

**An Analysis of Current Texts' Treatment
of the Concept of Abstraction**

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--Abstract—

While Korzybski (1958) used a multi-ordinal construct for *abstraction* to build his semantic differential that spoke to distortions from observation to conclusion, Hayakawa's (1949) use of the concept in his ladders of abstraction was single dimensional and positive. It is the thesis of this paper that current texts in communication misrepresent Hayakawa's abstraction ladders, spinning them in the negative direction of the semantic differential. This instruction, then, is at best misleading and more likely counterproductive.

Key Words: Hayakawa, abstraction, general semantics, communication textbooks and coordination

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Korzybski (1958) developed the *Semantic Differential* with its *levels of abstraction*. The levels reflect the nature of the distortions in a person's perception of reality. The higher the level, the more separated is the person's thought from the reality on which the thought is supposedly based. In Korzybski's system, then, *abstraction* is a variable to be understood so as to reduce its negative effects.

Korzybski (1958) recognized that at each level of his differential, the word, *abstraction*, has different meanings. He stated on page 179, "The term 'abstracting' is a multiordinal term, and hence has different meanings, depending on the order of abstractions."

Hayakawa was a student of Korzybski and was influenced by him. Still, Hayakawa (1942) credited many individuals for their influence on his thinking. This diversity led Hayakawa (1949) to define *abstraction* more consistently in constructing his *abstraction ladders*. Hayakawa defined *abstraction* in terms of inclusiveness. The more abstract the concept, the more of reality it denotes.

As used in his system, abstraction is a positive concept that needs to be understood so to use it correctly. Hayakawa (1949) said, "The interesting writer, the informative speaker, the accurate thinker, and well-adjusted individual,

operate on all levels of the abstraction ladder, moving quickly and gracefully and in orderly fashion from higher to lower, from lower to higher....” (p. 180).

It is the thesis of this paper that current speech-communication texts overlay Korzybski’s (1958) negative connotation of abstraction when discussing Hayakawa’s (1949) abstraction ladders. Thus, instead of providing the useful tool that Hayakawa intended, they disparage any movement up the ladder. They, then, don’t help students to become accurate thinkers and informative speakers as Hayakawa intended, but place a roadblock in that ability.

To support this thesis, I examined 17 current speech-communication texts to determine if they included and discussed abstraction ladders and if so, to what extent they cast the use of upper rungs of these ladders in a negative light. The 17 texts were selected from the two major textbook publishers in the field because they were the one judged most likely to be used in the majority of our courses. Of the 17 texts examined, 14 presented ladders. The discussion of the texts is grouped by nature of the text’s content.

Public Speaking

Five of the texts were designed for public-speaking courses. One of these, German et al. (2011) did not include an example of an abstraction ladder. The authors did, however, discuss *abstraction* consistently with Hayakawa (1949). For example, they told students, “Use examples to clarify complex and abstract ideas.” (p. 101).

In contrast, the other four texts presented an example ladder but then provided advice not to use it. Beebe & Beebe (2012), while encouraging students to be specific, generalized that general-semantics theory “holds the more concrete your words, the clearer your communication.” (p. 219). Of course, this conclusion fits with Korzybski’s (1958), not with the context of their discussion of Hayakawa’s (1949) abstraction ladders. Devito’s (2012) bold, colored heading was “Use specific terms and numbers” (p. 173). Lucas (2012), in similar font advised, “Avoid abstract language” (p. 290).” Engleberg & Daly (2013) section presenting their abstraction ladder was similar. Clearly, the advice in all these texts reflected Korzybski (1958) not the connotation which should have accompanied the discussions of the abstraction ladders in those sections. The discussions in these texts were primarily dichotomous: abstract language verses concrete language. Still, Lucas did say, “Admittedly, few words are completely abstract or concrete.” (p. 225).

Interpersonal

The three interpersonal books showed the influence of Korzybski (1958). Devito (2009), perhaps, leaned most toward Hayakawa’s (1949), “Effective verbal messages include words at many levels of abstraction Generally, however, the specific term will prove the better choice (104).” Beebe, Beebe & Redmond (2011) leaned almost completely in the opposite direction. They defined abstraction ala Korzybski (1958) as words that reflect referents we can

experience with one of the senses (p. 115) and yet presented their ladder in that context. Similarly, Floyd (2011) directly linked abstraction with ambiguity.

