

# Some General Semantics Principles

## An Approach to Developing Our Thinking and Critical Reasoning Skills

Alfred Korzybski, valued the **methods and approach of science and mathematics** as examples of **“human thinking at its best”** (in terms of predictability). In his seminal book on “General Semantics”, **“Science And Sanity”**, he introduced his system of **interrelated principles**...**“generalizations of the methods and approach of science and mathematics”** as semantic maps-guides worth following. In expanding our vocabulary with scientific and mathematical terms, and modifying our behavior through studying and applying the principles of general semantics, we **think more clearly**, become better at communicating, we expand our knowledge and horizons, we broaden our understandings, and improve our relationships with ourselves, others, and the world in and around us. (See **“Practicing Conscious Time-binding”** at [miltondawes.com](http://miltondawes.com)).

**Modifying** our thinking, based on **“consciousness of abstracting”** can be considered **“advanced thinking”**: advanced in the sense that in our sensing-imaginings-thinking-feeling-believing-meanings we give, reasoning, planning, judging, making decisions, theorizing, and so on, we **cannot invalidate** or go beyond the general semantics principles of **“non-allness”**, **“non-identity”**, and **“non-elementalism”**. (For elaborations on these principles and others, and some ways to apply them, visit [miltondawes.com](http://miltondawes.com))

1. Re. **“Abstracting”**. The philosopher “Bernard Lonergan S.J.,” in his book “Insight. A Study of Human Understanding” (page 355) refers to ‘abstracting’ quite clearly as **“a direction of attention to some aspects of the given with a concomitant neglect of other aspects.”** That we abstract cannot be refuted (any attempt would involve abstracting; our sensing, beliefs, opinions, theories, philosophies, actions, etc., all result from abstracting. **“Consciousness of abstracting”** (a master principle of general semantics) involves: **Remembering, being aware** that whatever we imagine, think-feel, say, do, etc., **we have not, and cannot include everything.** Practicing consciousness of abstracting, we become more critical thinkers, more creative beings--more **conscious time-binders**. “Conscious abstracting” a precursor” to consciousness of abstracting—involves: Being attentive, witnessing, being aware **that** we are ‘doing’ and **how** we are ‘doing’ (thinking-feeling, believing, imagining, saying, and doing, etc.). **Practicing conscious abstracting** allows us to review, change, modify, learn from, or stop, what and how we are ‘doing’--**while doing**.
2. **Principle of “non-allness”**: **We cannot imagine, think, say, understand, know all about anything or anyone—including ourselves.** One way to practice “non-allness” involves modifying our thinking and speaking using words including “some, sometimes, usually, probably, maybe”, as far as I know, etc., etc., (where applicable.) **“The map is not the territory”** (it is map of), and **“The word is not the thing”** (it is about) are popular translations of the “non-allness” and “non-identity” principles). A map is not identical with (not the same as), and a map is not a map of all the territory. The map is also a map of the map maker (non-elementalism principle). Our words, theories, ideas, beliefs, values, opinions, meanings we give, expectations, etc., can be thought of as **“semantic maps”...powerful influences on our attitudes and behaviors**. Many of our personal, institutional, social, and international problems, arise from our devotion to out of date, and ‘inaccurate’ maps.
- 3 **Principle of “non-identity”**. **No two things are the same in all respects: in terms of time-space, a thing is not even identical with itself. (We cannot help identifying...but we can recognize our identifications and minimize some of their effects.)** A label, a title, or name, is not the thing labeled or named. ‘Things’ are not (and are more than) what we think, say, imagine, believe, them to be. **Words, things, situations, etc. are not the meanings we give, and do not have meanings: We give meanings.** A way to minimize our language identifications: We can think of many words (or anything)

algebraically as “**semantic variables**” and “**names of sets**”. Each one of us (mainly non-consciously) give our individual ‘semantic values’ to words we hear, read, utter, etc. And we also individually decide what qualities, values, or characteristics belong to our sets. The ‘qualities’ or characteristics that belong to my set-name “friend”, or “abortion” are very likely different from yours. (See articles “Meaning and Truth”, and “General Semantics, Advanced Thinking” at <miltondawes.com>)

4. **Time-binding**: a natural, usually non-conscious process that involves **Building on, modifying, expanding, abandoning, seeking to improve** what we learn from ourselves, from present others... and through words, and other symbols, from others long gone. **Conscious time-binding (time-binding our time-binding)** involves conscious awareness of our natural time-binding actions in order to avoid some of its harmful effects. Conscious time-binding can be considered a foundation of human ethics. (With natural time-binding: We build better bombs. We learn how to get better at being ‘good’--and also, how to get better at being ‘bad’. With natural time-binding, we are both creative and destructive beings. With “conscious time-binding”: We consciously take a **heuristic (a general “let’s see what happens”)** approach): **We do what we do to discover what we are doing, to learn about what we are doing; to learn from what we are doing...how to do better what we are doing.** (Stopping doing is also doing.)
5. **Non-elementalism**. We live in a world of relationships. **To be, is to be in relationships**. “Non-elementalism” involves **not separating verbally and conceptually** what is actually not separate: thinking-and feeling, matter-and energy, intellect-and emotion, action-and consequences, mind-and brain, **language-belief-values-meanings-and behavior, time-space-and everything**, observed-observer, and others. Remembering that there exists a relationship **between structure-and function**, we make better plans and decisions, and arrive at more effective solutions to problems...among other rewards. (Re. time-space: Anything that exists, exists somewhere for some time.)
6. **Heuristic**—a let’s try and see what happens approach: An orientation based on “consciousness of abstracting, time-binding, non-allness, and non-identity”, and other g.s. principles. **We do what we do, to discover what we are doing!** to learn more about what we are doing; to **learn from** what we are doing; to **learn how** to do what we are doing, better.
7. **Intensional/extensional thinking**: We think intensionally, when definitions, words, labels, names, beliefs, ideas, opinions, stories, theories, maps, are more important to us, than what they are about. Thinking **extensionally**, we give more importance, higher priority to process, change, structures, functions (how things work, behave, operate, relate, change, etc. We find in the field ‘science’ a good example of extensional behavior.
8. **Etc.** Using and thinking “etc.” are ways to practice “non-identity”, “non-allness”, and “conscious Abstracting”: Using “etc”. is a way to **remind** ourselves that there is always **more** to what we see, hear, think, believe, define, know, understand, imagine, etc.—a way to becoming more creative by recognizing that there are other ways. When we ignore or forget the factor of “more”, we set ourselves up for shocks, disappointments, distress, conflicts--among other dissatisfying experiences.

**The scientific approach** can be thought of as “A heuristic cumulative enterprise evolving from ‘observations’, wonder, curiosity, imagination, and a concern involving experiments, predictions, and refinements of theories as a reliable way to make sense of things. Science provides a good example of “time-binding”...but not yet conscious-time-binding--although quantum physicists are getting close with their “uncertainty, observer–observed” paradigms. **“Scientists seek to create reliable ‘maps’ that most accurately represent territories mapped.”** In developing a scientific orientation, we are engaged in discovering functional relationships and ‘structures’ of the world

(including ourselves). As we live in a world of relationships, a scientific orientation can be quite beneficial in helping us extend our understanding of ourselves, others, and the world. We can be creative and artistic without becoming 'artists'. Similarly: **We do not have to be 'scientists' to practice a scientific approach to understanding things and experience more satisfying relationships.**

Milton Dawes/ 2013

