

## The Study of Semantics Today

**“It is the man determines what is said,  
not the words.”**

Henry David Thoreau, the man of the woods, knew what he was talking about when he determined the function of language as a communicative tool of human beings who each have their own experience and live their proper life made of needs and imagination.

Regarding linguistic semantics, of all the introductions to linguistic foundation, Salomon's (1966) 'Basic Considerations' are most convincing because they go right to the crucial point of linguistics: "Words constitute not only the materials to be studied but to some extent the instruments with which we do our probing and almost exclusively the means by which we report on the results." Three decades later Wierzbicka (1996) writes: "I believe that the strongest support for the hypothesis of a language-like innate conceptual system comes from its proven merits as a working tool in the investigation of languages and cultures." Both express from their very own point of view the benefits and limits of such a self-contained science. I hold these considerations to be primordial in any kind of approach to linguistic research.

For modern linguists who are still looking for a rigorous scientific approach to linguistic research, it seems to be difficult to accept Dilthey's (1833) epistemological determination of the study of arts by 'understanding', i.e. 'apprehension of unknown perceptions by retrospective performance', even after Heidegger (1954) and Betti (1955). Since Bloomfield many behaviourists and structuralists have preferred definitions like the following in order to demonstrate their rigorous scientific approach:

"To put it briefly, in human speech, different sounds have different meanings. To study this co-ordination of certain sounds with certain meanings, is to study language."  
(Bloomfield 1933/35:27)

After what he called 'a long cold winter of objectivism', Jerome Bruner welcomed the 'cognitive revolution' in the 50's of last century like the first rays of the spring sun because he hoped "[...] that revolution was intended to bring 'mind' back into the human sciences after a long cold winter of objectivism." (Bruner 1990:1)

But soon he had to correct his optimistic view, and he stated "[...] that revolution has now been diverted into issues that are marginal to the impulse that brought it into being. Indeed, it has been technicalized in a manner that even undermines the original impulse." (Bruner 1990:1)

Chomsky, who was to bring about the change with a mentalist approach, asserted in his generative grammar that syntax is independent of semantics and that language can do without cognition. He even warned of applying meaning in linguistic analysis:

"[...] if it can be shown that meaning and related notions do play a role in linguistic

analysis, then ... a serious blow is struck at the foundations of linguistic theory”  
(Chomsky 1955:14)

Thanks to Bierwisch (1970) and Lyons (1977) *Lexical Semantics Semantic and Relations in Syntax* have been empowering the grammar skills of language teachers. At the end of the 80's Lakoff contributed considerably to the *Semantic Feature Theory*, and Lyons' analysis of *grammatical meaning* has become the acknowledged field of modern semantics. However, the expectations of linguists that Chomsky's *generative grammar* would make the old dream of the *Universal Grammar Theory* come true, were soon frustrated.

In philosophy, semantics has become the domain of *symbolic logic*. *Meaning and truth, meaning and thought*, and the *relation* between *signs* and *what they mean* have been studied by many philosophers since Frege, Carnap, Peirce, Russell and Wittgenstein. There seems to be an existential irony, though, which marks the words of this great philosopher mathematician as a fatal verdict on logic semantics. Wittgenstein wrote somewhere:

“The borderlines of my language are the borderlines of my world.”

Leech expressed this circle conclusion in a less poetic manner:

“[...] cognition [is] turning in upon itself.” (Leech 1974:ix)

In view of these limits of a philosophy which does not yield findings on the spirit of man, I hold the humanistic study of the language arts with the help of hermeneutics to be the most promising research method in future. Instead of trying to find out about the spirit in general, we should look for findings in linguistic representations of man's spirit. There are two mainstreams of semantics which deserve a wide recognition in educational research: *Semantics in Literary Criticism* as suggested by Ogden and Richards (1925) and *General Semantics* as founded by Korzybski (1933).

Alfred Korzybski, who served as an officer in the first world war, felt horrified by the carnage he witnessed, like many of his contemporaries. Using his knowledge of engineering, he studied how human conflicts arise. His key question was:

"Why do we have such success engineering a long-lasting bridge, and such failure when we 'engineer' a peace-treaty?"

In his 'Premises of General Semantics', Korzybski uses the relation of a map to the territory as an analogy for the word to its object of representation. Against the Aristotelian, Euclidean and Newtonian system which has formed the human mind throughout history, he established his 'non-aristotelian' system which, he claims, "takes into account newly discovered complexities in all fields." (Korzybski 1933) He wants mankind to search for *successful* new vocabularies, in order to free themselves from "the old structural implications of speech."

Influenced by her Polish fellow countrymen Korzybski (1933) and Boguslawski (1966), Anna Wierzbicka started writing on '*primitives*' at the beginning of the 70's of last century. She has accomplished the most promising cross-cultural study of lexical and grammar semantics (Wierzbicka 1972; 1996) so far.

Lakoff/Johnson (1980), Lakoff (1987) and Taylor (1989) started with their studies on metaphors a semantic analysis of conceptual processes that are applied in a creative way in

literature as well as in traditional spoken language. We wish to refer to them as model linguists who do not investigate such phenomenon as exceptional but as typical of human linguistic skills which demonstrate their spirit by creative and imaginative expressions.

Both approaches, Wierzbicka's as well as Lakoff's, are examples of humanistic research, and they include culture as a main aspect in the study of language and human thought. Following Alfred Korzybski, we should assume now the responsibility we need to use our language with the same maturity as an engineer, who is building a bridge, applies his knowledge. Maybe this is the only way to a true understanding between human cultures.

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# PREMISES OF GENERAL SEMANTICS

***From: General Semantics***

***Toward a new general system of evaluation  
and predictability in solving human problems***

**By Alfred Korzybski**

The premises of the non-aristotelian system can be given by the simple analogy of the relation of a map to the territory:

1. A map is *not* the territory.
2. A map does *not* represent *all* of a territory.
3. A map is *self-reflexive* in the sense that an 'ideal' map would include a map of the map, etc., indefinitely.

Applied to daily life and language:

1. A word is *not* what it represents.
2. A word does *not* represent *all* of the 'facts', etc.
3. Language is *self-reflexive* in the sense that in language we can speak *about* language.

Our habitual reactions today, however, are still based on primitive, pre-scientific, unconscious assumptions, which *in action* mostly violate the first two premises and disregard the third. Mathematics and general semantics are the only exceptions.

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## **USEFUL LINKS TO KORZYBSKI AND GENERAL SEMANTICS**

**[Alfred Korzybski - Biography by Steven Lewis](#)**

**[Institute of General Semantics: Korzybski, A. 1933. General Semantics.](#)**

**[Institute of General Semantics: Mayper, S.A. 1958. Korzybski's Science and Today's Science.](#)**

**[ISGS: General Semantics in the UK](#)**

**[DFW Center for General Semantics: Review of Collected Writings](#)**

**[Alfred\\_Korzybski\\_Memorial\\_Lectures](#)**

**[Wikipedia: General Semantics](#)**

## **USEFUL LINKS ON SEMANTICS**

**[The Columbia Encyclopedia: Semantics](#)**

**[IASS - AIS: Semiotics: A Basic Bibliography - Reference Books](#)**

**[Kai von Fintel: Semantic Web Resources](#)**

**[Literature, Arts and Medicine Database: Lakoff](#)**

**[The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Gottlob Frege](#)**

**[Adger, D.: Formal Models in Linguistics](#)**

**[Cann, R.: Teaching Formal Semantics](#)**

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