

**ALFRED KORZYBSKI'S THOUGHT AND THE
QUESTION OF THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH IN
JOURNALIST'S WORK**

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In 1933, twelve years after his *Manhood and Humanity* came out, Alfred Korzybski (1879-1950), a Polish aristocrat who arrived in the United States during World War I, published his most famous book called *Science and Sanity*. A former Russian intelligence officer, earlier trained as a chemical engineer at the Polytechnic Institute in Warsaw, Korzybski had a broad-ranging intellectual background, which he employed to work out his theory of general semantics. It is beyond doubt that the theory under discussion can help journalists depict the reality of the world in its multidimensional complexity – and thus make their performance more professional.

In *Science and Sanity* Korzybski wrote: “As words *are not* the objects which they represent, *structure, and structure alone*, becomes the only link which connects our verbal processes with empirical data. To achieve adjustment and sanity and the conditions which follow from them, we must study structural characteristic of this world *first*, and, then only, build languages of similar structure, instead of habitually ascribing to the world the primitive structure of our language. If these arguments are conducted in a language of wrong and unnatural structure, our doctrines and institutions must reflect that linguistic structure and so become unnatural, and inevitably lead to disasters.”¹

¹ A. Korzybski, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, European Society for General Semantics, p. 59; <http://www.esgs.org/uk/art/sands.htm>; visited: 5 October, 2007.

Korzybski's idea of general semantics was based on an analogy between the relation of a map and a territory. There are three fundamental premises of this concept: "1. A map is *not* a territory. 2. A map does *not* represent *all* of a territory. 3. A map is *self-reflexive* in the sense that an 'ideal' map would include a map of the map, etc., indefinitely."² When applied to daily life and language, the premises in question are transformed into: "1. A word is *not* what it represents. 2. A word does *not* represent *all* of the 'facts', etc. 3. Language is *self-reflexive* in the sense that in language we can speak *about* language."³

Korzybski's conclusions seem to be a simple message for journalists and other communicators. One has got to be careful with using words, expressions and phrases, so as not to fall into the trap of windy rhetoric and semantic manipulation. The language should be used clearly and accurately, otherwise a piece of information may turn out just a piece of advertisement or propaganda. According to the author of *Science and Sanity*, an awareness of semantics can help communicators minimize such risks and become more ethical message senders.

Frankly speaking, Korzybski himself said little about ethics since he considered 'moralizing' a waste of time and simply "believed that internalizing an extensional (roughly, a 'fact'-based) orientation would necessarily lead to more 'ethical' behavior"⁴. It seems that this rule can be applied to the world of media, yet journalism ethics has to do with the responsible and knowledgeable use of language. A virtuous journalist should always look for answers to questions like how to avoid using seductive and lofty rhetoric, which can easily raise emotions but has often little to do with truthful and objective communicating, or how to shun simplifications and generalizations.

John C. Merrill, who tackles the issue under discussion, points out that Korzybskian general semantics orientation may help find answers to these questions. He names six rules a communicator ought to abide by when trying not to fall in language traps: «1. "Flux". Avoid denying change (static language/dynamic reality). 2. "Map Is Not Territory". Avoid confusing label with reality (word/label is not the thing). 3. "ETC" (principle of "*non-allness*"). Avoid assuming you have said all about anything. There is always more that can be added. 4. "IS" of Identity. Avoid verbal simplification (John Doe is a lawyer. He is much more than that). 5. Individualization.

² A. Korzybski, *General Semantics*; a paper from *Alfred Korzybski: Collected Writings 1920–1950*; ETC: A Review of General Semantics *et cetera*; Institute of General Semantics; p. 5; <http://www.esgs.org/uk/art/ak1.htm>; visited: 5 October, 2007.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ B. I. Kodish, *Ethics: A General Semantics Perspective*, ETC: A Review of General Semantics *et cetera*; Institute of General Semantics; p. 130-131; <http://learn-gs.org/library/etc/55-2-kodish.pdf>; visited: 6 October, 2007.

Avoid stereotyping (Arab-1 is not Arab-2; Ph.D.-1 is not Ph.D.-2). 6. Stay Low on Abstraction Ladder. Avoid highly abstract words (“cow: better than “animal”; “Bossy” better than “cow”; actual cow in reality better than any label).»⁵

Presumably, a journalist who follows these clues will be able to use language in a more responsible and precise way than the one that does not care about them. The former will present people ideas, events, and situations in a realistic and helpful manner, whereas the latter is likely to fall victim to the natural power of language. Of course, once a journalist purposefully manipulate facts and uses irrelevant words and phrases when writing or speaking about these facts, it is possible that the real victims of such journalism will be the receivers of the message. This is how propaganda works. There is no doubt that language affects not only people’s thinking but also their action. As Korzybski stresses out in the afore-quoted excerpt from *Science and Sanity*, irresponsible language usage may lead to disasters. Bearing this in mind, one can assume that when an influential communicator consciously uses propagandistic language to a vulnerable audience, it may, under certain circumstances, lead to catastrophes. All this seems to be no more than common sense, “but as Korzybski was fond of saying, common sense is really not very common”⁶.

