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Semantic Patterns and Cultural Pessimism

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> Abstract • I would like to focus on three points concerning the "framing" of the target article to get some more room for clarification here. First, it is unclear how the route is supposed to look that leads from the claim that semantic patterns of our language are outdated to consequences such as violence, murder, and suicide. Second, the reported shortcomings of our language appear to be at odds with what evolutionary theory suggests, i.e., the survival of the fittest. Third, I discuss the understanding of "history" that is (implicitly) used in the article.

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Language kills – but how?

« 1 » In the political speeches of Albert Camus, we can find a recurring topic: that abstraction is a key factor preventing human flourishing (see, e.g., Camus 2022: 21ff or 41ff). He shows us a very direct sense in which abstractions can have negative impact on our lives. Camus starts with our language consisting of abstractions; if we understand everything in abstract ways, we lose the emotional connection to those things. If we also understand other humans in such abstract ways – for example in bureaucracy and politics – they are just numbers to us rather than human beings with whom we can have a meaningful connection. And without such a meaningful connection between humans, all kinds of evil are about to take over the world (which was a very threatening situation for a young Camus in the 1940s and 1950s).

« 2 » In this way, Camus made an argumentative connection from "language consists of abstractions" to "abstractions are a cause of cruelty." While Andrey Druzhinin and Tzipora Rakedzon make a comparably similar claim in their target article, it is hard to tell how it connects with its (presumably different) starting point. They start with Korzybski's thesis that people chose "death over life, destruction over flourishing, insanity over science" (§3). So, what is the argument that leads to this claim? Very briefly, this is because the language we speak no longer lives up to the complexities of our lives. This is the case because the semantical patterns of our languages stem from ancient times (at least from the time of Aristotle, it is said) and therefore cannot cope with the complexities that have arisen since antiquity. In other words, the semantic foundations of language were laid in simpler times, which is why the application of a language founded in this way leads to misleading and even dangerous results in more complex situations. However, this makes me wonder: How exactly are we to understand the connection between semantic patterns like "Our language operates with a subject/object structure" or "language divides situations in dichotomous ways" to "People start wars and commit all sorts of atrocities"? Q1 The examples provided do not provide a convincing argumentative path.

« 3 » In §10 the example of "gender" is discussed. Here, we are told, is an example in which our language presents us with an unhelpful dichotomy that leads many people to have a confused view on the topic. However, it is far from clear that this is a semantic issue on a foundational level of how our language works. In other cases, dichotomies are perfectly fine – where something is either a potato or not a potato, either a 1 or a 0, and so on. That we now think that it is better to say that "gender" is not to be understood as a dichotomy is not an issue of semantic patterns of language, but a result of our being more empathetic to other people's struggles (which, put this way, contradicts Druzhinin and Rakedzon's claim). Therefore, I do not take this to show that *semantic patterns* of language lead to cruelty, but only that the *application* of language in certain situations can lead to cruelty. In other words, what the authors have shown here is that there is a specific problematic dichotomy, not that dichotomies as semantic patterns are problematic per se.

Survival despite language?

« 4 » Another issue concerns a background that Korzybski and the authors of the target article share. The latter write that Korzybski takes an "evolutionary view of the brain" (§7). It therefore seems reasonable to assume that Korzybski and the authors ascribe to an evolutionary worldview by and large (and not only when it comes to the brain). And I take it that it is a standard approach of the theory of evolution in which the term "evolution" is applied to populations – no matter whether a population is defined as a set of individuals, like Charles Darwin (1859) argued, or as a set of genes, as Richard Dawkins (1976) argued. The general idea of evolutionary theory is that the populations that survive and grow and thrive are the fit ones, the ones that have the greatest reproductive success.[1]

« 5 » However, if this is the background, I am puzzled by the setup of the proposed problem. The authors argue (as did Korzybski) that human language is dysfunctional and as such does more harm than good to us and should be changed to accommodate our needs in an increasingly complex world. Here, then, is my second question: Why does language not diminish human flourishing in the least if it is such a bad tool? Q2 One could make the equally ad hoc claim that we humans are not close to extinction, that global prosperity is the best in recorded history, and that human inventiveness is stronger than ever. None of this

1 | This is a view Humberto Maturana (Maturana & Mpodozis 2000) would have vehemently objected to, but his is not the mainstream view.

should be possible if language were such a bad tool for survival. Yet here we are.

