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Beyond IS...Creative writing with English Prime

Abstract

A brief history of a prescriptive English language discipline known as English Prime (E-Prime), a method of writing without use of the copula (the verb to be). Writing in E-Prime requires the author to expose the agent of a sentence and therefore lends itself favourably to other techniques of mimetic storytelling. An examination of my experiments using this constraint for creative writing demonstrates that utilising E-Prime enhances vernacular authenticity, improves clarity, readability and the quality of immersion in a text. The E-Prime constraint offers access to dynamics of language ordinarily subliminal. Keywords: E-Prime, creative writing, creative nonfiction, literary innovation and experimentation

The little word 'is' has its tragedies; it marries and identifies different things
with the greatest innocence;
and yet no two are ever identical, and if therein lies the charm of wedding them
and calling them one, therein too lies the danger.
– George Santayana (1955: 71)

English Prime (E-Prime): Writing/speaking in the English language without
the copula,
i.e. excluding tenses of the verb *to be* (are, am, is, was, were, be, been and
being)
and/or their contractions. (Bourland 1989: 203)

Introduction

Since my first poetry publication credit in 1992 and despite scores of publications in the years preceding I had never written a long-form work. After almost two decades considering what 'genre' of novel I would like to write, my interest in experimental literature, poetry and rascalion autobiography culminated in the decision to write an experimental memoir.

Considering Gore Vidal's definition 'A memoir is how one remembers one's own life...' (Wood 1995), it seems logical for authors of memoir to adopt a reflective voice, utilising techniques of diegetic storytelling. All of the memoirs I read in preparation for this experiment read like the television show *The Wonder Years*. The invisible narrator, or The Hidden Observer with an adult voice reflecting back on childhood, telling the viewer what the characters are thinking and feeling.

I set out to write a memoir in first person present perfect, just to see what would happen when writing a personal history without the reflective voice.

Right away I found myself perplexed by tensions that arise between mimetic and diegetic methods of storytelling. Aiming to write directly represented action (mimesis), where my protagonist exists in the eternal now or continuous present, where he lives rather than remembers (shows rather than tells) a personal history proved very difficult. The static hum of reflection drowned the dynamic action I desired to capture. Looking back to childhood, not tainting these reflections with adult sensibilities... not reflecting!

After multiple false starts, efforts to capture a first person present perfect voice as opposed to a reflective voice proved fruitless. Looking back through my academic reading list I unearthed an obscure constraint known as English Prime. I first learned of the discipline of E-Prime when I happened upon a collection of *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* at a book sale in the early 90s. This quarterly journal first appeared in print in 1943 and continues today as the flagship publication for the *Institute of General Semantics*.

I threw caution into the blender with hopelessness and began to try writing in E-Prime. At first I thought it possible to simply rewrite from an abandoned draft and translate. This failed; the process felt restrictive and laborious, the majority of my sentences contained at least one forbidden word. The shift in syntax and the lateral segue required while writing in E-Prime made it clear that I faced an entire overhaul of my writing process. You cannot say something *is* anything else. I started from the beginning.

A brief history

Alfred Korzybski (1879-1950), a pioneer of the theory of General Semantics, hypothesised in many of his seminal writings and lectures that language has a flaw: when one attempts to describe *being* they ultimately end up describing a series of processes, things *doing* things (describe a dancer without saying she *is* a dancer). He surmised that this flaw results in misleading abstractions and therefor linguistic errors. Humans do not have the ability to directly experience reality, we can only approach phenomena through our senses. We then describe 'reality' to each other using faulty semiotic systems. He identified this flaw in language as the '*is* of identity' and '*the is* of predication'. Korzybski famously summed up his hypothesis in 1931 in a speech to the American Mathematical Society when he said:

'The map is not the territory'. A language is like a map; it is not the territory represented...it may be a good map, or a bad map. If the map shows a different structure from the territory represented [...] then the map is worse than useless...it misinforms and leads astray. The use of *el* [elementalistic] language to represent events which operate as-a-whole is, at least, equally misguiding and semantically dangerous.
(Korzybski 1933: 498)

After the reprint of this lecture appeared in his book *Science and Sanity*, on the lecture circuit Korzybski would demonstrate his tenet by beginning with vigorous thumping on his desk, shouting, 'Whatever this is, it's not a table!' (Rae 2009).

