

ON SEMANTICS AND GENERAL SEMANTICS: RE-DEFINING THE FORMER TO UNDERSTAND THE LATTER

BEN HAUCK

If one could in some wise suddenly reveal clearly to mankind the full extent to which human culture, human achievements, human civilization in all its aspects and dimensions have depended upon the silent service rendered by the subtle relation which we denote in English by the little word *imply*, the vision would fill its beholders with ineffable wonder and awe; so little do we, ordinarily, sense the immeasurable gravity of a great imponderable principle [like implication].¹

—Cassius Jackson Keyser

*The Pastures of Wonder: The Realm of Mathematics and the
Realm of Science*

Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to re-define the subject of semantics, then to apply those insights to the subject of general semantics. Semantics and general

This essay is based on ideas posted previously in the author's general semantics blog *Off the Map*, under the title "Semantics: The Study of Implication (A Dramatic Reframing)" and subsequent blog posts. Compare <http://benhauck.com/offthemap/2011/02/20/semantics-the-study-of-implication-a-dramatic-reframing/>.

Ben Hauck works as an actor based in New York City and has authored the book *Long-Form Improv* (Allworth Press, 2012). He currently volunteers for the Institute of General Semantics as its Webmaster and serves on its board of trustees. For more information, please see his Web site <http://benhauck.com> and his general semantic blog <http://benhauck.com/offthemap>.

semantics are decidedly different subjects that unfortunately share a root name. This essay will demonstrate how this re-definition of semantics clarifies what general semantics constitutes.

Some Notes on Writing Style

First, I want to provide a few stylistic notes on how this essay is written.

When we write, we typically talk about things. But when we write about language, we talk about something conceptually different from things: *words*. That is, when we write about language, we end up in the peculiar situation of using words to talk about words. Our writing on language can become confusing if we do not distinguish whether we are talking about words or things. Take for instance this sample sentence:

The word choice was appropriate.

In this sentence, which was appropriate: the *word* or the *word choice*? The sentence is ambiguous. But say that I wanted to communicate in a sentence that the word “choice” was an appropriate word. If I submitted to you the sample sentence, you might be led to believe I was talking about an appropriate *word choice* instead.

Given this kind of potential confusion, when tasked with simultaneously writing about the verbal (words) and about the non-verbal (things), I find it very important to distinguish typographically between the two. When I want to talk about a thing, the word in the sentence looks like most words you encounter in most sentences. It is plain. However, whenever I want to talk about a word, that word is put within quotation marks. Doing this helps to clarify for you that I am talking about the word and not the thing the word represents. For example, I can talk about elephants, or I can talk about the word “elephants.” I cannot talk about the etymology of elephants, but I can talk about the etymology of the word “elephants.” You know better what I am talking about based on whether there are quotations around the word.

Sometimes, writers will use italics to serve a similar purpose in designating words in sentences. Such a writer might construct the sample sentence in this way:

The word *choice* was appropriate.

I use quotation marks as opposed to italics when designating a word. Using quotations marks from my experience offers less potential ambiguity than using italics. Italics can inadvertently communicate emphasis when you are

simply talking about a word without emphasis. Plus, foreign words, species names, etc., which traditionally are italicized in a sentence, in theory would lose their italics if you wanted to talk about them, making for dubious typography. (Why is this foreign word *not* italicized?)

When it comes to writing about words, often I add to my sentences some further clarification. I *index* the quotation marks that surround the words I am talking about.² Before the quotation marks, I frequently make explicit that the word within the quotation marks is, say, *a word, a term, a name, a phrase, so-called*, etc. Any of these explications functions just like an index of the quotation marks and clarifies better what the word in the quotation marks is grammatically. I practice this indexing because un-indexed quotation marks have potentially ambiguous meaning; they may read as direct quotations, scare quotes, dialogue, loose phrasing, etc., none of which may be what the quotation marks are supposed to imply.

Considering my intended message as well as these typographical principles, my ambiguous sample sentence should be rewritten:

The word “choice” was appropriate.

