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# Conventionality of Tautologies:

Diachronic and Synchronic Approaches to the English *NP will be NP* Expression\*

Hikaru AOKI

## 1. Introduction

The word *tautology*, which, according to *the Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, was first attested in 1555, was initially used in the field of rhetoric and introduced into linguistics as it came to be analysed in pragmatics. Many works on the interpretation of tautologies have emerged from the pragmatic viewpoint, and, for example, Stephen Levinson asserts in his work that:

An account of how they [= tautologies] come to have communicative significance, and different communicative significances, can be given in terms of the flouting of the maxim of Quantity. Since this requires that speakers be informative, the asserting of tautologies blatantly violates it. Therefore, if the assumption that the speaker is actually cooperating is to be preserved, some informative inference must be made. (111)

While such a pragmatic view was once prevalent, in 1987, Anna Wierzbicka proposed a view that considers the interpretations of tautologies in relation to the conventionalised implicature encoded in given constructions. The disagreement between Wierzbicka's view called 'Radical Semantics' and pragmatics has provoked vigorous debates. Furthermore, several studies on this topic have also been conducted from different viewpoints (e.g., Sakahara). However, what should be criticized is the fact that conventionality, which can be considered historically constructed, has often been marginalised by some scholars without any historical or diachronic investigation. In fact, little is known about the historical aspects of tautologies, and very few attempts have been made at this point. This leads us to focus on the historical aspect of tautologies including their conventionality. Therefore, this study aims to address these questions to discuss English tautologies from a broader perspective.

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## 2. Preliminary Discussion

### 2.1 Previous Studies and Their Implications

As indicated in Levinson's work, pragmatists assert that the Cooperative Principle plays a pivotal role in interpreting tautologies. According to pragmatists view, tautologies rely on language-independent, universal principles, which leads one to posit that certain aspects of tautologies, including their interpretations and usage, are universally recognised and that all tautologies are applicable and interpretable across languages. Contrary to this expectation, Wierzbicka points out that "some English 'tautological constructions' have no literal counterparts which can be used or interpreted in many other languages" (96), and "some Eng. tautological constructions do have literal counterparts in other languages, but are used in the latter with a different communicative import" (96). Focusing on such language-specific properties of tautologies, she suggests that "the communicative import is conventionally encoded in a given construction, and is not calculable from any language-independent pragmatic maxims" (96). The crucial point here is that, as she suggests in her discussion, such communicative import seems to be conventionally embedded in particular structures; that is, interpretations of tautological constructions should be regarded as historically acquired. Consequently, there is room to analyse tautologies from historical and diachronic linguistics.

The pragmatist criticism of her view also offers significant insight. Partially accepting the fact that some tautologies are untranslatable into another language, Ward and Hirschberg counter by stating, "Yet even where there are differences among languages in the syntactic form which tautological utterances take, this itself does not preclude a language-independent account of how tautological utterances are interpreted – any more than such differences in general preclude a universal account of other linguistic phenomena" (510). They adduce an English-French example of translation in order to support their view. According to their paper, "while *Les garçons sont les garçons* may indeed be impossible in French, *La guerre c'est la guerre* is not only perfectly grammatical but indeed conveys a meaning analogous to English equative *War is War*" (509). In their view, if an utterance exhibits a tautological aspect logically, it should be analysed within the framework of pragmatics, because, whatever form it takes, the fact that analogous tautologies are found in another language proves the existence of universal principles in interpreting tautologies. In other words, while Wierzbicka's view is somewhat equal to seeing tautologies as a problem of the form-meaning pair in that the change of forms influences the meaning, the pragmatists' view regards tautologies as merely a problem of the meaning side. This difference highlights that at least the formal side can be analysed as a language-specific concern since, be tautologies wholly a pragmatic problem or not, the reason

why such formal differences as those found between *war is war* and *La guerre c'est la guerre* exist remains unanswered. Even though whether English tautological constructions are equivalent to their counterparts in another language remains controversial, the counterarguments and the examples show that there is a need for onomasiological considerations as to why the present tautological expressions became fixed in their current forms.

