
OFF THE MAP

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HOW TO BE LESS WRONG MORE OFTEN

If you suffer with the popular neurosis of needing to be right as often as possible—or, less neurotically, if you want to be less wrong more often—here’s a trick from general semantics that will help get you there.

Speak Probabilistically

In general, the common tendency for people is to trust their nervous systems. They tend to believe that if they saw it, they intimately know about it, or if they have experience with it, they confidently know what will happen next.

For example, an extra on a film set may observe a lead actor yelling at a crew member. He may go tell other extras the lead was upset. He may quickly add that it is going to be a long day as a result. The extra may express these statements with absolute confidence in his observations and conclusions. As a listener, you have no inkling this extra believes the lead might *not* be upset or the day might *not* go long.

It is this certitude that makes the extra painfully wrong when he is faced with the reality of a short day, during which it was revealed the lead was joking around with the crew member, playfully in character, not actually upset. Had the extra spoken probabilistically about what he observed, he would have ended up less wrong when faced with information contrary to his claims.

General semantics teaches people to be suspicious of their nervous systems, and under that suspicion, to speak with probability (“uncertainty”) rather than with certainty. Being wrong is not necessarily a problem, but in case it is, speaking probabilistically can help toward being less wrong more often.

How to Speak Probabilistically

Speaking probabilistically is quite simple. It tends to involve just adding words like “probably” or “possibly” to any claim you want to make. Simply by add-

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ing these kinds of words, you dramatically and significantly change what you are saying and even what you are thinking when you make a claim.

Saying “The lead actor was upset” makes you decidedly wrong when the truth is revealed that the actor was fine. However, adding the word “probably” and saying, “The lead actor was *probably* upset,” does not make you as decidedly wrong when the truth is revealed that the actor was fine. In fact, by adding the word “probably,” you explicitly concede *there is the possibility the lead actor was not upset*, and when you are shown he was fine, you are less wrong than if you expressed with certainty that he was upset.

When you add the word “possibly” instead of “probably,” you get a similar but slightly different effect. When you say, “The lead actor was *possibly* upset,” you communicate *there is a probability the lead actor was not upset*. When it is revealed the lead actor was fine, you were not decidedly wrong because you conceded in your speech the potential that he was fine. You were less wrong than had you expressed with certainty that the lead was upset.

Conditioning Yourself to Speak Probabilistically

Speaking probabilistically is a habit that can be conditioned when you pay attention to what you say and write, and when you correct certainties as you express them.

To speak probabilistically and find yourself less wrong more often, each time you find yourself making a strong claim that implies certainty about your take on events, *immediately correct yourself and restate* by adding in the word “probably” or “possibly.” That is, if you catch yourself saying something like “The lead actor was upset,” promptly rephrase your statement and follow up with, “I mean, the lead actor was *probably* upset.”

By correcting yourself immediately, you start to recondition yourself into a new habit of speaking probabilistically. As a result, more than likely you will start to make probabilistic statements *before* making certain statements. Sooner or later, you will find that you speak probabilistically regularly, and you speak with certainty rarely.

Precautions When Speaking Probabilistically

In common parlance, the word “probably” suggests “a chance greater than 50%.” The word “possibly” tends to suggest “a chance less than or equal to 50%.”

If I say, “The lead actor was probably upset,” I am usually suggesting that I believe there’s a greater than 50% chance the lead was upset. If I say, “The lead actor was possibly upset,” I am usually suggesting I believe there’s a chance less than or maybe at most equal to 50% that the lead was upset.

Most situations probably don't have such easily determined probabilities, but some probabilities may be more or less measurable. While speaking probabilistically tends to make you less wrong more often, there is still some room to be dead wrong because you are making claims about probability. Furthermore, your estimates of probability can influence others' planning and behavior, so you may need to use caution as you use words like "probably" and "possibly."

For example, something may be more possibility than probability. Or, vice versa, something may be more probability than possibility. Even though you may not be able to measure a probability with precision, you can misrepresent it. Imagine what others might do should you say, "The world probably is going to end by 2015," when more factually it would be only a very slight possibility. Or imagine what others might do should you say, "It's possible the cancer is malignant," when more factually it would be highly probable. When you mislead listeners about probability, you can interfere with their decision making and antisocially influence their planning and behavior.

