Though various interpretations of Kate Chopin's short stories have been suggested, no one, to my knowledge, has analyzed her work using the principles, ideas, concepts, etc., of general semantics (GS)—how language, thought, and action are interrelated. By studying Chopin within the context of GS, one, perhaps, will gain a greater appreciation for and a better understanding of her stories. Indeed, Chopin speaks loudly and clearly to modern readers in "The Story of an Hour," "Desiree's Baby," "Beyond the Bayou," "Ma'ame Pelagie," and "A Matter of Prejudice."

Both "The Story of an Hour" and "Desiree's Baby" illustrate the dangers of making assumptions—or, to use the language of GS, the observation-inference confusion (Haney 1973, 211). An inference is nothing more than a guess, an assumption. Indeed, making inferences ordinarily does not get us into trouble, and it would be virtually impossible to get through a day without assuming. For example, we assume a mailed letter will reach its destination, a deposited check will be credited to our account, and the ceiling above us will not come crashing down. Unfortunately, making some inferences can have serious consequences. From time to time we read about a person who pointed at someone what he/she thought was an unloaded gun and pulled the trigger. The results literally were deadly. In both "The Story of an Hour" and "Desiree's Baby" inferences lead to tragedy.

Chopin tells us in the first sentence of "The Story of an Hour" that Louise Mallard's husband has died. We then learn he was killed in an accident and that Richards, a friend, "had been in the newspaper office when intelligence
of the railroad disaster was received, with Brently Mallard's name leading the list of 'killed'” (352). The careful Richards, wanting to make certain the report is correct, waits for another telegram. Only then is he ready to break the news.

When Louise hears the report, she cries and goes to her room to be alone, behavior certainly expected of a new widow. Then she realizes she has a newfound freedom: “There would be no one to live for during these coming years; she would live for herself” (353). She is ecstatic.

Josephine, her sister, also makes the observation-inference confusion when “kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole” (354), she mistakes Louise's ecstatic behavior for sickness. Louise at first tells her to leave, then opens the door. The two descend stairs to the first floor, only to hear a key opening the front door. When Mallard, who had been nowhere near the accident, appears, Louise dies “of heart disease—of joy that kills” (354).

Chopin, however, warns the reader in the first sentence that the situation is not completely rosy because Louise “was afflicted with a heart trouble” (352): a physical problem but also, perhaps, a less-than-perfect marriage, for “she had loved him—sometimes. Often she had not” (353). Louise's joy, it may be argued, is her thought of being single, not the realization that her husband is alive.

Even though each character—Richards, Louise, and Josephine—makes the observation-inference confusion, each has no reason to believe she/he is assuming: Richards waits for a second telegram, Louise has no reason to doubt Richards, and Josephine believes Louise is grieving over her husband's death. Indeed, we often do not realize we are assuming, and some assumptions are excusable. (Interestingly enough, Chopin's Civil War story “The Locket” deals with a young woman who also receives a report that her love interest has died. But unlike Louise, she is elated when she learns he is alive.)

In “Desiree's Baby,” Chopin depicts Armand Aubigny as a cruel, arrogant man who, likely, would never admit he was wrong. He is merciless with his slaves and his wife, and in marrying Desiree, “he could give her one of the oldest and proudest [names] in Louisiana” (241). In essence, Armand demonstrates a semantic error called allness, which occurs whenever a person “assumes that what he says or 'knows' is absolute, definitive, complete, certain, all-inclusive, positive, final” (Haney 1973, 299).

When Armand perceives his baby has black blood, he concludes—of course not realizing he is assuming—that Desiree is not white and rejects her. He tells her he wants her to leave: “Moreover he no longer loved her, because of the unconscious injury she had brought upon his home and his name” (244). After he tells Desiree he wants her to leave, she disappears with her baby. In the last sentence, the reader learns that Armand, the quintessence of
allness, has made the observation-inference confusion when he reads a letter his mother had written years earlier in which she admits she “belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery” (245).

By skillfully using both foreshadowing and irony, Chopin greatly enriches her story. Armand has a “dark [italics mine], handsome face” (242). Desiree, in vain, tries to refute his argument about her race: “‘I am white! Look at my hair, it is brown; and my eyes are gray, Armand, you know they are gray. And my skin is fair,’ seizing his wrist. ‘Look at my hand; whiter than yours [italics mine], Armand,’ she laughed hysterically” (243). Though Desiree has an “obscure origin” (241), Chopin tells the reader early that the boy and his father returned to Louisiana following Armand’s mother’s death in Paris when Armand was eight. At the end of the story, when Armand burns Desiree’s and the baby’s belongings, he discovers his mother’s letter; indeed, she is thankful Armand never will learn about her heritage. The irony is supreme. (Because of Chopin’s skillful foreshadowing, I totally disagree with critics who consider the ending contrived.)

