

GETTING RID OF THE “TO BE” CRUTCH

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THE LITTLE VERB *to be* serves as an all-purpose crutch for users of English. Grammarians, linguists, and writers, besides general semanticists, recognize the pervasiveness of *to be* and many of the ways it can lead us astray. Nevertheless, one English sentence in two employs some version of *to be*, and most paragraphs have at least a dozen.

What would happen if we threw *to be* out of the English language altogether? Could we still speak and write? A brief unit consisting of two or three one-hour lessons in E-Prime (English minus the verb *to be*) for adult professionals will provide unexpected bonuses.

Besides making students use a wider selection of action verbs—besides making their sentences livelier and more interesting—E-Prime also calls the students' attention to the psychological and philosophical implications of their addiction to *to be*. The E-Prime unit helps explain why Alfred Korzybski worried so much about the “ises-of-identity and predication.” These lessons apply equally well regardless of the course title—general semantics, technical writing, creative writing, or business English.

Recently, I taught the E-Prime unit at the U.S. Department of State to my class in Effective Writing for Managers, composed of twenty employees rated GS-12 to GS-17. Most of these students had graduated from college, and several held advanced degrees. They responded enthusiastically to the unit. But not all students of E-Prime need such advanced credentials. I have also presented this unit to ordinary high school seniors.

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Before getting into the unit itself, I usually find it helpful to examine the various ways we use *to be* in English: as an auxiliary to form the progressive tense, as a copula or equals mark, and as the essential auxiliary to form the passive voice.

In the first usage, as an auxiliary for the progressive tense, *to be* doesn't do much damage. We can say, "Josie is dreaming" or "Archie is running for office." People who like to identify grammatical relationships can have some fun with these, because the participle (in the above examples *dreaming* and *running*) acts like an adjective in a Subject-Linking Verb-Adjective (S-LV-Adj) basic sentence pattern. But they can also interpret it so that the whole phrase (*is dreaming* or *is running*) becomes the verb in a Subject-Verb pattern. In either case, *to be* doesn't confuse the meaning since these verbs translate easily into the present tense (*dreams* or *runs*). If *to be* acted in this way only, we would need have no concern about it. But in its two other uses, *to be* really causes trouble.

In a sentence like "Reginald is absent," the verb links or couples the subject to the predicate adjective to state a fact. Hearers recognize that Reginald might come in late at any moment. But the sentence "Reginald is stupid" uses the same grammatical structure. This sentence, unlike the first, does not state a verifiable report. Instead it presents the opinion of an agent who hides outside the sentence. A more forthright statement would be "*I think* Reginald is stupid." Clearly, in this case, Reginald, the innocent victim, may have done nothing to earn himself the bad label he got stuck with. Equally obvious, anyone who hears the statement "Reginald is stupid" tends to believe that he has less intelligence than the average; and more important, that next month or next year, Reginald will remain just as dumb as today.

A similar confusion arises with the usage "Mr. Landers is my supervisor," compared with "Mr. Landers is a cornball." In both, the verb *to be* indiscriminately relates the subject and the predicate noun, implying that they equal one another. Because we tend to accept the S-LV-N pattern as a factual report, we do not often differentiate when the same grammatical structure presents not a fact, but an unsupported opinion that belongs to Mr. Nobody.

In this way, the S-LV-Adj pattern produces the "is of predication" and the S-LV-N pattern gives us the "is of identity"—serious problems that concerned Alfred Korzybski. Simply dealing with the philosophy and psychology of these "ises" justifies our E-Prime experiment. But the next problem demands even more concern.

The third use of *to be* brings home the really bad effect it can have

as the auxiliary to form the passive voice. The big problem here lies in the passive usage itself. Style manuals, probably without exception, advise writers to avoid the passive and use the active voice whenever possible, for a number of very good reasons.

Passive usage takes the agent out of the subject position and puts him or her back into the sentence, if at all, as the object of an adverbial prepositional phrase tacked onto the end of the sentence. The original object must then move into the subject position, and we get, for example, "The water was spilled by Hortense." Like all passive subjects, the water does not act. An agent must drink it, splash it, use it, or spill it. Passive sentences crawl and drag along, lacking directness and liveliness. Each contains at least two more words (*was* and *by*) than its active voice counterpart. For these reasons among others, writing instructors urge their students to avoid the passive voice.

A more complicated problem arises when a writer selects for the subject of a passive sentence neither a person nor an object (as the innocent victim) but rather an abstraction coined from what would normally have been the verb of the sentence with a suffix such as "tion" or "ment." Verbs like *use*, *arrange*, *consider*, and *suspect* turn into *utilization*, *arrangement*, *consideration*, and *suspicion*, preempting the subject position and leaving the verb position blank. Then "smothered verbs" must use a form of *to be* to take their place. So we get sentences like "Utilization of the proposed arrangement is effectuated" or "Consideration of your unfounded suspicion is responsible for unnecessary delays in the completion of our project." We can see that such sentences do not contain any agent and, because *to be* doesn't take an object, can't have an object either. Who does what? Does anybody know? Surely such sentences have no referents in the real world.

I call sentences that start like these examples "subjections" because the subject so often ends in "tion." And I advise my pupils to shun the "tion." Although it may sound profound and high class, it actually conveys little or no meaning. Ordinarily, I would expect bright professionals with good ideas to stay away from "subjections." But, ironically, I find that business, technical, legal, and academic writing overflows with these agentless, objectless, and meaningless passives. They occur pervasively in the mountains of paperwork that choke professional offices and sharply reduce their effectiveness. And none of this could happen without that sneaky little verb *to be*.

In the real world, action and change always go on, producing

constant variety and nothing identical. Besides the individuality of every *thing*, every *person* sees with unique eyes, and feels, hears, smells, and tastes with one-of-a-kind sensors. He or she processes sensations through an individual brain and nervous system, and responds uniquely to an environment seen from only one shifting point of view.

General semantics requires that we remain aware of abstracting—the process with which each person selects a few things to pay attention to in the environment, and ignores most others. The notion of abstracting further asserts that people's brains provide names with which people refer to objects of experience, and, in turn, their brains give out more words with which they refer to and categorize the original names. General semanticists call these "higher level abstractions." The Korzybskian formulation of intensional reasoning means that people's brains may generate verbal concepts or ideas spun out of other ideas, without reference to external objective reality.

Therefore, when we say that something *is* something, we dishonestly, although probably unconsciously, suggest that what we *think* must really exist. This hides the fact that we use *to be* to make judgments and to put people into pigeonholes by describing them with a single adjective or noun. E-Prime results in better writing because it comes closer to describing what really goes on "out there."

To start the E-Prime unit, I ask the class, "What would happen if we decided to prohibit anyone from using *to be* for a single hour, or from writing it in any letter or report for a day?" Students usually respond that the idea *is* absurd, that English without *to be* is bound to sound funny, that nobody would *be* able to do it, and that it just *isn't* practical. This article itself, written entirely in E-Prime except for quoted examples and references to *to be* by name, demonstrates, I hope, that E-Prime need not sound peculiar.

I next suggest that E-Prime can eliminate confusion, head off misunderstandings, cut out lies, clarify relationships, and deal a solid blow to gobbledygook. With all these claims going for it, I ask, why not give it a try?

The idea of E-Prime originated with D. David Bourland, a student of Korzybski's. The E-Prime unit demonstrates that students don't really need *to be* nearly as much as they think. Conversely, getting rid of some of their "ises" helps students see that E-Prime can help their writing in other ways—by making them select better

subjects, more active verbs, and fewer flowery modifiers.

I start the E-Prime unit by passing out copies of an article, "The Unisness of Is," which I paraphrased from an old article in *Time*. I include a copy at the end of this paper for any teachers who want to copy and use it. This article reports an interview with David Bourland in which he explains the rationale of E-Prime. I assign this for overnight reading because it accords Bourland the credit he deserves for inventing E-Prime, and at the same time it gives the students ammunition for a lively class discussion at their next session.

When the students next convene, they usually sound skeptical. Most of them, having looked at how much they rely on *to be*, realize they would have a hard time getting along without it. On the other hand, I point out that English has thousands of other verbs, both action and linking, and that surely bright people can find substitutes for just one verb.

Some students object that E-Prime has no practical application. To this, I truthfully reply that Dr. Albert Ellis, the well-known psychologist, considers *to be* such a serious threat to mental health that he has rewritten many of his books in E-Prime as his contribution to sanity. Incidentally, I add, Dr. Ellis's books don't sound funny at all.

Regardless of whether or not my students seem convinced that E-Prime will cure all their writing problems, I exercise my authority and insist that each student write for the next assignment an essay of about three hundred words in E-Prime, on any subject he or she likes. In case they don't remember all the parts of *to be*, I tell them to consult the dictionary. I also remind my students that the verbs *to do* and *to have* as well as the auxiliaries *can*, *may*, *might*, *will*, *would*, etc., do not belong to *to be*, so they can freely use them in their essays.

Students often leave this session of the class grumbling that their teacher *is* crazy. But by the next class session I usually find that their attitudes, at least about E-Prime, have changed. Most of the students, having accepted the challenge of E-Prime, quickly become its advocates. They see all kinds of values they didn't anticipate. One student told me rather bemusedly, "I can't believe it. I've been thinking in the passive all my life!"

