

A CONTRASTIVE STUDY OF TAUTOLOGY BETWEEN CHINESE AND ENGLISH

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I. BACKGROUND

X is X constructions such as ‘Boys are boys’ and ‘War is war’ are usually identified as tautologies which are considered to be necessarily true and information empty by virtue of their logical forms. Yet it is well-acknowledged that this kind of tautological constructions and the like convey more implied meanings when used in conversations. Grice dubs them conversational implicatures based on certain universal and language-independent co-operative principles such as maxim of quantity. (Grice 1975, Levinson 1983, Yule 1996)

Maxim of quantity, among the four basic maxims of conversation which underlie any efficient co-operative use of language, proposed by Grice, suggests that speakers need to make their contributions as informative as possible, not more or less. Since utterances like ‘Boys are boys’ and ‘War is war’ obviously violate the maxim of quantity, there must be some informative implicatures which can be inferred from the conversations, if the speakers are assumed to consciously attempt to be efficiently co-operative. As Levinson (1983) puts it, ‘Boys are boys’ might be “That’s the kind of unruly behavior you would expect from boys” and ‘War is war’ might be “terrible things always happen in war, that’s its nature and it’s no good lamenting that particular disaster”. And they “share a dismissive or topic-closing quality, but the details of what is implicated will depend upon the particular context of utterance”.

Wierzbicka (1991: 391-403) argues against the Gricean view. She believes that Grice’s universal, language-independent principles are inadequate to fully explain the complexities of tautologies from a cross-cultural perspective. Many English tautologies can not find their literal equivalents in other languages. Some English tautologies do have their counterparts in other languages and cultures, yet many a time that they bear quite different implications. For her, this phenomenon suggests that “...the communicative import of tautologies is conventionally encoded in a given construction and is not calculable from any language-independent pragmatic maxims.” In other words, she is arguing against tackling the task of tautologies in terms of universal principles. Instead, she holds the position that the use of ‘tautological constructions’ is conventional and language-specific.

In addition, she advocates a ‘radically semantic’ approach and attempts to spell out the meaning of tautologies based on semantic representations and formulae, which are supposed to fetch up the

detriments of vagueness and imprecision inherent in ‘radical pragmatics’ doctrine. Grice and Levinson’s resort to contexts in calculating the meanings of tautologies is, from her point of view, another failing, for it offers no precise generalizations and many tautologies are context-independent in their force.

I defend my arguments by tentatively making a contrastive study of English and Chinese tautologies in terms of structure and interpretation, with an emphasis on Chinese culture specific tautological constructions. Chinese tautological expressions operate not only on truth conditions but also on contextual level, as the intended message is often heavily encoded in the context. It is not uncommon that in Chinese, tautologies with the same logical forms and the same truth conditions may have different interpretations in different contexts.

II. CULTURE-SPECIFIC AND CONTEXT-DEPENDENT

“nian zi shi nian zi, gang shi gang, die shi die lai, niang shi niang”

碾子是碾子，缸是缸，爹是爹来娘是娘

(roller is roller, crock is crock, father is father and mother is mother)

This is a line of words in the song of a popular Chinese tele-play, *Fence, Women and Dog*, (篱笆，女人和狗). I suppose it is extremely hard for people from non-Chinese cultures to imagine what it means. Even though the literal meaning might be caught, the abundant cultural information embedded in it can hardly be sensed. What I would like to advocate here is that in calculating the implicature of tautologies, both the conventional and non-conventional explanatory power may operate.

On the one hand, I agree with Wierzbicka in the respect that the use and calculation of tautologies is language-specific and culture-specific. Grice’s universal and language-independent principles, as a matter of fact, are mainly based on English language. In many cases, English tautologies can’t find their literal counterparts in other languages and when they do have counterparts, different meanings might be endowed with. And each language has its own language-specific tautological structures with particular culture-specific implications. On the other hand, contexts, including specific conversational context, phonological context, the large cultural and language context, and the mutual knowledge between the speakers, determine the interpretation of particular tautological utterances. Undoubtedly some tautological constructions are conventional whose meaning can be understood without invoking any particular context. It is due to the high frequency of the match between a particular tautological utterance and a particular meaning, though. However, in many situations contexts seem to hold the key to understanding the meaning of tautological constructions. Take Chinese for example; Chinese tautological expressions operate not only on truth conditions but also on contextual level, as the intended message is often heavily encoded in the context. It is not uncommon that in Chinese, tautologies with the same logical forms and the same truth conditions may have different interpretations in different contexts. I will further defend my arguments in the following sections by tentatively making a contrastive study of English and Chinese tautologies in terms of structure and calculation, with an emphasis on Chinese culture specific tautological constructions.

