

Communicative-Semantic Peculiarities of Tautological Constructions in the Present Indefinite Tense

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Abstract

Tautological constructions are widely used in written and oral speech and are expressed in different tenses. Tautologies used in the Present Indefinite tense have their semantic and communicative peculiarities. They outnumber those used in other tenses and are applied to convey different communicative and semantic purport. These meanings largely depend on textual and cultural context, number of the noun, definite and indefinite articles, other interlinguistic and extralinguistic factors. These tautologies may be divided into several groups: those of Tolerance, Obligation, and Tautologies that see through superficial differences. The paper reveals how far the grammatical structure is determined by discourse structure and the speaker's/writer's communicative intention.

Key words: Tautological construction, contextual dependence, syntactic formula, semantic peculiarities, communicative charge.

Introduction

English nominal tautologies are expressed in three tenses: Present Indefinite, Past Indefinite and Future Indefinite. As it may be obvious events referring to general occurrences are expressed in Present Indefinite and those referring to actions of past are expressed in Past Indefinite while tautological constructs referring to future events are expressed in the Future Indefinite tense. However, there are certain differences between tautologies expressed in this or that tense forms. Moreover, the point becomes more complicated as some tautologies can be used in either of these tense forms. The role of context comes afore in this case with all auxiliary preconditions such as the purpose of the speaker and addressee and others. The same tautologies express more or less different semantic meanings when used in different tense forms. In this article we will attempt to investigate the sets of tautologies which are more conveniently expressed in either of the mentioned tenses, explain the semantic and pragmatic demarcation lines between them, and try to dwell upon tautologies used in this or that tense form successfully. We will present sets of tautologies and their semantic meaning and communicative role on examples within contexts. In doing this we will use relevant academic material and refer to accepted linguistic theories. Our own comments, explanations, suggestions and presumptions will go in line with established theories and examples. The plural and singular number of the noun will also be taken into consideration while discussing the semantic meaning of tautologies.

Methods

The present paper covers comparative and analytical research methods applied to tautological constructions in the Present Indefinite Tense. The research includes different

linguistic approaches. As it was stated above tautologies are expressed in Present Indefinite, Past Indefinite and Future Indefinite tense forms. According to a survey carried out via the search engine Google the number of tautologies expressed in Present Indefinite prevail. This research which was carried out by Jascha Walter (2008:10) presents the following picture:

Students are students: 26.700
A students is a student: 294
Students will be students: 1.070
A student will be a student: 1
Students are just students: 619
A students is just a student: 1
Students will be just students: 0
A student will be just a student: 0
Teachers are teachers: 9.940
A teacher is a teacher: 391
Teachers will be teachers: 371
A teacher will be a teacher: 1
Girls are girls: 13.100
A girl is a girl: 584
Girls will be girls: 216.000
A girl will be a girl: 1
Lawyers are lawyers: 519
A lawyer is a lawyer: 126
Lawyers will be lawyers: 594
A lawyer will be a lawyer: 1

These data present the frequency of tautological uses. The research aims to study tense, number of the noun and presence or absence of either definite or indefinite articles in tautological constructions and reveal the impact of these factors on the meaning the tautology communicates.

Discussion and Results

The most dominant form in the data provided by J. Walter is *Students are students*, followed by *Students will be students*. *Students are students* shows an attitude of generalization with a person talking to a group of listeners from different nationalities (Walter 2008:10). In the following sentence *I always think who I am speaking to, but students are students* we can see several points which can be treated as generalized traits of tautologies. First of all, it is easy to notice that here the speaker does not put any distinction between any students. He speaks of students as a group of people who have specific traits, mentality and share more or less the same qualities. Second, the speaker uses the conjunction *but* here creating juxtaposition between two parts of the sentence. In the first part he claims that he always thought about who he spoke to. It is obvious that this habit

of his is general. Further he continues his idea saying that even so there is a special case – students. The students are singled out from general public as a separate group who the speaker may speak to. The students themselves, as it was already pointed, are taken as one set of people with identical values as much as they can be treated similarly.