Picking up on the enthusiasm of the moment, I invite the students to read their essays aloud to one another, taking turns. As each one reads, the others listen carefully, smiling at the strategies

the writer has used to avoid the *to be* trap, and marveling at the way E-Prime produces livelier, more tightly constructed expression. I always admire the variety of subjects the students have chosen. And along with them, I note that some subjects fit the E-Prime format better than others.

Students who try to describe the Library or Congress or the King Tut exhibit, essentially passive inanimate subjects, have more trouble than those who write about sports, family adventures, or accidents, in which *I, we, he, she, or they* supply realistic agents for action verbs.

But no matter what subject they have chosen, writers who have always relied heavily on the passive voice and the "is of identity" find E-Prime much harder going than their less pompous classmates. Some students write delicate descriptions, while others deal with earthier events in blunter language. But regardless of the theme, each essay sparkles with action verbs that enliven the writing at the same time they cut down on the need for extra adverbs.

Of course, neither I nor my students believe that we should necessarily give up *to be* forever. David Bourland may speak and write exclusively in E-Prime, but for most of us, just cutting down on our reliance on *to be* will suffice. We've seen how E-Prime can give us a shortcut to understanding the passive voice and the "ises of identity and predication," all of which interfere with lively description, clear writing, clear thinking, and honest expression. I usually suggest that students come back to E-Prime every few weeks, just to check up on themselves.

In any event, an E-Prime unit serves as an eye-opener for both students and teacher. For a two- or three-hour project, most of my students agree with me that E-Prime really pays off. After all, I couldn't have written this paper without it.

The Unisness of Is

A *Time* magazine article furnished the basis for the following report. Some years ago a reporter talked with D. David Bourland, a computer systems analyst, about his project of scrubbing from his speech and writing all forms of the verb *to be*. The first time he tried to do this, Bourland recalls, "it gave me a headache. But after practicing for a while, I found that it comes easily."

Would writing in E-Prime, as Bourland calls English minus the verb *to be*, sound funny? Bourland answers: "People seem impressed by the clarity of my expression and the ease with which

they can understand me."

"For example," he continues, "in a case where most people might judge themselves harshly by saying, 'I'm no good at math,' I would advise them to say instead, 'I got poor grades in sixth grade arithmetic,' or 'I did better in other subjects than I did in math.' With this sentence structure, I feel that people will not condemn themselves forever to fail at problems that require mathematical skill. Rather they will recognize that they simply report on past experience, without predicting that the same thing will inevitably, or even probably, happen again. In this way, we can avoid the 'self-fulfilling prophecy.'"

Bourland's interest in language and its effects on behavior and thought stems from his experiences as a young man in the 1940s when he studied at the Institute of General Semantics in Lakeville, Connecticut. There he attended lectures by Alfred Korzybski, whose theories form the basis of the general semantics movement. Korzybski believed that the verb *to be* causes serious communications disturbances and other psychological problems for modern man. In his book *Science and Sanity*, Korzybski referred to these problems as the "is of predication" and the "is of identity." In both, he blamed the verb *to be* for misleading people into making untrue and unwarranted assumptions.

Going his teacher one better, David Bourland heads up a crusade for the adoption of E-Prime.

"General semanticists," Bourland explains, "object to *to be* for philosophical as well as psychological reasons. To start with, we reject an axiom of classical logic: the principle of identity. For that reason, we call ourselves advocates of 'non-Aristotelian logic.' Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher who lived before Socrates, insisted that 'everything changes.' He saw this as the basic truth of existence. Time moves inexorably, and in the fraction of a second you need to describe a thing, it has already begun to alter.

"For example, sentences like 'A rose is a rose,' 'the law is the law,' and 'a man ain't nuthin' but a man' do not really say what they seem to. The first rose has wilted a tiny bit before you get to the next one. In the second example, identical words mean different things. One translation of 'the law is the law' might read, 'You must obey a jay-walking ordinance or take your chances on getting a ticket if they catch you.'

"Even more clearly," continues Bourland, "'A man ain't nuthin' but a man' might translate to, 'You can't expect any man to behave more honestly, strenuously, forcefully, etc., than the average

person.' You should notice that we could make many other translations for these sentences, so that what appears as a simple 'truth' in these sayings can actually mean almost anything anyone wants it to mean. Along with that belongs the idea that a speaker has no assurance that his listener will get the same message he sends.

"I believe firmly that language affects thought and behavior," Bourland goes on. "People don't realize how much everything changes because the verb *to be* gives them an illusion of permanence. Our language remains the language of absolutes and this very usually causes it. The spurious identity it so readily connotes perverts our perception of reality.

"A pair of common enough sentence structures employ *to be* to tempt man into mistaken value judgments. Korzybski called the Subject-Linking Verb-Adjective sentence pattern the 'is of predication' and the 'Subject-Linking Verb-Noun' pattern the 'is of identity.' "

A sentence like "Robert is stupid" exemplifies the first, while "Marcia is a genius" demonstrates the second. "Actually," explains Bourland, "both limit in a similar manner our ability to see Robert and Marcia as whole persons, or to accept the idea that they may develop different characteristics in the future. This makes us always see them as stupid or brilliant now and forever after."

Besides keeping us from falling into the errors he described, Bourland says, E-Prime has certain advantages over conventional English. For one, unanswerable questions like "who am I?—why was I born?—was man created to suffer?—who is the ruler of the universe?" do not arise because without *to be* nobody can ask them.

People who take refuge in waffling statements based on unprovable or unproved evidence cannot say in E-Prime, "It is established . . ." or "Of course, that is common knowledge. . . ."

In a sense, Korzybski argued that every time we use "is," we lie. Even though certain "to be" statements tell facts (i.e., Mr. Thomas is my boss), they still prevaricate in that the sentence directs our attention away from all the other aspects of Mr. Thomas's personality. It makes us believe that Mr. Thomas's "bossness" takes precedence over anything else about him.

According to David Bourland, "Using E-Prime can improve a person's outlook on life. Once you realize that every time you say *is* you tell a lie, you begin to think less about a thing or person's 'identity' and more about its function. I find that E-Prime makes me stay honest."

E. W. KELLOGG III AND
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WORKING WITH E-PRIME: SOME PRACTICAL NOTES

To achieve adjustment and sanity and the conditions that follow from them, we must study the structural characteristics of this world first and, then only, build languages of similar structure, instead of habitually ascribing to the world the primitive structure of our language.

Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity*

LISTEN to almost any news program, and you'll hear reports of political, social, and environmental crises. These problems do not originate "outside" of us, but from the beginning have stemmed from the short-sightedness of human beings going about their daily tasks using a two-valued, true-or-false, Aristotelian orientation: an orientation that has proven itself woefully inadequate to solving the complex problems of the twentieth century. Threats of nuclear war, overpopulation, and ecological disaster hang over our heads, and if we wish to survive, the solutions to these problems must also originate from us.

The science of ecology teaches us that we need to see through non-Aristotelian eyes, and deal with the world as an interdependent whole of interconnecting parts. And yet the English language itself betrays us in this task, as its very structure trains us to use the old simplistic viewpoint we need so desperately to outgrow. Unless we learn to think and communicate differently and more effectively about our problems, we may soon find ourselves released from the necessity of having to think at all. The authors see E-Prime (English without the verb "to be") as a practical starting point in the development of such a non-Aristotelian language. We hope that our readers will find the information presented here useful should

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they choose to make E-Prime an integral part of their own lives.

Since the publication of Bourland's article, *A Linguistic Note: Writing in E-Prime*, in 1965,(1) numerous articles, books, even dissertations (see references 2-17) have appeared testifying to the effectiveness of E-Prime as a discipline that encourages, even forces, the user to write, speak, and think more clearly and accurately. On the surface, the term E-Prime refers to an English language derivative that eliminates use of the verb "to be" in any form (such as "am," "is," "was," "are," "were," "be," and "been"). E-Prime allows users to minimize many "false to facts" linguistic patterns inherent in ordinary English, and to move beyond a two-valued Aristotelian orientation that views the world through overly simplistic terms such as "true-or-false," "black-or-white," "all-or-none," "right-or-wrong."

E-Prime automatically eliminates the "is-dependent" overdefining of situations in which we confuse one aspect, or point of view, of an experience with a much more complex totality (see references 7 and 12 for more details). This overdefining occurs chiefly in sentences using the "is of identity" (e.g., "John is a scientist") and the "is of predication" (e.g., "The leaf is green"), two of the main stumbling blocks impeding a non-Aristotelian approach. E-Prime can also enhance creativity in problem solving, by transforming premature judgment statements such as "There is no solution to this problem" into more strictly accurate versions such as "I don't see how to solve this problem (yet)."

Although many people have found the idea of E-Prime intriguing, not many have attempted to put it into practice. Of those who have, some have mastered writing in E-Prime, and a few speaking or thinking in it. Whatever the virtues of E-Prime as a linguistic discipline, experience has shown that students can benefit markedly from the practical advice of their predecessors. In this article, the authors will answer the major questions about the theory and practice of E-Prime that they have heard over the years, and offer useful guidelines that will smooth the path for those determined to make the discipline of E-Prime their own.