Once again, previous studies provide valuable insights. They indicate that there is room for investigating tautologies from a historical viewpoint, given that the interpretation of tautologies is, to some extent, anticipated to be conventionally encoded. Furthermore, assuming that tautologies are pragmatic phenomena, these studies also imply the necessity of research focused on the development of formal aspects of tautologies because the reasons the current form came to be used to express a particular pragmatic phenomenon are unclear. This paper addresses such concerns in the following sections.

## 2.2 Expressions to be Analysed

This paper primarily focuses on the *NP will be NP* type tautology (hereafter, a modal tautology) such as *boys will be boys*. This selection is grounded in Wierzbicka's description and the psycholinguistic study by Gibbs and McCarrell. As previously introduced, Wierzbicka asserts that tautological interpretation is encoded in a given construction, and she elucidates such conventional interpretation by using Semantic Metalanguage (cf. Wierzbicka, 103–4). For example, she states that “A ‘SOBER’ ATTITUDE TOWARD COMPLEX HUMAN ACTIVITIES is expressed by the following syntactic formula:  $N_{abstr} \text{ is } N_{abstr}$ ” (105) and “TOLERANCE FOR HUMAN NATURE is expressed by the following syntactic formula:  $N_{hum.pl} \text{ are } N_{hum.pl}$ ” (106). According to Wierzbicka, while human tautologies such as *fathers are fathers* have only one possible interpretation, the slightly different form *a father is a father* has four interpretations. The former can be understood as the construction encoding tolerance for human nature and the latter as obligation, appreciation, indifference, and absolute generalisation. Following her description, human tautologies  $N_{hum.pl} \text{ are } N_{hum.pl}$  must be preferable to other constructions such as *NP is NP*, which is perplexing because of its multiple possible interpretations.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Gibbs and McCarrell have examined the ease of

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<sup>1</sup> Though Wierzbicka regards both  $N_{hum.pl} \text{ are } N_{hum.pl}$  and *NP will be NP* as constructions showing tolerance, she considers them different and highlights their slight difference in meaning (106–107). However, whether she considers both the constructions as having only one interpretation is unclear.

interpreting human tautologies. They conducted a psycholinguistic experiment, requesting participants to assess the difficulty of interpreting these tautologies. Gibbs provides a concise summary: “[p]eople found it easier to assign meanings to tautologies containing human role nouns (...) and abstract nouns (...) than they did to statements containing concrete nouns (...)” (Gibbs 349). In detail, they also describe the results as follows:

Subjects found modal forms with human role nouns (e.g., *Doctors will be doctors*) to be the easiest type of tautology to comprehend and attributed relatively negative affect to these phrases. This finding supports the predictions of the semantic view that modal syntactic forms are most appropriate to use when they express a sober, mostly negative account toward people. Subjects find these types of tautologies easy to comprehend because of their stereotypical knowledge of people (i.e., different human role such as mothers, doctors, teachers, and so on). Tautologies with concrete nouns are more difficult to interpret precisely because subjects do not possess stereotypical attitudes toward concrete objects (e.g., carrots, hats, beds) in the same way they do for people and various human activities (e.g., war, divorce, vacations). (Gibbs and McCarrell 133)

While they attributed this outcome to the presence of stereotypical knowledge, there seems to be room for considering the importance of conventionality, as according to their appendix, the widely used form, such as *boys will be boys* was also contained in the list of tautologies used in the experiment in which subjects assessed the difficulty of interpreting tautologies. In other words, their research does not provide a definitive comprehension of the extent to which conventional interpretations influenced the results, which allows for the exploration of possibilities other than stereotypical knowledge. Although their explanation concerning stereotypes holds considerable validity, important is that there exists a psycholinguistic salience of difficulty level. The ease of interpreting modal tautologies is worth considering. Taking these points into account, this study mainly discusses modal tautologies.

