Epanalepsis in argumentation: Pseudo tautologies

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Abstract

Epanaleptic NP BE NP constructions like "Boys will be boys," "Business is business," and "A deal is a deal" are logically tautological, but they are most often deployed in argumentation rhetorically, by contextually promoting supposed properties of the NP, such as rambunctiousness, libidinousness, and insensitivity for boys or impersonality for business, in order to serve largely exculpatory ends, though usage can shift according to circumstances (*to prepon*). We argue that computer models of natural argumentation need to be aware of these ends or they will confuse rhetorical *fit* for logical truth.

Keywords

Tautology, epanalepsis, rhetorical figures

I yam what I yam an' that's all that I yam!
--Popeye the Sailor Man

1.Introduction

As Chris Reed told an interviewer in 2017, "teaching a computer how people communicate—and what an argument actually is—is extraordinarily complex" [1]. Things haven't changed in the subsequent 8 years; if anything, it has become more difficult since LLMs started roaming the landscape. But Reed also told that interviewer he and his team were using "2,000-year-old theories of rhetoric as a way of spotting the structures of real-life arguments." Among those theories, the topoi of invention are most prominent, the Aristotelian argumentation 'places' ([2], 1397^{a}7-1400^{b}33). One can argue any standpoint at all, Aristotle held, by building one's case from the topos of analogy, or example, or from the lesser to the greater, and so on.

Jeanne Fahnestock [3–5], has convincingly argued for a close association between topoi and at least some rhetorical figures. Reed was listening:

In much the same way that argumentation schemes capture common patterns of reasoning, rhetorical figures capture common patterns of speech. Although not as implicitly related to argumentative structure as argument schemes, rhetorical figures and argumentation are closely linked. Fahnestock [3] makes a compelling case for the

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conception of rhetorical figures as couplings of linguistic form and function. Drawing on a tradition that links figures to *topoi*, running back to Aristotle [2], Fahnestock argues that figures "map function onto form or perfectly epitomize certain patterns of thought or argument" ([3], p. 26). She demonstrates this claim for a specific group of figures related to organization. To the extent that the claim is true—that there is, in Fahnestock's terms, a "figural logic" at work in language—the potential for argument mining and other computational explorations of language is promising. [6] (Original citations in this passage replaced with our own for ease of reference.)

It is this programme of figural logic that we advance with a focus on epanalepsis and an eye on argument mining.

2.Epanalepsis

Epanalepsis is a figure of "perfect lexical repetition," in Fahnestock's sense [3, p. 158],[2] where the repetition is at the beginning and ending of the same phrase or clause, as in these instances:

1. In times like these, it's helpful to remember that there have always been times like these. (Paul Harvey, as quoted in [7], p.291)

2. Plato is philosophy, and philosophy, Plato. ([8], p. 633)

3. Corporations aren't people. People are people. [9]

4. Neck and neck; tête-à-tête; mano a mano; shoulder to shoulder; dog eat dog; little by little; one on one; day after day; a lie begets a lie; side by side; man to man; woman to woman; etc.

Epanalepsis manifests in a variety of grammatical constructions (as illustrated in routine constructions of 4), but we are interested in only one construction here, the NP BE NP construction[3] where $NP_1 = NP_2$, as in these instances (as well as 3 above):

5. East is east, and west is west.

6. Facts are facts.

7. Enough is enough.

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[2] It is "perfect" rather than, as is usual in figurative definitions, just "lexical" repetition because Fahnestock rightly distinguishes figures like antanaclasis, which is the repetition of word forms with different word meanings (as in "time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana") and polyptoton, the repetition of word stems with different morphology (as in "haters gonna hate").

[3] We are using *construction* in the sense of Construction Grammar [10].

8. Rules are rules

Instances 5–8 (and 3) are logical tautologies (language maven William Safire calls them *tautophrases* [11, 12]), unconditionally true propositions, … except that they are almost never deployed as true tautologies. Rather, their chief argumentative function is to selectively promote some alleged semantic properties of the repeated NP and deflectively bypass others in order to explain or, more often, excuse, some act or situation. Successful argument mining must be able to distinguish among these uses, not treating all epanaleptic NP BE NP constructions as true logical tautologies.

