

A SIMPLE DEFINITION OF GENERAL SEMANTICS

BEN HAUCK *

[A] number of isolated facts does not produce a science any more than a heap of bricks produces a house. The isolated facts must be put in order and brought into mutual structural relations in the form of some theory. Then, only, do we have a science, something to start from, to analyze, ponder on, criticize, and improve.

– Alfred Korzybski

*Science & Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems
and General Semantics¹*

The term, ‘semantic reaction’ will be used as covering both semantic reflexes and states. In the present work, we are interested in [semantic reactions], from a psychophysiological, theoretical and experimental point of view, which include the corresponding states.

– Alfred Korzybski

*Science & Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems
and General Semantics²*

FOR A NUMBER OF DECADES and perhaps for all of its life, general semantics has suffered from an identity crisis. People have long had difficulty defining the term general semantics for others. Of those people who have settled on definitions, many of their definitions are too vague, too general, or just plain awkward. The bulk of these definitions is of the awkward sort, more like descriptions than definitions³, leading to a hazy image of general semantics and a difficulty in categorizing it in the grand scheme of fields. Because of awkward definitions, people learning of general semantics for the first time can’t relate to it, so they don’t become interested in it.

*Ben Hauck webmasters the websites for the Institute of General Semantics and the New York Society for General Semantics. A long-time student of general semantics, he sits on the board for directors for NYSGS. For the past six years, Mr. Hauck has taught long-form improvisation in New York City, Toronto, and London, and he holds a BFA in Acting from Otterbein College. He lives in New York City. Website: <http://www.benhauck.com>.

Long overdue is a simple definition of the term general semantics that people can relate to instantly upon hearing. Providing such a definition will not only provide clarity to the meaning of the term, but it will also provide a clear focus for nearly everyone involved in the endeavor of general semantics. A simple definition of the term general semantics will also imply an organization and framework for many of its associated ideas.

Definitions of General Semantics and of Other Endeavors

Definitions for the term general semantics have been historically awkward. It is not uncommon to read definitions that employ strings of hyphenated words and puzzling terminology. These definitions may map the territory of general semantics well, though from a marketing perspective, they create perceptions of general semantics as something alien and impenetrable. Taken collectively, these troublesome definitions paint a picture of general semantics as something to which few people can relate.

Some examples of definitions (or phraseology regarded as definitions⁴) that have appeared over the years for the term general semantics include:

- *General semantics [...] is a new extensional discipline which explains and trains us how to use our nervous systems most efficiently.*⁵
- *General semantics is the study of relations between symbol systems and nervous systems as expressed in behavior.*⁶
- *General semantics is an up-to-date epistemology.*⁷
- *General semantics may be regarded as a systematic attempt to formulate the general method of science in such a way that it might be applied not only in a few restricted areas of human experience, but generally in daily life.*⁸
- *General semantics is (1) the study or correction of human responses to symbols, symbol systems, sign systems, and sign situations, (2) a study of how a human nervous system works and ought to work, (3) an educational theory whose aim is to study the evaluational processes of human beings, and (4) ultimately a nonverbal discipline of silence, of dissolving away the encrusted verbalizations and abstractions, dogmas and creeds which envelop most of us like layers of barnacles.*⁹
- *General semantics is a general theory of evaluation based on modern scientific knowledge, the postulates of Einsteinian physics, etc. It represents a methodological synthesis of trends in the Western world that evolved during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and are now increasingly becoming a part of our new world reorientation.*¹⁰

- *General semantics (or GS) can be referred to as a general system of evaluation and awareness. It provides a systematic methodology to understand how you relate to the world around you, how you react to this world, how you react to your reactions, and how you may adjust your behavior accordingly.*¹¹
- *General semantics deals with the study of how we perceive, construct, evaluate, and communicate our life experiences. It can be considered an interdisciplinary study in that when you study general semantics, you integrate knowledge from many academic fields—not just language and communication studies, but also psychology, physics, chemistry, mathematics, physiology, sociology, anthropology, etc.*¹²

Comparing these definitions with definitions of different sciences, we find an interesting pattern:

- *physical science – the study of non-living systems*¹³
- *geology – the study of solid matter that constitutes the Earth*¹⁴
- *seismology – the study of earthquakes and the propagation of elastic waves through the Earth*¹⁵
- *paleoseismology – the study of geologic sediments and rocks for signs of ancient earthquakes*¹⁶
- *analytical chemistry – the study of chemical composition of natural and artificial materials*¹⁷
- *biochemistry – the study of chemical processes in living organisms*¹⁸
- *organic chemistry – the study of chemical compounds primarily consisting of hydrogen and carbon*¹⁹
- *cosmology – the study of the universe and humanity’s place in it*²⁰
- *astronomy – the study of celestial objects and phenomena that originate outside the Earth’s atmosphere*²¹
- *gamma-ray astronomy – the study of astronomical objects at the shortest wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum*²²

The pattern you may see in these definitions of sciences is each is fairly short, but more notably, each begins with the phrase “the study of.” Learning any of these sciences as studies of particular things makes the respective sciences immediately understandable to students, even schoolchildren. Teaching general semantics as

the study of something is the first step toward elevating its status in the scientific community and bringing its interests easily into focus.

The Study of What?

The term general semantics gives a clue into what it studies. General semantics has something to do with the study of meanings. However, the word meanings is quite vague, as it could refer to the definitions of words, the consequences of actions, the intentions of people, or some other such popular referent for the word meanings. Therefore, in order to create a simple, clear definition, our definition of general semantics should either exclude the word meanings or include the word with a qualifier to identify what kind of meaning we refer to.

Cognitively, semantics is related to linguistics. Linguistics is *the study of language*. Semantics is *the study of meanings of words*. If semantics is the study of meanings of words and is related to linguistics, semantics may be generalized as *the study of meanings of language*.

In the communication process, linguistics and semantics are thus ordinarily related: *First*, there is language, *then* there is *meanings of language*. This ordinal relationship between linguistics and semantics meshes nicely with a fundamental formulation of general semantics: that of the *semantic reaction*. A semantic reaction is a reaction to something. It doesn't take much thought to realize that a semantic reaction is a reaction *to language*.

Therein we make progress toward our definition of the term general semantics. Given that semantic reactions are seen as fundamental in general semantics,²³ and given the ordinal relationship between linguistics and semantics, general semantics may be seen as *the study of semantic reactions*, or more clearly, general semantics may be seen as *the study of reactions to language*.²⁴

This definition merely puts perspective on the word *semantics* in the term general semantics. What might the word *general* mean in general semantics? Starting with the definition of *the study of semantic reactions*, we realize that the term semantic reaction as formulated by Alfred Korzybski in his landmark book on general semantics titled *Science & Sanity* refers to the total mind-body ("psychophysiological") response to language.²⁵ Korzybski studies the nervous, psychological, physiological, and behavioral consequences of language on a person. He regards language as behavior, so upon hearing an utterance and experiencing a semantic reaction, any language you use in your response to the original utterance amounts to behavior related to the original utterance. That is, what you say in response to some language is behavior, and as such, part of your semantic reaction.

Knowing this, the word general in the term general semantics refers to the whole slew of things that happens to a person upon hearing language and having a semantic reaction, not just the learned or dictionary meaning of a word. You might distinguish the term general semantics from special semantics, a term that may represent the careful study of a *sub*-reaction to language—nervous reactions, physiological reactions, linguistic reactions (speech responses), or some other aspect of a semantic reaction.²⁶

So, the simple definition of the term general semantics that I propose for popular consumption and adoption is *the study of reactions to language*, with the consideration that that phrase means *any* kind of reaction that comes as a result of encountering and experiencing language—*affective, cognitive, emotional, psychological, linguistic, physiological, or behavioral*. Contrast general semantics with special semantics, and for special semantics you have a more specific definition; you have *the study of emotional reactions to language*, or *the study of physiological reactions to language*, or *the study of linguistic reactions to language*, or the study of some other particular aspect of semantic reactions, whatever your special interest.

What about Regular Semantics?

With respect to the more widely known field simply called semantics, we need to accept that the meaning of that word is something slightly different than the meaning of the same word in the term general semantics.

In the name semantics, the word semantics refers to *meanings of words*. In the name general semantics, the word semantics refers to *semantic reactions*, the total mind-body response to language.

Semantics is more of a logical and historical field that elaborates on the connection of words and definitions, especially considering time, while general semantics is more of a behavioral field that observes how people react to speech and writing.

If we need to distinguish semantics from general semantics in conversation, we might use the adjective historical and refer to semantics as historical semantics. Historical semantics is *the study of the meanings of words over time*, while general semantics is *the study of reactions to language*.

Likewise, when Alfred Korzybski uses the adjective semantic in *Science & Sanity*, he usually means “of or related to reactions to language” rather than “of or related to the meanings of words.”

