MEDIA ECOLOGY: GENERAL SEMANTICS IN THE THIRD MILLENIUM

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Because there are four speakers tonight--each limiting the time for another--I will forego the customary ritual of thanking everyone in sight for having accorded me this honor. I will say only that being in this position means a very great deal to me. I will also forego the ritual of telling you what a great man Alfred Korzybski was. As a matter of fact, not having known him, I have no idea whether he was a great man or not. However, from reading his works, I have concluded that he was a brilliant and courageous explorer who charted some very mysterious and mystifying territory.

Let me fix on the metaphor of exploration for a moment since whenever I think of Korzybski's achievements, Christopher Columbus always comes to my mind. They are alike in several ways. For example, when Columbus embarked on his most famous voyage, it was already well known that the world was round, not flat. At least it was known (if I may pause for a pun) in educated circles. Similarly, when Korzybski embarked on his voyage, the intellectual community of his time was well aware that there were underlying structures to our conventional ways of codifying the world, and that the discovery of these structures would be of the greatest interest. In fact, by the time Manhood of Humanity appeared, Einstein had already offered a complete alternative to the underlying assumptions of traditional physics. And George Boole, who did the same for mathematics, died 15 years before Korzybski was even born.

When Columbus finally arrived on the shores of the Bahamas, he thought he had successfully completed his voyage. Not even the fact that there wasn't a Chinese or Japanese anywhere in sight deterred him from believing he had reached the Orient. Similarly, in reading Korzybski, one always feels he is claiming too much, too soon. He gives the impression, especially in the later editions of Science and Sanity, of believing that he has wrapped things up, leaving only the details for the rest of us to clarify.

Also, Columbus died never knowing that he hadn't reached the Far East, which was perhaps a blessing because he was to be denied the certainly deserved privilege of having this new continent named after him. I have the feeling that Korzybski, too, died not quite knowing where his discoveries would lead; and it is certainly the case that the academic world has done its best to avoid associating anything with Korzybski's name. Finally, and before I wring this comparison dry, Columbus was, after all, the greatest explorer of his day and maybe the best sea captain who had ever lived. He went from Portugal to the Bahamas in 73 days, without charts or decent instruments, with a very nervous crew, and in a ship just about as long as a lifeboat on one of our modern ocean liners. And so it was with Korzybski. Working outside the traditions then revered by the academic establishment--one might say, against the prevailing winds--he came up with the most dynamic map of the sub-structure of symbolic life we now have available.

Now, in trying to improve a map, you can do at least two different things. You can try to give a more detailed, well-focused picture of some small area.

Or, you can try to enlarge the map to make it include more territory. During the past five years, a group of us at New York University has been attempting to do the latter. And in doing so, we believe that we are giving a new direction to General Semantics, one that will add to its power to contribute to an understanding of the technological world in which we live. During the next 20 minutes, I want to tell you about what we are doing, and to tell it in such a way that you will come to believe that the title of my talk is not entirely presumptuous.

Let me begin, then, by saying in an over-simplified but I hope inoffensive way what I think Korzybski did. He began by correctly assuming that people do their thinking and feeling in and through the medium of language. And he assumed further that the quality of their thinking and feelings is controlled not by words but by the structural characteristics of the language they used. To help explain what this means, I want to use a quote by the great physicist, Arthur Eddington, from his Space, Time, and Gravitation. The quote is also found in Science and Sanity. Eddington said: 'The relativity theory of physics reduces everything to relations; that is to say, it is structure, not material, which counts. The structure cannot be built up without material; but the nature of the material is of no importance.' If I am not mistaken, this is exactly what Korzybski held to be the basis of what we might call his relativity theory of language. He was not particularly interested in the material that most of us call messages or content. To him, such content is like the trail left by an electron in a cloud chamber. It is not the trail we want to know about but the more compelling underlying structure, without which there could be no messages at all. In other words, he teaches us that what is important in the languaging process is the hidden system which generates what most of us call messages. This hidden system (to switch metaphors from physics to biology) is the double helix of human communication; it contains in its structure the essential program on which the variations we call content are built. Korzybski set himself to search out the shape of this double helix, and for his discovery of such 'genes' as multi-ordinality, self-reflexiveness, the IS of identity, and the IS of projection [or predication], Korzybski, in my opinion, should have been awarded a Nobel Prize. In fact, my own bias is such that had it been up to me I would have awarded him the prize simply for having formulated and developed the metaphor of the languaging process as a living environment. He says explicitly in the Introduction to the Second Edition of Science and Sanity that General Semantics deals with people's reactions to 'neuro-linguistic environments as environment.' In other words, Korzybski was the founder of 'linguistic ecology.' And that brings us to the beginning of my explanation of media ecology.