1. TAUTOLOGIES ARE CULTURE-SPECIFIC IN TERMS OF STRUCTURES

There are some structural similarities between English and Chinese tautologies for sure. Yet the

disparities in the tautological constructions seem to dominate. And it seems that Chinese has more tautological instances than English and holds more communicative functions. For one thing, in Chinese tautologies many parts of speech are involved, such as nouns, numerals, pronouns, adjectives and verbs, and sentences, too. In English tautologies, we often encounter nouns, pronouns, adjectives and sentences. For another, English tautologies share a ‘topic-closing quality’, (Levinson 1983) while Chinese tautologies do not seem to be confined to this function. They can occur at any stage of a conversation. What’s more, there are many instances of what I dub ‘tautological variants’ in Chinese, which will be further demonstrated in later sections.

1.1 SIMILARITIES IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE TAUTOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTIONS

There are surely some structural similarities between Chinese and English tautologies, which are demonstrated as the following, though the implied meanings of particular utterances might be disparate. In other words, what is demonstrated in the following examples are just structural similarities. Semantically, they are quite different in many cases, as I will show later. And sometimes Chinese tautologies are structurally different from English counterparts. In Chinese tautologies, different parts of speech can be used. Also, they may differ semantically.

X_1 is X_1 , X_2 is X_2

English: East is East and West is West.

White is white and black is black.

You are you and she is she.

Chinese: yi shi yi, er shi er (一是一, 二是二)

(one is one, two is two)

ding shi ding, mao shi mao (丁是丁, 卯是卯)

(Tenon is tenon, mortise is mortise.)

ta shi ta, wo shi wo (他是他, 我是我)

(He is he, I am I)

pie shi pie, na shi na (撇是撇, 捺是捺)

(pie is pie, na is na: pie and na are two basic strokes in writing Chinese characters.)

bi zi shi bi zi, yan jing shi yan jing (鼻子是鼻子, 眼睛是眼睛)

(nose is nose, eyes are eyes)

nian zi shi nian zi, gang shi gang; die shi die lai niang shi niang

(碾子是碾子, 缸是缸; 爹是爹来, 娘是娘)

(roller is roller, crock is crock, father is father and mother is mother)

guo qu shi guo qu, xian zai shi xian zai (过去是过去, 现在是现在)

(past is past, present is present)

X is X

English: Boys are boys.
War is war.
A boy is a boy.
Enough is enough.

Chinese: hao shi hao (好是好)
(good is good)

qu le shi qu le (去了是去了)
(went is went)

1.2 LANGUAGE-SPECIFIC TAUTOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTIONS

In addition, English and Chinese languages have their own language-specific tautological structures, which can not find their literal counterparts in the other language.

Some English tautological constructions are different from Chinese ones due to the difference in sentence structures in grammatical sense.

English: Either John will come or he won't.

If he does it, he does it.
What's done is done.

Chinese:

A. "Concessive Tautologies": (This term is borrowed from Wierzbicka:1991)

qin qi jiu shi qin qi (亲戚就是亲戚)
(relatives PRT are relatives)

nan ren dao shi nan ren (男人倒是男人)
(men PRT are men)

Concessive tautologies can also involve other forms of adverbs like zong shi (总是)(always), zhong jiu shi (终究是)(after all), hai shi (还是)(still), dao di shi (到底是)(after all), bi jing shi (毕竟是)(after all), jiu (就) (then) and so on. Interpretation of such tautologies is determined by many factors which will be spelt out in the next section.

