

## IN THE NAME OF SKEPTICISM: MARTIN GARDNER'S MISREPRESENTATIONS OF GENERAL SEMANTICS

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All too often, in diverse forums, principles and formulations originating from general semantics (GS) remain unacknowledged as *general semantics* or get watered down in various ways. This seems due not only to ignorance of their source or through misinterpretations of it, but also from fear of being associated with either GS or Alfred Korzybski, the originator of the discipline.

For instance, the editor of an anthology of GS-related articles once informed a close associate of mine that one of the potential contributors, a behavioral scientist, had withdrawn his article. The man had 'second thoughts' about coming out openly in print with his GS-inspired formulations. This, he worried, might damage his academic career.

Given the potential importance of Korzybski's work, why has it not become better known among those whose fields it affects? And more importantly, how did it become marginalized by some philosophers and skeptics? And why, in the year 2004, do some people fear being associated with it?

In this article, I examine the influential critique of general semantics made by Martin Gardner, one of its main opponents. In my view, a close look at Gardner's writings on GS will provide insight into some of the current confusion about and neglect of GS by the educated public and various academic communities.

### The King of Korzybski Bashers

In the March 2002 edition of *Scientific American*, Michael Shermer, a well-known science writer and skeptic, devoted his monthly column, "Skeptic," to the work of Martin Gardner. Gardner launched the modern skeptic movement in 1952 with his book, *In the Name of Science*, renamed *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*, in 1957. Shermer listed Korzybski among a motley group of now forgotten and irrelevant 'pseudoscientists' and 'pseudosciences' that Gardner wrote about in his early book. The book is "still in print," Shermer wrote, and is "arguably the skeptic classic of the past half a century."<sup>1</sup>

Arguably, indeed!

In this book, Gardner served as a 'hitman', devoting most of Chapter 23—"General Semantics, Etc."—to a critique which lambasted Korzybski and labeled GS a 'cult'. As a philosophy student at the time he first encountered Korzybski, Gardner's antipathy may well have been triggered in part by A.K.'s occasional disparaging remarks about certain philosophers in his lectures and in his book: "'Pure' extension is humanly impossible; 'pure' intension is possible, and is often found in hospitals for 'mentally' ill, and in some chairs of 'philosophy'."<sup>2</sup>

In any case, sniping at Korzybski and GS has remained a persistent albeit minor theme throughout Gardner's career. Something about Korzybski's work got under Gardner's skin, and he intermittently scratched away at the irritant for more than forty years, with inaccuracy and invective.

Gardner's misrepresentations and their not inconsiderable influence constitute, I think, a significant source of the transmission of false knowledge about GS in the scientific, philosophical, academic communities. Admiring skeptics like Shermer have continued the chain of error.

Shermer, an energetic psychologist/social scientist and historian/philosopher of science, founded The Skeptic Society and *Skeptic* magazine, writes books, appears on radio and television, has a regular

column in *Scientific American* devoted to skeptic issues, and seems to be taking up Gardner's mantle as a leader of the skeptic movement.

### The Trouble with Looking for 'Cranks'

The following excerpt from Shermer's March 2002 *Scientific American* column, "Hermits and Cranks," provides a basis for looking at Gardner's attempts to turn Korzybski into a pseudoscientific 'crank':

What I find especially valuable about Gardner's views are his insights into the differences between science and pseudoscience...How can we tell if someone is a scientific crank? Gardner offers this advice: (1) "First and most important of these traits is that cranks work in almost total isolation from their colleagues." Cranks typically do not understand how the scientific process operates[,] that they need to try out their ideas on colleagues, attend conferences and publish their hypotheses in peer-reviewed journals before announcing to the world their startling discovery. Of course, when you explain this to them they say that their ideas are too radical for the conservative scientific establishment to accept. (2) "A second characteristic of the pseudo-scientist, which greatly strengthens his isolation, is a tendency toward paranoia ..."

Shermer quotes from Gardner the following criteria of crank paranoia:

(1) He considers himself a genius. (2) He regards his colleagues, without exception, as ignorant blockheads.... (3) He believes himself unjustly persecuted and discriminated against. The recognized societies refuse to let him lecture. The journals reject his papers and either ignore his books or assign them to "enemies" for review. It is all part of a dastardly plot. It never occurs to the crank that this opposition may be due to error in his work.... (4) He has strong compulsions to focus his attacks on the greatest scientists and the best-established theories. When Newton was the outstanding name in physics, eccentric works in that science were violently anti-Newton. Today, with Einstein the father-symbol of authority, a crank theory of physics is likely to attack Einstein.... (5) He often has a tendency to write in a complex jargon, in many cases making use of terms and phrases he himself has coined.<sup>3</sup>

A careful analysis of Gardner's writings about GS indicates the folly of honoring Gardner's 'founding command' to guard the 'borderland' of science by applying his particular criteria of crankdom to unorthodox but potentially promising systems like general semantics.

