

Moscow HSE Pragmatics Workshop

Stage-level /individual level predicates distinction in the interpretation of nominal tautologies

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Outline

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Literature overview
- 3 Experiment: goals, predictions, design, results and discussion
- 4 Conclusions

Defining the problem

(1) A: -John has missed his plane!

B: -No wonder! John is John.

(2) A: In February 2019 Meghan Markle was in a XXL size coat!

B: #No wonder! Meghan Markle is Meghan Markle.

Research Questions

1. Why can the tautology in (1) invoke the assumption that John is always late, whilst that in (2) cannot evoke the shared assumption that Meghan Markle was pregnant?
2. What are the constraints on the evoked knowledge?

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Tautologies in pragmatic studies I

Grice's example of Quantity implicature

Extreme examples of a flouting of the first maxim of Quantity are provided by utterances of patent tautologies like *Women are women* and *War is war*. I would wish to maintain that at the level of what is said, in my favored sense, such remarks are totally noninformative and so, at that level, cannot but infringe the first maxim of Quantity in any conversational context. They are, of course, informative at the level of what is implicated, and the hearer's identification of their informative content at this level is dependent on his ability to explain the speaker's selection of this *particular* patent tautology.

(Grice 1975: 52)

Tautologies in pragmatic studies II

Different types of tautologies

- (3) a. I'll be there if I'll be there. *propositional, conditional*
- b. Either I'll like him or I won't. *propositional, disjunctive*
- c. Hubert is Hubert. *nominal, equative*

(Snider 2015)

Common knowledge in the interpretation of tautologies I

...the speaker intends to convey the belief that the participants share a view about some aspect of the noun mentioned in the tautology and wishes to bring this belief to the listener's attention.

(Gibbs and McCarrell 1990: 128)

The interpretation of tautologies involves an evocation of shared knowledge - “a set of qualities and attributes normally assumed about the objects”.

(Miki 1996: 635)

Shared knowledge makes it possible for the addressee to retrieve the intended I- and Q-implicatures.

(Meibauer 2008)

Common knowledge in the interpretation of tautologies III

(4) Bankers are bankers.

The second occurrence of the noun is restricted in its application to individuals exhibiting greed, lack of moral fibre, or what you have.

(Geurts 2010: 183)

- (5) a. War is war . . . #in fact, violence is avoidable in war.
b. Bankers are bankers . . . #in fact, many bankers are lovely.
c. Boys will be boys . . . #in fact, they often behave unpredictably.

(Rett 2015: 82)

Summarizing previous analyses I

- The existence of shared or stereotypical knowledge is taken for granted.
- It is part of the common ground and can be activated when needed.
- The tautology is a means to bringing it to the foreground.

Summarizing previous analyses II



- Previous analyses provide a plausible account for the way in which tautologies are interpreted when the interlocutors have common knowledge about an entity



- Previous analyses suggest no explanation why there are kinds of shared knowledge that cannot legitimate the use of a tautology

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Hypothesis & Predictions

Hypothesis

- Shared knowledge is not a sufficient condition for the interpretation of tautologies.
- **Predictions**
- Tautologies will be interpreted by evoked permanent, classificatory properties only.
- Contingent states will be systematically rejected, even if they are shared knowledge and supported by the context.

Design

- Tautologies with proper names (John is John)
- Sentences (2 levels: permanent properties vs. transitory states)
- 2 conditions x 26 contexts = **52 critical items**
- Control items (2 levels: relevant property (YES-control) vs. irrelevant property (NO-control))
- 2 conditions x 26 contexts = **52 control items**
- **4 practice items**

Critical Items

(1) ANN: Jill bought a Louis Vuitton bag!

BILL: No wonder! **Jill is Jill.**

- a. Conveyed message: She is a spendthrift. (permanent property)
- b. Conveyed message: She won the lottery yesterday. (contingent/transitory state)

Can Bill's reply convey the indicated message?

