

AN AUTO-INTERVIEW ON

RUSSELL JOYNER* **THE NEED FOR E-PRIME**

Q. THIS STRIKES ME as a bit of a conceit. Why do you insist on interviewing yourself — do you fear, from other interviewers, embarrassing questions, questions revealing lack of knowledge, unclear thinking or other symptoms of incompetence to discuss E-Prime?

A. Yes, the possibility of embarrassing questions has occurred to me. Although I claim no expertise for discussing E-Prime, I might feel insecure facing some other questioner. But much more important than any feeling of uneasiness, I need time to search for thoughtful answers to questions of substance. Many of the television interviews I have seen demand immediate, knee-jerk responses to unanticipated questions. This seems counterproductive to me — unless the program seeks to reveal what the interviewee will say *without thinking*. So I only want to deal with questions I have had some time to consider.

Q. E-Prime — English without any form of the verb "to be," — seems a vast subject when you realize that it touches

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on so many instances of thought, of expression and on so many situations in human affairs: the linguistic habits we speakers of English have developed since infancy, linguistic habits connected with learned behavioral responses to the world as well as to internal stimuli. Do you feel comfortable trying to delve into such a highly abstract subject, a subject so sweeping it practically begs for self-destroying generalizations?

A. No. The enormity of it numbs my mind. Attempts to draw even a small sample from a population of contexts that includes "am," "is," "are," "was," "were," "being," etc., overwhelm me. I suggest that we try to reduce the subject to a more manageable scope for this brief interview by focusing attention on a few uses of "is" and closely related matters.

Q. Agreed. You say that you want to learn to write in E-Prime. You want to give up writing all statements of the type "A is B," where either A or B can refer to *anything*, from real or imaginary words, numbers, or other symbols to real or imaginary objects, events, or processes?

A. Yes.

Q. You want to give up statements like "That woman is Ms. Quick, my next-door neighbor."; "Fred Williams is a Vice President."; "His teacher is Nadia Komiska." These statements rank among the most verbally economical ways of expressing the naming relationship that we have in the language. We use "is" statements very often in communicating about people's names, along with their title or position. You really would rule out all such statements from your writing?

A. I will try to learn to. Yes.

Q. We find uses of the verb "is" in a great many situations where people engage in labeling: "That is the Bar-X cattle brand."; "If this is 'Choice,' let's disregard beef grading."; "He is a terminal case."; "This car is a lemon."; "It is a non-performing loan. (No one has made a payment on it for years)." These uses of "is" show one of the strongest, most emphatic, most direct ways of expressing the labeling relationship. You wish to eliminate "is" from all of your written contexts involving labeling?

A. Yes.

Q. Surely you don't want to stop using "is" in dealing with the classes of animals and plants of the natural sciences, Zoology and Botany, and other widely used classes and hierarchies of classes. For example, you wouldn't restrict your freedom to write "A monkey is an animal."?

A. Yes I would — in the very little amount of writing I do on these matters. Whether using common or scientific names or referring to relationships between more or less rigorously defined individuals or classes, I want to learn to write without "is."

Q. If you forbid yourself the use of "is," does this mean that you can't even say that something *is a fact*?

A. Yes, indeed, it definitely means that I must *not* write the verb "is" to try to express or establish a truth.

Q. As one of the most frequently used verbs in the language, and certainly the most verbally economical, "is" must furnish some measure of help in conceptualizing and expressing similarities and differences. Otherwise its use probably would have disappeared long ago. Surely you accept that it plays some linguistically beneficial role in establishing and fixing relationships and in recalling, recognizing, organizing, and ordering relationships between the things we encounter in our daily life? Don't you agree?

A. Yes.

Q. Then why work so hard to try to get rid of it? Why fight a lifelong habit, a habit almost universally supported by other speakers of English, trying to learn to write without "is" (and other forms of "to be")?

A. I agree that in a great many contexts "is" produces unrivaled verbal economies. Where could we find a briefer, stronger, more concentrated, more emphatic way to express so many different relationships than "A is B," where A can refer to *anything* and so can B? But these seductive benefits come with unacceptable semantic and logical costs.

Q. Semantic costs? Would you give a definition of "semantic cost"?

A. I use "semantic cost" here to designate the kind of misunderstanding occurring when the mind (the evaluational system) suffers unclarity and confusion regarding what its words refer to. "Semantic cost" means the referential

misunderstanding the mind pays (undergoes) for a given use of a word or words.