General Semantics as a Science

Seeing general semantics as *the study of reactions to language*, we take a giant step toward elevating general semantics to the level of science. We only ensure

the status of general semantics in the scientific community where the study of reactions to language employs the scientific method as a means for gathering data about reactions to language. What makes a science *truly* a science like physics, chemistry, etc., is its employment of the scientific method in its study. Else, the science falls short of being a *true* science.

To date, people are not widely doing scientific experiments in general semantics (experiments on reactions to language), though scientific behavioral studies with respect to the impact of language on internal and external human behavior might be construed to some extent as general semantics experiments. To date, people are more inclined to *talk about* general semantics than to conduct scientific experiments. They are more inclined to provide opinions on what to do in light of general semantics research and foundations than they are inclined to design and implement scientific experiments.

This means that, to date, much of general semantics is *editorial* rather than *scientific*, an observation that suggests a lull in scientific activity related to general semantics. This lull does not suggest a death in scientific activity related to general semantics, nor does it suggest a death of general semantics as a whole. To the contrary, a simple definition of general semantics is expected to reactivate interest in general semantics and scientific experimentation related to reactions to language.

The Focus (Foci) of General Semantics

The simple definition of general semantics as *the study of reactions to language* says that, ultimately, people interested in general semantics pay attention to and focus on reactions people have to language.

This focus is very broad and very engaging, covering a wide range of topics important to everyday living. People interested in general semantics interest themselves in:

- how people interpret language
- how people behave based on how they interpret language
- how people reply based on the language they read and hear

People interested in general semantics also become interested in:

- the relationship between one's speech and one's thinking, and how changing one's speech can change one's thinking
- propaganda and its effects on people's semantic reactions
- persuasion and propaganda techniques

- advertising slogans and marketing messages
- critical thinking
- neuro-semantic and neuro-linguistics
- neuro-linguistic programming (NLP)
- rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT) and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)
- linguistic accuracy and inaccuracy and their respective implications in the engineering of humankind

The simple definition of general semantics as *the study of reactions to language* covers just about any idea you've ever encountered in general semantics without employing any hyphenated jargon or confounding terminology. It brings clarity to the endeavor of general semantics as well as focus to the endeavor. Ultimately, general semantics is seen as *a study*. The simple definition relates many of the various interests regarded as general semantics and makes understandable why they are part of the focus of general semantics.

Why Have General Semantics?

Almost every science exists to serve some purpose. That is, a science is not created as simply a study for the sake of having a study. It exists to solve some problem or set of problems. General semantics, too, is a study founded in order to solve some problem or set of problems.

General semantics seems to have come into existence primarily to solve problems with *time-binding*.²⁷ Time-binding, a notion first formulated by Korzybski in his first book *Manhood of Humanity*, is the uniquely human capacity to pass information on from one generation of humans to another. This capacity allows future generations of humans to start in their endeavors where previous generations have left off. Animals do not have the time-binding capacity, and as a result, they keep "starting from the beginning" with each generation.

By comparison, humans are able to experience progress while animals simply stay put. The primary mechanism that allows for time-binding is *language*. Human language allows one generation of people to communicate to another generation of people. As a result, a previous generation can provide instructions to a future generation on how to attack a problem, why to try one method over another, what *not* to do, etc., saving future generations precious time. The term time-binding roughly means consolidating experience into words, though it may also be construed as reducing the amount of time needed to move from step to step. By reducing time, in general, you serve progress.

Problems with time-binding emerge when language does not serve the progress of humankind. Language may interfere with the progress of humankind. Understanding the mechanics of language, or more specifically reactions to language, may afford a solution to the problems with time-binding. With this curiosity, we arrive at the founding of a scientific study of reactions to language.²⁸

Ordering the Many Ideas Associated with General Semantics

With respect to ordering the many ideas associated with general semantics, we start by looking at the whole spectrum from when Judy says something, to when Punch reads what Judy says. Furthermore, we look at the total mind-body reaction of Punch after Punch reads what Judy says. This is probably our main focus in general semantics. In general semantics, we even look at what Punch does to Judy or even what Punch does to Tom, Dick, Harry, et al., after Punch reads what Judy says.

