SOMEONE WHO has never heard the term “general semantics” is likely to pick up the “semantics” as the study of words and meanings, usually “tricky” meanings, and consider “general semantics” to be a kind of “general” study of words. We compound the confusion further by sometimes using the term “semantics” as an abbreviated form of “general semantics.” Suppose someone asks you, “What’s general semantics?” You might first consider what kind of answer would be most appropriate in the particular circumstances—an offhand, casual one, a somewhat longer answer, a more comprehensive, even scientific definition.

**Short and Simple**

Some short and clever definitions that pack a lot into just a few words:

A general semanticist is someone who, upon encountering a person with a beard, would say it was probably a man, but would hold open the possibility that it might be a bearded lady.  

Richard P. Marsh

General semantics is the science and art of understanding and being understood.  

William Pemberton

General semantics, as seen in terms of its working principles, is designed to help you “get the words out of your eyes.”  

Wendell Johnson

General semantics deals with how we use symbols, and how symbols use us. It stresses the dangers of letting the symbol be confused with the thing it symbolizes.  

Anon.

General semantics is the science of how not to be a damn fool.  

S. I. Hayakawa
General semantics involves talking about ourselves and about the world so that the talk will fit the world.  

Irving J. Lee

General semantics is a way to open one’s eyes and ears, and to be ready to take in new information.

S. I. Hayakawa

General semantics is a general theory of how you can act a little more sanely because you talk to yourself a little more sanely.

S. I. Hayakawa

General semantics is the study of relations between symbol systems and nervous systems as expressed in behavior.

Robert Pula

General semantics is part of the search for significance that we make in the world around us.

William Pemberton

General semantics helps people to gather information more accurately, evaluate it more clearly, judge it more soundly, and act upon it more successfully.

Stuart Larick

More Complex
Here are some more thorough definitions:

General semantics is not any “philosophy,” or “psychology,” or “logic,” in the ordinary sense. It is a new extensional discipline which explains and trains us how to use our nervous systems most efficiently.

Alfred Korzybski

General semantics can be viewed as a program of guided awareness, of educated consciousness of what is going on in the world and within ourselves.

J. Samuel Bois

General semantics may be regarded as a systematic attempt to formulate the general method of science in such a way that it might be applied not only in a few restricted areas of human experience, but generally in daily life. It is concerned with science as a general method, as a basic orientation, as a generalized way of solving problems.

Wendell Johnson

General semantics is concerned with constructing a science of man, based upon an empirical investigation of the way man’s perception of reality is distorted by the screen of language interposed between him and his world.

Anatol Rapoport
General semantics is the study of how we “size up” the world and then symbolically relate to it. It is concerned with the total reaction of the individual to the world.

Harry Maynard

General semantics is a linguistic self-control which teaches how symbols are related to experience so as to make it less likely that we take too seriously the absurd or dangerous nonsense that, within every culture, passes for philosophy, wisdom and political argument.

Aldous Huxley

General semantics is the study of what makes human beings human. In its inquiry into the disorders of symbolism, general semantics is also the study of what makes human beings sometimes less than human.

S. I. Hayakawa

General semantics points out how we “create reality” by selecting things to notice from Out There, selecting things to relate them to from In Here, and creating a Picture in Our Head from all that. One major problem is that we tend to think the picture we have created is a representation of what’s happening Out There, when so much of that picture comes from stuff already In Here.

Robert Wanderer

General semantics sets up systematically (1) the characteristics of life facts about which communicators must be aware, (2) the host of language habits which represent those life facts inadequately, (3) specific, usable and teachable devices by which to make language habits produce proper evaluation.

Irving Lee

General semantics is an up-to-date epistemology. It is the science of our mental activities, and it deals with how we observe with our senses and how we introspect, how we think, how we doubt, how we attain certainty, how we accept the views of others, how we communicate our own views, how we differentiate facts from opinions, how we remember and forget, how we solve problems, how we invent and create.

J. Samuel Bois

General semantics deals with how [one] perceives and conceives reality, and with the ways in which language, words, symbols, and linguistic habits influence people and human events. It is a way of analyzing language operations and improving communication.

Raymond Arlo
General semantics is like a little bag of tools. When different situations arise, you open the bag and take out the tool that will help you with that particular situation—indexing, dating, the abstraction ladder, the word-is-not-the-thing, or whatever.