One important lesson GS teaches us, then, is that we often get into trouble when we assume—and assumptions can be deadly. Another is that we should strive to be extensional, not intensional:

... one behaves intensionally when he responds to his “maps” (his feelings, imaginings, visualizations, formulations, attitudes, theories, preconceptions, evaluations, inferences) as if he were responding to the territory (objects, people, happenings, relationships, things, and so on). Trouble tends to come when the map is an inadequate representation of the territory. (Haney 1973, 412)

In “Beyond the Bayou,” Chopin depicts a woman, La Folle, who behaves intensionally. She will not venture beyond the bayou because of a frightening childhood experience; as a result, she literally will not examine the territory:

... there had been skirmishing and sharpshooting all day in the woods. Evening was near when P’tit Maitre, black with powder and crimson with blood, had staggered into the cabin of Jacqueline’s [La Folle’s] mother, his pursuers close at his heels. The sight had stunned her childish reason. (175)

Her preconceived notion that only unpleasant situations await her beyond the bayou has blocked the preferred extensional orientation. But an incident with Cheri, P’tit Maitre’s ten-year-old son, changes La Folle’s orientation. When Cheri is injured in a hunting accident—after he stumbles, his gun goes off, wounding him in the leg—La Folle realizes she must carry him to his
parents at the plantation Bellissime. As soon as she reaches the edge of the bayou, "the morbid and insane dread she had been under since childhood" (177) takes hold. After calling for help and realizing no one has heard her cries, La Folle, because of her great love for Cheri, ventures beyond the bayou: "Then shutting her eyes, she ran suddenly down the shallow bank of the bayou, and never stopped till she had climbed the opposite shore" (178).

La Folle still has not conquered her fear "of that unknown and terrifying world" (178), to which she has a *semantic reaction*: a "psycho-logical reaction... to words and language and other symbols and events in connection with their meanings" (Korzybski 1958, 24). She shuts her eyes, which are bloodshot when she opens them, "and the saliva had gathered in a white foam on her black lips" (178). People who see her make the observation-inference confusion: "Most of them shuddered with superstitious dread [italics mine] of what it might portend" (178). When she reaches her destination and presents Cheri to his father, she faints and awakens in her cabin.

Awakening, La Folle ventures to Bellissime to learn how Cheri is doing. After she reaches the bayou's edge, "she did not stop there as she had always done before, but crossed with a long, steady stride as if she had done this all her life" (179). Because her love for Cheri forced her to become extensional—literally to examine the territory—La Folle overcomes her fear of going beyond the bayou, and her perceptions change. She sees a field with "white, bursting cotton, with the dew upon it" (179), hears birds singing, and appreciates the colors and perfumes of various flowers; in essence, the ordinary has become extraordinary: "It all looked like enchantment beneath the sparkling sheen of dew" (180). What she now sees is a "beautiful world [italics mine] beyond the bayou" (180).

Interestingly enough, Chopin begins and ends her story with "the bayou." For La Folle, the bayou at the beginning and the bayou at the end are two different places. To use the language of GS, La Folle, thinking that experiences beyond the bayou *always* would be negative, is guilty of the *frozen evaluation*, which "assumes nonchange" (Haney 1973, 392). Obviously, people, places, and things constantly change. One way to correct the frozen evaluation is to use the "When Index" (Haney 1973, 399), sometimes called "dating." Thus, what La Folle ultimately realizes may be expressed as follows:

\[
\text{Bayou (Childhood)} \neq \text{Bayou (Adulthood)}
\]

Chopin also deals with the frozen evaluation in "Ma'ame Pélagie," whose heroine dwells on the past. (By beginning the story with "when," the author perhaps emphasizes the role time will play.) In the first two paragraphs, Chopin
paints a picture of an ante-bellum mansion spectacular then (in 1840) but not now (1870). Time has taken its toll on the once-impressive red-brick mansion: “Thirty years later, only the thick walls were standing, with the dull red brick showing here and there through a matted growth of clinging vines” (232).

The owner’s unmarried daughters, Ma’ame Pelagie, fifty, and Pauline, thirty-five, live on the premises in a modest cabin, for Ma’ame Pelagie, who has saved money for thirty years, hopes someday to restore the mansion and truly recapture the past. The obvious implication is that the sisters could have enjoyed a better lifestyle had Ma’ame Pelagie not overemphasized saving. Indeed, “they lived for a dream” (232), because what it would cost to rebuild, furnish, etc., the house in 1870, likely, would be far more than what it would cost to construct, etc., in 1840. Failing to use the When Index, Ma’ame Pelagie continues to makes the frozen evaluation.