In 1965, D David Bourland, a former student of Korzybski's, published an essay titled 'A Linguistic Note: Writing in E-Prime' and thereby coined the term (Bourland 1965-6). Bourland proposed the discipline as an addition to, and a remedy for, the problem identified by Korzybski. Many years later Bourland admitted that he himself had not conceived the idea, that a

person, whose name I can no longer retrieve, wrote to the Institute suggesting that, in view of the problems Korzybski had discussed ... perhaps we should just abandon *all* uses of the verb 'to be' ... it struck me as having considerable merit, provided one could really do it. (Bourland 1989: 101)

Stating that he had spent many years since the late 1940's experimenting with E-Prime, he added that he 'did not discuss this matter lest I become regarded as some kind of nut' (Bourland 1989: 102).

Korzybski's theories attracted some notable writers and thinkers, including William S Burroughs, who attended thirty five hours of seminars in 1939 and notes Korzybski's teachings as seminal to his writing practice (Rae 2009). After the publication of Bourland's 1965 paper, E-Prime gained popularity among proponents of the new-age movement including Isaac Asimov, Frank Herbert, L Ron Hubbard and the Quantum Psychologist Robert Anton Wilson. Wilson experimented with E-Prime as a tool for achieving changes in 'reality'. In *Quantum Psychology* he wrote:

The case for E-Prime rests on the simple proposition that 'isness' sets the brain into a medieval Aristotelian framework that makes it impossible to understand modern problems and opportunities. Consider the human brain as a computer. As the Prime Law of Computers tells us, GARBAGE IN, GARBAGE OUT... The wrong software guarantees wrong answers. It seems likely that the principal software used in the human brain consists of words, metaphors, disguised metaphors, and linguistic structures in general. A revision of language structure, in particular, can alter the brain as dramatically as a psychedelic [drug]. In our metaphor, if we change the software, the computer operates in a new way. (Wilson 1990: 98)

Despite this brief surge of interest among counter-culture types, E-Prime has languished. As stated, only the scientific community has shown more than a passing interest. Wilson notes that 'oddly, most physicists write in E-Prime' and that E-Prime 'has not caught on in learned circles or popular speech' (Wilson 1990: 97). My research shows that in the history of E-Prime only one author, David Gerrold, has attempted to write a creative work using this constraint: a science fiction space opera titled *Under The Eye Of God* (1993). Gerrold gained fame as one of the original writers for the television series *Star Trek* but his 'space opera' has been out of print since 1995. I spent considerable time trying to trace a copy of this novel armed only with the blurb, written in E-Prime:

On a small planet called Thoska-Roole, a loosely allied band of humans, androids, and bioforms make one last stand against the dominance of Phaestor, a race of genetically engineered killing machines. (Gerrold nd)

I discovered a title *Worlds of Wonder – How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy* (2001) by the same author, which contains a chapter about his experiment with E-Prime. Of this he states:

Despite my practically giving it away... that I had abandoned the use of the verb to be ... nobody noticed. And when I did point it out to others, nobody seemed to care. Or perhaps they didn't understand the size of the challenge. Nevertheless ... I remain proud of the effort. (Gerrold 2001: 205)

In January 2014 Gerrold released a self published ebook edition of *Under The Eye Of God*, and, although I respect his efforts, such sentences as quoted below have something to do with its critical reception:

Finn went swiftly up the hard ceramic steps, treading as lightly as he could. Still, his footsteps caused the boards to creak...
Sawyer looked over at him, one eyebrow raised questioningly.
His rifle swung meaningfully. The bartender stopped, he shrugged apologetically. (Gerrold 2014: 3)

I myself noticed a tendency for those annoying ‘ly’ adverbs and intensifiers to rise to the surface when writing in E-Prime; (not to mention the hard ceramic steps that creak) the fact that Gerrold struggled with the discipline is not a surprise. Gerrold also stated in *Worlds of Wonder* that he used a word processing program to ‘find all’ after he had written the text and then ‘translated’ this into E-Prime. This is a method I do not recommend. The writer must persist and learn to think using the constraint.

