E-Prime

E-Prime (short for **English-Prime** or **English Prime**,[1] sometimes denoted **É** or **E′**) denotes a <u>restricted form</u> of English in which authors avoid all forms of the verb *to be*.

E-Prime excludes forms such as *be*, *being*, *been*, <u>present tense forms</u> (*am*, *is*, *are*), <u>past tense forms</u> (*was*, *were*) along with their negative contractions (*isn't*, *aren't*, *wasn't*, *weren't*), and nonstandard contractions such as *ain't*. E-Prime also excludes <u>contractions</u> such as *I'm*, *we're*, *you're*, *he's*, *she's*, *it's*, *they're*, *there's*, *here's*, *where's*, *when's*, *why's*, *how's*, *who's*, *what's*, and *that's*.

Some scholars claim that E-Prime can clarify thinking and strengthen writing,[2] while others doubt its utility.

History

D. David Bourland Jr., who had studied under <u>Alfred Korzybski</u>, devised E-Prime as an addition to Korzybski's <u>general semantics</u> in the late 1940s.[3] Bourland published the concept in a 1965 essay entitled "A Linguistic Note: Writing in E-Prime" (originally published in *General Semantics Bulletin*). The essay quickly generated controversy within the general semantics field,[4] partly because practitioners of general semantics sometimes saw Bourland as attacking the verb *'to be'* as such, and not just certain usages.

Bourland collected and published three volumes of essays in support of his innovation. The first (1991), co-edited by Paul Dennithorne Johnston, bore the title: *To Be or Not: An E-Prime Anthology*.[5] For the second, *More E-Prime: To Be or Not II*, published in 1994, he added a third editor, Jeremy Klein. Bourland and Johnston then edited a third book, *E-Prime III: a third anthology*, published in 1997.

Functions of "to be"

In English, the verb 'to be' (also known as the <u>*copula*</u>) has several distinct functions:

- <u>identity</u>: *noun-phrase copula definite-noun*
  - *The cat is my only pet.*
- <u>class membership</u>: *definite-noun copula noun-phrase*
  - *Garfield is a cat.*
- <u>class inclusion</u>: *noun-phrase copula noun-phrase*
  - *A cat is an animal.*
- <u>predication</u>: *noun-phrase copula adjective*
  - *The cat is furry.*
- <u>ownership</u>: *noun-phrase copula possessive-noun*
  - *The cat is theirs.*
- <u>auxiliary</u>: *noun-phrase copula verb-phrase*
  - *The cat is sleeping.* — with the copula being part of the <u>progressive aspect</u> with the <u>present participle</u>
  - *The cat is being bitten by the dog.* — with the copula being part of the <u>passive</u> with the <u>past participle</u> of a <u>transitive verb</u>
- <u>existence</u>: *medial-proadverb-of-location copula noun-phrase*

- - *There is a cat.*
- location: *noun-phrase copula location-phrase*
  - *The cat is nowhere to be found.*

Bourland sees specifically the "identity" and "predication" functions as pernicious but advocates the exclusion of all forms for the sake of simplicity. In the case of the "existence" form or the "location" form, the copula could be substituted by *exist*, *sit* or *lie*.

Some ergative verbs may substitute the copula, including *taste, feel, smell, sound, grow, hinge, remain, rest, stay, reside,* and *turn,* among others.[6][7]

Examples

Colloquial English	E-Prime
The electron is a particle.	The electron functions as a particle when measured with the first instrument.
The electron is a wave.	The electron functions as a wave when measured with the other instrument.

One could rewrite the functions of "to be" as follows:

- "The cat is my only pet": "I have only a pet cat".
- "The cat is Garfield": "I call my cat Garfield".
- "Garfield is a cat": "I call my cat Garfield".
- "A cat is an animal": "'Cat' denotes an animal".
- "The cat is furry": "The cat feels furry".
- "The cat is sleeping": "The cat sleeps".
- "The dog is chasing the cat": "The dog chases the cat".
- "There is a cat": "I know of a cat".
- "The cat is on the mat": "The cat sits on the mat".
- "The cat is here": "I have the cat with me".

