

Fig. 5
Illusion



The Morbid Metaphor

Addendum to paper: Bliss (1955) trenchantly criticizes the use of metaphor, which of course reduces the already imperfect correspondence of word concepts between speaker and listener, or writer and reader. This metaphor-criticism can be related to Korzybski's warning against 100% identification when he says "Whatever is, is not" (a confusing way of putting it, as Bliss showed in his letter to Hayakawa, see Semantography Series No. 74). The havoc wrought by failure to notice the fallacy of the metaphor may play a part in patients who have "lost their reason" which is schematically shown above.

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- A Summary of this Paper by Dr. D.N. Everingham appeared in the Medical Journal of Australia, 15. October 1955, Page 614 (see below)

SEMANTICS AND PSYCHIATRY

A Summary printed in the Medical Journal of Australia
October 15, 1955, page 614

DOUGLAS N. EVERINGHAM (New South Wales), in a paper entitled "Semantics and Psychiatry" said that semantics is more than the science of meaning; it is the art of clear thought. Philosophers have argued over word meanings since speech had begun. In 1933, Korzybski, the pioneer of general semantics, had grouped together terms referring to concrete phenomena (referents) - for example, a sheep. His next stage of abstraction comprised terms referring to sensory impressions of those phenomena (percepts) - for example the appearance of a sheep. The third level of abstraction was made up of names of categories in which the original phenomena were included (concepts) - for example sheep in general, mammals et cetera. Further abstractions allotted to that category various attributes - for example woolly or white. As Bliss had stressed, the prior experience of no two minds was the same; so the attributes of the sheep would be differently viewed by, and the qualities of sheep in general would vary for different observers.

The attributes were often mistaken in common parlance for the basic concept. But while such confusion of abstraction levels caused much misunderstanding, worse confusion resulted from the widespread use of terms which embodied complex attributes - for example, such a term as "Nazi". Misunderstanding was the basis of most psychopathology and social pathology, which were increasing problems in medicine.

Dr. Everingham went on to say that Bliss had reduced Korzybski's levels into three types of meaning elements of all terms, referring respectively to objects, events (both recordable by photographs) and mental evaluations. The last group was the source of all misunderstandings.

Dr. Everingham referred to the important part that science could play in the reframing of speech along more satisfactory lines and examined the semantic aspects involved in the standardization of psychiatric terms.

End of Summary.