

## ***A TANGIBLE EXPERIENCE OF TIME-BINDING***

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WHEN ASKED to write a report about the New York Society for General Semantics 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary symposium, I had no idea I'd have a tangible experience of what it means to "time-bind." (See page 36 for the resulting report.)

Since my introduction to general semantics, I had thought of time-binding as the bottling up of events into words, then speaking or writing those words for other people to consume. More recently, while reading Cassius Keyser's book *Mathematical Philosophy*, I discovered a different formulation. Keyser writes the most eloquent characterization of time-binding I've yet to find:

If human beings are by nature civilization-builders, or "time-binders," and if all time-binders, or civilization-builders, are both inheritors from the toil of bygone generations and trustees for the generations to come, then we humans stand in the double relationship — debtors of the dead, trustees of the unborn — thus uniting past, present and future in one living, growing reality. (1)

It seemed that my original understanding of time-binding was too limited. Keyser suggests that time-binding does not occur merely between individuals, but more specifically between generations. It involves masses of present people standing between masses of past people and future people, passing the collections of the past into the hands of the future. Taken this way, time-binding appears evolutionary, cultural, and intangible.

However, this larger vision of time-binding offered little guidance when I wanted to manage or improve my time-binding at the individual, personal scale.

My recent reporting assignment helped me to understand in an intimate way how time-binding happens, how it can be improved, and how it can get corrupted. In that sense, my original take on time-binding proved fairly accurate.

As I explained to IGS President Andrea Johnson when I accepted the project, I lacked confidence in my ability to accurately portray the events of the symposium. The responsibility seemed enormous: I have long had difficulties with comprehension and attention span, and I embarrass myself on occasion by completely missing important plot points in plays and stories — my mind easily wanders or I simply fail to synthesize what I've heard. Despite these handicaps, I wanted to challenge my ability to report accurately what I witnessed, so I took on the project.

At the symposium, I hurriedly took notes during lectures, trying to get down as much information as I could. My handwriting was sloppy and rushed, sometimes illegible to anyone but myself, but my notes were fairly thorough. From a general semantics point of view, what I was doing was *abstracting*: perceiving aspects of the events around me and encoding those perceptions into symbols, i.e., abstractions of what I experienced. In addition to the information I consciously wrote down, there was information that I unconsciously left out as well as information I *consciously* left out. Whoever read my report would get only whatever I personally evaluated as worth reporting, and would miss information that I overlooked or considered negligible — in other words, they would only get one set of abstractions, mine.

When I began actually composing the report, I was nervous. I felt a tremendous responsibility to *accurately* communicate the events and speeches of the symposium to the readership. I realized that attendees as well as speakers might read the passages I composed, and if I reported events inaccurately, I could face anger and potential embarrassment from those people, embarrassment compounded by my own insecurity about my comprehension and attention span.

For this report, I wanted to limit my opinion of the events of the symposium to allow readers to formulate their own opinions. This meant that I couldn't treat one speech as more important than another by, for example, mentioning it higher up in the article. To be more accurate and less opinionated, I chose to report as best I could in the chronological order of the events at the symposium, for that would reduce the appearance of a bias for or against a particular lecture.

I also wondered whether I should paint general semantics, the speakers, the community, or the event in an exceptionally bright light. I had the opportunity in writing this report to "sell" general semantics, to paint speeches or speakers as "wonderful," "distinguished," or "amazing," and to do other sorts of

propagandizing if I wanted to. I decided that doing so would be *antithetical* to the scientific principles of general semantics. As Nicholas Johnson pointed out in his keynote address, general semantics was “a response to the dangers of propaganda,” a characterization with which I agreed. As I saw it, general semantics was interested in *the truthfulness of statements*, and I wanted to stay in line with that as much as I could in reporting.

As I began to write, I realized profoundly how my word choices could influence how my readers perceived the events and how they understood the thoughts and feelings of the speakers. Historically speaking, what “he said” and “she said” would depend to a large extent on what I *said* they said. In writing this report, I could influence how my readership *felt* about a particular speaker or event. I could also affect what makes the history books with respect to the symposium and which items survive only in the memories of the eyewitnesses. I felt very strongly the sobering position Keyser described, standing as an inheritor and a trustee — an inheritor of the events, and a trustee responsible for accurately transferring knowledge into the future.