The main problem with depending on the criteria of crankdom to determine the value of a set of formulations was noted by philosopher Morris R. Cohen: "If the premises are sufficient, they are so no matter by whom stated."<sup>4</sup> Gardner's criteria not only do not rule out the scientific value of a set of formulations, quite the contrary, they can encourage the premature rejection of potentially useful viewpoints.

A skeptic who presumes to defend *science* has the duty to adopt an 'impartial' scientific attitude and carefully examine controversial viewpoints on their own merits. Overzealous 'fringe watchers' defining and guarding the borderlands of science, may make some very serious miscalculations—particularly when they become overly dependent upon, and uncritically apply, these criteria, based on presumed character traits, for detecting 'cranks' and 'pseudoscientists'.

Gardner's criteria can easily become excuses for ad hominem attacks, as we see in his apparently shameless attack on Korzybski. A self-anointed fringe-watcher can very easily slip into an attitude in which he tries to confirm his beliefs in someone else's 'crankdom'. Unless he applies the criteria very carefully with an attitude based on fairness, they can provide an excuse for an inquisition—a distortion of 'facts' about a person and his views which can block the way of inquiry.

### **Name-Calling and the Art of the Fascinating Irrelevancy**

Gardner referred to GS as a “cult,” starting with his first sentence in Chapter 23 of *Fads and Fallacies* and continuing throughout the chapter. In this example of the *petitio principii* fallacy or “begging the question,” Gardner prompted readers to assume a controversial point before he offered any proof. This fallacy has an interesting neuro-linguistic aspect—keep calling GS a ‘cult’ long enough and maybe the label will stick. For some it has. Such name-calling has a ‘thought-stopping’, inquiry-blocking quality. It does not belong in the ‘toolbox’ of any fair-minded skeptic.

The level of Gardner’s argument remained surprisingly puerile but, since his work continues to get uncritically referred to, perhaps Gardner knew a thing or two about getting his point across, even to those whom, I would have hoped, would know better. Martin Maloney noted Gardner’s use of “the technique of the fascinating irrelevancy.”<sup>5</sup> Consider this melange of fact and inference:

The Count’s institute [sic] of General Semantics, near the University of Chicago, was established in 1938 with funds provided by a wealthy Chicago manufacturer of bathroom equipment, Cornelius Crane. Its street number, formerly 1232, was changed to 1234 so that when it was followed by “East Fifty-Sixth Street” there would be six numbers in serial order.<sup>6</sup>

The facts about Crane’s business and the Institute street number would be considered irrelevant in themselves to a critic playing by the rules of an adult skepticism. Gardner’s implied suggestion that Korzybski indulged in numerology has no basis in reality. In fact, Korzybski found numerology objectionable, a position that a thorough reader of his work would understand. He did not choose the building for any reason other than location, space and cost, nor did he change the street number. He simply found it curious.<sup>7</sup> To suggest otherwise (“Its street number...was changed...”) shows the level that Gardner often descended to throughout his intermittent career of denouncing general semantics.<sup>8</sup>

### **Korzybski and his Colleagues**

Throughout the chapter on GS (as he did in his other writings on the subject), Gardner worked to make a case that Korzybski operated as a ‘hermit’, an isolated loner utterly outside the stream of the scientific activity of his lifetime. “Cranks work in almost total isolation from their colleagues...in the sense of having no fruitful contacts with fellow researchers.”<sup>9</sup>

If Korzybski ‘was’ a crank, *by definition* he must have worked in total isolation. Gardner’s ‘investigations’ confirmed this for him: “Modern works of scientific philosophy and psychiatry contain almost no references to the Count’s theories.”<sup>10</sup> Gardner must not have looked very hard.

While Korzybski did not find much of value in the works of many philosophers of his day, he did acknowledge the work (and impact on his formulations) of Mach, Poincaré, Cassirer, Royce, Russell, Whitehead, Oliver Reiser, and F. S. C. Northrop, et al. Philosophers like Reiser and Northrop, and French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, among others, had an interest in and wrote about GS. Korzybski did not, as Gardner claimed, cast “sly aspersions on almost every contemporary major philosopher except Bertrand Russell.”<sup>11</sup>

Lexicographer and GS-scholar Allen Walker Read pointed out:

