

SEMANTIC REACTION

The term *Semantic Reaction* appears throughout Alfred Korzybski's book, *Science and Sanity*. In fact, it appears so frequently that Korzybski decided to abbreviate it as *s.r.*

Korzybski described *s.r.* as “the psycho-logical reaction of a given individual to words and language, and other symbols and events, in connection with their meanings, and the psycho-logical reactions, which become meanings and relational configurations the moment the given individual begins to analyze them, or somebody else does that for him/her.” This reaction is ‘emotional’ and ‘intellectual.’

If someone expresses their opinion of you in four letter words, it does not take you much time analyzing the words for their meanings and relational configurations to affect you both emotionally and intellectually. On the other hand, in some parts of the middle east, spitting on the ground in front of someone is considered an insult. As a westerner visiting this area, you might think this was merely a bad mannered way of clearing ones throat. However, when your knowledgeable companion explained the offence, a psycho-logical reaction may occur within you. You might even be tempted to react. Let's look at some other examples.

If one of your classmates were to pick up a stick and hit you with it, what would you feel? Hurt? Anger? Resentment? Surprise? Body tension? Fight or flight? To what were you primarily responding? A physical action. When you started thinking about it, then the semantic reactions begin.

On the other hand, if you are in a classroom, and someone enters and hands you a note saying, “Your mother called and she found your lottery ticket. You just won one million dollars.” Aside from jumping up and shouting, what feelings were you experiencing? Were there ones you could not quite describe?

Suppose the note said, “There was a fire in your bedroom. Your computer, your musical instruments, and all your CD's are history.” Now what emotions might you experience?

Suppose you have just received your driver's license, and as you go down the highway with some friends, red and blue lights appear in your rear view mirror. Describe your feelings. Are any of them physical, say funny feeling in your stomach? Did these feelings occur since you analyzed the meaning of the red and blue lights?

Suppose the police car overtook you and kept on going. Now describe your feelings.

You have asked for driving directions to the *Downtown Café*. A friend looks at his map and says, “Go down Chestnut Street and turn left on Market.” Simple enough. When you arrive at Market you are confronted by a sign, an arrow pointing to the right which says, “One way.” Explain your feelings and reactions to that sign.

In all but the example with the stick, nothing physical occurred. You were dealing strictly with words and symbols. However, if you think back, did everyone have the same reactions to these words and symbols as you did? Certainly not. Were any of the

reactions stated destructive or non-survival? Suppose someone had said he would turn left on Market regardless of the sign, or he would simply try to outrun the flashing red and blue lights. Would this *s.r.* indicate this individual might have a problem?

Suffice to say, we all have our own *s.r.* to given words and symbols. Some of these may actually cause us problems in our daily lives. When we become aware of these destructive *s.r.*'s. we can try to modify them. Here are a few examples you might discuss with your teacher or a guidance counselor if they affect you. You fill in the blanks.

Every time I hear the word 'test', I ?????.

Every time I hear the word ????? I get upset and????.

Every time I see ????? I want to ?????.

If these, or even more destructive ones, continue to get in our way, we can make an appointment with a psychiatrist. In this program, we will go no further with this subject. Keep in mind, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can really mess up my psyche."