Since the death of William Burroughs in 1997 and that of Robert Anton Wilson in 2007 only one living writer has written extensively about this subject: the ‘modern occultist, author, cofounder of the Illuminates of Thanateros, and practitioner of chaos magic theory’ Peter J Carroll (*Encyclopedia Thelemica* 2015). Carroll’s 1995 book *Psybermagick* is written in E-Prime and contains a chapter titled *Anontology* covering his views on the subject. It begins with a warning:

NOTHING HAS BEING – adjust your mind, you have a serious fault in the linguistic programs which structure your thought, which can halve your effective intelligence. (Carroll 1995: 94)

In a commentary on the chapter he writes:

The word virus of ‘being’ does not submit easily to defeat. Yet on paper, after some struggle, one may start to roll back the enemy. As it retreats you notice the enormity of the territory it once occupied. Vast areas of assumption dissolve into fresh and fluid thought. Every careless use of the words ‘am, are, is, was, and be’ reveals, upon correction, a wealth of ingrained assumption and lost information content. (99)

I contacted Mr Carroll, who for all intents and purposes is the world’s foremost authority on the subject, and requested an interview. As revealed, he was very happy to speak about the subject as no one has ever asked him about it.

For brevity I have included only several of the key quotes from Mr Carroll’s answers to my questions below:

When did you first learn of Korzybski’s theories about the ‘is’ of identity and the ‘is’ of predication and his views about this semantic ‘virus’ in our language?

I came across this idea in Robert Anton Wilson’s writings and decided to attempt my third book ‘*Psybermagick*’ [1995] using the E-Prime idea... Abandoning the idea of ‘being’ struck me as a supremely important method of thinking clearly about anything and everything and I wrote explicitly about this in *Psybermagick*. The scientific, metaphysical, and psychological tie-ins of the E-Prime idea attracted me immediately. Basically,

from a scientific point of view we cannot observe anything in a state of 'being', we can only observe what it does. Nothing remains stationary, atoms and the particles within them execute an endless high speed dance, continually spinning and vibrating and quantum jumping from wavelike to particle like behavior. Quantum physics looks weird and incomprehensible if you insist on trying to say that a quantum event like a photon of light or an electron of matter 'is' a particle or 'is' a wave, or 'is' anything at all...

Inspired by Korzybksi and Bourland I like to draw a delineation between the 'earth' and the 'world'. The earth is what Korzybski would call the natural environment and the world is what he would refer to as our semiotic reality (we live on the earth and in the world). These views have echoed down to us through Baudrillard and his ideas about the death of 'reality'. What strange effects did you notice occur in our semiotic environment when you experimented with English Prime?

I strongly suspect that an objective reality does go on outside our heads even though we can only perceive a degraded and filtered version of it inside of our heads. Moreover, not only does our sensory apparatus give us only a rather rough version of the outside reality but our internal processing mucks about with the incoming information adding all sorts of interpretations including the idea that phenomena have 'being' and essence in addition to the doing we actually observe. As some people in the modern world find themselves giving ever more of their attention to convoluted interpretations of reality and less and less to the more basic experiences of hunger, fear, physical exertion, real friendships, and real hardships; then they will indeed become detached from reality. Descartes famously asserted I think therefore I 'am'. One wit quipped that Descartes had probably yet to experience a serious toothache.

My research has revealed that only one author, David Gerrold (of Star Trek fame) has attempted to write a wholly creative work using English Prime. (I say 'attempt' because having just read it, I won't read it again) Am I correct or are you aware of other published creative works written in E-Prime?

Yes you CAN correctly assume this :)

I have read many of your interviews over the years and no one appears to have asked you about English Prime?

