Now let us look at Korzybski’s basic principles (or the non-aristotelian postulates, as they are sometimes called), on which his “non-aristotelian system” is built: (1) the principle of nonidentity; (2) the principle of nonallness; (3) the principle of self-reflexiveness.

As we shall see in a moment, logically the first principle is included in the second, so that it can be omitted. But we shall also see that, from the point of view of further development of Korzybski’s system, there is a very good reason for not omitting it, and even for putting it first. However, we shall look first at the second principle. To use Korzybski’s figure of speech, it says, “The map does not represent all of the territory”; that is, no matter how good a map you make, you cannot represent all of the territory in it. Translated in terms of language, it means that no matter how much you say about some “thing,” “event,” “quality,” or what not, you cannot say all about it. The connection between this principle and the notion of propositional function is not hard to trace. According to the latter, grass is green is a propositional function, because both “grass” and “green” are variables. Grass can refer to vegetation in Vermont, Kentucky, or California. Green can range over the color of canaries, emeralds, or gall. Therefore, even such simple propositions as “grass is green,” “the earth is round,” etc., can be true only within limits.

Now let us go back to the first principle, which can be stated as “The map is not the territory,” that is, the word is not the thing it represents. Clearly, if the map does not even represent all of the territory, it cannot be the territory. So logically there is no need to state the principle of nonidentity in addition to that of non-allness. However, the development of Korzybski’s non-aristotelian postulates implies far more than relations between language and fact. His big point is that the structure of
our language affects the function of our nervous systems, and this is where his work departs radically from that of the “classical” semanticists. To say, “the word is not the thing it signifies” is not just to indicate the obvious. It is to draw attention to a fundamental inadequacy of human behavior and to trace this inadequacy to the interaction of nervous systems with language.

According to Korzybski (and his idea is corroborated by numerous psychological and psychiatric findings), people do behave as if they identified words with things. Identified does not mean “equated verbally.” Practically everyone will agree that the word Negro is not the same as Mr. Smith, to whom the label Negro is applied. Nevertheless many people, in judging Mr. Smith, react to the label rather than to Mr. Smith. To take another example, a man may react to some situation, say a rejected application for a particular job, by labeling the situation “I am a failure.” He may then react to the label in ways that are far removed from an effective remedy of the situation.

The orientation recommended by Korzybski to free the individual from the tyranny of words was called by him extensional. Roughly speaking, to be extensional is to be aware of things, facts, and operations in the way they are related in nature instead of in the way they are talked about. The extensionally oriented person differentiates better than the word-minded (intensionally oriented) one. He is aware of the basic uniqueness of “things,” “events,” etc., and so he is more aware of change than the intensionally oriented person, who mistakes the fluid, dynamic world around him for the static, rigid world of labels, “qualities,” and “categories” in his head.

The extensional orientation of Korzybski is quite analogous to the “operationalism” of semantics. An operational definition is essentially an extensional definition, because it tells what to do (instead of what to say) to bring the thing defined within the range of experience. Likewise the criterion of predictive value in establishing truth is basically extensional. According to this criterion, statements, assertions, judgments, principles, in short all kinds of talking, are rated much as checks are rated in our economy: they are accepted if one is reasonably sure they can be backed by currency. For an extensionally minded person, words that cannot be defined by operations, and statements that do not by implication contain predictions of experience, are like checks on non-existent accounts.

This brings us to the third non-aristotelian postulate of self-reflexiveness. An ideal map of a territory, says Korzybski, would have to include a map of itself, if the map were part of the territory. But then it would have to include the map of the map of itself, etc., without end. This principle is illustrated on some packages, on which there is a picture of the package itself, which in turn contains another picture of itself, etc. To avoid this difficulty, the principle of nonidentity is extended to the more general principle of multi-ordinality. The map is not the territory. Neither is a map, of the map, itself a map. A map of a map would then be a map of the third
order, etc., etc. In terms of language, this means that theoretically we may have a language, about things, a language, about language, etc. As Korzybski himself points out, this principle is an outgrowth of Russell’s theory of types. It has “counterparts” in classical semantics, where logicians talk about languages of different order (meta-languages). In terms of human behavior, this suggests that one may react to the world, then react to his reaction, then to reactions of higher order, etc. Thus, Korzybski’s principles have a close relation to semantic principles. It follows that the whole Korzybskian system is an outgrowth of semantics. But the Korzybskian system goes much further. When its implications are worked out, it will be as far removed from semantics as semantics is from logic, and as logic is from grammar.