### **3. A Synchronic View**

#### **3.1 Method**

This study utilised the COCA corpus as the source of modal tautologies used in Present-Day English. The query syntax ‘**\_nn2 will be \_nn2**’ was employed to manually gather instances of modal tautologies from the search results, and some irrelevant cases found in the query result

were excluded. Furthermore, only a few instances of the past tense form *NP would be NP* were found; therefore, this paper will not discuss them.<sup>2</sup>

### 3.2 Data and Discussion<sup>3</sup>

Through a corpus search, 36 words were found to be used in modal tautologies in the COCA. The following table lists the words which occur in modal tautologies in COCA. Each word is recorded in its pluralized form as it occurs in the actual instances and the number of occurrences of each word is also given in parentheses.

Table 1. All Words Used in Modal Tautologies and their Occurrences in the COCA

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boys (275) <sup>4</sup> , kids (48), friends (37), girls (19), children (7), trolls (5), cats (4), men (4), bygoners (3), dogs (2), squids (2), Americans (1), autocrats (1), bears (1), bees (1), brothers (1), bullies (1), Christians (1), cranks (1), fathers (1), fools (1), guys (1), moms (1), niggers (1), owners (1), partisans (1), pigs (1), powers (1), primates (1), rumours (1), stars (1), teens (1), things (1), toys (1), tummies (1), wolves (1)
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The most remarkable finding is the overwhelming number of occurrences of *boys will be boys*. This is simply because that is widely known as a proverb. *OED* and *ODP* include this phrase, and the former describes it as follows:

**boys will be boys:** used to express resignation regarding an (undesirable) aspect of the behaviour of a boy or young man, as being supposedly characteristic of his age or sex.

Moreover, some instances show that the phrase is sometimes used in what is called a phrasal compound, a compound “that consists of a phrase or sentence as its first element and a noun as its second element” (Lieber 228). In the field of morphology, it has been pointed out that there are very few restrictions on the first element (Bauer et al. 457), and Hosoya reports that conventionally fixed expressions, including proverbs, occur at that position (65–66). The

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<sup>2</sup> The most frequent past tense form is *boys would be boys*, which had only 3 instances. It might be worth considering why modal tautologies are not compatible with a reference to past, in that tautologies probably contain semantic restriction.

<sup>3</sup> In this section, any quotation without reference to its source is taken from the COCA corpus.

<sup>4</sup> The case where *boys* is spelled *boyz* was counted among the number of *boys*.

followings are the examples where *boys will be boys* is also used in the first position of the phrasal compound.<sup>5</sup>

- (1) Since i wish to add emphasis and demonstrate my outrage of the acceptance of the **'boys will be boys'** attitude, (...).
- (2) (...), but also shapes women's expectations so that they have a kind of **'boys will be boys'** attitude towards what to expect out of men.

The fact that *boys will be boys* is contained in some phrasal compounds also proves the proverb is certainly stored in speakers' minds as a fixed expression.

Another significant observation about that data is that the modal tautologies tend to have some synonyms of *boys* more frequently than other words. The synonyms *kids*, *girls*, and *children* are preferred in the construction over *men*, *women*, and any other nouns. Comparing modal tautologies with non-modal ones, such as *boys are boys*, we can see the inclination for such words more clearly. The following table shows the frequency of words that refer to human beings with multiple occurrences in the COCA, as well as the number of occurrences of those words used in non-modal tautologies.<sup>6</sup> The word *women* was additionally listed and searched in order to include the counterparts of *men* and to enable us to compare them.