Korzybski discriminated carefully between sound philosophers, such as Russell and Whitehead, and unsound philosophers; but he made his way hard for himself by excoriating philosophers as a body in no uncertain terms. They in turn have ever since given him their cold shoulder. It is my own

observation that a line divides philosophers into two groups—those who are aware of the neurological basis of human reaction, and those who ignore neuro-linguistic issues...To some people, ‘thinking’ seems to take place in a vacuum. I remember a discussion many years ago with a professor who assured me that he was talking about “pure mentation,” and not about the nervous system at all. Sometimes it is called “ratiocination.” Such people assume that they can live and think in a realm outside physical constraints.<sup>12</sup>

Gardner’s anti-GS jihad involved one unwarranted claim after another about Korzybski’s supposed paranoid inability to acknowledge important predecessors and colleagues or supposed paranoid tendency to attack them. For example, Gardner wrote “One finds in *Science and Sanity* almost no recognition of the fact that the battle against bad linguistic habits of thought had been waged for centuries by philosophers of many schools.”<sup>13</sup>

What nonsense!

In *Science and Sanity* you will find a huge set of bibliographic references, as well as a dedication, acknowledgements, and extensive notes which demonstrate Korzybski’s recognition of his time-binding debt to other formulators, including some philosophers. The book also contains, in Korzybski’s words, a “large number of important quotations” at the beginnings of its parts and chapters. He wanted

...to make the reader aware that, on the one hand, there is already afloat in the ‘universe of discourse’ a great deal of genuine knowledge and wisdom, and that, on the other hand, this wisdom is not generally applied and, to a large extent, cannot be applied as long as we fail to build a simple system based on the complete elimination of the pathological factors.<sup>14</sup>

Korzybski’s failure to take much note of the work of John Dewey was presented by Gardner as an example of how Korzybski ignored modern philosophers. As indicated in the bibliography of *Science and Sanity*, Korzybski was familiar with Dewey’s work. However, his not discussing it in at any length hardly proves ‘crankdom’ on Korzybski’s part. Although pointed in a similar direction, Korzybski and Dewey simply moved along different tracks.

Interestingly enough, Korzybski for a period had an intensive correspondence with Arthur F. Bentley, a social scientist and philosopher who collaborated with Dewey in a 1949 foray into scientific epistemology—*Knowing and the Known*. Gardner might have found it salutary to consider what Dewey and Bentley said about Korzybski at one point in their book, after they had traced a trail of confused formulating regarding symbols, words, entities, etc., in the philosophy of Bertrand Russell (whom, in spite of his faults, Korzybski admired greatly):

Fusion of “symbol” and “entity” is what Russell demands, and confusion is what he gets. With an exhibit as prominent as this in the world, it is no wonder that Korzybski has felt it necessary to devote so much of his writings to the insistent declaration that the word is not the thing. His continual insistence upon this point will remain a useful public service until, at length, the day comes when a thorough theory of the organization of behavioral word and cosmic fact has been constructed.<sup>15</sup>

Korzybski collaborated and corresponded with some of the most important scientists, mathematicians, and psychiatrists of his day. He received acknowledgement from many of them. These included mathematician/philosopher Cassius J. Keyser, William Alanson White, M.D. (one of the leading American psychiatrists in the early twentieth century), and the geneticist C. B. Bridges (who helped him edit the first draft of *Science and Sanity*), among many others.

Gardner neglected to mention that Korzybski had studied ‘mental’ illness for two years under White’s supervision at St. Elisabeths Hospital in Washington D.C. in the 1920s. While there,

Korzybski conferred regularly with the psychiatrists at the hospital, interviewed patients, attended meetings, reviewed cases, etc. Korzybski certainly *did not* work in isolation, contradicting Gardner's "first and most important" criteria for identifying pseudo-scientists. It seems highly unlikely that White would have let Korzybski anywhere near St. Elisabeths if he thought Korzybski was a crank.

Both Keyser and White wrote about and used Korzybski's formulations quite explicitly in their work. Before his untimely death, Bridges had worked on using GS to create a non-aristotelian formulation of theoretical biology.<sup>16</sup> Hervey Cleckley, M.D., a psychiatrist whose work on psychopathy, *The Mask of Sanity*, is considered a classic, reformulated the second edition of his book to take into account his studies in GS.<sup>17</sup> And the list goes on.

Although people like Gardner and philosopher Ernest Nagel seemed to take an intense dislike to Korzybski and his work, there were many others like mathematician Edward Kasner, who said: "...I got to know Korzybski and under the influence of Keyser I started reading and admiring him...Korzybski is the only one that I ever met who united and had equal interest in mathematics and psychiatry. To me they seemed to dominate his career. He had a very sane view of mathematics....The more I read the more I have admired Korzybski..."<sup>18</sup>

Korzybski delivered many of his papers at scientific, mathematical, and psychiatric meetings and had articles in such publications as *Science* and *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, among others.

