

Clearer Thinking Through Practicing E-Prime

In his Non- Aristotelian system “General Semantics”, Korzybski proposed “non-identity” (a principle that “no two things exist as the same in all respects”) as structurally true, and made non-identity a basic principle of the system. In our thinking, speaking, writing, and consequent behaviors, our tendency towards “identification” expresses itself in one of the smallest, and potentially one of the most ‘dangerous’ (problem producing) words in the English language -- “is”. Korzybski labeled this “is”, the “is of identity” – not to be confused with the “is” of predication, the “is” of existence, and “is” used as an auxiliary verb. (Science And Sanity, page 750)

Of the many factors we can attribute to ethnic prejudices, misunderstanding, conflicts, and violence in our human interactions -- intra-personal, personal, societal, and international -- identification, reinforced through our use of the “is” of identity plays a significantly important part. I represent the possible mechanism as follows: We survive, and interact with ourselves, others, and with our environments based on what we believe exists. We often confuse (non-consciously) the “is” of identity with the “is” of existence. Our indiscriminate use of “is” reinforces particular beliefs, and often leads us to believe and act as if threats to our lives, our families, our wellbeing, our beliefs, things, and situations, etc. exist, despite the factor that we have no evidence that they do. In identifying, we believe and act as if our beliefs, our ideas, opinions, explanations, theories, etc., exist as identical (“no different from”, the same as) our opinions, beliefs, explanations, and so on.

D. David Bourland, a student of Korzybski, served as President of The International Society for General Semantics, and Trustee of The Institute of General Semantics. He taught English, and linguistics, wrote several books, and over sixty articles on general semantics, among other involvements. Probably, I assume, as a way to avoid the difficulty of our discriminating the different forms of “is” mentioned above, Bourland recommended in his invention “E-Prime”, that we use the English language without any form of the verb “to be”. Many of us making the effort to ban the “is” of identity from our cognitive processes might find this not such an easy task, due to cultural-linguistic conditioning, and our frequent use of the other forms of “is”.

- We can find many instances of discussions (often, it seems to me, intensionally oriented based on belief, rather than observations) involving the merits, and usefulness to the practice of general semantics, in avoiding all uses of the verb “to be”. From my own experience, practicing E-Prime helps me--and I generalize--students of the discipline towards more consciousness of abstracting through heightened self-awareness. Practicing E-Prime contributes to conscious abstracting – a precursor to consciousness of abstracting. I speculate: We will find it very difficult to remember that we have not included all, if we do not first self-consciously observe ourselves (awareness in the moment) thinking-feeling-doings and so on.) In my ongoing endeavor to practice E-Prime, I offer below, a list of some of what I have experienced through self-consciously observing these efforts. It represents some of my experiences practicing E-Prime which student-practitioners of general semantics might find useful to their practice.
- In practicing E-Prime: I become aware of a feeling related to how less powerful, less authoritative, less confident, unsure, etc., I (and I generalize, “others”) might seem-sound to a listener or reader when I say-write “It seems to me”, “In my opinion”, “I believe”, “I think”, “As I see it”, “As far as I know”, and so on, than when I make assertive statements such as – “What is important here”, “The fact of the matter is”, “The issue is”, He/She is a/an”, “This is not funny”, “The only thing that matters is”, “It is the right thing to do”, “The truth of the matter is”, and so on. I suspect, based on this feeling of disempowerment, it takes much courage, and confidence, to think, converse, write, speak, etc., in E-Prime than to write in the usual, more familiar, and less demanding manner. Student-practitioners of general semantics might find it not an easy matter thinking and speaking in E-Prime. The following represents some of my experiences practicing E-Prime which student-practitioners of general semantics might find useful to their practice.

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- I develop an awareness that it takes much longer to think, converse, and write in E-Prime. Thinking, speaking, writing in E-Prime slows me down. I have to re-think, re-view, and re-formulate my ideas. Until with more practice when E-prime becomes more internalized, spontaneity gets checked. (With practice E-Prime spontaneity improves.) I develop an awareness of the difficulty in practicing E-Prime in a society where speed matters: Presenting oneself as an expert, and authority through verbalism, gets rewarded--while indexing one's comments, etc., with phrases such as "It seems to me", "In my opinion", "As far as I know", and so on, might be judged as coming from someone uncertain, not confident, and unsure of themselves.
- Striving to think, write, speak, in E-Prime, I experience some excitement in the creative effort, and range of vocabulary it takes to avoid "is" and come up with words I accept as most accurately representing what I want to write or say.
- I become more aware of how easily an "is" slips in, and becomes 'invisible' even after repeated re-viewing of words before me. This concern results in more care in thinking, speaking, and writing – and a feeling of satisfaction when I catch these slips. Following this, I experience a feeling of amusement when after a while I become less concerned when an "is" slips in, since I know it does not represent a general way of thinking.
- I get much practice in applying the "calculus approach" to my thinking, and speaking when I have to re-think and restate my ideas and words in E-Prime. (The 'calculus approach' has to do with finely tuned awareness, close monitoring of one's attitude, thinking, speaking, writing, believing, interpreting, acting, re-acting, etc. For more on the calculus applied to everyday situations--Visit <miltondawes.con>)
- I find practicing E-Prime helps me toward a more extensional, more propositional, and less intensional orientation. If I say "The truth of the matter is", or "What is important here is", "This is the right thing to do", etc., "The meaning is...., there is no other way to look at this..." – I become aware that I have assumed there exists truth, and I have found it. I ignore the possibility that other persons might consider other factors important. I assume there exists a "right thing", and I have found it. I identify my interpretation as the only possible meaning, and ignore other possible interpretations. In thinking-speaking-behaving along culturally conditioned lines, conflicts, and often violence inevitably arise -- since as mentioned before, I dismiss possibly important, and value laden characteristics of the other person's world, and so might appear as a threat to their beliefs and values.
- In translating what I hear, and read to E-Prime, I develop a greater awareness of "is" in sentences where a speaker or writer uses the word "is".
- I develop a critical tendency in my understanding of the words expressed by 'experts', 'authorities', advertisers, and anyone I infer engaged in talking about what they have not done, seen, heard, experienced, and so on. I develop more sensitivity to their use of "is". I think in terms of the possibility that they seek to persuade me to identify what I read as "fact", and that they might have indulged in some identification themselves, among other possibilities.
- I find that in practicing E-Prime I feel a heightened sense of responsibility for what I think, feel, say, do. This, I infer, results from an awareness of myself as the one doing the thinking, the speaking, and the action.
- In practicing E-Prime, I become aware of ways that indiscriminate use of "is" reinforces "categorical thinking"--a "This is so" attitude, rather than a "This has some similar characteristics to that" attitude. A "This is so" attitude suggests finality, promotes an "allness orientation", tends to close doors to further explorations and discoveries, and blocks conscious time-binding (deliberate conscious efforts to improve oneself and one's accomplishments).

The above represents some findings to date. I will continue to observe. From personal practice, and experience, I recommend the practice of E-Prime as one of the ways to practice general semantics. In paying attention to our words – especially our use of "is", we show our sensitivity and valuing of the relationship between our use of language, and the attitudes, and behaviors that result. As Korzybski proposed in *Science And Sanity*, page 751 (I convert to E-Prime): 'If we use language of a structure

non-similar to the world and our nervous system, we should not expect our verbal predictions to conform with empirical verifications. As words do not exist as the things we use them to represent -- adjustments becomes futile'. Adjustments become difficult and stressful in a world that exists mainly through our words and in our imagination.

Milton Dawes/2009