Concerning an E-prime translation of the Bible.
David F. Maas

When D. David Bourland, Jr., looks for possible sources of material to rewrite in E-Prime (English without the verb to be (1)), he cautiously refrains from touching religious documents because it "would unnecessarily affront some folks no matter what the source of the religious writing." (p.73) For some reason, when I read this caution it triggered some latent iconoclastic adventurous urge deep in my nervous system.

A number of times David Maas has rushed in where Gabriel and Michael may have expressed some timidity. Consequently, after the 1994 Ambassador University Invitational General Semantics Symposium, I systematically began to recast portions of the Bible into E-Prime versions. I, and subsequently my students also, had an on-line N.I.V. translation of the Bible available. From the very beginning we tried to keep in mind Bourland's warning that "You cannot say that in E-Prime," for such translation inevitably changes the "meaning."

I went through verses, electronically eliminating constructions involving forms of to be and replacing them with italicized E-Prime alternatives. Consequently, by August of 1994 I had the first drafts of Psalms and Proverbs Proverbs, book of the Bible. It is a collection of sayings, many of them moral maxims, in no special order. The teaching is of a practical nature; it does not dwell on the salvation-historical traditions of Israel, but is individual and universal based on the rewritten in E-Prime. The Psalms seemed particularly amenable to this effort. Several of the Psalms (e.g., 98, 114, 136, and 150) already appeared in E-Prime in the N.I.V. translation. Undoubtedly this circumstance resulted from the fact that Hebrew does not use the copula .

The Epistles of Paul in the New Testament gave me much greater difficulty, but I thoroughly enjoyed the challenge of changing some of those convoluted sentences into crisper forms. By the time the spring semester arrived and I again faced my General Semantics class, I had completed a rough draft of the Epistles of Paul in E-Prime. I asked my general semantics class to help me (as a class project) to complete an E-Prime revision of the entire N.I.V. translation of the Bible.

I parceled out uniformly-sized portions of the Old and New Testaments to the nineteen students of my class. I challenged them to have their parts ready by April, the meeting date for our Spring Symposium, at which time I wanted to present a copy of the complete work to David Bourland. Unfortunately, we did not meet that deadline, but as I write this report we have reached the 96.777% mark. I hope to finish the rough draft of the entire N.I.V. Bible soon. [Update : I worked independently on a different version from February 23- to September14,2009, completing an E-Prime rendition of the New American Standard Bible]

Last spring at the conclusion of the 1995 Ambassador University General Semantics Invitational Symposium, I gave a brief summary of my reflections on this project, touching upon grammatical, rhetorical, epistemological and theological insights this class effort produced. I will present here a slight elaboration of that summary.

We touched first upon the aesthetic or cosmetic aspects of E-Prime. Composition teachers and magazine editors have complained interminably about the colorless anemic, baggy, passive voice. The words of the Apostle Paul take on a refreshing crispness when the use of E-Prime launders the passive voice out of them:

N.I.V. Gal. 3:19 ... The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator.

E-Prime N.I.V. Gal. 3:19 ... A mediator put the law into effect through angels.

In this passage the number of words remains the same, but the crispness of the E-Prime N.I.V. version seems to sparkle in comparison with the regular N.I.V. version. Of necessity, the agents involved appear in the second version.

Often the E-Prime version will use even fewer words, by eliminating the superfluous ones:

N.I.V. Rom. 7:21 ... When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.

E-Prime N.I.V. Rom. 7:21 ... When I want to do good, evil accompanies me.

The pesky placeholder   sometimes known as the expletive (e.g., there, it) adds many additional words.

 The E-Prime emphasis on the agent gets rid of much of such added baggage:

N.I.V. Rom. 3:12 ... There is no one who does good, not even one.

E-Prime N.I.V. Rom. 3:12 ... Not even one does good.

The E-Prime emphasis helps one to move away from static constructions and verbals toward process verbs, away from adjectives to adverbs. The use of E-Prime encourages one to use a wider variety of verbs that can readily replace the overused forms of to be:

N.I.V. Psalm 119:150 ... Those who devise wicked schemes are near, but they are far from your law.

E-Prime N.I.V. Psalm 119:150 ... Those who devise wicked schemes draw near, but they drift far from your law.