Soon after Korzybski's death, an obituary comment in the May, 1950 edition of *The American Journal of Psychiatry* stated: "The death of this great teacher...deepens appreciation of his essential contribution to human understanding, on an individual, widely social, or international scale."<sup>19</sup>

### Constructing a 'Crank'

"A second tendency of the pseudo-scientist, which greatly strengthens his isolation is a tendency toward paranoia."<sup>20</sup> I have already dealt with some suggestions of this by Gardner in relation to Korzybski and his colleagues, suggestions without substance. As part of further efforts to prove 'paranoiac tendencies,' Gardner asserted that Korzybski "believed himself one of the world's greatest living thinkers."<sup>21</sup>

How did Gardner know this? For someone who made part of a career out of debunking so-called psychics, Gardner didn't feel at all shy about demonstrating his own 'psychic' abilities, declaring 'what Korzybski believed about himself' without documentation from any source. How else could Gardner know unless he was dipping into 'the cosmic well of knowing' that 'psychics' are supposed to dip into? Seriously—Gardner provided no evidence that Korzybski ever said or believed this. Gardner's assertion remains another of his uncritical inferences masquerading as a statement of fact—"proof" that Korzybski was a crank.

However, there does remain the question of whether Korzybski overestimated the significance of his work. Again, Allen Walker Read:

Korzybski has been accused, in speaking of his own work, of overstating its value and importance. Martin Gardner has called it too strong an 'ego drive'. But our Robert Pula has a good riposte to that. Drawing from a Polish source [Stanislaw J. Lec—Ed.], he quoted: "A man who is a genius and doesn't know it, probably isn't."

In the academic world it is expected that a scholar should build up a reputation in some specialty, and from that base go on to synthesize other fields into his own. Korzybski did not do this, but was a 'system builder' from a base as an engineer, if anything. He drew from a wider range of fields,



some people thought, then he had competence in. The professors at the University of Chicago kept asking, “What right does he have to pontificate as he does?”<sup>22</sup>

Gardner—a former Christian fundamentalist who took up philosophy at the University of Chicago and lost, at least, the Christian part—was possibly influenced by these professors’ attitudes.<sup>23</sup> He attended some lectures that Korzybski gave while the Institute was in Chicago.<sup>24</sup> Allen Walker Read, then working in Chicago, knew Gardner:

Among the budding philosophers on the...campus was a graduate student named Martin Gardner, whom I knew and respected, but who picked up a contemptuous attitude from the department there. He later, in 1951, pilloried general semantics in his influential book *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*. This was not completely honest of him, since he admitted that Korzybski’s work was “controversial, borderline,” and that it “may or may not have considerable [scientific] merit.” I conferred with Gardner as he was writing the book and found that he was unduly influenced by a published report from Los Angeles that a group of Korzybski’s followers were founding a “General Semantics Church” and were about to go underground to preserve the purity of the faith from the impending destruction of the world. It turned out that within a few weeks this group lost its interest in general semantics and embraced scientology. But in this land of free speech, Korzybski could not prevent a few ‘loonies’, as I regard them, from proclaiming an alleged association with him.<sup>25</sup>

If Read advised Gardner not to ‘go there’, Gardner chose not to listen and linked GS to this ‘Church’ and to Scientology—then called “Dianetics”—which Gardner seemed to consider similar to the GS ‘cult’ but “more exciting.”<sup>26</sup> This appears especially ironic since two of the first serious critiques of Dianetics—L. Ron Hubbard’s famous entry into ‘fiction science’—had been published nearly simultaneously in two GS publications in 1951, the year before Gardner’s book appeared. One was written by the korzybskian psychiatrist Dr. Douglas M. Kelley, in *General Semantics Bulletin*, and the other, written by S. I. Hayakawa, appeared in *ETC*.<sup>27</sup>

The terminology that Korzybski developed for general semantics appeared to Gardner as further proof of Korzybski’s paranoid ‘crankdom’. Gardner’s jeering attitude toward Korzybski’s linguistic innovations was expressed in his description of them as “neologisms,” a term sometimes used to describe the ‘word salad’ of schizophrenics. “Many of the classics of crackpot science exhibit a neologistic tendency.”<sup>28</sup> For example, according to Gardner, “Most contemporary philosophers who use the word “semantics,” restrict it to the study of the meaning of words and other symbols. In contrast, the Count used the word so broadly that it became almost meaningless.”<sup>29</sup>

On the contrary, Korzybski carefully distinguished between *semantics* and *general semantics*, and consistently used the word “semantics” to refer to the linguistic/philosophical study of word ‘meanings’. What was Gardner talking about?

