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Semantic Prosody: The Phenomenon of "Prosody" in Lexical Patterning

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Abstract

The study of semantic prosody is new to the corpus linguistic field. It has become apparent through the current research that semantic prosody be integrated into English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) vocabulary learning, reading, writing and teaching. Semantic prosody, when taught explicitly, is valuable to the EFL/ESL teaching field to develop communicative competence among non-native English speakers (NNES). The different positive and negative connotations of specific words and their impact on NNES bilingual dictionaries are examined along with its effects on NNES written works. These findings give new insights into the teaching of semantic prosody. The results of the study suggest that if explicit instruction of semantic prosodic words and phrases in EFL/ESL vocabulary classes do not occur, then the results are a misuse of semantic prosodic words and phrases by NNES. Practical suggestions for EFL/ESL teaching of semantic prosody are provided.

Keywords: semantic prosody, connotation, bilingual dictionaries, English language learners, vocabulary acquisition.

1. Introduction

The term semantic prosody is known by other names such as semantic harmony or discourse or pragmatic prosody. Borrowing from Firth's (1957) *phonological prosody*, Sinclair (1987) called this process semantic association. The term semantic prosody was first introduced to the public in the early 90s by Louw (1993). Thereafter, it became an important concept in corpus linguistics for researchers. In 1991, Sinclair noticed that, "Many uses of words and phrases show a tendency to occur in a certain semantic environment" (pp. 112). For example, the word *happen*, is usually associated with an unhappy event such as, *accidents happen*. Louw (1993), using the concept of semantic prosody, claimed it was, "a consistent aura of meaning with which a form is imbued by its collocates" (pp. 157). Partington (1998) defined semantic prosody as, "the spreading of connotational coloring beyond single word boundaries" (pp. 68)

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aligning the concept of semantic prosody with connotation. Ping-Fang and Jing-Chun (2009) also defined semantic prosody as, "the associative meaning resulting from its collocates and is partially recorded in English learners' dictionaries" (pp. 20). Nevertheless, semantic prosody is by no means a simple collocation. Collocation is realized more on the lexico-grammatical level, while semantic prosody arises from the pragmatic level. Morley and Partington (2009) provide a pragmatic example of semantic prosody: "Like many high-altitude resorts, Cervinia can be pretty bleak if the weather *sets in*" (pp. 144). An example of a collocation on a lexico-grammatical level would be the sentence: Brian *pushed back the limits* of his anger.

Semantic prosody has been researched since the early 1990s and has become of popular interest for many scholars who recognize the importance of semantic prosody for English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) vocabulary learning and teaching. It has been noted that semantic prosody's primary function is the expression of the attitude of the speaker or writer towards some pragmatic situation (Louw, 1993; Partington, 1998; Zhang & Ooi, 2008). In addition, the attitudinal function of semantic prosodies can create irony through the deliberate insertion of a word, which clashes with the prosody's consistent series of collocates. Louw (1993) stated, "When writers/speakers consciously diverge from normal collocational patterns, ironic intent will be achieved," (pp. 164). An example of this in indicated in the sentence, "The modern conference resembles the pilgrimage of medieval Christendom in that it allows the participants to indulge themselves in all the pleasures and diversions of travel while appearing to be austerely bent on self-improvement" (pp. 164). The use of the phrase *bent on self-improvement* is seen as ironic because *bent on* has a negative prosody and *self-improvement* has a positive prosody, which clash in the sentence above.

This research paper will demonstrate that semantic prosody, when taught explicitly, is valuable to the EFL/ESL teaching field to develop communicative competence among non-native English speakers (NNES) (Louw (1993). The different positive and negative connotations of specific words and their impact on NNES bilingual dictionaries will also be examined along with their effects on NNES written works. In the last part of the paper, I will make some suggestions as to the teaching of semantic prosody.