Table 2. The Number of Occurrences of Human Tautologies in the COCA

	<b>boys</b>	<b>kids</b>	<b>girls</b>	<b>children</b>	<b>trolls<sup>7</sup></b>	<b>men</b>	<b>(women)</b>
modal	275	48	19	7	4	4	-
non-modal	5	40	2	17	1	38	17

The most frequent to the fourth most frequent words in modal tautologies are about a child, whereas non-modal tautologies do not exhibit such an inclination, considering that both *men* and *women* are frequently used in them. This suggests that modal and non-modal tautologies are different, that some instances of modal construction seem to be based on the phrase *boys*

<sup>5</sup> The underlining and bolded parts in the quotations are the author's own contributions.

<sup>6</sup> *Friends will be friends* is not listed in the table because all its instances refer to the work by the band, *Queen*.

<sup>7</sup> Here *trolls* are used as a slang word to refer to "someone who leaves offensive or upsetting messages on the Internet, just in order to get a reaction" (*LDOCE6*).

*will be boys*, and that they are the extended uses of the proverb. Some examples of *girls will be girls* show a relationship with *boys will be boys* in that they are mentioned near the phrase.

- (3) This logic holds true much of the time, but to apply this notion globally offers an all-too-convenient out for those who prefer to dismiss even clearly harmful behaviors by making the excuse that “**girls will be girls**” or “**boys will be boys.**”

It is noteworthy that the following example of *kids will be kids* also express “resignation regarding an (undesirable) aspect of the behaviour” of kids as mentioned in the description of the *boys*-type in the *OED*.

- (4) I am not trying to insult you or your daughter in any way by talking about parenting decisions and teenage behaviors. We do the best we can with what we know, and **kids will be kids** and that is why they need parents.

In example (4), considering that the reason for the necessity of parents, as demonstrated by the pronoun *that*, is the fact that *kids will be kids*, and that the speaker does not intend to insult teenage behaviour, it can be understood that the phrase conveys the idea that children will exhibit the typical behaviour of their age and that parents need to tolerate and anticipate such behaviour. The example containing the word *trolls* also shows the existence of *boys will be boys* as the basis in modal tautologies.

- (5) Again, don't worry, this harassment will never stop me from making my videos! (...). “But I'd just like to reiterate that this is not a trivial issue. It can not and should not be brushed off by saying, ‘oh well that's YouTube for you’, ‘**trolls will be trolls**’ or ‘it's to be expected on the internet’.”

In this quotation, the phrase is used with utterances that tolerate harassment, which the speaker does not want to do. Considering such co-occurring expressions, it is clear that the underlined part conveys tolerance for an undesirable aspect, as well as *boys will be boys* does.

While not all instances seem to express resignation or tolerance, there exist some other examples showing the same interpretation. These instances express the idea that the entities will behave as is expected of their characteristics.

- (6) So the next time she's in his office for a follow-up exam and he totally hits on her, what is she supposed to do? Sophie is a very beautiful young woman, **guys will be guys**. Occasionally, those guys are going to cross the line.

- (7) (...) I have seen chihuahuas and small terriers bite off lips and cause large lacerations, and cause significant damage. **Dogs will be dogs** and people still have to remember that they are still animals and need to respect that. Even if the dogs did know the victim, if there was a dog fight nevertheless, dogs will, can, and have what's called REDIRECTED on the woman.
- (8) Our big mistake was reaching for an overseas empire in 1898, and entering both world wars. But as Edmund Wilson said, all nations are like sea slugs, expanding whenever they can. # **Powers will be powers.**

It seems that these instances share similarities with *boys will be boys* in that they each imply the behaviour expected of a particular group. In example (6), the underlined part refers to the typical behaviour mentioned shortly afterwards. In example (7), *dogs will be dogs* is used, based on the fact that they exhibit behaviours like biting, which are typical of animals. In example (8), *powers will be powers* refers to the idea that nations attempt to expand their influence by force. While whether they convey tolerance and/or resignation is contextually unclear, these examples also show that there are surely tendencies in interpreting modal tautologies.

