A Cross-linguistic Comparison of Tautological Constructions with Special Focus on English

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1 Introduction

According to Grice’s maxim of Quantity cooperative speakers do not produce uninformative utterances. Given that tautological utterances\(^1\) are necessarily true and therefore provide no new information, one would not expect such constructions to be used in conversation. However, sentences like those in (1) are uttered all the time.

(1) a. Kinks will be Kinks.\(^2\)
b. An early day is an early day.\(^3\)
c. I will shave it when I shave it.\(^4\)
d. If I’m wrong, I’m wrong.\(^5\)

As it turns out, utterances like those in (1) are very informative. (1a) was used to explain that fans of the Kinks have accepted that Ray and Dave Davies (the two most famous members of the Kinks) will never agree on anything for long enough to play together again. (1b) was uttered as a means of accepting a member of a couple’s excuse for their having to leave an evening engagement early. An angry husband exclaimed (1c) in order to communicate to his wife that she must accept that he would not shave his mustache at that point, as she wanted. A talk show host communicated that he could accept it if his answer to a logic problem were wrong by uttering (1d). Clearly, there is more to the meanings and uses of tautologies than just their truth conditional values.

I am by no means the first researcher to notice this. There have been a variety of different approaches to accounting for the communicative significance of tautological utterances in English. Some researchers, sometimes called Radical Pragmaticists, argue that the meanings of such expressions are derivable by universal pragmatic principles (Levinson 1983, Brown & Levinson 1987, Ward & Hirschberg 1991). Other researchers, sometimes called Radical Semanticists, argue that the meanings of these expressions are conventionalized and language-dependent (Wierzbicka 1987, 1)

\(^{1}\)I follow Ward & Hirschberg (1991) in counting the following types of constructions as tautological: “‘a is a’ (equatives), ‘either \(p\) or not \(p\)’ (disjunctions), ‘if \(p\), then \(p’\) (conditionals), ‘when \(p\), \(p’\) (subordinate conjunctions), and ‘what \(p\), \(p’\) (headless relative)” (508). I will usually refer to equatives as nominal tautologies. This is misleading because at least adjectives can sometimes fill the \(a\) slots, however this is consistent with previous researchers' terminology.


\(^{3}\)Gilmore Girls; originally aired 05/03/2005.

\(^{4}\)Gilmore Girls; originally aired 02/24/2004.

\(^{5}\)Car Talk; originally aired 12/05/1997.
Still others argue for what Kwon (2009) calls a Non-radical or Hybrid account of the meanings of English tautological utterances. Under the Hybrid approach, the meanings of tautologies are partially conventionalized (semantics) and partially context-dependent (pragmatics) (Fraser 1988, Gibbs & McCarrell 1990, Gibbs 1994, Miki 1996, Bulhof & Gimbel 2001, 2004). Aside from Ward & Hirschberg, all of these researchers have focused almost exclusively on nominal tautologies, like (1a) and (1b). In the first major portion of this paper, I argue that this is mistake because there is considerable overlap in the communicative significances associated with tautologies of various types. In order to illustrate this, I will show that a wide variety of English tautologies are used to communicate the need to accept something that is treated as inevitable or beyond the control of one or both of the interlocutors. This is the result of these constructions evoking a common frame (Fillmore 1982): the ACCEPTANCE FRAME. I will define and illustrate this frame using both tautological constructions and examples of the lexical item accept evoking the frame. I will then show that understanding tautologies as evoking the acceptance frame allows us to account for certain patterns of acceptability associated with tautologies.

Additionally, both nominal tautologies, (2a), and conditional tautologies, (2b), can be used to convey the idea that the fuzziness of a category does not matter. That is to say that these constructions can be used to deny the importance of differences between instances of a particular category. Although this use has been documented for nominal tautologies (see especially Bulhof & Gimbel 2001), it has not yet been discussed for conditionals.

(2) a. A win is a win... Even if it’s a weird one.6
    b. people aren’t gonna buy something that is slower than what they already have, i dont care how high they can fly or how well they can scout with it. if it’s slow it’s slow.7

While much of the research on tautologies has focused on English, there have been a number of surveys of tautologies in other languages. Farghal (1992) gives a very thorough account of tautologies in Colloquial Jordanian Arabic, Okamoto (1991, 1993) deals with nominal tautologies in Japanese, Kwon (2009) discusses nominal tautologies in Korean, Meibauer (2008) offers an analysis of German nominal tautologies, and Escandell-Vidal (1990) accounts for nominal tautologies in Spanish. With all of these descriptions, it is now possible to do an in-depth cross-linguistic comparison of the use of tautologies. Such a comparison is important because there has been a fair amount of debate about whether tautologies have the same communicative significance cross-linguistically. Wierzbicka claims that nominal tautologies in other languages do not mean the same thing as their equivalents in English. Ward and Hirschberg, not limiting themselves to nominal tautologies, offer examples of equivalent tautologies meaning roughly the same thing in English and French, English and Spanish, and English and Turkish. Bulhof & Gimbel (2004) go a step further and say that the subset of nominal tautologies that they focus on should be translatable as tautologies in most, if not all, languages. A comparison of tautologies cross-linguistically based on systematic accounts, rather than a few choice examples from multiple languages, offers a way to either settle the debate or reconcile these apparently contradictory claims.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In §2, I offer a thorough description of tautologies in English and define and exemplify the acceptance frame. In §3, I offer a cross-linguistic comparison

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6http://lakersblog.latimes.com/lakersblog/2005/11/a_win_is_a_win.html
7http://74.125.155.132/search?q=cache:8qmaIpD__QjI:forums.worldofwarcraft.com/thread.html%3FtopicId%3D32203250%26sid%3D1%26pageNo%3D25+%22if+it%27s+slow,+it%27s+slow%22&cd=6&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&client=safari
of the meanings of tautologies. Finally, in §4, I offer a brief conclusion.

2 English tautologies: a thorough description

In English, as in a number of other languages, tautologies are used with a variety of different meanings. Although there has been considerable research on English tautologies there has not yet been a complete, or even thorough, description of the full range of their communicative significances. Perhaps Wierzbicka (1987) comes closest in her detailed account of the meanings of nominal tautologies. But while she describes a number of the uses of nominal tautologies, she does not discuss them all, and she does not deal with other types of tautologies. There has not yet been anything for English like Farghal’s (1992) description of tautologies in Colloquial Jordanian Arabic. In this section, I intend to fill this gap. Following Farghal’s model, I will divide English tautologies up according to their communicative significances and show which syntactic patterns (nominal/equative, conditional, etc.) are associated with each meaning. Whenever possible, I will connect my terminology to the terminology of previous researchers, especially those who have described tautologies in languages other than English. This is crucial because it makes cross-linguistic comparison possible, which in turn makes evaluations of claims about the translatablebility of tautologies possible.

2.1 The semantics of equative tautologies

Equative tautologies in particular have an especially wide variety of possible uses, but before discussing all of them, it is important to outline the semantics associated with these tautologies. While the first nominal in such tautologies denotes an individual or members of a category, I follow Meibauer (2008) and Autenrieth (1997) in saying that the second nominal is predicative. As Charles Fillmore (p.c.) points out, the second nominal does not denote an individual or category members, rather it picks out properties associated with that individual or the members of the category. So, for example, an equative like boys are boys really means boys have the properties of boys.

Beyond simply asserting that the individual or category members denoted by the nominal have the relevant properties, the construction treats the properties as if they are unavoidable and unchangeable. This means that boys are boys might reasonably be paraphrased as boys necessarily have the properties of boys. As will be discussed in §2.2.1, this aspect of the meaning of nominal tautologies is crucial for one particular pragmatic effect of the construction: what I call the acceptance/resignation use. This is not the only part of the construction’s semantics that is exploited for a particular pragmatic effect.

