Categorization and its embodiment: Korean tautological constructions in mental spaces theory

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ABSTRACT

Nominal tautological constructions have been the subject of much controversy with regard to whether the processes by which they are construed belong to the domain of semantics or the realm of pragmatics. Rather than discussing them within the all-or-nothing frames that radical semanticists and radical pragmaticists have created, this nonradical paper argues that the construal of nominal tautologies relies on two major cognitive abilities: the ability to discern whether a nominal expression refers to a specific entity or to a generic one in the given context, and the ability to assess the referent of a nominal with respect to its relation to its category and to bind it to a prototype relation, or a stereotype relation, or a peripheral relation, or to the category as a whole. I use Korean nominal tautologies as a case study to explore the functions of these critical abilities, and use mental-spaces theory to model the covert semantic bindings evoked by the constructions.

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1. Introduction

Categorization is an inalienable cognitive faculty of human beings; when humans experience the things around them, they cannot help but judge whether those things are friendly or hostile, and/or whether it would be beneficial or harmful to interact with them. One linguistic construction whose construal necessarily relies on this inalienable capacity for categorization is the tautology. Tautological constructions are always truth-conditionally true, but without categorization, they would be meaningless, because their structure consists of a mere repetition of linguistics contents. This paper aims to shed some light on the construal process of the tautological constructions, and to explore how interlocutors' categorization processes are embodied in that construal using Korean nominal tautologies as a case study.

The Korean nominal tautological construction is ambiguous. Its construal seems to depend at least in part on which of several possible postnominal particles is used, including -*un/-nun* (the topic marker),-*i/-ka* (the subject marker), or -*to* ('also' and/or a focus particle); however, the semantic ranges overlap; examples are given in (1)–(3).

> (1) *os-un*   *os*   *i-ci*[1]
>   clothes-Top   clothes   Cop-Decl
>   'Clothes are clothes.'[2]

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The utterance in (1) could be used in a number of possible contexts. For example, a supervisor in a clothing factory could use it to express dissatisfaction with the quality of an outfit that had been produced, equivalent to saying in English, *This can barely be called clothing*. In contrast, one could also use it upon seeing a friend who was wearing a particularly striking ensemble, equivalent to saying, *Now THAT'S an outfit*. Or one could use it to try to comfort a friend who had just lost a very expensive outfit, equivalent to saying, *It's just clothes*. Although there seems to be a preferred ending for each of these meanings, the topic-marked sentence in (1) could quite conceivably be used for any of the three.

In this paper, I argue that the interpretation of such utterances depends on the hearer's model of the speaker's embodied knowledge about the entity evoked by the first nominal, in particular, her knowledge of whether it is specific or generic. The interpretation also depends on the speaker's assessment of the entity and how she binds it to the category she thinks it belongs to – as a prototype, as a peripheral member, or to the category as a whole; this binding is a property of the second nominal. Mental spaces theory (MST) (Fauconnier, 1997; Faucinnier and Sweetser, 1996; Fauconnier and Turner, 2002) elegantly captures such covert match-ups and bindings between entities; I therefore employ MST to distinguish the specific and generic readings that affect the construal of the Korean nominal tautologies significantly. In particular, I use the MST matching theory to model the covert semantic bindings between entities that are evoked by the tautological construction.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 recaps the major points of debate about tautologies that have been raised since the 1980's. Among the various approaches, I particularly focus on Okamoto's (1993) discussion of the semantics and pragmatics of Japanese nominal tautological constructions. In Section 3, I examine a variety of examples of nominal tautologies in Korean, arguing that the construal of Korean tautological constructions is based on the relevant knowledge about the referent's specificity and on the speaker's assessment or categorization of the referent. Section 4 models and provides diagrams of these construal processes of the construction within mental spaces theory.

2. Previous approaches

From the perspective of truth-conditional semantics, tautological constructions are vacuous; they are redundant expressions that are true by virtue of their logical form alone (Okamoto, 1993:434). However, tautologies are nevertheless frequent in colloquial language, and have therefore been studied extensively by many linguists (e.g., Wierzbicka, 1987, 1988; Fraser, 1988; Bulhof and Gimbel, 2001). The topic gave rise to some rather overheated debates between so-called radical semanticists and radical pragmaticists in the late 1980's; the former claimed that tautologies are understood using purely semantic cues and the latter that the construal of tautologies takes place entirely, in the domain of pragmatics. Other scholars have asserted that construing tautologies is possible only when we take into account both the linguistic forms used and speakers' embodied knowledge of the entities in question (Gibbs and McCarrell, 1990; Okamoto, 1991, 1993; Farghal, 1992). These extensive debates and discussions demonstrate that what is going on with tautologies is far more complex than a matter of simple semantic vacuity, and that the understanding of nominal tautological constructions must involve some type of construal process.

2.1. The radical approaches

A number of scholars believe that tautologies are understood via a process of conversational implicature based on general, language-independent conversational principles operating on the particular context: the Gricean Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975; Brown and Levinson, 1987; Levinson, 1983; Okamoto, 1993). For example, Ward and Hirschberg (1991) claim that tautological utterances flout the maxim of Quantity in that the information contained in the statement is apparently not specific enough, and that, relying on the principle of Relevance, this therefore leads the hearers to search for a plausibly relevant specific meaning in the given context. In the same vein, Levinson (1983) also asserts that the implicature drawn from a tautological utterance depends on the particular context of utterance; for instance, *Boys will be boys* implicates that the speaker intends to convey that 'That's the kind of unruly behavior you would expect from boys' (Levinson, 1983:125).

This radical pragmatic approach, however, has been challenged. For example, Wierzbicka (1987:96) argues that the communicative import is conventionally encoded in each given tautological construction, and that it is not derivable from any language-independent pragmatic maxims. She backs up her argument by pointing out that some English tautological constructions do not have counterparts in many other languages, or at least their apparent counterparts are not similarly interpreted (1987:96). If these processes of pragmatic inferences are universally applicable, she argues, the counterpart expressions in each language should share a similar construal and should therefore be used with a similar communicative import.

Wierzbicka (1987, 1988) argues that the meanings of tautologies, particularly their attitudinal meanings, are at least assumed to be partly conventional and language-specific. She supports this argument by showing how English tautological constructions with different morphosyntactic patterns are construed differently; her descriptions of some of these phenomena, drawn from Wierzbicka (1987:105–108) are given in (2).

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[1] The verbal complex of the utterances in the colloquial Korean can include a variety of modal endings, including *-ci* (the committal marker), *-ya* (the assertive marker) and *-ney* (the factive realization marker).

[2] Some of the data used in this paper are obtained from previous cross-linguistic works on nominal tautologies; except where otherwise marked, the rest are made up by native speakers of a target language, including the author (for Korean data).