Is It *"Just Semantics"*?

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

"Oh, it's *just semantics,"* is a commonly-heard response when people disagree on language, concepts, or ideas. When this phrase is spoken, the speaker isn't simply sharing an opinion. When coupled with a dismissive wave of the hand, "It's just semantics..." is a weapon used to shred the value and the validity of another's words or ideas.

First, a short example. Awhile back, I received an Email from a friend in Texas—Paige Williams—about a new category that would be added to an Internet auction site. Paige had written to people who were in charge of this site, expressing her concern about the name of the category: "Special Needs." She was hoping they would consider a different name because "special needs" reinforces stereotypical perceptions and generates pity.

I also wrote to express my concerns, and suggested some alternatives to the "special needs" term. The response I received included, "It's just semantics," as well as anger and derision that so much attention was given to "labels."

As a side note, William Henderson, the principal of an inclusive elementary school, wrote the following in a magazine article *(Equity and Choice,* Vol. 9, No. 2, Winter 1993): "Simply categorizing children as 'special needs' causes some educators to focus on deficits and view [children with disabilities] as essentially incapable."

At a conference a few years ago, a presenter discussed a possible change in the "mental retardation" descriptor. A parent angrily interjected, "My 35-year-old daughter is *retarded.* Changing the word won't change that—call a spade a spade!" His unspoken message seemed to be, "It's *just semantics!"*

Semantics have been given a bad rap. Some people seem to use the word to imply, "What difference does it make which words we use?" And I find that very interesting. If the Internet auction staff and the father didn't think words matter, then why did they care if *others* want to use different words? They

protest too much—obviously, words *do* matter, or they would have agreed to others' requests!

Webster's New American Dictionary defines "semantics" as "the study of meanings in language." Perhaps we should help others learn this definition, so the next time we're faced with, "It's *just semantics,"* we can reply, "You mean it *is* about the *meaning* of a word?"

Language—and the meaning of words—is critically important. There are a variety of helpful books on the subject; two of my favorites are Wendell Johnson's *People in Quandaries: The Semantics of Personal Adjustment* and *Living with Change: The Semantics of Coping.* Both of these were out of print when I discovered them in 2002; I found used copies via on-line book searches. During a recent visit to www.generalsemantics.org, I was delighted to learn that *People in Quandaries* has recently been reprinted!

Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary defines *general semantics* as: "a doctrine and educational discipline intended to improve habits of response of human beings to their environment and one another, especially by training in the more critical use of words and other symbols." This is a great definition, but it doesn't begin to describe the *power* of general semantics.

I've always had a fascination with words, and when my baby son was diagnosed with cerebral palsy in 1987, a general fascination became specific to disability-related words and perceptions. When I wrote the first People First Language article in 1991, I didn't know I was using general semantics (and following in the footsteps of adults with disabilities who had created People First Language in the 1970s): critically examining language and its effects on our thinking.

Here's one enlightening passage from *People in Quandaries*: ". . . anyone would be hard put to define the normal child, or the normal adult. Authors who attempt to do so tend to end up stating their definitions in negative terms; that is, they tend to

define the normal in terms of the absence of various abnormalities. You are normal if only you are not abnormal. But by the time *abnormality* is defined, you are left with the disturbing suspicion that there is no one, including yourself, from whom abnormality is entirely absent."

Johnson was way ahead of his time—*People in Quandaries* was originally published in 1946. And while his books are not specifically about people with disabilities, his critical thinking exposes the myths we've created around people with disabilities or differences. At the time his books were written, People First Language wasn't on the radar screen, so some of the descriptors he used aren't what we would use today. But Johnson's respect for all people is tangible. Moreover, he was a person with a disability: he had a stutter, which led him to become a speech pathologist and then a clinical psychologist. In another passage, Johnson writes, "In a sense, there are no 'crazy' people—there are only 'crazy' ways of behaving. And we all behave in those ways more or less." I really like this man.

General semantics asks us to examine our words and how we behave, based on what we think words mean. A thoughtful consideration of Johnson's quotes can lead to a mind-expanding experience in how we think and speak about people with disabilities. Speaking more precisely can be one of the outcomes.

Using Johnson's examples, what *do* "normal" and "crazy" mean? Going back to where we started, what does "special needs" mean? And what does "retarded" mean? Think about other words we use about people with disabilities and ponder their meanings.

Now let's go further. Johnson asks us to question the value of the word "is," or more accurately, all the forms of "to be:" IS, WAS, ARE, WILL BE, and so forth. He describes a person saying, "The wall is blue," and points out that this is not a fact, but an opinion. For *you* could see the same wall and say, "It's turquoise." That's *your* opinion of the color you see. By speaking more precisely, one would say, "The wall *looks* blue,

to me." Johnson adds that the world would be a better place (fewer disagreements, fewer wars, etc.) if we all spoke in ways that clearly distinguished *opinion from fact.*

This concept enables us to understand how the lives of people with disabilities can be *ruined by words* when we treat *opinions* as *facts.* I've seldom, if ever, heard a therapist or doctor issue a prognosis that included the phrase, "in my opinion," as in, "This person needs therapy, in my opinion." What might happen if this scenario occurred? A parent might have the courage to respond, "Well, in *my* opinion, my child doesn't need therapy."

I've seldom, if ever, heard an educator, voc-rehab counselor, or other professional include "to me," when making an official decision, as in, *"To me,* the most appropriate placement for Bob is the sheltered workshop." If this occurred, Bob and/or a family member might decide to respond, "Well, *to us,* the most appropriate placement is in the community." Information that is *stated as an opinion* opens the door to dialogue, negotiation, and parity among the players that, in turn, could lead to the death of paternalism and the rampant "us/them" mentality of the service system.

In too many circumstances, people are giving only an opinion, but they—and we—see it as TRUTH with a capital T. At that point, attitudes are formed and actions are taken based on this opinion—an "UN-TRUTH." Johnson says, "...a fact, as an observation, is a personal affair, to be trusted as such and not as a universal truth." Before we accept the pronouncements of gatekeepers and others who have power, perhaps we should inquire, "Is that a *fact* or an *opinion?"*

Are semantics important? You bet they are. The words we use and the meanings we attach to words create attitudes, drive social policies and laws, influence our feelings, direct our decisions, affect people's daily lives, and more. It's time to recognize the power of language, and to change the way we think and speak. In the process, people with disabilities will be freed from the terrible bondage of words.