Although not all examples share the same interpretation, there are tendencies among modal tautologies in regarding their formal aspects and interpretations to some extent. The existence of exceptions is typically regarded as a drawback in Wierzbicka's perspective; however, the existence of certain tendencies suggests the presence of conventionality in the interpretation of tautologies, in which respect conventionality should be regarded as one of the significant aspects of tautologies in order to comprehend the whole aspects of them.

#### **4. A Diachronic View**

##### **4.1 Historical Background and Preliminary Discussion**

According to *the Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs (ODP)*, *boys will be boys* was first attested in Arthur Dent's work in 1601, in the form of *youth will be youthful*. While an earlier instance of the *youth*-type is found in the EHBC, this was also a work by Dent in 1582. In addition, *OED* says that the current form *boys will be boys* was attested in 1770, and its extended form *girls will be girls* in 1826. No description is found on the type with *kids* and *children* in either the *OED* or the *ODP*.

In the article on Arthur Dent in *the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Brett Usher introduces him as a "Church of England clergyman and religious writer" and says that "[h]is

ability to edify rural congregations was legendary, and, (...), he translated this skill into print, becoming one of the most popular protestant authors of his generation.” As this quotation implies, Dent’s two works in 1582 and 1601 sold well. According to the article, the former work, *Sermon of Repentance*, “was reprinted at least twenty-two times up to 1638” and the latter, *A Plain Man’s Pathway to Heaven*, reached a twenty-fifth edition by 1640 and “became one of the most frequently reprinted English books of its time”, and its forty-first edition was published as late as 1831. It is possible that these works created the potential for the general dissemination of the proverb and promoted its widespread use. However, if the work had played an important role in the dissemination of the proverb, the form *youth will be youth(ful)* would have prevailed instead of *boys*-type. Furthermore, even if its teaching has not changed, when and why the contained word *youth* shifted to *boys* remains uncertain. There is still room for further investigation into this change and its underlying reasons.

When it comes to its actual use, corpus data show few instances of *youth will be youth(ful)* or *boys will be boys* before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While *God will be God* were found 13 times and *men will be men* 6 times in the EHBC<sup>8</sup>, there were few instances in the same corpus. The same is true for the CLMET corpus. This fact, along with the first date of attestation of *girls will be girls*, implies that the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries saw the extension of *boys will be boys*. Accordingly, the next section focuses on this period as the target of the diachronic survey in the following section.

## 4.2 Method

At first, this section relied on the COHA corpus as a source for its diachronic investigation. Considering that the data available in the corpus starts in the 1820s, the gap between that year and the first date of attestation of *boys will be boys* seemed to be a serious flaw; however, as discussed above, a preliminary investigation using the EHBC and the CLMET revealed that there were few instances of the proverb in the concerned period. Considering these facts, this study used the COHA corpus and maintained the consistency in the target country.

To collect data from the COHA, the method described in Section 3 was used. Since this corpus covers the period from the 1820s to the 2010s, some periods overlap with those of the COCA. Moreover, not so many data were extracted that there was a need to periodize the range

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<sup>8</sup> This corpus, covering from 1473 to 1820, contains 987,242,247 tokens in total and 197,508,327 tokens within the period 1700-1820.

of data. Owing to these problems, this study focused on the period from the 1820s to the 1990s, and divided it into 3 periods, each covering 60 years.

### 4.3 Data and Discussion

The following table shows all the words that occur in modal tautologies and the number of their occurrences in each period. As the total number of tokens in each period is different, the per-million frequencies are also given in parentheses.