Q. I take it that the unacceptably high semantic cost of using "is" accounts for one of the reasons you have decided to try to write in E-Prime. You have given a vague, highly general notion of "semantic cost." How about tying this free-floating definition to some concrete examples?

A. In the question on naming, you gave the example "Fred Smith is a Vice President." The "is" in this statement tells both writer and reader that Fred Smith *now* has the title of Vice President. But, apart from instantaneous communication, how can the writer know, when making the statement, whether Fred Smith has accepted a higher title, or a lower title, or a golden handshake, or whether he has resigned, or received a notice of dismissal? The "is" in "Fred Smith is a Vice President." gives to me, and surely a great many other writers and readers of English, the certainty of a *factual statement*. But given a dynamic, highly mobile society like ours, titles can get conferred, change, or disappear with startling rapidity. In the midst of such changing conditions and uncertainty, do we want to use "is" to cast relationships of people and their titles into what many will interpret as *factual statements*?

In the Summer 1989 issue of *ETC.*, Ruth Gonchar Brennan tells of attending a class on general semantics (in the early 1960s) where students had spent the period trying to learn to distinguish between statements of fact and inference:

Toward the end of the class, Dr. [Harry] Weinberg offered us some statements and we were asked to determine whether they were statements of fact or inference. Harry Weinberg offered us the following example: "Fact or inference," he said, "John F. Kennedy is President of the United States." "Fact," we shouted in unison. "Fact?" he responded. "We've all been in class for almost an hour. Who's to say as a matter of fact that John Kennedy is President of the United States? It is an *inference*, although it's a highly probable one. He might have resigned, his back pain may have incapacitated him, he might even have been killed. Such a statement is *not* one of fact."

Class was over and I started to walk across campus. It was just slightly after noon on November 22, 1963. A young woman sat on the ground with tears streaming down her face. "Someone shot the President," she said. "Which President?" I asked. "Our President," she cried.

A. (continued) Your question on labeling included the statement "He is a terminal case." If these words came from a physician, they may amount to an inference based on the patient's vital signs. But this brief message gives no prognosis in terms of probability, of what could possibly happen: It tells nothing of the prospect of recovery as one might anticipate from the usual course of disease or peculiarities of the case. Here, again, the "is" lends an air of the certainty of a factual statement, this time about how long a patient will live. Surely "terminal" would appropriately label death within 10 days, perhaps death in 10 months, but death in 10 years or more? On rare occasions doctors have had to wait a decade or longer for a "terminal" patient to die.

Now let me touch on the matter of classification and "is." To write about classifying — the sorting of persons, places, things, processes, etc. — requires expressing relationships between individuals, between individuals and groups, and often relationships between groups and still other groups. Previously classified individuals and groups will surely carry names or labels familiar to one writing about them. Using the names and labels, the writer goes on to discuss relationships in some classificatory system or other. Thus, the discussion may well involve relationships between each of the following: the name of the individual *and* the individual; the name of the group *and* the group; the name of the individual *and* the individual *and* the name of the group *and* the group; and perhaps on into the greater complexities of one or more hierarchical organizations of groups. Consider the following statements:

A monkey is a primate and a gorilla is a primate,
but Ping Pong is not a gorilla. Ping Pong is the name
of my monkey.

Let those who find no confusion using "is" to express different classificatory relationships, translate, quickly and easily, the above statements to clearly reveal the following different relationships: between the name of the individual and the individual; between the names of groups and groups; between the individual and groups; and between groups and groups.

The writer attempts clarification with the following classificatory statements which he arrived at neither instantaneously nor all that easily:

The group called primate includes subgroups that carry the names of gorilla and monkey. Of these two subgroups, only the one named monkey includes the individual named Ping Pong who belongs to me.

Before going on, I should offer a closely related example illustrating how "is" and another form of the verb "to be" can sow seeds of confusion in a syllogism:

Primates are a Zoological group.
Ping Pong is a primate.
Therefore Ping Pong is a Zoological group.

We have here another exercise in reformulation: to both clarify referential meaning and to correct the logic. Little wonder that, in dealing with individual members and groups, students of set theory must learn *different* symbols to distinguish the quite different relationships that use of "is" so often confounds.

To repeat an answer to one of your earlier questions, I want to learn to eliminate "is" when writing about facts; I want to learn to stop using "is" to express or to establish a truth. Points illustrated in the following dialogue bear on this decision to discard "is" and to look for less misleading, clearer, more reliable formulations in E-Prime:

C. It is a fact that the United States is a North American country.

D. No, it is not a fact — the State of Hawaii lies many hundreds of miles outside of the North American continent.

C. Well, in the first half of the 20th century people accepted it as a fact. I guess it must have stopped being a fact the day Hawaii became a state.

