

On Knitting Sweaters during Conferences

Ben Hauck

I wish here to define the word “sense,” and I should think it is a fairly easy task, but before I do that, I wish to provide some examples of sensical statements and nonsensical statements.

Let’s say that I believe that I am standing here reading my speech. This statement, that I am standing here reading my speech, I will call a “theory.” It is testable; here, I’ll pinch myself as a test, and such test yields — OUCH! — evidence that I’m here. And as a test I’ll listen to myself as I read from this speech below me oh my gosh, it’s true! I’m reading my speech! Evidence!

Now, with this theory accepted that I’m standing here reading my speech, if I start making statements that I’m *not* standing here reading my speech, that I’m standing here knitting a sweater, or that I’m standing here singing an opera, you will say that I’m not making sense. You will say that I’m speaking nonsense. You would be right.

However, let’s change the theory, the theory we’ve accepted. Let’s accept that I *am* standing here singing an opera. With that theory now accepted, it then starts making sense for me to say that I’m standing here trying to entertain you with the sound of my voice, that I’ve practiced a lot to get to this place in my singing career, and that Luciano Pavarotti is my hero. It would then be *nonsense* for me to say that I’m standing here reading my speech.

You could say that all I’ve done in changing my theory is to redefine what I’m doing. A theory, then, it seems is a sort of *definition*. A theory can be thought of as one definition of a particular variable, and whatever this theory-slash-definition is plays a critical role in determining our perception of sense and nonsense. Thus, what is “sense” and what is “nonsense” is relative to the theory-slash-definition you hold. “Sense” is defined as behavior that is consistent with your theory or definition, and “nonsense” is defined as behavior that is inconsistent with your theory or definition.

It is my observation that most people expect other people to make sense. Their expectations act as theories: They are honed from their life experiences, experiences that show that more often than not, other people *do* tend to make sense, i.e., other people *do* tend to behave consistently within the theories people have formulated about them. And with these theories popularly held, I have found that I can have a very fun time in my life with this incredible lot of people who theorize I will make sense — by *not* making sense. You see, I am an actor, an entertainer, both professional and amateur, and my amateur pursuits are in confusing the bejesus out of people. For fun.

My style of entertainment involves the making of nonsensical statements. Look at me. You probably have made unconscious associations about me. I’m rather clean-cut looking. I’m rather nice. I smile a good amount of the time. You’d probably think, based on my look and behavior, “This guy is a normal boy.” And with that comment inside your noggin, you have just theorized. And I realize that you have theorized this, and it is my good fortune for that, for now, with the understanding that you have theorized this, *then* I can work my magic. I can now provide for your entertainment behavior that is inconsistent with the theory you have of me as a normal boy. If I were to interact with you after figuring out that you have a general impression of my niceness, goodness, and normalcy, I might start telling you that I walked here from New York City. That I hitchhiked to get here, that I was having this very delightful conversation with a prostitute before coming here, and that the hamburger we shared together was mighty tasty, a barbeque flavor only a prostitute and a normal boy together could enjoy. You see, given what you’ve theorized about me based on my look and behavior, I’ve just served up nonsense. It is nonsense because none of this “sense” is consistent with your theory about me.

Now, about my travels I’m only kidding. But if I didn’t follow my hitchhiking and hooker and hamburger statements with “I’m only kidding,” you might then have a muddy mess in your head, wondering what on Earth is going on, how on Earth could this be true, Ben’s “a normal boy,” “*This doesn’t make sense.*” Instead, you maybe chuckle upon the revelation of my kidding, then you relax that your theory about me is affirmed, that it is not jeopardized, since I was only kidding. “Ben *really* is a normal boy and not a *freak.*”



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It is this sort of nonsense that I absolutely love to dish over and over and over again to people. I figure out what people's theories are about me, how they define me, and then feed them information inconsistent with their theories and definitions. Admittedly, I annoy some people with incessant practice of such behavior, and people like my mother are onto me at times when I'm hoping to surprise them with nonsense. However, for others, it is not an annoyance, it seems to be *pleasure*, a delight and a half, this revelation of the limitations of their held theories and definitions, to unfold for them that reality is in one place more than their theories, that for a change their definitions *did not* describe the person fully.

I will heartily admit to you that of my character is a sizeable amount of niceness, of normalcy, etc., affirming your theories about me to a degree, yet I am not completely nice, absolutely normal, and my niceness and normalcy depend on where I find myself. Am I nice in most places I find myself? Yes. Am I nice when AOL Tech Support transfers me six times without remedying my AOL Address Book problem? The correct answer is: *Fuck no*.

And hopefully there I've gone again, surprising you with more nonsense. For I figured you theorized the f-word is unexpected from a boy like me, and inappropriate in this kind of venue, this venue where I am, in fact, before a distinguished audience such as yourselves, singing opera. By including the f word, again I've blasted your impressions, your theories, your definitions, with nonsense. I've provided you with information inconsistent with your theories-slash-definitions.

