

"Doc, note: I dissent. A fast never prevents a fatness. I diet on cod."

PENELOPE GILLIATT

EMORY MENEFFEE\*

### ***E-PRIME OR E-CHOICE?***

**A**N ENGLISH teacher at Pampa (Texas) High School tried valiantly to teach us to avoid overusing the simpler tenses of the verb "to be." Whenever I did this, she (and sometimes I) thought it clarified my writing. I later discovered general semantics and found that the situation was much more sinister: These little verbs (or their equivalent in other languages) may have contributed to two millennia of intellectual sloth and Aristotelian darkness. So perhaps it could be expected that eventually there would be a movement to eradicate every form and use of "to be" from written and spoken English.

E-Prime is David Bourland's name for a version of English minus all forms of the verb "to be," including "is," "am," "are," "was," "were," "be," and "been." In use, the verb appears mainly as an auxiliary, or in sentences involving identity, predication, existence, or location. Since identity and prediction give rise to most problems blamed on the "to be" verbs by general semanticists, some believe that their avoidance in only those usages would suffice. However, E. W. Kellogg (1) and Kellogg and Bourland (2) stress that complete elimination of all forms of "to be" is the only satisfactory way to obtain maximal benefits. Some of these benefits were listed by Bourland, (3) who stated that E-Prime (a) diminishes the ease of asking "meaninglessly" abstract questions such as "What is art?"; (b) makes it harder to frame internal and external "pigeonhole labeling" such as "I am a failure" and "She is Italian"; (c) eliminates use of "to be" forms in abbreviated explanation-dodging expressions

\* Emory Menefee, a former president of the International Society for General Semantics, is a research chemist.

such as "It is clear that . . ." and as a substitute for "equals" in verbal math; and (d) discourages the passive voice by forcing either identification or admitted ignorance of the role player. Claims are also made that E-Prime improves creativity, and that it helps in controlling semantic and signal reactions, especially when one speaks and thinks in it.(1, 2)

Probably not many people would object to these arguments. Nevertheless, I think we would be ill-advised to relinquish the full array of our language, flawed with "to be" and riddled with the passive though it is. Even though careless use of dynamite can kill, the explosive has not been banned; instead, people have chosen to learn its dangers and proper use. Rather than taking the axe to our rich language, let us learn (as we should have learned from our English teachers) how to use it optimally. This kind of optimum English I would call E-Choice. (Note 1) Scientists are not often considered great writers, but they have evolved a way to write, in whatever language, that conveys necessary information with a minimum of ambiguity. In general, tentative conclusions and speculations are easy to recognize. In English, this style would be a form of E-Choice, exhibiting clarity and sometimes even gracefulness.

Before expressing structural opinions about E-Prime, I begin with a problem that it shares with many ideas proposed under the general semantics umbrella—namely, that presumed benefits are rarely demonstrated except on an anecdotal level. Such demonstration, with even the crudest of quantification, would seem useful and perhaps even convincing when presenting E-Prime for acceptance to the large and varied world of English speakers. Enthusiasts (and I am one) tend to advocate general semantics for ameliorating a host of personal and interpersonal problems that are supposed to arise from our outmoded verbal baggage, with little or no evidence that they work. For a group that claims to be so strongly wedded to science, why don't we gather some hard data? (Note 2) Similarly, I agree with the premises of E-Prime given in the second paragraph, mainly because they seem reasonable, not because I have anything more than personal anecdotal experience to go on. I have convinced myself that general semantics has had a salutary effect in moderating my own behavior, but I know others knowledgeable in it who seem to have absorbed nothing—am I deluding myself? Where is our evidence? (Note 3)

Potentially harmful occurrences of "to be" appear to arise most often from abstraction mismatching, especially when a leading (subject) noun is equated with a noun of higher abstraction through

an "is of identity," or when it is described by an adjectival construction of higher abstraction through an "is of predication." For example, in the sentence "John is a farmer," the word "farmer" is more abstract than "John," since the name presumably refers to a particular individual, whereas "farmer" represents a more general class. Hence, we are not unambiguously defining John by this construction. On the other hand, saying "That farmer's name is John" offers no problems of definition, once it is understood who is meant by "that farmer." Similarly, "That painting is beautiful" predicates description in terms of a high-level abstraction, one that may or may not elicit sympathetic agreement. Recasting it into "I think that painting is beautiful" equalizes the abstractions by reduction to internal dialogue, and is therefore not as subject to dispute. An alternative, should retention of an abstraction such as "beautiful" be desired, might be "Most would agree that this painting is beautiful."

I doubt that the above examples, and thousands like them, are likely to cause much confusion or disagreement. Such may not be the case with a statement like "Most blacks are untrustworthy, so I don't think we should approve this loan." This statement reflects an attitude that seems unlikely to depend much on the language chosen, or in particular on the "are." Rather, it involves "allness" and ethnocentric attitudes that could just as well have been expressed in E-Prime: "Blacks have criminal tendencies, so. . . ." Returning to the second paragraph of this article, it would seem naive and unjustified in the absence of contrary evidence to think that E-Prime could be of more than slight benefit in the "really big" problems that face modern overpopulated societies.