When the first nominal denotes all of the members of category, rather than a particular individual, the construction treats all members of the category as if they were the same, in that all members of the category have the properties indicated by the second nominal. So, for example, another reasonable paraphrase of boys are boys would be all boys necessarily have the properties of boys. This part of the semantics of equative tautology is highlighted when they are used as what Bulhof & Gimbel (2001) call deep tautologies, as I will discuss in §2.3.1.

Having laid out the semantics of equative tautologies, we are now in a position to discuss the range of communicative significances that can be associated with these and other types of tautologies.
2.2 Acceptance/resignation tautologies

Acceptance or resignation tautologies express that something problematic should be accepted or that one ought to resign oneself to it. If the speaker is the one that ought to accept the problematic thing then the tautology communicates that acceptance has already occurred. If someone else is the potential acceptor then the tautology generally communicates the need for acceptance. Nominal, conditional, headless relative, and subordinate conjunction tautologies can all have this meaning.

Some other researchers have discussed acceptance tautologies using different terminology. Farghali (1992) discusses what he calls tolerance and fatalistic tautologies in Jordanian Colloquial Arabic, both of which are acceptance/resignation tautologies in my terms (I will discuss this equivalence at greater length in §3.1.1). In her discussion of nominal tautologies in English, Wierzbicka (1987) argues that tautologies of the form $N_{\text{abstr}}$ is $N_{\text{abstr}}$, such as war is war or business is business, express “a ‘sober’ attitude toward complex human activities” and tautologies with the form $N_{\text{hum.pl.}}$ are $N_{\text{hum.pl.}}$, such as boys are boys or kids are kids, express “[t]olerance for human nature.” In my current description, both of these subconstructions count as acceptance tautologies. As we will see throughout the remainder of this section, these are not the only forms that acceptance tautologies take in English.

2.2.1 Nominal acceptance/resignation tautologies

In nominal acceptance tautologies, what is to be accepted is a salient problematic characteristic of the person, people, thing, or concept denoted by the nominal. A few examples should clarify what I mean here. In (1a), repeated here along with the surrounding context as (3), the relevant characteristic is the most famous members of the Kinks’ constant fighting and refusal to play together.

(3) Every one of them would no doubt sacrifice an appendage to see the infamously feuding brothers share the stage again for a legitimate Kinks gig, but brothers will be brothers, Kinks will be Kinks, and their fans have by now learned to accept their fix in half doses...

In (4), innocent people dying and friendly fire are treated as unavoidable aspects of war that, therefore, must be accepted.

(4) But war is war. It isn’t pretty. There will always be collateral damage, blue on blue incidents, and civilian casualties. It’s not entirely avoidable. It can only be minimized.8

In (1b), repeated along with the conversational context as (5), the fact that an early day requires wrapping up the previous evening’s activities early is the relevant problematic aspect.

(5) LOGAN: Thank you, but I don’t think I could eat another thing, and unfortunately we should be going. I have an early day tomorrow.
EMILY: Oh, Logan, an early day. I’m so sorry we kept you.
LOGAN: I wish I could stay longer.
EMILY: An early day is an early day. Beatrice, get their coats.

In (6), the fact the possibility that bosses are sometimes unlikable is what must be accepted.

(6) You may not like the boss. That is not the issue. Maybe you wouldn’t have picked him or her if you had been given the choice, but the boss is the boss and that’s the way it has always been.9

In (7), Joe Biden’s tendency to misspeak is the salient problematic characteristic.

(7) Sure he will misspeak a few times but that’s just Joe being Joe.10

Before discussing the relationship between the semantics of equative tautologies and this particular use, there are a few interesting things to notice about the form of these tautologies. First, a variety of different types of nominals are possible. It can be a plural noun, (3), an abstract noun, (4), an indefinite NP, (5), a definite NP, (6), and a name, (7). This illustrates that communicating or calling for acceptance is not specific to any single subconstruction, but is possible with nominal tautologies more generally.

Another important thing to notice about these tautologies is that, as Wierzbicka (1987) points out and Gibbs & McCarrell’s (1990) psycholinguistic experiments confirm, the modal will is most compatible with nominals denoting humans. Consider the contrast between the famous example in (8) and the bizarre examples in (9).

(8) Boys will be boys.
(9) a. #War will be war.
   b. #A promise will be a promise.

The copula in the form being shows a similar preference for nominals denoting humans. Compare the acceptability of the sentences in (10) to the oddness of the sentences in (11).

(10) a. That’s just11 Manny being Manny.
     b. That’s just boys being boys.
(11) a. #That’s just war being war.
     b. #That’s just a promise being a promise.

Having noted these facts about form, we can move on to the relationship between the semantics of equative tautologies and the acceptance/resignation function. The key aspect of the meaning of nominal tautologies relating to acceptance is the fact that the properties picked out by the second nominal are treated as unavoidable or unchangeable. For English speakers, accepting or coming to terms with something that cannot be changed is seen as a healthy or appropriate response. This attitude is especially clearly illustrated in (12).

(12) It’s important to try to fix problems, but sometimes there’s nothing you can do to change a situation. For example, you can’t change the weather, so don’t waste your energy worrying about it.12

11It’s also notable that when the copula takes the form being the tautology often follows that’s just.
12http://www.ulc.psu.edu/studyskills/test_taking.html
As a result of the philosophy espoused in (12), sentences that convey the impossibility of change can often be used to communicate or call for acceptance. This is true not only of nominal tautologies, but also of sentences that directly state that change is impossible, as shown in (13).

(13) You CAN'T change it.  
     Like from birth, they’ve been competing. It won’t change.  
     Just try to adjust. Enjoy whatever they have to give.\(^{13}\)

2.2.2 Conditional acceptance/resignation tautologies

In conditional acceptance/resignation tautologies, what is to be accepted is the possibility that something problematic will happen. In (14), the possibility that someone’s significant other will get mad is what needs to be accepted.

(14) **If he’s mad, he’s mad.** There’s nothing you can do about it.\(^{14}\)

In (15), the fact that the team may lose is what has been accepted.

(15) I will be there to give the players direction, but **if we lose we lose**. We will never prepare to lose, but we do not have control over winning and losing.\(^{15}\)

Notice that neither (14) nor (15) assumes that what ought to be accepted will happen. The tautology in (14) does not assert that the man will get mad and the one in (15) does not predict that the team will lose. This can be contrasted with nominal tautologies, which call for the acceptance of something that is treated as if it were necessarily true. But like nominal tautologies, what is to be accepted is viewed as being beyond the control of the potential acceptor. This is clearly illustrated in both (14) and (15), where the sentences following the tautologies explicitly mention this lack of control. As discussed above in relation to the equatives, this lack of control aspect of the meaning of conditional tautologies is what allows the construction to take on the acceptance meaning.

2.2.3 Subordinate conjunction acceptance/resignation tautologies

In subordinate conjunction acceptance/resignation tautologies, what is to be accepted is potentially undesirable timing. In some cases, the relevant timing differs from the potential acceptors explicitly mentioned desires, as in (1c) (repeated in (16) along with surrounding context).

(16) **EMILY:** And please shave that moustache, I beg of you.  
     **RICHARD:** I want to see what it looks like fully grown, Emily. That was the agreement.  
     **EMILY:** Well, it looks like a caterpillar now. In two weeks it’ll look like a bigger caterpillar.  
     **RICHARD:** Very funny.  
     **EMILY:** I’m not trying to be funny.  
     **RICHARD:** **I will shave it when I shave it.**

\(^{13}\)http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080313102542AAYxO2R
\(^{14}\)http://forum.baby-gaga.com/about420751.html
\(^{15}\)http://www.u.tv/Sport/Peter-de-Villiers-surprised-by-Lions-exclusion-of-Steve-Borthwick-and-Ryan-Jones/205a856a-d201-4d6d-a939-d2dc3d19f5af
Notice here that the tautology communicates determination on the part of the speaker. Richard refuses to alter his behavior to match Emily’s desires.