2. The positives and negatives of semantic prosody

Stubbs (1995) as well as Xiao and McEnery (2006) also state that semantic prosody is seen to fall into three different categories: positive, neutral and negative connotations. Louw (2000) asserted that words contain negative semantic prosodies more frequently than positive ones. Stubbs (1996) has amplified the involvement of strongly negative semantic prosodies in causation. In 40,000 examples of the word *cause*, Stubbs reports that 90% of its most characteristic collocates are: *accident, concern, damage, death and trouble*. Xiao and McEnery (2006) using the Freiburg-LOB corpus of British English (FLOB) and the Freiburg-Brown Corpus of American English (Frown) corpora noticed 287 instances of the word *cause* used as a verb, 223 instances where *cause* had a negative prosody, 56 were neutral and 8 were positive. Semantic prosodies are strictly functional or attitudinal. Words such as *damage, problems, pain*, and *disease*, to name a few, collocate with the word *cause* so frequently that it shows a negative affective meaning. Zhang (2009) mentions that, "Only through interpreting large numbers of a word or phrase can we observe semantic prosody" (pp. 3). They are supported by a series of collocates in a similar way as those mentioned earlier in Stubbs' analysis of *cause*.

Another characteristic of semantic prosody is that it can be examined grammatically. Louw (1993) noticed that the phrase, *build up* reveals a positive semantic prosody when it is used transitively, for example, *build up confidence*. However, when used intransitively it can be seen as having a negative prosody, for example, *resistance builds up*. Semantic prosodies demonstrate some relationship with transitivity and in the case of *build up*, at least, this relationship is consistent computationally within large

corpora. The phrase *par for the course* has a negative prosody in the sentence, "Delays at the airport in the holiday season are *par for the course*" (Zhang, 2009, pp. 3-4). Philip Larkin's poem cited in Louw (1993) is offered as an analysis by Louw of the semantic phrase *gives rise to*. Larkin's line is:

> ...Strange reciprocity,
> The circumstance we cause,
> In time gives rise to us,
> Becomes our memory.
> Larkin's form of the phrase *gives rise to*, once verified from the corpus, is found to be negative, but our intuition has difficulty seeing this.

3. Cross-linguistic studies on semantic prosody

Several cross-linguistic studies have examined semantic prosody in English and Chinese (Xiao & McEnery 2006), English and Portuguese (Sardinha, 2000) and English and Italian (Tognini-Benelli, 2001). The cross-linguistic studies indicate that semantic prosody is universal in nature among the languages. Xiao and McEnery's (2006) study shows that the four near synonyms in the *consequence* group, *result, outcome, consequence and aftermath* can be arranged on a semantic continuum from positive to negative in both English and Chinese. The study also suggests that Chinese is, "more sharply divided between the clearly negative and positive ends of the continuum" (pp. 109-114). In contrast, with the considerable explorations of the phenomenon of semantic prosody in America, Europe and the Middle East, there is an apparent shortage of this topic in mainland China. Apart from the several significant studies made by Wei Naixing (2002, 2006), only a few Chinese researchers have conducted in-depth studies of semantic prosody.

Xiao and McEnery (2006) discovered that there were a number of phrasal verbs that share similar meanings with the words *cause* and *bring about*. They devised a table based on corpora from FLOB and Frown and supplementary data from the Peoples Daily 2000 (PDC2000) for the two English phrasal verbs *give rise to* and *arouse*. They found no significant collocate for the phrasal verb *give rise to* and only one for the phrasal verb *arouse*. The words that fit the *cause* meaning in Chinese were also analyzed and found that they differed in semantic prosodies. Xiao and McEnery, give examples of five near synonymous *cause*-words in Chinese that are of a negative semantic prosody and two words of a positive semantic prosody. They found that zhishi (致使), niangcheng (酿成), and zaocheng (造成) are overwhelmingly negative yet; yinfa (引发) and daozhi (导致) are frequently used with a negative semantic prosody. In contrast, cucheng (促成) and cushi (促使) typically show a positive connotation. The comparative analysis completed by Xiao and McEnery, "shows that close translation equivalents display very similar collocational behavior and semantic prosodies in both English and Chinese" (pp.120).