52 Years Ago in *ETC*: Volume 13, Number 1

Anatol Rapoport, “General Semantics and the New Behavioral Sciences”

There is in the library of my two-year-old daughter an opus entitled “The Friendly Book.” It is much like her other books, which have passed the rigid inspection of her parents. It talks about familiar things in a cozy way, presumably to encourage observation of the environment and a fondness for it. The sub-culture to which this little girl’s parents belong (the “egg-heads”) entertains as definite ideas about the importance of a child’s moral guidance as the Victorians once entertained. Where the Victorians once placed their faith in directives, extolling the traditional bourgeois virtues (honesty, industry, chastity, and respect for property), the modern so-called progressive parents have equal confidence in “non-directives” carefully designed to bring out the potentialities of the individual and to “socialize” him.

Ordinarily I would not have noticed anything remarkable about the “Friendly Book” except that its title brought to my mind another children’s book called “The Important Book,” which came out a few years ago. That title remained in my memory because the book was thoroughly panned in the pages of *ETC*. It was panned because it was directive in an area where general semanticists are especially sensitive: it was an attempt to tell the child what he should abstract from his observations. For example, there was a little essay on water, I think (I quote from memory): “Water fills lakes and flows in rivers and out of faucets. It falls from the clouds, etc. But the important thing about water is that it is wet.” There is a little essay on spoons: “Spoons are found in drawers and they are bright. They are long at one end and oval at the other. But the important thing about a spoon is that you eat with it.” And so it goes about all the familiar things, each little essay ending with the Important Thing. All this leads to the climax, the essay on You. “You may
be a little boy or a little girl. You have hands and feet. Your hair may be yellow or brown or black. But the important thing about You is that You are You.” (Presumably emphasis of the importance of the individual).

As I remember, the reviewer was quite incensed about this attempt, and, I believe, rightly so from the point of view of what general semanticists hold sacred in mental hygiene. The cardinal principle of mental hygiene, as it is derived from the principles of general semantics, is to prevent the sort of closure which the “Important Book” seeks to establish. “Closure” means a final commitment to a particular way of abstracting and evaluating. The general semanticist sees closure in the tyranny of the stereotype, in the breakdown of communication, and in neurosis. The prophylactic philosophy of general semantics is founded on the prevention of closure, and its therapeutic philosophy on the break-up of established closures. That is what is meant by extensional orientation: when the individual learns to turn from his word-maps long enough to perceive the more primitive stimuli impinging on him, the non-verbal sights, sounds, smells, etc., presumably he is enabled to form alternative ways of organizing these primitive, “factual” experiences. This is also the moral lesson of metalinguistics. The metalinguist or the anthropologist who succeeds in abandoning his verbally-conditioned abstracting habits long enough to experience the world as it is “organized” by the culture he is studying gains a vantage point in understanding not only that culture but the limitations of his own. Also in science, the really fundamental advances have been shown to have crystallized around some new, revolutionary ways of looking at the world that is, around new, unusual systems of abstracting.

To preserve this ability to form new kinds of abstraction is, in the opinion of general semanticists, a primary human goal. It is therefore understandable why the author of a book written for two and three-year-olds became the target of severe criticism in our journal. She seemed to be motivated by an opposite goal.

It seems to me that the situation in the new behavioral sciences can be described in similar terms and that therefore the principles of general semantics are germane to the problems involved.

Korzybski’s vision was a science of man. It was to be non-aristotelian (that is, structural rather than metaphysical or, plainly speaking, scientific). It was to be non-elementalistic (that is, it was to treat the organism-as-a-whole-in-environment). It was to be the foundation of man’s mental health (through self-knowledge and extensional orientation). The task of constructing such a science is easier written about than done, although the writing must have been none too easy. (One sometimes wonders whether the reading of Science and Sanity is not more difficult than the writing must have been.) The new behavioral sciences represent the doing.

We have seen that the first big problems the behavioral scientists encountered were precisely those that Korzybski put in the forefront, the problems of commu-
nication. When A talks to B, A has his abstractions in his mind and B his. As long as they are talking about the weather, their abstractions are sufficiently similar and no serious obstacles arise. But once they start talking methodology, the conceptual loyalties begin to tug at their mental coat tails. What is important, meticulous description or profound insight? Observation must be systematic, warns A. You kill to dissect, B accuses, quoting Wordsworth.

There comes a time when the two-valued orientation gets outgrown. The new behavioral sciences have room both for structural and for non-elementalistic approaches. The Important Book in the mind of each specialist had been telling him that the “important thing” about man is that he has “habits,” or that he is motivated by “drives,” or that he is isomorphic to a digital computer, or that he is a point on a sociogram. The new behavioral scientist is discarding that book. He is learning “The Friendly Book,” whose version for two-year-olds says: “I like trains—short trains, long trains, freight trains, passenger trains, trains that cross the plains, trains that go clickety-clack.” There is nothing in The Friendly Book about the Important Thing about trains. The Important Thing (like going places) will emerge in due time, but it will emerge from extensional experience and from friendly exchange of experience, not from being told. The six blind men, having learned to listen to each others’ impressions, are beginning to recognize their blindness. Perhaps the picture of the elephant will emerge after all.