**Simplified Timeline of Communication
& General Interests of Communication Sciences**

Judy speaks →	Punch hears	→ Punch’s internal semantic reactions →	Punch’s external semantic reactions → <small>(speaks, moves, emotes, etc.)</small>	Judy hears	<i>etc.</i>
1. linguistics & historical semantics	2. general semantics	3. general semantics	4. general semantics	5. general semantics	6. <i>etc.</i>

The upper timeline above shows a simplified narrative of what happens when Judy speaks to Punch. Judy says “Nice hare.” Punch mistakenly hears “Nice hair.” From hearing that, Punch internally processes that statement: Perhaps he is insecure about his balding, perhaps he interprets sarcasm from Judy, perhaps he starts to feel angry, perhaps his heart rate elevates. From these points, perhaps Punch’s muscles become tense and his brow furrows. From these points, perhaps Punch shouts an expletive at Judy and punches Judy. Then, perhaps Judy says “Hey!” and slaps Punch in retaliation for Punch’s semantic reactions. These events cover the sequence of events represented by the upper timeline.

The upper timeline could also lead from Judy saying “Nice hare,” to Punch accurately hearing “Nice hare,” to Punch feeling a wash of goodness internally, to Punch expressing to Judy “Thank you for saying that about my rabbit” then offering to let Judy hold his rabbit.

The corresponding lower timeline shows what scientific fields take interest in what steps of the timeline. Linguistics and historical semantics (the study of the meanings of words over time) take interest in utterances and their formulation. General semantics takes interest in almost everything after that point related to a given utterance. It takes

interest in what the reader hears, how he interprets it, how he reacts to it underneath his skin as well as how he reacts outwardly in behavior, expression, speech, etc. General semantics even takes interest in how the initiator of communication or other recipients of the semantic reaction hear and react.

We see that general semantics has a broad interest in the communication process. It is interested in nearly everything that happens after a word is read or heard. General semantics isn't so much interested in absolute or inherent meanings of words, etymology, morphology, or phonetics. It is interested in what words do to people—the results that follow when someone utters something.

The Actual Subject of Study in General Semantics

In general semantics, we study reactions to language, but to what does that phrase refer?

Specifically, we study humans who are listening and reading. We look at the words they are consuming. We observe and document how they react to those words—what they feel and think, what they experience emotionally and physiologically, as well as what they subsequently say and do.

We observe and document a range of different reactions to different kinds of speech and language. We compare the reactions people have to one kind of speech with the reactions people have to another kind of speech. We contrast the reactions.

From our observations and documentation, we may offer a theory. We might theorize that if we want to generate particular semantic reactions from people or within ourselves, we should use one particular kind of speech over another. From our observations and documentation, we might provide a model for predicting the semantic reactions of people in light of the introduction of a particular kind of speech. We might even uncover new aspects of semantic reactions to study based on our observations and documentation of semantic reactions.

Whatever the case, in general semantics, *the actual subject is people*. We study people when they are privy to language. We look at their affective reactions, their emotional reactions, their intellectual reactions, their physiological reactions, their linguistic reactions (their speech responses), their behavioral reactions (their resultant actions), etc. We appreciate each of these reactions non-elementalistically: Each functions as part of a whole; to separate them verbally is to misrepresent how they interrelate.

Big Topics in General Semantics

Looking at the literature of general semantics and the topics it covers, we see that in addition to covering the intake of language, its processing, and the

consequential behaviors that follow its intake, general semantics touches on Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian speech, quantum mechanics, mathematics, brain evolution, and other heavy contemporary¹⁹³³ ideas. Korzybski brings this dizzying array of heretofore unrelated ideas together in *Science & Sanity*.

The question becomes where these various topics fit in with respect to general semantics. There is little doubt that their inclusion within general semantics literature has made defining general semantics a difficult task and has influenced many of its awkward definitions. But in understanding general semantics as *the study of reactions to language*, and in understanding how that science aims to serve problems with time-binding, soon enough we see how these inclusions relate to its focus.

Many of the multidisciplinary inclusions in *Science & Sanity* serve as foundational scientific knowledge¹⁹³³ into the structure of reality and the functioning of the human nervous system. Other inclusions in *Science & Sanity* document historical and experimental observations of semantic reactions.²⁹

Many inclusions in *Science & Sanity*, however, fall outside general semantics and fit more into the category of *applied general semantics*. That is, these inclusions are not related to the study of reactions to language, but instead *apply* what is learned from the study of reactions to language.³⁰

The information below does not offer an absolute or all-inclusive framework for ordering and organizing the many ideas associated with general semantics and its simple definition as *the study of reactions to language*. It makes some striking omissions and in places may run contrary to the usual organization of general semantics ideas. The author hopes to provide a very general framework for the many ideas, the specific order and inclusion of which are largely open to revision and reinterpretation.

