

debate. (China's/ Asia's importance in the world militarily/ economically/ politically.) While the motion is not so specific that the issue is immediately apparent, other possible meanings (e.g. that Eastern Europe is prospering) seem much more strained and artificial– and correspondingly less reasonable.

Tautologies

A tautology is something that is true by definition.

The motion for the semi-finals of the 1995 World Schools Debating Championships in Cardiff was 'This House believes that extremism is the catalyst for progress'. One of the proposition teams was concerned that it might have to defend 'bad extremists' (e.g. the IRA), so tried to limit the debate to 'good extremists' (e.g. the South African anti-apartheid movement) by defining 'extremism' in terms of positive change. The Proposition defined 'extremism' as radical groups that contribute to the advancement of society, so ended up arguing that radical groups that contribute to the advancement of society help cause the advancement of society (progress). A tautology becomes a circular argument and leaves the Opposition nothing to debate. In this case, the Opposition first speaker pointed out that the definition was tautological, and her team won the debate unanimously.

Another example of a tautology would be defining the word 'best' in the motion 'This House believes that government is best when it governs least' to mean 'least intrusive into the lives of ordinary people'.

Truistic and tautological definitions are clearly unreasonable. They leave the Opposition no room for debate.

Absolute Words

Motions with absolute words such as 'all', 'everyone', 'always' and 'never' need to be approached with caution because, while their plain meaning might suggest taking such words literally, doing so might prevent a reasonable debate. People setting motions generally avoid using absolute words unless there is good reason to the contrary.

A motion such as 'This House believes that all politicians are incompetent' seems on its face much more difficult to prove than 'This House believes that politicians are incompetent'. If a single competent politician can be found, this seems to have disproved that 'all politicians are incompetent', whereas 'This House believes that politicians are incompetent' only requires this to be shown in the majority of cases.

The Judging Schedule to the Rules of the World Schools Debating Championships provides that when a topic is expressed as an absolute, the Proposition 'must prove the topic true in the significant majority of cases, but not in every conceivable instance'. 'All' can therefore be defined as 'in the significant majority of cases'.

As with the prohibition on truisms and tautologies, the reading down of absolute words is designed to ensure there is a reasonable debate. This after all is why six debaters show up. To debate. Not for one side to use the words in the motion to claim victory from the outset.