You call E-Prime a "linguistic discipline." A linguistic discipline for what?

Within practical limits, users of E-Prime try to say exactly what they mean. When I (E.K.) say "almost always" I mean that and not "always." In my writing I almost always delete or modify such absolutisms, and in speaking I try to do so, but sometimes don't

succeed. I try to qualify what I say to make it more accurate, avoiding the absolutistic point-of-view by using qualifiers such as "in my experience," "as I see it," "to me," etc.

As a discipline, E-Prime, like general semantics,(18) works to achieve a useful congruency between the verbal maps we make of experience, and the actual territory of experience itself. Although in the simplest sense E-Prime need only involve giving up any use of the verb "to be," in a practical sense it may also include other non-Aristotelian linguistic devices such as dating and indexing,(18) the avoidance of absolutisms,(19) etc. Thus, E-Prime_k denotes an E-Prime that also makes use of the general semantics formulations Korzybski suggested.(18) My (E.K.) own preferred form of E-Prime (E-Prime_p), aims at a phenomenologically ideal language(20) that represents and communicates the territory of my experience both to myself and others as clearly and accurately as possible.

How does E-Prime work?

Although one could describe E-Prime simply as English without the verb "to be," such a definition misses the profound transformation in personal orientation resulting from such a change. *In essence, E-Prime consists of a more descriptive and extensionally oriented derivative of English, one that automatically tends to bring the user back to the level of first-person experience.* In his book, *Language, Thought and Reality*, Benjamin Lee Whorf gives numerous examples of languages and cultures that support his "principle of linguistic relativity" which states that the structure of the language we use influences the way we perceive "reality," as well as how we behave with respect to that perceived reality.(21)

For example, if you saw a man, reeking of whiskey, stagger down the street and then collapse, you might think (in ordinary English) "He is drunk." In E-Prime you would think instead "He acts drunk," or "He looks drunk." After all, you might have encountered an actor (practicing the part of a drunken man), or a man who had spilled alcohol on himself undergoing a seizure of some kind, etc. Instead of simply walking by, you might look more carefully and send for an ambulance.

Although E-Prime usually reduces hidden assumptions, it does not necessarily exclude them. For example, you may have seen a woman, or a robot, or an extraterrestrial, etc., that looked like a man and acted drunk. E-Prime fosters a worldview in which the user perceives situations as changeable rather than static, and in

which verbal formulations derived from experience indicate possibilities rather than certainties.

Thus, removing the verb "to be" from English results in a language of a more phenomenological character,(20) in that this change can automatically reduce the number of assumptions in even simple sentences. Statements made in E-Prime almost always mirror first-person experience more adequately than the "is" statements they replace. E-Prime also greatly encourages one to use the active voice ("I did it," "Smith did it") rather than the often misleading, information poor, and even psychologically crippling passive voice ("It was done").(4)

If you can just translate a statement bristling with forms of "to be" from ordinary English to E-Prime, so what? Why bother?

In the first place, you can't. You simply cannot take a body of work written in ordinary "is" English, and by recasting it into E-Prime say "exactly the same thing."(16) Almost by necessity the writing will shift away from an Aristotelian towards a more non-Aristotelian language structure.(5) One cannot *rewrite* documents such as the Holy Bible, the United States Constitution, Shakespeare's plays, etc. in E-Prime; one can only *translate* them into E-Prime. Although I (D.B.) once translated the opening part of the Declaration of Independence as an illustration of the difference that E-Prime can make—I prefer my version naturally—we certainly have not called for a complete rewrite of everything into E-Prime. In the first place one can't rewrite these and other precious documents without changing their "meaning" as mentioned earlier. And in the second place, neither of us has the time even to begin such an endeavor, however much we might like to view the result!

Some languages do not have a verb exactly like "to be." Does this mean that native speakers of these languages think and communicate more clearly than do speakers of ordinary English?

The absence of the verb "to be" in a language does not necessarily confer any advantages to it. Rather than focusing on the absence of a verb that functions syntactically exactly like the English "to be," we need to address ourselves to the mechanisms of identity and predication used in a particular language. For example, Russian and Hebrew usually employ (in the present tense) simple juxtaposition for identity and predication structures. In a literal

translation into English we would find, for example, "I farmer." Remedial procedures analogous to E-Prime for other languages will of necessity depend on the syntactic structure of the particular language involved. General semantics, and the discipline of E-Prime, address the semantic problems peculiar to *English*. In *Science and Sanity*, Korzybski (18) targeted three main semantic factors of the English language that he felt needed revision in order to make general adjustment and sanity possible: (1) the subject-predicate form, (2) the "is" of identity, and (3) the elementalism of the Aristotelian system (see note 1). E-Prime eliminates two of these factors *in one stroke*.

I want to use the "is of identity" in identifying and classifying. Surely the scientific method depends on determining what "IS" and "IS NOT" true. What harm can possibly result from using "to be" in this context?

Classification does not depend on "this is this and that is that," but on *scientists* labeling "this" (phenomenon) by "that" (label). Actually, one might claim that scientific progress depends on the unmasking of assumptions masquerading as scientific facts or as "universal" laws. E-Prime can work synergistically with the scientific method in exposing artifacts. For example a scientist would not say "This *is* true," but instead "The available evidence supports hypothesis X." Science doesn't depend on "common sense" but on the scientific method, which deals in probabilities and not certainties.

When scientists (or anyone else) forget that a label *is not* the thing *indicated* by the label, they can get into serious trouble. When I (E.K.) test an enzyme's activity in a spectrophotometer, I *assume* that all of my reagents have proper labels, I *assume* that the balance on which I weigh these reagents gives reasonably accurate readings, I *assume* I know the chemical reactions involved through my training and by inference, and I *assume* that the spectrophotometer works properly. However, I actually only *see* a pen making a line on a paper chart. I know from hard experience that any one of the assumptions I made could have, and on occasion indeed have, proved false and resulted in false readings. E-Prime can make one much more aware of such covert assumptions, and in making these assumptions overt can give the user the opportunity to correct for them.

Actually, users of the scientific method *cannot* prove that a

hypothesis “is true,” only that it “is not true.” “Hypothesis” by definition means a “tentatively assumed proposition,” which makes phrases like “This hypothesis is true” oxymoronic. One would need to look at *all* the crows in the universe to prove the proposition “All crows are black,” but one needs only one white crow to prove it false. Many working scientists don’t clearly understand this intrinsic limitation of the scientific method—that except in the case of the trivial (e.g., the validation of a specific fact—“This particular crow has black feathers”) it can disprove a hypothesis, and cannot prove it. Instead, the method does allow scientists to judge a hypothesis as more or less probably valid, given the evidence available to them at a particular time and place.

Why eliminate ALL uses of the verb “to be”?

In principle, if not in practice, we agree that in some instances one could use forms of “to be” (in its auxiliary, existence, and location modes) without causing appreciable “semantic damage.” Even so, most English teachers would agree that most of us overuse and misuse the verb, and that even a 75% reduction in its use would improve our writing and speaking skills. But why go to the extreme of trying to eliminate it totally? Because for better or worse, it looks as if only an all-or-nothing approach to this problem works successfully. De Morgan, Santayana, Korzybski, and many general semanticists warned against misuses of the verb such as the “is” of identity, yet they continued to misuse it themselves!

We see the misuse and overuse of the verb “to be” by English speakers as a kind of linguistic addiction. It allows us to play God using the omniscient “Deity mode” of speech, as when we say, “That is the truth.” It allows even the most ignorant to transform their opinions magically into god-like pronouncements on the nature of things. Its overuse allows one to communicate sloppily without unduly taxing the brain by trying to come up with more appropriate verbs.

Let’s compare this linguistic “addiction” to one more mundane—cigarette smoking. Although reducing smoking from two packs to two cigarettes a day might reduce lung cancer to a level not significantly different from not smoking at all, no medical authority that we know of recommends this. And why? *Because it rarely, if ever, works.* Very few people can go from overuse to moderation in use—the temptation for old habits to reassert themselves proves just too strong. Although a less extreme form of E-Prime that allows for an

occasional use of “is” would probably accomplish the same goals, we have yet to see anyone manage this. For those simply interested in writing only, a less drastic form of E-Prime (such as E-Prime mod) (15) might suffice. With word processing capabilities, one could easily edit and revise writing in accordance with non-Aristotelian and phenomenological principles, checking each individual usage of “to be” for possible misuses. Given the word processing technology available today (1990), self-proclaimed general semanticists no longer have any excuse for not ridding their prose of instances of the “is of identity” and the “is of predication.” However, we ourselves have found it unnecessary to use the verb “to be” even in its more benign aspects—indeed, we have found that eliminating these usages has improved our writing style.

Perhaps most importantly, I (E.K.) very much doubt whether I could have learned to comprehensively eliminate misuses of “to be” in my speaking, and finally in my thinking, without the simple, and easily understood discipline that pure E-Prime requires. The simplicity of the basic rule allows me to make changes in real time, *while speaking or thinking.*

What about critics of E-Prime who, while admitting that E-Prime sounds like an interesting idea, claim that it can never work, and that eliminating all uses of “to be” from English damages the language in fundamental ways?