Scientific Knowledge in General Semantics

In *Science & Sanity*, Korzybski draws from diverse scientific fields to build foundational knowledge for general semantics.

In some places, Korzybski explains *the structure* of reality. He draws from scientific knowledge built from physics, colloidal chemistry, and other empirical fields to provide as accurate an image as he can of the structure of reality to date¹⁹³³.

In other places, Korzybski explains how reality *functions*. He uses Child's research on dynamic gradients to demonstrate the interrelationship of living cells and the environment. He also uses Child's research as evidence for the abstracting function of the human nervous system.³¹ Additionally, Korzybski draws from the experiments of Pavlov on conditional reflexes in dogs, noting the greater conditionality of the human nervous system than that of dogs.³²

Korzybski provides foundational scientific knowledge to ensure that the study

of reactions to language is not confounded by outdated, unscientific perceptions of reality that would otherwise blight his science. With these foundations laid out, he provides a standard for evaluating semantic reactions: *Semantic reactions that correspond to the structure and functioning of reality denote sanity in a person, while semantic reactions that do not correspond to the structure and functioning of reality denote unsanity in a person.*³³

Non-Euclideanism, Non-Newtonianism, and Non-Aristotelianism in General Semantics

From his studies of semantic reactions, one observation Korzybski makes is that speech can dramatically influence thinking. In *Science & Sanity*, he notes the role of linguistic revision in cultural change. To exemplify his point, Korzybski calls attention to historic paradigm shifts in mathematics and science.

Specifically, Korzybski discusses the shifts from the Euclidean to non-Euclidean paradigms in geometry, as well as shifts from the Newtonian to the Einsteinian (non-Newtonian) paradigm in mechanics. These shifts are usually characterized as shifts in thinking, but they might also be characterized as shifts *in speaking* given that nearly everyone encounters these ideas first in the form of speech or writing.³⁴ Shifts in Euclidean and Newtonian speech awakened revolutionary ways of thinking about their respective subjects of study. The slight rewording of single postulates in Euclidean and Newtonian systems yielded dramatically different, non-Euclidean and non-Newtonian systems.

Korzybski notes that shifting from the Aristotelian to a non-Aristotelian paradigm also awakened revolutionary ways of thinking. (In truth, general semantics may be seen as a revolutionary product of non-Aristotelian speech.) In the context of general semantics, non-Euclideanism, non-Newtonianism, and non-Aristotelianism exemplify alternate ways of speaking about subjects, the result of which bore amazing fruit for their employers. Specifically, they helped their employers to better understand the structure of reality. By better understanding the structure of reality, the practitioners of these new languages progressed in their respective applied sciences.

Applied General Semantics

The term applied general semantics refers to taking the knowledge gathered scientifically under the umbrella of general semantics and applying it toward other endeavors. Specifically, the endeavor most often selected for the application of general semantics knowledge is *human living*.

More often than a science, general semantics is interpreted as a practice,

a discipline, or even somewhat vaguely as a system. When interpreting general semantics as one of these, it is very, very important *in the interest of the scientific identity of general semantics* to refer to it as applied general semantics and *not* as general semantics.³⁵ General semantics as a practice or a discipline historically conjures up images of prescriptions or recommendations of behavior. *Science does not prescribe; it merely describes.* When someone makes a prescription in light of scientific knowledge, he is doing *applied* science; he is *not* doing (pure) science.

Put succinctly, general semantics is not applied general semantics. General semantics has to do with *the study of reactions to language.* Applied general semantics has to do with *applications of the knowledge gained from the study of reactions to language.* Another way to say this is that applied general semantics is *the application of knowledge gained from the study of semantic reactions.*

Applications of the Knowledge Gained from General Semantics

In terms of progress and time-binding, the non-Euclidean, non-Newtonian, and non-Aristotelian systems afforded not only revolutionary ways of speaking but also afforded revolutionary progress for humankind. In light of their discovery, Korzybski advocates these systems, the non-Aristotelian system of speaking in particular.

More generally, *technology* affords revolutionary progress for humankind, and technology is built through the application of knowledge gained from many different scientific studies. Given science's powerful role in technology and ultimately in human progress, Korzybski advocates taking *a scientific approach to human living* for the potential expansive progress it might afford for the typical human in his life. Korzybski observes that those people who run on theories about reality developed without the aid of the scientific method often exhibit signs of insanity. They operate by unfounded inferences, inaccurate language, antiquated metaphysics, and beliefs that do not match current¹⁹³³ scientific knowledge. Or, they gather their information by unscientific methods. As a result, these people have difficulty adjusting to reality. By training in science and scientific methodology, insane individuals can reduce their insanity, become saner, and improve their adjustment.