In other cases, the timing to be accepted differs not from anything explicitly mentioned, but from a schedule that might reasonably be assumed, as in (17).

(17) Resting on giant rocks, we try a Zen approach: El Refugio is where it is, and we’ll get there when we get there.\(^\text{16}\)

Here the author is communicating that his party is not concerned with reaching their destination quickly. There is no explicit mention of a specific desired arrival time, but often people want to reach destinations quickly or at a particular time. Based on this tendency, one might expect the author and his party to be bothered if their hike takes a long time, but this tautology communicates that they have accepted the timing of their arrival, even if it would usually be expected to be undesirable.

Before moving on to headless relatives, it is worth noting that the when-clause can also occur sentence-initially as seen in (18).

(18) I am now at 171 and my goal is 140. I don’t have a specific date set for that goal. When I get there I get there.\(^\text{17}\)

2.2.4 Headless relative acceptance/resignation tautologies

With headless relative acceptance/resignation tautologies, there is a considerable amount of variety in both meaning and form. I’ll start with the form differences. There are two types of differences. First, the first word of the headless relative can vary. In (19), we see that any wh-word is possible.

(19) a. I love to play the game no matter if it’s here in New Jersey or if it’s where everybody’s speculating. So whatever happens, happens. I have no say in it. I’m just an employee.\(^\text{18}\)

b. Everyone has got something to say about the weather. You can complain about it but that won’t help. You get what you get and you have to deal with it.\(^\text{19}\)

c. You shouldn’t be embarrassed by your sister. She is who she is and there are many aspects to her besides her weight.\(^\text{20}\)

d. Resting on giant rocks, we try a Zen approach: El Refugio is where it is, and we’ll get there when we get there.

e. Afraid there’s not a whole lot I can do about that one. Maybe it’s subconscious posturing, but it’s not out of any active desire to make myself sound intelligent. I talk how I talk—which is, basically, like an intellectual. For better or for worse.\(^\text{21}\)

When the wh-word is what, the headless relative may be either the subject or the object. Compare (19b) and (20).

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\(^{16}\)http://www.budgettravel.com/bt-dyn/content/article/2009/02/05/AR200902050502762_pf.html
\(^{17}\)http://caloriecount.about.com/far-along-weight-loss-journey-ft108463
\(^{18}\)http://www.insidehoops.com/kidd-interview-022207.shtml
\(^{20}\)http://in.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080526090356AAAY2xe
\(^{21}\)http://www.athleticsnation.com/story/2008/1/3/143136/8394
(20) We can’t change what has happened. **What’s done is done.** If we want to get healthy, we must forgive ourselves and others.\textsuperscript{22}

Finally, the verb can vary. It can be the copula (19c, 19d, 20), it can be a transitive verb (19b), or it can be an intransitive verb (19a, 19e).

As for meaning, there are two types of headless relative tautologies that can be distinguished. There are those that, like nominal acceptance tautologies, call for or communicate acceptance of an aspect of a person, people, a thing, or a concept. (19c)-(19e) contain examples of this type. (19c) calls for acceptance of the hearer’s sister’s weight. (19d) communicates acceptance of the destination’s great distance from the author’s group’s then current position. In (19e), the poster communicates that he has accepted his stilted vocabulary choices, which have been mocked by other posters on the same message board.

Compare these examples to the ones in (19a), (19b), and (20). These examples have nothing to do with people or things, but instead with uncontrollable events. In (19a), the speaker communicates his acceptance of future events, which he has no control over. In (19b), the author writes about the need for acceptance of weather-related events. The oft-used tautology in (20) is used to call for the acceptance of past events, which are necessarily unchangeable. At first glance, it might appear that headless relatives starting with what are always associated with acceptance of events, rather than characteristics of people, things, or concepts, but this is not the case, as shown in (21).

(21) I know the book assumes infidelity has already occurred, but it might have been an idea to make this a book as I suggested—one to be given to couples getting married, so that they have a guide book to prevent infidelity. But **the book is what it is.**\textsuperscript{23}

\subsubsection{The acceptance frame}

The shared communicative significance of all of these types of tautologies can be accounted for in terms of **frame semantics** (Fillmore 1982). In particular, all such constructions can be seen as evoking the **acceptance frame**, which is defined in (22).

(22) An acceptor does not worry much or trouble him/herself about an acceptee. The acceptee would normally be expected to cause worry, but is not excessively troubling.

This frame is evoked not only by tautological constructions, but also by the verb **accept**, as shown in the annotated sentence in (23).

(23) [I’ve]\textsubscript{acceptor} accepted [the fact that it’s unlikely if not impossible for me to get a decent job before 2009]\textsubscript{acceptee} and honestly I’m writing this because I have time to.\textsuperscript{24}

When the frame is evoked by **accept**, the acceptor and acceptee are generally syntactically realized, as shown in (23). By contrast, when tautological constructions evoke the frame, the acceptor, usually one of the interlocutors, is never syntactically realized and the acceptee is often unrealized as well. For example, in (1b), repeated as here (24), the acceptor, the speaker, is not mentioned. And the acceptee is the fact that an early day often requires leaving the previous evening’s engagements early, which is also not specifically mentioned, although it is alluded to by the presence of *an early day.*

\textsuperscript{22}http://www.ehow.com/how_4859074_move-after-failure.html

\textsuperscript{23}http://www.entelechyjournal.com/intimacyafterinfidelity.htm

\textsuperscript{24}http://www.michaelhaslett.com/?m=200811
An early day is an early day.

As Russell Lee-Goldman (p.c.) points out, it is by no means uncommon for a frame to be evoked with some of its frame elements being consistently syntactically unrealized. For example, when the ORPHAN FRAME is evoked by the word orphan, the child’s deceased parents are rarely, if ever, mentioned.

There are a few important aspects of the acceptance frame that account for some interesting properties of tautological constructions. First, the acceptee is something that would normally be expected to cause worry. This means that if the frame is evoked, but the possible acceptees are not worrisome, the utterance that evokes the frame will be odd. This is exactly what happens with sentences like the ones in (25), which Wierzbicka (1987) rightly notes are odd out of context.

(25) a. #Bottles are bottles.
    b. #Clouds are clouds.

In the present analysis, these are odd because they evoke the acceptance frame, but English speakers’ understandings of bottles and clouds do not include any troubling aspects, so there are no appropriate possible acceptees. As Gibbs & McCarrell (1990) point out, concrete objects, like bottles and clouds, lack negative stereotypical characteristics like boys’ loudness and unruliness or war’s violence and loss of life. At first this may seem like an ad hoc explanation, but there is evidence outside of this phenomenon for the difference between speakers’ conceptions of people and things like boys and war and things like bottles and clouds. While complaints about boys’ behavior and protests of and debates about war are all commonplace, no such fuss is made about bottles or clouds, or any of their characteristics.

While Gibbs & McCarrell’s insight that nominal tautologies containing nominals associated with richer stereotypes are more readily interpretable is clearly important, it cannot be the whole story. In particular, it tells us nothing about how the oddness of a tautology will vary with context. For example, in a context in which some aspect of bottles or clouds or the like is problematic, utterances like those in (25) cease to be odd. For instance, (25a) is perfectly acceptable in (26).

(26) A: These ship in a bottle things would be a lot easier to do if the necks just weren’t so narrow.
    B: Bottles are bottles.

The fact that (25a) is not odd in (26) receives a straightforward explanation in terms of the acceptance frame. In the context in (26), the fact that bottles have narrow necks, which is normally not troubling, is problematic. In this context, there is a reasonable acceptee, so the tautology is not odd. By seeing acceptance tautologies as evoking the acceptance frame, we are able to understand how the oddness tautologies like (25a) and (25b) will vary depending on context.

What is more, the fact that these constructions evoke the acceptance frame can be seen as the source of Gibbs & McCarrell’s insight. Nominals associated richer stereotypical understandings are seen as having more negative or worrying aspects independent of context. As a result, tautologies containing such nominals tend to have appropriate acceptees and so tend to be more easily interpretable independent of context.