Table 3. All Words Occurring in Modal Tautologies in the COHA and their Frequencies

1820s-1870s			1880s-1930s			1940s-1990s		
boys	11	(0.08)	boys	29	(0.21)	boys	66 <sup>9</sup>	(0.37)
children	2	(0.02)	girls	9	(0.06)	girls	8	(0.05)
girls	2	(0.02)	men	3	(0.02)	kids	5	(0.03)
dolls	1	(0.01)	children	2	(0.01)	men	3	(0.02)
men	1	(0.01)	fleas	2	(0.01)	bygones	1	(0.01)
women	1	(0.01)	publishers	2	(0.01)	niggers	1	(0.01)
			fools	1	(0.01)	parents	1	(0.01)
			gals	1	(0.01)	stallions	1	(0.01)
			women	1	(0.01)	wolves	1	(0.01)

As well as the data taken from the COCA corpus, the table also shows that the most frequent word is *boys*. While the variety of words occurring in modal tautologies is not extensive, this reveals that *boys will be boys* has been the prototypical example since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Section 3, it was pointed out that *boys will be boys* occupies a significant role in the use of modal tautologies because of its extended forms. The same can be observed in the COHA corpus, and the more frequent occurrences of the proverb proves its importance during these periods as well.

Regarding the interpretation, the earliest examples of the phrase in the COHA seem to express tolerance towards boyish behavior.

- (9) “To-morrow will be New-Year’s,” said Mark, (...). No one noticed him, and he presently repeated it. “Well, and what of it?” replied the old man, giving him a severe look. “Nothing of it, as I know of,” said the boy; “only I thought, maybe

<sup>9</sup> Note that 30 instances in this period are only taken from three common sources.

we would have something nice.” “Something nice!” echoed the grandfather; “don’t we have something nice every day?” “Well, but I want to do something,” urged Mark, sure that he wished to have the dull routine broken in some way. “**Boys will be boys**,” said Aunt Rachael, in her most conciliatory tone, (...). (COHA)

(10) “That’s true, my lad. But what were you fighting about?” “A woman, your excellency,” said St. Prix. “A woman! fools! a woman that’s not to be had without fighting for isn’t worth having. Well, well -- **boys will be boys**. I pardon you on two conditions. In the first place, you must shake hands.” Henri and Raoul advanced and joined their hands. “And in the next place, that you give a good account of yourselves to-morrow. Sacre nom de Dieu! I can ill spare two lads of spirit from the guards. And now,” said the marshal, rising, after restoring their swords to the officers,” good night, gentlemen; and plenty of hard knocks to-morrow.” (COHA)

In example (9), Aunt Rachael replies to Mark with conciliation, whereas the old man gives him a severe look. This demonstrates her tolerance towards Mark’s utterances which were not necessarily acceptable to others. In example (10), the meditating marshal says *boys will be boys*, in response to the reason the two men fought. Judging from the reason for the fight (a woman) and the situation in which the marshal talks about pardon, this quotation proves that the proverb has been used to express tolerance since that period. The fact that the proverb had already had that interpretation by that time leads us to suppose that, historically as well as synchronically, it has functioned as a fundamental expression in modal tautologies.

Additionally, we can see an increase in the number of occurrences of *boys will be boys* across all the three periods. The increase in its occurrences across these periods and the scarcity of examples before the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be attributed to its status as a proverb. According to the *ODP*, the status of proverbs has changed as described in the following quotation.

In medieval times, and even as late as the seventeenth century, proverbs often had the status of universal truths and were used to confirm or refute an argument. Lengthy lists of proverbs were compiled to assist the scholar in debate; and many sayings from Latin, Greek, and the continental languages were drafted into English for this purpose. By the eighteenth century, however, the popularity of the proverb had declined in the work of educated writers, who began to ridicule it as a vehicle for trite, conventional wisdom. (...). The proverb has none the less retained its popularity as a homely commentary on life and as a reminder that the wisdom of our ancestors may still be useful to use today. (xii)

Moreover, its introduction says this shift results in the fact that in the dictionary “recent quotations are often taken from the works of minor writers or from newspaper and magazines, while earlier quotations are more frequently from the works of major writers” (xii). This shift in register led to the widespread use of modal tautologies, and *boys will be boys* became prevalent as a proverb, which meant that the solid base of modal tautologies was established after the shift had occurred, by the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Modern linguistics has shown that idiomatic expressions including proverbs can serve as sources of rich and creative expressions once they are registered in the speaker’s lexicon. Speakers can utilise them, sometimes alluding to them and sometimes arranging them with another word (cf. Taylor, ch.4). This supports the idea that, after many proverbs had been popularised, the proverb prevailed as well, becoming the source of other modal tautological expressions.