In Walter's research there is another case of tautological expression from Directory of Academic Initiatives report on access and verification methods for a student specific order (Walter 2008:10). The sentence is as follows: *We want to make sure that students are students and can access the titles for download.* In this sentence no specific traits or features typical to students are implied. If we compare this sentence with *Students are students. They always try to have more fun and less work.* Here the speaker suggests there are general traits shared by all students and one would normally expect students to have reckless behavior, bound to spend their time outdoors and less time on their studies. While in the first sentence these meanings were not implied. It was meant to put a distinction between students and any other possible alternatives, for instance, employees, teachers, lawyers etc. However, even though in these two examples we have different messages we deal with the same construct: *students are students*. The context has a key role for the messages that these sentences convey. The sentences and expressions accompanying the tautological expression have a crucial impact on the semantic meaning of the tautology and its communicative purport. So tautologies of the form *N (pl.) are N (pl.)* may be used both to juxtapose one set of nouns to others as well as to lump units of the same set centralizing them around common features, values, habits and purposes. Further, Walter considers the tautology *A student is a student* (Walter 2008:11). He states that in all relevant found cases a notion generalization or uniqueness in character and properties are expressed. To ground this conclusion he provides the following example: *There wasn't a problem with Dylan's behavior in my class. Okay he had a reputation but it didn't mean anything. I didn't need to know about that – a student is a student. I'm paid to teach not to judge.* Here we deal with a tautology of *N (sing.) is N (sing.)*. This tautological expression conveys the notion of generalization. The word *A student* lumps all the specific and peculiar features that are commonplace and shared by everyone. What is important is that the user of this tautology is perfectly sure that the interlocutor(s) absolutely understand(s) his point. So here again we deal with Gricean Maxim of Quality which says that during conversation one should say as much as the other side is expecting to hear. The speaker here basically states that even though this student under question stands out among others (as it is obviously stated in the sentence) he treats him in his usual way, as he treats all the other students. To confirm his point he posits that his job is to teach and not to judge. This final statement omits any possibilities of exceptional approach toward this situation as he does not differentiate between this case and any other and makes this clear both by a tautology and his final sentence.

If we try to compare these two tautological patterns in their contexts, namely, *We want to make sure that students are students and can access these titles for download* with the one just discussed we can come to the following conclusion. The structure *N (pl.) are N (pl.)* is used to put distinction between students and any non-students. Whereas *N (sing.) is N (sing.)* is used to collect all Nouns, in our case students, under generalized, and true-for-all features.

It is worth mentioning Wierzbicka's approach toward tautologies depending on the tense forms. She postulates that abstract noun is most commonly used to express realistic attitude toward complex human activities (Wierzbicka 2003:405). As examples she provides the following tautologies: *War is war; Politics is politics; Business is business*. Studying these three examples one can notice that they refer to distinct fields of human activity with specific rules and laws true for each of them. Basically these rules are meant by the user of the tautologies. Saying *War is war* one is sure that his/her audience is well aware of results and aftermath of war. So as Wierzbicka mentions "this is perhaps linked to the complex character of the activity – which can be seen as a special 'way of life' [...] and inevitable negative aspects of this activity, which must be understood and tolerated. (Wierzbicka 2003:404).

So in this construction we deal with a tautological pattern expressed in the Present Indefinite tense. The tautologies of this sub-construction imply tolerance and sympathy to "ways of life" and "negative aspects of life". Later, Wierzbicka distinguishes tautologies that express tolerance to human nature. These tautologies are again expressed in the Present Indefinite tense and have the following syntactic formula:

N (hum. pl) are N (hum. pl.)

