

## WORKING WITH E-PRIME:

Some Practical Notes

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"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 report, and you'll find that we live in a world on the brink of political, social, and environmental crises. These man-made 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 two-valued true-or-false Aristotelian logic; a logic that has proven itself woefully inadequate to solving the complex problems of the twentieth century. The threats of nuclear war, overpopulation, and ecological disaster hang over our heads, and if we wish to survive as a species 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 as human beings 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, and hope that our readers will find the information provided here useful should 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, and 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 often move beyond a two-valued Aristotelian orientation which 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", over-defining of situations in which we confuse one aspect, or point of view, of an experience with a much more complex totality (see 7 and 12 for more details). This over-defining 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 to 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 have mastered speaking or thinking in it. Whatever the virtues of E-Prime as a linguistic discipline, experience has shown that students can markedly benefit from the practical advice of their predecessors. In this paper, the authors will answer the major questions about the theory and practice of E-Prime that they have heard over the years, and provide 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, 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, like "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<sub>k</sub> denotes an E-Prime that also makes use of the general semantic formulations Korzybski suggested (18). My (E.K.) own preferred form of E-Prime (E-Prime<sub>p</sub>), *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 in the user that results from such a change. *In essence, E-Prime consists of a more descriptive and extensionally oriented derivative of English, that automatically tends to bring the user back to the level of first person experience.* In his book, *Language, Thought and Reality* (21), Benjamin Lee Whorf gives numerous examples of languages and cultures that support his "principle of linguistic relativity". This principle 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.

For example, if you saw a man, reeking of whisky, 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), a man who had spilled alcohol on himself undergoing a seizure of some kind, etc. Instead of simply walking by, you might instead look a little more carefully and end up sending for an ambulance.

Although E-Prime usually reduces hidden assumptions, it does not exclude them. For example, you may have seen a woman, or a robot, or an alien, 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 (4) passive voice ("it was done").

## **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. If you don't notice the difference between the statement "The rose is red", and "The rose looks red to me", then you should 1. choose another article to read; 2. ask your designated driver to take you home; or 3. find a book by Wendell Johnson, Sam Bois, or Irving Lee on general semantics and get ready for some really fascinating insights.

One 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 and towards a more non-Aristotelian language structure (5). One can not *rewrite* documents such as the Holy Bible, The U.S. Constitution, Shakespeare, etc. into 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. Literally translated 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 which he felt needed of 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 completely removes 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 - 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 for that matter) forget that a label "*is not*" the thing *indicated* by the label, they can get into serious trouble. When I (E.K) test an enzymes 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 that "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 E-Prime? 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 like only an all-or-nothing approach to this problem works successfully. De Morgan,

Santayana, Korzybski, and many general semanticists have warned against misuses of the verb like 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 cigarette 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 (like 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 "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 "He is coming". In E-Prime one could say "He comes" (dramatic!), or "He will come later", or more specifically, "John said that he left the office 15 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 you can in ordinary English. For example you can say "I didn't take the money!" when you did, or "The XYZ race smell like pigs", when they do not. While the *discipline* of E-Prime aims at reducing dishonesty and prejudice (pre-judging) 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 educed 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 work better for the novice user at first to simply try 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 learning E-Prime, "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" turns into "The rice has cooked", "There is a store . . ." changes into "They have a store . . .", etc. 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 to 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 might 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 that 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 have possibly 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, it appears instead that 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, and 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 appear at this time woefully 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 a novelist 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 preventing signal reactions in others. I can often

smooth out arguments in my vicinity 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 indeed 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 in which 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 a trivial price to have paid when I consider the value of the result.

When you begin speaking in E-Prime you may often find yourself halfway through a sentence before you find to your dismay that you have nowhere to go but "is". We suggest in such cases you either stop, and rephrase the sentence into E-Prime, or if you have already finished the sentence, to redo the sentence either orally or mentally. 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 have 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" in order 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 feel?", 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 in 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 recognize 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. (1) *Locate*. Any student of Spanish can tell you that English does not have a verb that corresponds well 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. (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 gobbledegook. The reader may wish to convert the "is-es" 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-es" 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" mode 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 use 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 even giving a chance for the unprepared individual 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 to 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 "Fuck 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", "psychophysiologic", 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 psychneuroimmunology 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 "DickTracy *is* a great movie", and I translate this into "*Ron* liked *Dick Tracy*", I can avoid feeling angry with John 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 John's taste in movies differs from mine. In the moment, if someone says to me "You are a fucker", 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, adrenaline 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 that 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 copy editor 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 in E-Prime, begin to use it for more serious work. Although it works best to have 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 in which 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 speak in it occasionally. 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 only translate sentences into it, so with learning to speak in E-Prime. Unfortunately this process usually requires total immersion in the foreign 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 his or her 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 focus on one or only a few aspects of complex, dynamic processes, verbally separate interdependent aspects, 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: labeling in this way the capability of human beings to pass on their intellectual accomplishments from generation to generation through the symbolic means of spoken and written language. This accounts for the exponential growth of human knowledge, as well as indicating 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* (18) in 1933.
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" whereon we basically "live our lives", despite the conscious human preoccupation with the Symbolic Level as well. With reference to the Structural Differential (see (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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