

CALLING OUT THE SYMBOL RULERS

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NOTHING ILLUSTRATES the power of symbols and language quite like a presidential election. Of course, those of us who know a little bit of general semantics recognize that this “power” lies not in the words and symbols themselves, but in the motivations, intentions, reactions, and evaluations of the individual human beings who speak, write, see, hear, and read the words and symbols.

Alfred Korzybski emphasized that we must vigilantly maintain an ongoing awareness that *symbols* (or “maps”) are *not* the things symbolized (or “territories”). He underscored the potential consequences of confusing symbols with their referents when he cautioned that, “Those who rule the symbols, rule us.” (1)

Who rules *your* symbols?

With this issue we introduce a new regular feature, “Calling Out the Symbol Rulers.” Each quarter we will highlight examples of how rulers rule by symbols, and how we let ourselves be ruled by symbols. This feature will succeed to the degree that you and other readers participate in the process by corresponding with us — we seek your responses, reactions, analyses, opinions, and examples *you* find pertinent to this topic.

Whom might we classify as potential *symbol rulers*? By our definition, just about anybody who participates in a communicative transaction could be considered a *symbol ruler*. We might start by carefully observing people of influence such as politicians, bureaucrats, teachers, bosses, parents, supervisors,

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coaches, advertisers, priests, preachers, rabbis, mullahs, commentators, columnists, reporters, etc. How do they generate, manipulate, frame, and convey their messages? What techniques do they employ to influence our judgments and decisions?

You might apply some of the principles of general semantics in your analyses:

- Do they confuse *facts* with inferences, judgments, or beliefs? (And by what standard are *facts* differentiated from *non-facts*?)
- Do they over-simplify complex issues into easy-to-understand but misleading *either-or*, *black-or-white*, *right-or-wrong* polar choices?
- Do they attempt to attribute only one cause to an event or one consequence of an action, rather than recognizing multiple causes and multiple consequences — some of which we may never know?
- Do they generalize from one experience or one person's anecdotal evidence as if that were the only possible or the 'right' universal experience?
- Do they take responsibility for their own statements and judgments, recognizing what Wendell Johnson referred to as "to-me-ness," or do they attempt to speak for a group or with the authority of a group?
- To what degree are they saying something beyond the simple application of a label? ("All you need to know about him is that he's a *liberal!*")
- Do they objectify high order abstractions such as *truth*, *justice*, *moral values*, *security* and speak about 'them' as if 'they' were 'things,' rather than inherently inexact and personalized notions?
- Do they concentrate on similarities at the expense of ignoring differences, and vice-versa? Do they exhibit attitudes of "allness" (or "noneness")?
- Do they fail to apply Korzybski's *extensional devices* — specifically, *indexing* (Muslim Leader₁ is not Muslim Leader₂), *dating* (Senator Phlops views on de-regulation₁₉₈₀ may not represent the Senator's views₂₀₀₅), and *et cetera*, (the *et cetera*, or *etc.*, means that more can always be said; we can never know *all* there is to know about *anything*).

Remember ... these same principles that you apply critically to others, you can apply to yourself. And we want to emphasize that in general semantics we

are not so concerned with the *words* as we are with the underlying human thinking-feeling and evaluating processes, judgments, perspectives, etc., that are conveyed by the words.

Please send your contributions to the IGS office by e-mail, which we prefer, (symbols@time-binding.org) or mail (IGS, P.O. Box 1565, Fort Worth, TX 76101). Please note our Writers Guidelines on page 114, also posted online at www.time-binding.org/library/guidelines.htm.

The following articles address aspects of the 2004 presidential election from several points of view.

Gregg Hoffmann wrote his analysis after the Democratic and Republican conventions, but before the post-Labor Day heat of the campaign. His reactions to the symbols and language coming out of the conventions offered a portent of the verbal clashes that marked the campaigns in September and October.

Allan Brooks contends that the traditional labels and language of politics don't adequately reflect the direction and dynamics of the two parties. Using the scientific method and general semantics formulations to develop new terms could help us all see through the fog.

Terence Ripmaster does not conceal his semantic reactions in his post-election remarks, "Semantics and the 2004 Election," in which he makes connections with George Orwell's essay, "Politics and the English Language."

Nora Miller offers a survey of commentary and fact-checking resources from the Internet. During the campaigns, these sites experienced heavy traffic as people tried to find the facts behind the words. Even the Vice President mentioned one of them during the debate. We hope to watch some of these sites to see if they continue their service to the public's efforts at language evaluation and understanding.

We conclude this first section of "Calling Out the Symbol Rulers" with a special reprint from the Institute's archives. Presented as a paper at the Second American Congress on General Semantics at Denver University in 1941 and later printed in *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Irving J. Lee's article compares the rhetoric of Aristotle, Hitler, and Korzybski. We should remember that Lee prepared this article in 1940, before the ultimate consequences of the Nazi symbol rulers' propaganda were discovered in places like Dachau, Treblinka, Auschwitz, etc.

NOTE

1. Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics* (Available from IGS), p.76.