He seems to have confused the noun “semantics” with the adjective “semantic.” Clearly, Gardner was bothered by Korzybski’s use of the adjective “semantic,” as in “semantic reaction,” but despite Mr. Gardner’s irritability, there seems to be nothing particularly crackpot about that terminology.

Korzybski developed the term “semantic reaction(s)” to describe our nervous-system reactions to verbal and/or nonverbal events. The ‘meanings’ in such reactions consist mainly of non-verbal, organism-as-a-whole responses which underly any verbal response we may have. For example, a menacing dog confronts you and you react with a *neuro-semantic reaction*, i.e., you react with a primarily nonverbal ‘meaning’ for that situation, i.e. you evaluate it. (Hence “evaluational” is sometimes substituted for “semantic,” e.g., “evaluational [semantic] reaction.”)

By comparison, in the field of semantics, the term “semantic” refers to limited, verbal, definitional ‘meanings’ considered in isolation from an evaluating organism. *General Semantics is a different field*. To understand the use of the term “semantic,” you have to know the context and what field you are in.

It is true that even some prominent general semanticists confused *general semantics* with *semantics* in their writings, but Korzybski surely didn’t. As Read said, “Perhaps the closest synonym to Korzybski’s use of *semantic* is *evaluative*. When the reference is specifically to the system he has developed, he is careful to use the term general semantic(s).”<sup>30</sup>

In fact, Korzybski was so insistent on keeping the two fields separate, that his opposition to the tendency to refer to general semantics as “semantics” (and Hayakawa’s apparent refusal to *stop* referring to it as “semantics”) played a major role in splitting the general-semantics ‘world’ into two camps. We have only now begun to close this rift.

Gardner seriously misrepresented his friend Allen Walker Read’s scholarly work when he wrote that, “As Read points out, Korzybski considered a plant tropism, such as growing up instead of down, a ‘semantic reaction’.”<sup>31</sup>

Korzybski never made such a claim and Read was much too careful a scholar of GS to have pointed out what Gardner said he did. Korzybski, inspired by Jacques Loeb, had an interest in plant tropisms because he sought to understand the organic basis of human evaluative reactions and their continuity with the ‘irritability’ and ‘reactivity’ of simpler organisms.

In contrast to Gardner’s misreading, another critic of Korzybski, philosopher Max Black, came much closer to the actual “operational,” “physiological” character of Korzybski’s formulation of evaluational[semantic] reactions. As Black stated:

The important decision is now made to use physiological criteria of meaning, i.e., to test statements about meanings by observations of what is known or assumed to be happening in the nervous system of a biological organism. This choice of procedure gives a distinctive slant to Korzybski’s investigations, for he is, in his own words, mainly interested in “the neurological attitude toward ‘meaning’.”<sup>32</sup>

In other ways, Black misread *Science and Sanity* as much as Gardner did. However, to his credit, Black also found something of value in Korzybski’s use of language. Black wrote “Any reader of Korzybski’s major work, *Science and Sanity*, must be impressed by the liveliness, vigor, and freshness of the exposition.”<sup>33</sup>

Gardner, however, found very little of value:

[*Science and Sanity*] is a poorly organized, verbose, philosophically naïve, repetitious mish-mash of sound ideas borrowed from abler scientists and philosophers, mixed with neologisms, confused ideas, unconscious metaphysics, and highly dubious speculations about neurology and psychiatric therapy.<sup>34</sup>

Observe how confidently ‘skeptic’ Gardner speaks about “highly dubious speculations” in neurology and psychiatric therapy. Yet Gardner did not know enough about those areas to properly assess Korzybski’s work.

In contrast to Gardner’s personal opinion, we have the reports of well-known scholars in those fields who praised Korzybski’s work. (I’ve already mentioned the psychiatrist, William Alanson White.) The noted neurosurgeon, Dr. Russell Meyers, MD, FSC, had this to say in a 1971 letter to M. Kendig:

...I have just re-read *Science and Sanity* (my 8th run) and am so deeply impressed with it as to now say, without reservation, that, disregarding its rhetoric (in the main, its repetitious statements), it is far and away the most profound, insightful and globally significant book I have ever read.