Training in the methodologies of mathematicians can also aid in sanity and adjustment. Mathematics serves many different functions in general semantics and applied general semantics, but it is most notably helpful in applied general semantics.

In applied general semantics, mathematics is seen as *a nearly perfect language*,³⁶ one matching the structure of both reality and the human nervous system. Mathematics is also seen in applied general semantics as *exemplary human behavior*, the source of many historic human achievements.³⁷ Given both interpretations, mathematics represents ideal human brain functioning, the target

mental functioning for the insane person. All sorts of mathematics methodologies are seen to help the insane individual become saner. From employing mathematical practices like indexing terms to generalizing mathematical practices like the calculus, mathematical methodologies offer numerous approaches for helping the insane person to adjust.

The problems of insanity are important in general semantics because they can interfere with time-binding. If someone produces and promotes unscientific theories, future generations may pick up his language. These unscientific theories may stunt the progress of the future generations in much the same way Aristotelianism stunted human progress for hundreds of years. Where the time-binding capacity is diminished, there is concern that humans behave no differently than animals and become more inclined toward engaging in catastrophic war. Resolving insanity not only affords progress, but also diminishes the potential for human conflict.

Consciousness of Abstracting

If applied general semantics champions just one recommendation, it champions becoming *conscious of abstracting*.

From Korzybski's applied general semantic perspective, becoming conscious of abstracting plays a pivotal role in human progress. Consciousness of abstracting makes a person aware that:

- humans can't know everything
- words don't represent everything
- words aren't things but *represent* things
- humans project their words and ideas onto reality
- humans can't truly *know* reality

By becoming conscious of abstracting, a person learns about the subjectivity of his evaluations and that his nervous system is not absolute. By becoming conscious of abstracting, a person learns to differentiate between an event and an object, an object and a description, a description and an inference, an inference and a projection.

By becoming conscious of abstracting, a person delays his semantic reactions. By delaying his semantic reactions, he can offset the heightening of interpersonal conflict and reach agreements that never before seemed possible. By delaying his semantic reactions, he can also study subjects longer to make more informed inferences and theories, formulations that may aid in the progress of just one person in the future, or even all of future humankind.

Human Engineering

Understanding that applied general semantics is usually applied to problems of human living, *human engineering*, the field Korzybski proposed in his first book *Manhood of Humanity*, shines clearly as the ultimate Korzybskian endeavor.

In light of the writings in his first book and in light of his own profession as an engineer, Korzybski had a primary interest in the engineering of humanity. General semantics studies reactions to language and the knowledge Korzybski gained from general semantics could apply toward the engineering problems of humankind. World war was the result of problems in the engineering of humans; general semantics was a potential solution to those problems, while also a ticket to a *re-engineering* of humankind. The main method Korzybski concentrates on for re-engineering humanity could be seen as linguistic revision. By simple revisions to speech, one could potentially bring about radical changes in human behavior for the betterment of humankind, now and beyond.

Conclusion

The simple definition of the term general semantics as *the study of reactions to language* does not cover *every* idea included under the heading. Not even a complicated definition could cover the scope of ideas the term general semantics represented. However, the simple definition does cover a tremendous amount of related general semantic ideas, and it is served by the term applied general semantics, which covers the prescriptive aspects found in Korzybski's *Science & Sanity*.

With the adoption of the simple definition, general semantics finally gains a clear identity and a specific focus. It is first and foremost *a study*. Once people understand it as a study, like schoolchildren, they will easily begin to grasp the subject at hand.

NOTES & REFERENCES

1. Korzybski, Alfred. *Science & Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*. 5th ed. Englewood: Institute of General Semantics, 1994. p. 55.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
3. The author feels the need to distinguish between a definition and a description. Verbally, they may not look any different to a reader or listener, but behaviorally they differ greatly. The word definition refers to a verbal characterization designed to serve a particular purpose or objective. The

