TEN COMMON BLOCKS TO CLEAR THINKING WITH GENERAL SEMANTICS CORRECTIVES

MARTIN H. LEVINSON

To find out how important clear thinking was to the general public, noted self-help author and GS expert Kenneth Keyes, Jr. conducted a nationwide survey in America.[1] The survey consisted of two questions:

1. Which of the following would you most hate to have people say about you?
   a. You do not win friends easily.
   b. You cannot think clearly.
   c. You have trouble influencing people.
   d. One day your pants fell down when your arms were loaded with packages.
2. Why did you make that choice?

A vast majority of the survey's respondents (72.5%) thought it was most important to be known as a clear thinker. Here are some of the reasons they gave:

- Men prefer women who are reasonable in meeting problems of everyday life.
- Women prefer men who demonstrate excellent thinking ability.
- Men and women who think clearly can achieve greater popularity. They are looked up to; their ideas are considered "worth listening to"; they are invited to analyze the ideas and plans of other people.

Martin H. Levinson, PhD, a noted scholar of GS and the author of a variety of books including his most recent, *More Sensible Thinking* (2012), is the president of the IGS.

- The ability to think clearly and maturely is an important step in the avoidance of worry and unhappiness … and the achievement of peace of mind.

Clear thinking (the ability to ascertain and respond to what is "actually" going on in situations) is clearly a useful attribute. To become better at it, this article offers a number of practical GS strategies and techniques. They are presented in the context of overcoming ten common blocks to clear thinking.

Allness Attitudes[2]

—"I know all about that."
—"If you've known one Arab, Jew, Black, Hispanic, etc., you've known them all."
—"Let me tell you all about what is going on in the Middle East."

No one can know *all* about anything. That statement may seem obvious, but everyday people say or imply that they do know it all. Individuals who speak in this manner are demonstrating *allness attitudes*. They think they know what it is impossible to know—everything about a particular topic.

It is hard to talk with people who claim to know everything. They resist any new information you bring to a discussion, so why bother trying to have one. Individuals with allness attitudes do not want to exchange ideas and opinions. They want to pontificate.

Allness attitudes are quite common and relatively easy to spot in others, but detecting them in ourselves is a tougher proposition. More difficult still is coming up with ideas to keep us flexible and away from allness attitudes. Fortunately, such ideas can be had through GS.

Alfred Korzybski (the founder of GS) famously said the *map is not the territory*. With respect to language that can be expressed this way: what we say or think about things, "our verbal maps," does not cover all there is to know about them, "the territory." Science supports this idea and the notion we can't know all about the world or anything in it. The fact is our "mental maps" are always incomplete.

Indexing, a GS concept that involves examining individual cases within a larger category is another useful tactic in overcoming allness attitudes. For example, John says, "I hate sports." But "sports," in the way John is using it, is a very broad term. If we examine it more closely we see, $sport_1$ (tennis) is not $sport_2$ (bowling), is not $sport_3$ (chess), etc. Has John tried all sports? Highly unlikely! Indexing items can assist us to find differences that might make a difference.

Locating differences is particularly beneficial to combat the allness attitude known as "stereotyping." We stereotype adolescents when we say, "Teenagers are rude." But teenager$_1$ is not teenager$_2$ is not teenager$_3$, etc. Every teenager is a unique individual with his or her own behavior pattern. Indexing teenagers can help to show that case.

Employing qualifying terms like "to me," "I think," and "it seems," when making statements, is one more GS approach for defeating allness attitudes. Such expressions (e.g., "To me, pizza is the most delicious food," "I think New York City is the best place to live," "It seems that it is going to snow today,") make it clear that our observations and opinions have definite limits.

Finally, we can follow Korzybski's suggestion to add a silent "etc." to our thinking to remind us there is always more that can be learned and more that can be said.

"Knee-jerk" Reactions

If someone insults you, do you instantly counter with a slur or epithet of your own? Have you ever gotten into an argument over "feminism," "liberalism," "conservatism," or some other "ism," based on your immediate assumptions about that particular word? If you answered yes to either of these questions, you are allowing words to use you, rather than choosing to behave and react in a mature manner.