I also realized how much *power* I had over my readership. If I made a choice of words that subtly misrepresented what actually happened, readers might never know it, meaning that I might linguistically construct a certain reality that *never happened*, meaning that future readership generations removed from my report might believe unquestionably that something had happened when it had not. Historians might thus document false information about what happened, with little ability to determine the validity of the information, resulting in a *partially* truthful picture of the past rather than something more wholly so.

With this power and responsibility foremost in mind, I chose a conservative approach to my reporting. I tried to make as truthful statements as I could about what I experienced at the symposium, statements that could be tested by consultation with others there or by reading the speakers’ actual speeches. Where I offered opinions about the events, I did not identify who actually expressed those opinions, but I chose to convey my observations of the opinions of others. My language, compared to how I often write, was much more functional (verb-oriented) and less *characteristique* (adjective-oriented). In other words, to make more functional sentences, I tended towards verbs where I could have used adjectives.

When I sent Ms. Johnson a six-page first draft, I discovered that I had already *exceeded* the word limit for an *ETC* article.

This meant that I had to pare down the report, which again brought me face

to face with time-binding — serving as inheritor and trustee. What I had included in my original draft did not include *all* of the notes I took from the lectures, so my rough draft was an abstraction<sub>2nd</sub> of an abstraction<sub>1st</sub> from a territory (the symposium). But I found it a fair and accurate abstraction that others would appreciate and the past would approve of. Now, I faced the excruciating problem of creating an abstraction<sub>3rd</sub> of an abstraction<sub>2nd</sub>. Creating a “third-floor” abstraction from the territory would ensure that my readership had even *less* of an experience of the events of the symposium, meaning history and future generations would have even *fewer* details about the events and the speeches I experienced.

I was disheartened that I had to provide a significantly less complete report of the events at the symposium to my readership because of a word limit. While I’m generally all for revision and concision, for this exercise, I didn’t want to choose which items to delete, especially since some of these speakers’ lectures may never be heard again. One moment that I did ultimately drop, I’ll preserve here. I felt it was among the funniest comments at the symposium, and one I wanted my readership to know:

Vice President of Friends of the Institute of Noetic Sciences, [Allen] Flagg also commented on dreams and how the symbols of dreams are *not* hard-wired. He explained that science had revealed that rapid eye movement during sleep meant people were having dreams, and since that discovery, mammals in general had been found to dream, and even, according to Flagg, scientists had found that “*Platypuses dream!*”

So, while the report regrettably no longer contains these details, this essay at least preserves Allen Flagg’s treatment of dreaming in his symposium talk, his intimate connection with FIONS, and his exclamation — a surprising moment that words cannot do justice to. I wanted to include all of these events from the territory, but to reduce my verbiage, I regrettably had to abridge my map.

In other words, restrictions on my time-binding capacity meant that some of the past would be *artificially* lost that might otherwise be communicable. As we abstract, we leave out information naturally, but as we write, sometimes we are forced by artificial constraints to leave out additional information.

If I were to come up with a synonym for the term “time-binding,” I might now choose “reporting.” This word makes time-binding a less foreign, less abstract idea for most people. Plus, it helps a “time-binder” better understand how to do “time-binding” well — we can time-bind better merely by improving

our reporting. Mainly, we can move from less accurate wordings of some event to more accurate wordings. We can also remove our own opinions of what we witness so that our listeners can formulate a more correspondent perception of what actually happened. More generally, we can understand and conscientiously take on the responsibility we have when we put pen to paper, hands to keyboard, or voice to air.

When the future listens, its understanding and success depends on *our* reports from the present. Time-binding is done individually and now<sub>1st</sub>, but the minutest choice of word can have cultural impacts and implications now<sub>2nd</sub> and later.

### NOTE

1. Keyser, Cassius J. *Mathematical Philosophy*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1922. p.4.