THE GENERAL SEMANTICS AND SCIENCE FICTION

OF ROBERT HEINLEIN AND A. E. VAN VOGT*

H. L. DRAKE

INTRODUCTION

I have been including a unit on General Semantics in my speech-communication classes. Students' critiques of General Semantics seems to constantly include the following: (1) It's nice but people can't or don't live that way: and, (2) How can General Semantics be used in the 'real' world outside of the classroom? As a teacher of speech-communication I have felt that I must satisfy these two points for myself as well as my students.

One such approach which I use seems to satisfy both major comments presented above. I have found that the literary genre of science fiction has grown in audience and stature. My recent speech-communication students have registered an interest in science fiction and have been astounded (no pun intended) to discover that there is an explicit connection between their favorite type of fiction and non-fictional General Semantics. An end result is that for many students General Semantics becomes a more meaningful approach to verbal and non-verbal communicating, and their subsequent speeches, group discussions and films seem to reflect this.

I shall never forget two students in different classes. One, a young lady, challenged me to prove that someone, somewhere outside of speech-communication classrooms was using General Semantics. The other student, a young man, read science fiction novels in the backrow while I lectured. The latter student was bored to death in class until I proved to him that there is a connection between speech-communication and science fiction -- that connection is General Semantics. For these two students, and all of my students past, present and future this paper is dedicated. (The first version of this paper, 'Science Fiction and General Semantics,' copyright 1973, was delivered at a Science Fiction Colloquy held at William Rainey Harper College on April 19, 1973.)

The purpose of this study is to establish some positive relationships between Alfred Korzybski's general semantics[1] and contemporary science fiction. The relationships will be established in the following manner: (1) by documented evidence that at least two world-renowned science fiction authors advocate general semantics principles and subsequently use general semantics in their stories: and, (2) by emphasizing some major premises to be found in Korzybski's discipline which may also be found in viable science fiction. The premises to be mentioned lead to

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an extensional approach which Korzybski felt was necessary if a more valid means of evaluating were to be devised. The obverse would lead to intension in dealing with self-defeating myths.

This study presupposes the following. Alfred Korzybski codified premises and subsequently established one alleged scientific approach to evaluting. This approach would seem to be quite apropos to rhetoric, in both verbal and non-verbal forms. It would seem that it is being substantiated more and more everyday that these rhetorical forms involve complex interfaces of the intrapersonal and interpersonal. General semantics deals with, and science fiction offers prime examples of, these interfaces.

GENERAL SEMANTICS

Korzybski maintained that general semantics was a scientific methodology which included checking the fact-territory first and then constructing a language which reflects that territory as closely as possible. This is one way of describing the 'natural order' of evaluating. This 'natural order' is particularly valuable in the following manner. Korzybski maintained that the survival of Homo sapiens included predicting that which may happen, or could happen, based on 'proper' abstracting of data at hand at any given present. '...if our orientations and evaluations are inadequate, our predictability is impaired.... If we have a more adequate or proper evaluation, we would have more correct predictability, etc....'[2]

Korzybski's scientific approach was 'extensional'. (Homo sapiens moving out from and back to, self). This extending from self and moving back to self includes: (1) time-binding: (2) the 'natural order' of evaluating: and, (3) from number (2) a realization of the abstracting of phenomena (incompletely) from constant flux.

(1) Time-Binding. Korzybski maintained that the one most important factor which set Homo sapiens apart from any other living organism was his intellectual capabilities as manifest in records left from one generation to the next. In leaving records of himself man 'binds-time'. Any one point in time-space seems to be based upon that which has taken place in the past. During any present, man builds on the past and his building moves him toward a future. Thus, time-binding has to do with the past, present and future.

(2) The 'Natural Order' of Evaluating. Korzybski felt that proper evaluation included following what he considered to be the time-binders' empirically verifiable perception processes. In short, the processes moved from submicroscopic process levels to perceptual levels, to verbal levels. This was the natural order. The 'reversal' of the natural order was not empirically-based, but rather, often relied on myths about that which is to be found on non-verbal levels. This latter mythopoeic approach impairs the development and perpetuity of Homo sapiens.

Korzybski's
'Natural Order
of Evaluation'

Korzybski's
'Reversal of the Natural Order
of Evaluation'

