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Are repetitive sentences analytic?

0. Logicians usually assume that repetitive sentences – i.e., sentences of the form ‘A is A’ – are trivial identity sentences. But if we consider the occasion and purpose of repetitive sentences, we discover that in ordinary communication they are not used to give trivial information; indeed, they are not used as identity sentences at all.¹ Thus we may be led to the view that repetitive sentences in ordinary language are not analytic. Similar arguments may convince us that there are no analytic sentences in ordinary discourse, and that genuine analytic sentences are “philosopher’s nonsense” (Wittgenstein).² There is nothing alarming about this, it might be said, since the ordinary language philosopher and the logician evidently talk about different things: (a) ordinary uses of repetitive sentences, and (b) logical uses of repetitive sentences. But something has gone wrong here. Our attitudes towards repetitive sentences in non-philosophical contexts have a complexity which is left unexplained by the Wittgensteinian theory. Sometimes we waiver between feeling that such sentences as ‘War is war’ and ‘Women are women’ are trivially true and feeling that they are highly informative, sometimes we may feel that they are not true at all, and sometimes we may think it beyond question that they are true. How are we to account for this complexity? I shall break this question up in three parts:

- (1) What is the occasion and purpose of repetitive sentences in ordinary language?
- (2) What is the function of repetitive sentences in logic?
- (3) What is the relation between the ordinary and the logical uses of repetitive sentences?

1. According to D. W. Hamlyn, the uses of sentences like ‘Black is black’ are “by no means ordinary or straightforward”. The uses of “tautologies” are “essentially idiomatic”,

¹ “‘War is war’ is not an example of the law of identity”. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 221.

² *Ibid.* For a similar view, see John Wisdom, *Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*, p. 5.

and clearly such sentences could not express factual statements: “suggested analytic statements or non-mathematical tautologies in ordinary language ... could be used only to tell us something about the use of words.”³

Of these theses the first is true if it is interpreted in a certain way, the second is misleading, and the last two are false. The general rule for repetitive sentences is that they are used to make points which the context makes clear. It is not easy to state more precise rules or to bring the uses into neat categories, and I shall not try to do so. The examples will, however, illustrate some common uses.

The dependence on context shows itself in various ways. Repetitive sentences cannot usually be shuffled from one place to another without altering the meaning of the text; the same sentence can be used to make different points in different contexts; and repetitive sentences are less informative than most sentences when presented out of context. Thus they differ from the self-contained unit of meaning philosophers sometimes take as the paradigm of a descriptive sentence. Few sentences in actual discourse live up to the ideal; perhaps the best illustration would be some articles in encyclopaedias: rather haphazard information conveyed in an impersonal manner with few ellipses and cross-references and thus few pronouns and similar devices. If such discourse is considered straightforward, then most conversations are peculiar indeed, and repetitive sentences are mostly used in conversational language.

Repetitive sentences are often used to suggest that something has some property which is brought out by some contrasting feature in the context, as in the following examples:

- (i) Seven year old Martin has got some presents: a pair of stockings, a cake, a five-penny. “But of all this Martin liked the five-penny best. For he had already learned that a pair of stockings, that’s a pair of stockings, and a cake is

³ D. W. Hamlyn, “Analytic Truths”, *Mind* 65, 1956, pp. 361-362.

a cake; but a five-penny, that is an infinite number of wishes ... ” (From Hjalmar Söderberg’s novel *Martin Bircks ungdom* (in Swedish).)⁴

- (ii) “It was a bad performance. But Shakespeare is Shakespeare, and it seems impossible to spoil ‘The Midsummer Night’s Dream’ entirely.” (From a review.)

The feature which directs the interpretation of the repetitive sentence is often non-verbal. We see something, and comment that “boys are boys” or “women are women”.

Another common use of repetitive sentences is to point out the uniqueness of something: “Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” Or we may say ‘Paris is Paris’ feeling that Paris has its own atmosphere which cannot be described in the ordinary way; the word ‘Paris’ has got something of the right atmosphere itself and it therefore the only proper word.

In other cases, the repetitive sentence sums up a line of thought or a whole theory. An argument against representative art was concluded with the sentence “a surface is a surface, a line is a line, nothing more, nothing less” (from *Art Concret*, a journal which appeared in one number in 1930). Similarly, G. E. Moore “summarized the character of his opposition to monism in the quotation from Bishop Butler, “a thing is what it is and not another thing.”⁵

A repetitive sentence may be used to rebut some particular suggestion:

- (iii) “Listen, M. Poirot. Get this – and get it clearly. I’m hiring you to investigate a case of murder.”
“Do you mean – ?”
“Yes, I do mean. A case of murder is a case of murder whether it happened yesterday or sixteen years ago.”