Criticisms of E-Prime often depend on theoretical arguments that have little validity in actual practice. In our experience E-Prime not only does not damage English, but, as we have already pointed out, it actually improves it in a number of interesting and significant ways. Still, does E-Prime have any disadvantages? Unfortunately, yes, and the prospective user will have to decide on their relative importance. First, you lose the helping verb function of “to be” indicating a continuous process. For example the statement “It is raining outside” translates to “It continues to rain outside,” which indicates the progressive mode in another way. One also loses the use of “to be” implying a future condition, as in “She is coming.” In E-Prime one could say, “She comes” (dramatic!), or “She will come later,” or more specifically, “Anita said that she left the office fifteen minutes ago and should arrive any minute now.”

In the context of poetry, the E-Prime user may lose some of the power of metaphor (“He is a tiger”), although one can compensate

for this loss by using similes ("He acts like a tiger"). On the other hand, poets who use E-Prime will find themselves forced to vary their verb choices, a process that can add to the evocative power of a poem. E-Prime also forces a substantial reduction in the use of the passive voice ("It was done"), but except in special instances, such a reduction would usually prove beneficial rather than detrimental.

Of course, learning to write and speak in E-Prime involves the disadvantage that one has to devote a certain amount of time and effort to the task, especially in the early stages. Writing acceptably in E-Prime initially involves additional drafts, and even final versions may sound awkward until this new writing skill has developed. Overall, most criticisms of E-Prime in regard to its potential applications as a spoken or written language seem woefully premature, as it has not yet had time to grow and develop.

I have heard that if we learn to write, speak, etc. in E-Prime that we will AUTOMATICALLY reduce the level of dishonesty, bigotry, etc., in our lives. How does this come about?

First of all, it doesn't. Neither of us has ever made such claims for E-Prime, although I (D.B.) once had *Time* magazine attribute such views to me. (23) One can lie or express bigotry in E-Prime just as one can in ordinary English. For example you can say "I didn't take the money!" when you did, or "Members of the XYZ race smell like pigs," when they do not. While the *discipline* of E-Prime aims at reducing dishonesty and prejudice (prejudging) in our communications, the *technique* of E-Prime does in no way guarantee such a result. We have found that while E-Prime can facilitate honest communication, that as in any other language, the intention of the individual involved plays the predominant controlling role.

E-Prime does not cure or resolve all linguistic and behavioral problems. Sometimes, general semanticists feel called upon to point out this unfortunate situation to us, often as if to say something to the effect of, "Well, if E-Prime doesn't solve *all* of my problems, I really don't see any reason to bother with it!"

However, consider what this easily teachable technique *does* accomplish: (1) E-Prime can make communication clearer and more understandable by lowering the level of abstraction and bringing it closer to the level of first-person experience; (2) it resolves two of the main semantic problems that Korzybski educated in English; (3) it can improve self-esteem by providing immediate prophylaxis

for those who tend "to live their lives in the passive voice"; and (4) it invites attention to the verbal excesses of those who enjoy speaking in the "Deity mode."

When I try to write in E-Prime my writing sounds awkward. I write much more easily in "is" English. I realize that eventually I will learn to use E-Prime more effectively, but how can I make it through this transitional period without losing my job?

We can tell you from personal experience that most of this awkwardness derives from the problems inherent in using any new language. The more you use E-Prime, the more your skills will improve. By simply following the rule (no forms of "to be") anyone can write in E-Prime, but it usually takes a great deal of practice and *creative* effort before a person can learn to write in it well. Over the years many people (who knew nothing of our idiosyncrasy) have complimented us on both our speaking and writing skills—but it took years of practice before this happened. As far as using E-Prime in work-related writing, it will probably seem better for the novice user to simply try at first to minimize instances of "to be" as much as feels "stylistically comfortable," with the aim of eventually writing professionally in 100% E-Prime as skill improves. Of course, we still recommend writing in 100% E-Prime in less critical areas (personal letters, diaries, notes, etc.) during this transition period.

Our skill in using E-Prime increases continuously, and we can honestly say that our stylistic limitations derive not from E-Prime as a language, but from limitations inherent in our present abilities. We do not speak in E-Prime as well as we write in it, and our skills in *speaking* E-Prime will probably remain several years behind our skills in *writing* in E-Prime, into the foreseeable future. Although we understand the difficulties facing a novice user, "this too shall pass," with time and practice.

When I try to write in E-Prime I tend to sound either "wishy-washy" or "spaced out"—most of my sentences include "seems" or "appears" instead of "is," and even my factual descriptions sound indefinite. How can I change this?

Novice writers in E-Prime often still write using "to be" sentence structures, (14) and often try simply to replace deleted "is's" with "seems" and "appears." Such sentence structures often use the passive voice, as in "It was done." At first one might translate this as

"It appears done," but by moving from the passive to the active voice one can proceed to a much less "wishy-washy" and more informative version, as in "Dan did it." Similarly, one need not translate "The rice is cooked" into "The rice seems cooked," but instead can redescribe the actual "event" more informatively, as in "Russell cooked the rice."

Forms of the verb "to have" can make useful alternatives for their "to be" counterparts during the early stages of learning to use E-Prime. Quite often they can substitute with minimal or no changes in many "to-be"-style sentence structures. For example, "The rice is cooked" translates as "The rice has cooked," "There is a store" changes into "They have a store," and so on. Because of its utility, however, beginners tend to overdo it, and lapse into a form of pidgin E-Prime. Unfortunately, overuse of the verb "to have" brings its own set of problems, (24) leading the user to map/see the world in terms of objects and possessions instead of dynamic processes ("I *have* a relationship to . . ." instead of "I relate to . . ."). As a verb, "to have" encourages the user to change action verbs into quasi-object nouns ("I *have* love" instead of "I love"), so we recommend that students of E-Prime minimize their use of "to have" as soon as possible, and release and make use of the trapped verbs instead.

In other instances, it helps to bring the "is" sentence back to the level of first-person experience, and to use verbs that directly tie into that experience. Thus, instead of saying "The music is good," or the weak E-Prime alternative "The music seems good" one might instead say, "The music sounds good." Other examples include "She looks beautiful" instead of "She seems beautiful," and "This food tastes good" instead of "This food seems good." Please don't misunderstand: "seems" and "appears" have their uses, especially in contexts where one wants to emphasize doubt. However, with practice you can learn to write in E-Prime without using them at all should you so choose, once you have learned more elegant alternatives to the "is style" sentence structures that require them as substitutes.

I feel that I use E-Prime fairly well for factual writing and reporting, but it just doesn't work when I want to express myself creatively or poetically. Does the inherent nature of E-Prime as a language make it unsuitable for artistic expression?

As a glance through any good poetry anthology will show you, (22) many major poets throughout English history, who could not possibly have heard of E-Prime, make very sparing use of "to be" in their work. In fact, with very little effort we have found complete poems written in perfect "E-Prime" by Shakespeare, Pope, Blake, Shelley, Keats, Emerson, Longfellow, Tennyson, Yeats, and Joyce. If anything, rather than hindering artistic expression, E-Prime might actually enhance it.

Imagine a third-year student in French who tries to write poetry like Baudelaire, fails, and then blames the French language rather than his or her current lack of skill for the failure. If you try to use E-Prime for tasks beyond your current level of skill, then fail, it makes little sense to blame E-Prime for the failure. Criticisms of E-Prime in regard to its potential for use in creative endeavors seem premature, as it has not yet had time to grow and develop. At present, to our knowledge no one (let alone an artistic genius) has ever tried to write a novel, or epic poem, in 100% E-Prime.

Who can say what novelists like William Faulkner or Ernest Hemingway might have written had they learned E-Prime as their native tongue instead of ordinary English? Again, can one judge the potential of French as a language by looking at the written works of a class of third-year French students? One might compare E-Prime at its present stage metaphorically to that of a seedling. E-Prime needs to grow and develop and one might hope that critics would refrain from criticizing it based on its current lack of "fruits," just as one would not criticize an apple seedling for not yet producing apples.

I've learned to write in E-Prime fairly well, and have even attempted to speak in it. I sounded awkward, and I had trouble holding even an ordinary conversation without leaving many sentences half-finished. Why should I make the effort required to speak in E-Prime?

Speaking in E-Prime confers a number of advantages to people seriously interested in training themselves in non-Aristotelian thinking. We have found speaking in E-Prime an efficient and effective discipline, as its use forces us to incorporate general semantic principles in an integral way almost every time that we open our mouths. I (E.K.) also frequently translate the speech of others into E-Prime, and this has served me well as a buffer against signal reactions in my own thinking and behavior, and in preventing signal reactions in others. I can often smooth out arguments in my vicin-

ity simply by interjecting E-Prime translations of key statements into conversation. For example, if someone says "That is a stupid idea!" I might reply, "What don't you like about it?" rather than "It is not!"