Non-Verbal Levels
Homo Sapiens

Verbal Levels
Homo Sapiens

Non-Verbal levels
evaluated as more
important than
verbal

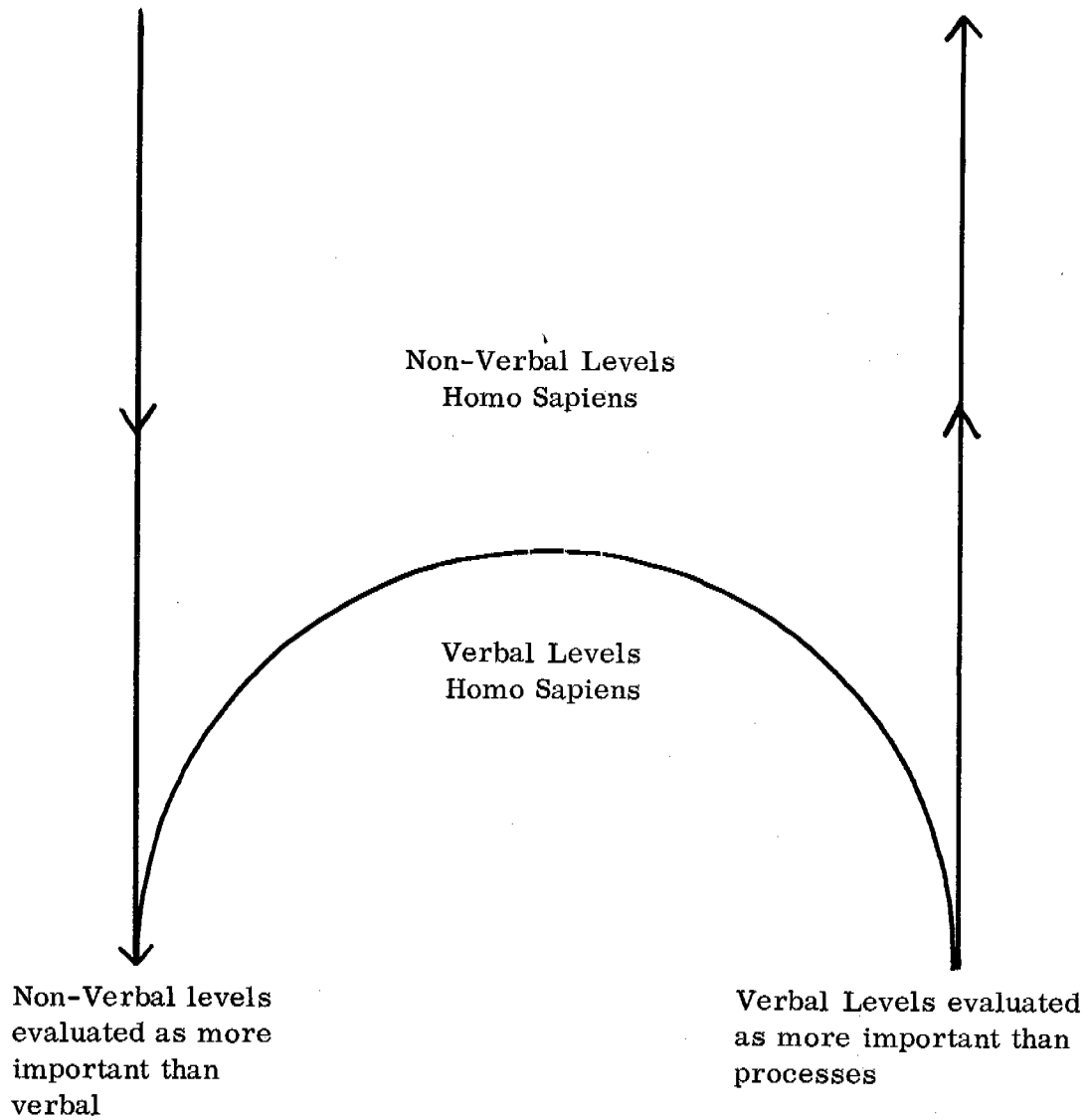Verbal Levels evaluated
as more important than
processes

Figure 1

(3) <u>The Consciousness Of Abstracting From Constant Flux.</u> Accepting the premise of the natural order led Korzybski to maintain that <u>Homo sapiens</u> can never abstract the whole of anything, but only bits and pieces. Especially is this true, thought Korzybski, when it would seem that it has been proven that <u>Homo sapiens'</u> environments are in constant movement. It would appear that no phenomenon remains the same. With this consciousness of abstracting there is 'non-allness', that is, we cannot know all that there is to know about a person, place or thing. There is non-identity', in this consciousness of abstracting, in the sense that whatever we might say about a phenomenon at one instance, may not apply the next time we check because of constant flux. Also, whatever we might <u>say</u> a phenomenon <u>is</u>, it <u>is not</u> in the sense that we cannot know <u>all</u> that there is to know about that phenomenon and the verbal levels are not the same as the non-verbal. The problem is even more complex, relative to non-identity, if we take into consideration that no two individuals abstract identically.

Further, said Korzybski, since this business of abstracting is so complex, the extensional <u>Homo sapiens</u> will strive for 'symbol reactions'. Evaluations should not be made precipitously. Observe first, collect as much data as possible first, then make value judgements. Act on, and communicate, that which is empirically verifiable. The obverse of this is the intensional 'signal reaction'. With this latter, one acts without thinking and/or checking the facts. 'Signal reacting' refers to acting on myths and/or inferences rather than empirical data without being aware of doing so.

These are only some of the operational definitions and premises to be found in the overall discipline of general semantics. The above select list of criteria seems to be most applicable in relating to science fiction.

Abraham Kaplan describes general semantics as being an analytic philosophy. General semantics involves empiricism in the sense of calling for language (communicating) based on experience of 'the "real" world out there'. It would seem that 'experiential verification' is a key to orthodox (Korzybskian) general semantics. This is important to keep in mind when considering the following remarks on science fiction and science fiction authors.