No, they haven't. *Psybermagick* where I explained the theory and tried it out, remains a small circulation book from a small publisher. I like to think that in my subsequent three books I had mastered the technique to a degree that nobody really noticed the subtle absence of all tenses of the cursed verb 'to-be', but I hope that it has a subliminal effect on the thought processes of the readership. We have two millennia of muddle headed Platonic idealism to undo. [1]

Most people outside of scientific and science fiction communities, writers and readers alike, on hearing of the concept, dismiss it as a complex and crazy notion. And I agree. No other creative work outside of these genres has been attempted, or at least published. Challenging the very concept of Being cannot go unpunished. Platonic and Aristotelian methods of enquiry are at the very bedrock of western civilisation. Both of these didactics presume ‘is-ness’ which in turn makes it necessary to view our semiotic environment in terms of ‘other’ or binary oppositions. This is not a philosophical paper but in practice it raises some ontological questions. Perhaps the aversion to E-Prime results from entrenched ideas of binary opposition? I struggled, not once in my memoir could I write: ‘I *am* a poet not a shelf picker in a factory’.

Criticism of E-Prime

Critics of E-Prime, including fans of Wilson, argue that using E-Prime *does not* improve readability and that sentence structures become maximalist. One critic wrote:

A jury will be much more impressed with the statement: “This *is* the gun that fired the bullet that killed Mr Jones” than its E-based (equivalent): “This weapon which has the characteristics of a gun has produced the same markings that seem to mark this bullet that allegedly made Mr Jones appear dead.” (Walker 2001)

This critic approached the problem of E-Prime too literally. By trying to avoid the ‘is’ of identity and predication his sentence became maximalist and dull. I’d already decided to use minimalist literary techniques while authoring my experimental memoir. How these techniques would enhance or hinder the use of E-Prime I had yet to determine. In my first experiments, I noticed the instinct to maximalise, rely on adverbs as Mr Gerrold fell victim to, or over-explain as in the example above. I set about dismantling and then rewriting the sentence, using E-Prime with minimalist literary devices.

‘This is the gun that fired the bullet that killed Mr Jones’ seems like a proper sentence. It conveys a message, it conforms to grammatical rules, but both the definitive use of the word ‘is’ and the disembodied voice don’t work for my planned textual experiment. Recasting this sentence in E-Prime requires me to step well beyond simplistic literary advice like ‘showing not telling’. The act of imagining *who said* that sentence gives me a character, and a scene, a scene that needs to be populated. Writing this scene in E-Prime hints at some new form of narrative rhetoric. Exposing the agent of that sentence helps me to build the story, to make it interesting; the story starts to show itself. The invisible observer, that disembodied voice, is the problem with the sentence in question. Who said the sentence? My rewrite:

“The forensic evidence shows unequivocally that this gun fired the bullet which killed Mr Jones!” said the sweaty lawyer, tossing the weapon onto the evidence table.’

No ‘forbidden words’ ... no invisible observer, also, the sentence no longer contains an unquantified opinion.

Too maximalist? Compare our sample sentence:

‘This is the gun that fired the bullet that killed Mr Jones.’

Twelve words, and my rewrite: twenty six words. More than double, but let's exclude the non narrative section – the original contains no agent.

'The forensic evidence shows unequivocally that this gun fired the bullet which killed Mr Jones!'

Fifteen words ... let's trim it.

'The forensic evidence proves this gun killed Mr Jones.'

Eight words. Less than the original!

So the real problem with both the sentences in question: 'This is the gun that fired the bullet that killed Mr Jones – and – This weapon which has the characteristics of a gun etc. etc.' reveals itself. It is not just bad story telling ... after all the simple sentence does provide an image to the reader. In both instances the utterance comes from a disembodied voice. The American literary critic Wayne C Booth covered both of these problems in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). Booth argues that showing *vs* telling is not 'a reliable clue to the miraculous superiority of modern fiction' (Booth 1961: 26). He wrote that making an argument in favour of one method or the other is too simplistic, that Mimesis *vs* Diegesis (show *vs* tell) is no golden rule of writing at all. What about this disembodied voice? To answer this, Booth turns to Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre is an interesting choice, considering our challenge here, to write without the copula, to challenge the assumption of 'being'. Sartre believed that 'existence precedes essence' (Sartre 1946a: 3), that since one cannot explain one's own actions and behaviour by referencing any specific human nature, they are necessarily fully responsible for those actions. 'We are left alone, without excuse' (Sartre 1946b) Booth believed that Sartre is of the opinion that the author should 'avoid omniscient commentary altogether' for the simple reason that if 'we suspect for a moment that he is behind the scenes, controlling the lives of his characters, they will not seem to be free' (Booth 1961: 50).