E-Prime translations tend to emphasize process. Consequently, adverbs seem frequently to replace adjectives:

N.I.V. Psalm 144:8 ... whose mouth are full of lies, whose right hands are deceitful.

E-Prime N.I.V. Psalm 144:8 ... whose mouths tell lies, whose right hands act deceitfully.

A selection of verbs stand ready to reanimate previously embalmed verbals:

N.I.V. Isa. 6:9 ... [they may] be ever seeing but never
perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding

E-Prime N.I.V. Isa. 6:9 ... that they may continually see but not perceive, and continually hear but never understand.

E-Prime encourages one to search out and identify an agent. Even the Deity may return explicitly as a role player:

N.I.V. Psalm 1:1 ... Blessed is the man

E-Prime N.I.V. Psalm 1:1 ... God blesses the man ...

The E-Prime version of the epistles of Paul returns the responsibility for behavior back upon humans rather than on some specter-like forces beyond their control. Consequently, the emphasis in E-Prime moves away from people as helpless victims and more toward the roles of humans as responsible agents:

N.I.V. Rom. 6:17... though you used to be slaves to sin ...

E-Prime N.I.V. Rom. 6:17... you used to <u>enslave</u>. yourselves to

sin ...

N.I.V. Rom. 6:20 ... When you were slaves to sin, you were
free from the control of righteousness ...

E-Prime N.I.V. Rom. 6:20 ... When you <u>enslaved</u> yourselves

to sinful behavior, you separated yourselves from righteous

behavior.

Even though the woman Paul described in 1 Cor. 7:29 would certainly not claim to support women's lib, she makes a free choice that would probably please Dr. Laura Schlesinger, a contemporary advice dispenser:

N.I.V. 1 Cor. 7:39 ... A woman is bound to her husband as
long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry
anyone she wishes...

E-Prime N.I.V. 1 Cor. 7:39 ... A woman binds herself to her
husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she
has become free to marry anyone she wishes...

The discipline of writing in E-Prime encourages the writer (or speaker) to admit to the subjectivity of his or her perceptions:

N.I.V. 1 Cor. 9:16 ... Yet when I preach the gospel, I
cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach.

E-Prime N.I.V. 1 Cor. 9:16 ... Yet when I preach the
gospel, I cannot boast, for I feel compelled to preach.

Certain motor behaviors which appear to consist of ghostly, <u>ethereal</u> as essence:

N.I.V. Rom. 3:9 ... We have already made the charge that Jews
and Gentiles alike are all under sin.

E-Prime N.I.V. Rom. 3:9 ... What shall we conclude, then? Do we

behave any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge

that both Jews and Gentiles have sinned.

When reified essences become converted back to motor behaviors and neurological processes, <u>human behavior</u>   seems somewhat more controllable. Recently I heard one theologian describe sin

metaphorically as pollen dust on a windshield. Unfortunately, this metaphor does not have much productivity in helping us to modify aberrant "thought" patterns. Without E-Prime, motor behaviors which we can potentially shape and modify may become described as set and hardened traits. E-Prime helps us to turn such traits back into behavior by perceiving them as such:

N.I.V. 1 Cor. 5:10 ... not at all meaning the people of this world

who are immoral or the greedy and swindler .

E-Prime N.I.V. 1 Cor. 5:10 ... not at all meaning the people of
this world who act immorally or greedily or who swindle
commit idolatry

N.I.V. Rom. 7:7... What shall we say then? Is the law sin?

Certainly not! Indeed I would have not known what sin was
except through the law.

E-Prime N.I.V. Rom. 7:7 ... What shall we say, then? Does
keeping the law equate to sin? Certainly not! Indeed, I would not
have known how to covet and how not to covet except through
the law.

In converting descriptions of static traits to descriptions of process behaviors, we may eliminate the hopeless feeling that a perceived character trait must remain permanent.

Of course the use of E-Prime will not necessarily relieve a significant amount of religious conflict, but it could aid our efforts to neutralize the rather pervasive neurolinguistic distortions that we naively bring upon ourselves through faulty evaluation.

(1.) For provocative articles and discussion of E-Prime see To Be or Not: An E-Prime An Anthology, and More E-Prime: To Be or Not 11, both published by ISGS   .

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