A Better Tomorrow for General Semantics

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Today is Sunday, November 16, 2008. Looking at general semantics today, you could say that general semantics has an identity crisis on its hands.

Ask someone in GS what GS is and you will likely get a different answer from each person you ask. To insiders, each of these answers may make sense, but to the GS outsider, these answers present a nebulous picture of general semantics. Frankly, GS looks and sounds convoluted and impenetrable. GS practitioners are hard-pressed to interest others in GS if they can't harmoniously answer the simple question, "What is general semantics?"

The problem of defining GS has many facets. For guidance, we look to past GS authors for their definitions of GS. The chorus is atonal. Each author sings a note, but the music lacks a tonal center. We look to the Institute of General Semantics for an official slant, a perfect definition of general semantics, but we only increase the cacophony.

When a visitor to the IGS website asked the question, "What is general semantics?" she used to hear this:

> 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.[1]

Right now on the IGS website, the visitor hears this:

> General Semantics […] 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.[2]

Quite conspicuously, neither of these definitions feature "the *is* of identity." In fact, each definition seems to avoid "the *is* of identity." They do not answer the question "What is GS?" with "GS is …," but instead they answer with "GS *deals with*" and "GS *can be referred to as*." Essentially, these definitions talk around general semantics rather than getting to the point and answering the question appropriately. While they may sound true and accurate to the GS insider, these troublesome definitions are neither short nor succinct, making for confusing answers to the question "What is general semantics?"

As a result of these confusing answers, people can't quickly understand GS. They can't relate to it. They can't relate GS to other fields or to their lives. People can't hear its relevance or its appeal. GS sounds dicey. It sounds abstract. It sounds highfalutin'. It sounds obscure.

These, in truth, are major marketing problems for general semantics. GS does not want to sound dicey or abstract or highfalutin' or obscure. It wants to be quickly and easily understood. Without a widely sung, simple definition of general semantics, GS is left without an identity. My thesis is straightforward, resounding, and spoken with utmost gravity: *The future of general semantics depends upon a simple definition of general semantics.*

The fear of "the *is* of identity" is at the root of the problem of defining GS. GS practitioners are fearful of saying things like "GS is x" because they are taught that doing so means they are confusing GS for an abstraction. They are allegedly committing something called "identification." Identification is thinking a map is the territory rather than a representation of the territory. In GS, identification is explained as a habit with potentially serious cognitive and perceptual complications.

However, GS practitioners seem to overlook another popular lesson from general semantics when it comes to the word "is." That is, just because someone uses the word "is," the person has

not necessarily committed identification. The speaker may have intended to do something else. In other words, the word "is" does not signal identification; instead, to call it "identification," you must inquire into whether the person confuses map for territory, word for thing. Rather than a signal reaction, we should have a symbolic reaction to the word "is." We should ask ourselves, "What does 'is' mean here?" rather than assume that we know what it means here.

The answer to the question "What is GS?" is not typically an identification but a definition. The person is not using an "is of identity" when answering "GS is x." Instead, I might call this "is" "the *is* of definition." What follows "the *is* of definition" is a definition, a slant, or even a deliberate kind of branding for the subject at hand. "The *is* of definition" reduces vagueness and increases clarity about the subject. It is like a high-definition television set, setting you up for a clearer picture. "The *is* of definition" signals not that the words that follow it are a map of the territory. Instead, "the *is* of definition" signals that the words that follow it are important puzzle pieces. They help to reveal a picture, but they never admit to showing the complete image.

If GS practitioners could formulate a simple definition of general semantics without fear of committing identification, they would be able to overcome the marketing problems that their confusing definitions compound. With a simple definition in hand, GS insiders would finally provide a short, succinct answer to the question "What is general semantics?" Their simple definition would make it easy for others to comprehend GS quickly. They would stop talking around GS and cut immediately to its core. GS outsiders would thus be shuttled inside: Hearing a simple definition, they would quickly be able to relate GS to other fields they know. They would also be able to relate GS to their lives. Frankly, coming up with a simple definition of GS would aid in time-binding general semantics, increasing the speed at which people come to understand GS. This is all awakened by recognizing that definition is not identification.