In general semantics, we would say that this rewritten sample sentence now exhibits a “self-reflexive” characteristic. “Self-reflexive” means “referring to itself,” and the quotation marks along with their preceding index in the sample sentence help to indicate that the word enclosed refers to the word itself rather than to the real-world, non-verbal thing the word typically represents. We might even call the self-reflexive part of the sentence “reflective,” or still “self-reflective” (which is very nearly redundant), as if to imply that the self-reflexive part is not just referring to itself but “mirroring” itself, too. If the term “self-reflexive” is not itself to be seen as redundant, then we would think the term “reflexive” to mean simply “referring to something.” We then would not call the self-reflexive part of the sample sentence “reflexive” except as a special case of reflexivity. That is, “reflexive” should be a word reserved for words that refer to things other than words; if a word refers to a word, then rather than “reflexive” we would call it “self-reflexive.”

Because the sentence exhibits a self-reflexive characteristic, we might then say there are different “levels” of language in this sample sentence. The words outside the quotation marks refer to things, so we will simply call those words by the name “language.” The quotation marks and the word they contain (“choice”) are language that refers *to language* so we will call it “meta-language.” “Choice” (the word plus its quotation marks) is still

language, but it is conceptually different than plain language. In an imprecise sense, meta-language is “language about language,” but more specifically it is language within a sentence that refers not to things but to words. Only in a metaphorical sense is meta-language on another “level.” In a truer sense, meta-language is language *nested* within language. The distinction between language and meta-language helps in discussing, say, the correct editing of our sample sentence, “The word choice was appropriate.” We might ask, “Is the word ‘choice’ in the sample sentence language or meta-language?” On hearing the answer, we know whether to add quotation marks around the word when editing the sentence. In sum, plain language refers to things, while meta-language refers to words, not things.

There is still room for ambiguity when discussing words and things together in the same sentence, but quotation marks with indices remove much of the ambiguity. The context in which the sentences appear should help to remove other traces of ambiguity. If ambiguity remains even with quotation marks and an index (such as when someone reading the sentence “The word ‘choice’ was appropriate” thinks the internal marks are scare quotes), I generally recommend rewriting the problematic sentence to remove the ambiguity. But with these clarifications, my use of quotation marks should have little ambiguity as we move forward in this essay.

On Definition

We have now arrived at the task of re-defining semantics to clarify general semantics.

When we think of a definition, we typically think it must relate to a word. However, a word is not the only thing that can have a definition. In fact, a thing can have a definition, too. That is, *both words and things can be defined*. I can define the word “semantics” as “the study of meaning.” That sort of definition should not surprise you. But I can also define semantics, the thing, as the study of meaning (*sans* quotation marks). In the former definition, I am helping you to understand the word, giving you a translation of it into other words. In the latter definition, I am helping you understand the thing, pointing your mind to other things so that you get a picture of it. In the former definition, you are immediately directed to think of verbiage. In the latter, you are immediately directed to think of things.

More to the point, I should note that a definition is not just a static string of words in a dictionary. *Definition is a process* and that string of words in the dictionary is one result of that process. Definition is an act of clarification

that can be performed on nearly all things, not just words. And definition can be done by many different methods, not just by translating words into other words. We can define photographs in pixels, and the more pixels we use, the more “high-definition” the photograph. We can define territorial borders using rivers, and we can further define those borders with fences, walls, land surveys, etc. We can define medical conditions by listing symptoms, and we can further define them by outing their bacterial, viral, genetic, etc., sources. We can define eras by choosing inciting and extinguishing incidents. We can define relationships by outlining responsibilities and deal breakers. Of course, we can define words by translating them into other words. But we can also define words by showing pictures, by pointing at objects or actions, by demonstrating what we mean, or by some other method.

Defining the Term “Meaning”

It is fairly standard to define semantics as the study of meaning. But as we have learned from C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards in their book *The Meaning of Meaning*, the word “meaning” has so many meanings that the word is at best ambiguous and at worst vague. When the word “meaning” is invoked in a discussion, its meaning needs to be explained clearly else there may be trouble. For example, when I want to talk about “the meaning of Bob Dylan,” if I do not explicate what kind of meaning I want to talk about, you do not know if I want to talk about Bob Dylan’s significance (one interpretation of the word “meaning”), his intention (another interpretation of the word “meaning”), his underlying messages (another interpretation), the implications of his existence (yet another), his function in the whole of society (still another), or some other topic implied by the word “meaning.” Note that each of these meanings of the word “meaning” is a distinctly different idea. Significance is not intention, is not underlying message, is not implication, etc. However, somewhat tragically, they all may be referred to with the same label, “meaning,” making discussions of meaning almost always, *ahem*, meaningless.