(2) ANN: Jack robbed a bank!

BILL: No wonder! **Jack is Jack.**

- a. Conveyed message: He is a shady character. (permanent property)
- b. Conveyed message: He has gone crazy after the accident. (contingent/transitory state)

Can Bill's reply convey the indicated message?

Control Items

(3) ANN: Alice married a millionaire!

BILL: No wonder! **Alice is a real Cindy Crawford!**

- a. Conveyed message: Alice is beautiful like a model. (YES-control).
- b. Conveyed message: Alice is very smart. (NO-control)

Can Bill's reply convey the indicated message?

(4) ANN: Benjamin can lift eighty kilos at a time.

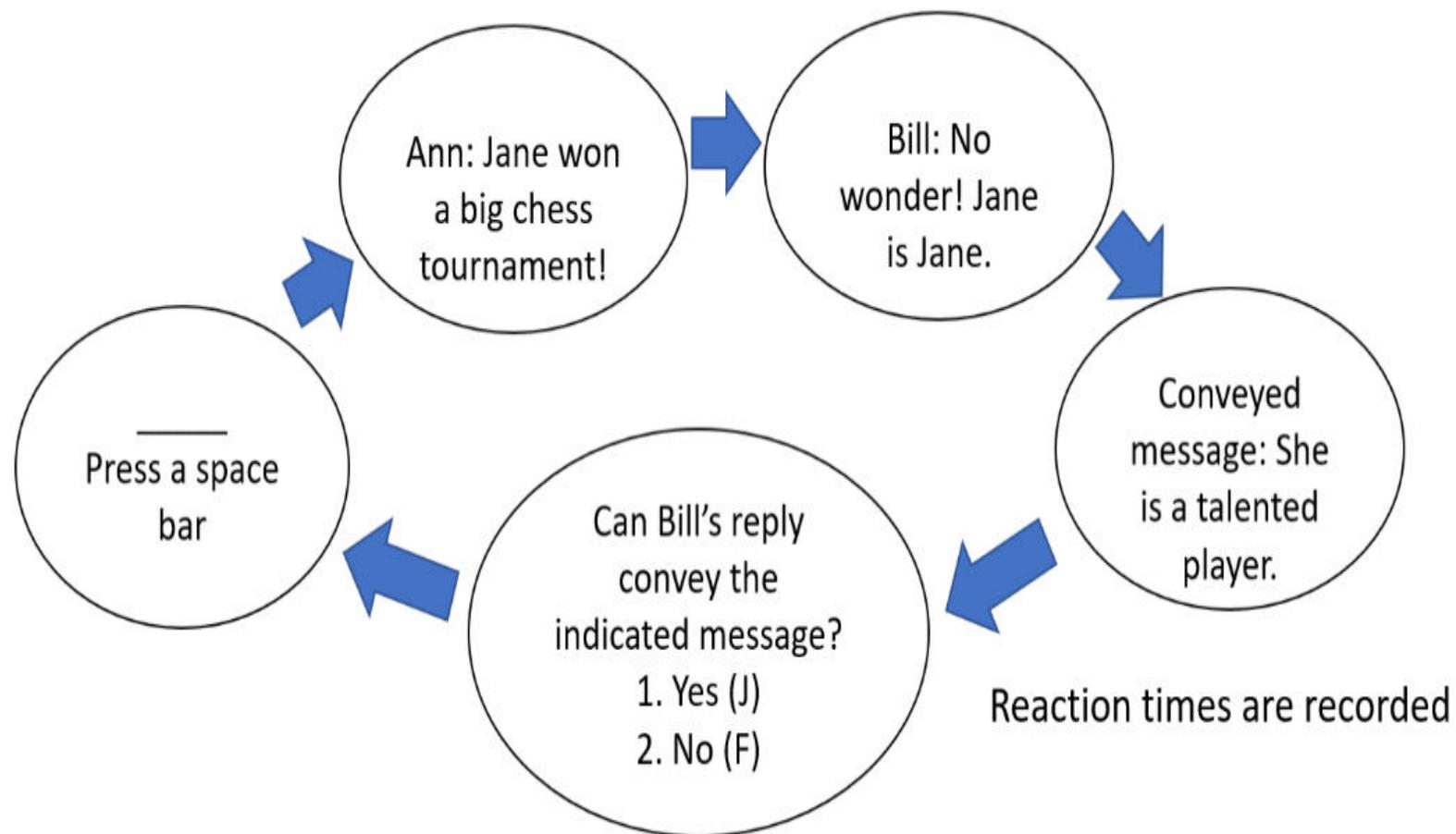
BILL: No wonder! **Benjamin is a real Schwarzenegger.**

