

1941

## Correspondence

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### Recommended Citation

*Correspondence*, 10 Fordham L. Rev. 340 (1941).

Available at: <https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/flr/vol10/iss2/12>

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## CORRESPONDENCE

The *FORDHAM LAW REVIEW* is pleased to publish correspondence which it considers interesting to its readers, but without implication that it accepts or rejects the contentions therein expressed.

April 18, 1941.

EDITOR  
FORDHAM LAW REVIEW  
Dear Sir:

The *Obiter Dicta*, entitled "It's A Circus" in the May 1940 issue of the *FORDHAM LAW REVIEW*, subtitled "Some Antics of Semantics", rather an atrocious pun, clearly indicates that the unnamed author has substituted a gross misconception for even elementary knowledge of his subject.

He lays down as a rule of semantics, "You should use only words which have a definite 'referent', *i.e.*, an object or situation in the *real* world to which the word refers, like 'pig', 'iron', or 'mud' ". No semanticist ever made such a statement. It is the unnamed author's own statement, and definitely erroneous. The semantic precept is, "Do not use abstract words as though they referred to something concrete," an entirely different injunction. For example, when you refer to "Justice", realize you are referring to an abstract principle, and don't think in terms of a robust female in flowing robes, blindfolded, and exhibiting a pair of old-fashioned scales. The latter thought entails personification and false identification, and leads only to confusion. But to consider "Justice" as the fairest, most humane, moral, and ethical disposition of the problems of individuals in a given case, is to use semantically, *i.e.*, with precise significance, the mental powers which distinguish "Man" from "Animal."

Here arises an opportunity to point a semantic distinction. When I say, "The man who wrote the article," the word "man" has a referent which, or who, can be seen, heard, measured, and otherwise known objectively. When I say "Man" as above, I use an abstraction, a handy label referring not to an object, but to a general classification. All that the semantic discipline requires is that the user of both terms, or either term, be conscious of the distinction. Greater clarity, even the legal abstraction, "A meeting of the minds," follows. I hope the man who wrote the questioned article doesn't think that semanticists can only conceive of "A meeting of the minds" as the surgical removal of two brains from their respective bony temples, and a thorough mixing thereof. The only valid description of such a procedure would be by the abstraction "Drastic"!

Here I am using another abstraction, "Sarcasm". But with the good intent of pointing out his error to the man who wrote the article. I could use a much simpler symbol for him if I knew his (my referent's) name. But the name would not be the man. He, in the flesh, brain included, is the referent. His name would be a handier symbol, but still only a symbol, as it would give me no, or negligible, additional knowledge of him. I hope he grasps the distinction. Let's call him X, another symbol.

X didn't grasp the distinction when he wrote, or he could not have so gleefully

pounced upon Stuart Chase for his title, "The Tyranny of Words." X says Chase violated "his own mandate" (of not using abstractions) by using the word "Tyranny", an abstraction. But X erred grievously in his statement, for Chase never laid down such a mandate. The so-called "mandate" flowed from the tip of X's pen, due to the failure of X's mind to grasp what Chase really said, which, in sum, was, "Find the referent *when* the word has a referent. If the word connotes an abstraction, use it, *but* be conscious of the abstract connotation."

Did X notice that in the title "The Tyranny of Words", both "Tyranny" and "Words" are abstractions? "Words" are never more than symbols. If the word is a symbol *for* a thing, the word is the symbol, or label, *referring* to the thing. The *thing* is the referent. But we need word symbols, or labels, for more than objective things. And so, "Words", "Tyranny", "Justice", "Sarcasm" are handy abstract labels for subjects we wish to discuss.

So, friend X, don't personify "Tyranny" as a brutish fiend with jaws dripping blood. Such a picture, mental or in cartoon, is just another symbol. I'll help you fight "Tyranny", but I won't waste time looking for the referent.