3.Tautophrases: excuses and accusations

Example 3 is a good version of the explanatory use of this construction. It's from a presidential campaign speech by Barack Obama in 2012 and is meant to draw a sharp contrast with his opponent, Mitt Romney. The first clause is false (corporations *are* people, from a legal perspective), but is there to characterize Romney's priorities as unsound. The second one is true *a priori*. The juxtaposition of these clauses works well argumentatively because while people are legal entities, they are also flesh and blood entities, which corporations are not, and Obama counts on his audience to activate the flesh-and-blood features of personhood such that the second proposition appears to prove the first proposition (corporations are not people; they aren't flesh and blood).[4]

In a more typical example of the construction, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared datum 8 during the 2022 pandemic restrictions on travel to Australia in order to deny number-one-ranked Men's tennis star, Novak Djokovic, official entry into the country, where he had come to compete in the Australian Open [14]. A month later we see another typical use about another sports figure on another continent. Russian figure skater, Kamila Valieva, had tested positive for a banned substance before the Beijing Winter Olympics and disputes erupted over whether she should be allowed to compete while the review process was underway. Another skater in the competition, Switzerland's Alexia Paganini, said "I have a lot of empathy for her because she, regardless of everything, she did have to get on the ice and work hard"; then she added, "I feel sorry for her, but rules are rules and they should be followed" [15].

Of course rules are rules. Prime Ministers are Prime Ministers. Tennis players are tennis players. Figure skaters are figure skaters. Grass is grass, ice is ice, and so on. These are tautologies; self-evident, *a priori* truths. As such, they carry no information. They are vacuous. But Morrison's communicative point is clear: there is no room for Djokovic to maneuver. He cannot legally enter the country. Djokovic was unvaccinated against COVID-19 and Australia had a regulation against admitting anyone

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[4] Examples 1 and 2 have different argumentative functions altogether, 1 being a beginning-to-end-and-back-again cyclicity to emphasize transience of 'times like these,' as befits a more narrative grammatical structure, not immediate predication; and 2 also having a cyclic flavour but the antimetabole 'over-rules' the epanalepsis and its function is reciprocal specification, Plato and philosophy being mutually coextensive. [13] The examples in 4 serve a range of overlapping functions.

unvaccinated into the country. He's not saying its incorrect or inappropriate or unsafe for Djokovic to enter the country. He's saying there is an inviolable dictum against it. His hands are tied. Paganini's point was the same. Valieva had tested positive for a banned substance. The Olympics have a rule about that. There is no alternative: Valieva should not be allowed to compete. It is absolute. Rules are rules. But apparently rules play out differently. In the end, Djokovic was prevented from officially entering Australia while Valieva was allowed to participate. Djokovic did not compete in the 2022 Australian Open. Valieva did compete in the 2022 Winter Olympics.

Rules are multiplex concepts. There are rules for driving, for playing games, for moral conduct, for logical inference, for business, for talking. They are not all alike. Even in the same domain there can be different sorts of rules. Some rules for driving belong to a body of normative practices, for instance (e.g., shoulder checks when merging into another lane), while others are regulated by codified regimes (e.g., stopping for a red light). Some rules for talking are socially mediated (being quiet in libraries), while others are so cognitively entrenched that speakers may not even be aware they 'follow' them (e.g., the -s, -z, -əz alternation for the regular English plural). Rules may be absolute (in chess, you always lose the game if you are in checkmate), but some are optional and contingent (you can move a pawn diagonal to its file, but only if an opposition piece is in the destination square). Some rules have conditions. Some rules have exceptions. Some rules contradict other rules. Rules are multiplex.