Most importantly however, the discipline of speaking in E-Prime eventually forced me (E.K.) to learn to *think* in E-Prime. The simplicity of the rule (don't use any forms of "to be") allowed me to make changes in real time, *while* speaking and eventually while thinking. In learning a foreign language, beginning students continue to think in their native language, while they translate their thoughts as best they can into the language they hope to learn. *But experience has shown that in order to gain true fluency in a language a student must learn to think in it.* This point may sound trivial but it can have profound importance, as thoughts in one language may not have an adequate translation in another. And as we often see the world through the medium of the language we use, this shift can in fact change the way we experience the world.(21) Excluding "to be"—with its connotation of permanence, finality, and completeness—can bring one to experience the world more as a process, as a world that changes, rather than one defined by static ideas and permanent objects.(11) These days I habitually think in E-Prime, and although this took me years to achieve, I see the effort involved as trivial when I consider the value of the result.

When you begin speaking in E-Prime you may often find yourself half-way through a sentence before you find to your dismay that you have nowhere to go but "is." We suggest in such cases that you stop and rephrase the sentence into E-Prime. If you have already finished the sentence, reword it either aloud or silently. Often this happens when you used the passive voice and put the object, rather than the subject, of a sentence first. To avoid this, try beginning each sentence or clause with the subject, to make sure that you will not inadvertently leave it out. For example, change "The hike was held. . . ." to "The Sierra Club held the hike. . . ." Look for patterns in the sentences that you can see no way to complete. Once you have discovered the pattern (often old "is" sentence structures) look for alternatives that satisfy you. They do exist, but you may need to work hard to find them, because in order to see them you will have to break through your own habitual patterns of language use.

I find it difficult to use E-Prime versions or responses to colloquial expressions such as "Who are you?," "How are you?," "Is X there?,"

and "Where is Z?" without sounding at least a little odd. How can I deal with standardized expressions like this?

In speaking E-Prime in a non-E-Prime world, I (E.K.) sometimes resort to "pidgin E-Prime" to avoid statements which, although they make better logical sense than their English equivalents, may sound slightly awkward. For example, if someone asks me "Who are you?," instead of replying "My friends call me Ed," I might simply say "Ed." Of course, I assume the questioner really meant to ask "How do you label yourself?" and not "With what verbal concepts do you identify yourself as an existential being?" Other languages (for example French and Spanish) do in fact ask questions about one's name in a more logical manner (*Comment vous appelez vous?*, *Como se llama usted?*). Instead of asking "How do you label yourself?" you might simply substitute a general request for more personal information, as in the imperative, "Tell me about yourself." Specific situations allow other E-Prime variations, such as: "Your name, please?" (great for hotel desk clerks or telephone operators), "Would you please introduce yourself? I don't believe we've met before." (good for formal social occasions), "What name do you go by these days?" (great with disciples of swamis who have changed their name, or bank robbers with a number of aliases), or even (for singles situations) "If I want to find your number in the telephone directory, what name should I look under?"

No matter how improved E-Prime versions of idiomatic English phrases appear from a general semantics point of view, they may still sound a little out of the ordinary to the unprepared listener. Instead of asking "How are you?" I might ask "How do you do?," or "How has life treated you lately?" or even a West Coast alternative such as "How goes it?" On the telephone, instead of asking "Is Julie there?" I'd probably ask "May I speak with Julie?" Rather than asking "Where is X?" I might ask "Where can I find X?" or more elegantly, "Would you please direct me to X?" In my experience, even colloquial expressions have socially acceptable E-Prime equivalents, although it might take a fair amount of time and effort on your part to find one in any given situation.

On the other hand, in the early days of trying to speak E-Prime I (D.B.) rationalized my use of polite, formula, "to be" dependent phrases in order to avoid the risk of sounding like a nut. Now I've decided to stick to E-Prime all the time, even if I do occasionally sound a trifle odd. Like my co-author, I also have found "pidgin E-Prime" useful during the transition period. Of course, we recog-

nize that pidgin E-Prime can sound less than elegant, and condone its use only when necessary during the earliest phase. At this point, let me describe two devices I've employed to good advantage along these lines:

1. *Locate*. Any student of Spanish can tell you that English does not have a verb that corresponds to *estar*. By using "to locate" intransitively (and somewhat ungrammatically), and ignoring the durative aspect, we can come close to the meaning of *estar*. Instead of asking, "Where is X?" we can inquire "Where does X locate?" or "Where can I locate X?"

2. *Equals*. We can dramatically illustrate the pervasive use of "to be" by the pidgin use of "equals" instead. Let's consider one example in detail. Originally, we can assume that a sincere, thoughtful person wrote this bit of semantic gobbledygook. The reader may wish to convert each instance of "is" to "equals" to underscore the misery: "Because language is the symbolization of thought, and symbols are the basic unit of culture, speech is a cultural phenomenon fundamental to what civilization is."

Now suppose we try to recast this assertion into E-Prime, and attempt to capture what the writer might have tried to express, but could not with all of those "is's" of identity gumming up the works. We believe that the author, whose name we've withheld to protect the guilty, might have meant something like this: "Because language depends upon the symbolization of thought, and because symbols define the basic unit of a culture, speech as a cultural phenomenon plays a fundamental role in civilization as we know it." (E.K.)

Or this: "Semantic reactions provide the basis for the linguistic and, more generally, symbolic behaviors that constitute the basic unit of cultures. Hence we must recognize speech (in the broadest sense) as a cultural phenomenon fundamental to each specific civilization." (D.B.)

From our point of view, the original "is-of identity" version sounds rather trite and pompous, whereas the E-Prime versions at least have the virtue of providing the basis for further scientific/philosophical investigations.

I find it very hard to vent my emotions in E-Prime. I get much more satisfaction telling someone "You ARE an idiot!" than saying "You act like an idiot sometimes!" How can I overcome this deficiency?

Each of us routinely uses language to manipulate others, to get them to do what we want, and to provoke a physical or emotional response. In many ways "is" statements have much greater emotional impact than their E-Prime equivalents. "You are a #%&*!" can

evoke an emotional reaction significantly greater than the E-Prime equivalent, "You act like a #%&* sometimes!" "Is of identity" statements have the ability to powerfully stimulate signal reactions, not giving the unprepared individual a chance to buffer the blow consciously. However, this "disadvantage" as such applies mainly to written E-Prime. Spoken language has an emotional impact not just through *what* you say but through *how* you say it. Voice tone, rhythm, and inflection can drastically change the perceived meaning of a sentence. An innocuous "Thank you" said sarcastically can provoke an explosive response ("Don't you use that tone of voice with me!"). In this sense, E-Prime only modulates and does not control the affective content of speech. Or to put it another way, if you really want to provoke someone to punch you in the nose, you can do it in E-Prime, with the time-honored "F&%k you!" But why would you want to?

What effect does E-Prime have on our semantic reactions?

Korzybski (18) proposed the non-elementalistic term "semantic reactions" to label more accurately the complex "cortico-thalamic," "psycho-physiologic" interplay typical of us as human beings and carried on uniquely by us as time-binders (see note 2). Research into this field has expanded greatly since Korzybski's time, and today (1990) scientists use terms such as psychosomatic, psychoneuroendocrinology, and psychoneuroimmunology in their investigations into the mechanisms by which almost every aspect of our complex mind-body systems affects almost every other aspect. Thus "thinking" does not exist in isolation, as the way you think affects the way you feel, which affects the physiological functions of the endocrine and immune system, etc. Words can, and do, profoundly affect many different aspects of the mental-emotional-physiological-biochemical-etc. complex that comprises our physical selves.

In our experience we've found E-Prime to have a significant impact on our semantic reactions. Although much of this impact occurs at "the silent level" (see note 3), we can at least point out how using E-Prime can reduce stressful reactions during daily life. If Ron tells me (E.K.) that "Dick Tracy is a great movie," and I translate this into "Ron liked *Dick Tracy*," I can avoid feeling angry with Ron later when I discover that I did not like it. In fact, I might not even attend the movie in the first place knowing how Ron's taste in movies differs from mine. In the moment, if someone says to me "You are a #%&*!", I now automatically translate such a statement into a more

benign E-Prime form such as "You have made me very angry!" As a result I experience a reduced stress response (feeling upset, increased heart rate, cold hands and feet, adrenalin rush, etc.) Similarly, in communicating with others, I've noticed that E-Prime doesn't "push their buttons" in the way that ordinary English used to and that "heated" arguments rarely occur.

How can E-Prime improve creativity?

E-Prime can boost creativity in a number of ways, but let's look at just one. Problems that "are" unsolvable in ordinary English only *seem* unsolvable in E-Prime. This apparently subtle shift in attitude can make a great difference. When people say "That is impossible" they have in effect erected a mental brick wall by dismissing even the *possibility* of coming up with an answer to a particular question. If I (E.K.) say "That seems impossible," or "I don't see how to solve this problem (yet)," part of my mind continues working on the problem and often eventually finds one or more solutions to it.

Do you think E-Prime will ever come into general use?

Yes—at least in diluted form. We see E-Prime gaining acceptance in small stages where it has the most immediate advantages—as in the improved clarity seen in writing that reduces the use of *is*, *am*, *are*, *was*, and *were* to a minimum. This has already begun to happen. DeWitt Scott, a copyeditor for the *San Francisco Examiner* and a writing consultant, recommends E-Prime as a useful writing tool because it "forces me to express myself in straightforward statements and come out of the clouds." (14) If a practical newspaperman can see the benefits of E-Prime in news reporting, one can hope that other writers will not lag far behind.

What sort of practical program would you recommend for learning to write and speak in E-Prime?