- a. Conveyed message: Benjamin is a bodybuilder. (YES-control)
- b. Conveyed message: Benjamin was born in Austria. (NO-control)

Can Bill's reply convey the indicated message?

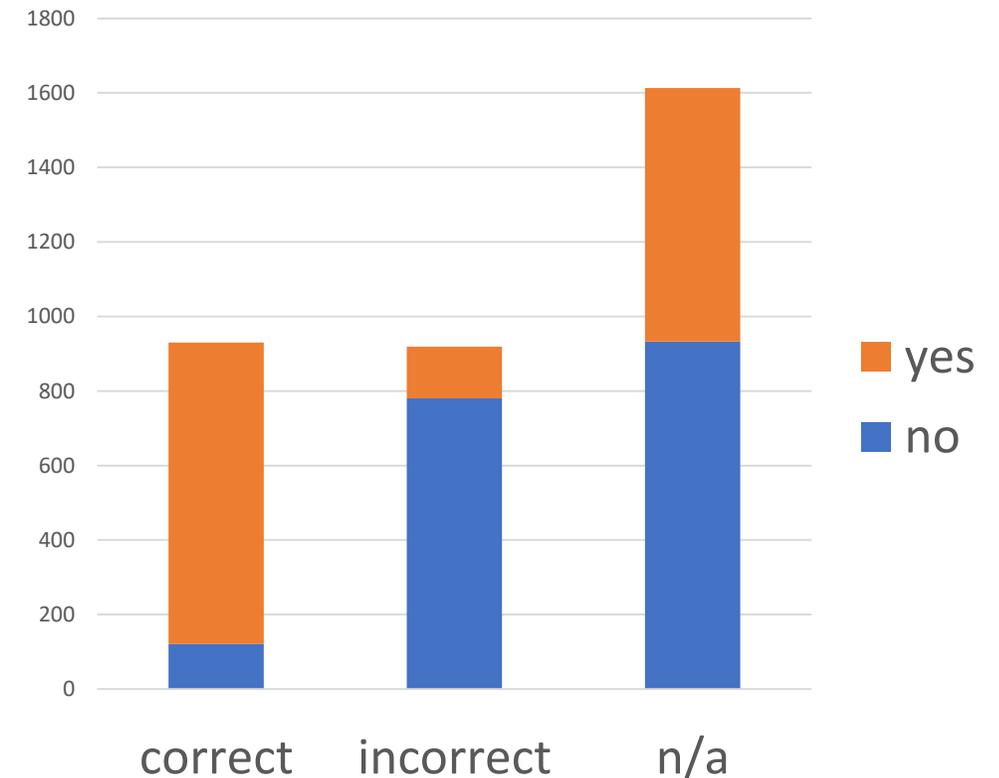
Task & Procedure

- Ibx Farm, Amazon Mechanical Turk
- 68 participants
(33 females, mean age – 41.6 y.o., age range – 26 – 67 y.o.)