A MEMBER OF THE GENERAL SEMANTICS GROUP
AT THE PRISON IN VACAVILLE, CALIFORNIA

General semantics is a general theory of evaluation based on modern scientific knowledge, the postulates of Einsteinian physics, etc. It represents a methodological synthesis of trends in the Western world that evolved during the 19th and 20th centuries, and are now increasingly becoming a part of our new world reorientation.

INSTITUTE OF GENERAL SEMANTICS

More Comprehensive

These definitions are still longer and more “complete”:

General semantics provides a method of studying the part language plays in human affairs. It emphasizes the effectiveness of human communication in (1) the awareness of the all-pervasive character of language in daily affairs, (2) the habit of looking to language as a possible clue to some of our misunderstandings and conflicts, and (3) an appreciation of the scientific method and a consideration of applying it to language.

CATHERINE M. MINTEER

General semantics insists that our sensory perceptions are gross approximations and may be a source of error. These errors multiply in a fantastic manner when we fail to pay attention to orders of abstraction and when we confuse interpretation with first-order experience.

J. SAMUEL BOIS

General semantics is a very broad methodology covering the whole range of human evaluation, including directions for seeking control of worry, hate, feelings of inferiority, etc., linked to both an ethical system which is not in contradiction to anything known to science, and a program for proper evaluation which is firmly rooted in the psychoneurological structure of man.

HARRY WEINBERG

General semantics is (1) the study or correction of human responses to symbols, symbol systems, sign systems and sign situations, (2) a study of how a human nervous system works and ought to work, (3) an educational theory whose aim is to study the evaluational processes of human beings, and (4) ultimately a nonverbal discipline of silence, of dissolving away the encrusted verbalizations and abstractions, dogmas and creeds which envelop most of us like layers of barnacles.

S. I. HAYAKAWA
General semantics is concerned with organizing the factual material and its derivative higher abstractions in such a way that the relation between the “in here” and the “out there” is continually maintained on a “current” basis. The “raw material” of knowledge is consciously organized, and the relevant portion of it can be focused on whatever particular problem concerns us.

John Magee

General semantics is the science and art of how we operate in the world around us. We take note of the kinds of assumptions we make, the way we see things, the way we use words and symbols, the role of our self-concept in our relationship with the rest of the world, and some of the kinds of bias and distortion that plague all of us in the way we listen, the way we think, and the way we operate.

Robert Wanderer

General semantics deals with our reactions to words, symbols, and to whatever happens to us; as distinguished from semantics, which deals with words and their meanings.

J. Samuel Bois

General semantics is the study of total meaning as it resides in and is a function of the symbol and the response, the person and the purpose, the time and place and culture. It urges us to broaden our awareness, and increases our tolerance for verbal behavior through understanding the way language is used to communicate meaning.

Weller Embler

General semantics is designed to introduce an over-arching system that welcomes the plurality of cultures and logics, and that brings together in a set of simple interlocking theorems the activities of the scientist, the poet, the artist, the philosopher, the statesman and the man in the street.

Viewpoints Institute

General semantics is concerned with an analysis of [humans] as abstracting, self-reflexive, self-determining organism[s], and [their] evaluative behavior[s]. It is not concerned with ideologies, except as specimens of human behavior, since ideologies represent a pathological, reversed order of evaluation leading eventually to an animalistic conflict.

J. Talbot Winchell

General semantics is the study of the relationship between words and people, between symbols and behavior, between what makes “sense” and what sometimes prevents us from achieving the degree of “sense” we’d like. We’re concerned with false assumptions, unseen blockages in perception, hidden confusions in evaluation,
and other ways in which we sometimes fail to act as efficient, as sensible, as human as we might.

ROBERT WANDERER

“Good” Answers

In the situation of someone asking for a definition of general semantics, sometimes you don’t want either one that’s short and clever or one that’s very long and more comprehensive. Here are some “middle-sized” answers:

General semantics is the study of the relations between language, thought, and behavior – how we talk, therefore how we think, and therefore how we act.

S. I. HAYAKAWA

General semantics deals with how people perceive the world and how the language we use has an influence on that perception, and how our language locks us into a particular way of seeing the world.

PAMELA BUTLER

General semantics is simply the name we give to all those inquiries which take as their starting point the pre-eminence of symbols and structure in human communication, and which are dominated by the paradigm of communication as environment.

NEIL POSTMAN

General semantics urges upon us the image of language as a self-correcting cybernetic system, with verbal-visual maps that are tentative and hypothetical and always open to revision and amalgamation. These can never represent more than a part of the territory and are best seen as informed relationships between mind and environment.