This is to say, to say “semantics is the study of meaning” is to make an ambiguous, potentially vague statement about semantics since the definition invokes the word “meaning.” Semantics needs a bit more definition if it is going to be defined in terms of “meaning.” The book by Edward MacNeal titled *Mathsemantics* and the books by Cassius Keyser titled *Mathematical Philosophy* and *The Pastures of Wonder* add some important clarification on what might be intended by the word “meaning” in the usual definition of semantics.

Text on the book jacket for the 1994 hardcover of MacNeal's *Mathsemantics* includes an innocuous passage that inadvertently defines the term "mathsemantics":

[The book] *Mathsemantics* takes off from a quiz that was given to job applicants for the author's consulting firm who described themselves as "good at numbers." Most of them, it turned out, weren't in fact good at numbers, because they couldn't draw conclusions about what the numbers meant.

At the face of it, the word "mathsemantics" might be defined as "the study of what numbers mean" or "the study of the meanings of numbers." However, by reading the passage on the book jacket, we see that the meaning of the word "meaning" in the definition of the term "mathsemantics" has something to do with drawing conclusions. Rephrasing the passage a bit, MacNeal writes that people were not very good at explaining what was *implied* by numbers. So the word "mathsemantics" might be re-defined as "the study of what numbers imply" or "the study of the implications of numbers." These re-definitions give some insight into what kind of meaning of "meaning" we might be dealing with in semantics. *Meaning has something to do with implication.*

Cassius Keyser—a philosopher of mathematics and a close friend of general semantics founder Alfred Korzybski—had a sizeable influence on Korzybski's work, and it is convenient to this discussion of semantics and general semantics that Keyser's work puts special attention on the notion of implication. Implication, the process, figures mightily in logic and mathematics. As Keyser explains in his work,³ in a logical or mathematical system, we might have a set of postulates p and we might have a set of theorems q derived from p . The relationship between the postulates and the theorems could be expressed as " p implies q ." The process of implication is the means by which we arrive at these theorems. The postulates work as impliers; the theorems are their implicates. That is, the theorems are *the implications* of the postulates. In still different words—of special importance to this discussion—the theorems are *the meanings* of the postulates.

On Implication

But just what is implication? Implication should be seen not as a formal, codified process relegated only to mathematics and logic. Instead, it should be seen as *behavior*. Implication is *implying*. It is *suggesting* and *suggestion*. We cannot directly put our images and ideas into another person's head. We have to coax a bit. Implication is a human behavioral process using

sound, movement, symbolism, etc., aimed at conjuring in another person's body-and-mind what is in *your* body-and-mind. We all do it. When we talk and when we write, we implicate and imply. The process of implication may be active or passive, intentional or un-intended, and any range in between. In its negative sense, implication is innuendo and manipulation. In its positive sense, implication is conjuration and mind transference.

The products of implication—those ideas that come to mind after reading or hearing a message—are called “implicates.” We also call them, more naturally, “implications.” In general, one set of choice words has a different set of implicates (implications) than another set of choice words. If I told you “I’m a general semantics scholar,” the term “general semantics scholar” conjures a set of implicates. If I told you instead “I’m an actor,” the term “actor” conjures a completely different set of implicates. If I told you “I’m a general semantics scholar-actor,” I’m unsure what that sentence would conjure for you but it would have its own set of implicates as well. Punctuation can also have implications. As explained earlier, I can use or not use quotation marks and imply one thing rather than another.

For any given message, the implicates (implications) may be relatively numerous or they may be relatively few. Imagine hearing a language you have never heard before: The words imply almost nothing to you, but for a native speaker the words have many implications. Another way to say this is for you the foreign language is “meaningless” and for the native speaker the language is “meaningful.” You might do nothing after hearing a foreign sentence since it implies nothing to you, but a native speaker might be called to action given the sentence’s rich implications to him. Compare the experience of hearing a foreign language with the experience of hearing your mother tongue: The words you hear in your language have an incredible number of implications. You would say your mother tongue is “meaningful.” On hearing it, your brain is flooded with images, and your body is flooded with feelings.

