



A

Note On Evaluational Reactions

By

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“General semantics suggests that specialists particularly should be more careful in their choice of common words for their technical terminology, because a technical definition will not alter the folk-meaning, and corresponding living human neuro-semantic reactions. In general semantics, the folk-meanings can no longer be neglected.”¹ –Korzybski

Korzybski’s warning has implications for today’s general-semantics community. In my opinion, we need to apply it self-reflexively to one of our central terms—the *semantic reaction*. For too many years, the simplistic folk-meanings associated with “semantic” and “semantic reaction” have undermined our ability to communicate with the general public (see Reference 2).

As an attempt to correct this problem, I suggest using the term “evaluational reaction” and phasing out “semantic reaction”. This should reduce the amount of misinterpretation and misevaluation that takes place when we speak and write.

Using “evaluational reaction” will not compromise our formulational integrity. As early as 1939, Korzybski began heading in this direction, applying the term “evaluational reactions” and inserting “evaluational” in parenthesis, e.g. “semantic (evaluational) reaction” (see references 3 and 4). In fact, Korzybski experimented with many variations on this theme for the rest of his life, including neuro-evaluational reactions, evaluationally (neuro-semanticly), neuro-semantic (evaluational) environments, and semantic (evaluational) mechanisms (see references 5, 6, 7, 8).

Although making this change alone will not transform our work, it marks an important step forward, and one with historical precedence.

References

1. Alfred Korzybski (1935), “An Outline of General Semantics: The Application of Some Methods of Exact Sciences to the Solution of Human Problems and Educational Training for General Sanity”, *Alfred Korzybski Collected Writings: 1920–1950*. Collected and arranged by M. Kendig. Final editing and preparation for printing by Charlotte Schuchardt Read, with the assistance of Robert Pula. Englewood, New Jersey: Institute of General Semantics, 1990, p. 204.

2. Read, Allen Walker (1948). “An Account of the Word ‘Semantics’” in *WORD*, Volume 4, Number 2, pages 78–97:

“The folkloristic attitude towards words, that they are merely the garment that covers ideas, to be put on or changed at will, has naturally influenced the popular use of the word *semantics*.” p. 89.

3. Alfred Korzybski (1939), “General Semantics and You—The Foundations of a Science of Man”, *Alfred Korzybski Collected Writings, op. cit.*, p. 273.

"It must be emphasized that the term evaluation involves both 'emotions' and 'intellect', and so automatically does not split the personality into verbalistic fictions of *separate* 'emotions' and 'intellect'. In General Semantics we are interested in *actual evaluational reactions*, and not only what we say about them."

4. Alfred Korzybski (1939). "General Semantics: Extensionalization in Mathematics, Mathematical Physics and General Education. Paper III. Over/Under Defined Terms", *Alfred Korzybski Collected Writings, op. cit.*, p. 267.

"Analysis shows the inherent dualism of over/under defined terms, depending on whether intensional or extensional methods are used, eliminating conflicting dualism in science and semantic (evaluational) reactions."

5. Korzybski, Alfred (1946). "General Semantics: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems", *Alfred Korzybski Collected Writings, op. cit.*, p. 578.

"It became apparent that at both extremes of neuro-evaluational reactions the psycho-logical mechanisms are similar, differing *not in kind* but in *degree*, and that the rest of us, with our endless variety of individuals and types of reactions, are somewhere in between the extremes."

6. Korzybski, Alfred (1947). "On International Languages", *Alfred Korzybski Collected Writings, op. cit.*, p. 589.

"I inspected fundamentally the main Indo-European languages, and it seems to me that the only solution is to accept the Basic English, provided it is revised from a non-aristotelian point of view, so that it would not fool evaluationally (neuro-semantically) those whom we train."

7. Korzybski, Alfred (1948). "What I Believe" *Alfred Korzybski Collected Writings, op. cit.*, p. 649.

"I had to include neuro-linguistic and neuro-semantic (evaluational) environments as environments, and also had to consider geographic, physico-chemical, economic, political, ecological, socio-cultural, etc., conditions as factors which mould human personalities, and so even group behaviour."

8. Korzybski, Alfred (1950). "The Role of Language in the Perceptual Processes", *Alfred*

Korzybski Collected Writings, op. cit., p. 689.

"We see how the above diagram [the "Silent and Verbal Levels" diagram] indicates human semantic (evaluational) mechanisms in the average individual who is hovering between sanity and semantic illness."

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In a sense, being born into a culture is like being born in the back seat of a moving car. If we can't learn how to climb into the driver's seat, we will remain passengers regarding our own fate.

—Gregory Sawin

We were hardly aware of the fact that Civilization is literally a product of human labor and time; we had not thought deeply upon the principle of its genesis nor seriously sought to discover the laws of its growth; we had not been schooled to reflect that we who were enjoying it had neither produced it nor earned its goods; we had not been educated to perceive that we have it almost solely as a bounty from the time and toil of by-gone generations. We had not been disciplined to feel the mighty obligation which the great inheritance imposes upon us as at once the posterity of the dead and the ancestry of the yet unborn. We had been born in the midst of a great civilization, and, in accord with our breeding, we lived in it and upon it like butterflies in a garden of flowers, not to say "maggots in a cheese." —Cassius J. Keyser

The problem of *intension* and *extension*, according to Korzybski, in many ways summarizes the fundamental differences between the Aristotelian and the non-Aristotelian systems. The difference between intension and extension had been recognized from the time of Aristotle and his followers but they never applied it to 'human *living reactions* as *living reactions*, which can be predominantly intensional or predominantly extensional'. —Antony M. Economides

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