Also, some probabilities may actually be measurable. For example, if you say, "When I flip this coin, it will probably be heads," a statistician may dispute your claim by saying, "Statistically, there is no evidence to support that heads will appear more often than tails." A scientist who has studied coin tossing may have a different take based on her years of observation. "Tails actually is more probable, I find!" she might exclaim. Evidence and theory may refute your probability estimates.

All in all, speaking probabilistically does not absolutely prevent you from being wrong. From time to time, you need to be especially cautious about how you represent probability, else you risk still coming off dead wrong.

Persuasion and Speaking Probabilistically

Speaking probabilistically may make you less persuasive to the general public. However, it may also make you more persuasive.

When you say something like "Smoking will kill you," you probably have more persuasive power over others than if you say "Smoking will probably kill you." However, since speaking probabilistically tends to make you less wrong more often, over the long term you may develop more persuasive power because of your tendency to avoid making claims that are dead wrong. You may earn your listeners' trust because you repeatedly demonstrate you are not tempted to make decidedly wrong statements.

Furthermore, when you learn how to speak probabilistically, you adopt "uncertainty" as an attitude, and statements expressed with certainty become suspect. The kinds of statements typically more persuasive to the general pub-

lic become less persuasive over you. You even start to see the propagandistic nature of statements expressing certainty, suggesting how desperately others want to convince you of their perspectives and express certainty to that end.

Speaking Probabilistically as a Measure of Sanity

How someone speaks can serve as one measure of that person's sanity or unsanity. By speaking probabilistically, you likely reflect a sane understanding of your nervous system. Furthermore, you potentially reflect a saner perspective of the world around you than the perspective of someone who speaks with certainty.

For our purposes, “unsane” refers to being oriented to fancy over fact. “Sane” refers to being oriented to fact over fancy. Essentially, the insane person believes in a world informed by delusions, while the sane person believes in a world informed by dispassionate scientific observation.

General semantics teaches that you cannot be certain about anything you experience, given the limitations of your nervous system. From the perspective of general semantics, your nervous system *abstracts*, meaning it captures some characteristics of what you experience but naturally and inevitably leaves out other characteristics. That is, by its nature, your nervous system is unable to capture *all* of the characteristics of what you experience. To express certainty about something would be to take a fanciful, delusional, and “unsane” perspective about the abilities of your nervous system to take in information correctly and absolutely.

Because our nervous system is an abstracting, integrating mechanism, all human psycho-neurological reactions [. . .], to be similar in structure, must be based on the mathematical theories of statistics and probability.

—Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity* (p. 310)

By speaking probabilistically, you become a bit more adjusted to the limited capabilities of your nervous system. You resist the temptation to delude yourself into believing you can be 100% certain about anything your nervous system experiences, and you regularly speak in a way that reflects “uncertainty” over certainty. You repeatedly avow other possibilities than just the one you want to claim.

Speaking Probabilistically for a Better Society

In essence, statements expressing probability tend to project one possible world but instruct others to also look out for other possible worlds. On the

contrary, statements of certitude tend to project a world informed by a fanciful confidence in one's nervous system and instruct others to believe in that world blindly.

Given these observations, your statements have social ramifications. When you speak probabilistically, others can take your claims with the grain of salt that isn't seasoning your statements when you speak with certitude. With your "uncertainty" disclosed, you help others to make better decisions as they weigh your information in their pursuits.

[I]n a world quite different structurally from our fancies, we are often able to adjust ourselves for all practical purposes, often avoiding major disasters for a number of years.

—Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity* (p. 309)

In facilitating better decision making with your probabilistic statements, you perpetuate the time-binding process described in general semantics—the professional progress of humanity as enabled by factual speech. The probabilistic extra helps the other extras understand they may want to prepare for an upset lead actor or a long day “though they may not need to,” rather than convincing them with certainty they should brace themselves for trouble. The former statement may yield a responsible group of extras and a collaborative work environment; the latter statement may mean a victimized group of extras who lash out by behaving irresponsibly on set. Neither of these may be the actual result, but the point is that by using or not using little words like “probably” or “possibly,” you may have dramatic and significant social ramifications.

Conclusion

Sanity involves having an orientation to facts. If it is factual to say that as humans we can't ever be 100% certain, then it would seem sane to assert nothing stronger than a probability and nothing weaker than a possibility. When reality proves more complex than your expectations, the result of speaking probabilistically about it is that you find you are less wrong more often.

Reference

Korzybski, Alfred. *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*. 5th ed. Englewood, NJ: Institute of General Semantics, 1994.