Nominal tautologies and evoked knowledge

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Previous studies
- Nominal tautologies evoke shared knowledge.
- The main focus is on extralinguistic vs. metalinguistic knowledge.

Our proposal
- Tautologies evoke more dimensions of knowledge: extralinguistic vs. metalinguistic + descriptive vs. normative + common vs. local.
- Different ways of interaction of these dimensions result in different interpretations.
- There is a class of formal tautologies that do not require shared knowledge at all.

Outline

Nominal tautologies

(1)   a. War is war.

             b. Boys will be boys.

             c. A promise is a promise.

"The speaker intends that the hearer recognize:
i) that **the speaker holds some view** towards all objects referenced by the NP;
ii) that the speaker believes that **the hearer can recognize this view**;
iii) that this view is relevant to the conversation."

(Fraser 1988)

Extralinguistic vs. metalinguistic tautologies

> (2)   a. Partial means partial.
>   b. No is no.
>   c. Tyranny is tyranny.

"The speaker the speaker implies that **he is observing the linguistic code faithfully**."

"Tyranny" is to be understood as non-vague, i.e. tyranny, whether it be this act or another, committed by our side or another, at this time and place or another, is tyranny."

(Miki 1996; Bulhof & Gimbel 2001)

Extralinguistic vs. metalinguistic tautologies

extralinguistic = 'enriching' tautologies
metalinguistic = 'restricting' tautologies

(3)   a. Speaker A: Thousands of people were killed in those regions.

      b. Speaker B: War is war ('armed conflict').

➡ 'This is the kind of thing one would assume to happen in wars.' (definitional)

      c. Speaker C: War is war ('stupid bloodshed').

➡ 'There is nothing one can do about it.' (fatalistic)

(Meibauer 2008)

Other kinds of knowledge?

(4)   a. A rule is a rule.

            b. A bet is a bet.

            c. A deal is a deal.

"A syntactic formula (ART) N is (ART) N is concerned with **obligations**, and, more broadly, with **rules of human behaviour**."

(Wierzbicka 1987, 1991)

Other kinds of knowledge?

  (5)   a. Ernst is Ernst.

             b. Your cars are your cars.

"The interpretation of tautologies with proper names like involves reference to **shared, but not necessarily cultural** knowledge."

(Escandell-Vidal 1990; Meibauer 2008; Vilinbakhova & Escandell-Vidal in press)

1 How do the various dimensions of knowledge interact with each other (i.e. are all combinations possible)?

2 How are the evoked types of knowledge related to the existing classifications of tautologies?

3 How can the interpretation of nominal tautologies be accounted for, if no shared knowledge can be evoked?

> **COCA**

THE CORPUS OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ENGLISH (COCA)

450 MILLION WORDS, 1990-**2012**

a*_n BE a*_n
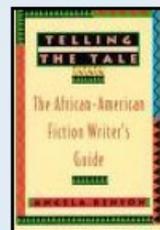
> **Web-based sources**

love is love

Outline

1 Background

2 Dimensions of knowledge and their interaction

3 Tautologies without shared knowledge

4 Conclusions

Tautologies as generic sentences

- Different dimensions of knowledge are discussed in detail in connection with various types of generalizing statements.
- Tautologies form a legitimate class of generic utterances: they are characterizing statements and describe general truths by definition.

In many tautological cases the **reference of the first NP is generic in nature**, that is, reference is made rather to an abstract class of entities than to concrete entities given in discourse.

(Meibauer 2008)

Tautologies as generic sentences

- The **analysis** of tautologies **from the perspective of observations in the literature on genericity** is legitimate.
- Tautologies are expected to inherit properties of a broader class of generic utterances.

(Lawler 1973; Milsark 1974; Nunberg & Pan 1975; Burton-Roberts 1976; Carlson 1977, 1995; Diesing 1988; Kratzer 1989; Chierchia 1995; Krifka 1995, 2004, 2013; Cohen 2001; Dayal 2004; Borik & Espinal 2012; Leslie & Lerner 2016; Van Rooij 2018)

Normative vs. descriptive knowledge

- The dichotomy between normative and descriptive knowledge is central in the literature on genericity
- Two main approaches to the analysis of generic sentences can be distinguished: the **inductivist** view, and the **rules-and-regulations** view.