B. Some Special Cases of Chinese Tautology:

a. Negative tautologies

This pattern always involves the use of the negator “不”.

bi zi bu shi bi zi, lian bu shi lian (鼻子不是鼻子，脸不是脸)

(nose is not nose, face is not face)

die bu xiang die, ma bu xiang ma (爹不像爹, 妈不像妈)
(father is not like father, mother is not like mother)

yin bu yin, yang bu yang (阴不阴, 阳不阳)
(yin not yin, yang not yang) (yin and yang are believed to be the two basic principles which form the whole world, representing female and male, negative and positive, and so on)

nan bu nan, nv bu nv (男不男, 女不女)
(male not male, female not female)

b. Tautologies used as an adverb

ta bi zi bu shi bi zi, lian bu shi lian di chong wo han dao: “chu qu!”
(他鼻子不是鼻子, 脸不是脸地冲我喊到: “出去!”)
(He, in a nose-is-not-nose-and-face-is-not-face way, shouted at me: “Get out!”)

ta cong lai dong shi ding shi ding mao shi mao di zuo shi qing.
(他从来都是丁是丁卯是卯地做事情。)
(He always in a ding-is-ding-mao-is-mao way does things.)

c. “Multiple tautologies” (This term is borrowed from Luo:1988)

jun jun, chen chen, fu fu, zi zi (君君, 臣臣, 父父, 子子)
(A ruler *is* a ruler, a minister *is* a minister, a father *is* a father, a son *is* a son)

What is significant about this pattern is its performative implicature. As is well known to the Chinese, the implied meaning of this famous quotation by Confucius is to demand or urge the listener or reader to act in accordance with his or her place in the social hierarchy.

2. CONTEXT AS THE KEY TO THE CALCULATION OF TAUTOLOGIES

Many tautological utterances have their own conventional meanings in their particular cultures. Nevertheless, in calculating tautological utterances, context sometimes speaks more, including phonological context, conversational context, and even cultural context. Here I would like to focus on the role of different contexts in calculating Chinese tautological constructions.

2.1 Phonological context

There are cases that the stress on different parts of a particular tautological utterance might solicit different or even disparate meanings. Take Chinese “concessive tautology” as an example. In “concessive tautologies” with “dao shi” (倒是), such as “qin qi dao shi qin qi” (亲戚倒是亲戚)(Relatives *PRT* are relatives.), emphasis on different words might lead to two adverse meanings. If the stress is on the first word, a negative meaning is often induced. And if the stress is on “dao shi”, a positive meaning is usually incurred.

qin qi *dao shi* *qin qi* (*jiu shi* *bu tai qin*) 亲戚倒是亲戚 (就是不太亲)
 (Although they are relatives, they are not very close.)
qin qi *dao shi* *qin qi* (*jiu shi* *bi bie ren qin*) 亲戚倒是亲戚 (就是比别人亲)
 (They are really relatives, much closer than anyone else.)

However “concessive tautologies” with “*jiu shi*” (就是), “*bi jing shi*” (毕竟是), “*zong shi*” (总是), “*zhong jiu shi*” (终究是), “*hai shi*” (还是), etc. usually bear positive meanings, no matter which words are emphasized.

Here are two other examples.

qu le *shi* *qu le* (*ke shi* *mei ban cheng shi*) 去了是去了 (可是没办成事)
 (went is went)
 (Although he went there, he didn’t achieve what he wanted to do.)

hao shi hao, *huai shi huai* (*bu yao hun xiao*) 好是好, 坏是坏 (不要混淆)
 (Good is good, bad is bad. Don’t mix the two.)

hao shi hao (*ke bu shi wo xiang yao de*) 好是好 (可不是我想要的)
 (Even though it is good, it is not what I want.)

2.2 Cultural contexts

It is very hard for a person to understand a tautological utterance if he is from a different culture. Chinese expressions are culture-heavily-loaded. Usually, the message is encoded in the broad culture which can not be articulated in several words or sentences, yet any Chinese person can sense and understand it.

