Tautological Constructions in Mandarin Chinese

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Abstract:
Tautological constructions are a type of interesting constructions which has particular syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic characteristics. They are like gestures or interjections: they appear ‘natural’, universal, and self-explanatory; but they are also conventional, language- and culture specific. They show both ‘natural logic’ and ‘cultural logic’; and the more ‘natural’ they seem, the more culturally revealing they are.

Tautological constructions have been studied from the perspectives of semantics (e.g. G. Leech 1983) and pragmatics (e.g. Brown & Levinson 1978, A. Wierzbicka 1991), but seldom done in the framework of cognitive linguistics, construction grammar in particular. There are still some holes or problems in the previous studies. For example, why have English tautological constructions been so widely mistaken for universal devices fully interpretable on the basis of Grice’s maxim of quantity? Why does Levinson (1983) regard “a dismissive and topic closing quality” as a shared property of tautological constructions of different kinds? One obvious reason is that the form of tautological constructions is so deceptively simple, and so deceptively similar to logical tautologies that it is easy to jump at a conclusion. Therefore, it is necessary for us to reconsider tautological constructions here.

The aim of this purpose is to investigate the syntactic and semantic properties of the Chinese nominal tautological construction “NP₁ shi NP₁” (NP₁ is NP₁) in the framework of construction grammar. Sometimes, contrastive studies will be made between English and Chinese. And the methodology used here is contrastive analysis and linguistic typology.

Tautological constructions are ubiquitous, which occur in both English and Chinese. For example, in English, we have the following constructions:

(1) Boys are boys. War is war. Friend is friend. Home is home, be it never so homely.
   A wolf, after all, is a wolf in spite of its artful disguises.

In Mandarin Chinese, the similar counterparts can be found:

(2) Nanhai jiu shi nanhai (Boys are boys). Zhanzheng jiu shi zhanzheng (War is war). Pengyou jiu shi pengyou (Friend is friend).

This demonstrates that tautological constructions can be universal and their constructional meaning can be similar or identical.

In addition, in Mandarin Chinese, there are some tautological constructions which have no counterparts in English. For example:
(3) *Tou shi tou, jiao shi jiao.* (Head is head, foot is foot)

This sentence is used to describe the beauty of girls or women, because in China women’s hairstyle and feet are considered very important. Most Chinese girls or women like to decorate their hair and feet. This example indicates that tautological constructions can be language- and culture-specific.

Through the study of this paper, we can draw some important conclusions: the meaning of Chinese nominal constructions is conventional; it seems that the meaning may vary according to context, but there is an underlying abstract conceptual content realized by various types of Chinese tautological constructions.

In sum, it is a matter of fundamental significance to study tautological constructions. Apparently, this significance doesn’t come from the frequency of use, or the necessity of tautological constructions. It derives from the fact that one’s decision on a ‘small’ point like this has far-reaching importance in respect of one’s whole idea of what linguistics is all about, what it is supposed to do, and what it can do. The basic question is this: should grammar (syntax) be autonomous of semantics and pragmatics, or should constructional meaning be spelt out within a holistic framework of cognitive linguistics? The answer is very clear, I think!

**Key words:** tautological construction; construction grammar; constructional meaning