Korzybski had a most curious and paradoxical blockage in his vision (it seems to me). I say 'curious and paradoxical' because he accuses Oswald Spengler of having exactly the same blockage. Although he lavishly praises Spengler's awesome but queer book, The Decline of the West, he goes on to say that Spengler missed a couple of obvious and important points. In spite of the fact that Spengler was a mathematician, Korzybski asserts that Spengler failed to understand that mathematics must be considered a language; and further, that Spengler did not fully understand the connection between the structure of mathematics and other achievements of an historical epoch. Now, I will be so bold as to admit myself into the Korzybski-Spengler conversation and assert that these are precisely the two points Korzybski missed in relation

to mass media of communication. And not only modern media but ancient technologies, as well. He did not see that media such as writing, print, radio, and film must be considered as languages, and therefore he did not seriously reflect on how their structures influence the perceptions and values of an historical epoch. It is true that he does mention that radio and movies, for example, can be made into important educational instruments. But it is clear from the context that he is talking about the content of these media, not their structure--a most un-korzybskian lapse.

The best example I can give of his failure to see media as structured environments can be found in one of his own examples. In Science and Sanity, he explains that modern mathematics could not be built on the Roman notation for numbers. You simply cannot multiply 683 by 746 unless you have access to a symbol system whose structure will permit the operation; that is, make it conceivable. Korzybski says that the discovery of the principle of positional notation made modern mathematics possible. He concludes by saying, 'Every child today is more skillful in his arithmetics than the experts of those days.' He adds, 'Incidentally, let us notice that positional notation has a definite structure.' Now, let us notice something that Korzybski didn't: namely, that every child doing his or her arithmetics has the use of pencil and paper. This is extremely important because the principle of positional notation presupposes a writing system which will make the structure visible. In fact, I would almost say that positional notation is nothing but a visual structure. You can prove this to yourself by trying to multiply even something simple like 64 and 27, but without using pencil and paper. What you will do, I think, is to convert your finger into a pencil and the space in front of your nose into a piece of paper. Then, you will be ready to calculate. If you make a mistake, you might even convert the tips of your fingers into an eraser to erase the imaginary marks you have made on imaginary paper.

But this is only one illustration of Korzybski's failure to appreciate the role of media as environments. Throughout his work, he makes almost no distinction between speech and writing. He conveys the impression that their neuro-semantic environments are the same. And yet he himself formulates the principle of non-additiveness; that is, when a new factor is added to an environment, you do not have the old environment plus the new factor. You have an entirely different environment. For Korzybski not to have pondered what changes writing, or print, or radio, or the telephone would make on one's neuro-semantic environment is almost incredible. But hold, my friends! There is nothing to fear. It is precisely at this point that media ecology comes into the picture.

Media Ecology is General Semantics writ large. It starts with the assumption that people do their thinking and feeling not only in and through language but in and through all those media which extend, amplify and transform our senses. Further, Media Ecology assumes that what is important in understanding these processes is not so much the content of media but the ways in which they structure our transactions with them. Media ecologists want to know what kind of environment we enter when we talk on the telephone or watch television or read a book. We want to know the answers to such questions as, at what level of abstraction does a medium operate? What aspects of reality does it isolate and amplify? What aspects of reality does it exclude? What is the nature of the information it gives? What are its spatial biases? Its temporal biases?

What does a particular medium require us to do with our bodies and our senses? In what directions does it encourage us to think? And how do such biases determine our relations with others and with ourselves?

To be a bit more specific: consider the case of the speech I am giving now. Would you respond to it in the same way if you were watching a video-tape of me instead of me in the flesh? Would you be more engrossed? Would I seem to speak with more authority? Would you feel freer to talk to the person next to you? Would you feel required to talk to the person next to you? Would you be more or less fidgety? Would your mind be more or less concentrated?