Occasionally my narrator will *tell* the reader how he 'feels' what he 'believes' and so forth. But, if I avoid the copula, and thereby expose the agent of every sentence, the voice can at no time become disembodied, it can never come from outside of the text. Given the ease of the courtroom scene manifesting as it did, I started to think of my sessions on the creative work at the writing 'routines' or 'scenes', or textual storyboarding.

At this point I turned to Phillips and Huntley's *Dramatica Theory of Story* 'which functions to present all the ways a mind can look at an issue' (Phillips & Huntley 2001: 16). Dramatica theory provisions for distinctions between the Main Character, The Protagonist and the Hero in a story:

A Main Character is the player through whom the audience experiences the story first hand, a Protagonist is the prime mover of the plot and a Hero is a combination of both Main Character and Protagonist. (Phillips & Huntley 2001: 27)

I determined the following distinctions for my experimental memoir: the author is the Main Character who serves as the reader's position in the story, what you read is experienced by the author as he experiences it. The Protagonist is the *idea*, that life imitates art (cinematic literature, creating my own adventures to write about later) and the Heroes are all of the other characters. To further water down my concerns about the ever present raging 'I' that would inevitably present itself in the telling of my story, I adopted both Rimbaud's observation that 'I is another' and Jean Genet's defence of his own *I* when he stated: 'I, is just a slightly magnified character' (Genet 1981). [2]

My research unearthed an article by John C Herbert titled *English Prime as an Instructional Tool in Writing Classes*. Herbert summarises E-Prime by quoting Bourland and Kellogg:

Advocates of E-Prime claim that Aristotelian logic, which induces English speakers and writers to report beliefs as true or false, or “black-or-white,” through the use of the verb *to be*, creates false absolutes. (Bourland & Kellogg 1990)

Herbert also offers a set of criteria for writing in E-Prime:

- Do not tell a story about a special place with narration, but show the place through description.
- Do not use first person (I, we) or second person (you).
- Do not use any forms of the verb *to be*, including its auxiliary forms with progressive tenses and passive sentences.
- Describe one place at a single point in time, using as many active simple present tense verbs as possible.
- Focus on what you experience through the five senses and not on your actions in the place. (Herbert 2006)

These rules work for my experiment. Except rule two, which I counter as described above. I will show the reader the town of my childhood and the way the unchartered outback encroaches its boundaries. I will avoid all eight forbidden words and their contractions. I will describe one place at a single point in time using dynamic action words and I will relay these memories as feelings, sounds, smells and sights in my text, not intellectual musings.

To these rules I add – *no invisible observer*.

Experiments and results

At first, writing without any tenses of the verb to be [3] induces migraine. The discipline requires one to labour over every word in every sentence. But this reveals the frequency of the use of these abstractions in our vernacular. For instance, the statement, ‘Suzy *is* beautiful’ assumes that we all agree on an objective beauty. As soon as you write the sentence *Suzy is beautiful* you have committed the writerly sin of surmising a subjective abstraction, by *not* describing Suzy and letting the reader decide. Describe Suzy’s beauty, distinguish opinion from fact ... even if we don’t agree on what constitutes beauty, make the reader see her anyway. Then, if the reader doesn’t agree, at least we have an understanding of the Main Character’s aesthetic principles.

As an added bonus writing in E-Prime removes the passive voice from your prose, often too well. Characters become responsible for their actions. This can present some problems. An example: early on in my story I recall: ‘My father ran over my mother with a tractor’ (Frazer 2013). Present tense, passive voice eradicated ... Dad sounds like a villain. After sourcing every available piece of literature about E-Prime I found that Bourland himself had encountered this when he noted:

While statistically E-Prime only makes trivial changes relative to the English lexicon, it does affect the syntax. Even this effect, however, does not seem as severe as it might appear. This unexpected lack of severity proceeds from the well-known “richness” of the English language, which provides a wealth of

linking verbs (become, seem, appear, verbs related to the senses), apposition, etc., that can take over most of our habitual applications of *to be*. On the other hand, E-Prime does admittedly entail the necessity of expressing the progressive aspect by using "...continues to..." and it *makes use of the passive voice difficult or even impossible*. (Bourland 1989: 103)