Hybrid

The six introduction-to-communication texts provided the discussions which were more in alignment with Hayakawa (1949). Still, the negative overtones of Korzybski (1958) were ever present. Indeed, Gamble and Gamble (2010) gave Korzybski joint credit for the initial construction of an abstraction ladder.

Five of these books defined abstraction, consistent with the context of their abstraction ladders, in terms of its inclusiveness and/or specificity. Beebe, Beebe and Ivey (2010) were the only authors to link concrete words to tangible items following Korzybski (1958).

The advice in the context of these texts' treatment of *abstraction* which was most in agreement with Hayakawa (1949) came from Pearson & Nelson (2000). They concluded their discussion of specific and general words by saying that the important point, "is to use each where it is most appropriate." (p. 417). When Titsworth and Harter joined this pair (Pearson, Nelson, Titsworth & Harter, 2011), they failed to give the same advice.

Gamble and Gamble (2010) did manage to find two advantages for the use of abstract language. Perhaps it was a choice to damn with faint praise. Their two advantages were (1) "our communication becomes easier and faster

and (2) it enables us to “be deliberately unclear” (p. 100). Engleberg & Daly (2013) failed to state any advantages.

Probably Devito (2010) was most typical of this group. He said, “Effective verbal messages include words from a wide range of abstraction. At times, a general term may suit your needs best. Generally, however, the specific term will prove the better choice.” (p. 73).

Small Group

The only book in this category was by Beebe & Masterson (2012). They did not discuss abstraction. The only possible indication of any influence from Korzybski (1958) was found on page 27, where they instructed group members to “identify specific criteria (or standards).” Of course, “specific criteria,” taken literally, is an oxymoron. They probably mean *clearly identified criteria*.

Argumentation and Debate

There were two books in this category. Rybacki & Rybacki (2008) had no discussion of abstraction. Inch & Warnick (2010) had an excellent discussion of abstraction complete with a seven rung ladder. They also related the use of language at appropriate levels of abstraction to adapting to different audiences and situations. The credited Hayakawa (1949) appropriately and defined abstraction fairly consistently with his view, “Abstraction refers to the degree to which relevant characteristics are omitted in language.” (p. 208). The only problem word in this definition, the word which introduced a Korzybski (1958)

type bias, is *relevant*. Ideally, abstraction omits unnecessary and irrelevant characteristics. Objectively, the definition would be without either *relevant* or *irrelevant* since people, in abstracting, do often omit relevant details. The problem is that we don't teach them to use abstraction ladders at the level of ideas.

Basic Implication

The influence of Korzybski's (1958) negative coloring of the word *abstraction* is clearly present within all discussions and most potential applications of Hayakawa's (1949) abstraction ladders within our textbook, and thus most likely in most classroom instruction. Interestingly, the influence is found least in textbooks written for courses where the students are most likely to be communication majors. Could it be that we believe that we need to simplify the instruction for the average student?

This negative connotation of the word *abstraction*, it should be obvious, is a major obstacle in our appropriately utilizing a valuable concept. Please consider three ways that the concept should be better employed in our instruction.

First, understanding abstraction, as used by Hayakawa (1949), is essential to understanding coordination and subordination in thought and outlining. However, the concept is principally avoided in the discussion of outlining. Where coordination and subordination are provided as principles of

outlining, the word *importance* replaces the word *abstraction*, resulting in misunderstandings and confusion (see, for example, Nelson et al., 2009, p. 138).

Second, understanding reasoning, both deductive and inductive, depends on a clear understanding of how sentences and thoughts are ordered along the relevant abstraction ladder. Deduction is the application of a more general principle to a more specific observation that is subordinate (that is relevant to) the principle. Induction is the assimilation of relevant observation into a high-order abstraction.

Third, formulation and application of standards, whether used in judging speeches, relationships or solutions, depends on a clear understanding of abstractions since all criteria must be general enough to be applied to yet unknown specific situations. The formulation of criteria demands the ability to move up an appropriate abstraction ladder. Application demands similar movement down the ladder.

Summary

Hayakawa's (1949) development of the concept of *abstraction* is both uniform and positive. Of the 19 texts examined only three did not provide an example or any specific explanation of any abstraction ladder. The only texts that did not distort Hayakawa's (1949) view were the three that omitted the discussion of his ideas.

By instructing students to avoid abstract language, current texts and the resulting classroom instruction, impedes our students learning in major ways.

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