Now the line of song in the Chinese teleplay again:

“*nian zi shi nian zi, gang shi gang, die shi die lai, niang shi niang*”
 碾子是碾子, 缸是缸, 爹是爹来 娘是娘
 (roller is roller, crock is crock, father is father and mother is mother)

A person from another culture can hardly understand what this means, but on hearing and saying this, a clear picture of Chinese country life, plain, simple and true, with everything and everybody serving its duty, will come to any Chinese person’s mind. And how Chinese country people accept life as it is can also be seen in this line of words.

Two other examples:

“*kan zhe hai zi xie de zi, pie shi pie, na shi na, zhen hao kan*”
 (看这孩子写的字, 撇是撇, 捺是捺, 真好看!)
 (Look at the kid’s handwriting. Pie is pie, na is na, what a good handwriting! Pie and na are

two basic strokes in writing Chinese characters.)

This can only be understood if Chinese way of writing characters and Chinese judgement in good writing are known.

“Jun jun, chen chen, fu fu, zi zi” (君君，臣臣，父父，子子)
(A ruler *is* a ruler, a minister *is* a minister, a father *is* a father, a son *is* a son)

Confucius tenet expressing Chinese social hierarchical order in saying this can not be fully comprehended if a person does not grow up in China and is ignorant of Chinese culture.

2.3 Conversational Context

A particular tautological utterance used in different conventional contexts might bear different meanings. Yao Ming, once interviewed on TV about how he compares Michael Jordan and himself, said: “Jordan is Jordan, I am I.” Conventionally, a tautological expression like “He is he, I am I” means that he and I are different and it is good, I will not try to change the difference. But a different meaning in this particular tautological utterance is revealed in Yao’s further explanation. What he really means is that Jordan is great and I can never catch up with him, not to mention exceed him, which manifests Yao’s modesty.

III. PRAGMATIC AND COMMUNICATIVE IMPORTS SERVED BY CHINESE TAUTOLOGIES

What’s more, Chinese tautologies seem to serve more pragmatic and communicative imports and are more widely applied in everyday use than English tautologies. Here I would like to further portray several special and particular pragmatic and communicative values that may come with Chinese tautological expressions. I need to make it clear that the following tautological sentences may perform another function in a different context. What I portray here is just some possible calculations. There are many other cases, though.

1. PRIASE

kan zhe hai zi xie de zi, pie shi pie, na shi na (看这孩子写的字，撇是撇，捺是捺。)
(Look at the kid’s handwriting. Pie is pie, na is na. What a good handwriting! Pie and na are two basic strokes in writing Chinese characters.)

kan zhe hai zi zhang de, zhen piao liang. bi zi shi bi zi, yan jing shi yan jing
(看这孩子长的，真漂亮。鼻子是鼻子，眼睛是眼睛。)
(Look at this kid. How pretty she looks! Nose is nose, eyes are eyes.)

kan ren jia de tiao jian, cai dian shi cai dian, bing xiang shi bing xiang.
(看人家的条件，彩电是彩电，冰箱是冰箱。)

(Look at what they have! Color TV is color TV, fridge is fridge. They have everything!)
(These words were commonly used in China in 1980's when only some families were just beginning to get rich.)

2. CRITICISM

This pattern seems to usually involve “jiu shi” (就是).

zuo le *jiu shi* zuo le (bu yao bu cheng ren) 做了**就是**做了 (不要不承认)
(Did it is did it. – You did it and you must admit.)

mei le *jiu shi* mei le (ni zen mo hai shuo mei dui ne?) 没了**就是**没了 (你怎么还说没丢呢?)
(Lost is lost. – You lost it and you must admit.)

cuo le *jiu shi* cuo le (yao cheng ren cuo wu) 错了**就是**错了 (要承认错误)
(Wrong is wrong. – Don't deny. You must admit.)

3. ACCEPTANCE

zou le jiu zou le ba (wu suo wei) **走了**就走了吧(无所谓)
(Gone is gone. – He has gone and that is OK.)

da le jiu da le ba (jiu zhe yang ba) **打了**就打了吧(就这么样吧)
(Broken is broken. – You have broken this and let it be.)

gei ta jiu gei ta ba (bie yao le) **给他**就给他吧(别要了)
(Gave him is gave him. – You have to accept the fact that you have given it to him. Don't ask for it any longer.)

