The Tyranny of Words. By Stuart Chase. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1938.
Pp. 396. $2.50.

Here in "his most important book" (so the jacket informs us) a tired reformer finds new magic. Korzybski, Ogden and Richards, Bridgman, Hogben, Frank, Arnold, Robinson and others too numerous to mention have introduced Mr. Chase to the "science" of semantics. His theses, borrowed from so many sources and offered without pretense of originality, are oversimple, obvious, old, inadequate, often superficial, sometimes contradictory, and somewhat useful.

Failure of communication is Mr. Chase's devil; his heaven, the sweet reasonableness into which men relapse when communication breaks through. "The world outside has a natural pattern, order, structure." So does our nervous system. But "language has not been reared to correspond to" these structures. It "has grown on a more devious pattern." Two "besetting sins" dominate our use of language. "One is the identification of *words* with *things*. The other is the misuse of abstract words." "Hot," "cold," "good," "bad," "capitalism," "communism," "fascism," "interstate commerce" and "due process" are treated like objects; "unwarranted identifications and high order abstractions run riot." Men talk, argue, and fight without knowing what they are talking, arguing, or fighting about.

Hope of salvation Mr. Chase finds in semantics. From Korzybski he borrows the concept of levels of abstraction. In verbalizing about an object man can move from the sub-microscopic level up through the microscopic and macroscopic levels to concepts of such generality as to be practically meaningless. Take a pencil. At the first level it is a "mad dance of electrons"; then at the macroscopic level, a non-verbal object which we can see and touch. Next comes the word, label, or symbol "pencil," and, at still higher levels, more elaborate description, pencils-as-a-class, and so on up through "standard of living," "economic goods," "production," and "capitalism" to "Western civilization" and "human culture." From Ogden and Richards, he takes the concept of "referent." "Not a single word means anything in itself"; "The point of every discussion is to find the referent"—the object, the pencil. Finally, from Bridgman, he adds a touch of meaning for scientists, the "operations" test. "Concepts not subject to operations are meaningless." This is as true of "Germany" and "credit" as it is of "length." "Facts are the central exhibit of the scientific method."[1] The sum of Mr. Chase's borrowings is a "young and difficult study." Its goal is to make man conscious of abstracting, to enable him to find referents or to show the absence of referents.

In the second half of the book Mr. Chase forages, in twenty page chews, through his predecessors looking for referents. Naturally he finds very few. He ticks off the philosophers from Aristotle to Hutchins in nineteen pages, turns with logicians for eighteen ("Logicians tend to oppose the scientific method . . . ."!), shakes the economists right and left for twenty each and swings them for twenty-two more, goes round and round with the judges for twenty, strolls with the statesmen for twenty-two, faces the world outside for eleven, and ends up with an appendix of horrible examples, including an earlier paragraph of his own.

The vitiating factor in Mr. Chase's analysis is, of course, in his restrictive use of referent—his effort to confine the multiple functions of language to simple pointing

[1] In fairness, Mr. Chase states that "fact" is "an abstract term of a very high order"; yet he seems to me to ignore this insight in most of the practical applications of his doctrines. His stress is more on "the referent" than on consciousness of abstracting.

to tangible particulars. Even he must continually violate his own canons. What are the "referents" for "the scientific method," "the philosophic method," "the natural structure of the world outside," "the human purpose," "sane men in general" (how does this differ from the abhorred "mankind"?), or "the awful depths of language itself"? Are not even his key concepts—"semantics" and "referent"—somewhat spooky? Communication, investigation, and experiment require abstractions of all degrees of generality. To make our world manageable, we must subsume under categories, abstract from totality, and ignore "irrelevant" tangible particulars. The "big, blooming, buzzing confusion" about us is yet to be reduced to static, atomistic elements which can be given unique names for all time to come.

It is true, no doubt, as one of Mr. Chase's mentors has written, "that a name apart from our uses of it is nothing but a shape on paper or an agitation in the air."[2] But the *uses* of language are many. Sometimes it is used to promote, describe, or celebrate moral attitudes. Such is the language of legal doctrine. The student who sets out to find tangible referents for trust, title, lien, bailment and so forth is in a fair way to drive himself neurotic. In Mr. Chase's own words: "There is not a reliable referent in the whole litany." Nevertheless, these legal concepts do have an operational meaning (or meanings) in terms of judicial behavior and social context. Useful questions to ask about such concepts are not whether they are tangible or intangible, true or false, fiction or non-fiction but, if you are an advocate, whether or not they are persuasive, or if you are a judge or legislator, whether you like the results to which they point, or if you are a scientist, whether they aid in accurate description. To contemporary law students nurtured on Hohfeld, Cook, Corbin and their followers all of this is old stuff.

In the realm of moral judgments other than "legal" the breakdown of Mr. Chase's test of meaning is equally obvious. He ends up on chapter with a ringing plea for statesmen to find "the human purpose to be accomplished in a given situation"; and the "fraudulent concepts" of Hitler are to be destroyed by their own "falsity." But he rejects the labor theory of value because "there is no operational foundation to prove" it. He can find no referents for "the good," "justice" and so forth, and few for Socialism, Communism, or Fascism; they are just blab, blab, blab. Hopefully, he looks forward to the day when we can "dispense with concepts not derived from careful observation"; but he also adds "and from the necessities of survival and well-being *under the conditions of this earth.*" These latter words open a wide door. The truth is of course, that there can be no "operational foundation" to "prove" any theory of value and that the emotive powers and ceremonial or consolatory functions of symbols depend largely upon their lack of empirical referents. Can psychological and organizational needs be exorcised by showing that there is nothing immediately tangible behind gods or ghosts or goal-words? Witness our insistent demand for a "constructive philosophy." What so excites Mr. Chase about the hope in semantics if not his own picture of Utopia?

In sum, Mr. Chase might well have heeded his own early warning: "A high and mighty disdain for all discussion of abstract ideas is simply another form of mental confusion." Yet his problem is important and his sources are important; it is to be hoped that his words will exercise enough tyranny over his readers to drive some few to such sources and beyond.

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[2] Richards, Logical Machinery, 16 Psyche 76, 79 (1936).

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