You say, friend X, that your struggle with conflicting legal definitions of the word "Circus" shook your faith in realist semantics. But your reasoning is in reverse, as the conflicting definers were using methods definitely non-semantic. Their confusion, and yours, should have shown you the need of such a science. Their and your difficulty stemmed from the futile attempt to cram all types of circuses into one rigid definition. "Circus", without context, is an abstraction. Ringling Bros. Circus has a referent, and presents no difficulty. So has Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, and can be readily described. "Circus", alone, is a symbol for a various *class* of entertainment. Of course you can't define "Circuses in general" by a description of *one* circus which was held in a tent. Semanticists know better. Describe individual circuses by their individual characteristics, the true semantic method, and your difficulty disappears. You may still have a broad label "Circus", but you realize the term is an abstraction, and you quit trying to cram Circus 1, Circus 23, and Circus 77, all of which have referents, into the abstraction "Circus", which has no referent. A proper understanding of this distinction would have spared you your travail.

And so, friend X, read Stuart Chase again, carefully. Read the books to which he refers, particularly the basic book, Alfred Korzybski's "Science and Sanity." Then write another article. It should be interesting.

Very truly yours

(Signed) GEORGE F. LAHEY, JR.

(The following reply to Mr. Lahey was received from the author.—EDITOR.)

April 21, 1941.

Fortunately, neither you nor I seem to have been contaminated by the Stuart Chase school of semantics. If we were, the difficulty of establishing the requisite "communication line" between us would forestall such an immediate and comprehending exchange of correspondence.

At the outset, may I remind you that you are guilty of violating one of your own semantic tenets when you belabor my statement of the rule of referents. As a *universal* rule, applied to all schools of semantics, it would undoubtedly be erroneous. But note, please, that the *Obiter* (which seems to have created such a furor) was

directed solely at "the semantic surgeons of the Stuart Chase persuasion". A careful reading of the much-maligned *Obiter* will make it readily apparent that there was no attempt to condemn semantics *as such*. As a matter of fact, the present writer stated, "Words are slippery things, indeed, but lawyers and laymen know, if our modern semanticists do not, that they are not clarified merely because they refer to external objects." Observance of your own valid distinction (set forth in the third paragraph of your letter) would have spared you this verbal gnashing of teeth.

Now that we have delimited the controversy to a consideration of the semantics of Stuart Chase, let us re-examine my conclusions in the light of Mr. Chase's writings. First he states—and quite dogmatically, too—that abstract words and phrases without *discoverable* referents register a semantic blank.<sup>1</sup> Further on he defines semantics as a discipline connecting *tangible* referents.<sup>2</sup> You rush to his defense by saying that what is really meant is: "If the word connotes an abstraction, use it, *but* be conscious of the abstraction." Mr. Chase does not seem to agree with you, however. His doctrine very explicitly declares that if it is impossible to find a referent for what he calls a high-order abstraction (such as "truth", "beauty", *etc.*) then further discussion is futile.<sup>3</sup> Whether you realize it or not, your views on semantics are not in harmony with those of Chase, whom you choose to defend. For example, you say that you will help fight "Tyranny" (a very praiseworthy endeavor), but you "won't waste time looking for the referent." Friend Chase says that no matter how difficult the quest for referents, they *must* be found.<sup>4</sup> Who's wrong—tutor or disciple?

The only conclusion I can arrive at, after reading Chase *ad nauseam*, is that he would reduce all concepts to a materialistic bathos so overwhelming in its plenitude of facts and figures that we would spend the rest of our living days accumulating data, which in turn would aid us in accumulating more data . . . *ad infinitum*. No less a liberal than Professor Chafee is awake to the dangers and fallacies inherent in the Chase school. He writes:

"However, it is one thing to say that abstractions must be used cautiously, and quite another to urge, as Mr. Chase does, that, unless they can be verified by the methods of the natural sciences, they must not be used at all. . . .

"As part of this attack on abstractions, widely sold books are persuading the public that 'negligence', 'good faith', 'reasonable' and the very word 'law' are weasel words which do not really serve to settle disputes. Precedents are marked for slaughter, for if universals are to be abandoned we should admit that we live in an atomistic world where one legal case lacks any significance for another legal case."<sup>5</sup>

One final observation: you and I don't disagree with each other. We, together, disagree with Chase.

Very truly yours  
MR. X\*

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1. CHASE, TYRANNY OF WORDS (1938) 21.

2. *Id.* at 243.

3. *Id.* at 101.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Chafee, *The Disorderly Conduct of Words* (1941) 63 N. Y. STATE BAR ASS'N REPORT 530, 546.

\*Referent: William J. Daly, Jr., Member of New York Bar; Editor-in-Chief of FORDHAM LAW REVIEW, 1939-40.