As a first step, concentrate on using E-Prime in unimportant notes or letters and in your personal diary. After you have gained some facility in writing, begin to use E-Prime for more serious work. Although it works best to aim at a goal of 100% E-Prime for your final version, expect to have a few "to be" sentences in the text in cases where the E-Prime version sounds overly awkward, etc. Count any reduction in the incidence of "to be" in your written work

as an achievement in the right direction. With continued effort your expertise in writing in E-Prime will increase to the point where few, if any, readers will detect any abnormality of writing style: more than likely you will receive compliments on the clarity and improved quality of your finished work.

By the time you have learned to write easily in E-Prime, you will probably already have begun to occasionally speak in it. However, if you really want to reap the full benefits of the discipline, you will have to make a serious commitment to speaking in E-Prime *exclusively*, because *speaking* in E-Prime will force you to learn how to *think* in E-Prime. Just as with learning a foreign language, a time comes when you begin to think in the language rather than to merely translate sentences into it, so with learning to speak in E-Prime. Unfortunately this process usually requires total immersion in the language and culture and a serious commitment on the student's part. As we do not live in an E-Prime culture, this makes your own personal commitment to speak in E-Prime doubly important.

When first learning to speak in E-Prime, you may have to rehearse each sentence mentally before you say it. For a while people might find your conversation a trifle limited, but as many people like to hear themselves talk most of all, they probably will not notice your reticence. Nodding the head, looking intelligently interested and occasionally mouthing words and phrases such as "yes," or "perhaps," "I agree," "indeed," etc., will prove adequate for all but the rarest of conversations, where someone actually wants to talk *with* rather than *at* you. In such a case, if you take on an attitude of deep thought, even half-finished phrases and pidgin E-Prime may command respect! As mentioned earlier with respect to arguments, I have also found it valuable to practice translating the statements of others during conversations, and then feeding back the E-Prime statement to the original speaker. You will probably feel surprised at the difference this can make.

Some Final Words.

In our experience, writing and speaking in E-Prime has proven itself an effective discipline for integrating non-Aristotelian thinking and behavior patterns even into so-called habitual or even "unconscious" levels of the "mind-body." I (E.K.) not only write and speak in E-Prime, I think and even dream in it. Although E-Prime does not train one in *all* aspects of non-Aristotelian evaluation, it does a thorough job of training its students in some aspects, and

facilitates the learning of many others. Learning to write and speak in E-Prime can constitute the heart of an effective system of self-training in general semantics, and deserves serious consideration from individuals committed to the integration of non-Aristotelian processing into their habitual thought and behavior. We believe that you will find the results well worth the effort, and we look forward to hearing from you. But please—do it in E-Prime!

NOTES

1. *Elementalism*. Korzybski pointed out a variety of general semantic mechanisms that characterized the Aristotelian orientation. Among these he found: (a) widespread identification, (b) allness, (c) a two-valued system of evaluation, (d) ignoring the multiordinality of many important terms, (e) an emphasis on an intensional rather than extensional definitions, and (f) elementalism. (See reference 18, pp. xl–xlii, for a more detailed summary.) Korzybski perceived elementalism as especially harmful because of its pervasiveness. He used the term “elementalism” to label the procedure by which we verbally separate one or only a few aspects of complex, interdependent dynamic processes, and then pretend to deal with them “objectively” as independent or separate. He saw examples of Aristotelian elementalism in discussions of “body” versus “mind,” “feeling” versus “thinking,” “space” as separable from “matter” and “time,” etc.

Korzybski encouraged a non-elementalistic, non-Aristotelian, approach to life problems: personal, social, and scientific. He originated the use of the extensional device of the *hyphen* as a symbolic tool to foster a more holistic approach, as in terms such as “space-time,” “body-mind,” and “psycho-logics,” etc. At one time I (D.B.) tried to encourage the use of the non-elementalistic term, “socio-logics,” (25) to little avail as yet.

2. *Time-binding*. Alfred Korzybski’s appearance on the intellectual scene began in 1921 with the publication of *Manhood of Humanity*. (26) In this work he defined humanity functionally as a time-binding class of life, labelling in this way the capability of human beings to pass on their intellectual accomplishments from generation to generation through symbolic means, usually spoken and written language. This accounts for the exponential growth of human knowledge, and explains the intrinsic anti-human bias of totalitarian regimes (of the right or the left) that characteristically prevent, or pervert, time-binding processes. Korzybski’s analyses of the mechanisms of time-binding eventually led to the publication of his major work, *Science and Sanity* in 1933. (18)
3. *Silent Levels*. Korzybski’s non-Aristotelian model, as illustrated by his Structural Differential, makes use of an Event Level, an Object Level, and a Symbolic Level composed of an indefinitely great number of orders of abstraction. He referred to the Event and Object Levels as the “silent levels” in which we basically “live our lives,” despite the conscious human preoccupation with the Symbolic Level. With reference to the Structural Differential (see reference 18, pp. 386–411), Korzybski said of it in his seminars, “It came to me in a flash, and I have spent the rest of my life trying to understand it.”

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A LINGUISTIC NOTE: WRITING IN E-PRIME

D. DAVID BOURLAND, JR.

Introduction

MEN HAVE WARNED US for years of the dangers and inadequacies that can result from the careless, unthinking, automatic use of the verb "to be." Alfred Korzybski, Augustus de Morgan, and George Santayana have contributed outstanding warnings. It seems appropriate to reproduce here some of their more trenchant criticisms of this seemingly innocuous term.

Santayana stated, in *Skepticism and Animal Faith*:

The little word is has its tragedies; it names and identifies different things with the greatest innocence; and yet no two are ever identical, and if therein lies the charm of wedding them and calling them one, therein too lies the danger. Whenever I use the word *is*, except in sheer tautology, I deeply misuse it; and when I discover my error, the world seems to fall asunder, and the members of my family no longer know one another.(1)

De Morgan, writing something over one hundred years ago, showed in *Formal Logic* the close connection between the verb "to be" and allness orientations:

The most difficult inquiry which anyone can propose to himself is to find out what any thing *is*: in all probability we do not know what we are talking about when we ask such a question. The philosophers of the middle ages were much concerned with the *is*, or *essence*, of things: they argued to their own minds, with great justice, that if they could only find out what a thing is, they should find out all about it: they tried, and failed. Their successors, taking warning by their example, have inverted the proposition; and have satisfied themselves that the only way of finding what a thing is, lies in finding what we can about it; that

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modes of relation and connexion are all we can know of anything; in short, the proverb "tell me who you are with, and I will tell you who you are," applies as much to the nature of things as to the character of men.(2)

As one might expect, Korzybski gave the clearest expression of the sociocultural issues involved in, and implied by, the verb "to be." The following two excerpts from *Science and Sanity* present his position:

The little word "to be" appears as a very peculiar word and is, perhaps, responsible for many human semantic difficulties. If the anthropologists are correct, only a few of the primitive peoples have this verb. The majority do not have it and do not need it, because all their semantic reactions and languages are practically based on, and involve, literal identification. In passing from the primitive stage of human society to the present slightly higher stage, which might be called the infantile stage, or infantile period, too crude identification was no longer possible. Languages were built, based on slightly modified or limited identification, and, for flexibility, the "is" of identity was introduced explicitly. Although very little has been done in the *structural* analysis of languages in general, and of those of primitive peoples in particular, we know that in the Indo-European languages the verb "to be," among others, is used as an *auxiliary* verb and also for the purpose of positing false to facts identity. With the primitive prevalent lack of consciousness of abstracting, and the primitive belief in the magic of words, the *semantic reactions* were such that words were identified with the objective levels. Perhaps it is not too much to say that the primitive "psychology" peculiarly required such a fundamental identity. Identity may be defined as "absolute sameness in all respects" which, in a world of ever-changing processes and a human world of indefinitely many orders of abstractions, appears as a *structural* impossibility. Identity appears, then, as a primitive "over-emotional" generalization of similarity, equality, equivalence, equipollence, etc., and, in no case, does it appear in fact as "absolute sameness in all respects." As soon as the *structurally delusional* character of identity is pointed out, it becomes imperative for sanity to eliminate such delusional factors from our languages and *semantic reactions*. With the advent of "civilization," the use of this word was enlarged, but some of the fundamental primitive implications and psycho-logical semantic effects were preserved. If we use the "is" at all, and it is extremely difficult to avoid entirely this auxiliary verb when using languages which, to a large extent, depend on it, we must be particularly careful not to use "is" as an identity term. . . . (p. 400)

For thousands of years, millions upon millions of humans have used a great deal of their nervous energy in worrying upon delusional questions, forced upon them by the pernicious "is" of identity, such as: "What is an object?," "What is life?," "What is hell?," "What is heaven?," "What is space?," "What is time?," and an endless array of such irritants.

The answer, based on the human discrimination of orders of abstractions and so proper *human evaluation*, is definite, undeniable, simple, and *unique*: "Whatever one might say something 'is,' it is not." Whatever we might say belongs to the verbal level and *not* to the un-speakable, objective levels.

