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Balvant Parekh Centre for General Semantics and Other Human Sciences Baroda

&

C.K. Thakur College, New Panvel,
University of Mumbai

Jointly Organize

A National Workshop
On

Perceptions of Language

26-30 November 2015

Venue:
Plot No.-01, Sector-11, Khanda Colony,
New Panvel (W), Dist.-Raigad,
Maharashtra-410 206

To : Head of the Department
Please circulate this flyer among the teachers, research scholars and students of your Department. Thanks for your cooperation.

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**Introduction**

Balvant Parekh Centre for General Semantics and Other Human Sciences, in collaboration with the Department of English, C.K. Thakur College, University of Mumbai will organize a five-day workshop on “Perceptions of Language” during 26-30 November 2015 at the C. K. Thakur College campus. The Workshop aims at introducing General Semantics approach to effective language behavior advocated by Alfred Korzybski to the students and teachers across disciplines; mostly in the humanities and social sciences. The workshop will be organized around readings of significant texts by Korzybski and other semanticians and critics, lectures by the resource persons, and interactive sessions with the participants. The number of participants should not exceed 40.

**Concept Note**

General Semantics is a theory of evaluation based on modern scientific knowledge and postulates invented and pioneered by Polish born engineer-philosopher Alfred Korzybski (1879-1950) in his 1933 book, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*. It is the study of language as a representation of reality and how it affects thought and, in turn, how language affects behavior. More specifically, as Catherine Minteer has observed, this theory provides a method of studying the part language plays in human affairs. For Minteer, it emphasizes the effectiveness of human communication in (1) the awareness of the all-pervasive character of language in daily affairs, (2) the habit of looking to language as a possible clue to some of our misunderstandings and conflicts, and (3) an appreciation of the scientific method and a consideration of applying it to language.

The present course takes Korzybski’s final paper, “The Role of Language in the Perceptual Processes” published as a chapter in *Perception: An Approach to Personality* (1951), edited by Robert R. Blake and Glenn V. Ramsey as the core text of study along with excerpts from selected works by Stuart Chase, S. I. Hayakawa and Steven Pinker. The course aims to synthesize Korzybski’s analysis that a reflection on the nature of language is incomplete unless it is accompanied by a problematization of the world within which language operates. Another important area the course would steer towards is the contributions of General Semantics to the discipline of Communication and Cognitive Neuroscience.

Korzybski’s essay discusses the problem of “Perception” through a neuro-linguistic analysis of the perceptual processes. He discusses the main structural considerations of the “Aristotelian” language system and its effects on our outlook of the world, evaluations, and therefore, even “perceptions” and posits the solution by proposing a “Non-Aristotelian” language system. By “Aristotelian” he means the classical two-valued orientations of either-or classifications and its implicit reliance on identity, which he feels are no longer relevant to language. In presenting his formulations of “Non-Aristotelian” system, Korzybski proposes usage of extensional devices which would change the structure of language without changing language itself.

Extensional devices are the structural expedients which would increase our “consciousness of abstracting”, and free us from the archaic, “Aristotelian” limitations inherent in the older language structures. Korzybski puts emphasis on the incorporation of these devices into our actual evaluational processes.
He foregrounds the revised structure of language with neuro-physiological effects; as it necessitates “thinking” in terms of “facts”, or visualizing processes, before making generalizations. For him, the old “Aristotelian” language structure, with its subject-predicate form hindered rather than induced such desirable neuro-physiological functioning and led instead to verbalize speculations divorced from actualities, eventually inducing, “split personalities” and other pathological reactions.

Along with Korzybski’s essay, we will discuss excerpts from S.I. Hayakawa’s 1941 book *Language in Thought and Action* to explore how Hayakawa makes a distinction between the verbal world, which he calls the ‘intensional world’, and the world of experience; which he calls the ‘extensional world’. According to Hayakawa, our verbal or intensional reports function as maps to the territory of the non-verbal or extensional world of our experience. In what Hayakawa calls “intensional orientation”, the thought and action of people is conditioned by the (precise or confusing) image projected by words. Hayakawa also addresses the questions of how language should be used to attain cooperation and understanding rather than confrontation and conflict.

We will also be reading excerpts from Stuart Chase’s book *Tyranny of Words* which is one of the easier introductions to the applied philosophy of language and introduces the reader to Korzybski’s idea of General Semantics. While using a theoretical approach, (to the philosophy of language) Korzybski develops practical ideas and tips to aid the individual in attaining a greater clarity in communication; the area Chase tackles is: how do we communicate meaning accurately, particularly as the level of abstraction of our ideas increases? As such, it illustrates the struggles in the field of General Semantics to develop its methodology, and contribute to the field of Communication Studies.

Finally, this course would look at Steven Pinker’s *The Language Instinct*, to reflect on how human brains are wired to think and build languages in particular ways. Pinker, in his work refutes Korzybski’s take on linguistic relativity as a single-valued, absolutistic and uni-directional belief that “language determines thought.” While for Korzybski words are not the subjects they represent, but incomplete, approximate, and sometimes misleading signs; for Pinker it is instinct that creates language “spontaneously,” “independently of whatever else happens”.

Simultaneously, for a contrastive position, we will read Bruce Kodish’s article, “What We Do With Language - And What It Does With Us”, which criticizes Pinker’s argument and foregrounds Korzybski’s thesis that “language”, ‘thought’ (more accurately, neuro-evaluational processes), ‘behavior,’ and ‘culture’ do not function separately but rather as elements within a gestalt (a unified whole) where they mutually interact in multi-dimensional and probabilistic ways.”

### Registration Fee

Each outstation participant is required to pay a registration fee of Rs. 750/- (Rupees seven hundred and fifty only) through a bank draft payable to Balvant Parekh Centre for General Semantics and Other Human Sciences on any bank in Baroda before 31 October 2015. The fee will take care of tea and lunch. The fee is non-refundable. Those who need accommodation on the campus should get in touch with the local course coordinator, Rajesh Yeole. Outstation participants will have to make their own travel arrangements.