word description refers to a verbal characterization that serves no particular purpose or objective. *Focus on the behavior*: If I asked you to describe this essay, you might say, “It has a lot of words, it’s written in English, it’s by Ben Hauck, it’s about general semantics,” etc. *Essentially, when you describe, you list characteristics*. Describing is not defining. If I ask you to *define* this essay, your behavior will change. If I ask you to define the essay without specifying a purpose, you’ll be at a loss for words, maybe overwhelmed by the task. If I ask you to define the essay *so that someone else will read it*, you might quickly say, “This essay is a step toward the acceptance of general semantics as a science,” “This essay is a must-read,” etc. If I change the purpose and ask you to define the essay *so that no one will read it*, you might quickly say, “This essay is something you should skip over in this issue of *ETC.*,” “This essay is rubbish,” etc. *Essentially, when you define, you position*. Comparing the verbal results of description and definition, on the surface they all look basically the same. However, comparing the psychological behavior associated with description and definition, you start to see that what you say when you *describe* depends on what you abstract at a given moment, while what you say when you *define* depends on what your greater objective is. In light of these understandings, a lot of purported definitions of general semantics read more like descriptions than definitions in that they try to mention characteristics of general semantics rather than serve a particular purpose. More bluntly, they *don’t* serve a purpose. The author feels the need to elevate the status of general semantics in the scientific community. As a result, he aims for a simple verbal characterization of general semantics, a definition to serve that purpose.

4. Wanderer, Robert. “General Semantics: A Compendium of Definitions.” *ETC.: A Review of General Semantics*, July 2007, pp. 193-204.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 194, An Alfred Korzybski definition.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 194, A Robert Pula definition.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 195, A J. Samuel Bois definition.
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9. *Ibid.*, p. 196, An S.I. Hayakawa definition.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 196, An old Institute of General Semantics definition.
11. “Discover > General Semantics.” Institute of General Semantics. Available: <http://time-binding.org/inner.php?mtrid=1&mpid=1> (Accessed July 1, 2008).
12. *Ibid.*
13. Adapted definition from the sentence “Physical science is an encompassing term for the branches of natural science and science that study non-living systems [...]” “Physical science.” Available: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Physical_Science (Accessed July 1, 2008).

14. Adapted definition from the sentence “Geology [...] is the science and study of the solid matter that constitutes the Earth.” “Geology.” Available: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geology> (Accessed July 1, 2008).
15. Adapted definition from the sentence “Seismology [...] is the scientific study of earthquakes and the propagation of elastic waves through the Earth.” “Seismology.” Available: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seismology> (Accessed July 1, 2008).
16. Adapted definition from the sentence “Paleoseismology looks at geologic sediments and rocks, for signs of ancient earthquakes.” “Paleoseismology.” Available: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paleoseismology> (Accessed July 1, 2008).
17. “Analytical chemistry.” Available: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Analytical_chemistry (Accessed July 1, 2008).
18. “Biochemistry.” Available: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biochemistry> (Accessed July 1, 2008).
19. Adapted definition from the sentence “Organic chemistry is a discipline within chemistry which involves the scientific study of the structure, properties, composition, reactions, and preparation (by synthesis or by other means) of chemical compounds consisting primarily of carbon and hydrogen, which may contain any number of other elements, including nitrogen, oxygen, the halogens as well as phosphorus, silicon and sulfur.” “Organic chemistry.” Available: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organic_chemistry (Accessed July 1, 2008).
20. Adapted definition from the sentence “Cosmology [...] is the quantitative (usually mathematical) study of the Universe in its totality, and by extension, humanity’s place in it.” “Cosmology.” Available: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cosmology> (Accessed July 1, 2008).
21. Adapted definition from the sentence “Astronomy [...] is the scientific study of celestial objects (such as stars, planets, comets, and galaxies) and phenomena that originate outside the Earth’s atmosphere (such as the cosmic background radiation).” “Astronomy.” Available: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Astronomy> (Accessed July 1, 2008).
22. “Astronomy > Gamma-ray astronomy.” Available: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Astronomy#Gamma-ray_astronomy (Accessed July 1, 2008).
23. Alfred Korzybski begins Chapter 2 of *Science & Sanity* with the sentence “The term *semantic reaction* is fundamental for the present work and *non-elementalistic systems*” (p. 19).
24. Compare the definition the term general semantics as “the study of reactions to language” with the following quotations attributed to Koryzbski: “The [non-elementalistic] study of the [semantic reaction] becomes an extremely general scientific discipline” (*Science & Sanity*, p. 25); “The present work is written

entirely from the [semantic reaction] point of view” (*Ibid.*); and “[...] a study of the [non-elementalistic] mechanisms of meanings, through psychophysiology and general semantics [...]” (*Ibid.*, p. 24).