So, when Morrison and Paganini declared "rules are rules" they were referencing a semantic and pragmatic bag of diverse, overlapping, and not always compatible phenomena. How does this tautological claim about a heterogeneous concept work? They both elaborated. "No one is above these rules", Morrison said [14]. "[Rules] should be followed", Paganini said [16]. In this case, the *rigidity* of rules (they apply to everybody; they carry moral obligation) is invoked to explain the exclusion of Djokovic on the one hand, and to call for the exclusion of Valieva on the other hand. The fact that rigidity is only a feature of *some* rules doesn't enter the picture. This notion of rigidity is quite common among tautophrase clichés:

9. A deal is a deal.

10. Business is business.

11. The law is the law.

12. A promise is a promise.

13. Boys will be boys.

Tautophrases are meant to look and feel self-evident, indisputable. So they are frequently invoked in order to ignore—most frequently, to excuse—behaviours. 'A

promise is a promise,' for instance, is deployed to excuse intransigence. 'Maybe circumstances have changed, maybe you lost your job and your spouse left you and your dog died, but you still agreed to throw me a big birthday party. A promise is a promise.' The property that is foregrounded here is the (allegedly rigid) obligation a promise puts on someone. These expressions are effectively excuses for the utterer or someone else to behave in a way that is against the best interests of their interlocutor or society at large. Most notoriously, "boys will be boys" is invoked to excuse loutishness, aggression, and/or libidinousness, by men as often as by boys. With these tautophrases, especially with those like "boys will be boys," the semantic structure itself presupposes that certain people, groups of people, things, or concepts, have specific traits or properties that are inherently associated with them. These phrases then often entail that attempting to correct or change these properties is futile. In some cases, as with "boys will be boys," tautophrases attempt to shield the relevant subject from scrutiny.

Not surprisingly then, the tautophrase construction comes in flurries when behaviour is in need of excuses. There is no better example than Donald Trump. In and around the 2016 presidential campaign against Hillary Clinton, for instance, this phrase flooded social and conventional media:

14. Trump is just being Trump. [17]

15. Trump is a bit of a black box and a poker player. Every time he makes a move that seems inscrutable, he's not looking for votes or counting poll numbers. **Trump is just being Trump**, raising the ante, messing with his opponents, and planning the next move. [18](emphasis added)

16. Millions of people went to the polls Tuesday in California, one of the most diverse places on earth, to participate in the democratic process. The weather was lovely, the turnout was expected to be decent for a primary, and the presumptive Republican nominee for president of the United States of America was in the news for adding another Archie Bunker[5] moment to his highlight reel. But you know what? I don't blame him. **Trump is just being Trump**, doing what works. Sixteen other Republicans wanted the nomination, but they didn't have a chance. [19](emphasis added)

These epanalepses, in short, have the same axiomatic quality as Morrison's and Paganini's 'rules are rules' usage. But, of all the possible properties that rules might have, even legislated rules, they only foreground one, rigidity. Examples 14–16, like most uses of their key phrase, leave the relevant properties unspecified and therefore

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[5] A fictional television character known for racism, homophobia, misogyny, and all round bigotry.

inconsequential, not unlike 13, "boys will be boys," which can be recruited to excuse vulgarity, brutality, sexual abuse, even rape, as the situation calls for. And 14–16 also serve the same exculpatory speech act. Whatever it is (racism, misogyny, 'locker room talk'), it is regrettable but inevitable because of Trump's complex make up; the *just*, in particular, is there to deflect the unpleasantness and clear the ground for some presumed virtues: wealth, business acumen, and, most ironically, straightshooting honesty.

But there was also pushback at the time for this exculpatory usage:

17. [W]hen Donald Trump put out a full page ad in the New York Post demanding that the Central Park Five, black teenagers who were later exonerated by DNA testing, and set free, should be given the death penalty for a crime they had yet to be found guilty of, it was dismissed by mainstream media as **Trump just being Trump**. When reports began to surface about Donald Trump saying things like "laziness is a trait in the blacks" and "the only kind of people I want counting my money are short guys that wear yarmulkes every day", they were dismissed as **Trump just being Trump**. … Personally, I always recognized Donald Trump's racist dog whistles. (emphasis added)

18. When people (and I hear pundits say this) that **trump is just being trump** when he makes offensive, even racist, comments, I don't get it. trump isn't being trump, trump is being an asshole. or... he's an asshole being an asshole. #TrumpIsAnAsshole #TrumpIsARacist   [20] (emphasis added)

