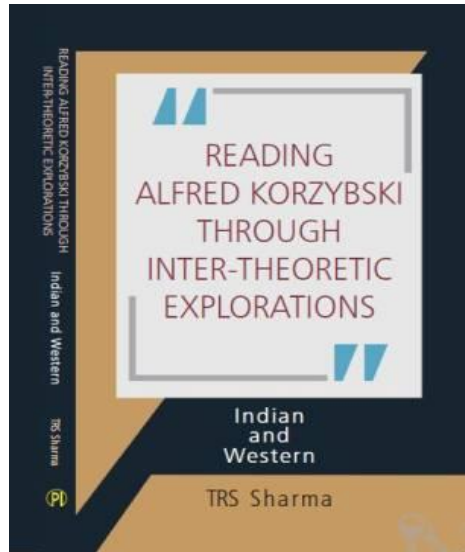


TRS Sharma, *Reading Alfred Korzybski through Inter-theoretic Explorations: Indian and Western*. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2018. 194 pp. ISBN: 978-93-82178-26-2.



TRS Sharma's book, which was awarded the Hayakawa Book Prize for 2018 by the Institute of General Semantics, New York, is an important and timely contribution for more reasons than one. First, Sharma's book addresses a glaring lacuna which exists with regard to an inexplicable apathy towards the work of Alfred Korzybski, one of twentieth century's most extraordinary language thinkers. A look at the bibliographic details of many of the current so-called authoritative books on language and meaning and semantics would sadly testify to this. Secondly, the author's remarkably erudite explorations of Korzybski's complex formulations of General Semantics are inter-theoretic, with the author delving into the conceptual complex of Korzybski's insights and attempting to make sense of it by showing the commonalities and divergences it has with the ideas of Western language thinkers like Wittgenstein, Saussure, Leavis, Frege, Whorf, Bakhtin, Chomsky and Derrida in Part I of the book, and with those of the ancient Indian language thinkers like Nagarjuna, Dinnaga, Dharmakirti, Adi Shankara and Bhartrhari in Part II. This framework of the book, which has two parts containing sixteen chapters each, fits in with the notion of comparative epistemics involved in the author's study of Korzybski's General Semantics, and it is possibly the only book of its kind.

Sharma begins his book with a careful distinction between Korzybski's General Semantics and "the usual kind of semantics," which refers to that branch

of linguistics which “studies meaning in language and in other symbolic systems of communication” (13). General Semantics, on the other hand, is, as Sharma stresses, “a system, which deals with the neuro-linguistic, neuro-semantic issues which, chronologically speaking, for the first time Korzybski was able to discuss” (14). Therefore, much broader in scope than Semantics, Korzybski’s theorising of language and communication in his General Semantics entails a knowledge of biology, physics, chemistry, anthropology, psychiatry, neurology, and such other disciplines, making us marvel at the grandeur of his vision while, at the same time, unnerving us at times with the abstruseness of his ideas. From what we can understand from Sharma’s eloquent introduction to the Korzybskian discourse, there is a centring of the human body and its complex nervous system in it; it is the functioning of the “human-organism-as-a-whole-in-an-environment” (with the hyphens used deliberately to indicate interconnectedness) that is focused upon. In Part I of the book, Sharma discusses the most important terms in the Korzybskian discourse like “event,” “process,” “abstracting,” “extension,” “intension,” “non-elementalism,” “multi-ordinality,” etc., and tries to situate Korzybski in the intellectual milieu of the other important language thinkers of the early twentieth century who were enabling the ushering in of an epistemic change with regard to the Aristotelian system of thought, the binariness of which has always led us into evaluating things in terms of polar opposites, of “either/or” exclusive positions: for/against, win/lose, etc.

In the Korzybskian non-Aristotelian system of thought, we are made aware of the fact that the world is more often about gradations, probabilities and degrees of intensity than polarities and dichotomies. The Aristotelian laws of identity, contradiction and excluded middle, which, as Sharma points out, have “had a deleterious effect on western conceptual thinking,” are countered by Korzybski with his pithy aphorisms, which Sharma quotes in order for us to understand the Korzybskian discourse better (14). The Aristotelian law of identity which posits “whatever is, is,” for instance, is countered by Korzybski with his aphorism “whatever you say a thing is, it is not” (14). It is this aphoristic way of thinking, especially with regard to the limits of verbal language, which Wittgenstein, the philosopher that Sharma discusses in Chapter 2 of Part I, seems to share with Korzybski. If Korzybski makes us aware that “the word is not the thing” and that “the map is not the territory,” thereby pointing out how we make the mistake of mapping with static words the dynamic world of process and change we live in, Wittgenstein has his own set of aphorisms in his *Tractatus*, as pointed out by Sharma, which reveal how our attempt at “identifying the verbal with the real world” is bound to result in mis-evaluation of some degree:

Objects can only be *named*. Signs are their representatives.
 I can only speak *about* them: I cannot *put them into words*.
 Propositions can only say *how things* are, not *what* they are...
 (*Tractatus*, 3.221, ctd. in Sharma 21; italics in original)

