

**THE GOOD,
THE BAD,
AND THE UGLY:
Comments on the
E-Prime Symposium**

E. W. KELLOGG III*

SINCE THE PUBLICATION of Cullen Murphy's article "To Be in Their Bonnets" in the February, 1992, issue of *The Atlantic* magazine, the idea of E-Prime (English without the verb "to be") has aroused the curiosity and interest of people across the United States. (1) This interest grew further when Robert Siegle of National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" interviewed me as one of the few who speak fluently in E-Prime. Although the NPR broadcast provided neither a phone number or address, the International Society for General Semantics received hundreds of calls from people wanting to order the book *To Be or Not: An E-Prime Anthology*. (2)

From the response, it looks as if E-Prime has more widespread appeal than anyone expected. Although E-Prime has aroused controversy since Dave Bourland went public with the idea in 1965, only recently has it surfaced in such a way

* Dr. E. W. Kellogg III presently serves as the Vice-President of Publications of ISGS. Currently, he has an E-Prime workbook underway which he hopes to publish in 1993. The workbook will comprise a sort of short course (about 10 classroom sessions) aimed at high school English classes that will allow students (and teachers) to experiment with E-Prime.

as to make it virtually impossible for the general semantics community at large to ignore. I feel delighted that the editor of *Et cetera*, Jeremy Klein, has given me the opportunity to preview and comment upon the papers included in this special E-Prime symposium issue.

Those familiar with my articles (3, 4) know that I have made a long-term commitment to training myself in a more "mindful," non-Aristotelian and phenomenological orientation by changing the way I use language. In spite of my enthusiasm for E-Prime as an experimental discipline, its use does entail certain difficulties. In his article "The Word 'E-Prime' Is Not the Thing," veteran general semanticist Robert Wanderer grabs the bull by the tail and faces the situation. (5) He asks the following questions, among others: "Must we lose the acceptable constructions using 'to be'? Does making the big effort to ban 'to be' lead us to overlook other problems? And can we gain the advantages without loss of accuracy and occasionally awkward constructions which substitute for the unacceptable language?"

Although anyone seriously interested in E-Prime will need to consider these important questions for themselves, I will take this opportunity to answer them from my own point of view. Must one eliminate the use of every form of "to be" in order to reap the benefits of the discipline? William Dallmann, in his "Is Is Not Is Is Not Is And Other Thoughts On E-Prime," proposes E-Prime_{mod}, a form of E-Prime that disallows the use of "to be" in its_{mod} identity and predication modes *only*. (6) In its written form at least, Dallmann's variant succeeds in allowing the user to more clearly communicate with others, while eliminating "to be" in its most pernicious usages.

Must one use 100% E-Prime to reap any of the benefits? Certainly not. Any reduction in the use of "to be" can prove beneficial, and I applaud the efforts of anyone who moves in this direction. An all-or-nothing attitude can sabotage the learning of E-Prime by the beginner, and even after achieving a certain level of skill an individual may not choose to go "all the way". (3, 4) However "weaker" forms of E-Prime can no longer take advantage of the relatively simple rule (no use of *any* forms of "to be") that allowed me to make changes in

my language use in "real time" — while speaking or thinking. This has brought about such deep-seated changes in the way that I process information that I even dream in E-Prime. For advanced practitioners who want to reap the *maximum* benefit, and to learn to habitually *think* in E-Prime, I recommend that they adhere to the rule of complete elimination of "to be," because at this point in time (1992) only this extreme form of the discipline has succeeded in achieving such a result.

Moving on to Wanderer's second question, does making the big effort to ban "to be" lead us to overlook other problems? To this I can answer with a fairly definitive "no." Although beginners may need to make a "big effort," as with any other learned skill the effort required decreases markedly with practice. This has allowed me to focus and implement further refinements in my use of language, such as Alan Walker Read's deletion of absolutisms (words such as always, never, all, none etc.), or Korzybski's extensional devices. (7, 8) Although eliminating "to be" makes a practical starting point towards a more non-Aristotelian language, it only begins a process which seems to have no end.

