

A New Type of Informative Tautology: *Für Unbefugte Betreten Verboten!*

Manfred Krifka¹

Humboldt-Universität Berlin

Zentrum für Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft (ZAS) Berlin

Abstract. This paper is concerned with a previously unrecognized type of informative tautology, illustrated by the German subtitle of the paper (and abbreviated by FUBV), with the intended meaning ‘Access to Authorized Persons Only’. In spite of the fact that signs with this wording can be found in many locations in German-speaking areas, and even are constitutive for rules that can be legally enforced, it is argued that FUBV literally expresses a tautology.

After a short discussion of other cases of informative tautologies such as *Boys will be boys* in section (2), the nature of the FUBV tautology is analyzed in detail in section (3). It is argued that *unbefugt*, which has both adjectival and adverbial uses, refers to the property of ‘not being authorized to perform α ’, where α can be specified by an infinitival complement, and the overt specification of the source of authorization itself is blocked due to the morphological negation, *un-*. The nominalization of this adjective/adverb refers to persons that exhibit this property. In the nominalized form, the type of action α remains syntactically unexpressed, and has to be considered a parameter specified by context. It is argued that in the context of FUBV, α is contextually specified as ‘entering the area in front of which the sign is placed’, an indexical expression. FUBV itself is a structure in which the propositional phrase *für Unbefugte* specifies the potential addressees, and the main predication lacks a copula and a definite article for the object, a feature characteristic for headline style (the fully explicit form would be *...ist das Betreten verboten*). The resulting meaning (fully formalized in deontic modal logic in the paper) is, ‘If x is a person that is not authorized to access the region in front of which the sign is placed, x is not authorized to access the region in front of which the sign is placed’. A simple proof shows that this is indeed a tautology.

Section (4) argues in detail that FUBV is, nevertheless, felt to be informative by German speakers. Two lines of arguments support this claim: (i), ample corpus evidence, mostly photographs that the author took personally, sometimes under difficult circumstances like in front of military complexes, from 2004 – 2012, and some photographs from archives dating back to the late 19th century; (ii) experimental evidence, a rating experiment with 48 subjects (mostly undergraduates of Humboldt University).

Section (5), the core of the paper, explains the informativity of FUBV as follows: Natural language quantification, which includes conditional clauses and generic (to be specific, characterizing) clauses, comes with a presupposition that the restrictor of the quantifier is non-empty. In the case at hand, this presupposition states that there are persons that are not authorized to access the region in front of which the sign is placed. As with many presuppositions, this presupposition can be accommodated by the reader. In a next step, a competent reader will self-ascribe the property of not being authorized in case there was no previous instance of an authorization.

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This requires a reasoning step familiar from autoepistemic logic, also known as the “closed world assumption”: If there would have been an act of authorization, the authorized person would, *ceteris paribus*, know about it; hence the competent reader that was not authorized can conclude that she indeed is not authorized to access. The article highlights the fact that it is not the at-issue content of the FUBV expression that creates this information, but rather its non-at-issue content, its presupposition. This could be expressed by *Es gibt Unbefugte*, ‘there are non-authorized persons.’ But interestingly, this explicit clause is not attested in the corpora, and would, according to introspective evidence, not lead to the same behavioral patterns as the FUBV expression.

Section (6) addresses another aspect of natural-language quantification: Quantifiers with explicit domain restriction scalarly implicate that their predication does not hold for the domain of discourse in general. For FUBV, this conversational implicature amounts to ‘there are persons that are authorized to enter the region in front of which the sign is placed, and ‘for persons that are authorized to enter the region in front of which the sign is placed it does **NOT** hold that they are not authorized to enter the region in front of which the sign is placed’, i.e. they are authorized. It is shown that this implicated proposition is a tautology as well, and that its informativity resides in the non-empty domain assumption.

The paper concludes with sketches of explanations for alternative wordings of FUBV, such as *Betreten erlaubt nur für Befugte* ‘Access legal only for authorized personel’. It also discusses consequences for legal theory and praxis.

1. Introduction

Für Unbefugte Betreten Verboten.

2. Known Cases of Informative Tautologies

Omitted, as not relevant for the main points to be made here.

3. The Nature of the Tautology

Already known by now.

4. The Informativity of the Tautology

Omitted for legal reasons, for lack of funding for photographic reproductions, and because approval by the Ethics Commission could not be obtained in time.

5. A Presuppositional Autoepistemic Account

For Authorized Readers Only

6. A Tautological Conversational Implicature

Top Secret.

7. Conclusions and Outlook

Classified.