The second important aspect of the acceptance frame is the fact that the acceptee is not excessively troubling. This means that if the frame is evoked, but all of the potential acceptees are extremely troubling, the utterance that evokes the frame will be odd. This is why, as Wierzbicka points out, the tautologies in (27) are odd out of context.
(27)  
  a. #Sadists are sadists.
  b. #Rapists are rapists.
  c. #Nazis are Nazis.

Like the sentences in (25), these tautologies are odd because they evoke the acceptance frame, but fail to offer an appropriate acceptee. Unlike in (25), where all potential acceptees are simply too easy to accept, the potential acceptees in (27) are too problematic. For English speakers, in general, certain characteristics of people like sadists, rapists, and Nazis are completely unacceptable. Again this might seem to be an ad hoc explanation, but there is evidence for this unacceptability independent of the oddness of these utterances. Sadists are marginalized, Nazis are used as a symbol of evil, and rapists are sent to prison.

What is more, in a context in which the normally exceedingly troubling aspects of people such as sadists, Nazis, or rapists are not seen as troubling, utterances like the (27a)-(27c) are not odd. For example, (27c) is not odd in (28).

(28)  
  KKK Member 1: I think that people might take our marches more seriously if we could just get those Nazis to be less vocal about their anti-Semitic views.
  KKK Member 2: Nazis are Nazis.

As with (25a), the lack of oddness of (27c) in the right context can be explained in terms of the acceptance frame. In the context in (28), the racism of Nazis, which is normally too troubling to be accepted, is not so problematic to the interlocutors, KKK members, who don’t generally object to racism. Instead, for the interlocutors the aspect of Nazis that needs to be accepted is how vocal they are about their beliefs, which is frustrating, but not so bad (to the speaker and hearer) that it is unreasonable to accept.

2.3 Deep tautologies

Deep tautologies (Bulhof & Gimbel 2001, 2004) respond to an assumed or stated belief that differences between category members make some of those members marginal or less valid examples of the category. The deep tautology denies the importance of these differences; in effect treating a fuzzy category as if it were not fuzzy. By denying the importance of differences between category members, these tautologies communicate that, for the present purposes, all that matters is membership in the category, not being central.

As with acceptance tautologies, previous researchers have discussed deep tautologies using different terminology. In his discussion of nominal tautologies in Japanese, Okamoto (1991, 1993) talks about tautologies that communicate CATEGORY IMMUTABILITY. As I will show in §3.2.2, these are equivalent to deep tautologies. Deep tautologies are also equivalent to Wierzbicka’s (1987) ABSOLUTE GENERALIZATION and INDIFFERENCE tautologies, both of which are used to communicate that all members of a category are essentially the same.

2.3.1 Nominal deep tautologies

In nominal tautologies or, more accurately, equative tautologies, the nominal or adjective evokes a category that is believed to have more and less marginal members. The tautology downplays the relevant differences between marginal and central category members and effectively claims that all that matters is being a member of the category. In (29), a loss evokes the category of losses (of
strength). The tautology is used to claim that the magnitude of the loss is unimportant; even small losses of strength count and have the consequences associated with such losses.

(29) It doesn’t matter if your illness is severe or mild – a loss is a loss. You may not be considered disabled, but if you live with a chronic illness, you are still facing changes – something that will impact the rest of your life.25

In (30), war picks out the category of wars. The tautology is responding to the (unstated) belief that, if certain people are doing the fighting, a conflict might not really count as war. War is war is used to deny that belief; treating all conflicts as war, regardless of the identity of the participants.

(30) War is war, it doesn’t matter who’s fighting it.26

In (31), the boss evokes the entire category of bosses. The tautology is responding to the idea that someone of a lower rank might not be as valid a boss (or leader) as someone of a higher rank. It denies the importance of rank for counting as the person in charge.

(31) The boss is the boss, regardless of rank.27

In (32), sisters evokes the category of sisters (here meaning women who have survived breast cancer). The tautology is challenging the idea that certain women, by virtue of not being Christian, are not sisters (in sharing the survival experience) as much as those who are.

(32) Sisters are sisters. No matter what their background.28

In (33), hot picks out the category of hot weather. The tautology rejects the claim that weather feels hot because of humidity is somehow less hot than other weather that feels hot.

(33) Hot is hot, it doesn’t matter what’s causing it.29

In (34), late evokes the category of late arrivals. The tautology is used to communicate the fact that the extent of lateness does not matter for determining whether something is considered late. Any amount of tardiness, even a tiny one, is considered late.

(34) A package is considered late even if it’s 60 seconds late. Late is late.30

Notice that, as is the case with the acceptance/resignation use, a variety of nominals are possible with the deep tautology reading. The nominal can be an indefinite NP, (29), an abstract noun, (30), and a plural noun, (32). These are all forms that are also possible with the acceptance reading. As a result, some tautologies are potentially ambiguous. For example, war ((4) and (30)) and the boss ((6) and (31)) are attested in both acceptance and deep tautologies. This means that, at least with some nominals, form does not distinguish these two readings, context is required.

There are, however, some form differences between acceptance and deep tautologies. While deep tautologies allow adjectives, acceptance tautologies do not. The tautologies in (33) and (34) can

26http://letstalk.adventist.org/have_your_say/2004_09_23.html
27http://www.arrse.co.uk/Forums/viewtopic/t=16149/start=45.html
28http://community.breastcancer.org/forum/38/topic/739410
only be used as deep tautologies. Another difference is that will can be used with some acceptance tautologies, as shown in (8), but can never be used with deep tautologies. The copula can also take the form being with some acceptance tautologies, (10), but can never be used with deep tautologies. Note that this cannot simply be the result of will and being only being compatible with nominals that denote humans, since such nominals are possible with a deep tautology reading, (32).

2.3.2 Conditional deep tautologies

In spite of syntactic differences, the meaning of conditional deep tautologies is very similar to that of their nominal counterparts. In both cases, the tautology denies the importance of differences between members of a category. As shown above, in nominal tautologies, the relevant category is evoked by the nominal or adjective. With conditionals, the category is indicated by a nominal or adjective within the repeated clause. So in (35), the relevant category is slow vehicles, which evoked by the slow, not the entire clause it’s slow. Notice that this differs from acceptance/resignation conditional tautologies, such as if we’re late, we’re late, where it is the possibility of the truth of the proposition associated with the entire clause, here we’re late, that is relevant, not just the category of late arrivals.

(35) people aren’t gonna buy something that is slower than what they already have, i dont care how high they can fly or how well they can scout with it. if it’s slow it’s slow.

Here the writer is responding to the idea that a vehicle might not really count as slow if it has other positive attributes. The writer rejects this, using the tautology to communicate that other factors do not affect a vehicle’s status as slow.

In (36), the relevant category is late timing (of a swing in baseball), which is evoked by late.

The tautology communicates that the swing being considered late does not depend on the speed of pitch.

(36) It doesn’t matter how hard the pitcher is throwing – if you're late, you're late.31

2.4 Evoking an extreme example

Tautologies can sometimes be used to evoke an extreme example of an action or state. Both conditionals and subordinate conjunctions are compatible with this function. Notably, this is the only function of English tautologies that is not attested with equatives.

2.4.1 Conditionals evoking an extreme example

(37a) is a typical example of a conditional tautology evoking an extreme example of a state. Here the author communicates that when the subject of the repeated clause gets upset, she gets very upset.

(37) a. . . .her’s generally extremely easy-going so I know that if she’s upset, she’s upset. . . .32
    b. #She’s upset if she’s upset.

There are a few restrictions on the form of the conditional when it is associated with this function. First, there is a particular intonation pattern associated with this function. The verb in the apodosis is emphasized. This is why the author italicized upset in (37a). Second, the protasis must precede the apodosis. Notice the oddness of (37b). The oddness arises because emphasis on the verb in the apodosis is only compatible with the extreme example use, but the ordering of the clauses is incompatible with this function.