At the heart of his concept of general semantics lies the notion of “time-binding”. Considering time-binding a human capacity, the author of *Science and Sanity* explains its meaning in this way: “A functional analysis, free from the old mythological and zoological assumptions, showed that humans (...) are uniquely characterized by the capacity of an individual or a generation to begin where the former left off. I called this essential capacity ‘time-binding’. This can be accomplished only by a class of life which uses symbols as means of time-binding. Such a capacity depends on and necessitates ‘intelligence’, means of communication, etc. On this inherently human level of interdependence time-binding leads inevitably to feelings of responsibility, duty towards others and the future, and therefore to some type of ethics, morals, and similar social and/or socio-cultural reactions.”⁷

So according to Korzybski, ethics is a derivative of time-binding, which consists of the human ability to use language and other means of communication (symbols like pictures, sounds, gestures, etc.) to transmit information across time. As time-binders human beings may contribute to the future of humanity. It means that time-binding can give people a sense of responsibility towards others. As Bruce I. Kodish

⁵ J. C. Merrill, *Journalism Ethics. Philosophical Foundations for News Media*; St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1997, p. 157.

⁶ Ibid., p. 158.

⁷ A. Korzybski, *What I Believe*; a paper from *Manhood of Humanity*, 2nd edition 1950; Institute of General Semantics, p. 2; <http://www.esgs.org/uk/art/ak2.htm>; visited: 7 October, 2007.

puts it, “we build on what others have said and done, as others will build upon what we say and do”⁸. Such an approach has obviously an ethical aspect. Commenting on the concept of time-binding, Harry Weinberg wrote: “Inherent, then in our concept of the effective time-binder is an attitude, an ethical judgment, a moral precept as strong as any of the Ten Commandments: (...) ‘So act as to make thyself a better time-binder; so act as to enable others to use their time-binding capacities more effectively.’”⁹

The spirit of the Korzybskian ethics is anti-absolutistic. It is in favour of the situation ethics of Joseph Fletcher, with its stress on dynamic and flexible guidelines, and against stiff and habitual norms of evaluating people’s behaviour without regard to various circumstances. On the grounds of general semantics, it is important not to ignore even small differences between two individuals, events, situations or phenomena. The above-mentioned principles, like “Arab-1 is not Arab-2” (there are not two exactly the same Arabs) or “John Doe is a lawyer” (he is not only a lawyer but possibly also a scientist, horse rider etc.), stress out the significance of avoiding stigmatizing and stereotyping clichés in expressing views about people.

Blurring differences between various persons, no matter how subtle these differences are, means yielding to stereotyped patterns of human behaviour. A communicator who attributes much importance to truth and honesty should avoid it. The same applies to describing animals, events, things, phenomena; no two of them are identical. For example, two apparently identical dogs are never identical, it is usually simple to notice some differences in their look on closer examination; two red apples are never red to the same degree, they must differ in shades of colouring... According to Korzybski, one ought to look at the substance, behind the labels to be more truthful when describing the world. Merrill puts it this way:

“The new system or orientation, according to Korzybski, stresses the dynamics of the real world and the basically static nature of language. Flux is an important aspect of general semantics: the need to use language so as best to depict the constant changes occurring in reality. Korzybski went back to the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus to make this point. Heraclitus said something like this: No person steps in the same river twice. The river is constantly becoming a new river, and also, the person is constantly becoming a new person. Every time such a person steps, the person has changed, and the river has changed. All is new, although the old names prevail. So as Korzybski would put it, people should be aware of this

⁸ B. I. Kodish, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

⁹ H. Weinberg, *Levels of Knowing and Existence: Studies in General Semantics*. New York: Harper & Row, 1959, p. 159 (quoted in: B. I. Kodish, *op.cit.*, p. 132).

weakness of language to keep up with reality: Bill Smith in 1970 is not Bill Smith in 1990; the Rhine River in 1990 is not the Rhine River in 1994.”¹⁰

So the sense of general semantics boils down to clarifying the language of science and everyday life so that it could keep up with reality. Such an approach is characteristic of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who stated in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that all philosophy is but “critique of language” (4.0031). The author of *Science and Sanity* made only a few references to Wittgenstein’s thought, yet Sanford I. Berman stresses that “there is a much greater relationship between the thinking of Wittgenstein and Korzybski than these references might suggest”¹¹. In the light of *Science and Sanity* and *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, one can assume that the author of the former would endorse the stance of the author of the latter, according to which “the object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts”¹². To Korzybski accurate, precise, and relevant language is a necessary instrument of obtaining and imparting any kind of ideas and information about the world. Taking this into account, Kodish defines general semantics “as a scientific, and thus up-to-date and open ended, *applied epistemology* or theory of knowledge”¹³.