D. Rubbish! Surely you can't mean that one day it was a fact and the very next day it was false!

C. You're probably right. If something is a fact, how can it become false? What is the point in something being a fact if you can't depend on it for the next 24 hours?

The different meanings these participants give to "It is a fact" — meanings they find so frustrating and confusing — would receive scant attention from cartographers. Map makers must remain aware that people not only give names to land masses, but laws get passed requiring the use of names in many situations; and more or less frequently laws get enacted that change such names. As cartographers, their responsibilities include noting and publishing such name changes: After Hawaii acquired statehood, map makers stopped producing maps and charts marked with "Territory of Hawaii" and started calling the islands "State of Hawaii." Cartographers also know that land masses undergo constant changes and that their duties involve observing and charting such changes when of sufficient magnitude. A single eruption of one of Hawaii's volcanoes can dramatically change the height and shape of the mountain as well as closely surrounding land.

From the various widespread uses of "It is a fact ..." I infer that for many it has a semantic role of building an unchanging world welded to a fixed language and the security that such stability provides. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* gives at least two quite different referential meanings gleaned from past uses of the word "fact": reference to an actual occurrence, an event or something that has actual

existence; and reference to a piece of information presented as having objective reality. Such pieces of information commonly come to us in the form of written statements. Evidently we learn to use the word "fact" to refer to *both* actual occurrences and events *and* statements about occurrences and events *simultaneously*. No wonder that, in using "fact," we so often weld words to things, confuse verbal statements with occurrences, events, or processes. Or, as general semanticists say, confuse maps with territories.

Such semantic welding assists those who would influence the direction of our thoughts: those who covertly dictate (instead of overtly suggest) which words for us to use.

For example, in labeling people and behavior they might say: "It is a fact that she is virtuous." Or "It is a fact that she is puritanical." "It is a fact that he is a chauvinist." Or maybe "It is a fact that he is a patriot." Thus, such words may offer certainty regarding the *true* label to use.

In more than a few contexts "It is a fact ..." assures continuity; it introduces a truthful history of the past and an unflinching prediction of the future — a world we can anticipate with total confidence. No such world, of course, exists.

Q. You have made clear your desire to learn to write in E-Prime. If possible, would you forbid all other writers from using "is" and other forms of "to be"?

A. No. Although writing only in E-Prime would probably help some of the poets I have read, it would restrict the poetic license needed by others. How about e. e. cummings' line, "Bang is the meaning of a gun." Or Gertrude Stein's "A rose is a rose is a rose...."?

Who would rule out future analogies as insightful as Barnett Newman's "Aesthetics is for the artist as ornithology is for the birds."?

Playwrights certainly must have freedom to put *any* words into the mouths of their characters and so must novelists. Unable to predict the future, I would never dictate the use of E-Prime by others. Nevertheless, I feel convinced that *all* writers of English could benefit enormously by learning to write skillfully in E-Prime — not to write with the time-consuming effort of translating into a "foreign" language (as I

have spent doing this interview), but to write E-Prime with the ease and familiarity of a second language.

Q. Would you briefly summarize what your answers in this interview have to do with general semantics and E-Prime?

A. In originating general semantics Alfred Korzybski dealt with many different kinds of human misevaluations, including the confused thinking and unsane behavior resulting from certain uses of "is" and other forms of the verb "to be." He developed the structural differential, a training device for describing and differentiating relationships: relationships between reduced and expanded ranges of attention; between processes over time; between individuals; between groups; between names, labels, and other verbal maps and the non-verbal world of objects, events, and processes; and between many other relationships as well.

It remained for one of Korzybski's most inventive students, D. David Bourland, Jr., to conceive of E-Prime and develop it as a study and practice. By showing how "is" and other forms of "to be" promoted misevaluations spelled out in Korzybski's general semantics, Bourland demonstrated important benefits of E-Prime; both as a means of alerting language users to the pitfalls of using "to be" and as a medium for producing more reliable verbal formulations.

In this interview I have dealt with only a *few* examples stemming from *one* form of "to be." Other students of general semantics and E-Prime have investigated different uses of "to be" and offered other evaluations of E-Prime. But we can rest assured that *much* about E-Prime and closely related matters remain for exploration. Shall I go on?

Q. Would you like to?

A. Another time, perhaps — we must consider the reader.