That your body fills with feelings brings us to an important point. For the recipient of a message, implications are not merely mental phenomena. Implications are *psycho-somatic* (i.e., mental and physical). They can even be *socio-environmental*. They can also be any part thereof. Implications can affect nervous, cardiovascular, muscular, digestive, etc., systems. More broadly, implications can influence work and play performance, general health, family function, social contribution, etc. This is to say very generally that words can imply, that words can have implications, and that their implications can correlate with observable and measurable symptoms, conditions,

effects, etc. *Implications have implications!* “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me,” the lesson many parents teach their teased children, may under-estimate, even mis-represent, the psycho-somatic and socio-environmental implications of words.

In general semantics, you will hear the term “semantic reaction” used to refer to the total-body response a human has to words relative to their meanings.⁴ I would argue that semantic reactions and implications (implicates) are nearly one and the same thing. Put another way, I would argue that the terms “semantic reaction” and “implication” (“implicate”) are nearly synonymous. To say you have a semantic reaction to a particular word is to say that a particular word has implications for you. Just like semantic reactions in general semantics, implications have far more implications than just the mental, and more accurately they are total-body responses to words relative to their meanings.

But neither semantic reactions nor implications are just the psycho-somatic products of verbal stimuli. Semantic reactions and implications can also result from exposure to *the non-verbal*. In addition to words, *things* can conjure sets of implicates. If there is smoke in the air, one implication may be that there is fire near its source. If there is thunder, one implication may be that lightning preceded it. An object, situation, event, happening, etc.—*anything non-verbal*—can just as well imply something to us as words and language can. Given this understanding, it would be dangerous to say that the universe is speaking to us in a language with as yet little understood implications, but the analogy is tempting: *Is the non-verbal simply a special kind of verbal, rather than the other way around?* More to the point, verbal and non-verbal entities can conjure implicates and have implications.

Re-defining Semantics

Keeping all of this in mind, we finally come to re-defining semantics. Semantics, yes, is the study of meaning but, as I have shown, saying so is problematically vague. The kind of meaning semantics deals with is not significance, or intention, or hidden messages—all ideas dusted up by the vague word “meaning.” The kind of meaning semantics deals with is *implication*. So, more specifically than the study of meaning, *semantics is the study of implications*. Semantics studies what is implied by verbal and non-verbal stimuli.

This definition of semantics dramatically opens up the subject of study. In semantics, we look at things—*any* things, words included—that can stimulate. Then, more importantly, we observe what is implied by those stimuli.

Semantics, understood with this broad re-definition, is not just about words, which is what we typically think of when we think of semantics. Any stimulus that has implications can be the focus of semantics. Surely, words can have implications, but so can events. So can actions. So can objects. Weather can have implications. Politics can have implications. School funding can have implications. Human rights, their violation, and their defense can have implications. Multitudes of things verbal and non-verbal can have implications. Semantics, per this broad re-definition, studies them all.

So, in semantics, we study what is implied by verbal and nonverbal stimuli. If we want to advertise to others the specific semantics we focus on, understandably we need to clarify our semantic study with an adjectival index. If we study what *words* imply, we might say we study “lexical semantics.” This is essentially the study of dictionary definitions. If more broadly we study what *languages* imply, we might say we study “linguistic semantics.” This is essentially the field of communications studies or at least a portion of such studies. If we focus mostly on the semantic content of syntax—this is to say if we study what is implied in the structuring and ordering of messages we compose—we might say we study “syntactical semantics.” If we focus mostly on proper English in polite society and what is implied by its use, then we might say we study “proper-English semantics” or “polite-English semantics.”

But, of course, since in semantics we do not merely study the implications of verbal stimuli, we should also take care to denote with indices any specific non-verbal semantics we might take interest in. Are we interested in what is implied by political beliefs? Then we might say we study “political semantics.” Do we like to examine the implications of environmental pollutants? Then perhaps we say we study “ecopollution semantics.” In general, whatever adjective we add in front of our semantics is the stimulus whose implications we study.