There are 1,025,109 words in the English Language (*Global Language Monitor* 2014) and we only remove eight in this experiment (plus contractions). The proliferation of assumed or glossed over detail is certainly rewarding to write and read. But the total absence of a passive voice presents a very unique stumbling block. Unfortunately Bourland does not offer a solution to this problem. It took me six months to produce 18,000 words written exclusively in E-Prime. I labored with the experiment and the research and found an article written by Bourland titled 'E-Prime: Speaking Crispily' (Bourland 1996). Bourland developed a definitional semantic equation, what he called the 'Crispness Index' ($C.I. = \text{Number of E-Prime Sentences} / \text{Total Number of Sentences}$). Using this index he analyzed dozens of texts ranging from books sourced in bookstores after asking the manager to tell him 'what single book in his store he considered most poorly written' to the works of Hemingway, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* and the writings of Korzybski himself. Bourland concluded '...one can say that professional writers of fiction, whose work has received the attention of professional editors, tend to use a form of the verb *to be* in about half of their sentences' (Bourland 1996: 203). After analyzing my text and removing a few slip-ups of the word 'ain't', which, although a non-standard dialect, simply replaces *am* or *isn't*, my first 20,000 words obtained a C.I. score of one to one.

Excited by the way my text read, I employed a retired academic and widely published author who now offers professional editing and manuscript assessment services. She didn't notice what I'd done, but commented on the richness of the prose and restored the copula in a few shaky passages in the narrative where I had difficulty with E-Prime. She also noted that the sentence 'My father ran over my mother with a tractor' implies that my father has psychopathic tendencies.

Despite numerous hours of research I could not find a remedy for this problem. I did find people who claim the opposite, that E-Prime *removes* blame-based thinking. American psychologist Albert Ellis advocated the use of E-Prime 'especially in writing, as a way to avoid muddled and blame-based thinking that makes psychotherapy patients distressed' (Ellis 2001). Elaine C Johnson in her essay 'Discovering E-Prime' recounts a discussion with the semanticist Ruth McCubbrey about what to tell students when encouraging the use of E-Prime:

Tell them it ties their language closer to experience, that using other verbs forces them to take responsibility for their statements. (Johnson 1998)

While an extreme example, my sentence in question demonstrates a problem not too often encountered in the discipline of creative writing, a *lack* of the passive voice. I didn't want to rewrite the sentence by adding a lame adverb like 'accidentally' (see Gerrold) or lose the foreshadowing effect of its placement in the narrative by elaborating further. I spent the next six months pondering the problem and experimenting with E-Prime. I discovered that many minimalist literary techniques lend themselves favourably to writing in E-Prime. Avoiding clichés, or what minimalists called 'received text', comes as

a natural consequence. *Recording Angel*, or writing without passing judgment, can apply a ‘patch’ to the break in narrative experienced when the active voice becomes too stressed. As the minimalist author Chuck Palahniuk puts it ‘nothing is fed to the reader as fat or happy’ (Palahniuk 2002) and ‘you get a slow drip of single-sentence paragraphs, each one evoking its own emotional reaction’ (Palahniuk 2004: 144-5). Palahniuk learned this from Tom Spanbauer, who teaches what he calls ‘Dangerous Writing’. On this minimalist form of literary expression Spanbauer says:

Writing dangerously is going to that place inside each of us that is hidden and secret. There is something sad or sore there. It’s going to that place, investigating it and writing from that place. (Spanbauer qtd in Gabbettas 2011)

Other techniques developed by Spanbauer to facilitate this personal writing, including ‘Recording Angel’, work very well with E-Prime. ‘Burnt Tongue’, ‘a way of saying something, but saying it wrong, twisting it to slow down the reader’ (Palahniuk 2004: 144) proves useful to do that very thing, slowing down the speed of the narrative that results as a consequence of using dynamic E-Prime language. The method of ‘Going On The Body’ which:

involves the reader on a gut level, involves avoiding cliches, and requires unpacking physical sensations into discreet units of experience and then [to] describe these experiences in direct and novel ways. (Vanderpool 2007)

This comes as a natural consequence of E-Prime when one avoids saying something *is* anything else. The minimalist technique ‘Horses’ – ‘recurring themes which provide the backbone of a story, formulated and reiterated in various disguises in the course of a narrative’ (Sári 2012), allowed me to avoid modifying my ‘psychopathic dad’ sentence by unpacking it and influencing its context in the broader body of text.