E-Prime as a discipline does not begin and end with the elimination of "to be." The rule provides the focus, but the intention of the practitioner plays an even more important part. I myself aim at a phenomenologically ideal language (E-Prime_p), that represents and communicates the territory of my experience both to myself and others as clearly and accurately as possible. In this regard it makes sense to differentiate between the "spirit" and the "letter" of the law, and I can at least agree with Ralph Kenyon when he draws attention to this distinction. (9) Philip Thompsen and Dong-Kuen Ahn's interesting paper on "flaming" provides tentative (*very* tentative) support for the idea that when E-Prime "works," the intention of the individual does play a predominant controlling role. (10)

However, it seems a mistake to tackle this particular issue with an either/or attitude. After reading *Science and Sanity*, and a plethora of other general semantics books, I labored with the best of intentions to incorporate the insights of general semantics into my life. Months of energetic efforts on

my part led to very little progress. My discovery of E-Prime in 1977 changed this situation radically by providing me with a practical focus and a guiding principle through which I could coordinate my efforts. In my experience, E-Prime as a discipline requires both the spirit and the letter of the law to succeed. In theory we can separate the two; but in practice they make an integrated whole.

Arriving at last at Wanderer's third question: "...can we gain the advantages [of E-Prime] without loss of accuracy and occasionally awkward constructions which substitute for the unacceptable language?" Before answering this question, let me point out that such "awkward constructions" occur almost exclusively in spoken E-Prime translations of colloquial expressions of the "Who are you?" and "How are you?" ilk. In practice, and in the context of a living conversation, I usually come up with suitable alternatives. On the phone I will ask "May I speak with Paul?" instead of "Is Paul there?" Although it may require a bit of creative effort, I've found that such "awkward constructions" decrease markedly as one's skill in speaking in E-Prime increases.

The discipline of E-Prime confers many advantages to the practitioner, and certainly other methods exist to achieve at least some of them. In achieving a "consciousness of abstracting" E-Prime works extraordinarily well. I find myself often reminded of Ellen Langer's work at Harvard as I go about my daily tasks, and now believe that the "side effect" of increased "mindfulness" may in the end prove as important as its more straightforward linguistic benefits. (11) However, at least in this respect, other methods, from the phenomenological *epoché* to zen meditation, may achieve an effect comparable to that of E-Prime.

However, E-Prime does more than increase "consciousness of abstracting" in its users, it also changes the way in which they structure language. To paraphrase McLuhan, "the medium conveys its own message," and it seems almost axiomatic among general semanticists that the *structure* of a language can profoundly influence the mental processes and behavior of the individuals who use it.

I contend that in the majority of its occurrences in the "is of identity" and "is of predication" modes the verb "to be" ap-

pears in pernicious usages, because it encourages "false to facts" habits of thought through which we see a world made up of unchanging independent objects. In contrast, science (1992) describes the world as a conglomeration of ongoing interdependent processes in which our perception as individuals plays a not inconsiderable part. In this respect, one must at least eliminate "to be" in its identity and predication modes in order to achieve an improved congruency between the map of language and the territory of experience. In my judgement, nothing else can do the same job.

A number of the participants in this symposium issue argue that even if one overtly removes "to be" from English, that it still "exists" through implication in certain sentence structures. For example, in his article "Metaphor and E-Prime" Raymond Gozzi, Jr. talks about the subterranean "is" of identity or predication. (12) Do such covert forms of "to be" exist and do they play a role even in the overtly "is free" language of E-Prime?

Although I consider this an important question, it appears based on a number of false assumptions. For example, Gozzi contends that the "act of naming relies on the verb 'to be' to establish a name — and then simply assumes the 'is' of identity or predication every time we use the name." Really? When someone asks me "Who are you?" and I reply "Ed" must this necessarily mean "(I am) Ed" instead of the E-Prime alternative "(I label myself) Ed"? The naming function does not require "to be" overtly or covertly, and if a child asks me "What is this?" while looking at my computer, I will more than likely point at the object in question and say "We call this a computer."