⁴ There seem to be differences between the uses of repetitive sentences in Swedish and English. I draw therefore upon material from both languages.

⁵ John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, p. 209.

“But my dear young lady – “

(Agatha Christie, *Five Little Pigs*, Fontana Book ed., p. 13.)

Finally two examples to illustrate how the same sentences can be used to make different points:

- (iv) “Twenty years are twenty years, and when he finally returned home, everybody seemed to have forgotten about it.”
- (v) “Twenty years are twenty years, and oaks grow slowly. In fact, the tree was still about the same size as when he visited the spot in the thirties.”

This examples will suffice to show how flexible repetitive sentences are and to rebut the view that they cannot express factual statements. Repetitive sentences can perhaps be used to point out the use of words, but that is not their typical use. (Hamlyn’s example is not quite convincing: we can say ‘Black is black’ to someone who is “equivocating about the colour of something” in order to “point out to him the use of the word ‘black’, and suggest that to attribute blackness to something is to exclude the possibility of attributing to it some other colour.”⁶ But is this not to draw attention to a feature of the world we happen to live in rather than to a linguistic fact? The answer seems to depend upon how much we are willing to build into our colour concepts.⁷

Another over-crude view of repetitive sentences is that they always play upon the connotations or suggestions of words.⁸ This sounds plausible for sentences like ‘Communists are Communists’ and ‘A Jew’s Jew’, for it might be held that the words ‘Communist’ and ‘Jew’ have fixed connotations for some groups of people. But that is certainly not true for ‘twenty years’, for instance (cf. the examples above). “The connotation view” is true only if the word ‘connotation’ is stretched to include all contextual features which help us to see the point of repetitive sentences.

⁶ Hamlyn, *op. cit.*, p. 361.

⁷ See J. J. C. Smart, “Incompatible Colours”, *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. X, No.3, April 1953.

⁸ Cf. the confused discussion of repetitive sentences in S. I. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, e.g. p. 213f. – For the term ‘connotation’, see L. Bloomfield, *Language*, pp. 151-157.

And now some words on the view that repetitive sentences are used idiomatically. If the view is taken seriously, it is rather misleading but not wholly wrong. According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 'idiomatic' means 'characteristic of a particular language'. Repetitive sentences are not idiomatic in this sense, since they occur in English, Swedish, Latin, Russian etc. But the dictionary sense is by no means exhaustive, as a glance into some collections of English idioms tells us. Many of the metaphorical expressions in *A Book of English Idioms* by V. H. Collins (3rd ed., 1958), for instance, are not peculiar to English. Repetitive sentences are not metaphorical (though they resemble metaphors in certain ways; cf. section 3), nor are they like those idiomatic phrases the meanings of which have to be learned as items ('at that', 'make it' etc.). We understand new instances of the pattern 'A is A' as well as those we have already heard many times. Repetitive sentences are thus unlike some groups of idioms. But they do resemble one group of phrases and sentences sometimes called "idiomatic", viz. colloquial locutions and standard phrases used in ordinary life in so far as they are mostly used in conversational language.

It may be noted, finally, that there are other sentences which are used in exactly the same way as repetitive sentences, e.g. 'If you've lost, you've lost' and 'What I have written, that I have written'. (These sentences could – though perhaps with a clumsy result – be rephrased in the form of repetitive sentences.)

2. Philosophers and logicians often assert that every sentence which consists of two referring expressions joined by 'is', 'is the same as', 'is identical with' or some such phrase expresses an identity statement. Accordingly, we are said to write 'Elizabeth II is the present Queen of England' to mean that Elizabeth II is the same person as the present Queen of England.⁹ On this view, both 'The author of Hamlet is the author of Macbeth' and 'The author of Hamlet is the author of Hamlet' are identity statements, the first informative, the second trivial. But if we mean that Elizabeth II is the same person as the

⁹ Patrick Suppes, *Introduction to Logic*, p. 101.

present Queen of England when we say 'Elizabeth II is the present Queen of England' (S), then it should certainly be possible to substitute 'is the same person as' for 'is' in S without causing any oddity. Now that is possible in such a case as the following. We have referred to a person by the two expressions 'Elizabeth II' and 'the present Queen of England', and suddenly we realize that our listener does not know that the expressions refer to the same person; so we say S. But if somebody who has never heard the name of the present English sovereign asks "Who is the present English Queen?" (assuming for some reason that the sovereign is a female), then it would be awkward to answer that Elizabeth II is the same person as the present Queen of England but perfectly in order to say S.