With some knowledge of the interim developments of science and the socio-political events that have materialized since 1933, I can say in retrospect that any modifications that might now have to be made in the original text would be trivial, mainly technological supplements; none in principle ('structure'-as-function). A.K. [Alfred Korzybski] has proved far more a prophet than he would ever have allowed himself to fancy. What a tremendous breadth and depth of insight, analytic and synthetic achievement! <sup>35</sup>

Dr. Meyers was Chief of Neurology and Neurosurgery, Williamson Appalachian Regional Hospital, 1963-1974; and Chairman, Division of Neurosurgery, and Professor of Surgery, University of Iowa, 1946-1963. He produced hundreds of scholarly papers in a wide variety of scientific fields, many of the same fields about which Korzybski wrote so well. And he was not the only prominent neurologist who praised Korzybski, e.g., the late C. Judson Herrick, Professor of Neurology, University of Chicago.<sup>36</sup>

### With a Little Help From Korzybski's 'Friends'

Gardner appreciated much more the work of Korzybski's student S. I. Hayakawa, whose watered-down version of GS, which Hayakawa often called "semantics," seemed more palatable to Gardner.<sup>37</sup> In a review of a book by Hayakawa's long-time colleague Anatol Rapoport, Ralph C. Hamilton (a former staff member of the Institute of General Semantics who had studied and worked with Korzybski) touched on a point central not only to Rapoport's but also to Hayakawa's versions of 'semantics,' throughout much of both men's careers:

As an exposition of non-aristotelian outlook and method this book [*Science and the Goals of Man*] offers little to a newcomer to the field. It would not take him to the core of non-aristotelianism or, specifically, general semantics and probably would mislead him in this way: the structure of language Rapoport uses implies and reinstates the very aristotelian premises which his professed non-aristotelian orientation would supersede. He talks about the new orientations but seldom uses them here. To explain them to the man in the street he reverts to that man's habitual frame of reference, and finds himself in the position of a modern physicist trying to explain relativity in terms of the 'ether', 'gravitation', euclidean 'straight line' geometry, 'space', 'time', 'matter', and so on.<sup>38</sup>

Hayakawa's and, to a lesser extent, Rapoport's writing skills, longevity, popularity and influence are not in doubt. Their writings and those of popularizers like Stuart Chase introduced many people to Korzybski's work—good, from my point of view, however unfortunate such promotion may have seemed to Gardner. Nonetheless, I don't consider their work a completely unmixed blessing. In Allen Walker Read's words, "From reading Hayakawa one would never get the impression of richness and depth that Korzybski actually provides."<sup>39</sup> Read quoted from Yale philosopher F. S. C. Northrop's 1954 Korzybski Memorial Lecture in which Northrop said:

The problem, therefore, of understanding Count Korzybski's semantics [sic] is much more complex than many of his simple-minded expositors have supposed. It requires a clarification of the type of conceptual meaning which appears in mathematical physics as well as of the type of conceptual meaning which is present in the more purely inductive, natural history sciences and in so much of common sense experience.<sup>40</sup>

I'd like to note the importance—here as elsewhere—of indexing, in this case indexing 'general semanticists'. Despite their simplifications and oversimplifications, Hayakawa and Chase probably had much positive effect in getting Korzybski's work into greater public view. For years, Hayakawa, an English professor, edited *ETC.: A Review of General Semantics* with a consistently high standard of scholarship, readability, and interest. His excellent books, with their focus on language, led



at least some people to explore Korzybski's broader realm. And he consistently gave credit to Korzybski without, as far as I know, denigrating his teacher. (See my article "Getting Off Hayakawa's Ladder" for my detailed assessment of Hayakawa's presentation of GS in his book, *Language in Thought and Action*.)<sup>41</sup>

On the other hand, despite his training as a mathematical physicist, Rapoport reports that he found no value in Korzybski's work without the help of his mentor, English professor Hayakawa (see the first chapter of Rapoport's memoir *Certainty and Doubt*). Although he served Hayakawa as an assistant editor of *ETC.* for about 20 years, Rapoport, who made a name for himself in systems theory and mathematical approaches to the social sciences, had an especially uneasy relationship with Korzybski and his work. Rapoport waxed hot and cold on GS throughout his long career and at times seemed similar to Gardner in the level of inaccurate portrayal, misinterpretation and nasty invective against Korzybski, both in print and to colleagues.

Ed MacNeal, a creative general-semantics writer, who knew Rapoport at the University of Chicago during the 1940s, described what seems to me a typical outburst by Rapoport, one which does not appear to contain even one statement of fact:

... Anatol Rapoport, of "prisoner's dilemma" and other fame, asked about Korzybski, "If he was not a crackpot... why was he so repetitive, verbose, pugnacious, redundant and self-congratulatory, manifesting all the symptoms of crackpot delusions?" A campus joke from the 1940s went, "Do you know the difference between ceramics and semantics? Semantics is crackpottery."<sup>42</sup>

Remembering the importance of temporal indexing or dating, I looked at Rapoport's memoir of 2001, to see if any significant change had occurred in these views. Unfortunately, the 'bad-mouthing' has continued. Korzybski bashers like Gardner couldn't have done much better than what 'semantics' 'friends' like Rapoport did at times.