When the women’s niece, La Petite, comes to live with them, the situation, it appears, will change. But La Petite tires of her isolated existence and tells the sisters she cannot continue to live with them. Pauline, who perceives La Petite to be “like a saviour” (235), weeps until her sister promises her La Petite will remain. Ma’ame Pelagie then once again returns to her past:

It was not the first time she had stolen away to the ruin at nighttime . . . but she never before had been there with a heart so nearly broken. She was going there for the last time to dream her dreams; to see the visions that hitherto had crowded her days and nights, and to bid them farewell (236).

Continuing to live in the past, Ma’ame Pelagie once again sees the mansion as it was immediately before the Civil War when her father is hosting a party. By using mainly the present tense, Chopin emphasizes the fact that to her heroine, the past and the present merge. When Ma’ame Pelagie leaves the premises, she seemingly bids farewell to her memories: “Not once did she look back upon the ruin that brooded like a huge monster—a black spot in the darkness that enveloped it” (238).

A new home replaces the ruin and cabin, La Petite remains, and Pauline becomes almost youthful: “Her cheek was as full and almost as flushed as La Petite’s. The years were falling away from her” (238–239). On the other hand, Ma’ame Pelagie has aged considerably; she continues to live in the past, forever a victim of the frozen evaluation, and probably never will change: “While the outward pressure of a young and joyous existence had forced her footsteps into the light, her soul had stayed in the shadow of the ruin” (239).

Though Ma’ame Pelagie refuses to change, the elderly Madame Carambeau, the central character of “A Matter of Prejudice,” realizes her perception
of the world has been incorrect. For years, she has viewed society as being either acceptable or non-acceptable, that is, French or non-French, a classic example of the two-valued orientation, sometimes called polarization and the either/or fallacy. A person who makes this semantic error exhibits a “proneness to divide the world into two opposing forces . . . and to ignore or deny the existence of any middle ground” (Hayakawa 1964, 230).

Intensely prejudiced, Madame often makes another semantic error: indiscrimination, “the neglect of differences, while overemphasizing similarities” (Haney 1973, 333). A person guilty of indiscrimination tends to stereotype, as does Madame.

The narrow-minded, prejudiced Madame Carambeau, who appropriately lives in New Orleans’ French Quarter, “despised Americans, Germans, and all people of a different faith from her own” (282). For ten years she has not spoken with her son, whose sin was marrying an American.

At the beginning of the story, Madame Carambeau’s little grandson is having a birthday party. When a guest playing tag falls into Madame’s lap, she realizes the little girl is ill. The child, who apparently speaks only English, “was perfectly content to lie still and prattle a little in that language which madame thought hideous” (284). Caring for the child, Madame, who seems a hopeless victim of the two-valued orientation, tells her (Madame’s) servant: “Ah, those Americans! Do they deserve to have children? Understanding as little as they do how to take care of them!” (284).

When a carriage arrives for the little girl, the personnel, seen through Madame’s eyes, include “a stiff [italics mine] English coachman driving it, and a red-cheeked [italics mine] Irish nurse-maid seated inside” (285). Guilty of indiscrimination, not to mention stereotyping, Madame “had an original theory that the Irish voice is distressing to the sick” (285).

Ultimately, the little girl changes Madame’s attitude, for after she leaves two days later, Madame admits to herself that the only criticisms she has of the child are she is American-born and does not know French. She can blame her for neither:

But the touch of the caressing baby arms; the pressure of the soft little body in the night; the tones of the voice, and the feeling of the hot lips when the child kissed her, believing herself to be with her mother, were impressions that had sunk through the crust of madame’s prejudice and reached her heart. (285)

A month later, on Christmas, Madame decides to visit an American church, though she still exhibits indiscrimination when she says, “I suppose
they are all alike” (286). She sits patiently through the service, though En-
glish is foreign to her. Following, she says she wants to see her son. When her
daughter-in-law and granddaughter enter the room, Madame realizes the little
girl is the child she had nursed to health. With the reconciliation complete,
Madame says she no longer is prejudiced; in fact, the child will teach her
English, and she will teach her granddaughter French.

Indeed, a semantic analysis of the above five works indicates not only
their richness but also illustrates how forcefully and meaningfully Chopin
speaks to modern readers. It is doubtful that semantic errors ever will be com-
pletely eliminated. Unfortunately, making them and continuing to make them
can cause problems, even tragedies, in everyday life. But being aware of them
and concentrating on reducing them can lead to calmer, more logical, more
productive lives.

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