Rationale

Bourland and other advocates also suggest that use of E-Prime leads to a less dogmatic style of language that reduces the possibility of misunderstanding or conflict.[8][9]

Kellogg and Bourland describe misuse of the verb *to be* as creating a "deity mode of speech", allowing "even the most ignorant to transform their opinions magically into god-like pronouncements on the nature of things".[10]

Psychological effects

While teaching at the University of Florida, Alfred Korzybski counseled his students to

> eliminate the infinitive and verb forms of "to be" from their vocabulary, whereas a second group continued to use "I am," "You are," "They are" statements as usual. For example, instead of saying, "I am depressed," a student was asked to eliminate that emotionally primed verb and to say something else, such as, "I feel depressed when ..." or "I tend to make myself depressed about ..."[11]

Korzybski observed improvement "of one full letter grade" by "students who did not generalize by using that infinitive".[11]

Albert Ellis advocated the use of E-Prime when discussing psychological distress to encourage framing these experiences as temporary (see also Solution focused brief therapy) and to encourage a sense of agency by specifying the subject of statements.[12] According to Ellis, rational emotive behavior therapy "has favored E-Prime more than any other form of psychotherapy and I think it is still the only form of therapy that has some of its main books written in E-Prime".[13] However, Ellis did not always use E-Prime because he believed it interferes with readability.[12]

Publications

- *Laws of Form* by G. Spencer-Brown, 1969 (except for one statement)
- *Quantum Psychology*, by Robert Anton Wilson (1990)
- *Worlds of Wonder: How to Write Science Fiction & Fantasy* by David Gerrold has a chapter about (and written in) E-Prime
- *The New American Standard Bible in E-Prime*, composed by Dr. David F. Maas[14]
- *Scoundrel Days: A Memoir*, 2017 Brentley Frazer[15]
- *An Insider's Guide to Robert Anton Wilson* by Eric Wagner
- *A New Guide to Rational Living,* by Albert Ellis and Robert A. Harper (1975)

Criticisms

Many authors have questioned E-Prime's effectiveness at improving readability and reducing prejudice (Lakoff, 1992; Murphy, 1992; Parkinson, 1992; Kenyon, 1992; French, 1992, 1993; Lohrey, 1993). These authors observed that communication under the copula ban can remain obscure and imply prejudice, while losing important speech patterns, such as identities and identification. Further, prejudices and judgments may become more difficult to notice or refute.

Various arguments against E-Prime (in the context of general semantics) have been conjectured:[16]

- "Effective writing techniques" are not relevant to general semantics as a discipline, and therefore it should not be promoted as general semantics practice. E-Prime does not distinguish statements that disobey the principles of general semantics from statements that do not. It lacks consistency with the other tenets of general semantics and should not be included into the discipline.
- The advocates of E-Prime have not proven that it is easier to exclude the verb *to be* than to eliminate only the is-of-identity and the is-of-predication. It may well be easier to do the latter for many people. *To be* statements convey not only identity but also asymmetrical relations ("X is higher than Y"); negation ("A is not B"); location ("The princess is in another castle"); auxiliary ("He is going to the store") etc., forms that would also have to be excluded.
- The elimination of a whole class of sentences results in fewer alternatives and is likely to make writing less, rather than more, interesting. One can improve bad writing more by reducing use of the verb 'to be' than by excluding it.
- The context often ameliorates the possible harmful effects from the use of the is-of-identity and the is-of-predication, so it is not necessary to eliminate all such sentences. For example, "He is a judge" in response to a question about what someone does for a living would not be questionable, although "He works as a judge" would be an equivalent E-Prime sentence.
- Excluding *to be* has little effect on eliminating identity. For example, a statement of apparently equal identification, "The silly ban on copula continues," can be made without the copula assuming an identity rather than asserting it, consequently hampering our awareness of it.
- Identity-in-the-language is not the same as the far more important identity-in-reaction (identification). General semantics cuts the link between the two through the practice of silence on the objective levels, adopting a self-reflexive attitude, e.g., "as I see it" "it seems to me" etc., and by the use of quotation marks—without using E-Prime. One of the best languages for time-binding is mathematics, which relies heavily on the notion of equivalence and equality. For the purposes of time-binding, it may be better to cut the link between identity-in-the-language and identity-in-reaction.