2.4.2 Subordinate conjunctions evoking an extreme example

(38) and (39a) are clear examples of subordinate conjunctions evoking and extreme example of an action. In (38), the author communicates that whenever the subject of the repeated clause goes for a run, he runs a great distance. In (39a), the author communicates that if their friend’s bird yells, he yells very loudly.

(38) And **when he runs, he runs**. I’m not just talking two miles here!33

(39) a. my friends bird is cute too, he is more into talking and says things a lot clearer then my bird. he bites a lot more often and a lot harder, **when he yells, he YELLS**. he has an unbelievable scream that knocks your socks off.34
   b. He **yells** when he yells.

There are restrictions on the form of subordinate conjunctions when they have this function that are analogous to the restrictions on the form of conditionals with the same use. As with conditionals, the verb in the main clause is emphasized, indicated in (39a) by capitalization. Also like with conditionals, the subordinate clause must follow the main clause. This accounts for the oddness of (39b), in which the intonation pattern associated with evoking an extreme example conflicts with the clause order, which is incompatible with this use.

2.5 Other nominal tautology readings

There are a variety of functions of tautologies that only occur with equatives in English. These include **obligation** and **ideal tautologies**, as well as tautologies that highlight the discreteness of an individual or a category or that highlight the straightforward nature of an individual or category members.

2.5.1 Obligation tautologies

Obligation tautologies communicate that one must fulfill one’s obligations related to the repeated nominal. The nominals found in (40), which all denote agreements or contracts, are representative of the type of nominal usually found in obligation tautologies.

(40) a. A bet’s a bet.
   b. The law’s the law.

34http://au.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20081001205006AAQ9qFh
c. It’s the interest rates on his government-backed student loans, which range from 6.8% to a whopping 8.5%.

“That’s just ridiculous,” Lee, 35, told me. “The rate for a 30-year mortgage is around 5%. Why should anyone have to pay 8.5%?”

Well, because a deal’s a deal, and that’s the rate Lee accepted when he received his loan.  

Such tautologies are particularly interesting because they are at once acceptance/resignation and deep tautologies. For instance, (40c) is meant to convince Lee that he must accept the terms of the deal he agreed to, even though he clearly does not want to. At the same time, Lee appears to be suggesting that his deal is not valid because the interest rate is excessively high. The tautology rejects this suggestion, communicating that even with such a high rate, what Lee agreed to counts as a deal. While I am the first researcher to have claim that obligation tautologies should be thought of as having deep and acceptance functions at the same time, I am not the first to discuss them at all. Wierzbicka (1987) and Farghal (1992) both discuss them in some depth.

2.5.2 Ideal tautologies

Unlike tautologies of obligation, ideal tautologies have not been discussed previously. Ideal tautologies are used to convey the idea that all members of the category denoted by the nominal are (or were) ideals of that category (Lakoff 1987). In (41a) and (41b), the authors convey the idea of all men having the characteristics of an ideal man. What constitutes ideal is, of course, context dependent, varying greatly depending on the author/speaker. Notice that in (41a) the ideal man is, at least, computer savvy, while the ideal in (41b) is chivalrous. Although ideal tautologies are perhaps most often about men, they are not always, as shown in (41c).

(41)  a. Remember when men were men and wrote their own device drivers?  

    b. These blokes live in a different world and adhere to the old ways of chivalry, where men are men and women are to be protected and adored.  

    c. But back then cars were CARS, a fender bender didn’t do $5000 worth of damage!

Such tautologies are often used to describe some imagined and idealized past. As a result, they frequently appear as part of constructions that evoke nostalgia (e.g., (41a) and (41c)). This means that the copula is usually in the past tense. This is, however, not always the case, as illustrated in (41b).

2.5.3 Discreteness of an individual or category

Okamoto (1991) points out that, in Japanese, some nominal tautologies can be used to emphasize that individuals are discrete. The same use is possible in English, as well. In all of the examples in (42), nominal tautologies are used to highlight the fact that certain individuals or categories are completely distinct: East and West in (42a), men and women in (42b), the author and readers in (42c), and the reader and everyone else in (42d).

35 http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-lazarus14-2009oct14,0,7172117.column
36 http://www.infoworld.com/t/networking/remember-when-men-were-men-and-wrote-their-own-device-drivers-400
37 http://banderasnews.com/0505/vl-heybonita.htm
(42)  a. Oh, **East is East**, and **West is West**, and never the twain shall meet...\(^{39}\)
b. **Men are men** and **women are women** and it’s about time that we stop blurring that distinction.\(^{40}\)
c. These are the my favorites. These may not be in your favorites-list, but hey, **I’m me** and **you’re you**.\(^{41}\)
d. The important thing to remember is that **you’re you**, not anyone else. You’re a unique individual with your own personality, strengths and weaknesses, struggles, and all the other unique things each individual has that no one else has.\(^{42}\)

It is worth noting that these tautologies often come in pairs ((42a)-(42c)), with each tautology providing the specific individuals being juxtaposed. This is not necessary, however, as shown in (42d).

**2.5.4 Straightforward nature of an individual or category**

Nominal tautologies can be used to communicate that with an individual or the members of a category what you see is what you get. Generally, this is by comparison to other individuals or members of another category that are more complicated. In (43a), rats and ants are viewed as simply being the product of their biology, while humans can be something more. In (43b), phones of the 60’s are compared to current phones. The author uses the tautology to communicate that phones used to be nothing more than phones, whereas modern phones can also be used as cameras, planners, etc.

(43)  a. **A rat will be a rat, an ant an ant**, they will continue to function the way they do without interrupting their genetic codes’ program for living. But human beings can be more than just human...\(^{43}\)
b. First of all, there are some real fundamental differences between the “old” phones and today’s phones. In the 60’s a **phone was a phone**. Nothing more. They were used to make and receive phone calls. No fancy stuff.\(^{44}\)

**2.6 Discussion**

Given the wide variety of functions associated with nominal tautologies, it is unsurprising that so much previous research has focused on them (often to the exclusion of other types of tautologies). According to my classification, nominal tautologies can be used with six different functions. Conditionals, which are associated with the next highest number of functions, can only be used with three. Although this makes it understandable that nominal tautologies have received a comparatively large amount of attention, I maintain that it is a mistake not to consider all English tautologies together. As shown in §2.2, all types of tautologies can be used to evoke the acceptance frame. This shared function, along with the fact that these constructions are all necessarily true, justifies giving them a

\(^{39}\)From “The Ballad of East and West” by Rudyard Kipling


\(^{41}\)http://blog.srikanths.net/2008/11/srikanths-favorite-firefox-add-ons.html

\(^{42}\)http://infp.globalchatter.com/messageboard/viewtopic.php?t=15252

\(^{43}\)http://thecriticalthinker.wordpress.com/2009/07/31/maoa/

\(^{44}\)http://www.engineer-exchange.com/content/view/37/70/
unified account. This raises the question of how the meaning of tautologies ought to be accounted for.

Wierzbicka (1987) proposes a proto-constructional approach under which the meaning of each tautology must be specified along with its form. Wierzbicka has two reasons for making her proposal. First, previous Gricean approaches had failed to explain how the specific meanings of particular tautologies can be calculated based on universal pragmatic principles. For example, no one had showed how flouting the maxim of quantity by uttering the ostensibly uninformative *you’re you* in sentences like (44), repeated from (42d), could lead hearers to understand that they (indicated by you) are distinct from other individuals.

(44) The important thing to remember is that **you’re you**, not anyone else.

Second, she argues that tautologies in languages other than English do not mean the same thing as their English equivalents and, therefore, the meanings of tautologies must simply be specified for each language. For instance, the German sentence *Knaben werden Knaben sein* ‘boys will be boys’ cannot be used to call for acceptance of bad behavior, while its equivalent in English can.