Despite the discussion above, a different tendency emerges when we focus on older examples. As mentioned earlier, before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *God will be God* was the most frequently occurring instance found in the EHBC. Apparently, this tautology has the same formal features as the current modal tautologies; however, this seems to convey the emphasis on the immutability of the presence of the designated entity. The instances of the expression, in some cases accompanied by a concessive clause, clearly illustrate these aspects of the construction during that period.

(11) **God will be God** and the Judge of the world whether you will or not:(...).  
(EHBC)

(12) (...), and though I perish to all eternity, yet **God will be God** blessed for ever, and Lord of the whol Earth. (EHBC) [(...), and though I perish to all eternity, yet God will be God, blessed forever, and lord of the whole Earth.]

(13) If not, I shall give thee the answer much like that I gave the Atheist before, **God will be God** whether thou wilt or no: (...). (EHBC) [If not, I will give you the answer much like the one that I gave the Atheist before: God will be God whether you will or not: (...)]

In contrast to the frequently occurring instances of that time, the first occurrence of *youth will be youthful* shares a similar characteristic with modern modal tautologies, referring to the stereotypical aspects of the younger generation.

(14) Thus my deare Brethren, I beseeche you purpose in your hartes without anye further delay, and bee not like to Epicures, and fla ckgraces, whiche say **youth will bee youthfull**, and youth will haue his course, & (...). (EHBC) [Thus, my dear brothers, I beseech that you decide in your hearts without any further delay, and don't be similar to Epicurus and graceless people, who say youth will be youthful, youth will have his course, and (...).]

While its form is different from that of modal tautologies in Present-Day English in that it does not contain exactly the same words before and after the verb, their interpretive similarity suggests their continuity throughout the history of the English language. It seems probable that such a tautological expression converged towards the form *NP will be NP* and became the model for current modal tautologies.

In summary, as well as discussed synchronically in Section 3, the data from the COHA suggest that *boys will be boys* has functioned as a fundamental expression of modal tautologies historically. Its original expression was already attested in Early Modern English; however, its form was different from that of the current modal tautologies, which converged on the current structure afterwards. Since proverbs had not been disseminated in general by the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the time it became the core of the tautologies is expected to be after the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the register of proverbs changed. In fact, some modal tautologies such as *God will be God* were attested later than the first date of attestation of *youth will be youthful*, and they did not convey the same interpretation as in Present-Day English, which implies that the proverb *boys will be boys* did not have a presence in the period.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has examined English tautologies, focusing especially on *NP will be NP* type, from synchronic and diachronic viewpoints. Section 3 discussed synchronic features, both formally and semantically, and their background in relation to the proverb *boys will be boys*. In Section 4, it was pointed out that the original form of the proverb converged with the current one and subsequently became the fundamental expression of modal tautologies, coinciding with the change in the register of proverbs.

Although this study has been conducted on the viewpoint advocating the conventionality of tautologies, it does not intend to refute the pragmatic perspective. In fact, conventionality does play a role in interpreting tautologies; however, the origin of such interpretations cannot be explained from this viewpoint. When one insists on conventionality, one must posit that a specific interpretation has been fixed in a form. This assertion assumes the existence of a

specific interpretation beforehand and cannot explain the interpretation's origin. Accordingly, there ultimately exists a need for pragmatic or another theoretical analyses. Furthermore, this study only addressed some part of tautological expressions and did not cover the majority of them.

While there remain such problems regarding this study, nevertheless it highlights the existence of conventionality in some cases and underscores its significance historically and diachronically, in which point this paper is valuable in the study of tautological expressions.

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