A. E. VAN VOGT

A. E. van Vogt's novel, The World of Null-A, was first published in serial form in Astounding Science Fiction magazine in 1945. It was subsequently published in hardcover by Simon and Schuster in 1948. The 1970 revised edition includes an 'introduction' by van Vogt in which he attempts to be more explicit as to the novel's relationships to general semantics[4] His explanation seems to remain on a high level of abstraction and therefore could be quite cryptic, especially for those who have no background in general semantics. But this is not to say that he is 'wrong' or a 'bad' writer, as some are wont to label him.

In The World of Null-A, and the sequel, The Players of Null-A,[5] van Vogt allegedly attempted to characterize 'identity'. From a general semantics point of view, identity (in the sense of absolute sameness in all respects) pushes Homo sapiens toward the intensional side of the continuum and tends to force a person into absolutism, static orientations and subsequent misevaluating. Often, to say a phenomenon is (identity) something or the other is to freeze it and stop any further abstracting and additional knowledge relative to that phenomenon. To say that something is often precludes any consideration of other points of view (allness instead of non-allness). Thus, the protagonist in the Null-A stories--Gilbert Gosseyn, (pronounced 'go-sane') --has to deal with the identity problem from both the intra-and-interpersonal points of view.

Van Vogt suggests a 'gradational scale' as an answer to identity problems. This scale allows for different shades of gray between the either-orness of black and white. (Van Vogt's term here is synonymous with the semantic continuum which some of us use in working with Korzybski's general semantics in the classroom.) For Korzybski there was a negation of the either-orness and otherwise limiting factors with identity, through the consciousness of abstracting--the same consciousness of abstracting which van Vogt states he attempted to call attention to in his Null-A stories.

It would seem that anthropomorphism comes into play when considering the is of identity. That is, there would appear to be a tendency on the part of Homo sapiens to find significance of a personal nature where none need be present. Human beings tend to consider their species as the center of all phenomena. To put it metaphorically, a major cross which Home sapiens takes up is solipsism. This is an example of the reversal of the natural order, as discussed earlier. It would seem that this is part of what van Vogt attempts to get across in his Null-A stories. The more static orientations (through the is of identity), the less progress and survival potentials. The less 'staticity', the higher the progress and survival potentials. Homo sapiens may be moving away from the caves--from his inward myths which inherently include himself as the center of all without considerations of non-Homo sapiens' points of view. To take an optimistic point of view, hopefully Homo sapiens is moving toward greater survival potential by letting go of the old self-defeating and self-deprecating mythology with subsequent incorrect evaluations.

It is fitting then that at the end of the Null-A stories Gilbert Gosseyn becomes more aware of just who manipulates whom. He finds that Homo sapiens has been manipulated by, and worshipping, self. To put it in the vernacular, that's what it's all about.

At the risk of being too abstruse I would like to suggest that Donald Wollheim's seemingly facetious description of van Vogt's heroes being 'godlike'[6] may not be too far from what may be considered a viable avenue of thought. A key to this thinking would be in defining the multiordinal term, 'god'. If, for instance, 'god' were to be defined as 'intellect', then Wollheim is probably closer to an astute observation than he intended. This formulation is one approach which a person may take in achieving a different perspective relative to the reading (and writing) of science fiction. Such a perspective

could lead to accepting science fiction as a serious genre in contemporary literature. (However, I hasten to add that this is not the only perspective leading to considering the genre a valid one.) It is not the purpose of this study to attribute an approach to van Vogt which he did not intend. But, as a reader and evaluator of van Vogt, I offer the preceding remarks as a possibly viable means of understanding his Null-A stories.

Wollheim has relegated Korzybski's general semantics to a position of Depression-era gimmickry. He apparently sees general semantics as a quasi-panacea of the pre-World War Two age -- a panacea in the pejorative sense of the term. Wollheim maintains that he sees little or no connection between van Vogt's Null-A stories and general semantics. I disagree with Wollheim on both counts. Having studied general semantics for a number of years, in 1976 I can say that I do not believe Korzybski's premises are, or ever were, simply faddism or gimmickry. Further, in my opinion, connections between the Null-A stories and general semantics are, indeed, evident.

Van Vogt's Null-A stories do not meet Damon Knight's standards in the area of style, plot, characterization and background.[7] I tend to agree with Knight relative to his select criteria which may be termed 'traditional'. However, it seems to me that in his critique of van Vogt, Knight displays ignorance relative to general semantics.

Knight describes Korzybski's Science and Sanity as 'unreadable'. Was Knight attempting to be objective? His description of Science and Sanity does not seem to fit the territory. That is, while Korzybski is not light reading, Korzybski can be read.

Knight also had fun with the term 'non-aristotelian', while speaking of the van Vogt Null-A stories. Again, Knight did not seem to have an adequate understanding of how Korzybski and some general semanticists use the term.