The added rub is, though, in reality, virtually all of this information I'm providing you *makes sense* coming from me. I am more than just "sensical" — I consciously speak a sizeable bit of nonsense — or rather, I am a mixture of sense and nonsense. *That* is the truth. *That* is a more accurate definition of me. So, how you can best determine when I *truly* make sense or *truly* make nonsense is by figuring out *my values* at the time of one of my particular utterances.

It should now be pretty clear to you a certain value I have in entertainment contexts. It is for the introduction of nonsense. This speech, for me, is an entertainment context. So now, with my values understood, that I value nonsense, it will *make sense* when I say nonsense things. I probably spoil any further attempts at introducing actual nonsense to this speech by such a confession. Oh well. But hopefully I'm starting to make sense: My nonsense becomes sensical given that I value nonsense in this speech.

Now let's say you defined me differently, that your overall impression of me from when you first laid eyes on me up until I took the lectern was that I am erratic, that I make no sense in the least, that I'm highly, utterly nonsensical, that I'm the epitome of nonsense. Wouldn't it then be for you *nonsensical* that I started speaking crystal-clear sense? Wouldn't it then be for you *nonsensical* if I got up and gave this very speech? I think it would. For what I'm saying is largely making sense to you.

Now, for the value of such findings, that nonsense can be sensical if we understand the values the sense-maker has and that our perceptions of sense and nonsense depend on how we choose to theorize and define ...

If we can nail down as a scientific principle that any given person operates in a sensical way — nay, if we can permit the definition of all humans as sensical — then, we can say that their behavior, no matter how "nonsensical" it may seem, is by implication *sensical*, relative to their personal values. For example, if you value life and I value death, my suicide attempts make about as much sense as your attempts at survival, and any attempts for me to live and you to die would be nonsensical. Suicide attempts are thus not nonsensical — they can make a lot of sense given the suicidal person's values.

I likely challenge some of your theories by such a bold theory, no doubt, to see the most nonsensical behavior as sensical. Please jog your brain for a moment for a short list of people you define as monsters, as crazies, as wackos. My theory means that Jeffrey Dahmer, serial killer and cannibal, was sensical. My theory means that Adolf Hitler, anti-Semite and murderer of countless Jews, was sensical. My theory means that child molesters are sensical, frauds and swindlers are sensical, manic-depressives and schizophrenics are sensical, that morticians are sensical, religious zealots are sensical, Presidents of the United States of America from all days and ages have been sensical. They are as sensical as you, the others in the room, and Dr. Phil. Understanding their "sense" involves redefining them from "monsters" and whatnot to

“people” like you and me subject to the scientific principle I’ve outlined, that they’re inescapably sensical, and then figuring out their personal values.

Well, where do such implications leave us? They leave us with an investigation, an experiment, something to which we might target our scientific methods and general semantics discipline. They leave us with the question of “What are the values these people hold that lead them to such ‘deviant,’ ‘sociopathic,’ and ‘unsane’ behavior?” And we can design experiments to answer such questions. We can ask the people what they value. Where they don’t or can’t tell us, we might study them over time, seeing what things they pick up from the table, from the internet, from the library, from their interactions with other people. Such collections may be suggestive of the information they value. We might compare what they pick up against what they do not pick up, and learn about their values this way. Or we might do a historical study of what they picked up or didn’t. I’m not a scientist in the disciplined sense. I, of course, am an opera singer, so the design of experiments I leave to Mr. Pavarotti.

In the field of general semantics, we have a fellow by the name of Alfred Korzybski. We know of Alfred Korzybski that he valued the sanity of Man. We also know that he valued engineering, that he valued the scientific method, and that he valued the new scientific ideas that were swirling around him in the early part of the twentieth century. We further know that he defined people as time-binders and his world as populated with unsane behavior. Given these values and definitions he held, so much of Alfred Korzybski’s numerous and diverse ideas *make sense*, for they are implied by his definitions and values. His senses of good time-binding and sane behavior are implied by his values. Indeed, his discipline named “general semantics,” which could be summarized as a discipline concerned with good time-binding and sanity, makes sense in light of his values adopted from engineering, science, and modern scientists. Wherever one loses track of the sense of general semantics, wherever it seems to feel like a bunch of nonsense, that person need only reconnect with the values and definitions and theories that Alfred Korzybski adopted, and he or she is back to understanding why it is in existence.

In closing, I ask you to take a moment to theorize given what you know about me, what I am about to say. You know that despite my open and happy provision of “nonsense,” I see “sense” in the provision of my “nonsense.” What will my closing be like? Perhaps you will be a good guess, and your theory will map out my course of action, and my following action will make sense in light of your theory. Or, perhaps you will be a bad guess, and your theory will not map out my course of action, while I go do something completely nonsensical relative to your theory. I am unsure at the moment what you will theorize about how I will close. Actually, I have a pretty good sense. That is why I am ending this speech abruptly.



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at Read House