Quine has claimed that we need not posit language-independent propositions in order to explain how it is that the truth-values of sentences containing pronouns, indexicals, etc. fluctuate from context to context. He argues¹ that 'eternal sentences' will serve our purposes:

... there is no evident reason not to appeal simply to the eternal sentences themselves as truth vehicles. If we undertake to specify the proposition 'expressed' by the utterance of some non-eternal sentence, e.g. 'The door is open', on some particular occasion, we do so by bracketing some eternal sentence that means that proposition; thus we have had to compose an eternal sentence anyway, and we could just as well stop there. (p. 208)

(An 'eternal sentence' is one which is either always true or always false – such as 'It is raining in Columbus, Ohio, at 4:00 EST on October 9, 1973', as opposed to 'R is raining, here, now', which may be true or false depending on the circumstances under which it is tokened.²) According to Quine, then, every non-eternal sentence may be paraphrased into (and regarded as a conversational surrogate for) the relevant eternal one, on any given occasion of its use.

Charles Sayward has recently challenged this view,³ arguing first that "there is a certain sort of case in which it is quite plausible to think that no eternal sentence can be used to express what is asserted" (pp. 537–538), i.e., that not every natural sentence has an eternal sentence which captures what we intuitively take to be the sense or purport of the original.

Suppose Smith asks Jones 'What time is it?', and Jones replies 'It is 4:30 p.m.'. Suppose this episode takes place in Lincoln, Nebraska, and that what Jones said is true. Now it seems unlikely that any eternal sentence could be used to express the proposition Jones expressed. For what could such a sentence be? It could not be 'It is 4:30 p.m., March 1, 1967, in Lincoln, Nebraska, at 4:30 p.m., March 1, 1967, in Lincoln, Nebraska.' For the proposition expressed by uttering this sentence would be a necessary truth, and Jones' assertion was not a necessary truth. (p. 538)

(Sayward goes on to turn aside an unpromising objection to this argument.)

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I want to maintain that this case is not as troublesome as Sayward supposes. Let us grant that the eternal sentence for which ‘It is 4:30 p.m.’ is a surrogate ought to be, in the case in which Jones’ answer is correct. ‘It is 4:30 p.m., March 1, 1967, in Lincoln, Nebraska, at 4:30 p.m., March 1, 1967, in Lincoln, Nebraska,’ or, for short, ‘It is 4:30 at 4:30’. I shall contend that there is a natural way of construing ‘It is 4:30 at 4:30’ according to which the sentence is contingent and non-trivial.

Consider the sentence, ‘The chairman is the chairman’. Although it looks like a trivial identity-statement, it bears a contingent and substantive construction: if we read the first occurrence of ‘the chairman’ more or less as a fused referring expression and the rest of the sentence as a predicate, the whole sentence will function in such a way as to pick out a particular person and assert that that person (by whatever name or however described) is the chairman (has the property of being chairman) – and this assertion, an ordinary singular predication, is plainly non-trivial. Thus one can say, ‘It’s lucky that the chairman is the chairman’, without thereby expressing one’s gratitude to God for having made the logical truths true. (One can also (coherently) wish that the chairman were not the chairman. And compare ‘George IV wished to know whether the author of Waverley was the author of Waverley’; read in the way I am suggesting, this sentence says in effect that George IV wished to know whether Scott wrote Waverley, which assertion betrays no logical blindness on George IV’s part.)

The same way of interpreting apparent identity-statements can be applied to ‘It is 4:30 at 4:30’. Let us construe the second occurrence of ‘4:30’ as a fused referring expression, serving merely to pick out a particular moment (the moment at which the speaker happened to speak, under whatever designation); the whole sentence may then be read as a singular predication having the second occurrence of ‘4:30’ as its subject. Thus, one who utters the sentence would be predicating something of the moment 4:30 (however it is referred to), viz., the property of its-having-been-4:30-at that moment. Analogously, we can say without oddity, ‘It’s lucky that it was 4:30 at 4:30; if it had been 5:30 already, I’d have been in big trouble’, ‘I wished that it hadn’t been 4:30 at 4:30’, ‘George IV wished to know whether it was 4:30 at 4:30’, etc.

Just what property is expressed by the predicate ‘It is 4:30 at...?’ We might be tempted to say it is the property of being (identical with) 4:30;