The passage in 17 explicitly calls out the exculpatory use, and 18, a tweet, rejects it altogether as false. The tweet is perhaps the more interesting response since it throws epanalepses back at the Trump apologists. First, the author (Beth Bacheldor) repeats the offending epanalepsis, "trump is just being trump," then its antithesis, "trump isn't being trump," and rounds off her argument by proposing a new tautophrase to take its place, "an asshole being an asshole," predicating it of Trump and adding the coda of two hashtags. One of them general, #TrumpIsAnAsshole, reasserting the main standpoint, and the other more specific, subtyping the kind of asshole she is designating Trump, #TrumpIsARacist . Bacheldor gives us both an argument and meta-argument. She doesn't seem quite sure how to deal with the axiomatic nature of the offending tautophrase, so she just rejects it outright with an antithetical epanalepsis of her own in order to clear for her own accusatory (and, in her view, explanatory) tautophrase. Her reasoning is flawed, of course; in particular, "trump isn't being trump" is self-contradictory, like 'a square is not being a square', which she could have avoided by recognizing something the first of her hashtags asserts: that categories can apply simultaneously, that it is possible for some entity to be both Trump and an asshole. She

might have moved directly to the subtyping and bypassed the antithesis: 'Trump is indeed being Trump. He is being a racist asshole. He is a racist asshole being a racist asshole.'

This meta-argumentative use of the phrase has in fact become prevalent in Trump's second term, with rhetors using it to indict the media (all examples from X, *née* Twitter):

19. The media not holding Trump accountable for every crazy thing he says, and chalking it up to Trump being Trump is one of the most pernicious and irresponsible things of this era. [21]

20. what a nasty ignorant bully and a freaking embarrassment. Or as supporters & media would say Trump being Trump. [22]

21. This should leave the world shocked: That a sitting president would even think to joke about shitting on his own citizens. Yet, because it's trump too many—even our media—just shrug it off as trump just being trump. It's shameful. Treasonous even. [23]

Examples 19–21, of course, are not indicting the media without premises. They all include some accusatory premises (that Trump says crazy things; that he is nasty, ignorant, etc.; that he posted a vulgar video, which 21 reposts as evidence). In fact, the originally exculpatory phrase has been repurposed by many rhetors these days to be *in*culpatory:

22. Trump being trump a huge Liar. [24]

23. It's Trump being Trump again; a Russian asset [25]

24. Trump being Trump. Just a self-important, arrogant, bigoted, vile maggot that feeds off other people and wallows in their misfortune like a pig in shit, because all he is is a pig(apologies to pigs) [26]

Examples 22–24 all use the phrase not to excuse some characteristic but allegedly inconsequential slippage of behaviour, but to spotlight properties presumed to vitiate his entire character. It may be worth noting that Trump's opponents in all three of his elections also came in for NP BE NP treatment, with trackable misogynist results. There was not much of this treatment for Hilary on Twitter, just a little over a dozen laconic comments on other tweets largely of this sort, all of them disparaging in some way:

25. her biggest problem is Hilary being Hilary [sic] [27]

26. It isn't that Hillary Clinton can't stop lying. It's that it's Hillary being Hillary. [28]

27. Hillary being Hillary always = EVIL!! [29]

And this one after the election:

28. Hillary lost to Trump because she was Hillary. Period [30]

Examples 26 and 27 specify the properties they promote (dishonesty and evil); 25 and 28 work by innuendo. Some properties of Hillary Clinton–uppitiness, corruption, carelessness with emails–are just problematic for 25 but come down to the composite property of unelectability for 28. Whatever those properties are, they don't include her blonde hair, the fact that she is a lawyer, that she went to Yale, certainly not that she was a senator (an elected position), and so on. Hillary being Hillary is almost always bad, with only a very, very few quasi-benign tweets. We found one, which also includes the familiar Trumpian tautophrase:

29. Trump being Trump isn't news. Hillary being Hillary, not the demonized caricature, will help close deal w/swing voters and Dem base methinks [31]

Like Clinton, Kamala Harris got overwhelmingly accusatory tautophrases; also like Clinton, they only use her first name:

30. This is Kamala being Kamala, SHE SPEAKS OUT OF BOTH SIDES OF HER MOUTH! [32]

31. That's just Kamala being Kamala. Never before has anyone been promoted so far beyond her level of competence. It's actually quite impressive that she has gotten as far as she has with so little intelligence and acumen. [33]