Knight may be given a positive credit for evaluating the Null-A stories with traditional literary criteria. But, it is to be suggested that there can be other criteria by which to judge van Vogt's stories: one such set is general semantics. If one takes van Vogt literally, he states in his 'Introduction' to The World of Null-A that when he was twenty-three years old his objective was to proselytize general semantics. Thus, the question becomes: How well did van Vogt comprehend (abstract) and proselytize general semantics? An answer in part -- as indicated earlier -- is that this study finds that van Vogt has a good working knowledge of general semantics but is perhaps too cryptic (high level abstractions) for the average layman (especially one who is not familiar with Korzybski's evaluative processes).

Van Vogt's stories seem to be two-edged swords. There are the superficial, light story sides. There are also the underlying general semantics formulations. These may be labeled overt and covert, respectively. As I understand van Vogt, he concentrated on the covert. Thus, the overt may have suffered -- as, indeed, Knight suggests. Van Vogt would have done well to have attempted to satisfy both

the overt and covert. Perhaps this was too much to expect from a young and in-experienced writer (at the time of the Null-A stories).

In sum--short of his crypticness--van Vogt seems to have succeeded with his Null-A stories from a general semantics point of view. He may not have fared as well when Knight's traditional literary criteria are applied. Neither Knight nor I should be absolutistic in our value judgements. We should be aware of not unequivocally judging by a select list of criteria. Who does not put a multiplicity of corroboration to work and hopefully arrive at a more valid overall evaluation? I pose a question for my literary colleagues. Is contemporary literature to be judged according to traditional criteria only?

Knight is not alone in negatively criticising van Vogt. In my opinion, Sam Moskowitz also reflects little knowledge relative to general semantics in critiques of van Vogt to be found in two works, Explorers of the Infinite: Shapers of Science Fiction, and , Seekers of Tomorrow: Masters of Modern Science Fiction.[8] Moskowitz suggests that van Vogt's use of general semantics is tied up with van Vogt's alleged interest in 'offbeat self-improvement cults'. In Seekers of Tomorrow, Moskowitz berates Korzybski for presenting no original material and being abstruse. According to Moskowitz, van Vogt's interest in general semantics became an 'obsession'.

Moskowitz' and Knight's critiques of Korzybski, general semantics and van Vogt may become questionable in light of their opinions relative to another science fiction author.

ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

If Damon Knight and Sam Moskowitz consider Korzybski, general semantics and van Vogt in a negative light, they appear to be obsequious in their approaches to Robert A. Heinlein. It is interesting that they look upon Heinlein with such favor and apparently do not credit him with having any connection with general semantics and Korzybski. But such a relationship can be made and Heinlein himself provides some documentation, to say nothing of what his fiction reflects.

On July 4, 1941, Heinlein delivered a speech at the Third World Science Fiction Convention in Denver, Colo.[9] In that speech Heinlein explicitly stated that he and his work had been influenced by Alfred Korzybski.

Heinlein's 1941 speech emphasized some major general semantics premises: (1) time-binding: (2) a consciousness of abstracting from a world in constant flux; and, (3) the natural order of evaluating.

Heinlein stated that the time-binding formulation is what makes science fiction a viable--perhaps foremost--literary genre. Plot takes a back seat in this case. For Heinlein, time-binding is the 'strongest factor' in science fiction.

Heinlein indicated that he preferred the term 'Future Fiction', because of the time-binding factor. He stated that science fiction attempts to make an educated guess as to the future based on what the author knows of the past and present. But science fiction also includes another basic premise to be found in general semantics.

To Heinlein, science fiction most pointedly illustrates that the phenomena known as Homo sapiens--together with the environments--are in constant flux. Science fiction deals with change. Often the science fiction fan is more aware of change than many other people. The serious science fiction authors attempt to deal with probable future changes.

In 1941, Heinlein presented what may be considered as a provocative thought, to wit, that science fiction fans may, in the final analysis, be more prepared to meet the future than those who have cast--do cast--aspersive stones on the genre! This may prove to be a most ironic phenomenon in modern literary history if Heinlein is correct.

Heinlein's 1941 speech concentrated on a 'scientific method'. He implies that Korzybski's general semantics is just such a method. Heinlein's considerations of a scientific methodology included a sane approach in the environments of, and with the phenomenon known as, Homo sapiens. He eschewed the unsane or non-scientific approach. It would seem that Heinlein's attitude followed Korzybski's natural order of evaluation; i.e., base intra-and interpersonal communicating on factual data.[10] In his speech Heinlein seemed to be answering the unsane allness of Hitlerism; e.g., if one used a scientific method one could not be anti-Semitic. Heinlein's non-allness reasoning included the idea that no one person--Fuehrer or not--could know all of the Jewish peoples in the world. Heinlein went on to suggest that the Korzybskian methodology precludes 'hatred'.

Heinlein's 1941 philosophy relied heavily on the symbol reaction inherent in the natural order of evaluating as opposed to the unsane signal reaction found in the reversal of the natural order. For the symbol reaction one checks facts and evaluates first, then acts later. The symbol reaction also aids us in remembering that we do not abstract identically. In the signal reaction there is little or no checking with factual data and subsequent consideration of that data but, rather, acting first and perhaps checking and 'thinking' later.

Heinlein agreed with Korzybski that general semantics is for laymen as well as academicians. It is also worth noting that for researchers, Heinlein gave a verbal picture of Korzybski, circa 1941.