« 6 » Druzhinin and Rakedzon paint a very different, grim picture of our situation. They begin their article by saying that today is worse than ever, and their formulations imply that everything used to be better in the past – see, for example, §1, where they write about, "*today's* world of raging wars," "violence and hate speech are *becoming* […] *more popular*," and say that "*more and more* people are oriented towards self-destruction" (my emphasis). Were there no gruesome wars in antiquity (although the world was so simple back then)? Were the Dark Ages such a good time to live? Was negotiation and diplomacy a much stronger suite of the politicians of the 19th and early 20th centuries (which led to two world wars, one of which Korzybski witnessed)?

« 7 » The point is: if the human condition today is bad, then it has always been bad. Otherwise, our survival and even flourishing as a population becomes a miracle that refutes evolutionary theory (which is a possible route, but it is hard to imagine that this is what the authors are arguing, since they do not add any critical remarks to that effect).

Is this Whig history?

« 8 » My third point concerns the missing historical sensitivity throughout the setup of the target article (which seems to be inherited from Korzybski). In §9, we can read, for example, that, according to Korzybski, Aristotle's language and knowledge was built on "primitive patterns of thought," that people in ancient times had much less scientific knowledge at their disposal, and that life back then was generally simpler and without human-made complications (see §13). In Korzybski's view, the problem of Aristotle and his contemporaries was that they did not have scientific ways of thinking and speaking. In §12 it is said that only with science can we make safe assumptions and deal with empirical evidence.

« 9 » This is a classic example of Whig history, the view that the past was dark and morose but led us to a (by and large) glorious present. While it is understandable that Korzybski had this view of history, since it was *en vogue* in his lifetime, today, more sensitivity is required.

« 10 » Seen this way, antiquity developed (now bad) semantic patterns of language and arrived at simple knowledge only. Then we invented science and now we are finally able to have thorough knowledge of our surroundings. To put it somewhat exaggeratedly, the situation of Aristotle and his contemporaries is reminiscent of the first circle of hell in Dante's *Inferno*. Here reside the philosophers of antiquity, who had the misfortune to be born before Christ, so they could not be Christians and were therefore condemned for all eternity even though they were otherwise good people. Could they not at least have been born after the scientific revolution?

« 11 » Whig history is not a very well received position to take for many reasons. Katy Gardner and David Lewis (2015), for example, criticized it for its overly simplified teleological view of history (which is, in its core, Christian), for its presentism, its arrogance and for being corrosive with regard to all other historical eras but the present.

« 12 » From this, three additional issues arise for the target article.

a It is at odds with Druzhinin and Rakedzon's "everything was better in the past" narrative when they describe our current situation (see §7 above).

b Whig history leads to the very implausible claims presented, such as that antiquity was a simpler time, that there was no idea of a (sub)microscopic level but only of macroscopic objects, that no safe assumptions about the world were possible and that people back then were not able to properly deal with empirical evidence. These are, at least, the direct claims in the article.

c Moving to a more general level, the Whiggish approach in the target article declares that all humans aim (or at least should aim) to develop science. All past efforts are to be interpreted in terms of this goal, therefore it is appropriate that today we describe past efforts as attempts to reach the same goals that we are aiming to reach today (but doing this better).

For these reasons, the Whiggish approach to history is at odds with the understanding of human flourishing that most (radical) constructivists had and have, since it proposes one absolute goal all humans shall aim for and not an adaptive use of our intellectual means to cope with our surroundings.

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