And then there is what we call “general semantics.” In general semantics, we do not take an interest in what is implied by army generals. Nor do we take an interest in semantics-in-general. General semantics, as founded by Alfred Korzybski, has a more specific interest than its name implies.

In general semantics, it might be said we take an interest in thought-and-emotion. In light of our indexing exercise, we might more descriptively call general semantics “cognitive–emotive semantics” to imply that in general semantics we study the implications of cognitions (thoughts) and emotions. Furthermore, we might take hints from Albert Ellis’s work⁵ and call general semantics “cognitive–emotive–behavioral semantics” to include the interest in behavior seen in general semantics. To call general semantics

“cognitive–emotive–behavioral semantics” is to imply that the focus of study in the subject is what is implied by a troika of stimuli: thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. But if we stopped there, we would miss more definitive interests in general semantics.

Some Background on General Semantics

While it is not my purpose in this essay to rename general semantics, it is my purpose to apply the insights of this re-definition of semantics to general semantics, and so it is my purpose to definitively characterize what general semantics and its founder Alfred Korzybski are examining in the intricate and expansive subject.

We understand from Korzybski that he took an interest in sanity,⁶ and in studying sanity, he particularly studied what he found to be examples of the best and of the worst of human thinking. His best examples of human thinking came from the science and mathematics of his time, and his worst came from the thinking of the mentally ill.

Korzybski noticed that the kinds of thinking used by the mentally ill and other individuals whom he classified with the clinical term “unsane” showed a lack of regard for scientific and/or logical–mathematical insight. For example, someone distraught (unsane) might say to a dear friend, “I have no friends.” In so doing, this unsane person has made an illogical statement because it is said to a friend, a mathematically incorrect statement because it miscounts the number of friends the person has, and by both accounts a scientifically inaccurate statement because observation contradicts the statement. The saner distraught person would emend such ways of thinking rather than hold fast to them. That is, the saner distraught person might say “I have no friends” then realize and say, “Well, that’s not true, I have at least you as a friend”—a statement that may still exclude other friends not in mind, but one that is at least truer than the original mis-statement.

Relative to the refined science and logic–mathematics of Korzybski’s time, Korzybski dubbed false-to-facts, pseudoscientific, illogical, and unmathematical kinds of thinking “aristotelian.” His choice for that term was slightly unfortunate for it maligned the manifold contributions made by Aristotle to a number of fields, but Korzybski’s word choice was meant to single out some primary notions in logic that were attributed to Aristotle and enforced within classical teaching for hundreds of years. It was these very tenets of logic associated with Aristotle that were gradually refuted in the makings of modern scientific thinking: Observations were not matching

the aristotelian prescriptions, so the aristotelian ways of thinking needed to be unlearned and supplanted with new ways of thinking. Modern observations acutely rendered aristotelian thinking “pseudoscientific,” “illogical,” and “unmathematical” except in special cases. The aristotelian “laws of thought” (as they were long called) became, to use an American metaphor, largely unconstitutional.

Korzybski simply labeled as “non-aristotelian” those new ways of thinking that agreed with modern science, logic, and mathematics. In a sense, the new ways of thinking were merely refutations of the so-called “laws of thought.” For example, the aristotelian notion of identity, that a thing is a thing, was refuted when it was understood that all things change, meaning that a thing is not always a thing and a thing is always becoming something else. The aristotelian notion of the excluded middle, that a thing is either a thing or not a thing, was also refuted when it was understood that relativity can mean that a thing may appear as one thing from one vantage but as another thing from another vantage. The third aristotelian notion—the notion of non-contradiction, that a thing cannot be both a thing and not a thing—was refuted when considering the lessons of both change and relativity together. These refutations gave way to thinking Korzybski called “non-aristotelian,” but he also grouped under this name other newer insights from science and mathematics.⁷ Notably, einsteinian/non-newtonian science and non-euclidean geometry were considered “non-aristotelian” by Korzybski, meaning that the term “non-aristotelian” referred not just to the refutations of the “laws of thought” but also to refutations of some aspects of Newton’s work and some aspects of Euclid’s work. Heisenberg’s principle of indeterminacy used in quantum mechanics and generalized by Korzybski as “the general principle of uncertainty” was regarded as “non-aristotelian” as well, as were other modern scientific ideas from his time (e.g., ideas from colloidal chemistry).