These methods work particularly well in first person present perfect as stated by Spanbauer himself in an interview with the San Diego Writers Collective:

First person to me is like riding a surfboard. The wave is right under me and when I get it right there’s no feeling like it. Third person feels like I’ve stepped aside from the “sweet spot” and I’m writing about someone else on the surfboard riding the wave. (Spanbauer 2011)

I think his student Palahniuk may have also caught on with a reference to E-Prime in a recent essay titled ‘Nuts and Bolts: “Thought” Verbs’. He says to his students:

From this point forward – at least for the next half year – you may not use “thought” verbs. These include: Thinks, Knows, Understands, Realizes, Believes, Wants, Remembers, Imagines, Desires, and a hundred others you love to use. The list should also include: Loves and Hates. And it should include: *Is* and *Has*, but we’ll get to those, later. (Palahniuk 2013)

To remedy the problems encountered so far, that is: 1. Maximalist sentences; 2. The problem of blame (the dynamic voice points the finger at the doer); and 3. Third person omniscient (hidden observer), I formulated these three simple rules:

- No hiding in the text

- No living outside the sentences
- No invisible observer.

While one can endeavour to write without casting aspersions, convincing the reader to abandon their own blame-based thinking patterns requires some serious work. To do this you must not let your reader leave the text, and to accomplish that you must not let your narrator or your characters live outside of the sentences. I spent 2012 experimenting with narrative sketches and monologues in E-Prime, and researching qualities of ‘authentic voices’ in literature and the methodology used to obtain those authentic voices. I started my PhD creative work in January 2013. After several false starts and many hiccups due to the tyranny of memory and mistakes in my timeline, by December 2013 I produced 148,000 words written exclusively in English Prime. This figure includes a complete rewrite of the initial 20,000 words as a result of the process that unfolds when you get into the E-Prime ‘territory’. The seemingly outlandish claim by Korzybski that we do not directly experience reality, and Wilson’s crazy notion that simply altering language structure can have psychedelic effects, now don’t seem so outlandish or crazy. When you ‘plug in’ to E-Prime the semiotic environment becomes more vivid and active. An extract from a reflective journal written during my early experiments demonstrates the excitement felt:

So I begin, and immediately I feel overwhelmed by the discipline it takes to avoid using tenses of the verb *to be*. At times I swear that I can feel my brain squirming in my skull. But I persist and after a while I find myself faltering less and less. I also feel binocular in a land of the blind. Something almost miraculous happens, descriptions of places, events and people become vivid in the mind’s eye as the words flow. The old familiar shortcuts cannot *be* used. I cannot whitewash over anything, I cannot *tell* the reader anything. I must show, demonstrate, describe. (Frazer 2011)

Once you start to map a story using E-Prime the quality of immersion in the story improves exponentially. Even during the laborious process of editing you find yourself dragged through the text. What started out as an experiment to write more descriptively has become a whole new way of not only writing, but seeing. My desire to create an authentic voice required me to somehow ‘marry’ these two vastly different methods of story telling. The definition of memoir as ‘a record of events based on the writer’s personal observation’ (*Collins English Dictionary* 2014) lends itself to a diegetic ‘recollection’ style prose where the narrator reports or recounts the story. My ‘narrator’ had to become a character, to serve as the reader’s position, as a means to show or enact directly represented action. Using E-Prime as a device to expose the orator, the narrator steps out of the shadows and into the story.