Heinlein's acknowledged relationships to Korzybski and general semantics are also to be found in his copy-righted speech delivered on February 8, 1957 at the University of Chicago.[11]

In the 1957 speech, Heinlein extensionally uses the formulation of 'multi-meaning' (operationally defining a word which has more than one meaning in different contexts),

when he maintained that science fiction has various meanings for different people. Heinlein agreed that his definition of science fiction involves three major areas: (1) the scientific method: (2) data collected by scientific means; and, (3) the relationships of the collected data with Homo sapiens.

Heinlein felt that general fiction often represents the static as opposed to a world in flux which is found in science fiction. To Heinlein, science fiction presents the imaginary which is possible. General fiction all too often presents the imaginary which is not possible.

According to Heinlein, the serious science fiction author must strive for a non-myopic point of view through a conciousness of the abstracting process--with no two people abstracting exactly the same way--including phenomena in constant change. To aid in a closer realization of the 'real' in the environments of Homo sapiens, Heinlein advocated that a distinction be made between mythopoeic intensionalism and the extensional checking of factual data.

The future is 'ever-emerging' for Heinlein and therein lies the hope for survival and intellectual development of Homo sapiens. The extensional approach breaks the bonds of parochialism and frees the intellectual capabilities of the time-binder. Science fiction can reflect this, depending on the author.

With such a philosophy Heinlein saw science fiction as being far more 'real' than most other approaches to fiction. Science fiction is more representative of the territory because it extrapolates and thus often hits its mark. If science fiction authors extrapolate (based on that which has taken place and that which is taking place), then, maintained Heinlein, science and science fiction can be closely related--a valid and otherwise profitable symbiosis, if you will.

Thus, in 1957 Heinlein established a case for science fiction being the 'main-stream' of fiction and not to be relegated to a back seat. Science fiction meets many requirements for the contemporary time-binder who may or may not realize that what may really be bothering him is that the staticity of the past alone is no longer sufficient for the present and a preparation for the future. It is a case of running headlong into McLuhan's rear-view mirrorism.

Alfred Korzybski saw that the ultimate in 'wealth' was the intellect of the time-binder. In my opinion, Heinlein also sees this and the idea is reflected in his works.

In his 'Introduction: Pandora's Box', to be found in The Worlds of Robert A. Heinlein, Heinlein's general semantics approach is implicit.[12] His view of science fiction is, again, based on a premise of time-binding: i. e., taking the past into account along with the present in order to extrapolate. In this work, Heinlein establishes a semantics case--of definitions--which, in the final analysis, is important when approaching (writing, reading, et cetera), science fiction. For Heinlein the key to 'good' science fiction is not a matter of the apocalyptic (reversal of the natural order of evaluating), but rather, extrapolation (based on the natural order of evaluating).

Heinlein himself indicates that to one degree or another his work reflects a confidence in the intellect of Homo sapiens. The noun-verb hope is a key to Heinlein's approach to the time-binder. (I might add here that this is also a major part of what I abstract from van Vogt's Null-A stories.)

In Explorers of the Infinite, Sam Moskowitz labels Heinlein as one of the foremost contemporary science fiction authors. In Seekers of Tomorrow, Moskowitz presents what is in my opinion a fine historical perspective of Heinlein. But in neither book does Moskowitz acknowledge Heinlein's obvious connections to Korzybski and general semantics. If Moskowitz were to make such an acknowledgment, would he have to readjust his estimation of Heinlein in light of what he has stated relative to van Vogt's relationship with Korzybski and general semantics?

In Science Fiction: What It's All About, Sam Lundwall considers Heinlein--along with Asimov--as being close to the epitome of the 'good' science fiction writer. [13] According to Lundwall, Heinlein--more than any other science fiction author--is preparing youth for the future.

The Lois and Stephen Rose study, The Shattered Ring: Science Fiction and the Quest for Meaning, gives Heinlein credit for probing the 'inner space' of the Homo-sapiens. [14] Relative to what I suggested earlier as a possible point of departure when reading van Vogt, the Roses suggest that Heinlein's works often reflect a negation of the traditional approach that 'God' exists outside of man. The Rose study tends to substantiate Heinlein's importance as a science fiction author. Heinlein's overall approach to science fiction would appear to be not unlike how other writers and cr itics view the genre.

OTHERS

In his 'Afterword' in The Light Fantastic, Harry Harrison seems to support the Heinlein contention that science fiction can be the most viable form of contemporary fiction. [15] Science fiction is a 'living literature'.

As further corroboration of the validity of Heinlein's thinking, James Blish [16] suggests that televised space-flight--to say nothing of live television from the Moon--has aided the cause of science fiction immeasurably. Blish sees science fiction ful-filling a three-fold need relative to Homo sapiens: (1) science fiction prepares the masses for that which will more than likely take place in the future; (2) science fiction provides a palatable medium for presenting science to the layman; and (3) science fiction replaces traditional religion relative to Homo-sapiens' mythopoeic tendencies.