CHARLES HAMPDEN-TURNER

General semantics provides a coherent, tested, teachable approach: a system derived from the successful methodology of modern sciences, concerned with developing up-to-date maps of “reality.”

INSTITUTE OF GENERAL SEMANTICS

General semantics encourages the study of processes behind the curtain of language. It investigates the relations between words, what words refer to and the human beings involved, the effects of the language on evaluation and of evaluation on language.

MARY MORAIN

General semantics is a discipline drawing upon the best scientific methods for the deep restructuring of human beings to make optimal use of their potentialities.

ALLEN WALKER READ
General semanticists analyze the mixtures of descriptions, inferences, and judgments that compose differing versions of an event. They examine the originators of various versions, searching for a source who distinguishes between these various levels of abstraction, a source highly knowledgeable about related events, a source unencumbered by a vested interest in conclusions to be drawn from any particular version of what happened, a source whose version deserves confidence.

Robert Allardyce

**About Language**

To a great extent, general semantics is “about” language and its effects:

General semantics is an analysis of language, beginning with meanings rather than sounds. It can give the student an increased ability to listen, to form valid judgments, to make practical decisions, and to escape the domination of verbal spooks.

Stuart Chase

General semantics is a field of research, scholarship, and practical methodology concerned with the distinctively human function of creating and using symbols.

Wendell Johnson

General semantics is a tool for analyzing and understanding almost every area of human endeavor because it is a metaphor-linguistic system—a pattern for talking, thinking, and feeling about talking, thinking, and feeling.

Harry Weinberg

General semantics is less interested in word lore than in that miraculous harmony by which one goes through words to the world. Its emphasis is on the use of words—the best words in the best order—and on what language does, rather than on what language is.

Geoffrey Wagner

General semantics involves the study of the relationships between words and other words and symbols and other symbols, and the relationships between words and what they stand for, but it emphasizes relationships between language and human behavior. It makes use of [one’s] ability to transcend [oneself] and perceive [oneself] in the act of perception.

Kenneth Johnson

General semantics is concerned with revealing and understanding the linguistic unconscious—the role that language unwittingly plays in our behavior and way of life. It is thus part of the major advance in the behavioral sciences of this century—that of making the unconscious conscious.

Anon.
General semantics is a way to avoid getting hung up on words. By studying the relationship between words and the things they stand for, plus the way the speaker and listener are involved, the semanticist is able to see and think more realistically.

ROBERT WANDERER

About Communication

General semantics is also “about” the whole process of communication:

General semantics is concerned with communication and the reactions people have to the world of words and other symbols. It deals with the way in which our understanding of the world is influenced and shaped by how we talk about it. It is not simply a matter of studying language, but of studying yourself and your reactions.

S. I. HAYAKAWA

General semantics studies ways in which a better understanding of the communication process can improve an individual’s judgment, reasoning ability, and indeed his mental health.

STUART CHASE

General semantics assumes that communication is a good thing. Therefore, the more information you get, the more accurate that information is, and the more effectively you process that information, the better off you are.

ROBERT WANDERER

General semantics is a recent movement which has given knowledge and insight into human evaluating processes and particularly the relationship between meaning and the symbols of language. It is concerned with the study of communication.

LAURENCE PETER

General semantics deals with the process of how we get information and what risks, distortions, and errors take place as this process occurs. It is the study of communication in the broad sense: how people communicate with their physical environment, with themselves, and with other people. It includes how [they] perceive, how they behave, how they use symbols, and how they operate in social institutions.

BURLY PAYNE

General semantics is a new system of thinking and communicating, through which you learn to express yourself more effectively, to put your mental processes in order, and to develop dependable standards for making judgments, evaluations, and decisions.

GINA CERMINARA
General semantics teaches how we can communicate, work and negotiate with others who have maps in their heads that are different from those in our own.

Emory Menefee

About Awareness

General semantics is also “about” becoming more aware of this whole process and all aspects of it:

General semantics teaches us to expect and look for the unique differences in every object, event, or person, so that we shall be ready (for example, as applied to children) to understand not only the uniqueness of each child but, on the other hand, not to have a faint dislike for other people’s children because they are not like one’s own.

S. I. Hayakawa

General semantics is a discipline that offers tools, techniques, devices, and approaches that aim at helping us to progressively “see” greater areas of the realities of a given subject or set of circumstances.

Samuel Whitman

General semantics is the study of human evaluation. We study the human being as an organism which handles information, and we also study the nature of that information, particularly our symbolic system which we use to handle that information.