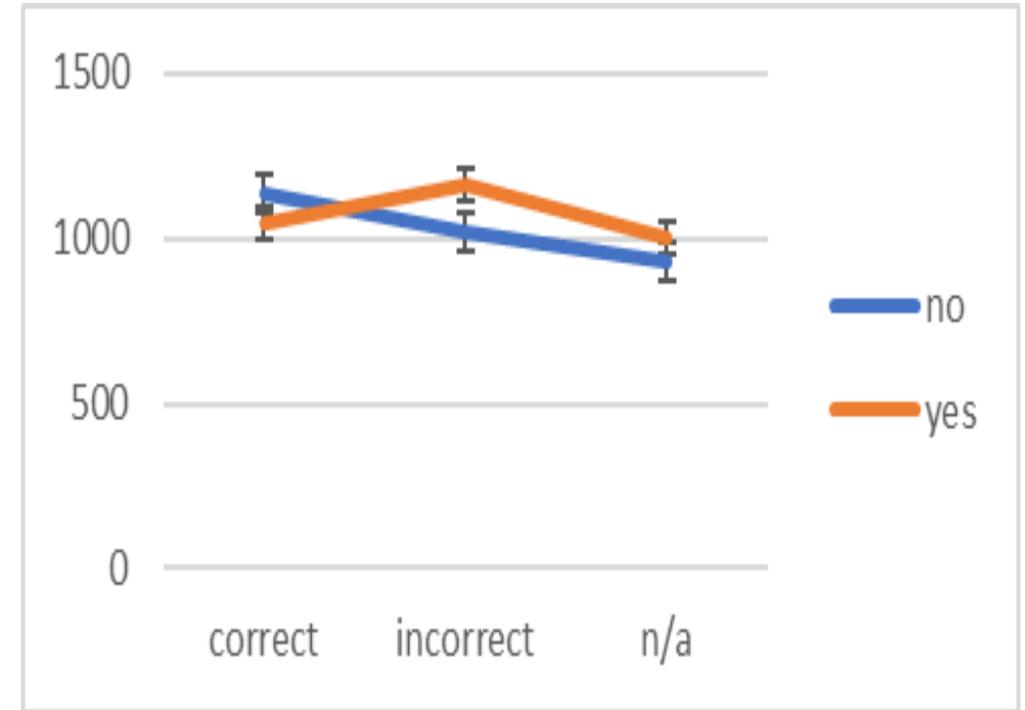
Results I

- True control items received significantly more *yes*-answers than false control items ($\beta = -4.6473$, $SE = 0.3540$, $z = -13.127$, $p < 0.0001$).
- With respect to *yes/no*-answers to true control items and critical items the difference is significant ($\beta = -2.9008$, $SE = 0.3053$, $z = -9.503$, $p < 0.0001$).
- With respect to *yes/no* answers to incorrect control items and critical items the difference is significant as well ($\beta = 1.5788$, $SE = 0.2728$, $z = 5.787$, $p < 0.0001$).