4. Teacher's role

Semantic prosody is an important component of cross-linguistic studies researching the effects semantic prosody has on NNES student learners versus native English speaking (NES) learners. The role that ESL/EFL teachers play seems to be the vital part of the equation in relaying the concept of semantic prosody to their students (Ahmadian & Yazdani, 2011; McGee, 2012: Xiao & McEnery, 2006; Zhang, 2009, 2010). McGee (2012) stated that teachers should explicitly teach semantic prosody to their students. He stated that there is a hidden nature to semantic prosody that cannot be realized by NNES students without being noted by the teacher. McGee continues, "Such knowledge is open to a teacher's

introspection and falls within his or her explanatory capabilities" (pp. 172). If the words are not open to a teacher's introspection then, "That L2 learner could become familiar with a word or phrase and *not* be aware of the typical evaluative usage patterns knowing the typical context within which the word occurs, and its pragmatic functions" (pp. 172). The responsibility falls to the teacher and their knowledge of semantic prosody to communicate the proper examples of semantic prosody to their students. McGee (2012) recommended that, "Teaching materials begin to address semantic prosody as they have recently begun to address collocation" (pp. 184).

Xiao and McEnery (2006) believe that a, "Learners' L2 intuition, nevertheless, is inevitably less reliable than their L1 intuition" (pp. 126). Teachers have the responsibility to, "compare collocational behavior and semantic prosody/preference of near synonyms in L1 and their close translation equivalents in L2, and make learners aware of L1-L2 differences" (pp. 126). This could reduce the number of errors from the L1-L2 semantic prosody. The use of collocation patterns and semantic prosody can also vary across texts in general, technical or discourse specific genres such as a course for an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) class.

Ahmadian and Yazdani (2011) stated that, EFL students need to learn the collocations of words, "characteristic of the language, as well as being aware of the conditions of semantic prosody" (pp. 294). Zhang (2010) agreed as he stated that he sees similarities and differences between the collocations of NES learners' and Chinese NNES learners' writing and use of collocations where semantic prosody is either overused by NNES Chinese or underused. Chinese NNES also use, "a number of interlanguage collocations and unusual collocations which makes their English sound unnatural and less idiomatic" (pp. 455). The teaching of near synonyms, and the teaching and learning of vocabulary instruction and dictionary compilation is also recommended by Zhang. He argues for a different teaching focus than the traditional vocabulary teaching methods in English language schools used in China currently. Zhang defines traditional teaching methods as either knowledge-based teaching or the Grammar Translation method which offers students the translation equivalent of a word in vocabulary instruction. For example, the word commit, is taught as *to do* or *perform* which is equivalent to *gan* or *zuo* in Chinese. These teaching styles do not introduce NNES students to the correct semantic prosody of the word/s.

5. Semantic prosody in NNES dictionaries

Throughout EFL/ESL student's careers, they will most likely use English dictionaries and bilingual dictionaries to determine definitions of individual words and word phrases. Zhang (2009) has argued that semantic prosody can help students understand how to use lexical items. Pan and Feng (2003) have stated that semantic prosody should be included in dictionaries especially when they are being designed for EFL learners. To determine the semantic prosody of three lexical items in English-Chinese bilingual dictionaries, Ji and We (2000) chose *set in*, *rife*, and *propaganda* and noted that none of the dictionaries they examined listed the phrase *set in* as being of a negative semantic prosody. The word *rife* was translated as if it had a positive semantic prosody. Wang (2004) examined five lexical items, *incite*, *impressive*, *contribute to*, and *persist* and *persevere* in ten English-Chinese bilingual dictionaries. Wang found that *impressive* and *persevere* were appropriately translated into a positive semantic prosody, but that *incite* and *persist* were not presented in a negative semantic prosody in the dictionaries. The phrase, *contribute to* had a neutral prosody. Both of these studies suggested that the poor representation of semantic prosody could mislead NNES learners in their use of English words.