### Did Gardner Reform?

Gardner and Rapoport clearly did not see the richness and complexity that Northrop and others found in Korzybski's work. After the first edition of Gardner's 'skeptic' classic, came out in 1952, Korzybski's co-worker M. [Marjorie] Kendig, who became Director of the Institute of General Semantics after his death, decided that she would not waste the Institute staff's and her own time dealing in depth with what some saw as an attempt at character assassination:

...Mr. Gardner appears to be a gifted writer. He reports with gusto opinions about opinions and gossips about gossip (some have called them 'malicious distortions'). His biases and sources are easily spotted if one 'knows the field'. Correcting errors of fact is a simple business. Disentangling this potpourri of fact, fable, and fallacy would take some weeks. Analysis would fill a volume. And to what purpose? We are up against 'the perpetuation of error' in print. When, if ever, has the tortoise of facts overtaken that hare? I, for one, doubt that we need to defend Korzybski at this late date. [Obviously, I disagree with Kendig on this last point.—BIK]

I content myself with the statement that Gardner's interpretations and most of his data about Korzybski are as far from accurate as his obvious error in citing page 800 of *Science and Sanity* for a quote which is not within 500 pages thereof...<sup>43</sup>

This error, not surprisingly, was not corrected in the second edition. Up to and including 1993, when he published an article on E-Prime in *Skeptical Inquirer*, Gardner continued his mudslinging with generous dollops from *Fads and Fallacies*. Several people knowledgeable in GS (including myself) responded to the 1993 article with letters to the editor which were published with Gardner's response to them, wherein he wrote:

Readers are urged to check the final chapter of Max Black's *Language and Philosophy...* [Korzybski's] misunderstanding of Aristotelian logic, Black writes, led him into countless absurdities. "Very little remains of Korzybski's theory of abstractions except some hypothetical neurology fortified with dogmatic metaphysics." Ernest Nagel, reviewing Black's book, said: "Black's restrained but nonetheless devastating critique of the basic ideas on which Korzybski rests his pretentious claim is alone worth the price of the book."<sup>44</sup>

(To his credit, Gardner republished these letters with his article in his 1996 book, *Weird Water and Fuzzy Logic*.)

To find out if there were indeed anything to Gardner's and Nagel's claims about Black's critique, which I had not read before, I undertook a serious in-depth examination of Black's chapter. The results of my research were published in an article in *General Semantics Bulletin* in 1997. In my article, "Contra Max Black," I showed that although Black raised a few valid points, his arguments appear far from "devastating" and result mainly from a misreading of Korzybski's work.

A copy was sent to Gardner but was never acknowledged so I have no idea whether he ever received or read it. I like to think that he did and that it might have had some effect, since I have not heard any further anti-korzybskian sounds from his direction. Perhaps this silence about GS indicates he has learned something. I don't know.

At any rate, although he still writes, Gardner seems near the end of his career and whatever damage he has personally done to Korzybski's reputation and to GS has been done. Or perhaps not, as others like Shermer have taken up his mantle, uncritically referring to his old work on Korzybski (which he himself may have second thoughts about by now) and seem intent on repeating his at-times mistaken approach to skepticism.

For all the 'good' Gardner may have done in criticizing deserving nonsense, the failure of leading skeptics and skeptics organizations to acknowledge Gardner's unskeptical abuse of a great scientific-philosophical formulator like Korzybski indicates some problems within the 'skeptic' movement and within some parts of the related scientific, humanist and academic communities as well. (Note well—I am not excoriating all skeptics, scientists, humanists, or academics here!)

For me, Gardner's writings on GS and Korzybski remain a low point of a particular style of scientific skepticism, which I dub "the horselaugh school." Gardner, hailed as one of "the ten outstanding skeptics of the twentieth century," took as his motto a witty saying from H. L. Mencken, "One horselaugh is worth ten-thousand syllogisms."<sup>45</sup> In his work on (or, perhaps more aptly stated, his 'working over') of Korzybski and GS, Gardner exposed the limitations of this motto. Although there remains a place for satire and humor in skeptical writing, derision does not work well as a general strategy for legitimate skepticism. Gardner's picking at GS actually constitutes an 'Achilles heel' for Gardner and a continuing source of embarrassment for the skeptic movement.

I consider this an occasion for genuine sadness. For Gardner has also done significant legitimate work as a skeptic and as a writer/critic about science and mathematics. Serious students of general semantics share in a general skeptical outlook. Gardner's vituperations—as well as those of other eminent anti-korzybskians who should have known better, like Sydney Hook, W. V. Quine, Ernest Nagel, and Max Black—drove a wedge between "skeptics" and their korzybskian allies.

It also put other debunking efforts by Gardner into question—at least in the eyes of some people—as well it should have. If Gardner could so misrepresent Korzybski's work, one wonders what else he might have misrepresented during his long career. How much trust can one give to a 'fringe watcher'—which Gardner has called himself—who does not seem to be able to adequately distinguish between a flat-earth enthusiast and a Korzybski?