In Future Perfect H. Bruce Franklin looks at science fiction from the point of view of societal value systems at any particular date. [17]

Thomas D. Clareson presents a historical perspective relative to the genre which is, I believe, an invaluable aid to the serious student and researcher of science fiction.[18] Among other points, Clareson suggests that science fiction can provide heretofore unconsidered avenues of approach to the 'human experience'. It seems to me that this is the very modus operandi of Heinlein and van Vogt.

Fred L Whipple's remarks in The Saturday Review indicate that he,too, views science fiction as providing a valuable foundation for youth.[19]

An editorial in another edition of the Saturday Review would validate science fiction from the point of view that the genre deals most explicitly with the technological revolution.[20] Science fiction, states the editorialist, can aid toward educating us relative to procedures in case we don't make it as a species earth.

In discussing science fiction, Russel Nye also maintains that the genre is inherently based upon scientific facts and subsequently reflects the scientific knowledge and moods of the times.[21]

The above are but a few of the researchers and/or writers of science fiction who tend to lead credence to the approaches of Robert A. Heinlein and A. E. van Vogt-- both of whom, as has been pointed out earlier in this study, have been greatly influenced by the general semantics of Alfred Korzybski.

As both Heinlein and van Vogt suggest, what may have at first seemed to be nothing more than extraordinary imagination on the part of some authors, may lead us closer to 'reality' than any other form of fiction extant. It may prove to be the most ironic piece of phenomenon in contemporary literature that the worlds of 'Buck Rogers' (born on January 7, 1929)[22] with the help of Richard Calkins, John Dille and Philip Nowlan, and 'Flash Gordon' (sired by Alex Raymond),[23] have more value now for Homo-sapiens than other type of fiction.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to establish some positive relationships between serious approaches to science fiction and some premises to be found in the major works of Alfred Korzybski. It would seem that relationships to be drawn include: (1) time-binding (2) the 'natural order' of evaluating; and (3) with the natural order of evaluating, a consciousness of abstracting from phenomena in constant flux.

(1) Robert Heinlein provides explicit documentation as to how he uses the past and present in order to extrapolate in his stories. He further recommends that the serious science fiction writer would do this as opposed to erratic fantasies. For Heinlein there is a sound scientific foundation upon which stories of the possible are to be constructed.

(2) It would seem that most sources presented in this study agree that 'good' science fiction has a close affinity with comtemporary scientific data. It is a case of the science fiction authors' stories reflecting the fact-territory as provided by science at any particular date.

Most sources in this paper--especially Heinlein--tend to substantiate the idea that 'good' science fiction and Korzybski's extensional methodology for evaluating are similar. The diagram in Figure 1 illustrates Korzybski's premises that a science of man would include Homo sapiens checking data first (natural order), and then conducting intra-and-interpersonal communicating based on perceptions at any particular date.

Korzybski maintained that it is non-scientific (intensionally unsane) to conduct important intra-and interpersonal communicating based on the mythopoeic reversal of the natural order of evaluating.

Korzybski's natural order formulation is based on the way Homo sapiens perceives. Perception is by way of the nervous system. Korzybski maintained that there was empirical evidence to support this formulation. His premises about the human nervous system, based on the neurology of his time, have caused some to deny the viability of general semantics. It is not the purpose of this study to deal with this argument.

(3) Accepting the natural order formulation would lead to considerations of the intra-and interpersonal environments of Homo sapiens being in constant motion. To deny this--as illustrated in the van Vogt stories--would often bring about the 'is of identity'. The 'is of identity' involves extreme parochialism in the sense of static orientations which would preclude any further considerations of the phenomenon in question. This staticity includes absolutes in the sense of not taking into account that human beings perceive differently, to one degree or another. The 'think first' attitude (symbol reaction), seems well illustrated in van Vogt's stories. In my opinion, the symbol reaction is implicit in the views of most of the sources cited in this study.

Two well-known science fiction writers--Robert A. Heinlein and A. E. van Vogt-- have explicitly and publicly expressed the influence that Korzybski's general semantics has had on their writing. Granted, van Vogt is perhaps cryptic (high level abstractions). But it would seem that Heinlein has made a clear case for distinct relationships between science fiction and general semantics and further, among science, science fiction, general semantics and Homo sapiens. In my opinion, the relationships which Heinlein proffers are exciting to contemplate.

As R. Buckminster Fuller is saying and writing, the intellect may be Homo sapiens' only real wealth. Heinlein and van Vogt reflect this in their writings. I believe that Korzybski felt similarly. In his 1941 introduction to the second edition of Science and Sanity Korzybski wrote:

> ...But we humans after these millions of years should
> have learned haw to utilize the 'intelligence' which
> we supposedly have with some predictability, etc.,
> and use it constructively, not destructively....

I believe that 'good' science fiction presents <u>hope</u>. Science fiction can present the kind of <u>hope</u> which C. J. Keyser saw:

> ...when men and women are everywhere bred to
> understand the distinctive nature of our human kind,
> the time-binding energies of man will be freed from
> their old bondage and civilization will advance, in
> accord with its natural law....[25]

There are innumerable ways in which to illustrate the contemporary viability of General Semantics for speech-communication students. One such way is to draw relationships between the in-class theories of Korzybski and the bookstore racks of science fiction paperbacks.