After I completed the first draft of my creative work I enlisted a group of beta readers with the aim to gauge reactions toward not only the story itself, but the way I have ‘told’ or written the story. My beta readers included a native German speaker, a dyslexic chef, a native French speaker who translates to English for a living, an emotionally disturbed artist, a paranoid schizophrenic musician and a retired literary agent who has published twelve books. [4] I elected to only inform my test group of the technique of E-Prime after their initial reactions. The response received proved very positive. The German speaker said ‘for the first time I read English while thinking in English, not needing to translate to German and back.’ The dyslexic chef spoke with great excitement about how she ‘powered ahead with the story, not tripping over words like I always do, what sorcery is this?’ The French translator commented

on ‘the beat of the story, you swing from image to feeling ... it’s like jazz poetry, in turn the story evokes feelings of elation and dread, like you can’t quite articulate how you personally feel ... you’re in the head of the protagonist and you can’t get out.’ The retired literary agent said: ‘Started reading from when you sent it – slept for maybe six hours and just finished now. Could. Not. Stop. Very compelling reading ... the utterly active voice keeps the reader right up against the windscreen.’ Later, after she had finished reading she offered to come out of retirement and pitch it to her publishing contacts for me [4].

E-Prime offers a world of promise for students and teachers of writing across all disciplines. It is a constraint which offers access to dynamics of language ordinarily subliminal. If you aim to pursue truth and authenticity in your writing, or simply clarify your ideas in text, consider English Prime a whole new Operating System, a new pallet of shades to paint the world, a discipline that warrants rigorous investigation and experimentation.

I conclude with two passages from my manuscript, as examples of my argument that using E-Prime improves clarity, readability and immersion in a text. From *Scoundrel Days*:

A crunch of gears there as the bus navigates a bend. We’ve left the coast now. Mountains on either side. Rainforest reaching up.

If I ever get off this island I’ll miss the various perfumes the most; the eucalypt soprano drops in, riding on the cicada screech, then the contralto of rotting mangoes, it grabs onto the skirts of the toad croak ... then comes the baritone of molasses on the smoke from sugar mills. Above all of this, in the crescendos, the tenor, the stench of death, road kill rotting on bitumen, it tremors in from the edges on the cry of crows.
(Frazer 2013: 132-133)

Granddad had this huge dent in the left side of his head. I asked him about it, as would any innocent kid. He told me that he rode the light-horse in Gallipoli:

– One day, he said, shuffling in the shade of the shed where the grass feels cool and the mango tree leaves haven’t yet browned from the sun; Out in the desert in Egypt, I came across a body on the sand, I demounted, to check the fellow, and he sprung up with a blade.

My eyes widened.

– He didn’t stab me, though the bastard had the will, because, back then, Boy, I had the reflexes of a champion pugilist! and he attempts to do this forward shuffle, one fist clenched and punching the air in front of him, but he cramps up and I have to wait for him to catch his breath.

– What happened then, Granddad? (Frazer 2013: 220)

Notes

[1] Original interview with Peter J Carroll by Brentley Frazer, 2014. Full permission was granted by Mr Carroll to reproduce the transcript for this paper. return to text

[2] Genet’s statement appears in no published interview in written form. He states this in an interview filmed. The video is viewable online. The link is available in the ‘Works cited’ section of this paper. return to text

[3] E-Prime Rules

Disallowed words:

be
being
been
am
is; isn't
are; aren't
was; wasn't
were; weren't

Contractions formed from a pronoun and a form of to be:

I'm
you're; we're; they're
he's; she's; it's
there's; here's
where's; how's; what's; who's
that's

Naturally contractions of 'has' are allowed: she's, he's

E-Prime likewise prohibits contractions of to be found in nonstandard dialects of English, such as the following:

ain't
hain't (when derived from *ain't* rather than haven't)
whatcha (derived from what *are* you)
yer (when derived from *you are* rather than your)

Allowed words:

E-Prime does not prohibit the following words, because they do not derive from forms of to be. Some of these serve similar grammatical functions (see auxiliary verbs).

become;
has; have; having; had (I've; you've)
do; does; doing; did
can; could
will; would (they'd)
shall; should
ought
may; might; must
remain
equal

return to text

[4] Presented as anecdotal. Ethics approved. Permission from all involved sought and granted. Individual names omitted to retain privacy of those concerned. Further excerpts from this section elaborated upon in my exegesis. return to text

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