William Pemberton

General semantics is largely concerned with human adjustment; the effect of the environmental stimuli on the individual; the effect of the individual on the environment; the realm of life.

Clarence Meader

General semantics is about awareness and the personal linguistic unconscious that each of us has embedded within our systems, and taking a look at those unconscious assumptions and unconscious habits to see how they get us into trouble.

Eugene Rebstock

General semantics is a methodology concerned with recognizing in effective thinking, detecting hidden assumptions, and communicating with a maximum of understanding and a minimum of time and errors.

Robert Wanderer
As a Science
In other words, general semantics ties in the method of science with our everyday life:

General semantics is a never-ceasing attempt to organize, in a well-balanced system, the cumulative findings of the present sciences of man and to derive from this system rules and procedures for self-management and mutual understanding.

J. Samuel Bois

General semantics formulates the method of science in a way that makes reasonably clear the possibilities of its application to our personal and social problems.

Wendell Johnson

General semantics is interested in applying modern scientific methods and knowledge in human behavior in order to direct it toward sanity. It moves from science to sanity—from theory to therapy.

Walter Steurmann

General semantics consists of studying the natural processes of our world according to the best knowledge we have of modem science, and trying to correct our habits of evaluating and speaking to fit what we “know” and how we “know” it.

Rachel Lauer

General semantics is a way to bring to bear upon the management of our organism the findings of the human sciences of today.

J. Samuel Bois

General semantics is an application of the methods, habits, and viewpoints of science to the everyday problems of living. Hopefully, it will lead to an integrated science of man.

Stuart Larick

General semantics is a reeducational system whose purpose is to train people to use language as scientists do when they are being scientific. This is done through the application of various tactics intended to raise the effects of the languaging process to a conscious level and to keep such awareness relatively constant.

Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner

General semantics is a system in which the scientific method, the one clearly effective method of problem solving, has been put into a form which can be applied by the average person to “nonscientific” problems.

Allen Flagg
Long-range Effects

Getting general semantics “under your skin” and developing a “semantic orientation” presents certain difficulties but offers certain advantages:

In general semantics we do not “preach” “morality” or “ethics” as such, but we train students in consciousness of abstracting, consciousness of the multiordinal of mechanisms of evaluation, relational orientations, etc., which bring about cortico-thalamic integration, and then as a result “morality,” “ethics,” awareness of social responsibilities, etc., follow automatically.

General semantics has as its basic idea that no one can know it all, no one needs to know it all, and that human beings can enjoy life which is a never-ending quest, increasing knowledge and wisdom and predictability through experience, by keeping their minds open and flexible and hospitable to new information.

General semantics is a long-range undertaking that will demand, first, a radical self-examination, and then, a painful self-administered change in the values and purposes each of us cherishes.

General semantics aims not merely to make changes in the language we use, but to bring about a sweeping and profound reorientation that will avoid the faulty personality reactions that develop in the Aristotelian system.

General semantics views healthy human beings as complex but organized entities, whose pleasure and challenge is problem-solving, whose characteristics include an eagerness for living, as well as an interest and involvement in daily life.

Related Ideas

The following thoughts, some of them from people outside the field of general semantics, pertain to it:

Nature must cherish uniqueness, because it has gone to great lengths to provide it. We are all unique, since we select what we want to see and what we want to ignore, and this selection is necessarily different for each person.
Words enable us to behave like human beings, but also to behave more stupidly than dumb beasts. . . . Labels are devices for classifying experiences, for putting things in pigeon holes. But in the real world pigeon holes do not exist—even the pigeons spend most of their time flying around.

Laura Huxley

The empiricist...thinks he believes only what he sees, but he is much better at believing than at seeing.

George Santayana

Language is more than a tool for the objective description of the world; it is also a form of word-magic to be used in trying to control the world, or at any rate to control others’ perception of it.

Garrett Hardin

If the human race is to survive, it will have to change its ways of thinking more in the next 25 years than it has done in the last 25,000. In a rapidly changing system it is desperately easy to learn things which are no longer true.

Kenneth Boulding

(Because we as a nation do not make adjustments to current conditions) we are guided, in part, by ideas that are relevant to another world; and as a further result, we do many things that are unnecessary, some that are unwise, and a few that are insane.

John Kenneth Galbraith

To cease looking at things atomistically in visual experience and to see relatedness means, among other things, to lose in our social experience . . . the deluded self-importance of absolute “individualism” in favor of social relatedness and interdependence. When we structuralize the primary impacts of experience differently, we shall structuralize the world differently.

S. I. Hayakawa