The often-heard cry of 'Why should we study this?' can be turned into something like 'Gee, this is interesting!' Often with the latter exclamation the students are really saying, <u>this</u> <u>is</u> <u>meaningful</u> <u>to</u> <u>me</u>, <u>therefore,</u> <u>it</u> <u>is</u> <u>important.</u> Perhaps that's at least part of what speech-communication is all about.

HAROLD L. DRAKE is Assistant Professor of Speech Communication at Auburn University. For his dissertation showing some relationships between formulations of Alfred Korzybski and Buckminster Fuller, plus documenting meetings and associations of the two gentlemen, he was given the 1973 Irving J. Lee Award in General Semantics offered by the International Society for General Semantics. See <u>GSB</u> Nos. 38-39-40, pp. 56-58, and 120, 'Interview with Buckminster Fuller: His Comments on Alfred Korzybski and General Semantics.'

Dr. Drake is writing a 'general semantics novel' with a science fiction background. 'However,' he writes, he is 'careful not to suggest that GS <u>is</u> SF.'

A. E. VAN VOGT INTERVIEWED

by H. L. DRAKE*

A. E. van Vogt in his Hollywood
home, Summer, 1975. Photo by
Richard Leon Edwards.

Canadian-born A. E. van Vogt has been a free-lance author since the 1930's. Two full-length science fantasy novels contained General Semantics formulations. More than thirty years and many books and magazine stories later, van Vogt is planning another novel which will contain Korzybski's formulations.

General Semantics has been a prime factor in van Vogt's private as well as professional life. The following are excerpts from an interview conducted with van Vogt in his Hollywood home on September 4, 1974.

Q. When did you hear of General Semantics and why did you become interested?
A. When I was living in Canada I met a man from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation who loaned me Korzybski's book, Science And Sanity. At that time I was working on a story about Venus. I was trying to conceive of Venus without a government as we know it. I was thinking, what would it take? What kind of technology would it take? What kind of mental attitude, et cetera? It would take some kind of mental training. I abandoned my original thoughts for the story and applied the General Semantics concepts. That's how that came to be. But I didn't actually write the story until I got here to Hollywood, in November, 1944.
Q. And 'The World of Null-A' was serialized?
A. It was serialized starting about a year later in Astounding.[1]
Q. A sequel followed entitled, 'The Players of Null-A.'[2] Both were later published

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in book form.[3]   What did Korzybski think of your novels?

A. Well, he allowed himself to be photographed reading The World Of Null-A. I never did see that photograph, but I'm told that that's what happened. And also, that he marked passages in the books, both stories. After his death, I wrote the Institute and asked them if I could have those books and they said no. They verified that it was true, that they were marked and that they were on file. Mostly, said the lady who answered my letter, he just marked them.

Q. M. Kendig?

A. Yes, M. Kendig. That's the name. I think, as a matter of fact, that The World of Null-A was good for the Institute in that all kinds of people, particularly young people, showed up at the Institute for special training, as a result of reading my story. When you earlier used the word 'proselytize' it really was like an advertisement for the Institute of General Semantics.

Fred Pohl wants me to write a third in the series. He wanted me to do this some years ago when he was editor of Galaxy and If. I said to him at that time that I'd think about it. I think it can be done because actually, after I had finished Players I did have a thought that since these people came from another galaxy, you know, the Gosseyn-type, and made the trip using different bodies, they've actually set everything up so that they can go back. Obviously, when you come from somewhere, you eventually want to go back. That would be the third story, called 'The Return Of Null-A.' I have told Fred Pohl that I will do it. Now, I don't know whether that means it will actually happen or not. I have written bits and pieces of it for my own amazement and I understand General Semantics ten-times as good as I did then.

Q. In World, why did you name your protagonist 'Gosseyn?' Was it strictly tongue-in-cheek?

A. That was purely accidental. No, I saw that a man of that name existed about two thousand years ago, in the middle-east. When I say 'of that name', it was spelled that way in the article that I was reading. I looked at that and I thought, 'Two thousand years ago? That name?' I thought 'Well, I'll be damned!' I picked it up right away and put it into my story! That was an unusual name.

Q. It fit properly, I think.

A. Yes, go sane.

Q. Go sane in the world.

A. Right. It was an ideal name. That's how I got it.

Q. Aside from World and Players, what relationships do you see between General Semantics and science fiction? Now, perhaps, as opposed to what you were seeing back in the mid-forties.

A. Now, to me, General Semantics is only an enduring truth that I can use in a story, that aspect of it. It is not something that combines with science fiction except that it is part of my trinity of requirements in a story.

Q. Did you ever read Manhood Of Humanity?

A. No, I never read that book. Maybe it was a hard book to get. You know, Science And Sanity wasn't that easy to get.

Everything that I've read by Korzybski, when I examine a paragraph of his, I'm fascinated! He's saying something every minute! He makes sense to me, moment by moment. I can't think of anything specifically at the moment, but whenever I read anything I think, 'By God! He knows what he's talking about!' He's thinking the thoughts that I've had, it's taken me all of these years to work on some of these understandings, and he's saying it right there. I didn't understand some things when I read them at first, but when I go back, I realize, shall we say, he knows what I now know! I think that Korzybski was a better man than I am in terms of thinking about what he's talking about. But, you have to make it your own by grasping it and it's not anybody else's that way, you see. For example, I find in Hayakawa's first book on the subject,[4] he uses the terms 'purr' and 'snarl words'. But, you see, I find those unsatisfactory terms. Because what I came up with in connection with that was the concept of the 'defining word', which defeats the mind.