Ward & Hirschberg (1991), who offer a purely pragmatic approach, address both of these issues. They propose that by flouting the maxim of quantity a speaker signals that hearers should look for alternate utterances that the speaker has specifically chosen not to utter. The forms of the alternative utterance are similar to that of the actually uttered tautology. Crucially, hearers are then meant to infer that these alternative utterances are not relevant. For example, when a speaker utters *you’re you* in sentences like (44), she has specifically chosen not to utter alternatives like *you’re like other people*, among other things. Hearers will infer that this alternative has not been chosen because it is irrelevant. So they will conclude that the speaker is communicating that the person picked out by *you* (the hearer) is not like other people, or, in other words, that they, the hearer, are distinct from others. Such accounts are possible for all of the tautologies discussed above and the approach has the added advantage of being able to account for the ambiguity of tautologies like *war is war*, which can be either an acceptance or a deep tautology. This is because alternative utterances considered by hearers will vary depending on context. In the context in (45a), repeated from (4), hearers will consider alternatives like (45b), whereas in the context in (46a), repeated from (30), hearers will consider alternatives like (46b). This difference in considered alternatives is what accounts for the difference in the way that hearers interpret the tautologies differently depending on context.

(45) a. But **war is war**. It isn’t pretty. There will always be collateral damage, blue on blue incidents, and civilian casualties. It’s not entirely avoidable. It can only be minimized.
   b. War is safe for bystanders.

(46) a. **War is war**, it doesn’t matter who’s fighting it.
   b. War is a very specific type of armed conflict.

As for issues of translatability, Ward & Hirschberg offer a number of counterexamples to Wierzbicka’s claim that tautologies in other languages cannot mean the same thing as their English counterparts. For example, they report that French *La guerre c’est la guerre* can indeed mean the same thing as *war is war* in English. Although they acknowledge that it is not possible to translate all English tautologies as tautologies in other languages, as Wierzbicka’s examples show, they point out that this does not mean that tautologies cannot be accounted for in terms of language-independent pragmatic
principles. While this is certainly true, whether or not such an account alone is sufficient to account for tautologies depends on the extent to which tautologies are intertranslatable cross-linguistically. Wierzbicka’s examples give the impression that, for the most part, syntactically equivalent tautological utterances do not have equivalent meanings cross-linguistically, whereas Ward & Hirschberg’s examples suggest just the opposite. If Wierzbicka is right, Ward & Hirschberg’s pragmatic account can only be a small part of the story. Both Wierzbicka and Ward & Hirschberg use cherry-picked examples to make their points about translatability, so it is difficult to decide who is presenting the more accurate picture. For this reason, it is important to compare systematic descriptions of the use of tautologies in a variety of languages, rather than just a few hand-picked examples.

3 Cross-linguistic comparison of tautological constructions

It is now possible to do an in-depth cross-linguistic comparison of tautological utterances because a sufficient number researchers have offered thorough descriptions of the uses of such utterances in different languages. In the current section, I offer just such a comparison, focussing on English, Colloquial Jordanian Arabic (CJA; Farghal 1992), Japanese (Okamoto 1991, 1993), and Korean (Kwon 2009). I have chosen to focus on these languages for two reasons. First, these languages are all genetically unrelated to English, so we might expect to find greater differences between these languages and English, in terms of the use of tautologies, than between, say, German or Spanish and English. Second, these researchers each offer thorough descriptions of a wide variety of functions of tautological utterances in their language. They are not simply discussing one or two selected meanings associated with tautological utterances in the language.

The current comparison is organized by function. For each comparison, I identify those languages that do not have the relevant use and for those languages that do I offer a brief description.

3.1 Acceptance tautologies

Although every type of tautological utterance in English can be used to convey or call for acceptance, this function does not appear to common cross-linguistically. Of the languages currently being compared, only English and CJA show such a use. Neither Japanese nor Korean appear to have anything resembling acceptance tautologies. Additionally, Meibauer (2008), who covers a variety of tautological utterances in German, discusses some examples of acceptance tautologies in English, but makes no mention of equivalent examples in German.

3.1.1 CJA acceptance tautologies

Farhgal describes two types of tautologies that count as acceptance tautologies in my terminology: tolerance and fatalistic tautologies.

Farhgal’s tolerance tautologies are equivalent to nominal acceptance tautologies in English. CJA tolerance tautologies take the form Def Nsg. (bi-ðal) Nsg. Just like their English equivalents, they

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45 All data in this section are taken from Farhgal (1992; CJA), Okamoto (1991; Japanese), and Kwon (2009; Korean), unless otherwise noted.

46 Okamoto and Kwon limit their discussions to nominal tautologies, but their descriptions of the meanings associated with nominal tautologies aim to be exhaustive.

47 bi-ðal is translated as ‘will-stay’.

17
can call for acceptance of problematic aspects of a variety of different things, including humans, (47), complex human activities, (48), and objects, (49).

(47) a. il-bint  bint
def-girl  girl
‘Girls are girls.’
b. il-bint  bi-ḏḏalḥā  bint
def-girl  will-stay (fem)  girl
‘Girls will be girls.’

(48) a. il-ḥarb  ḥarb
def-war  war
‘War is war.’
b. il-ḥarb  bi-ḏḏalḥā  ḥarb
def-wars  will-stay (fem)  wars
*‘Wars will be wars.’

(49) a. il-kursī  kursī
def-chair  chair
#‘Chairs are chairs.’
b. il-kursī  bi-ḏḏlḥū  kursī
def-chair  will-stay  chair
*‘Chairs will be chairs.’

There are a few notable differences between nominal acceptance tautologies in English and tolerance tautologies in CJA, as described by Farghal. First, the form of the nominal is more restricted in CJA, always appearing as a definite singular noun. As shown in §2.2.1, nominal acceptance tautologies in English are attested with a wide variety of forms of nominal, including, but not limited to definite singular nouns. Second, the use of bi-ḏal in CJA is less restricted than the use of it’s equivalent, will, in English. In English, will can only be used when the referent of the repeated nominal is human, whereas bi-ḏal is possible with abstract nouns, (48b), and concrete, non-human nouns, (49b). Finally, if English speakers do not have a rich stereotypical understanding of the category evoked by the nominal in an equative acceptance tautology, as in chairs are chairs, the tautology is odd unless it is uttered in an appropriate context. Farghal reports no such need for contextual support for the equivalent tautologies in CJA (note the lack of oddness of (49a)).

Farghal’s fatalistic tautologies are also acceptance tautologies according to my classification. Utterances of the forms Rel  V past  V past  and Rel badduh  V  bi-V, exemplified in (50) express resignation towards past and future events that are treated as unchangeable or unavoidable. It is reported that (50a) could be said to a grieving son to encourage him to come to terms with his father’s death.

(50) a. illī-māt  māt
Rel-died  died
‘That, who died, died.’
b. illī-badduh  imūt  bi-mūt
Rel-want  die  will-die
‘That, who has been predestined to die, will die.’
Although there are no perfect syntactic parallels between these and any English acceptance tautologies, the meanings described by Faraghal are quite similar to the meanings associated with some English headless relative acceptance tautologies, like *what’s done is done* and *whatever will be, will be*, or the less familiar ones in (51).

(51)  a. She said what she said, and all the liberals in Arkansas together can not spin it any other way.\(^48\)

       b. On that Georgetown thing, I blame Georgetown more than I blame Obama. He’ll do what he’ll do, but Georgetown doesn’t have to comply.\(^49\)

3.2 Deep tautologies

Deep tautologies are attested in all of the languages currently being compared. This is just what Bulhof & Gimbel (2004) would expect, since they have claimed deep tautologies can be translated into any language as tautologies.

