

## **THE TOP TEN ARGUMENTS**

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### **AGAINST E-PRIME**

#### **Argument #10:**

**T**HE CLAIM THAT E-Prime has an inherent, beneficial effect on a person's writing ability seems highly questionable, considering that E-Prime deliberately eliminates a whole class of statements from the language, resulting in fewer alternatives. The English writer can use *all* of the statements available to the E-Prime writer, *plus* a whole class of statements containing the verb "to be." The greater variety of available wordings should make the English writer's efforts *more* interesting to read, not less. (Any bad writing that occurs because of the *over-use* of the verb "to be" — a common failing — can be more easily overcome by simply *cutting back* on one's use of "to be," rather than resorting to E-Prime.)

#### **Argument #9:**

Even if E-Prime should improve one's writing, that is not a reason to promote it as a general semantics practice. The class of items that we might call "effective writing techniques," fall outside the subject matter of general semantics,

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and so any incidental benefits are as irrelevant to general semantics as they would be to any other discipline. Imagine if you will that E-Prime improved the writing of students and professors in the physics department of some university. Would we then consider E-Prime to be an element of physics?

#### Argument #8:

The harmful effects that may result from the use of the is-of-identity and the is-of-predication are often ameliorated by the context, and so the need to eliminate all such statements from our language is not as great as the advocates of E-Prime apparently assume. It is one thing to say, "The rose is red" in a flat statement of "fact"; it is quite another to say, "The rose is red *to me*." If in response to the question, "What does John Jones do for a living?" I answer, "He's a professor," there seems to be little that a general semanticist should quarrel with, given that the response is occurring within the context of asking what the man does for a living, a context that greatly affects the meaning of the answer.

#### Argument #7:

The range of perfectly acceptable "to be" statements covers a vast expanse, and includes asymmetrical relations, e.g., "Mt. McKinley is higher in elevation than Mt. Shasta"; negation, "The map is not the territory"; location, "Oakland is on the west coast"; auxiliary, "It is raining," "I am going to the store," etc.; and possibly many other unidentified forms, e.g., "I am aware of that." These forms must be sacrificed when adopting E-Prime, at considerable cost for no proven benefit.

#### Argument #6:

Eliminating "to be" from the English language may have little effect on eliminating *identity* from the language. A statement such as, "The practice of E-Prime is silly," has a tell-tale form, and can be easily recognized by general semanticists as having the structure of identity (or predication).

Yet, a statement of apparently equal identification, "The silly practice of E-Prime continues," can be made in E-Prime without the verb "to be." The latter form may even hold more dangers. Since the E-Prime statement assumes an identity rather than asserting it, our ability to recognize it as a problem is hampered. That does not favor the adoption of E-Prime.

#### **Argument #5:**

Identity-in-the-language is not the same thing as the far more important *identity-in-reaction* (identification), and the two should not be confused. A whole system, called general semantics, was developed to cut the link between identity-in-the-language and identity-in-reaction. Through the practice of *silence on the objective levels*, adopting a self-reflexive attitude, e.g., "as I see it," "it seems to me," et cetera, and by the use of quotation marks — "It 'is' a great day," — and so on, the link can be cut. Korzybski claimed that persons properly trained in general semantics could use any language and not be led astray. (It should be noted that one of the training techniques of general semantics is to reword is-of-identity and is-of-predication statements, e.g., "That man is a fool" becomes "I evaluate that man as a fool." This technique existed long before E-Prime was thought of, and differs from it in that, although the technique is encouraged, there is no absolute requirement to use it in all circumstances or to extend it to statements that actually do not violate the principles of the discipline.)

#### **Argument #4:**

The advocates of E-Prime assume that it is far easier to eliminate the verb "to be" from the English language than it is to eliminate just the is-of-identity and the is-of-predication; they also apparently feel that serious efforts have been made to do the latter and that the attempts have failed. Neither assumption seems supported by the available facts. I doubt that more than a handful of people have seriously tried to train themselves to distinguish between the different uses of

the verb "to be." Who has, for example, gone over his or her writings, checking the sentences that contain the verb "to be" as an auxiliary verb (for example, "I am going to the store"), and underlining other sentences that use "to be" to express identity or predication? Although it might take months to easily (automatically) distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate uses of the verb "to be," it takes months or years to learn E-Prime. The Spanish language, regarded as one of the easiest to learn, has two verbs for "to be"; one is used to indicate permanence, and the other, temporary states. Spanish-speaking people apparently have no trouble making such distinctions. For many people, it might actually be easier to distinguish between different uses of the verb "to be" than to eliminate "to be" entirely from the language.

### **Argument #3:**

There may be considerable benefits to humankind in the use of the verb "to be" that the formulations of general semantics do not take into consideration. We know that one of the best languages for time-binding is mathematics, a language that relies heavily on the notion of equivalence and equality. " $Y = Z$ " seems quite similar in form to "John Jones is that professor." Mathematicians do not ascribe content to their languages, however, whereas English speakers frequently confuse language and "reality." For the purposes of time-binding and progress, it may be better to keep "to be" in the language — but cut the link between identity-in-the-language and identification-in-our-reactions (by training ourselves in general semantics) — rather than to take a meat-axe to the verb "to be."

### **Argument #2:**

The phrase "the natural order of evaluation," as a general semantics formulation, refers to the process of moving from lower orders of abstraction to higher; from, for example, the notions of test-taking, attending classes, and reading textbooks, to the generalized notion of "student." A civilization advances when it can move from the idea of individual trees

to that of "forest." Korzybski claimed that the capacity to produce higher and higher abstractions leads to a general consciousness of abstracting, which he described as "the very key to further human evolution." (*Science and Sanity*, 3rd ed., p.xxi) E-Prime tends to make the expression of higher orders of abstraction more difficult; instead of describing someone as a student, for example, the E-Prime speaker is more likely to say, "She attends classes at the university," or some such thing. That sort of forced return to lower orders of abstraction may have drawbacks that the advocates of E-Prime have not examined. It would seem more in line with the time-binding of the human race, to leave the individual free to choose the appropriate order of abstraction in the given case, rather than to erect a structure that forces him or her to lower orders. Of course, many individuals do neglect the lower orders of abstraction in their talking and reacting, but training in general semantics may be a better prescription for that malady than E-Prime.

### Argument #1:

E-Prime makes no distinction between statements that cross the principles of general semantics and statements that do not. A statement such as, "I am going to the store," violates no formulation of general semantics, yet E-Prime prohibits it. That clearly places E-Prime outside the interrelated set of principles and practices that constitute the discipline. The first question we should ask of a principle or practice of general semantics is whether or not it fits the facts (and the other formulations of the system), not whether or not it is expedient. The map-territory paradigm, the verifiable premises of the discipline, the deliberately limited nature of Korzybski's formulations, all suggest that we should not allow a practice that lacks consistency with the other tenets of general semantics into the system. In my opinion, E-Prime goes way beyond the borders of what a discipline with scientific aspirations should tolerate.