I assume that because Gozzi thinks in "is" English, he made assumptions about the *necessary* participation of the "subterranean is" in "naming" and "metaphor" that appear invalid upon closer examination. The subterranean "is" of identity or predication may exist, but it seems clear that their existence depends upon the intention of the individual, and not upon a hypothetical property of the "underlying ontology of language."

Similarly, the unconscious reintroduction of forms of "to be" by individuals who read articles written *about* E-Prime

can seriously hamper their understanding of E-Prime. No matter how carefully I may say or write something in E-Prime, I have discovered to my annoyance that even intelligent individuals often retranslated my statements into some sort of absolutistic "is" equivalent, and then responded to what they think I said, but didn't! For example, in his article "E-Prime or E-Choice" Emory Menefee wrote that "...Kellogg and Bourland stress that complete elimination of all forms of "to be" IS the only satisfactory way to attain satisfactory benefits." (emphasis mine) (13) Obviously, we do not hold such a position, and I would hope that readers at least of this article will make a conscious effort to respond to what they see written, and not to some "is" English translation of it.

I found the reintroduction of "is" effect in full flower in James French's article "The Ten Top Arguments Against E-Prime." (14) In this article Mr. French fabricates clay pigeons of his own design and then shoots them down. As someone who knows the subject from the "inside-out," I found his arguments of little merit. For the most part he simply presented his subjective opinions as objective facts. He also neatly avoided considering one of the most important arguments in favor of E-Prime — that individuals who actually give E-Prime a fair try usually find something of value in it. Experience does count for something, and if you tell carpenters that a hammer will not drive nails they will not take you seriously. Unfortunately, although I can not take Mr. French's comments seriously myself, they may discourage others from trying E-Prime for themselves and making a judgement based upon their own experience.

Some Final Words

Readers of this special issue of *Et cetera* may have noticed that most of the participants of this symposium at least agree on the usefulness of E-Prime as a tool for the teaching of general semantics. In a more widespread application, I hope that short courses in E-Prime will eventually find increased use in high school and college English classes. In this format, E-Prime can provide a practical and entertaining way of helping students gain awareness of how they overuse and abuse the verb "to be," and of the opportunities offered by

other verb choices and sentence structures. So far, a number of English teachers have established that E-Prime can work effectively in this regard, and it seems reasonable to predict that ever larger groups of students will find themselves exposed to E-Prime, and to general semantics, in this way. (15-17)

E-Prime as a discipline involves a number of limitations that most English speakers would find onerous, and I certainly would not expect it to hold any more appeal to the majority of English-speaking people than a low-fat vegetarian diet would to the same group. Only recently has research conclusively demonstrated that such a diet confers long-term health benefits, and despite the hard evidence in its favor, it has only begun to gain in popularity. (18) Perhaps a hundred years from now empirical scientific research will show that E-Prime confers mental health benefits among those who practice it. Time will tell.

As one of the few committed to E-Prime in both its written and spoken form, it seems obvious that I have found the benefits well worth the time and effort involved. E-Prime plays an integral role in my life, and it has significantly enhanced it in too many ways to mention here. Those who do not find E-Prime to their taste, like Mr. French, may well cry "Where's the BEef!" opting for a "richer" linguistic diet, regardless of the potential cost to their mental health. (Note to Emory Menefee: a good pun never dies, and a bad pun never, ever, dies.) Fortunately, the future success of E-Prime may not depend upon its wide acceptance, but upon its adoption by individuals who use it because of its practical value in their daily lives. If the articles in this special symposium issue of *Et cetera* have intrigued you, I suggest that you experiment with E-Prime and judge its value for yourself.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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 16. Elaine C. Johnson, "Discovering E-Prime," *Et cetera* 45, no. 2 (Summer 1988) 181-183 #.
 17. Andrea Johnson, "Oh To Be A Writer," *Et cetera* 49, no. 2 (Summer 1992).
 18. See John Robbins, *Diet for A New America*, (Walpole, NH: Stillpoint Publishing, 1987) for a summary of scientific research on this topic.