3.2.1 CJA deep tautologies

Faraghal’s absolute generalization tautologies, which take the form *Def N\(_{pl}\)*, *N\(_{pl}\)*, are deep tautologies. Like their equivalents in English, the sentences in (52) downplay the importance of differences between category members. The particular effect of downplaying differences in these examples is that all members of the category are treated as if they were the same.

(52)  a. il-banāt banāt  
       def-girls girls
       ‘The girls (are) girls’, i.e., ‘A girl is a girl.’

       b. il-ḥurūb ḥurūb  
       def-wars wars
       ‘The wars (are) wars’, i.e., ‘Wars are wars.’

       c. il-karāsī karāsī  
       def-chairs chairs
       ‘The chairs (are) chairs’, i.e., ‘A chair is chair.’

Although the meaning of CJA absolute generalization tautologies is similar to that of their English equivalents, the form of the CJA sentences is more restricted. Faraghal reports that for this construction the nominals are always plural and the first nominal is always definite. In English, nominals in deep tautologies can take a much wider variety of forms, including, but not limited to plural nouns, as shown in §2.3.1. In fact, it is even possible for adjectives to appear in equative deep tautologies in English.

3.2.2 Japanese deep tautologies

Okamoto discusses deep tautologies in Japanese, which he describes as emphasizing the immutability of a category or attribute. Such sentences, like their English equivalents, are often used to convey

\(^{48}\)http://community.kfsm.com/service/displayDiscussionThreads.kickAction?as=97523\&w=225196\&d=295179

\(^{49}\)http://theblueboar.blogspot.com/2009/04/springfield-catholics-sound-on-on-notre.html
that even marginal or unconventional examples of a category do indeed count as members of the category. As shown in (53), deep tautologies always take the form $N \text{ wa } N$.

(53)  

a. (A woman writes about how much she cried when her husband passed away.)\(^{51}\)  

\[ \text{Watasi-tati wa kessite naka no yoi fuufu de wa arimasen desita.} \]

We by no means amicable couple Neg Pst  

\[ Sore \text{ demo, fuufu wa fuufu datta no da to tuukan-sase-rare-ta koto desu} \]

yet, couple couple Pst Comp feel strongly-Cs-Pas-Pst Comp  

‘We were by no means an amicable couple, yet (a married) couple was (a married) couple, (I) was made to feel (that) very strongly.’

b.  

\[ Henna \text{ katati site-te mo tukue wa tukue yo. Monku iwanai de tukainasai} \]

\[ \text{strange shape have-even though desk desk complain without use Imp} \]

‘Even though (it) has a strange shape, (a) desk is (a) desk. (So) use (it) without complaining’

3.2.3 Korean deep tautologies

Kwon (2009) discusses deep tautologies in Korean. As shown in (54), such sentences downplay the importance of differences between category members. In particular, these examples, like the CJA examples above, convey the speaker’s attitude that all category members are essentially the same. For example, (54a) and (54b) might be uttered by someone who is tired of waiting for their friend who keeps trying on different outfits and who wants to communicate that any of the clothes will do.

(54)  

a.  

\[ \text{os-un os-i-ci} \]

\[ \text{clothes-Top clothes-cop-Comm} \]

‘(Lit.) clothes are clothes’

b.  

\[ \text{os-un os-i-ya} \]

\[ \text{clothes-Top clothes-cop-Comm} \]

‘(Lit.) clothes are clothes’

c. A:  

\[ \text{chinkwu-ka mwue-lako sayngkak-ha-ni?} \]

friend-Nom what-Comp thought-do-Intr  

B:  

\[ \text{chinkwu-nun chinkwu-ci.} \]

friend-Top friend-Decl  

(Lit.) A: ‘What do you think is a friend?’ B: ‘Friends are friends’

(How do you define a friend? There is nothing special about a [particular] friend)

3.3 Obligation tautologies

Like acceptance tautologies, obligation tautologies are only attested in English and CJA, not Japanese or Korean. This is perhaps not surprising, given that, at least in English, obligation tautologies can be seen as simultaneously having acceptance and deep tautology functions. If this is right, we would only expect to find obligation tautologies in languages where we also find acceptance tautologies.

\(^{50}\) wa is the topic marker.  

\(^{51}\) In glosses of Japanese, TM=topic marker, SM=subject marker, Cs=causative, Comp=complementizer, Neg=negation, Pst=past tense, and Pas=passive.
3.3.1 CJA obligation tautologies

In CJA, obligation tautologies, which are exemplified in (55) take the following forms: $N_{poss} \ N_{poss}$, $N_{poss} \ ya‘nî \ N_{poss}$, and $N \ ya‘nî \ N^{52}$.

(55) 

a. ’umm-ak ’umm-ak
   mother-your mother-your
   ‘Your mother (is) your mother.’ (One must fulfill obligations to one’s mother)

b. ’umm-ak ya‘nî ’umm-ak
   mother-your mean mother-your
   ‘Your mother means your mother.’ (One must fulfill obligations to one’s mother)

c. ’um ya‘nî ’um
   mother mean mother
   ‘A mother means a mother.’ (A mother must fulfill obligations to her children, etc.)

Although the meaning of English obligation tautology, a mother is a mother, is roughly the same as the meaning reported for (55a) and (55b), the form is different. First, the nominal in English is indefinite, whereas it possessed in CJA. Also, the verb is the copula in English, whereas a verb meaning ‘means’ can be used in CJA. Additionally, The meaning associated with (55c), is not available in English.

3.4 Discreteness of an individual or category

In English, Japanese, and Korean, nominal tautologies can be used to highlight the fact that an individual or category is distinct from another individual or category. This function is not available in CJA.

3.4.1 Japanese discreteness of an individual or category

In Japanese, the formula $N \ wa \ N$ is associated not only with the deep tautology function, but can also communicate that an individual or category is discrete or autonomous, as shown in (56). In (56a), the speaker uses the tautologies to emphasize the fact that they are completely different and distinct from the hearer. In (56b), the speaker uses a tautology to highlight her understanding of upperclass people as completely distinct from ordinary people.

(56) 

a. Kimi wa Kimi, ware wa ware nari, saredo nakayosi.
   you you I I yet good friends
   ‘You are you, I am I; yet (we) are good friends’

b. (The author writes about the difference between upper class people and ordinary people like herself)

\(^{52}\) ya‘nî means ‘means’.
There is no need to particularly feel inferior. “Those people are those people,” when (this) conclusion was drawn, after that, (it) has become much easier (for me) to get along with (them).”

3.4.2 Korean discreteness of an individual or category

In Korean, it is also possible to use a tautology to highlight the fact that two categories are completely distinct. For example, in (57), the nominal tautologies convey the idea that money and friendship are completely distinct (or at least should be).

(57) ese tal-lako ha-e.
soon give.me-Comp do (say)-Decl
money-Top money-Cop-and friend-Top friend-Decl
‘(Lit.) Tell him to give you the money back as soon as possible. Money is money and friends are friends’ (Tell him to give you the money back. The thing is that money and friendship are separate matters)

3.5 Functions found only in English

Some of the functions that I discussed above are only attested in English. Tautologies evoking an ideal, like in when men were men, those conveying the straightforward nature of members of a category, as in back then a phone was (just) a phone, and those evoking an extreme example, such as when he runs, he runs, do not have equivalents in CJA, Korean, or Japanese. But it's not simply the case that English tautologies have all of the functions found in other languages and then some, rather there are some functions found in CJA, Korean, and Japanese that are not available in English, as we will see in the next few subsections.

3.6 Admiration/desirability tautologies

Tautologies can be used to express admiration for, or the desirability, of someone or something. Although this function is unattested in English, it is available in CJA and Korean.

3.6.1 CJA admiration tautologies

CJA speakers can express admiration with a wide variety of possible formulas. Farghal reports that an admiration reading is available with any of the following formulas: Def Adj (bi-ð. al) Adj, Adj Adj, N N, When x do y, x do y. Each of these possibilities is illustrated in (58).