Capturing and Clarifying General Semantics

Lest we forget, we are talking about semantics and the application of its re-definition to general semantics. So the question for now is, “The implications of what stimuli are studied in general semantics if general semantics is to be considered a type of semantics?” You might think that because it is dubbed “general,” that general semantics takes an interest in the implications of a wide swath of things. I would say that this is not so; saying so says nothing about the actual content of general semantics books, its lecturers’ presentations, and

the activities of its students and practitioners. In general semantics, the interest, though encompassing, is somewhat specific. For insight into what might be the specific interest, I would direct you to the subtitle of the first book on general semantics, Alfred Korzybski's *Science and Sanity*. That subtitle is: *An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*.

In light of the perspective on the meaning of the word “semantics” presented in this essay, I would argue that the construction of that subtitle is a bit confusing. The subtitle seems to imply that the book is to introduce *both* non-aristotelian systems (one subject) and general semantics (a separate subject), as if to outline two different subjects of equal weight. I would argue in light of my re-definition of semantics that the ambiguous subtitle is actually saying that the book introduces a single subject—non-aristotelian systems—and explains what is implied by that subject—their general semantics. My argument is that the term “general semantics” does not stand for a separate subject but instead translates to “general implications.” That is, the book introduces a single subject and discusses the implications of that subject. To drive home the point, an ineloquent but clearer re-titling of the subtitle might be this: *An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and the General Implications of Those Non-Aristotelian Systems*.

This is to say that in general semantics, we study systems—of science, of mathematics, of logic, of thinking, of emotion, of behavior, etc.—dubbed “non-aristotelian.” And, if we are also interested in their so-called “semantics,” then we are saying we also study the implications of those systems. Specifically, we look at the adoption of those non-aristotelian systems and note their impact on sanity in the personal, professional, social, societal, human, etc., spheres. In other words, we look at what happens when people start taking on modern scientific, modern mathematical, and modern logical ways of thinking, emoting, doing, etc. We contrast what happens to the sanity of the person who tells her friend “Well, at least I have you as a friend” with what happens to the sanity of the person when she holds fast to the false-to-facts notion “I have no friends.”

On Renaming General Semantics for Clarity's Sake

If the above discussion has merit, then something could be said *against* the naming of general semantics as “general semantics.” To call it “general semantics” is as if to call it “general implications,” a generic name which says almost nothing about what the subject actually covers. A more descriptive name for the subject might be “non-aristotelian systems” if it were not that such a name has almost no semantic content (i.e., few implications)

outside of general semantics. Also, such a name would probably have misleading implications inside a different field. It might be that if general semantics were a study, it might well be called “scientology” if it were not that a religion (albeit mildly influenced by Korzybski) had already taken that name and infamed it. “Modern scientific thinking” might be a decent name for Korzybski’s subject, a moniker that might describe general semantics a bit better. The name “applications of modern scientific thinking” goes a step further in describing the subject, yet the added verbiage means a unique and searchable name for the discipline is lost. Perhaps since general semantics has a definite application bent to it, then it might be thought of as a therapy. If so, perhaps “science therapy” might be an appropriate name for what goes on in the discipline. Or it may just have to be (which seems to me to be the case) that with the long history of application of the name “general semantics” to the subject, we have to take on the negligible burden of having on the ready a quick-and-dirty definition of general semantics, with a side note that the discipline’s name “general semantics” is almost as arbitrary as your name is “Larry” or “Jill,” providing little description of the actual subject.

What if as a bit of ad-campaigning to better market the discipline we incorporated Korzybski’s name into the discipline’s name? It might be tempting to call our discipline “korzybskian semantics” (meaning we are interested in the implications of Korzybski work), but I fear that step is one in the direction of losing the layperson. A better approach might be to refer to our subject as “korzybskian thinking.” In so doing, we promote the name associated with the philosophical foundations of the discipline while explicating that the field deals with thinking. If charged to explain korzybskian thinking in an elevator pitch, we might follow with an explanation like this one:

Korzybski promoted the teaching of modern scientific thinking to resolve problems with human sanity, with implications on our everyday behavior, emotions, thoughts, and language.