On the basis of the Korzybskian concept, journalists should try to enhance standards of their professional performance by writing and speaking like scientists, which is to mean they ought to test everything before printing or broadcasting it. One of the implications of such a scientific attitude to reality would be taking by media people “a rather aloof demeanor – standing back, observing calmly, questioning insistently, and recording carefully”¹⁴. A journalist trying to bring general semantics rules into life will be devoted to scientific reports, based on observable, verifiable data. He will not jump at conclusions on the grounds of dubious evidence or poor factual material. It is unlikely that such a journalist will categorize people as either good or bad, wise or stupid, interesting or boring, etc. Either-or, two-valued orientation, which Korzybski associates with Aristotle, will be unacceptable for him. He understands that people and other entities in the world are complex

¹⁰ J. C. Merrill, *Legacy of Wisdom. Great Thinkers and Journalism*; Iowa State University Press/Ames, 1994, p. 102.

¹¹ S. I. Berman, *Wittgenstein and General Semantics, ETC: A Review of General Semantics et cetera*; Institute of General Semantics, p. 22; <http://learn-gs.org/library/etc/45-1-berman.pdf>; visited: 8 October, 2007.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ B. I. Kodish, *op. cit.*, p. 131. Kodish refers to Robert P. Pula’s preface to Korzybski’s *Science and Sanity* (see: “Preface to the Fifth Edition, 1993” in Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity*. Fifth Edition. Englewood, NJ: Institute of General Semantics, p. xvii).

¹⁴ J. C. Merrill, *Journalism Ethics. Philosophical Foundations for News Media*; *op.cit.*, p. 160.

beings, that's why it is reasonable to take a multi-valued orientation when describing and judging them.

Journalists must always be on their guard to avoid yielding to subjectivity. It is a natural inclination, nevertheless it has to be curbed for the sake of the search for truth. Many reporters often believe they are giving factual information, when, in fact, they are only expressing their opinions. The necessity of differentiating between facts and personal views is a must in the work of the media people. One may doubt if this can be reached with absolute certainty but one mustn't give up trying. To overcome natural tendency to bias, journalists must recognize their preferences, interests, likes and dislikes. Once they are aware of them, they are more ready to keep distance from human egoistic proclivity towards choosing only what is appealing and what gives pleasure. A litmus test for a journalist is making sure that he/she is able to include in his/her report or article information that is unpleasant to him/her and with which he/she disagrees. Being capable of covering a broad array of subjects from various perspectives, using neutral, accurate, and relevant language – will mean being just a good “map-maker”, whose “maps” won't be one-dimensional and misleading for the “map-readers”.

The anti-absolutistic approach to ethics, characteristic of the Korzybskian concept of general semantics, stresses out the difference between two kinds of statements: statements of fact and statements of inference. When discussing ethical issues, people often mix value judgments with descriptive sentences. For example, such utterances like “X is a good man” or “Y is an immoral person” have the superficial appearance of descriptive reports, statements of fact, but they obviously involve inferences by going beyond a given set of facts. Confusing value judgments with descriptive statements of fact can easily mislead the receiver of the message.

It also contravenes the famous “is-ought distinction”, attributed to David Hume. Hume's “One cannot derive ought-sentences from is-sentences”¹⁵ seems a serious challenge for many journalists and editors. According to Kodish, their problem may be resolved in a simple way. Stressing that the sentence “These apples are bitter” cannot be the direct premise of the sentence “You shouldn't eat any of these apples!”, he sees the solution to the problem under discussion in connecting the factual statement (“These apples are bitter”) with an injunction (“You shouldn't eat any of these apples!”) by means of a conditional if-then statement, based on a value system that someone holds. Thus, the afore-mentioned two clauses will make up the sentence:

¹⁵ D. Ritschl, *Can Ethical Maxims Be Derived from Theological Concepts of Human Dignity?*, [in:] D. Kretzmer, E. Klein (eds), *The Concept of Human Dignity in Human Rights Discourse*, Kluwer Law International, The Hague, 2002, p. 92.

“If you don’t want to get sick, you must not eat bitter apples”¹⁶. On the grounds of such a syllogism, we can infer what we “should” do from statements of fact.

General semantics learns speakers how to take more responsibility for their words. It may help them avoid deceit, dissimulation, duplicity. It warns them that words may easily become deceptive; calls attention to inferences treated as facts, to either-or statements, overgeneralizations or multi-ordinal terms, to statements unrestricted in time or to overly-simple statements of causality, etc. As Kenneth G. Johnson notes, “Korzybski did not attempt to give us answers to the questions that plague us”¹⁷. Instead, he “provided an open-ended meta-linguistic *system* for finding answers, for taking into account the nature of language and the critical role of the human nervous system”¹⁸.

Journalists who consider the art of persuasion and eloquence the most important aspects of their professional performance may find this kind of ideas unattractive. They won’t be eager to follow the rules of general semantics, since it would mean they have to curb their inclination to using lofty or seductive rhetoric, with which they can cast a spell on their readers or listeners. However, the imperative of the search for truth, which lies at the heart of the Korzybskian concept of general semantics, is about the relevance of words rather than about their beauty.

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¹⁶ B. I. Kodish, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

¹⁷ K. G. Johnson, *Relevant?*, ETC: A Review of General Semantics *et cetera*. Spring 1991; Institute of General Semantics, p. 60; <http://learn-gs.org/library/etc/48-1-johnson.pdf>; visited: 12 October, 2007.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

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