25. Note the generality of the term semantic reaction: “The working tool of psychophysiology is found in the *semantic reaction*. This can be described as the psycho-logical reaction of a given individual to words and language and other symbols and events [...] It is of great importance to realize that the term ‘semantics’ is *non-elementalistic*, as it involves conjointly the emotional as well as the intellectual factors (*Science & Sanity*, p. 24); “The term ‘semantic,’ ‘semantically,’ ‘semantic reactions,’ ‘semantic states’ [etc.], are [non-elementalistic], as they involve both emotions and intellect [...] All these terms apply equally to ‘senses’ and to ‘mind,’ to ‘emotions’ and to ‘intellect’—they are not artificially split.” (*Ibid.*, p. 30); “The present enquiry [...] deals with linguistic and semantic issues and their *physiological* and psycho-logical aspects” (*Ibid.*, p. 10); “From a [non-elementalistic] point of view we can never disregard the effect the ‘body’ or ‘emotions’ have on the ‘mind,’ and vice versa the effect that the ‘mind’ had on the ‘emotions’ and the ‘body’” (*Ibid.*, p. 546); and “In the work of general semantics we deal with the *living neuro-semantic* and *neuro-linguistic* reactions” (*Ibid.*, p. xl).
26. Special semantics may have its problems from a Korzybskian perspective. Korzybski notes the term semantic reaction as non-elementalistic, meaning the ideas it represents are empirically interconnected (mind-body). Elementalizing the ideas (to mind and body) misrepresents empirical evidence. A field of special semantics would need to appreciate and remember non-elementalism else its relationship with the greater field of general semantics would be in question.
27. Korzybski notes near the beginning of Chapter 1 of *Science & Sanity*: “In the present volume I undertake the investigation of the mechanism of time-binding.” (p. 7)
28. Korzybski notes a few passages later: “The formulation of General Semantics, resulting from a General Theory of Time-binding, supplies the scientists and the laymen with a general modern method of orientation, which eliminates the older psycho-logical blockages and reveals the mechanisms of adjustment.” (*Ibid.*, p. 8)
29. Korzybski writes in his chapter “On Non-Aristotelian Training”: “The procedure for training in the present system [...] follows directly from the theoretical considerations which have been explained in the foregoing chapters. The contentions of the system have been verified experimentally in all cases where it has been consistently applied.” (*Ibid.*, p. 469)

30. The author is of the opinion that Korzybski poorly organized his book, mixing general semantics and applied general semantics and not adequately distinguishing between the study of reactions to language and *applications of the knowledge* he gained from studying reactions to language. In rough, Korzybski mixes the descriptive with the prescriptive, leading to a confusing read that makes the reader question whether general semantics is science or more properly termed philosophy.
31. *Science & Sanity*, pp. 102-103.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 335.
33. Korzybski writes: "A 'science of man' must follow science (1933) in its structure and method. Only by accepting the current 'scientific metaphysics' as given by science at a given date *is sanity possible*" (*Science & Sanity*, p. 531). Also: "Sanity means *adjustment* and without the minimum of the best structural knowledge of each date concerning the world, such adjustment is impossible." (*Ibid.*, p. 727)
34. Regarding shifts in paradigms, Korzybski speaks of the meddling of philosophical grammar. By philosophical grammar, he means the laws of thought, making something cognitive (*thought*) into something linguistic (*grammar*). Given this, the author of this essay considers *speech laws* or *rhetoric laws* more appropriate characterizations of what prevents paradigm shifts. Note how the philosophical grammar burdens thinking: "The primitive form of representation which Aristotle inherited, together with its structural implications and his philosophical grammar, which was called logic, are strictly interconnected, so much so that one leads to the other." (*Science & Sanity*, p. 92)
35. Notice that the author of this essay uses the word multidisciplinary to refer to the scientific influences on general semantics (Cf. "Big Topics in General Semantics"). In this sense, a science is regarded as a discipline. This is a fair characterization when a science is seen as a study: A study is something you do, therefore a practice, therefore quite possibly a practice at which you can discipline yourself. By strict adherence to scientific methodology, you probably justifiably make your science a discipline. However, referring to general semantics as a discipline seems to bring to mind something much different. Referring to it as a discipline, general semantics does not tend to bring to mind the study of reactions to language with strict adherence to scientific methodology. Instead, it brings to mind a way of doing *other* things. It brings to mind personal lifestyle rather than disciplined study. Korzybski's convoluted organization of *Science & Sanity* may be most responsible for the confusing identity of general semantics. (Cf. note 29.)

36. *Science & Sanity*, p. 69.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 67.