Let me repeat once more that the "is" of identity forces us into semantic disturbances of wrong *evaluation*. We establish, for instance, the *identity* of the un-speakable objective level with words, which, once stated, becomes obviously false to facts. The "is" of identity, if used as indicating "identity" (structurally *impossible* on the objective levels), says nothing. Thus, the question, "What is an object?," may be answered, "An object is an object"—a statement which says nothing. If used in definitions or classifications, such as "Smith is a man," a type of statement used even in the *Principia Mathematica*, or "A is B or not B," as in the formulation of the law of "excluded third" in the two-valued Aristotelian "logic," it always establishes an *identity*, false to facts. The first statement expresses the *identity* of a proper name with a class name which must lead to the confusion of classes (higher order abstractions) with individuals (lower order abstractions). This confusion leads automatically to disturbed evaluation in life, because the characteristics of a class are *not* the "same" as, nor identical with, the characteristics of the individual. I shall not analyse in detail the "A is B," because, obviously, it is *not*. (pp. 408-409) (3)

In this paper the writer describes an approach toward this particular term that can produce semantically interesting results. If we represent the whole of the English language as *E*, and the linguistic element "to be" with all its inflectional forms by *e*, then this paper concerns the language *E'*, defined as:

$$E' = E - e$$

This subtraction may appear trivial, but consideration will show that it introduces important structural changes. Grammatically speaking, we have given up most of the passive voice, much of the subjunctive mood, and some participial usages. More significantly, however, subject-predicate language (note 1) has become impossible, the "is" of identity cannot rise up to debilitate our statements, and we become *forced* to use actional, functional, straightforward statements.

Origin and Applications

I cannot claim credit for having made the suggestion that led to the formulation of the language *E-Prime*. Unfortunately I cannot name the person who did. While on a fellowship at the Institute of General Semantics in 1949, I saw a letter written by a man

from some small town in Connecticut (Tollins?), which advanced an audacious suggestion. He recommended that we stop using the verb "to be" in any form.

At that time I had a paper in preparation for the Third Congress on General Semantics (University of Denver, July 1949). The suggestion seemed worth trying; it clearly constituted much more than a mere grammatical trick. Accordingly, I prepared the paper later published as reference 4, trying to avoid any use of "to be." (Note 2) This initial attempt to write in E-Prime resulted in a paper not necessarily stilted or awkward in phraseology, as one might expect.

I have also used E-Prime in references 5 and 6, plus the present paper. It has eventually become easier to write in E-Prime, even when treating rather extensive analytical material such as in reference 6. Of course, one would find it particularly difficult to *speak* routinely in E-Prime. However, one can use the E-Prime approach in key places of an oral analysis or discussion, to good effect. I have tried this on occasion and can recommend E-Prime as a good technique for bringing a discussion out of verbal clouds, onto orders of abstraction that tend to promote fruitful analysis and agreement. I recommend this approach particularly to teachers of general semantics who wish to help students become sensitive to mechanisms of identification, and to authors of serious articles in the field.

Some Properties of E-Prime

This section presents a discussion of the more important properties of the language E-Prime, certain questions that vanish, certain role-players that become evident, and some aspects of abbreviation.

1. *Vanishing Questions*: One simply cannot ask, in E-Prime, certain questions that have long plagued individuals in various ways. In addition to the questions posed by Korzybski in the second quotation given above, we can include the following ones:

What is man?

But is it art?

What is general semantics?

I submit that the structure of those questions predisposes the ensuing discussion to areas of discourse in which the likelihood of useful information exchange becomes severely reduced (not *impossible*, mind you, but significantly *reduced*). This observation tends to lend further emphasis to the magnitude of the task accomplished by Korzybski in proceeding from such a question as "What is man?"

to his time-binding definition of mankind, and thence to general semantics.

2. *A Matter of Abbreviation*: To a certain extent, the verb "to be" allows and, indeed, seems to force abbreviation or truncation in speech and writing. In the language of mathematics a goodly amount of abbreviation becomes sheer necessity; mathematicians even encourage one another to emphasize abbreviations in formal presentations in the name of "elegance." This seems appropriate, and serves as a matter of despair only for struggling students, since the language of mathematics contains precise definitions for the quantities, relations, operations, etc., involved in such elegant statements. In marked contrast to this, descriptions and assertions in our ordinary discursive languages usually contain extremely high order abstractions (e.g., "right," "the past") that require extensive elucidation rather than further abbreviations.

One example may illustrate further the desired point of this matter of abbreviation. Consider the following assertion, with which one really can have little quarrel (on the face of it): "We do this thing because it is right." The last three words potentially imply volumes of political, sociological, and theological discourse, as well as inspiration, disputation, etc. We could employ the statement as a whole in (at least partial) justification of actions that could range from seeming heinous to some, to those that seem unquestionably foreordained (and hence requiring no justification) to others. Of course, this raises questions about the nature of the information content of such an assertion. In any event, one may find it an interesting exercise to recast that statement in E-Prime, while preserving the presumed intent of the original statement. I suggest this as one possibility: "We do this thing because we sincerely desire to minimize the discrepancies between our actions and our stated 'ideals.'" That form obviously does not have the pithy snap of the original statement. Some would probably characterize that particular E-Prime variant as somewhat pedestrian. Even so, the E-Prime statement seems to admit openly the participation in the overall situation of some creed or set of beliefs, allegedly held currently by some humans and subject to change (although perhaps only after some considerable struggle).

3. *Return of the Role-Players*: Perhaps due in large part to the abbreviational aspects discussed above, a language whose structure allows (or encourages) incessant use of "to be" seems to suppress the presence or influence of some of the important role-players. E-Prime, in contrast to such suppression, tends to invite

particular attention to the agents involved. We become encouraged to reflect the fact that certain humans, still living or formerly living, as acted upon by beliefs about one another and the worlds about us, perform or performed the various activities under discussion. It becomes evident that some person wrote the given paper—it did not appear by some magic. One furthermore becomes aware of the implication that the person who prepared the given non-magical paper may have included some inaccuracies or misleading statements. Hence we may suggest that the use of E-Prime fosters the critical review of written material.

4. *A Disclaimer:* The use of E-Prime does not, by itself, preclude identification or other undesirable linguistic forms and reactions (such as confusion in orders of abstractions, elementalism, and ignoring the multiordinality of most key terms). It does, however, perform outstandingly in removing what one could call the "supreme irritant." The following statement by Korzybski provides a measure of what E-Prime has to offer:

The subject-predicate form, the "is" of identity, and the elementalism of the Aristotelian system are perhaps the main semantic factors in need of revision, as they are found to be the foundation of the insufficiency of this system and represent the mechanism of semantic disturbances, making general adjustment and sanity impossible. (3, p. 371)

By adopting E-Prime, we accomplish the first two factors requiring revision called for by Korzybski, *at one stroke*. The following section comes to grips with the third factor called out.

A Beneficial Combination

Korzybski asserted in his last few seminars that one of his most important contributions consisted in revising the structure of our language, through the extensional devices (Note 3), without making it necessary to revise the language itself. Let us represent the result of transforming the structure of conventional English by the adroit application of the extensional devices as E_k . Then let us consider the proper subset of E_k consisting of the set intersection (or "join") $E_k \cap E'$. We may represent that join as E_k' .

This operation preserves the structural benefits that potentially accrue from the extensional devices that encourage our consciousness of abstracting (Note 4), which facilitate the construction of non-elementalistic formulations, and which warn against treating higher order abstractions loosely. The language E_k' supplies the linguis-

tic assistance that results in improved formulations as discussed in the preceding sections. Furthermore, the basis for undeniably justified criticism of an occasional use of the "is of identity" in reference 3 becomes removed.

I suggest that the general semantics community explore the possibilities of E-Prime as well as the even more beneficial E_k' .

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NOTES

1. Logical or linguistic form in which an "entity" (the subject) has a property or "quality" (the predicate) assigned through an asserted "identity" relation, as in "Grass is green," "Beauty is truth," "John is a liberal." Some respectable philosophical, and even mathematical logical, circles continue to regard the subject-predicate form with approval.
2. This effort fell short in one instance. A glaring "was" spoils an otherwise perfect record (excluding quotations, of course). I fancy that a well-meaning editorial change *may* have done me in.
3. Indexes, chain indexes, dates, use of the et cetera, hyphens, and quotes.
4. The devices can also foster consciousness of semantic construction; see reference 5.

THE SEMANTICS OF A NON-ARISTOTELIAN LANGUAGE

D. DAVID BOURLAND, JR.

Introduction

IN AN EARLIER paper this writer invited attention to some of the characteristics of a subset of the English language he called "E-Prime."⁽⁴⁾ This subset consists of standard English with the exclusion of all the inflectional forms of the verb "to be." It forms a language with some interesting properties.

The earlier paper covered the more prominent characteristics of E-Prime. The following items review the consequences of adopting E-Prime:

Certain questions vanish. One cannot ask, in E-Prime, "What is life?" "What is Man?" etc. We regard these as poorly structured questions. These questions involve the use of what some critics have called the "is of identity."

Some misleadingly elegant abbreviations become impossible, as implied in such statements as "We know this is the right thing to do." These abbreviations usually involve what some call the "is of predication."

Some verbally suppressed, but nevertheless active, role-players return to the scene. Statements reflect the fact that some human originated, repeated, stated, etc., them. The frequency of such low content forms as "It has been found that . . .," "It is known that . . ." goes to zero. E-Prime tends to invite attention to the agents involved in information transactions.