- "Inductivist approach: generic statements express **regularities in the empirical world** based on some observed set of instances.
- Rules-and-regulations approach: generic sentences denote **rules** and involve causal relations between properties."

(Carlson 1995)

Normative vs. descriptive knowledge

- Tautologies tend to be **descriptive**, expressing empirical generalizations.

(6)   a. War is war.   (=1)

        b. Boys will be boys.

- "Terrible things always happen in war, that's its nature and it's no good lamenting that particular disaster.
- That's the kind of unruly behaviour you would expect from boys".

(Levinson 1983)

Normative vs. descriptive knowledge

- Tautologies tend to be **descriptive**, expressing empirical generalizations.

(6)   a. War is war.   (=1)

          b. Boys will be boys.

BUT These tautologies both include descriptive properties (i.e. for kids, "they may be noisy, boisterous, unruly, tiresome, but not 'bad'"), **and carry some form of normative force** (namely "a call for indulgence and tolerance", indicating that the addressee should accept the behaviour of kids, which can be annoying or disturbing).

(Wierzbicka 1991)

Normative vs. descriptive knowledge
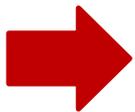
➡ Any tautology can in principle point to some descriptive property and, at the same time, be used as a call for action or a recommendation to have a certain attitude towards things.

Normative vs. descriptive knowledge

(7)   a. Simmons, however, said I was "delusional" to ask about their frictional recent history on Wednesday. "Do you ever argue and scream at family members?" he said. "It's called family biz. **Family is family**, and you go through all kinds of things, and if that's news to you then you're being delusional. You disagree with your mom and your dad and other family members." (COCA, NEWS: Minneapolis Star Tribune, 20.09.2017)

▪ 'With your family you go through all kinds of things'.
▪ The tautology expresses an **inductive generalization** and hence is **descriptive**.

Normative vs. descriptive knowledge

(7)   b. Billy gathered up the wrapping paper and put his coat carefully back into the box. "Didn't mean to make such a mess," he said. "I do wish I could stay." "No problem at all, Billy," Cecil said. "**Family is family**." Billy wished them a merry Christmas, and Skye reminded Ross to stir the gravy. Ross and Cecil watched them drive into the night. (COCA, Smith Jamie Lyn, FIC: Kenyon Review Jul/Aug 2015)

- 'One should prioritize time with one's family over any other activity'
- **A social rule** is invoked and hence a tautology is **normative**.

Linguistic vs. world knowledge

- Tautologies have a definitional nature.
- Most of the literature on tautologies has focused on the contrast between world knowledge and (meta)linguistic knowledge.
- Tautologies can point towards either world knowledge or linguistic knowledge.

Linguistic vs. world knowledge

(8)   "No gentleman would do such a thing," replied his wife. "**A liar's a liar**," said Mr. Platt. "And **a gentleman is a gentleman** and wouldn't say so," said his wife in unaccustomed rebellion. (COCA, Prevarication Jones, FIC: Saturday Evening Post, 1994)

- **A liar is a liar** refers to **a linguistic rule** conveying the definitional sense of liar.
- **A gentleman is a gentleman** evokes a **moral rule**: 'Gentlemen do not humiliate harmless people'.

Linguistic vs. world knowledge

- Tautologies that refer to world knowledge are enriching tautologies: they gain relevance by evoking a wide variety of properties, both descriptive and normative.

(9)   Mick JAGGER: (Singing) I want to tell you how it's gonna be. And you're gonna give your love to me. I'm gonna love you night and day,' cause **love is love** and not fade away. Well, **love is love** and not fade away. (COCA, SPOK: NPR_FreshAir, 11.06. 2002)

- The speaker evokes certain facts about the world, specifically, the properties commonly associated with the corresponding concept LOVE.

Linguistic vs. world knowledge

- Tautologies that point to the literal meaning, in contrast, are restricting tautologies: they are understood as narrowing down the expressed concept to the non-vague and "definitional" meaning.

(10)   "**Abuse is abuse**. Saying otherwise is like saying you're just a little bit pregnant. Whether it's a slap or a punch, under the law they're both acts of abuse and punishable by law."
(COCA, Dan Pacheco, NEWS: Denver Post, 23. 03. 1995)

- The tautology is used as an argument against the idea of distinguishing between 'hard' and 'light' cases of abuse.

