General Semantics: An Overview

by Milton Dawes

Every now and again, students of general semantics are asked: "What is general semantics? The abstractions (selections) below represent an overview. They do not answer the question as asked – It is translated to:"What is general semantics about".

The impact of Korzybski's experience on the battlefields of the first world war lead him to wonder 'How come we humans became so advanced in the fields of science, mathematics, and technology, yet continued to behave so primitively with each other?' He was very concerned with the ever expanding gap between progress in these fields, and the quality of our human relationships. Over a period of twelve years … "He studied human evaluations in science and mathematics and psychiatry, 'at their best and at their worst' as he put it, form the standpoint of predictability and human survival". (See *Manhood of Humanity*, page xxiii)

From a functional 'definition' (not what mankind is, but what mankind does), and a theory of mankind as a "time-binding class of life" (presented in his first book *Manhood of Humanity*), Korzybski formulated his Non-aristotelian system "general semantics", and published his second book *Science and Sanity*. General Semantics represents a "way of thinking", based on the proposition that "science and mathematics represent human thinking at its best". And that we can make progress in our human relationships through "conscious time-binding", following the methods and principles of a non-aristotelian system presented in *Science and Sanity*, and *Manhood of Humanity*.

General Semantics, a non-aristotelian system-discipline created by Alfred Korzybski, emphasizes that "human beings constitute an interdependent time-binding class of life, involving feelings of responsibility, duty towards others, and the future". As such, general semantics is concerned with the quality of human relationships – intra-personal, social, professional, interpersonal, national, international, environmental, etc.

General Semantics constitutes: a system-discipline concerned with the "sanity of the human species" – leading to

"a general theory of psychotherapy".

a system-discipline based on principles of non-identity, non-allness, non-elementalism, a general principle of uncertainty, infinite valued maximum, probability, etc.

a system-discipline based on a "general theory of time-binding" (a method for conscious improvement in any field of activity).

a system-discipline showing how we can develop time-binding intelligence, become conscious
time-binders …toward time-binding excellence.

a system-discipline offering "a general theory of values".

a system-discipline offering a "non-elementalistic theory of meanings".

a system-discipline proposing "a time-binding foundation" for human ethics.

a system–discipline formulated as "a general theory of evaluation"— with principles we can
apply to help us use our intelligences more intelligently.

a system-discipline showing how "in modern scientific methods there are factors of sanity to be
tested empirically". As such, general semantics can be considered as "generalized
science and mathematics".

a system-discipline based on a proposition that "science, and mathematics (especially the
calculus) show the 'human mind' working at it best "(in terms of predictability); and that
"we can learn from science and mathematics how this 'human mind' should work, to be
at its best".

a system-discipline proposing that "structure is the only content of knowledge"… a system-
discipline proposing that "structure is the only content of knowledge"… which, together
with the non-identity, and non-elementalism principles proposes a foundation for an up-
to-date epistemology.

a meta-critical evaluation system-discipline offering a theoretical foundation for critical thinking,
based on principles including "non-identity, non-allness, non-elementalism, and
 consciousness of abstracting".

a system-discipline offering principles and procedures as psychological tools we can use to help
us use our nervous systems more efficiently…a way of minimizing 'stress', and
enhancing our 'spiritual' and psycho-physiological wellbeing.

a system-discipline emphasizing a "non-elementalistic" organism-as-a-whole-in environments
approach, involving interconnectedness, interactivity, inter-relatedness, interdependence,
etc.

a system-discipline with principles and procedures – tools we can use to make improvements
and progress in any field of activity, not a haphazard affair, not depending solely on
guess work, intuition, gut feelings, trial and error, but based on time-binding, heuristic,
(general semantics) methods of approach – involving, creativity, co-operativeness, and
interdependence.

a system-discipline which emphasizes the importance of recognizing "powerful relationships
between language-thinking-attitude-and behavior" – determinants of the kinds of

organizations, institutions, fields of thinking-activities, clarity of communication, and quality of relationships with ourselves and with others.

a system-discipline with principles we can apply to help us become more imaginative and creative individuals; and thinking about how we think about things, become better (more effective, more efficient) planners, problem-resolvers, decision makers, etc.

a system-discipline with principles we can apply to help us improve levels of consciousness, labeled "empirical, intelligent, rational, rational self-consciousness, and appropriation of rational self-consciousness". These involve sensing-experiencing, inquiry, understanding, reflection, judgment, decision, responsibility, morality, and recognition of these levels. (I top this off with consciousness of abstracting.) (See Bernard Lonergan's *Insight …A Study of Human Understanding*)

an extensional system-discipline offering principles and procedures we can use to become conscious of our abstracting (awareness that we do not and cannot cover all in our thinking, understanding, explanations, knowledge, etc.), and 'better' time-binding human 'beings'.

Korzybski cautioned that we should not expect to get much benefit from general semantics by just talking about it…We have to use the principle-tools in our relationships (thoughts, feelings, attitudes, interactions, etc.) with ourselves, others, and our environments. These principles are elaborated on, and unfamiliar terms are broken down through lectures, demonstrations, discussions, exercises, music, short films, etc., in The Institute of General Semantics seminar-workshops.

The above does not cover all the characteristics of general semantics. So in the spirit of "non-allness, "non-identity", and "consciousness of abstracting", the reader is invited to add to this list…and share.

Milton Dawes/2006