Words are not the things they represent. Being labeled an "idiot" does not make you an idiot. But you act idiotically when you don't take time to figure out an appropriate response to situations and instead let other people push your emotional buttons. GS labels impetuous responses as "signal reactions."

Why do humans act impulsively? We do so because we have been conditioned to respond that way. Like Pavlov's dogs, we automatically behave in certain ways under certain conditions. Political propaganda, as well as commercial propaganda (advertisements), is premised on the idea that individuals will react to slogans, names, designs, etc. in the same manner that dogs can be induced to respond to bells and buzzers.

But we do not have to unthinkingly react to stimuli. We can learn to delay our responses long enough to investigate conditions and deal with them in a thoughtful manner. This can have a far more salutary effect than reacting precipitously. The following story underscores that point.

A hunter lived with an infant in a cabin, guarded by his dog. One day, the hunter returned from the fields and saw the cradle overturned and the baby nowhere in sight. The room was a mess. The dog was lying with

blood all over his muzzle. The hunter, enraged, shot the dog. He then found the baby, unharmed under the bed, and a dead wolf in the corner.

Many people take for granted the human ability to delay one's reaction. But students of GS are not among that group. They know that the capacity to delay reacting (GS labels delayed reactions as "symbol reactions"), and bring one's higher brain functions into play, is an important characteristic that distinguishes the human species from the rest of the animal kingdom.

Either-or-Thinking

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC) was a careful observer of his culture and its language structure. From his observations, he derived what has come to be known as the "laws of thought," tools of logic that are very much with us today. One of those laws is "the law of the excluded middle"—a thing is either "A" or "not A."

The law of the excluded middle encourages us to believe that every question can be answered in terms of "either-or." The English language pushes us in a similar direction. Its many polarizing terms (e.g., good/bad, hot/cold, tall/short, thin/fat) lead us to think in extremes rather than with gradations.

Either-or thinking keeps us from noticing the great diversity in the world. For example, people do not come in two varieties: tall or short. If we lined up everyone in the United States and arranged them according to height, we would have at one end of the line professional basketball players and at the other end, midgets. Between these two groups would be the vast majority of individuals.

Most things we encounter are more accurately mapped by a statistical distribution rather than by either-or terms. This idea can be seen on a bell curve of normal distribution. If you plot instances from daily life, such as days above and below 100°F, IQ, height, weight on a graph, it is the middle range that has the most distribution. Either-or comparisons show up at the two extreme ends of the graph.

To get past either-or thinking, GS recommends using a *multivalued approach*. This approach involves examining more than just two alternatives. Case in point: it is Friday evening and you want to relax after a hard week. You think, "I'll either go to the movies or stay home and watch TV." Sadly, the movie and TV programs that are on do not seem very appealing. So, what can you do? Are you stuck between a rock and a hard place? You are if you use either-or thinking. But if you employ a multivalued approach, you can brainstorm additional possibilities—attend a play, read a book, go out to dinner, walk around the neighborhood, etc. In life, there are rarely only two choices.

Projection Problems

"She's gorgeous." "That painting is not art." "_____ was a great movie." When individuals make statements like these, they are telling us precious little about what they are describing. They are telling us, instead, something about themselves. They are projecting their ideas of what they consider to be "beautiful," "art," and "great cinema." They are confusing opinions with facts.

To convey to ourselves and to others that our projections are attitudinally based rather than reports of objective "reality," GS recommends the use of qualifying expressions in communications (e.g., "as I see it," "apparently," "from my point of view," etc.). Such phrases indicate that beliefs are being transmitted, not absolute truths.

GS also recommends being aware that when we use the word "is" to link a noun and an adjective modifying that noun that we may unconsciously project. To illustrate, when we say "She is lazy," or "He is smart," we are suggesting "laziness" is found in her or "smartness" is found in him. This contradicts what is really going on: we are projecting our opinions concerning "laziness" and "smartness" onto other people. Qualifying our responses affirms that reality—"She seems lazy to me," "From my point of view he is smart."

Rigid Thinking

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus asserted over 2,000 years ago that we cannot step in the same river twice. Science has confirmed this process view of existence, and has demonstrated that everything in the world is constantly changing—sometimes slowly and sometimes quite quickly. That includes people.