She studies the following examples *Boys are boys; Kids are kids; Women are women; Children are children*, and referring to Pascal (Pascal 1981:34) she states that the kernel meaning of these tautologies is that "they are there to be put up with". As stated in the case of complex human activities such as *war* it will have the flavor of sober, worldly-wise resignation; whereas in the case of the "tautologies of human nature" it will sound like a call for indulgence and tolerance. Further this is explained by the fact that while in the case of human activity the undesirable aspects are seen as a matter of grim necessity, in the human nature type they are seen as a matter of human weakness. The next sub-category of tautologies expressed in the Present Indefinite tense is of the following formula:

A N is a N.

This formula is used to express tolerance at "special times". Saying "special times" holidays, parties, birthdays and other pleasurable activities are referred to. Such tautologies are:

A picnic's a picnic. (Nesbit "The Enchanted Castle" p.222)

A party is a party.

A holiday is a holiday.

By these tautologies the speaker stresses the exceptionality of these occasions (picnic, party, holiday) among other days of the year. Also it is important to note that such constructions refer to happy and joyful events and are hardly possible to be used to express neutral feelings.

It is hardly possible to say:

An evening is an evening.

A spring is a spring.

These constructs are used in singular and one cannot say *Picnics are picnics*; *Parties are parties*. It should also be noted they are used in the Present Indefinite tense and hardly are possible neither in the Future Indefinite tense nor in the Past Indefinite tense. Wierzbicka contradicts *A picnic will be a picnic* or *A holiday will be a holiday* to *Boys will be boys* and claims that the first two tautologies are hardly usable “because in the case of picnics, holidays and such the need for tolerance is based on the “special” character of a certain time, not on a foreseeable character of a “species of (willful) human beings.” (Wierzbicka 2003:409). Further Wierzbicka claims that tautologies that express the limits of tolerance are also used in the the Present Indefinite tense. For example *Enough is enough*; *a joke is a joke*. The noun is used in singular. The formula is: *N is N* or *A N is a N*. As is pointed out “the semantic representation of the “stern and implacable” sentence *Enough is enough*” is in fact closely related to that of the indulgent sentences such as *A picnic is a picnic* or *Boys will be boys*.

The next sub-category includes tautologies that see through superficial differences. The syntactic formula is: *A N (hum.) is a N (hum.)*. As Wierzbicka notes “the deep distance toward men (even dead men) has to be expressed in the singular (*A man is a man*, and not *Men are men*), whereas patronizing tolerance is always expressed in the plural (*Kids are kids*, not *A kid is a kid*). As we see in these examples the singular form of the noun underscores a peculiar quality which is of interest at the given situation while plural conveys a notion of generalization and overall tolerance toward the matter. However, the point is controversial and disputable. The singular may also be referred to not only stress distrust, that is to say a negative emotion but also positive sides as well. Say in a context like this situation:

No matter what he wears and how much he earns A man is a man. He is responsible for his family.

In this case it is hard to maintain that distrust is what the speaker means to imply. Further, we have also come across the syntactic formula *N1 is N1 (and N2 is N2)*.

e.g. *East is East (and West is West)*
White is White (and black is black)

These types of tautological constructions “refer to what the speaker presents as an irreducible difference, which follows from the unique nature of each member of the set, and which has to be accepted as irreducible” (Wierzbicka 2003:413). Here Wierzbicka makes an interesting point. She posits that “the sets in question are binary, and the two members can be seen as opposites. Formally, tautologies of this kind are distinguished by their complex character: they are not merely tautologies but double tautologies; and although the second part can be omitted, its presence is implied by the first part”. By saying “double tautologies” here we understand the following. Firstly, if we break the sentence into semantic charges it bears then we will have two blocks – *East is east* and the second one – *West is west*. Either one is a tautology itself. Saying *East is east* one may

imply that whatever is specific and special to the East belongs only to the East and basically this is what makes it the East as we are used to know it. The same refers to the West. Here again the typical features and qualities that exceptionally belong to the West are grouped under the idea of the West. In both East vs. West we understand the specialties exceptionally referring to either of them. Then we have these two tautologies contracting each other in one sentence – *East is East and West is West*.