From Chapter 4 to Chapter 6, Sharma discusses with his usual lucidity some of the key terms in the Korzybskian theory-praxis like “event” and “process,” for instance, which indicate how we live in a world of constant flux, of “ceaseless becoming,” of *kshamikavaada*, a term (indicating the notion of flux being the only reality) used by the early Buddhist thinkers which Sharma invokes in Chapter 4 (25). This Korzybskian notion of being in constant flux also relates to the idea of the unfinalisability of the self of Bakhtin, whom Sharma deals with in Chapters 12, 14 and 16. In discussing Korzybski’s plea for a new non-Aristotelian semantic cartography, Sharma calls for in Chapter 4 an understanding of how in Korzybski and Saussure, another important language thinker of the twentieth century, the principle of “difference” replaces the primacy of the fixity of the Aristotelian “is” of identity. Here one thinks that Sharma perhaps could have expatiated upon why Korzybski recommends in his *General Semantics* the reduction in the use of the “to be” verb and suggests the use of “to me” phrases: “It seems to me...” rather than “it is....” After all, what appears “to be” does so in the eyes of the beholder only. Moreover, the key recommendations of Korzybski with regard to the development of new language habits with which to re-educate our neuro-semantic systems are important because Korzybski chooses to “operate in the extensional field of parole” like Bakhtin does, as Sharma points out, rather than in the intensional realm of the Saussurean “langue” (31, 74). In this context, one feels that Korzybski’s concept of punctuating our language with “et ceteras” in order to remind ourselves that we cannot possibly say everything that could be said should have also found a place in Sharma’s discussions.

In Chapter 5, Sharma analyses one of the most fundamental of Korzybski’s concepts, i.e., “abstracting,” by which the latter meant the continuous process of selecting, omitting and organising reality which we are involved in. In order to show how the process of abstracting proceeds from lower to higher levels, Korzybski develops a model of the Structural Differential, which Sharma discusses in detail in Chapter 13 (78-79), along with the Korzybskian notion of “multi-ordinality.” However, one feels that “abstracting,” “multi-ordinality” and the model of the “Structural Differential” could have possibly formed part of the same chapter, unlike what happens in Sharma’s book. The same is possibly true of the two chapters on Bakhtin, Chapter 12 and Chapter 14, the latter being just over half a page long. In the middle chapters of Part I, especially Chapter 7 and Chapter 8, Sharma seems to be treading a biased terrain, training his gun against the “aazaadi-shouting” “neophyte revolutionaries of elite schools” while he has almost nothing to say either about the attempt to straitjacket educational diversity in higher education institutes across the country or about the propensity of the powers that be to use the draconian colonial sedition law against dissenting students (41). Of course, Sharma cautiously points out in Chapter 8 that

“[g]enuine dissent is what we need to respect” but he fails to let us know what “genuine dissent” means to him.

It is in the sixteen chapters of Part II of the book where Sharma explores the several points of intersection in the discourses of Korzybski and the ancient Indian language thinkers that his most major contribution lies. He begins by questioning in Chapter 1 of Part II the commonplace “cultural stereotypes” regarding the West being analytical in its approach to reality and the East intuitive by pointing out pertinently that it is the language of degree, which Korzybski always emphasised in his work, of analytical or intuitive thinking which is “of supreme importance when we talk about cultures” (93-94). After all, haven’t Shankara and Maadhva, apart from the Nyaya and VaisheShika schools of thought been analytical in their discourses?

The first ancient Indian language thinker that Sharma takes up for discussion is the Buddhist Nagarjuna, whose deeply interlinked notions of *prateeyasamutpaada* (the inter-dependence of things) and *shoonyata* (emptiness), based on the concept of negation, find distinct echoes in the Korzybskian discourse. Just as Korzybski develops his ideas using negative arguments (for instance, the label we use for an object is not the object and the object is not the event, and so on), Nagarjuna bases his theoretical premise of *prateeyasamutpaada*, i.e., things and objects arising because of their dependence on other things arising, on the notion of things and objects being essentially *svabhaavashoonya* or “emptiness by nature.” Sharma, of course, while comparing Nagarjuna with Korzybski, does not fail to point out how the former’s negation “goes a couple of notches higher in the orders of Differential abstraction” than Korzybski’s to reach the state of *shoonya* or “the absolute negation” (111). With his phenomenal polymathic scholarship, Sharma manages to trace with great felicity of expression the rather convoluted histories of Shankara’s multi-ordinal notions of *mayaa* and *brahman*, and Bhartrhari’s triad of *pashyanti*, *maadhyama* and *vaikbari*, which astonishingly resonate with Korzybski’s triad of event, object and labelling. In the midst of these dense philosophical discussions, Sharma does not forget to bring in a tinge of humour. This is exhibited in Chapter 7 of Part II when while explaining Dinnaga’s theory of *apoha*, which literally means “to exclude by means of reasoning,” Sharma gives the familiar example of the “cow”; i.e., how the word “cow” gets its meaning by excluding “all its counter-correlates which are non-cows,” hoping that the cow-vigilantes who are on a rampage in many parts of India would for once shift their attention to language (121).

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