Individuals change over time as new facts present themselves and new circumstances emerge. Are you the same person today that you were a year ago, five years ago, ten years ago? Do you look exactly identical? Has your behavior stayed the same? It is comforting to think the world and the people in it are invariable from day to day. It makes for easy predictability. But life is process, so change must occur.

Dating, a GS tool that involves attaching dates to our evaluations, can help us stay attuned to the fact that we live in a changing world. $Iraq^{2014}$ is not $Iraq^{1994}$, $Joe^{who\ is\ working\ out\ this\ month}$ is not $Joe^{sans\ workout\ last\ month}$, computer technology$^{in\ the\ current\ decade}$ is not computer technology$^{in\ the\ last\ decade}$. Dating shows that ours is a "restless universe," where everything mutates over time.

If life is dynamic, must the positions we take on various issues be set in stone? Is it a weakness to change our minds? Neil Postman, a prominent educator and proponent of GS, didn't think so. Postman[1967] published a book titled, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. Twelve years later, Postman[1979] published another book, *Teaching as a Conversing Activity*. In the introduction to that work he wrote, "The Earth has gone around the sun twelve times since the publication of our best known book, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. I do not seem to be facing in the same direction as I was in 1967. Frankly, I do not know if I have turned or everything else has. But many of the arguments which then seemed merely opposite now seem acutely apposite ..."[3]

There are times when consistency is a virtue. We want airline pilots to consistently be alert when they are flying us to our destinations, baseball players have to consistently get on base to bat over .300, and consistency is the hallmark of our judicial system—rulings are based on precedent.

But, to paraphrase Emerson, "consistency is (also) the hobgoblin of small minds." It can keep us from taking risks and expanding our knowledge in new areas. A foolish consistency can hinder us from seeing and making changes that might be beneficial. GS stresses that it is a mark of wisdom to know when to be consistent and when to be flexible.

Badly Designed Questions

Asking questions that can be verified is an essential part of the scientific method. Such questions can be answered on the basis of systematic observation—they can be tested. "What biological processes caused my birth?" is an example of a question that can be substantiated. "Why was I born?" is not (there is no way of ascertaining any particular answer as relevant or valid).

Asking questions that can be answered through experimentation and analysis can have positive results for the person asking them. That is shown in the following story.

Marvin was severely injured in an automobile accident. In the hospital, he continuously asked himself, "Why did this have to happen to me?" Marvin answered this question in various ways: "God must hate me to have caused my accident." "I am not a good person so I guess I deserved to be injured." "I'm just an unlucky guy." Thinking about these responses led Marvin to become depressed and not work hard at getting better.

Had Marvin asked himself action-oriented questions like "What can I do to aid my recovery?" and "How can I make the best of this situation?"

he would have increased his chances of more quickly returning to normal, as such inquiries focus on coming up with constructive thoughts and behaviors rather than wallowing in self-pity.

In GS, it is taught that the way questions are phrased sets the terminology and structure of their answers. For example, the question "What is *the* way to do x?" may elicit the response "The way to do x is …" (which implies there are no other ways to do x). And the question "Am I a good person or a bad person?" may produce the reply "Of course, you're a good person" (which suggests the question you asked was a reasonable one that could only be answered in two ways). Queries that are poorly designed can result in less than adequate responses.

As children, when the teacher asked us questions, many of us were conditioned to search for the answers. A better education would have had us first analyze the questions.

Elementalism

We live in a process world. But our language does not accurately reflect this fact, because it allows us to "split" with words what cannot be split in the world "out there." For example, we talk about the "mind" and "body" as if they were separate entities. But that is not correct. Can there be a mind without a body? Lacking a body, there would be no mind. And without the mind, what would the body be? Moreover, the chemical processes of the body affect the mind—that's why antidepressants work. And the opposite is true. Our mental state can influence our physical condition—worry can aggravate ulcers and other bodily ailments.

GS labels our tendency to use words in isolation as *elementalism*. We practice elementalism when we let the word "flower" makes us forget that the "real" flower is an ever-changing process that entails air, light, water, and soil. When we talk about a flower, using words, we should not fool ourselves into thinking we are fully describing a real flower.

Elementalism is involved when we seek *the* cause of something, unconsciously assuming there is only one cause—for example, *the* cause of juvenile delinquency, *the* cure for cancer, *the* way to raise children. Yet most problems in life do not have single antecedents. Causation is typically multifaceted.