I do not wish to underplay the problems our antiquated language can create, but I do think the solutions are much more likely to be found in our learning to use (or, rather, not misuse) the language we have than in excising any particular parts of it in hopes of curing our communications-related ills. Part of the difficulty, if not most of it, lies in the nearly total ignorance of science, its methods, and its processes on the part of almost all the people of this earth. I say almost all because I doubt that more than a few million (this is purely a guess) might, from training or experience, have an accurate idea of what is involved in writing an acceptable scientific paper, designing an experiment, or describing and explaining a scientific procedure. In my experience as a practicing scientist, most people I know have little or no idea of the process of science, which makes them susceptible to whatever a media report or a self-styled

"expert" may say. Aside from those ignorant of science merely through lack of training and interest, we sometimes see another group (often, unfortunately, associated with the arts) taking a pridefully ignorant antisience position, based on the perceived "evils" science has wrought. Attempts at describing science in terms of a process to improve knowledge of our world, rather than the misuse sometimes made of technology by political and business interests, will often go unheard.

The language of science, including the verb "to be," has performed ably for a long time. The passive voice, deeply beloved by most scientific writers, persists in spite of generations of editorial assistants who have tried to discourage it. (Note 4) Dogmatic statements are avoided by frequent use of "weasel words" such as "probably," "the data suggest," "in the author's opinion," etc. Scientists seldom use unqualified "is" verbs to equate a lower to a higher abstraction, just as they generally avoid highly abstract terms (e.g., "truth") altogether. Historically, however, such remarks have challenged the scientific community. For instance, taking an example from a recent pro-E-Prime article by Robert Anton Wilson, (4) I can assert that no contemporary physicist would utter absolutisms such as "The electron is a particle" or "The electron is a wave." However, such statements a century ago were part of a controversy that stimulated the most sweeping revolution ever seen in physics. It seems likely that Aristotelian thought stultified scholarship for two thousand years, not because it codified the wrong definitions, but because a hundred generations of "thinkers" allowed themselves to remain so ignorant of the world around them that they would believe nearly anything. The situation is not much different today among those who choose to remain ignorant of science.

Although E-Prime can be a useful pedagogic tool to force extreme attention on the verb "to be," it seems quixotic to expect it to be widely accepted. E-Choice, by contrast, retains ordinary English, including "to be" in all its forms, but stresses the dangers of equating, by any construction, differing abstraction levels. Wider knowledge of science and its methods should help discourage the making and accepting of absolute statements and absurd abstractions, but the likelihood that many more people will gain such knowledge seems remote. It is a major aim of general semantics to encourage people to apply the language and thought processes of science to their own lives and problems; thus, even in the absence of extensive knowledge of science, a thorough understanding (and reduction to practice) of general semantics may circumvent language-

oriented problems and promote clearer thinking. We don't need to drastically alter the language, but we do need to maintain a watchful consciousness of our use and interpretation of it.

### NOTES

1. As readers may surmise, the name E-Choice arose from the strained similarity between the term E-Prime and a USDA meat grade. I would hope it survives only in this article. After all, E-Choice is just English as we know it, expressed through a general semantics filter.
2. Bourland (reference 3) counted the number of occurrences of sentences containing identity and predication uses of "to be" in various well-known documents, and attempted to show that, on the basis of lower counts, the U.S. Constitution has "great flexibility and power" compared to, say, the "rigid dogmatism" of Aristotle's *Politics*. This kind of quantification is probably specious, since one can find numerous examples of seminal scientific works that have very high identity and predication counts: Darwin's *Origin of Species* and Watson and Crick's paper on DNA, to mention only two.
3. The kind of quantitative evidence needed to substantiate general semantics claims might involve at minimum the following of control and "treated" groups for a number of years, statistically sampling such indicators as divorce rate, drug abuse, job turnover, salary, criminal involvement, medical history, etc.
4. When I use the passive voice to say, "The flask was heated to one hundred degrees Centigrade," I could hardly imagine any reader wanting to know who did the heating. In this way, the passive is a useful shorthand. In addition, certain nuances are unique to the passive and cannot quite be said otherwise (short of absurd circumlocutions): "The motor is running."

### REFERENCES

1. E. W. Kellogg III, "Speaking in E-Prime," *Et cetera* 44(2): 118N28 (1987).
2. E. W. Kellogg III and D. David Bourland, Jr., "Working with E-Prime: Some Practical Notes," *Et cetera* 47(4): 376-92 (1990).
3. D. David Bourland, Jr., "To Be or Not To Be: E-Prime as a Tool for Critical Thinking," *Et cetera* 46(3): 202-11 (1989).
4. Robert Anton Wilson, "Toward Understanding E-Prime," *Et cetera* 46(4): 316-19 (1989).