

THE E-PRIME CONTROVERSY: A Symposium

PREFACE

Attack on the Killer Be's

PHILOSOPHERS HAVE MADE a to-do over "to be" (and its cognate forms) long before such twentieth century un-Be-witchers as George Santayana, Bertrand Russell, I. A. Richards, and Alfred Korzybski began their campaigns against the Be-fuddlement of the human species. Raymond Gozzi informs us of an ancient "patron saint" of E-Prime, one Lycophron, a pupil of the rhetorician Gorgias (483?-376? B.C.E.), the antagonist of Plato's dialogue of the same name. According to Mr. Gozzi:

Lycophron apparently grew tired of the endless Greek philosophizing about the existence of things we can only talk about, and became convinced that the verb "to be" misled people into positing the existence of non-existent verbal entities. As Gomperz [Theodore Gomperz, *Greek Thinkers*, Vol. 1. London: John Murray, 1901] put it, Lycophron felt that philosophers confused the use of "to be" as a copula and as [a predicator of] existence. His response was to avoid all use of "to be."

Raymond Gozzi
(Personal Communication)

"To be" continues to Be-devil the semantically sensitive. Their numbers have recently increased as a result of Cullen Murphy's *Atlantic Monthly* article (reprinted herein) and sto-

ries on National Public Radio, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and elsewhere. As one might expect, some mistaken notions regarding E-Prime and general semantics appeared in the media melee. For example, Joel Achenbach, writing for the *Washington Post*, claimed that "there is an entire movement, many decades old, to eradicate 'to be' from the language. The movement, described in the *Atlantic Monthly*, is called 'general semantics,' and one of its tenets is that 'to be' is dangerous."

Kierkegaard, Sartre or Hamlet might indeed have claimed "that 'to be' is dangerous." But I haven't seen the list that includes the particular tenet Mr. Achenbach mentions, and I doubt if it would appear on any canonic semantic list in such a delightfully self-subverting form.

Perhaps E-Prime has had its fifteen minutes of fame and only a few grammarians, philosophers, and semanticists will maintain an interest in it. The verdict of E-Prime's severest critics may prevail, and historians will relegate E-Prime to a footnote referring to it as a cognitive-linguistic cul-de-sac. On the other hand, its advocates, whose writings indicate a profound knowledge of many hidden factors distorting human understanding, may indeed properly claim the attention of those seeking fruitful paths toward the realization of human potentialities.

The authors who participated in this issue's symposium certainly haven't answered all questions regarding the merits of E-Prime. However, with backgrounds in linguistics, physics, art, education, therapy, etc., they do offer us an intriguing intellectual excursion.

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