

Tautologies at the interfaces: *Wer kann, der kann*

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Abstract

Tautologies are among the prime examples to demonstrate the contribution of pragmatic principles to the interpretation of utterances that would be uninformative from a strictly logical and truth-conditional perspective. While traditionally the focus has been on nominal tautologies (*a is a*), the present paper is concerned with the hitherto lesser-studied subtype of headless relatives (*what p, p*). On the example of German *wer kann, der kann* (lit.: 'he who can, can') it will be illustrated how semantics (polysemy of *können* 'can'), syntax (correlative free relative clause) and pragmatics (Q- and R-principles) interact to yield the specific communicative effects associated with this tautology. Exhibiting one-to-one correspondences (in lexical, structural and functional terms) in some languages, such as Slovene, but not in others, such as Russian and English, *wer kann, der kann* at the same time serves as a test case for the 'radically pragmatic' and 'radically semantic' approaches to tautologies.

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1. Introduction: *wer kann, der kann*

The present paper is concerned with one particular tautology by means of which the interaction of semantics, syntax and pragmatics in the interpretation of these structures can be illustrated: German *wer kann, der kann* (henceforth: *wkdk*), as encountered in (1):

- (1) Am Budget soll es nicht liegen: Den schönsten Tag ihres Lebens lassen sich die Schweinsteigers angeblich rund eine Million Euro kosten. *Wer kann, der kann* ... (<http://www.bunte.de/stars/stars-die-liebe/star-hochzeiten/ana-ivanovic-bastian-schweinsteiger-das-tat-sie-nur-aus-liebe-339981.html>, 13.7.16)
'It's not a matter of budget: reportedly, the Schweinsteigers pay about one million Euro for the most beautiful day in their life. *Wer kann, der kann* ...'

For this specific tautology, two main functions can be discerned (Sonnenhauser, 2015): reinforcement as in (2) and justification/explanation as in (3) (see section 3.2 for details):

- (2) Ein rührender Macker, Poser und Lautsprecher. Riss sich das Trikot vom Leib, zeigte – *wer kann, der kann!* – seinen Body [...]. (COSMAS: T12/AUG.01178 die tageszeitung, 09.08.2012)
'A heart-warming poser. He tore off his clothes and – *wer kann, der kann* – presented his body.'

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- (3) Doch die Botschaft war im Grunde die Gleiche: *Wer kann, der kann*, Geld spielt keine Rolle, und die Haute Couture lebt sich aus, wie sie will. (COMSMAS: RHZ04/JAN.19014 Rhein- Zeitung, 23.01.2004)
'But the message was basically the same: *wer kann, der kann*, money is not an issue and the Haute Couture enjoys life.'

The alleged first attestation of *wkdk* is given in (4). As suggested by the translation provided by the same source, (4'), a paraphrase has to be used in English in order to reproduce this structure.

- (4) Xaver Krenkl [1780–1860] war ein berühmter Stammgast im Hofbräuhaus. [. . .] Der mehrfache Sieger bei den berühmten Oktoberfest-Pferderennen war so couragiert dass er es sogar wagte, mit seinem prächtigen Vierergespann im Englischen Garten die Kutsche von König Ludwig I. zu überholen. Als dieser ihm zurief "Er weiß wohl nicht, dass das Vorfahren verboten ist!" rief Krenkel [sic!] mit voller Brust „*Wer ko, der ko!*“ [= Bavarian for *wkdk*; BS]. (http://www.hofbraeuhaus.de/de/01/hist_kurioses.html, 14.01.2015)
- (4') Xaver Krenkl was a famous regular at the Hofbräuhaus. [. . .] A repeated winner of the famous Oktoberfest horse race, he even had the gumption to overtake the carriage of King Ludwig I. in the English Garden with his own splendid four-in-hand. When the king called out, "Doesn't he know he's not allowed to pass?" Krenkl loudly responded with, "*Some people just have what it takes!*" (http://www.hofbraeuhaus.de/en/01/hist_kurioses_en.html, 14.01.2015)

The fact that no idiomatically equivalent English translation of *wkdk* seems to be available is discussed in the following excerpt from an online dictionary (dict.leo.org, 15.1.2015), based on the Bavarian variant *wer ko, der ko*:

- (5) I have heard the phrase 'Wer ko der ko' [*wkdk*] [. . .]. Any ideas what that phrase means?
A: "who can, does" oder "those who can, do"
B: "Who can does"??? "Those who can do"??? Hmm. Sehr kurios. [. . .] Es bedeutet gar nichts, hat einfach nicht die "Tradition" von "Wer ko, der ko". [*wkdk*] Übrigens ist der bayerische Ausdruck für mich, [. . .] Zeichen eines [. . .] Sich-Über-Etwas-Hinweg setzens.
'Hmmm. Very strange. It does not mean anything, does not have the 'tradition' of 'wer ko, der ko' [*wkdk*]. By the way, to me the Bavarian expression is an indication of disregarding something.'
A: [. . .] It is an attempt to reproduce the effect and intention of the expression. [. . .] Any attempt to reproduce something like "wer ko, der ko" [*wkdk*] in another language is generally doomed to fail. "Those of us who can, just get on and do it" (whilst looking down the nose) would be nearer but of course not quite so "kurz und knapp"!;-)
B: [. . .] a number of the situations where "Wer ko, der ko" [*wkdk*] is used [. . .], situations where you cock a snook at someone, or a rule, or a tradition, but doubtless not all. The short expressions you give are pretty much, I would say, translationese: nobody ever says that.

The discussion in (5) raises three basic puzzles:

- (i) 'effect and intention': what are the situations this structure is typically used in, i.e. its main functions,
- (ii) 'tradition': what is the specific connotation associated with this structure, i.e. its communicative relevance and the difference to possible paraphrases,
- (iii) 'translationese': what are the reasons for the lack of a one-to-one correspondence in English, i.e. the impossibility of translating it by cognate lexical expressions, preserving structure and function.

In what follows, these questions will be dealt with by elaborating the interplay of syntactic structure, semantic information and pragmatic inferences.

2. At the interfaces

As is well-known, from a logical point of view, tautologies are true in every situation and are hence of no informational value, while they do carry communicative import in their natural language uses. This makes them a recurrent object of linguistic pragmatics.

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