Linguistic vs. world knowledge

- According to the theories of genericity, definitions form a subset of rules and regulations, that is, they carry normative force; hence, metalinguistic generic statements are normative, not descriptive.
- Generic statements referring to world knowledge include both descriptive generalizations and physical, biological, social, or moral rules. In other words, they can evoke both descriptive and normative knowledge.

- **Enriching** tautologies can be **both descriptive and normative**.
- **Restricting** tautologies can **only** be **normative**.

Common vs. local knowledge

- **Common** knowledge is part of the socio-cultural and linguistic community, so it is available to the interlocutors with **no need for shared experience**.
- **Local** knowledge **may** just **be shared between two people** in a particular context – family members, friends, colleagues, etc.

Common vs. local knowledge

- Most tautologies invoke common, widely shared knowledge.

(11)   Mr. COBB: … I seem to be doing, you know, is – is really making it go. And – and it is more about, you know, the romance of two people, any two people, you know, which transcends race, which tran – transcends religion. They are totally disparate in type and size and colour and attitude and everything, but yet, **love is love**, **you know**? (COCA, SPOK CBS_Morning, 04.03.1996)

Common vs. local knowledge

- However, other tautologies can evoke local knowledge, either descriptive or normative.

  Tautologies with proper names:

(12)   Ernst is Ernst   (=5a)

  Descriptive: 'Ernst is typically cheerful and energetic'
  Normative: 'Ernst should be treated in a special way' (because he is the youngest in the family / disabled / eccentric, etc).

Common vs. local knowledge

- However, other tautologies can evoke local knowledge, either descriptive or normative.

    Tautologies with highly specific referents:

    Your cars are your cars.   (=5b)
(13)

    Descriptive: 'The addressee cares very much about his cars'
    Normative: 'The addressee should fulfil certain duties towards his cars'.

Common vs. local knowledge

- **Restricting** tautologies can only **induce common** (but not local) **linguistic rules**.

(14)

   a. **A family means three people**: maximum two adults and at least one child under 14 years of age. (https://issuu.com)

   b. **Family means family** at Aquatopia, **which means no matter how many children in your family it's $30**. Bring all your own children and take advantage of this fantastic offer. (http://www.fairfieldcity.nsw.gov.au)

   c. # **Family is / means family** at Terme Merano, so you can only take one child.