The next class of tautologies expressed in the Present Indefinite Tense is called Tautologies of Value. Three sub-categories focusing on the value of certain things (and also people) are to be distinguished here. The first sub-category emphasizes the low value of certain categories of things (and people).

e.g. *A woman is a woman, but a good cigar is a smoke.*

(Kipling "Betrothed" quoted in Barlett (1980))

With minimizing particle such as "only" Kipling stresses the idea that "despite appearances, this particular X is not different from Xs." What Kipling implies is the low value of the entire class of women (as compared to cigar). The comparison itself is meant to highlight the disparaging attitude toward women when they are compared to cigars. In contrast to this in the following sentence *A shilling is a shilling* (Blyton 1980:57) the speaker is concerned with the value of even one shilling and holds it as significant and attaches importance to it. The analysis of the material has shown that in such tautologies singular form of the noun is most likely to be used.

It is worthy to note that the meaning of some tautologies is not clear. For instance, saying *An egg is an egg* one may imply either that eggs are just eggs and not more than that or that even one egg counts or even that an egg is very valuable and significant. Here again we have the Present Indefinite Tense with singular form of the noun.

Next in this classification is the sub-class of tautologies "which expresses indifference to individual differences, and which stresses the interchangeability and equal value of things (within a kind)". The tautologies of this sub-class are also put in the Present Indefinite Tense. For instance:

- *How was the day?*
- *Oh – a party is a party.*
- *Do you want Nescafé or Maxwell House?*
- *It doesn't matter. Coffee is coffee.*

(Wierzbicka 2003:416-417)

Such tautologies are used to imply indifference toward the subject matter. The speaker implies that it is all the same for him/her and he/she could not care less.

The formula *A N is a N* is also used to express tautologies referring to both "nature" and "value". e.g. *A sheep is a sheep*.

The message is that though any sheep is different from any other (as no animal is identical to another) they have the same value from certain point of view. Another example of

this formula referring to "nature" is *A doctor is a doctor*. Here we have two options for the message imparted. Either it means that though one doctor may seem different from the other (in looks, character, etc.) they share the same professional traits and knowledge and skills. Contrary to this interpretation one may understand this sentence as no matter that the doctor is a professional of his work and is qualified to cure one should not put too much faith in him. And finally Tautologies of Obligation are also expressed in the Present Indefinite Tense and in singular form of the noun. Here is the syntactic formula:

(ART) N is (ART) N

In these tautological constructions "if a noun embodies a modal meaning such as "one should do X, then the pattern *(ART) N is (ART) N* implies that the obligation in question must be fulfilled, even if one prefers not to do so" (Wierzbicka 2003:419):

A rule is a rule

The law is the law

A promise is a promise.

(A.C. Doyle "The Complete Sherlock Holmes" p.417, 513)

A deal is a deal

A test is a test.

An agreement is an agreement. (ibid. p.141)

This type of tautologies generally includes "nouns referring to contractual undertakings such as bet, promise, deal, law etc." (Wierzbicka 2003:420) Human relational terms are also used as in *A father is a father*. This tautology suggests that though fathers differ from person to person, all fathers have certain qualities in common; the respectful and to some extent obedient attitude toward a father. This syntactic structure changes when the meaning of a noun clearly implies obligation. The article may be omitted; for example; *Duty is duty*.

According to Wierzbicka tautologies of obligation normally require a singular form of the noun. The difference between the sentences with singular or plural forms of the noun is obvious in the following tautological constructions:

Promises are promises.

A promise is a promise.

The first sentence with formula Present Indefinite tense *N (pl.) are N (pl.)* implies that promises are not very reliable. The plural form stresses that there is nothing special or unique about promises; they are many. And as anything in big number its items may be different and not always controllable. So promises are many that is to say different, which mean some may be reliable while others not so much.

The situation changes with the formula of the Present Indefinite tense *N (sing.) is N (sing.)*. The singular form underscores the uniqueness hence importance of the promise.

