

## ON MEANINGFUL TAUTOLOGIES

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If contemporary semanticists think of tautologies at all, it is usually in a rather cursory manner, to discuss a phenomenon of relatively little theoretical interest. This was apparently not the case with the earlier tradition of philosophers of language, who recognized tautologies as being of considerable interest to any general theory of meaning.<sup>1</sup>

The clearest tautology is typically of the form, X is X. In actual usage, however, sentences of this form occur, with meanings which are not circular. Consider, for example, the cliché Business is business. Presumably, the intent here is to stipulate that *financial negotiations are not to be taken lightly*. The two occurrences of the word business, then, are quite different: the first uses the word in its primary meaning, *financial negotiations* and the second is used with a secondary (connotative) meaning *serious; not to be taken lightly*, a meaning which is found in the expression He means business. The result is what can be called a "meaningful tautology".

The same connotation *not to be taken lightly* seems to be attached to the second occurrence of the word promise in the expression A promise is a promise. A friend reports a conversation in which her mother asserted that After all, your father is your father, presumably to be understood as claiming that her *male parent was worthy of respect or consideration*.

Sometimes, however, the item in question cannot be said to have a secondary meaning. Rather, there is an implicit adverbial modifier. The understood modifier may be an intensifier, e.g., *uniquely* as in the baseball player's praise of an opposing pitcher, Dwight Gooden is Dwight Gooden. Or, the implicit modifier may be a trivializer, *merely* or *only*, as in the graduate student's complaint that Theory is theory.

The facts are a little more complex in the line of the popular song where we learn that A kiss is (just) a kiss. The occurrence of the adverbial modifier presumably renders the sentence non-tautological.

Indeed, tautologies seem to appeal to writers of popular songs. Consider the line, Everybody is somebody, but nobody is nobody, where the secondary meaning, presumably, is *insignificant*.

More problematic are expressions like That's that or Enough is enough, where it is not clear where to localize the connotation *finality* or *definiteness*.<sup>2</sup>

The verb be need not be in the present tense: Boys will be boys. The primary meaning is presumably *young human males*; the secondary meaning is perhaps *playful* or *malicious*.

There may be no verb expressed: First things first. Presumably, the secondary meaning *logically prior* precedes the primary meaning, *chronologically prior*.

Sometimes, a syntactic construction, tautological in form, takes on a connotation: If it rains, (then) it rains. The if-then construction has the secondary meaning of *acceptance* or *resignation*.

A similar connotation apparently has been associated with a different syntactic form: Either he shows up, or he doesn't show up.<sup>3</sup>

A connotation of *inevitability* or *desirability* or *assertiveness* seems to be associated with sentences of the form of the dictum of pop psychology: You've gotta do what you've gotta do, or I know what I know. The wh- construction can be combined with the verb be: What's done is done.

A rather interesting example is provided by Yogi Berra's now famous insight about the outcome of a baseball game: It ain't over 'til it's over. Here, there does not seem to be a secondary meaning at all. Rather, the insistence is on the literal meaning: *It is not over merely because it is almost over*.

A different type is illustrated by an old advertising slogan used by the American Tobacco Company: Remember, 'tobacco' is our middle name. Here the meaningful tautology is based on the distinction between *mention* and *use*, the use involving a metaphorical meaning of middle name, namely, *characteristic* or *significant*.

Consider now, one of the best known lines of Spanish poetry, Los sueños, sueños son *Dreams are dreams*.<sup>4</sup> One interpretation presumably juxtaposes the primary meaning *images experienced while asleep* with a secondary meaning, *aspirations; hopes, desires*. But, there is another secondary meaning, *unreal; unrealistic; purely imaginary* which can also be juxtaposed to the primary meaning, yielding the interpretation *images experienced while asleep are unrealistic; purely imaginary*. But now, by a simple algebraic operation ("things equal to the same thing are equal to each other") we derive a third interpretation, in which the two secondary meanings are juxtaposed: *(Our) aspirations are unrealistic; purely imaginary*.

Having now catalogued a number of examples, I wish to elaborate on the original premise, and in fact, renege on the implication thereof. Tautologies may or may not constitute a phenomenon of some interest and relevance for semantic theory. But the phenomena illustrated here, *meaningful tautologies* seem not to fall within the domain of any semantic theory at all. They seem to involve connotations and associations which more properly belong in a theory of language use, not a theory of linguistic structure.

WORKS CITED

- Ayer, A.J. 1946. *Language, Truth and Logic*. Dover Publications.
- Honig, Edwin. 1970. *Life is a Dream*. Hill and Wang.
- Palmer, F.R. 1976. *Semantics*. Cambridge University Press.

NOTES

1. Thus, for example, a typical reference is the one by Palmer (1976), where tautologies are defined as "compound sentences that are true irrespective of whether the original sentences are true or false, their truth depending on the connectives alone" (p. 184). For the earlier position, however, see Ayer (1946), where there is a discussion of the stock example, "All men are mortal" (p. 96).

I have benefited from conversations and correspondence with Jack Hoeksema, Cynthia Steele, Marina Tarlinskaja and Alice ter Meulen.

2. I can contribute nothing to the understanding of Gertrude Stein's tautological line, "A rose is a rose is a rose."

3. This is precisely the construction used by Palmer as an illustration; cf. fn. 1.

4. I do not intend to trivialize by this gloss the range of philosophical issues regarding life and reality touched on in the play. Of some interest, therefore, are the actual attempts at poetic translation of the line in question. Thus, for example, Edwin Honig (1970) renders the line in question "Dreams themselves are only part of dreaming" (pp. xxix, 77).