How unfortunate that Gardner couldn't sufficiently delay his anti-korzybskian logorrhea long enough to consider general semantics more fairly. Instead, this description by Lichtenberg seems to fit Gardner's published sniping at Korzybski and general semantics from 1952 to 1996: "He can't hold his ink; and when he feels a desire to befoul someone, he usually befools himself most."<sup>46</sup>

"Misread, unread, and superficially treated" has been the lot of Benjamin Lee Whorf's work, writes Whorf scholar Penny Lee.<sup>47</sup> Korzybski's related work has shared a similar lot. However, the transmission of errors about Korzybski, general semantics and the non-aristotelian orientation, based on hostile and/or oversimplifying opponents—and followers—will no longer do.

We have now reached a time when philosophers, scientists, as well as laypeople—who are seeking to create a broadened understanding of 'science' and its relation to humanity—should reexamine previously accepted 'skeptical' accounts of general semantics.

There is important work to be done in taking general semantics as a whole and applying it to problems, integrating it with related theories and approaches, developing it, and reassessing it in the light of new understandings and data in science, philosophy, etc.

General Semantics deserves to be taken seriously as *a*—not *the*—foundation for the further development of human knowledge and well-being.

## Notes

1. Shermer
2. Korzybski, 1994 (1933), pp. xxxii
3. Gardner 1957 (1952), pp. 12-13. You can find Shermer's article on the *Scientific American* website (See Bibliography for full web reference).
4. Qtd. in Chase, p. 60
5. Maloney, p. 217
6. Gardner, 1957 (1952), p. 283
7. Korzybski 1947, p. 325. Gardner's continuing reference to Korzybski as "The Count" may qualify as another fascinating irrelevancy intended for disparagement. Regarding Korzybski's title, Allen Walker Read noted:  

Being a 'foreigner' (I use quotation marks) also was a disadvantage to him, especially when he had the suspicious title of 'Count'. Lecturers from abroad, like the flamboyant Count Herman Keyserling, had imposed themselves by self-promotion on American gullibility. Too many German Freiherren had paraded themselves as 'Counts'. (I may say parenthetically that Korzybski did not seek out the title 'Count', in spite of the standing of his family in the Polish aristocracy, but it was fostered by his wife, a talented American portrait painter, who believed it was useful to her to be called 'Countess Korzybska'. (Read 1984, p. 16)
8. In his book, *Science: Good, Bad, and Bogus*, Gardner used the Crane 'bathroom' connection in a juvenile critique of GS, a satirical "Manifesto of The Institute of General Eclectics" where he makes fun of "*Science and Sanitation*, by the late Count Aulayore Beeyemski." (pp. 59-61)
9. Gardner 1957 (1952), p. 8
10. Ibid, p. 286
11. Ibid, p. 283
12. Read 1984, p. 14

13. Gardner 1957 (1952), p. 283
14. Korzybski 1994 (1933), p. xci
15. Dewey and Bentley, p. 220. Despite this nod to Korzybski, Dewey and Bentley did not see that general semantics constituted the very “thorough theory of the organization of behavioral word and cosmic fact” that they anticipated.
16. Korzybski 1994 (1933), p. 784
17. Kendig 1950/1951
18. Kasner
19. Comment: Alfred Korzybski
20. Gardner 1957 (1952), p. 11
21. Ibid, p. 283
22. Read 1984, pp. 16-17
23. Frazier, p. 35
24. Gardner 1993, p. 262
25. Read 1984, p. 14
26. Gardner 1957 (1952), p. 287
27. Kelley, Hayakawa
28. Gardner 1957 (1952), p. 14. Gardner’s friend and supporter, humanist philosopher Paul Kurtz, has coined a number of new words he saw as necessary to represent new views. This hardly makes Kurtz a ‘crank’.
29. Ibid, p. 282
30. Read, 1948
31. Gardner, 1957 (1952), 282
32. Black, p. 227
33. Ibid, p. 223
34. Gardner 1957 (1952), p. 281
35. Meyers qtd. in Kendig, 1972
36. Korzybski, 1994 (1933), p. 803
37. Gardner 1957 (1952), p. 287
38. Hamilton, p. 74
39. Read 1984, p. 15
40. Northrop, p. 2
41. Kodish, 1993
42. Macneal, pp. 46-47
43. Kendig 1952/1953, p. 96

- 44. Gardner 1993 b, pp. 106-107
- 45. "The Ten Outstanding Skeptics...", p. 24
- 46. Lichtenberg, p. 85
- 47. Lee, p. 14

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