32. Once a thief, always a thief. Kamala being Kamala [34]

And this one after the election:

33. Kamala being Kamala kneecapped her campaign. Ironic seeing as how she made her entry into politics on her knees [35]

Meanwhile, "Biden being Biden," using the last name, got some approbatory (34–36) but mostly accusatory (37–39) tautophrases:

34. Biden being Biden is just fantastic!! What a breath of fresh air. Hallelujah! [36]

35. Biden being Biden is the best way to unite the country. [37]

36. You're right: It took an extraordinary mix of determined people of all backgrounds & persuasions to pull the US back from the brink. & Biden being Biden will try to unite us. [38]

37. Biden, being Biden, is already flip-flopping on the "day one" talk, now saying he "needs time" to "work with Congress" on it. [39]

38. Lol biden being biden Strongheaded egotistical dishonest pos [40]

39. Biden's comments are completely empty and worthless. Comments were circular, as usual. Biden being Biden. [41]

There was also a perception that the expression, or the sentiment it epitomizes, was used in exculpation, though the evidence on this is slim indeed (we found none):

40. Since he can't discern truth from fiction, he just blurts out things he was told or heard someone say. It really was a rare moment of truth being told. The media wants to write it off as Biden being Biden. It wasn't slip; he doesn't even realize what he said! [42]

41. If you hear something that looks weird, you can always say it's only Biden being Biden. It worked for the last four years. [43]

4.Conclusion

A true tautology utilizing the NP BE NP construction would require NP_1 and NP_2 to have identical semantic structures, such that $NP_1 \equiv NP_2$. For the most notorious exculpatory tautophrase (13), "boys will be boys," for instance, we would have NP_1, $NP_{2 =}$[+ human, +male, -mature); nothing more. Properties like ±aggressive and ±libidinous are connotative, not denotative (and not particularly amenable to binary features).

All of our examples play out almost exclusively by connotation, which emanates not so much from the words themselves as the argumentative context. They foreground specific properties that provide the warrant accompanying the argument-foreclosure implications of the apparent tautology. The foreclosure function works because the structure implies that everything inherent to the subject is carried over equally into the predication, a complete and total mapping. But deployment in a given situation only

works because specific features are promoted to accomplish explanatory, exculpatory, accusatory, or inculpatory speech acts. There is even this ultimate slam-the-door-shut epanaleptic cliché, which expresses almost cosmic fatalism:

42. It is what it is

These tautological foreclosure moves are bad-faith argumentative ploys, what Pragma-Dialecticians call "derailments", strategic maneuvers intended not to resolve a dispute but to prevent genuine resolution. For argument mining, recognizing tautophrase constructions is crucial. Their surface level equivalence can mislead computational models that rely on literal semantic meaning, overshadowing the underlying rhetorical jobs they do. Recognizing this rhetorical function would help distinguish genuine attempts at reasoning from the pretense of self-evidence. An argument should be defeasible in order to be reasonable; otherwise, it is just dogmatic assertion. Tautologies are not defeasible, and tautophrase constructions mimic true tautologies.

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40. western_man 🇵🇸 🕊 [@Earnest_Voice]: @axios Lol biden being biden Strongheaded egotistical dishonest pos, https://x.com/Earnest_Voice/status/1333207639363346432, last accessed 2025/11/04.

41. We Stand [@WeStand85]: Biden's comments are completely empty and worthless. Comments were circular, as usual. Biden being Biden., https://x.com/WeStand85/status/1338486031214120961, last accessed 2025/11/04.

42. Nancy - ULTRA MAGA - Trump Supporter! [@nlnarm]: Sage advise. Since he can't discern truth from fiction, he just blurts out things he was told or heard someone say. It really was a rare moment of truth being told. The media wants to write it off as Biden being Biden. It wasn't slip; he doesn't even realize what he said!, https://x.com/nlnarm/status/1330346683323068416, last accessed 2025/11/04.

43. Angelo [@AngeloMaccarro3]: @benshapiro If you hear something that looks weird, you can always say it's only Biden being Biden. It worked for the last four years., https://x.com/AngeloMaccarro3/status/1334884296499339264, last accessed 2025/11/04.