The use of E-Prime certainly cannot forestall all the mechanisms of identification, which of course go much deeper than mere verbalization. However, E-Prime does remove the "supreme irritant"

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and, in the process, eliminates both the subject-predicate form and the "is of identity."

This paper presents several applications of E-Prime, starting with general semantics and then moving out into other parts of the world.

Non-Aristotelian Premises

The so-called Non-Aristotelian Premises (Non-Identity, Non-Allness, and Self-Reflexiveness) have appeared in various books and papers. Evidently Korzybski's appreciation of their key significance evolved during the ten-year period between the publication of *Science and Sanity* (1933) and the Second American Congress on General Semantics (1943). These now-familiar "laws" do not appear grouped together as such in *Science and Sanity* (Note 1), but they did receive explicit treatment in Korzybski's Congress paper as quoted below:

- (1) A word is not the fact, feeling, situation, relation, etc.
- (2) A word covers not all the characteristics of an object, situation, fact, feeling, etc..
- (3) Language is also self-reflexive in the sense that in a language we can speak about language. (7)

Let us now consider these premises from the viewpoint of E-Prime. It would seem that both the first and third need recasting slightly. One possible E-Prime variant for each of those appears below:

- (1') No two structures can exhibit absolute sameness in all respects; most particularly, a structure on the symbolic level (such as a "word") has characteristics that differ significantly from those of other structures associated with it on the object level or event level (such as the fact, feeling, situation, relation, etc., labeled by the given "word").
- (3') We can use language self-reflexively, in the sense that in a language we can speak about that language, but we must recognize that the resulting symbolic structures will belong to higher orders of abstraction than those we ascribe to the symbolic structures of the initial language.

The statements in (1') and (3') make use of a two-part distinction between levels of abstraction (event level, object level, and symbolic level) and orders of abstraction on given levels. The writer

has discussed and employed this analytical technique in several papers (Note 2); more recently Welte has also found this distinction useful in his anthropological research, evidently independent of the writer's efforts. (Note 3)

Perhaps again, as in the initial paper on E-Prime, the writer should admit that the statements in (1') and (3') do not have the terse cogency of the original forms in (1) and (3). But despite their seeming pedestrian quality, they present a necessarily fuller description. The premise as written in (3') also seems to the writer to lead more directly into considerations of the multiordinality of key terms. (Note 4)

Map-Territory Analogy

Now let us turn to the Map-Territory Analogy, a teaching procedure used by Korzybski in explication of the Non-Aristotelian Premises and in illustration of the importance of structural factors. In E-Prime these familiar statements may appear as follows:

A "map" belongs to a level of abstraction different from that of the "territory" it represents.

A "map" does not contain all the structural characteristics of the "territory" it represents.

A "map" may self-reflexively contain a "map" of higher order that shows the relation between the "territory" represented in some detail to the surrounding "territory."

"Instant General Semantics"

The increasing tempo of life today has contributed to the growing use of "instant" products. Whether coffee, tea, or whatever, the "instant" versions of items usually supply a slightly degraded product that tries to trade convenience for quality.

E-Prime supplies a kind of "Instant General Semantics." Although it clearly provides only a partial version, the contributions E-Prime makes in relieving us from the linguistic miseries of the "is of identity" and subject-predicate language amount to significant contributions.

One does not acquire this particular instant product without some semantic labor. Readers may demonstrate this to themselves by writing their next letter in E-Prime.

Talking about Dogs, etc.

Some time ago, while driving along, the writer and his then-four-year-old daughter noticed a large shaggy dog walking down the street. As we returned home later, the little girl asked, pointing, "Daddy, is that the *same* dog we saw a while ago?" (Note 5) Upon reflection it becomes apparent that one cannot answer that question correctly either by "yes" or "no."

As noted earlier (4), it becomes necessary to use E-Prime as augmented by Korzybski's extensional devices: E_k -Prime. With the richness of that language we can describe the recalled object-level happening, observed at time t_1 , as $Dog_1^{t_1}$. Then, at time t_2 , we can rephrase the earlier question as: "Daddy, do I see $Dog_1^{t_2}$ or $Dog_2^{t_2}$?" Then Daddy can properly reply, "I think that we see $Dog_1^{t_2}$." While granting that this second question may exceed the capabilities of most four-year-olds, how about us forty-year-olds?

One may choose to see this consequence to the dog encounter: If we need E_k -Prime (at least) to speak accurately about shaggy dogs, surely we need this or better to discuss more complicated matters of greater moment.

Discussion

Several people have offered the suggestion that, even with the adoption and use of E-Prime, one may still identify one order or level of abstraction with another.

The term "identification" labels an undesirable and un-speakable semantic reaction. An individual who suffers noticeably from such semantic reactions may require extensive retraining, which will surely entail more than linguistic means alone. The suppression or, indeed, the adoption of a finite set of terms cannot offer an effective method for changing semantic reactions, unless this activity represents just one part of a multifaceted program.

In the writer's opinion, however, E-Prime offers these services:

- E-Prime completely removes the insidiously easily available and culturally acceptable handmaidens of subject-predicate language and is-of-identity forms.
- E-Prime forces the issue by tending to make fallacious constructions more noticeable and hence more obviously needful of revision.
- By introducing the constraint of avoiding *all* forms of an all-too-commonly used linguistic form, a heightened degree of verbal

consciousness becomes forced upon the given individual writer. This consciousness can lead to two particularly beneficial developments: (1) greater care in linguistic sensitivity; and (2) consciousness of abstracting on a more general level.

It seemed desirable to emphasize, above, the matter of E-Prime removing a culturally-approved—at least approved in the Aristotelian culture—pacifier. The forms of "to be" have become so placidly a part of the background noise of conventional speech that one has to make an effort in order to perceive them. A peculiarly difficult point to convey to some people consists of the observation that one simply does not *need* the verb "to be" in order to speak, relate, analyze, etc.

The writer has put together a number of papers in E-Prime, dealing with topics somehow related to general semantics. The Appendix shows the results of applying E-Prime to an excerpt from the Declaration of Independence, to demonstrate that E-Prime can readily flourish in such a nontechnical area.

In a discussion of multiordinal terms, Korzybski (6) included the following analysis of a higher-order mechanism:

I recall vividly an argument I had with a young and very gifted mathematician. Our conversation was about the geometries of Euclid and Lobatchevski, and we were discussing the dropping and introduction of assumptions. I maintained that Lobatchevski introduced an assumption; he maintained that Lobatchevski dropped an assumption. On the surface, it might have appeared that this is a problem of "fact" and not of preference. The famous fifth postulate of Euclid reads, "If a straight line falling on two straight lines makes the interior angles on the same side less than two right angles, the two straight lines, if produced indefinitely, meet on that side on which are the angles less than two right angles." We should note, in passing, that a straight line is assumed to be of "infinite" length, which involves a definite type of structural metaphysics of "space," common to the A and older systems. This postulate of Euclid can be expressed in one of its equivalent forms, as, for instance, "Through a point outside a straight line one, and only one, parallel to it can be drawn." Lobatchevski and others decided to build up a geometry without this postulate, and in this they were successful. Let us consider what Lobatchevski did. For this, we go to a deeper level—otherwise, to a higher order of abstraction—where we discover that what on his level had been the dropping of an assumption becomes on our deeper level or higher order abstraction the introduction of an assumption that through a point outside a straight line there passes more than one parallel line.

Now such a process is structurally inherent in all human knowledge. More than this, it is a unique characteristic of the structure of human

knowledge. We can always do this. If we pass to higher orders of abstractions, situations seemingly "insoluble," "matters of fact," quite often become problems of preference. This problem is of extreme semantic importance, and of indefinitely extended consequences for all science, psychiatry, and education in particular.

Now in the case of E-Prime, one may regard this as the result of a comparatively trivial suppression of one speech form out of the some 490,000 words that make up standard English. The writer submits, however, that by completely avoiding "to be" we introduce an important psycho-logical factor: a linguistic implementation of the non-Aristotelian assumption of non-identity. This particular factor operates most importantly through encouraging the use of functional, structural expressions that tend to facilitate visualizations and hence provide a basis for diminishing identifications. The importance of visualization techniques should not require elaboration here.

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NOTES

1. Korzybski covered the material summarized in the Non-Aristotelian Premises, of course, as for example on pages 11, 58f, and Supplement III. But he did not collect these three premises together in *Science and Sanity*.
2. See Bourland references 1, 2, and 3, and Bourland and McManus reference 5.
3. See Welte reference 8.

4. See Korzybski reference 6, pp. 433f.
5. Emphasis supplied, of course.

APPENDIX

Excerpt from the Declaration of Independence in E-Prime

We assert and shall operate on the basis of the following explicit postulates:

1. All citizens have equivalent political rights.
2. All citizens simply by virtue of their existence have certain inalienable rights, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
3. Men institute Governments in order to secure the rights given above.
4. Governments derive their powers solely from the consent of the governed.
5. Whenever any form of Government operates inconsistently with the previously listed postulates, the People have the right to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new Government.

etc.

To Be or Not:

An E-Prime Anthology

Edited by
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Paul Dennithorne Johnston

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