

## **THE WORD "E-PRIME"**

ROBERT WANDERER\* **IS NOT THE THING**

**E**-PRIME PRESENTS A DILEMMA to the general semantics-oriented person seeking to represent the stuff *Out There* more accurately.

I believe it merits our praise for eliminating false-to-fact constructions such as the *Is of Identity* and the *Is of Predication*, near-meaningless phraseology such as "it is known that..." and passive forms which fail to fix responsibility for the action they attempt to describe.

But I'm left with several nagging questions: Must we also 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?

On the first question, E-Primeologists say yes: They find it more consistent and practical to eliminate all forms of "to be" rather than try to differentiate between the OK and the not-OK forms. On the second question, we cannot fairly blame E-Prime for not doing what it doesn't claim to do. In *To Be or*

\* Robert Wanderer writes the "Illustrating General Semantics" feature for *Et cetera*. He also edits *The Map*, the newsletter of the San Francisco Chapter of I.S.G.S.

Not, Kellogg and Bourland call E-Prime a "practical starting point in the development of a non-Aristotelian language" (p.37), which seems to suggest that other reforms may come later. But I'm still uncomfortable with the awkward substitutes; I wonder if the cure is worse than the alleged disease.

My name is Robert Wanderer. That sentence uses a "semantically acceptable" form of "is," but E-Prime rejects all forms of "to be." E-Primeophiles suggest I eliminate that "is" by saying such things as "People call me Robert Wanderer" or "At my birth, my parents decided to name me Robert Wanderer." But I find these convolutions not only longer and less clear, but somewhat inaccurate: Is my name Robert Wanderer just because the majority of my friends say so, and am I using that name only because of a decision my parents made many years ago?

Similarly, I find Kellogg's suggestion that we change "What is your name?" to "What do you call yourself?" (p.97) as somewhere between quaint and ludicrous, with a possibility of insulting.

Kellogg translates "This food is good" to "This food tastes good" (p. 96). I see "I think this food tastes good" as still better, but I would rank "I think this food is good" as better than his "This food tastes good," since I consider affixing responsibility more important than eliminating "to be."

Bourland offers a translation of a passage from Machiavelli's *The Prince*, changing the first sentence from "Everyone admits how praiseworthy it is in a prince to keep faith..." to "Every one admits that praiseworthy princes should keep faith..." (pp.112-113). I consider the use of "should" as much of a problem in its own way as the use of "is," and we would need a longer and more involved translation to assign responsibility.

I see Bourland at his weakest when he attempts to deal with Korzybski's "Whatever you say a thing is, well, it is not; for the word is not the thing" (p. 111). As he points out, the statement had considerable shock value. Bourland's offer to explain Korzybski's dictum by using the Structural Differential I consider both a cop-out and not understandable to many people; and his translation "One must differentiate carefully between structures on the Object Level ("perceived

reality") and related structures on the Symbolic Level" as losing not only the shock value but the elegant simplicity of the original.

Let me try to state my difference with the Bourland/Kellogg point of view. We probably agree on aiming for a clearer, more accurate representation of the *Out There* in the words we use to deal with it. We probably agree on eliminating the "bad" forms of "is." But they seek to eliminate all forms of "to be" even when the result strikes me as inaccurate or weird or even just plain dumb. I gather I put more emphasis than they do on cutting back use of "shoulds" and other ways we fail to take responsibility; or perhaps they agree but see this as a possible future development. Also, I wonder if the debate over "to be" might tend to lead people in the general population to regard general semantics and E-Prime as too "far out" for consideration.

Certainly we can regard E-Prime as a useful teaching technique to improve writing and thinking and as a way of alerting students to the problems of language (while keeping in mind the central goal of accuracy and clarity). While I have generally tried to avoid "to be's" in this piece, I reserve the right to steer clear of the awkward extremes of E-Prime. As someone once said, the word *is* not the thing.