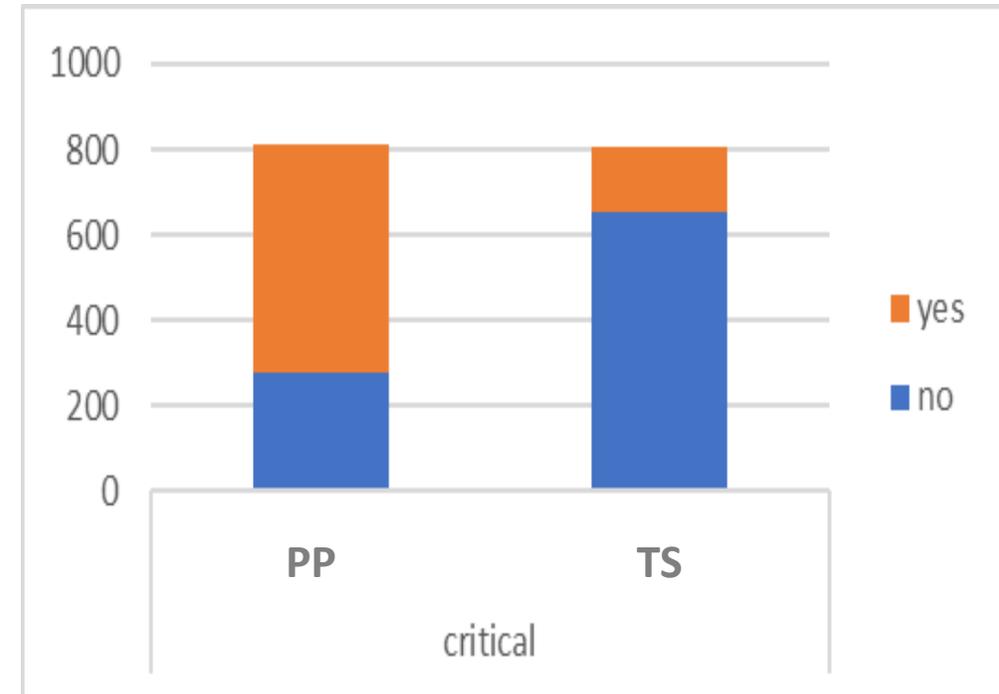
Results II

- The difference for reaction times turned out to be significant in processing of true control and critical items ($\beta = -0.109177$, $SE = 0.02109411$, $t = -5.17573$, $p = 0.0000$) and false control and critical answers ($\beta = -0.088112$, $SE = 0.02117901$, $t = -4.16034$, $p = 0.0000$).
- The difference for reaction times was not significant in processing of true and false critical items ($\beta = -0.021066$, $SE = 0.02383794$, $t = -0.88370$, $p = 0.3769$).