According to an article (written in E-Prime and advocating a role for E-Prime in ESL and EFL programs) published by the Office of English Language Programs of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs in the State Department of the United States, "Requiring students to avoid the verb to be on every assignment would deter students from developing other fundamental skills of fluent writing."[17]

See also

- English passive voice
- Elaboration
- Epistemology
- Implicit attitude
- Language ideology § Language use and structure
- Language proficiency
- Linguistic philosophy

- Linguistic relativity
- Ontology
- Perspectivism
- Point of view (philosophy)
- Temporality
- Universality (philosophy)
- Wooden language

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Footnotes

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2. Zimmerman, Daniel (Fall 2001). "E-Prime as a Revision Strategy" (http://www.ctlow.ca/E-Prime/zimmerman.html). *ETC: A Review of General Semantics 58.3*. pp. 340–347. Retrieved 2009-01-10. "Using E-Prime, I require students to paraphrase about half their sentences—admittedly, in a special way, but using as stylistic models the best of the rest of their sentences, already written in 'native' E-Prime. The more gracefully and effectively they learn to do this, the more they begin to sound like themselves as writers, rather than like all the other writers around them sound about half the time."
3. Cullen Murphy, "Just curious: essays", 1995, ISBN , 039570099X p. 78 (https://archive.org/details/justcuriousessay00murp)

4. Johnston, P.D.; Bourland, D.D.; Klein, J. (1994). *More E-prime: To be Or Not II* (https://books.google.com/books?id=uXOzfqfcW-0C&pg=PR12). International Society for General Semantics. ISBN 978-0-918970-40-4. Retrieved 2021-02-07.

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17. Herbert, John C. "English Prime as an Instructional Tool in Writing Classes" (https://web.archive.org/web/20061007112531/http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/vols/vol41/no3/p26.htm). *English Teaching Forum Online*. United States Department of State. Archived from the original (http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/vols/vol41/no3/p26.htm) on 2006-10-07. Retrieved 2009-10-06. "When applying the aforementioned ideas to any writing assignment, teachers must make sure their students know that the proposed set of guidelines represents only one means to an end and does not present an end in itself. Requiring students to avoid the verb to be on every assignment would deter students from developing other fundamental skills of fluent writing. However, introducing E-Prime restrictions for at least one assignment forces students to spend more time with their essays, to think critically about acceptable grammar and vocabulary, and to search for new, or nearly forgotten, vocabulary."

External links

- Excerpt (http://rawilson.com/quantum-psychology/) from *Quantum Psychology*, 1990
- Beyond Is: Creative Writing with English Prime (http://www.textjournal.com.au/april16/frazer.htm) by Brentley Frazer

- E-Prime! – The Fundamentals (https://web.archive.org/web/20130204204954/http://www.generalsemantics.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/articles/etc/46-3-bourland.pdf), by D. David Bourland, Jr. Accessed: 8 December 2015.
- Speaking in E-Prime (http://www.generalsemantics.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/articles/etc/44-2-kellogg.pdf) by E. W. Kellogg III. Accessed: 8 December 2015.
- E-prime: The Spirit and the Letter, by Ralph E. Kenyon Jr. (http://www.xenodochy.org/gs/e-prime.html)
- Discovering E-Prime (https://web.archive.org/web/20061221093237/http://learn-gs.org/library/elaine-eprime.htm), by Elaine C. Johnson
- E-Prime and Linguistic Revision, by C. A. Hilgartner (https://web.archive.org/web/20200330140249/http://www.hilgart.org/papers_html/091S196.B07.html)