(58) a. il-hilwah ʰilwah
def-pretty pretty
‘She’s unmistakably pretty.’ (Nobody can miss that she’s pretty)
b. il-hilwah bi-ðḏalhā  hilwah
def-pretty will-stay (fem) pretty
‘She’s pretty and will stay pretty.’ (She’s pretty no matter what she wears)
c. hilwah hilwah
pretty pretty
‘She’s extraordinarily pretty.’
d. bint bint
girl girl
‘She’s a real girl.’
e. lammā badrus badrus
when (I) study (I) study
‘When I study, I am exceptionally good at that.’

3.6.2 Korean desirability tautologies

Kwon discusses nominal tautologies in Korean that he describes as expressing desirability. In particular, he gives the example in (59), in which the positive attributes of a friend are highlighted. I lump this type of example with CJA admiration tautologies because it appears to be completely analogous to the CJA tautology in (58d).

(59) tow-a cwu-ese cengmal komawu-e.
help-Conn give-Conn.because really thank (you)-Decl
yeksi chinkwu-nun chinkwu-ney.
doubtlessly friend-Top friend-Dec1
‘(Lit.) Thank you for giving me help. The friend is a friend, doubtlessly.’ (Thank you for giving me help. You ARE a friend.)

3.7 Condemnation/undesirability tautologies

Tautologies can also be used to express negative feelings about someone or something. Farghal refers to tautologies that express negative feelings as condemnation tautologies, while Okamoto and Kwon talk about such tautologies expressing the undesirability of an individual.

3.7.1 CJA condemnation tautologies

In CJA, tautologies can be used to express condemnation, as shown in (60a). Notice that these are syntactically identical to the admiration tautologies that contain adjectives, exemplified in §3.6.1. The only difference is that the admiration sentences contain a positive adjective, while the condemnation sentences contain a negative adjective.

(60) a. il-biš’ah biš’ah
def-ugly (fem) ugly (fem)
‘She’s unmistakenly ugly.’
b. il-biš’ah bi-ðḏalhā biš’ah
def-ugly (fem) will-stay (fem) ugly (fem)
‘She’s ugly and will stay ugly.’

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3.7.2 Japanese undesirability tautologies

In Japanese, tautologies of the form \( N \text{ ga } N \) communicate that the referent of the nominal has some undesirable or abnormal quality. For example, in (62), \( \text{otenki ga otenki da} \) ‘weather is weather’ communicates that the weather is bad and \( \text{basyo ga basyo da} \) ‘(the) place is (the) place’ communicates that the place is not safe.

(62) a. A: \text{Nee, kyoo pikunikku iku?}
Hey today picnic go
‘Hey, shall (we) go on a picnic, today?’
B: \text{Soo nee, Otenki ga otenki da kara pikunikku wa yameyoo yo}
well weather weather so picnic TM cancel let’s
‘Well, (the) weather is (not good) weather, so let’s cancel the picnic.’

b. Taken from Okamoto (1993)
\text{basyo ga basyo da kara, ki o tuke-nasai}
place SM place COP because be careful.
‘Because the place is (not a safe) place, be careful.’

3.7.3 Korean undesirability tautologies

In Korean, just like in Japanese, tautologies can express the idea that someone or something has some undesirable quality. This is illustrated in (63).

(63) \text{pwusi-nun pwusi-ney}
Bush-Top Bush-Decl
‘(Lit.) Bush is Bush’ (Bush IS stupid!)

One major difference between the Korean example in (63) and the Japanese examples in (62) is that the Korean tautology is actually ambiguous. This same sentence could mean ‘Bush IS great!’. Only the context of the utterance or knowledge of the speaker’s attitude can disambiguate the sentence. In Japanese on the other hand, undesirability tautologies are the only tautologies of the form \( N \text{ ga } N \), so there is no such potential for confusion.

3.8 Discussion

Looking over this cross-linguistic survey it is readily apparent that there is a considerable amount of overlap in terms of the functions associated with tautologies. Every language considered makes use of deep tautologies and nearly all of the rest of the functions discussed are attested in at least two languages. This is potentially surprising considering the fact that such overlaps cannot be the result of genetic relatedness or areal effects. If, however, tautological utterances acquire their meaning based on language-independent pragmatic principles, as Ward & Hirschberg (1991) argue, then these common communicative significances are not surprising at all. For this reason, the commonalities
found between uses of equivalent tautologies in the languages surveyed can be viewed as lending support to Ward & Hirschberg’s claim. This cannot, however, be the whole story.

Although the languages surveyed do indeed show a lot of overlap in way that speakers can use tautologies, there are also quite a few differences. There are differences not only in which functions are available in which languages, but also in terms of the restrictions placed on constructions associated with the same function in different languages. So, for example, English and CJA differ both because CJA speakers can express admiration using tautological constructions, while English speakers cannot, and because will can only be used with nominals referring to humans in acceptance tautologies in English, while the use of bi-ðal, the equivalent word in CJA, is not restricted. Based on differences of these types, there must be language-particular accounts of the idiosyncrasies associated with the uses of tautologies in different languages, in addition to Ward & Hirschberg’s universalist approach. Such an account would need to explain why, for instance, English speakers cannot say The weather is the weather and mean that the weather is awful. Given that this meaning is available for the equivalent tautology in Japanese (see (62a)), the unavailability of this meaning cannot be the result of anything in Ward & Hirschberg’s analysis because their language-independent analysis must be consistent with meanings found in any language. This means that there must be something about English in particular that rules this meaning out. It is possible that this is simply a fact about English that must be stipulated (as Wierzbicka’s analysis suggests) or it might be the result of some other independently motivated aspect of English grammar. Deciding between these two alternatives is beyond the scope of this paper, but the fact remains that these language-specific details that cannot be accounted for based on language-independent principles must be dealt with. Crucially, the need to deal with such facts does not force us to abandon Ward & Hirschberg’s analysis completely. Instead, the language-independent analysis can coexist with language-specific analyses, with the language-independent analysis accounting for the commonalities in tautology interpretation cross-linguistically and language-specific analyses accounting for differences between languages.

4 Conclusion

The current paper makes two main contributions to the growing literature on tautologies. First, in §2, it offers an exhaustive, or at least extremely thorough, description of the wide variety of uses of English tautologies. In doing this, I have laid out the full range of data that someone wishing to account for tautologies in English must be sure to handle. This is important because a number of researchers have offered analyses based on a subset of tautologies and assumed that their approach worked for everything. Now researchers will be able to test their analyses against all of the relevant data.

Second, the paper includes a cross-linguistic survey of the uses of tautologies in a relatively diverse, if small, set of languages, found in §3. The findings of this survey are consistent with seemingly contradictory previous claims about the translatability of tautologies. Since there are quite a few cases where syntactically equivalent tautologies can be used with the same meaning in multiple languages, it is understandable that Ward & Hirschberg were able to find a number of equivalences in terms of both form and meaning. At the same time, there are plenty of cases where a function is found in one language, but not another, or where a function is attested in two languages, but the forms of the tautologies associated with that function are not parallel. Based on this, it is also understandable that Wierzbicka was able to find tautologies in English that
cannot be translated into another language as a tautology. When we consider the fact that there are at once substantial commonalities in the use of tautologies cross-linguistically and considerable differences from language to language, it becomes apparent that neither an analysis based solely, or even mainly, on language-independent pragmatic principle nor an analysis that handles exclusively language-particular data is sufficient to fully account for the meanings of tautologies. Instead, a hybrid approach that combines universal pragmatic principles and language-specific tools is needed. I am not the first researcher to argue for a hybrid approach, but previous researchers such as Fraser (1988), Farghal (1992), Gibbs & McCarrell (1990), and Meibauer (2008), who have explicitly argued that a hybrid approach is needed, have made their arguments based largely on language-internal data. The current paper lends considerable support to their argument by showing that looking in depth at cross-linguistic data leads to the same conclusion.

References


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