Elementalism is firmly established in our language and when we use words its effects cannot totally be avoided. But there are GS tools that can mitigate its power. For instance, we can use hyphens to connect false-to-fact "elementalistic" terms to suggest they refer to inseparable nonverbal events.

Einstein, recognizing the "one-ness" of space and time, created the notion of "space-time." Other nonelementalistic terms include "psycho-biological," "neuro-linguistic," and "organism-as-a-whole-in-environments."

We can also place quotes around words that suggest false-to-fact structures—for example, "thoughts" and "feelings." Mental states and emotional states do not take place in isolation. Thoughts and feelings influence each other.

And we can add a silent "etc." to our thinking—for example, "mind, etc.," "thoughts, etc.," "feelings, etc." Adding etc. indicates there is always more that can be learned, more that can be said.

Jumping to Wrong Conclusions

John arrives late to school, a factual event that can be observed, verified, and proven. His teacher makes an inference based on this fact—"I suppose John overslept." The teacher then makes a judgment, based on his inference—"John thinks he can get away with anything." When the matter is investigated, it turns out John was late to school because he was mugged.

We must make assumptions and inferences. It is not possible to observe, check, and test everything. But to make accurate inferences, rather than erroneous ones, GS advises we take into consideration the variety of possible causes of an event and the variety of reactions we are capable of. To be more confident of our inferences, GS also counsels that we base them on observations and that they converge—a number of inferences point to the same conclusion.

The structure of the English language can lead us to confuse facts with inferences and assumptions. That is because "In English we have no grammatical constructions, verb tenses, or moods to distinguish what we have experienced from what we have assumed. It is easy to say and think we know when we are only guessing; the same words may describe or infer, depending on the context. We learn to perceive and think with this confusion."[4]

To avoid fact/inference mix-ups, Irving J. Lee, the author of *Language Habits in Human Affairs* and other books on GS, offers these distinctions[5]:

Statement of fact
- Made *after* observation or experience
- Is confined to what one observes or experiences
- Only a *limited* number can be made
- Represents a high degree of probability, is close to certainty

- We tend to get agreement when it is possible to make factual statements about an event or situation

Statement of inference
- Made anytime—before, during, or after observation
- Goes beyond what one observes or experiences
- Can make an *unlimited number* in any situation
- Represents some degree of probability
- We can expect disagreement if only inferential statements can be made regarding an event or situation

Reliance on Common Sense

Most of us are familiar with the commonsense nostrum "When you assume you make as ass out of *you* and *me*." But you can't *not* assume. Assumptions drive human behavior. The important thing, from the point of view of GS, is to be aware of your assumptions and to question, test, and revise them when necessary.

This is what scientists do when they use the scientific method. A scientist will start out with an assumption about something, refine it through questioning into a hypothesis, test the hypothesis, analyze the results, and make revisions if needed. In science, assumptions are open to question. They are not simply taken for granted.

Taking assumptions for granted is what happens with "common sense," a philosophy that is certainly quite common but one that does not necessarily make a lot of actual sense. This can be observed in mother wit bromides that offer conflicting guidance for the same situation—He who hesitates is lost/Look before you leap, Go with the flow/Swim against the tide, A penny saved is a penny earned/Penny wise and pound foolish. Common sense enshrines bias, dogmatism, elusiveness, and imprecision.

Not examining assumptions can be a health hazard. That is shown in the following story:

"A doctor was awakened in the middle of the night by a phone call from a man for whom he had done some medical work a few years before.

"'Doctor,' said the excited man, 'please come over right away. My wife is in great pain and I'm sure it's her appendix.'

"'Well now,' replied the doctor, 'I don't think that's it. I'll drop around the first thing in the morning. Don't worry. It's probably just indigestion.'

"'But, doctor, you've got to come right away now. I'm positive it's appendicitis,' protested the alarmed husband.

"'Oh come, Mr. Johnson,' the doctor said somewhat irritably. 'I took out your wife's appendix almost two years ago. You know as well as I do that couldn't be it.'