evoked knowledge

- extralinguistic + descriptive + common
- extralinguistic + normative + common
- extralinguistic + descriptive + local
- extralinguistic + normative + local
- metalinguistic + normative + common
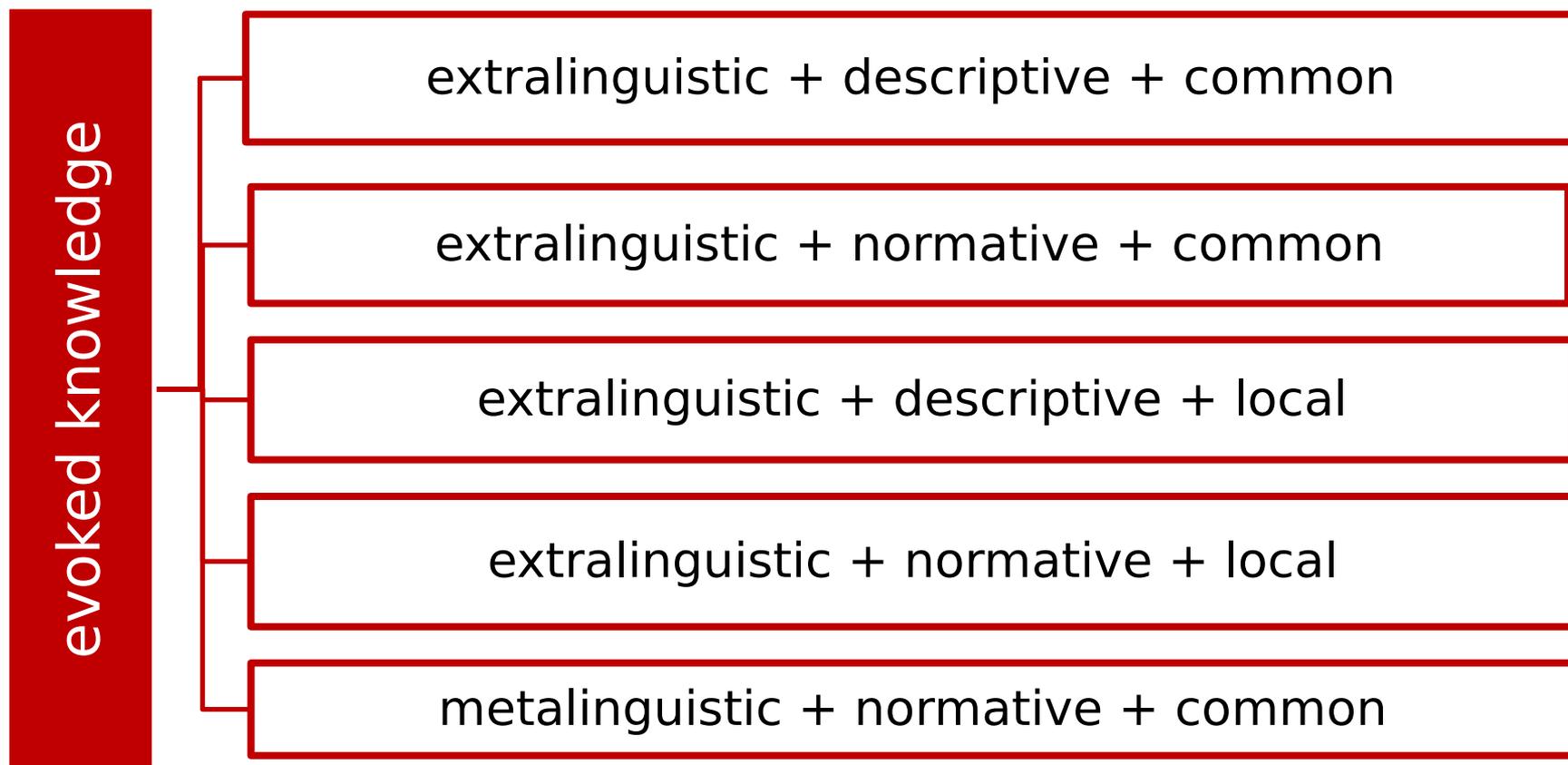
Figure 1. Types of evoked knowledge in nominal tautologies.

- Some tautologies require no kind of knowledge.

(15)
A: ...and to check the formation of plural nouns they used the wug-test...
B: -Did you say wug? What's wug?
A: - Forget about it! **Wug is wug**.

(16)
A: What kind of person is your father?
B: Oh, **my father is my father**.

(Escandell-Vidal 1990, Meibauer 2008)

- These tautologies are used as a response to an information-seeking question, and their function is elusive - an attempt to avoid giving a more informative answer.
- These are called **formal tautologies**.

- Tautologies can be felicitously used to avoid providing the requested information, due to either the speaker's inability or unwillingness to do so.

- **This poses a new challenge to any account of tautologies.**

Tautologies without shared knowledge

- While **the regular way of processing superficially uninformative statements**, including tautologies, involves its reinterpretation to make them meaningful for the addressee, in the case of formal tautologies this possibility **is blocked**.
- By answering a request of information with a tautology emphasizing the identity of the very same referent with itself, the speaker is surely not contributing to resolving her interlocutor's doubts.

- It is mutually manifest to both the utterer of tautology and the addressee that the potential evocation of shared encyclopaedic or metalinguistic knowledge is ruled out, and hence **the only available interpretation of the tautology is a literal one,** an "empty" claim communicating the equation of two identical symbols.
- Such verbal behaviour gives rise to **secondary implicatures**:
  - ➤ 'the question is irrelevant', '
  - ➤ the speaker does not want to discuss this issue with the addressee',
  - ➤ 'the addressee should look for this information elsewhere'
  - ➤ or even 'the speaker is angry with the addressee'.

Outline

1 Tautologies evoke different dimensions of knowledge, which interact with each other.

2 Enriching tautologies can be descriptive or normative, evoking local or common knowledge.

3 Restricting metalinguistic tautologies are always normative and evoke common knowledge.

4 When shared knowledge cannot be invoked, tautologies function as elusive responses to information-seeking questions.

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Thank you!

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