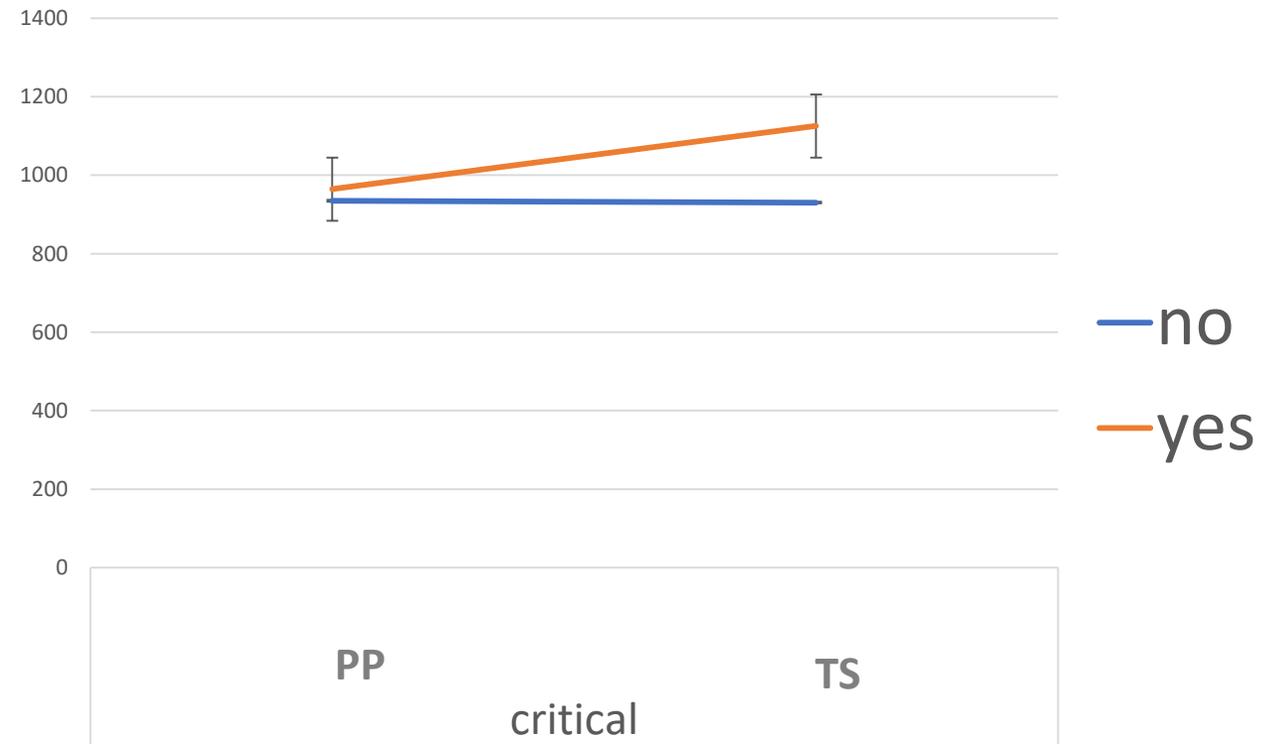
Results III

- The difference between two interpretations (permanent properties vs. transitory states) turned out to be statistically significant both for subjects ($\beta = -3.0479$, $SE = 0.1617$, $z = -18.85$, $p < 0.0001$) and for items ($\beta = -2.2232$, $SE = 0.1712$, $z = -12.984$, $p < 0.0001$).
- Critical items, in which the conveyed message included permanent properties, received significantly more *yes*-answers than critical items with transitory states. The latter, in turn, received significantly more *no*-answers than critical items with permanent properties.



Results IV

- No significant difference was observed in reaction times for two types of interpretations (including permanent properties vs. transitory states) both for subjects ($\beta = -0.002022$, $SE = 0.02466346$, $t = -0.0820$, $p = 0.9347$) and for items ($\beta = -0.014333$, $SE = 0.03663178$, $t = -0.39127$, $p = 0.6957$).



Discussion I

- The participants were significantly more likely to accept the conveyed messages with permanent properties than messages with transitory states.
- The results are consistent with our alternative hypothesis that only inherent or classificatory properties of an individual can be invoked by using a tautology with proper name.
- Why is it so?

Discussion II

- ✓ The very form of the tautology imposes an identity requirement between the two proper names involved.
 - Tautologies with proper names give rise to three main kinds of interpretations: uniqueness of the referent, unchangeability of the referent and identification of the referent.

(Vilinbakhova and Escandell-Vidal 2021)

- The interpretation selects characterizing features of the referent, because they are needed to sustain any claim on uniqueness, unchangeability and identification.
- Inherent, permanent and specific properties are, therefore, the choice option.

Discussion III

- ✓ The distinction between inherent, classificatory properties of individuals and episodic or transitory stages in which an individual is found is reminiscent of the difference between Individual-Level Predicates (ILPs) and Stage-Level Predicates (SLPs).
 - ‘Property predicates’: *tall, intelligent, beautiful, boring or crazy*, and predicates of shape and color
 - ‘State-descriptive predicates’: *sick, hungry, tired, drunk or naked*

Discussion IV

Properties are those facts about entities which are assumed to be, even if they are not in fact, permanent, unalterable and in some sense possessed by the entity, while states are conditions which are, at least in principle, transitory, not possessed by the entity of which they are predicated and the removal of which causes no change in the essential qualities of the entity.

(Milsark 1974: 212)

Discussion V

- There is a number of well-known effects of ILP/SLP distinction in the grammar of natural languages.
- The results obtained lend further support to the idea that the ILP/SLP distinction is deeply rooted in human cognition, as a contrast between what is inherent to an individual and what is not.

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- ✓ The predictions of the claims in the previous literature, according to which all kinds of shared knowledge would behave alike, are not born out.
- ✓ The results are fully compatible and consistent with our hypothesis:
 - Only inherent or classificatory properties of an individual can be invoked by using a tautology.
 - Shared knowledge is not the criterial notion.

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