I gave a couple of talks at universities which I call, 'Semantics Of Twenty-First Century Science.' I go into a lot of this kind of thing, the words of science. Examples are: 'elements' in chemistry, 'lazy' and 'bum' and 'criminal'. These are unfortunate words.

Q. These are multiordinal words. Are you suggesting that we should get rid of these words? Isn't this part of what Korzybski was talking about?

A. Yes! Whenever I read the guy, I realize that he said all of this.

Q. In the important situations--

A. --we should understand what we're doing. Absolutely! Otherwise, we are doing something to the brain. We're conditioned and therefore we cannot have a creative thought! And I would say that is one of the reasons whay we have a limited number of really creative people, because of the number of defining terms in science at the present time, in every science. In law, the lawyer is trained in certain terms. He doesn't look at the world anymore, then, in human terms. He looks at the world only in those terms which are defined for him.

Q. It seems to me that what you've been saying can also be just as formidable in everyday living.

A. Well, you see, that's what my 'Semantics Of Love', talk was all about. I define some of the simple words that are used in relationships of man and woman.

Q. Can we say then, that if we have less of these defining words we would have a better world?

A. Unfortunately, 'better' is a defining-word. I do this all the time to myself. The English language, and I presume [this is the case with] all languages, is absolutely loaded!

Q. You caught me! But thanks, It's good for me! But, if we got rid of these defining-words, what kind of a world would we have?

A. My own feeling would be that everything would be more relaxed and there would be less tension, immediately.

Q. What has General Semantics meant to you personally and professionally?

A. Professionally, I merely wrote two novels, shall we say. I completed the last one in 1948 and at that time I joined the International Society for General Semantics. I didn't know at the time that the Institute also accepted memberships. I joined the local

International branch. I have supported it ever since and I read <u>ETC.</u> I find some of it dull, et cetera. They've really killed the thing to some extent by being too academic about it. What interested me is the fact that I could go out there and talk to people, which I did to various groups on different subjects, and find that interest [in General Semantics] could be aroused that quickly. All through those years I discovered that I did the following. I would start to make some positive statement, like, 'Well, you noticed that I just used an <u>all-ness</u> there.' Or, I would say, 'Well, now we've got to <u>date</u> that a little bit, and I think we need to define our terms here a little better.' I would automatically hold up two sets of fingers, like this, when I used a word that I wanted to put in quotes. I would actually do that, almost unthinking. Some people would say, 'What are you doing? Two little rabbits!' You look odd, et cetera. But it didn't bother me and I'd have a chance to explain. Essentially, by doing that, and consciously reconsidering all these things I started to be able to suspend judgment. I did not jump to an instant conclusion about something.

Q. Why has General Semantics not been well received sometimes?

A. Well, whenever I read <u>ETC.</u>, and I read it over the years, I discovered that there was a whole group of psychiatrists that had accepted General Semantics to some degree. All kinds of people who were really very kind to comment at all in <u>ETC.</u>, but they were altering it. They were arguing with Korzybski. They were not accepting, they had their own definitions of the things that he said. They tore him to pieces, a little bit. My own feeling is that they were wrong and he was right. As a result, he got academically mangled. I remember an ex-student, maybe he was a graduate student, and he said he had joined up in the semantics class at UCLA, or something like that. The professor opened up the class with this statement: 'Now, if any of you are here because of that Korzybski nonsense, forget it!' That was his opening sentence. The student said from that moment on they were dealing with historical semantics.

The presentation of General Semantics is probably too intellectual.

By the way, in France, <u>The World Of Null-A</u> was reprinted there about three years ago and has been in print ever since, mind you, as a quality paperback. [5] And <u>Players Of Null-A</u> is close behind. I get letters from people in universities wanting to know if I have more information about General Semantics, et cetera.

Q. Did you ever meet Korzybski?

A. No, never did.

Q. You've met Hayakawa, I presume.

A. Yes, I have. I don't know if he would remember me or not. I went up to him and shook hands with him at a lecture that he gave. I saw him one other time and he knew who I was when I identified myself so it was not a totally blank situation but, I mean, we didn't say anything to each other.

Q. Did you meet Irving Lee?

A. No. I met a number of the local people, years ago. I did not go to many General Semantics meetings. But, I delivered a couple of lectures at the local club, many years ago. You know, I completed my study of General Semantics, in a sense, in 1948.

Q. You had written me to that effect and I didn't quite understand what you meant.

A. Well, you see, that doesn't mean I'm through with it. I'm still a member of the association. I now belong to the Institute also. So these are subjects that remain, but I'm not involved in them. For awhile, I was involved in General Semantics with a great feeling, et cetera. But I looked at that many times, you know, because I'm not happy with being involved in anything!

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