"'That's true enough,' said the husband, 'but I've got a different wife.'"[6]

Employing a scientific attitude, "uncommon sense," can bring our assumptions into awareness and lead us to examine and revise them. GS experts Susan P. Kodish and Bruce I. Kodish suggest when faced with a difficult problem we use uncommon sense and ask: What am I assuming about this situation? Can I assume something different? What will happen if I do? Is what I'm assuming here so? How can I test this? What observations can I make that may show this isn't so?[7]

Searching for Meaning in the Wrong Places

What is the difference between a "freedom fighter" and a "terrorist?" Were the victims at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq subjected to "abuse" or "torture?" Are organizations that comment on news reporting "media watchdog groups" or are they "pressure groups?" Do not look to the dictionary for the answers to these questions. Their answers depend on how individuals interpret events.

It is an axiom in GS that, strictly speaking, words don't "mean," people "mean." The physicist P.W. Bridgman put it this way, "Never ask 'What does word X mean?' but ask instead, 'What do I mean when I say word X?' or 'What do you mean when you say word X?'"[8] The fact is words do not have "one true meaning"—for the 500 most used words in the English language, the *Oxford Dictionary* lists 14,070 meanings.[9]

Words mean different things to different people. The field of law is based on this principle.

Words mean different things at different times. In 1896, the nine men on the U.S. Supreme Court said separate but equal facilities for blacks and whites are constitutional. In 1954, a set of nine different men said, in effect, *separate* and *equal* are opposites.

Words mean different things in different contexts: He beat (hit) the drum with a stick. Beats me (I don't know). The reporter has the mayor on his beat (area to cover.) He beat (defeated) Joe at chess.

We use words to categorize and label people and events. But the categories we formulate are not "out there," in the "real world." They are

created in our heads and expressed in language. The following are some GS observations on labels and categories:

- How we label or categorize a person will depend on our purpose, our projections, and our evaluations; yet the person does not change just because we change the label or category. When I taught in the New York City school system in the 1970s, there were students who were labeled "children of retarded mental development." That term became thought of as pejorative so a new name was devised, "special education students." Perhaps in the future another tag will be attached to these "problem learners."

- Things are not the same because they carry the same designation—for example, Leonardo da Vinci, Matisse, Jackson Pollack, and Andy Warhol may all be considered "artists."

- Each classification tells us something about the way in which an object is considered (by someone) to be similar to certain other objects; each tells us something about the ways in which it is considered different from certain other objects. The federal government, under the Controlled Substances Act, classifies marijuana as a Schedule I Drug (heroin and LSD are also classified as Schedule I drugs). Because of that taxonomy, federally, it is illegal to sell or possess marijuana. Federal marijuana restrictions would most likely be changed if the State of Colorado, which recently legalized the sale and use of marijuana, was in charge of scheduling drugs for the nation.

Putting people into categories is a commonplace occurrence in political discussions on "talk radio." ("You believe that because you're a 'liberal'!" "That's what I though a 'conservative' would say!" "What do you expect from a 'reactionary'!") But such pigeonholing does not advance political dialogue. Rather it leads to a malady that is rampant in politics, "hardening of the categories." Fortunately, this disease can be treated. The remedy? GS.[10,11]

Notes

1. Kenneth S. Keyes, Jr., *How to Develop Your Thinking Ability* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1950), iv, v.
2. The term "allness attitudes" comes from Robert R. Potter, *Making Sense: Exploring Semantics and Critical Thinking* (New York: Globe, 1974), 72.
3. Neil Postman, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* (New York: Delacorte, 1979), 2.

4. Laura L. Lee, "Two Kinds of Disturbed Communication," *General Semantics Bulletin* no. 22, 23 (1958): 47.

5. Kenneth G. Johnson, *General Semantics: An Outline Survey*, Third Revised Edition (Fort Worth, TX: Institute of General Semantics, 2004), 13.

6. Keyes, 111, 112.

7. Susan P. Kodish and Bruce I. Kodish, *Drive Yourself Sane: Using the Uncommon Sense of General Semantics,* Revised Second Edition (Pasadena, CA: Extensional Publishing, 2001), 40.

8. Johnson, 21.

9. Ibid.

10. See Irving J. Lee, *Language Habits in Human Affairs*, Second Edition (Concord, CA: International Society for General Semantics, 1994).

11. Samuel I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, Fifth Edition (New York: Harcourt Harvest, 1990).