According to Wierzbicka "the ability to co-occur with the definite article (or with a definite possessive) does seem to distinguish "tautologies of obligation" from the other tautologies which normally require the singular. Thus *Neighbors are neighbors* can be

used as an expression of difference. While Wierzbicka puts distinction between this tautology and *My neighbors are my neighbors*. In the latter one the speaker feels obligation and even responsibilities for his neighbors.

However, as the analysis of our material has revealed, *N (pl.) are N (pl.)* in the Present Indefinite tense may also be used to express duty and obligation and be considered as a tautology of obligation. In the paragraph from a novel "How I Live Now" by Meg Rosoff one of the characters uses the tautology *Orders are orders*:

Osbert came out looking guilty and told Piper and me to pack a bag with our things because we were going to be rehoused and I just looked at him and shouted there is NO WAY I'm going to be sent off to some REFUGEE HOME in the BACK OF BEYOND and Osbert looked pretty miserable and stared at the ground and said Orders Are Orders and I thought it's lucky they didn't tell him to shoot us.

(M. Rosoff "How I Live Now" p.75)

Here the speaker saying *Orders are orders* implies that though it is unpleasant, insulting and uncomfortable to obey the order they still have to do it. And though his interlocutors are extremely unwilling to do so eventually they have to since it is what the order obliges them to do. She even thinks that they were lucky the order had not demanded shooting them otherwise it would be inevitable. This thought highlights the importance of order and in this paragraph the tautology of obligation is applied to stress the intenseness of the order.

Conclusion

The research on tautological constructions expressed in the Present Indefinite tense has enabled us to reveal a number of grammatical factors that determine the semantic-communicative characteristics these structures display in discourse. Proceeding from the data chart of usage frequency of tautologies as well as other sources from fiction it has been concluded that tautologies are more often used in the Present Indefinite tense rather than in the Past Indefinite or Future Indefinite tense forms. Relying on these sources it may also be summed up that the frequency of tautological construction with plural noun as the agent of the sentence outnumbers those with singular. It has also been marked that the usage of definite or indefinite articles or their absence affects the communicative meaning of tautological constructions.

Thus, the study of tautological constructions once again comes to prove the heavy reliance of grammatical packaging on the communicative intention the speaker/writer pursues in the given discourse situation.

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Անգլերենի նույնաբանական կառույցների հաղորդակցական-ինաստաբանական առանձնահատկությունների շուրջ

Նույնաբանական կառույցները անգլերենում օգտագործվում են տարբեր ժամանակաձևերով: Ներկա անորոշ ժամանակաձևում կիրառվող նույնաբանությունները խոսքում առավել հաճախակի են կիրառվում և ունեն իրենց թե՛ կառուցվածքային և թե՛ իմաստային-հաղորդակցական առանձնահատկությունները: Վերջիններս պայմանավորված են համատեքստով, գոյականի թվով, անորոշ կամ որոշյալ հոդի առկայությամբ/բացակայությամբ, այլ ներլեզվական և արտալեզվական գործոններով: Հոդվածում վեր է հանվում քերականական կառուցվածքի, դիսկուրսի կառուցվածքի և խոսողի/գրողի հաղորդակցական մտադրության միջև գոյություն ունեցող փոխադարձ պայմանավորվածությունը:

Коммуникативно-семантические особенности тавтологических конструкций

Тавтологические конструкции широко употребляются как в письменной, так и в устной речи и выражаются в разных временных формах. Тавтологии, которые выражаются в настоящем времени, имеют свои семантические и коммуникационные особенности. Эти конструкции в плане частотности значительно превышают тавтологии выраженные в прошедшем и будущем времени. Они также отличаются по смыслу и коммуникативной цели. Последние в большинстве своем зависят от контекста, грамматического числа существительных, наличия определенного или неопределенного артикля, других лингвистических и экстралингвистических факторов. В статье выявляется взаимосвязь между грамматической структурой, структурой дискурса и коммуникативной интенцией говорящего/пишущего.