The 'is' which joins two referring expressions is thus not always synonymous with 'is identical with'. The nexus 'is' expresses identity only when the sentence in which it occurs is used to point out that two referring expressions apply to the same thing, person, or class. And since repetitive sentences are not used for that purpose, we get the result that they are not identity sentences.

On the other hand we feel that instances of 'A is A' are trivially true and that 'A is not A'-sentences are paradoxical. Similarly, 'It is raining and it is not raining' and 'He is a married bachelor' can make good sense in the situations in which they are used, but we feel clearly that they are startling ways of expressing oneself.

The syntax of English permits the formation of 'A is A'-sentences as well as 'A is not A'-sentences, but both types of sentences are excluded by other rules. 'A is not A' is excluded by a semantical or logical rule, 'A is A' is excluded by a rule for informative talk (a pragmatic rule).

The pragmatic rule is roughly that 'A' and 'B' must be different if 'A is B' is to count as an identity sentence. Repetitive sentences do not fulfil this requirement, a fact which may contribute to our puzzlement over them.

The logician neglects this pragmatical rule and permits 'A is A'-sentences. 'A is A'-sentences look like 'A is B'-sentences, but the two types have different functions. 'A is B'-sentences are informative (sometimes used to make identity statements, sometimes used predicatively); 'A is A'-sentences are used to rule out contradictory sentences of the type 'A is not A'. Because 'A is A' looks like informative sentences, they tend to create confusion; and it would perhaps be better not to use 'A is A' at all. We could reject 'A is not A' in other ways than by asserting that A is A. It is, however, not only logicians who say that A is A. We all use sentences to reject the negations of them. That accounts, I think, for our feeling that repetitive sentences are trivially and necessarily true.

We remember that Wittgenstein said that analytic sentences are "philosophers' nonsense" (p. 1 above). That is true of repetitive sentences, we now see, if 'nonsense' means uninformative and if the word 'philosopher' is meant merely to draw attention to the fact that such sentences have a function in logic. But it would be a mistake to suppose that logic is only for logicians and philosophers.

3. It is a psychological fact that some people sometimes feel inclined to think that repetitive sentences are both informative and trivial. If it is true, as I have tried to show it is, that there are two different uses of repetitive sentences, this feeling can be explained as a wavering between two interpretations of repetitive sentences. Even when a repetitive sentence is used to make a synthetic statement as in the examples in section 1, the trivial interpretation hovers in the background. This is, I presume, the reason why repetitive sentences have come to be used in the peculiar way of section 1: they are used because of their persuasive aura of triviality and truth. Ordinary repetitive sentences could be said to be parasitical upon the repetitive sentences in the logical use.

That both interpretations of repetitive sentences play a part in the synthetic uses is shown by the ascription of truth to them. If somebody uses a repetitive sentence to make an informative statement, we often hesitate to object to it by the words 'That is not true'; but if there is no possibility of misunderstanding, we can do so. The 'that' in the phrase

‘That’s not true’ then refers to the *point* of the sentence rather than to its trivial *meaning*. We react in a similar way in the case of misdescribing, it may be noted. If somebody points at a man with a blue neck-tie and says ‘The man over there with the black neck-tie is a carpenter’, we may grant that what he *meant* was true though what he *said* was not quite correct.¹⁰ Since the subject expression is used mainly to identify a person, it does not matter very much whether it describes the person correctly. Consequently, we may say ‘That is true’ referring to some *communicated* sentence rather than the *uttered* sentence. The ascription of analyticity is similar to the ascription of truth: we may attribute analyticity or syntheticity either to some communicated sentence or to the uttered sentence.

The distinction between the meaning of a sentence and its point, force or function, or between the primary (usual, standard) meaning and the secondary (occasional, contextual) meaning is perhaps best illustrated by the case of metaphor, where there is an unusually clear difference between the “literal” and the “figurative” meaning. Repetitive sentences resemble metaphors on this point but that does not turn them into metaphors in the usual sense of that word.

My answer to the question whether repetitive sentences are analytic is, then, yes and no. However difficult it may be to explicate analyticity and to decide on border-line cases, we can rest assured that sentences which mean roughly that Shakespeare is an excellent writer or that a line cannot be made to represent anything (cf. the examples in section 1 above) are not analytically true. And yet there is a core of meaning by virtue of which repetitive sentences are true and analytic. This core of meaning is no mysterious entity but simply the result of the fact that there is another use of repetitive sentences which we feel to be central, viz. the logical use to exclude contradictory sentences.

¹⁰ This example is discussed (though not very successfully) in Håkan Törnebohm, “On Truth, Implication, and Three-Valued Logic”, *Theoria*, 22, , Part 3 (1956). Cf. Mats Furberg’s and my note on that article in *Theoria*, 23, Part 2 (1957).