And now suppose that you are not hearing this speech at all but reading its words in the General Semantics Bulletin. Would some of my sentences take on a different meaning? Would meanings you have heard tonight disappear? Would you feel more isolated? Well, of course, you would feel more isolated. Print is the isolating medium par excellence.

It creates a closed space, usually resulting in the suspension of all interest in one's surroundings. Have you ever passed out written material to a group to whom you are talking? It instantly makes them a non-group and transforms them into so many individuals. That is why you cannot keep their coordinated attention and there is no point in telling them not to look at the printed material until you have finished talking. In the competition among media for people's attention, print will win over speech, most of the time. Perhaps that is why most teachers insist on reading aloud to students whatever is contained in printed material they hand out. They must intuitively sense that the only way to maintain control over a print environment is to replicate the content of the environment with their own voice. I might add here, in case you are interested, that in the competition among media for people's attention, the telephone wins hands down in just about every context. We even have testimony to the fact that the act of love can be terminated instantly by the ring of a telephone. In Media Ecology, we call this telephonis interruptis. Less serious but equally revealing is the fact that on two occasions in the past year, bank robbers in the actual process of being surrounded by police took time out to answer phone calls placed by curious reporters. One of the bank robbers actually said, 'Could you call back later. I'm busy now.' I'd like to see Korzybski explain that! Well, not even Media Ecologists can--at least at the moment. But we try, because these matters are, for us, central issues. How does the structure of a medium occupy our minds? How does it intrude upon or limit or expand or even distort our consciousness? Naturally, the search for answers to such questions is a big job. Therefore, you will be surprised to know we have taken on still another. Consider this: if a medium of communication is defined as an environment, and if an environment is a system through which human beings establish a predictable continuity in life, then media include more than language and technologies. They also include those systems we usually call social environments: a classroom, a courtroom, a concert hall, a business office, an oral examination, a hotel lobby, a restaurant. Each of these methods of human congregation is in fact nothing but a complex message system whose structure imposes certain ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Just like language and no less than flickering images on a screen.

Incidentally, Korzybski acknowledges this in Science and Sanity where he remarks that each person's individual evaluative system is influenced by larger systems of which he is a part, and urges that this level of communication be studied. Consider, for example, this question: what are the subjects of conversation that are permissible between two strangers who find themselves in an apartment-house elevator? Well, they may comment on the weather or, possibly, the efficiency of the elevator. But if one were to turn to the other and ask, 'Are you visiting someone here, and is it for business or pleasure?', well, there is probably going to be some trouble. But why? That question is frequently asked by one stranger of another on airplanes, and almost always receives a polite, sometimes lengthy (even fantastic) reply. And if you say that the difference is accounted for by the fact that an elevator ride usually takes no more than 60 seconds and an airplane ride no less than 60 minutes, you are, of course, giving the beginnings of a media ecological answer. For beyond doubt, the length of time one must be part of a communication environment powerfully shapes the permissible content of the environment. In other words, time is an underlying 'gene' controlling the type and scope of messages produced. But it is not the only one. There is also, for example, space. Among other things, space controls the position of people's bodies. People who are standing say different things from people who are sitting. They also feel different. Long before Edward Hall developed proxemics, Harry Golden observed that the problem of segregation in Southern restaurants could be solved if everyone would just stand while eating. As media ecologists have found out, when people sit, they create exceedingly thick boundary markers--closed systems, if you will. Standing creates a more fluid environment which greatly encourages egalitarian attitudes.

And then, of course, there is also, as an underlying characteristic of all social environments, what may be called its role structure. Two people standing in an elevator for 30 seconds do not have the necessary time and space to develop a structure to support differentiated roles. Two people sitting in an airplane for 2 hours do. When there is no role differentiation, messages must of necessity be neutral and inconsequential.

The exploration of temporal bias, of spatial bias, of sense and body bias, of role bias, of abstraction bias--that is what Media Ecology is. In short, the study of media as environments. For what is language or television or an elevator other than a largely concealed environment which defines how people shall conduct themselves?

And so, we media ecologists peer at the modern world of communication and think that in the years ahead we will see further than Korzybski did. And if we do, well, I remind you of Freud's famous reply when told that one of his students was publicly claiming that he had gone beyond the Master himself. Freud said, a gnat standing on the shoulders of a giant can usually see further than the giant.