SEMANTICS

by Leonard Feinberg*

Semantics is the study of meanings -- meanings of words, of linguistic forms, of relationships between symbols and behavior. When Count Korzybski and some of his disciples like Hayakawa first proposed the basic concepts of semantics, they believed that perfecting communication to the point where both the speaker and listener, writer and reader, understood exactly the same thing, would lead to the elimination of wars, improved economies, healthier family relationships, and so on. Korzybski's early followers were convinced that his concepts were as revolutionary, and as significant, as those of Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Einstein.

There are few people who share that belief now. But there is no denying that semantics is an enormously important element of all human communication and directly relevant to the problem of inter-cultural relationships. Language is not just a means of communications; often it is a barrier -- sometimes an intentional barrier -- to communication, as in diplomacy ("a diplomat is a man sent abroad to lie for his country"), in law (each side distorts the evidence on its own behalf), in romance ("of course I love you, baby"), in war ("our victorious troops retreated to previously prepared positions"). Language is often used as a barrier against unpleasantness, against reality, against people.

Words have connotations as well as denotations, special meanings as well as literal ones, emotional implications as well as logical values. "Fire hydrant" means one thing to a fireman, another to a harried motorist looking for a parking place, and a third to a strolling dog. The word "red" has different meanings to a Cincinnati baseball fan, a painter, a bookeeper, an embarrassed girl, an angry man, a communist. Even the faculty at Iowa State took a long time to agree on a definition of "Home Economics." And the members of this panel never did agree on a definition of "communications" that satisfied all of us.

The choice of words is important. You are now attending a "conference," not a shindig or a binge. Each session has someone listed as "presiding," not bossing. The speakers at this session were introduced as "professors," not eggheads or do-gooders. And your host is Iowa State "University," an institution infinitely superior to Iowa State College.

*Dr. Feinberg is professor of English, Iowa State University.
The people attending this conference were asked yesterday to give us examples of semantic problems in cross-cultural relations that they had personally experienced. One of you told us that in an African village you tried to convince the villagers to accept medical inoculations by stressing the fact that the doctor who would come was a helpful man. You kept saying "my friend the doctor" will do this and "my friend the doctor" will do that, and you noticed that your interpreter seemed embarrassed and halting in her translation. It wasn't until later that you learned that in that locality the term "my friend" meant "my lover." Another member of this audience, teaching nutrition in Egypt, used the term "food fad." The interpreter didn't understand it, the women didn't understand it -- and the American home economist wasted two valuable meetings trying to explain it before she gave up. And a third member of this conference, faced unexpectedly by a woman from India who arrived on campus without any previous correspondence, asked to see her "credentials." The woman looked puzzled, showed her marriage license, then in desperation pulled out her cancelled steamship ticket.

But semantic difficulties are not limited to cross-cultural communications. We have a great many examples of our own. One popular form is proverbs, which Kenneth Burke calls "strategies for living." Proverbs are oversimplifications, available for reassurance and pep talk, and conveniently contradictory so as to satisfy whatever need we have. Thus we have both "look before you leap" and "he who hesitates is lost." Similarly, depending on your mood, you can choose either "out of sight, out of mind" or "absence makes the heart grow fonder."

Words are not things -- But we often behave as if they were. Advertisers have long known this. You and I are supposedly members of the "Pepsi generation," smoking a Winston cigarette because it "tastes good like a cigarette should," ending up in "Marlboro country" fortified by our knowledge that "Ajax is stronger than dirt." Vance Packard, among others, has given us many examples of the effect of words on sales; the same product -- soap, book, movie -- under a new name often proves far more successful than it had been under the original semantic tag. And if concrete objects are hard to identify, think of the difficulty of defining abstract terms like "freedom," "peace," "honor," "race," or "progress."

Sydney Harris has given us many examples of what he calls "antics with semantics." When your child gets into trouble, he is wild; when my child gets into trouble, he is exuberant. If we cannot agree it is because you are stubborn; I am consistent. You are fat; I am stylishly stout.

Our language also includes gobbledygook. At a recent conference of economists, the word "depression" was replaced by "orthodox recession," and "unemployment" became "increasing disemployment." The penchant for euphemisms is spreading. There are no more failures or loafers -- there are only "under-achievers." A New York committee recently instructed its employees to stop using the word "slum": the proper term is "an older, more overcrowded area." In Ames, you will be pleased to learn, there are no old people, only senior citizens and golden agers. Janitors have become stationary engineers and undertakers are morticians. And the savages of the 19th century have blossomed out as underdeveloped countries. Time magazine is particularly adept at choosing derogatory terms to describe people
and ideas it dislikes, commendatory words when writing about its favorites -- while pretending that it is completely objective.

Communication of course involves much more than words. In an excellent book, Anthropologist Edward Hall illustrates the importance of the "silent language" -- gestures, tone of voice, accent, bearing, form of address, choice of clothing, timing. How one shakes hands or nods, or laughs, all are important and revealing indications of his basic attitude. There are, of course, too many of these variables to be anticipated. No one can provide a perfect model or pattern; some problems may never arise; totally unexpected situations will certainly appear; the relative importance of issues will vary.

There is also the basic question of the degree to which any foreigner or outsider can direct the activity of, or introduce changes in, another culture. The optimum may be not 100 per cent as the Ugly American believed (the term "Ugly American" in the Burdick-Lederer book originally described an admirable American very successful in dealing with a foreign culture). The optimum may be as low as 10 per cent.

Most foreign students who come to the United States understand, in English, far less than they try to give the impression of understanding. (So, for that matter, do most American students, as every teacher reading examinations painfully discovers.) The level of competence in English among foreign students varies greatly. Although in theory they have attained a certain proficiency, in fact totally unprepared students have been sent here for political reasons, family connections, financial considerations, and other motives which may have pragmatic value but interfere with communication. And the problem is further complicated by the fact that many of these students pretend to understand when in fact they don't. Sometimes they say "yes" not because they agree, or because they understand instructions, or because they have any intention of performing a task, but simply because their culture has conditioned them never to say "no" to an authority or, in some instances the representative of a colonial power. Sometimes students say "yes" because they are ashamed to admit that they don't understand what was said to them.

A few semantic problems might be mentioned. To us, "pass" means a grade of 70 per cent or 75 per cent. To many Asian students it means 40 per cent. The word "country" implies a unified loyalty to us that it cannot suggest to hostile tribes pushed into arbitrary national boundaries in Africa and Asia. The word "socialism" has an unpleasant connotation for most Americans; it has a pleasant connotation for a great many Latin Americans, Asians, and Africans. "Democracy" obviously means something different to us from what it means to the "democratic republics" of China and East Germany and North Korea. And a popular rat poison in Mexico is called "The Last Supper."

Semantics, then, is very important. Even if perfect communication were ever achieved there would still be other problems -- individual differences, environmental conditions, social pressures, wishful thinking, aggressive instincts. But until a reasonable amount of accurate communication is achieved -- until the speaker and the listener understand the same thing -- desired changes are not likely to be made.