

Lance Strate. *On the Binding Biases of Time: Essays on General Semantics and Media Ecology*. New York: Institute of General Semantics, 2011. 302 pp.

Lance Strate's *On the Binding Biases of Time* is a set of talks, turned articles, turned chapters celebrating the lasting power of a single theoretical apparatus: general semantics. General semantics is a compact interdisciplinary method established by Alfred Korzybski for understanding the human organism in its environment. The book is a series of explorations of this method by routes through the method's own history and by reflective analysis of more distant topics, such as J.R.R. Tolkien and Canada's *Beaver Magazine*. Though it does not engage directly with other writing on time and temporality, and its central topic is general semantics rather than time, it offers something to specialists interested in time as well as those with other interests.

Certain chapters would make good teaching materials; those on Neil Postman, Alfred Korzybski, the relation between semantic and media environments, and the Ten Commandments as ground rules for the semantic environment of the Jews are welcoming, clear, and sometimes a bit charming. The tenets of general semantics come off as straightforward ideas with unexpected implications that have been kept alive by the many intellectuals who have at some point come under their influence (this list include Heinlein, Luhmann, Bateson, Hubbard, Engelbart, and Burroughs). Strate aims to continue this tradition.

Overall, the book is most interesting for its vision of how time operates in representation and human history. The general idea is that humans nurture a timeless symbolic moment and therefore have a responsibility to expand this distinctive eternal time. It is the special destiny of humans to collect knowledge (productive practices). It happens that science (an organized system of thought) is the best way to do it, and so general semantics has distilled key properties of science, allowing the rate of progress known in the hard sciences to be generalized beyond them.

The slogan of general semantics is that "the map is not the territory." This slogan is a summary of three rules. First, because the world is in flux, no thing is identical to any other thing (non-identity). In *reality*, no representation is interchangeable. Second, any impression of another thing is necessarily partial (non-allness). In abstracting *from reality*, no representation is complete. Third, representation can represent representation (self-reflexivity). *Within* the realm of representation, no representation is immune to reflexivity. (For example, if I say I am not who I say I am, this alters the meaning of the representation I make of my self.)

In other words, representation is constant while what is represented changes. There is a world of being, and there occurs a world of becoming. The first represents the second. While language is a preferred medium of representation, any object can represent another. Therefore signifier and signified are two aspects of a thing, two points of view on a matter, rather than two kinds of objects. Here lies the difference between saying a word *is* a word and that a word *represents* a word. In the actual world, there are only processes of abstracting and no material abstractions (words represent words). In the symbolic dimension, abstractions do exist (words are words). So while changes occur within representation, they are timeless reconfigurations of identities rather than embodied and material processes of transformation.

The model separates the time of being, which is only achievable by representation, from that of becoming, which is the unavoidable condition of anything in the real world. For this reason, we should avoid using the verb “to be” because it implies fixity in the world (a convention called E-prime, English), we ought to pluralize nouns whenever appropriate to indicate that the signified is multiple, we ought to put a date in superscript over objects to clarify that they are not the same object at different times (for example, Tokyo¹⁹²⁴ and Tokyo¹⁹⁴³), and we should add the phrase “et cetera” to the end of statements as a reminder that representation is always partial. Such conventions, used consistently in a chapter memorializing Neil Postman, exemplify the care with which language ought to be used as an instrument.

The justification for this system can be found in the special time of the human race. Humans are unlike plants and unlike other animals because they accumulate knowledge (know-how) as if it were a kind of energy. This situation mitigates the dreariness of the fact that each individual will inevitably die and it allows humans to make progress. Some techniques foster accumulation of knowledge better than others. Language is a historical tradition of theory-making that helps humans accumulate knowledge. Scientific language is an improvement on this. Although humans have advanced generally, advances in science and engineering have been most pronounced and have recently accelerated. For other domains to flourish in a like manner, humans ought to generalize scientific thought and govern their societies on its basis, by social engineering (especially in education).

What is meant by science is not just biology, chemistry, and so on. Scientific thought is organized, empirical thought that observes neutrally, records accurately, and revises its assumptions over time. In this sense, poetry makes us careful with words and therefore contributes to sophisticated scientific