It is all nice and good to talk about the need for a simple definition of general semantics, but how do we actually come up with one? Fortunately, the answer isn't that hard to find. For advice on how to formulate a simple definition of GS, we look to other fields to see how they define themselves. Four fields of increasing specificity are physical science, geology, seismology, and paleoseismology. They define themselves in ways that schoolchildren could understand. Here is how they define themselves:

- *Physical science is the study of non-living systems.*
- *Geology is the study of solid matter that constitutes the Earth.*
- *Seismology is the study of earthquakes and the propagation of elastic waves through the Earth.*

As for paleoseismology, first ask yourself if you have any idea what it is. Yes? No? If No, let's see if these puzzle pieces give you a clearer picture: *Paleoseismology is the study of geologic sediments and rocks for signs of ancient earthquakes.*[3]

In these examples you heard two notable features. One, each field is seen as a study of something. And two, each definition employs the verb "is." Essentially, each of these fields has an identity, and that identity is as a study.

The "is" in these definitions does not confuse thing for word. Instead, the "is" brands. The "is" brands physical science, geology, seismology, and paleoseismology as studies. By this branding, the definitions help to communicate that a person does something when he does physical science, or geology, or seismology or paleoseismology: Ultimately, he studies.

It will greatly aid the future of general semantics to take its cues from these simple definitions. *GS must be seen as a study.* People, even schoolchildren, can relate to studies. They can compare the study of one subject to the study of another subject. And they can figure out quickly whether the study is of interest to them.

The next question becomes, "What does GS study?" Although GS encompasses so many ideas, fortunately, there is fortunately an easy answer to this question as well. Near the beginning of his introductory book on general semantics titled *Science and Sanity*, Alfred Korzybski offers clear insight into what GS studies. He writes, "The present work is written entirely from the [semantic reaction] point of view."[4] He also writes, "The [non-elementalistic] study of the [semantic reaction] becomes an extremely general scientific discipline."[5] You might be asking now, "What is

a semantic reaction?" "Semantic reaction" is a general term that covers every reaction you have when you hear a word, whether it be a neural reaction, a chemical reaction, an emotional reaction, an intellectual reaction, a physiological one, a linguistic one, a behavioral one, a social one, or some other reaction. In short, a semantic reaction is the *total mind-body reaction* a person has to a word.[6] Given these insights, the short answer to the question of "What does GS study?" is "GS studies semantic reactions." Therefore, *general semantics is the study of semantic reactions*.

Removing jargon from this definition, we arrive at the definition I'd like to champion: *General semantics is the study of reactions to language*. In his study, a GS practitioner gathers data by focusing on people and looking at how they react to language—emotionally, intellectually, physiologically, linguistically, socially, and so on. That is, he looks at the total mind-body reaction people have to language. Insofar as GS is interested in maintaining a profile as a science, GS practitioners ideally gather their data via the scientific method. When they do so, we could then say that general semantics is the scientific study of reactions to language. Where GS practitioners report on reactions to language without employing the scientific method, GS is not truly scientific and might better be termed an editorial study or a critical study.

The simple definition of general semantics as the study of reactions to language helps to distinguish what general semantics is as well as what applied general semantics is. Applied general semantics is easily understood: *It is any application of the knowledge gained from the study of reactions to language.* And there is an abundance of applications of the knowledge gained from this study. Most notably, we apply this knowledge for better understanding of how we react to any stimulus, whether it is propaganda or an optical illusion, a traffic signal or Euclidean geometry.

In truth, a lot of what is associated with general semantics is more appropriately termed applied general semantics. For example, writing in E-Prime—English without be-verbs—is applied general semantics, not general semantics proper. The same with respect to using scientific principles as ways of life—this is most likely applied general semantics, not general semantics proper. Speaking informally you could call it all general semantics. But speaking formally, precision is more critical; applied general semantics must be distinguished from general semantics in order to protect general semantics as a science and as a study.