Given a few more floors to explain, we might go on to say:

The implications of practicing Korzybski’s thinking include a happier, more adjusted life, one with more clarity about our capabilities as humans and what is going on around us, and one with less conflict and greater communication.

This pitch came to me by seeing the subject of general semantics as a study of the implications of non-aristotelian systems.

Note that in these descriptions of general semantics nothing much is said of language or words. Language and word choice are two *of many things* implicated in Korzybski's work. They are not the primary interests in general semantics; rather, they are *implicated within* general semantics. Specifically, they are implicated in the study of non-aristotelian systems—which in places encourage speaking and using language in ways different than we are typically accustomed to doing. Unfortunately, it may be that because general semantics has the word “semantics” in its name, the subject's linguistic implications draw more attention than its cognitive and behavioral implications—which are arguably more important than its linguistic implications.

Conclusion

In sum, in the sense that semantics is a study of implications, general semantics is less than a true semantics. While there is definitely an interest in implications in general semantics, the discipline is greater than its interest in implications. More primarily, general semantics is invested in differentiating olden “aristotelian” thinking from modern scientific “non-aristotelian” thinking. It is via the adoption of modern scientific thinking—“non-aristotelian systems”—that other topics become implicated: thought, emotion, behavior, language use, word choice, and even punctuation. While these topics are of interest in general semantics, they are subservient to the interest of differentiating modern and olden kinds of thinking. To modify an aphorism made popular by Korzybski to drive home the point: In general semantics, “the words are not *the thing*.”

Notes

1. p. 10.
2. In general semantics, Alfred Korzybski promoted the use of indices on words (he calls them “indexes”) to differentiate referents that shared the same name. For example, rather than referring to you as a “person” and me as a “person” as well, he recommended indexing the terms to drive home the point that we are not identical. So, he advocated referring to you as “person₁” and to me as “person₂.” The lesson comes from the language habits of mathematicians. However, the lesson can also make for ineloquent writing, rendering opaque a writer's intended message. A synonymous, more eloquent approach to indexing is to *adjectivally differentiate* referents that share the same noun. For example, instead of referring to you as “person₁” and to me as “person₂,” the writer might better refer to you as “the first person” and to me as “the second person.” Another approach would be to refer to you as “the older person” and to

me as “the younger person.” Etc. Adjectives and other modifying words function much like korzybskian indices while making the sentences more eloquent and easily comprehensible than sentences that contain subscripted indices. For more information on Korzybski’s notion of indexing, see the “Introduction to the Second Edition” of his book *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, pp. lx–lxii.

3. Notably, see Cassius Keyser’s book *Mathematical Philosophy: A Study of Fate and Freedom*, pp. 57–60, as well as his book *The Pastures of Wonder: The Realm of Mathematics and the Realm of Science*, pp. 26–39. Both books flesh out rather clearly the role of implication in logic and mathematics.
4. See Korzybski’s book *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, p. 9 and other places, for Korzybski’s use of the term “semantic reaction.”
5. Albert Ellis founded what was eventually called “rational emotive behavior therapy,” a popular psychotherapeutic approach that draws philosophically from Alfred Korzybski’s work.
6. At very least, note the title of his first book on general semantics, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*. But precedent to its publication, Korzybski studied the mentally ill at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington, DC, under the supervision of its superintendent William Alanson White.
7. See the chart on pp. lii–liv in *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, which clearly contrasts non-aristotelian orientations from aristotelian orientations.

References

- Keyser, Cassius Jackson. *Mathematical Philosophy: A Study of Fate and Freedom*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1922.
- Keyser, Cassius Jackson. *The Pastures of Wonder: The Realm of Mathematics and the Realm of Science*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1929.
- Korzybski, Alfred. *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*. 5th edition. Englewood, NJ: Institute of General Semantics, 1994.
- MacNeal, Edward. *Mathsemantics: Making Numbers Talk Sense*. New York: Viking, 1994.
- Ogden, C. K., and I. A. Richards. *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*. 8th edition. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946.