4. SUASION/REQUIREMENT

Father says to Son:

“zuo shi zuo, zhan shi zhan” (zuo zheng le, zhan zhi le) 坐是坐，站是站(坐正了，站直了)
(Sitting is sitting and standing is standing. Sit straight and stand straight.)

5. APPROVAL/COMPLIMENT/FLATTERY

ni shuo xing jiu xing (bu xing ye xing) 你说行就行(不行也行)
(You say it is OK, then it is OK, even if it is not.)

ni shuo bu xing jiu bu xing (xing ye bu xing) 你说不行就不行(行也不行)
(You say it is not OK, then it is not OK, even if it is.)

This word play is usually applied when talking about the power of authority because in China, it is often the leader who will decide almost everything. So people often joke by saying: “领导说你怎么样就怎么样。”(If the leader says you are bla bla, then you are bla bla, even though you are not.)

6. COMPROMISE

ni shuo hao jiu hao(wo bu yu ni zheng)你说好就好(我不与你争)
(You say it is good, then it is good and I will not argue with you.)

ni shuo you yi si jiu you yi si 你说有意思就有意思
(You say it is interesting, then it is interesting. – I don't want to argue with you, so I have to agree with you.)

hao, hao, hao, ni shuo zen mo yang jiu zen mo yang 好, 好, 好, 你说怎么样就怎么样
(OK, OK, OK. No matter what you say, I have to agree with you. I don't want to argue.)

7. EVALUATION

ta shuo zuo jiu zuo, shuo zou jiu zou 他说做就做, 说走就走
(If he says he does it, he does it at once. If he says he goes, he goes at once.)

8. REVOLTING/OBEDIENCE/COMPROMISE

Very often, this pattern is used as an act of revolting and shows some degree of anger when the speaker has no other alternative and has to obey an authority or compromise with another person. He or she does not really want to do so, though.

Mother asks her kid not to watch TV and the kid tries to argue but fails and then says angrily:

“*bu kan dian shi* jiu bu kan dian shi” (neng zen mo yang) 不看电视就不看电视(能怎么样)
(Don't watch TV then don't watch TV. I don't care about that! – I have to obey you, but it does not hurt me even though I obey you. But actually the kid really wants to watch TV.)

Father asks his son to do homework and not to play. The son argues with Father for a while and then says angrily:

“*bu wan jiu bu wan*” 不玩就不玩
(No play then no play. I don't care. – even though he really wants to play.)

A husband and a wife are arguing about who should do cooking. Finally, husband fails and says angrily:

“*bu* zuo jiu bu zuo, kan shui neng e guo shui” 不做就不做，看谁能饿过谁
(No cooking then no cooking. Let's see who will be more hungry. – Even though I have to compromise, it can not hurt me. Actually he is already very hungry.)

9. DISAPPROVAL/DEPRECATATION/DEVALUATE

dang guan jiu shi *dang guan* ma (mei shen mo da bu liao de) 当官就是当官嘛 (没什么大不了的)
(Being an official is being an official. Nothing great.)

shu le jiu *shu le* bei (mei shen mo liao bu qi) 输了就输了呗 (没什么了不起)
(Losing is losing. Nothing serious.)

10. COMPLAINT

wo zuo *jiu shi* wo zuo (ni bie lai chan huo) 我做就是我做 (你别来捣和)
(I do it and I mean it. You don't come to bother!)

IV. CONCLUSION

My discussion and analysis of tautologies is certainly not exhaustive and there are many other tautological utterances and a lot of other interpretations unmentioned here. I would like to restate that my main standpoints here: Tautology seems to be quite a simple topic in the realm of linguistics, yet the understanding and calculation of it is rather complicated for many factors are involved. Grice's basic and universal principles do not seem to be able to explain the whole story. And tautologies are culture-specific and language-specific, though many tautological utterances are conventional. On the other hand, the interpretation of tautologies depends upon the context, including phonological, conversational and cultural contexts, the interpretation of the Chinese tautology in particular.

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