So, we now have our simple definition: *General semantics is the study of reactions to language.* This may sound all well and good, but why does GS exist? Why does anyone care about this study?

The study of reactions to language stems from the interest of solving problems related to human progress. In his first book, *Manhood of Humanity*, Korzybski introduces the notion of time-binding. Time-binding is the unique property humans have that can be defined as the passage of information from one generation to another, in effect reducing the amount of time the future generation needs for learning, expediting their technological progress.

A good example of time-binding is a recipe for chocolate cake. Someone in the past experimented with different ingredients in order to eventually create the first chocolate cake. She wrote those steps into a recipe, and she published that recipe in a book. A person from a future generation finds the recipe and is able to make the chocolate cake without spending the time experimenting on how to do it. The future generation has spent less time in getting to chocolate cake, thus having time to develop the chocolate cake or for other activities. In effect, the future generation can progress because of the past generation's efforts.

Time-binding is primarily done by means of language. That is, in theory, humans are able to progress because of language, but sometimes language impedes their progress. To understand and solve problems in time-binding, a study of language is warranted. It is with this need came the invention of general semantics. General semantics is referred to by Korzybski as "an investigation into the mechanism of time-binding."

Essentially, the invention of the field of general semantics is especially for the conscious time-binder, the person who is interested in assisting the progress of future generations—the person who is interested in making it easier and faster for the kids and grandkids to learn, to free up their time, facilitating technological progress in their generations. The conscious time-binder is the caring time-binder; she cares about human progress, and she doesn't want to see it stop. Applying the knowledge gained from the study of reactions to language aids conscious time-binders in their humanitarian and humanistic efforts.

So, what does tomorrow for GS look like? Tomorrow for general semantics depends on

your forwarding the simple definition of general semantics as *the study of reactions to language*. Providing this simple definition of GS not only quickly clarifies the field, but it also has the potential to heighten its profile as a science. Furthermore, providing a simple definition of GS clarifies the objectives for the GS practitioner: The GS practitioner *a)* studies reactions to language, *b)* to aid time-binding and human progress.

With this clear definition committed to memory, GS instantly becomes more relatable. It has more potential to attract people tomorrow than it does today. It gains a more practical profile tomorrow than it has today. Tomorrow, it can become more scientific. But perhaps best, with this clear definition committed to memory, general semantics becomes more organized. GS practitioners start to sing the same tune. And the cacophony transforms into euphony. With a simple definition of GS, the Institute of General Semantics and other organizations gain a clear vision for pioneering a better tomorrow for GS.

Tomorrow for general semantics starts Monday, November 17, 2008. I might even say it starts … *now.* Start answering the question "What is general semantics?" with the short, snappy answer, "General semantics is the study of reactions to language." If you need to add detail that it deals with emotional reactions, intellectual reactions, physiological reactions, any kind of reaction related to words, quickly add that, too. Then just see what happens. I expect surprising and immediate clarity. That means less time spent trying to talk about general semantics and more time actually talking about general semantics.

It might even mean more time to develop your chocolate cake.

Notes

1. "Discover > General Semantics." Institute of General Semantics. Available: http://time-binding.org/inner.php?mtrid=1&mpid=1 (Accessed July 1, 2008).
2. Ibid.
3. The author has adapted these definitions from their Wikipedia entries:
   - "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).
   - "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).
   - "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).
   - "Paleoseismology looks at geologic sediments and rocks, for signs of ancient earthquakes." "Paleoseismology." Available: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paleoeismology (Accessed July 1, 2008).
4. Korzybski, Alfred. *Science & Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*. 5th ed. Englewood: Institute of General Semantics, 1994. p. 25.
5. Ibid.
6. 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, as it involves conjointly the "emotional" as well as the "intellectual" factors non-elementalistic" (*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 psychological 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)