

THE NEGATIVE APPROACH TO THE MEANING OF LANGUAGE

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Words and their meanings are never more than abstractions, which cannot substitute for that to which they refer (e.g. using the word for "dinner" and thinking about what it means to us cannot provide the kind of nourishment that comes from actually eating a meal). Moreover, words cannot abstract all that is to be known about any given thing. Indeed, they do not even abstract all that is essential to the function of that thing (e.g. the word "chair" abstracts what is essential for the function of supporting a person who sits on it, but not what is essential to its functioning at the atomic or nuclear level). So, it is necessary to recognise that all language has an essentially negative and partial relationship to that to which it refers. A. Korzybski has put this relationship very succinctly in the assertion:

"Whatever we say it is, it isn't."

This statement is not a metaphysical assertion about the basic nature of "what is." Rather, it is a very deep challenge to the entire structure of our communications, both external and internal (which latter are called "thought").

To understand this challenge, let us begin with the fact: "We are always talking about it" ("It" refers to anything whatsoever). When we read Korzybski's statement, our first response is to see that we have already begun to say something about "it" (whatever "it" may happen to be). And then, noticing that "it" is not what we say, and that what we say is at most incomplete abstraction even from what is to be known, we assume that "it" must be something else, as well as something more. But "something else" and "something more" are also what we say "it" is. As we do this for a while, we begin to be struck by the absurdity of the whole procedure. For whatever we say it is, it isn't.

What is the appropriate response to such a situation?

Evidently, one has to stop saying anything at all, not merely outwardly, but also, inwardly. It is suggested here that if all the "chatter" of thought can really stop, then something new can happen. But even to say this much may be going too far. For if this means that "it" will be "something new," then the novelty that we say "it" is will be what "it" is not. The paradox with which the reader has to be left is "What is it when there is no saying at all, neither outwardly nor inwardly?"