In general, the lack of semantic prosody, with regards to word translations, in the designing of both English and Chinese dictionaries for EFL/ESL students is not ideal. Partington (1998) has stated, "Information about semantic prosody is vital for non-native speakers to understand not only what is grammatically possible in their language production but… also what is appropriate and what actually

happens" (pp. 8). Zhang (2009) lists two reasons for the errors associated with semantic prosody and NNES learning. The first is that, "ESL/EFL instructors may be unaware of the importance of semantic prosody and underestimate it in teaching" and second that, "ESL/EFL textbooks or bilingual dictionaries do not explicitly represent the feature of semantic prosody or may provide inappropriate semantic prosodic information that can mislead language learners" (pp. 9-10). This has been noted in the Ji and We (2000) and Wang (2004) studies of English-Chinese bilingual dictionaries cited in Lee (2011).The use of semantic prosodic information should be made explicit in bilingual dictionaries especially for lower level and intermediate level NNES students who use bilingual dictionaries often.

6. Semantic prosody and its effects on Korean NNES writing

Lee (2011) demonstrated how semantic prosody can affect beginning and intermediate NNES Korean students' writing. He viewed the semantic prosodies of various lexical items which were presented incorrectly in English-Korean dictionaries. He found that in the students' sentences the most inappropriate use of words were *bring about, utterly, persist, persistent,* and *be bent on.* The mismatch between the Korean and English translations caused students writing samples to be incorrect in the use of the semantic prosody of the words. This indicated that the dictionaries used in the study did not provide adequate examples which demonstrated the words semantic prosody. Lee suggested that the designers of the bilingual dictionaries should be more aware of the contexts in which the words are commonly used. Lee agreed with Ji and We (2000) and Wang (2004) stating that the designers should also be , "More attentive to semantic prosody when explaining lexical items, and this appears to be critical when considering the fact that beginner/intermediate EFL learners still frequently rely on them" (pp. 269-270). He stated that one should examine the semantic prosody of the Korean translations to see if they match the English word. When this is not available then the, "semantic prosody of a lexical item along with its typical collocates should be explicitly denoted in its translation" (pp. 265). This way the NNES dictionary users learn the context of the word and its semantic prosodic meaning.

7. Teaching of semantic prosody to NNES

It appears that the best way to teach semantic prosody, collocations, and near synonymous words or phrases is to focus on what proves the most difficult for the NNES learners. Pan (2010) states, "semantic prosody is achieved by its frequent collocates, so it falls into the field of collocational study" (pp. 53). Semantic prosodic phrases and words are an important part of native speaker competence and should be included in ESL/EFL classes for NNES learners. NNES students most likely commit lexical collocational mistakes rather than grammatical ones (Namvar, Nor, Ibrahim and Mustafa, 2012; Shen, 2009). Mistakes also occur because of a particular semantic problem or how the word or phrase is used in context.

How do the teachers know which words or phrases to teach their NNES learners? Coxhead's, Academic Word List and the 2,000 most frequent word families should be taught to NNES according to Nation (2001, 2008). Nation (2001) stated, "The most frequent 1,000 words families have been found to account for 75.6% of the running words in newspapers and 84.3% of the running words in conversation" (pp. 17). Pan's (2010) research shows that Chinese NNES English major learners demonstrated similar semantic preferences as NES, but large differences are, "indicated in their underlying collocational patterns" (pp. 52). He also asserts that the Chinese NNES English learners seemed to have acquired the features of near synonymous words, but that more efforts need to be made to, "improve the breadth and depth of their lexis" (pp. 52). Pan believes that the Chinese NNES English learners have acquired the features of near synonymous words because they are exposed to more authentic English materials and larger quantities of them as well. He stated the reasons they fail to produce the correct semantic prosody

is due to NNES students relying on familiar words and intralinguistic transfer. Chinese English teachers also placed more emphasis on grammar than lexis. In addition, NNES Chinese learners use high frequency words which are acquired in high school and rarely use the low frequency words acquired in college, revealing a deficiency in their lexical knowledge. Pan states, "Chinese teachers should first shift their focus from teaching words to teaching word clusters (pp. 63). Webb (2007) has researched the use of known synonyms to the use of unknown synonyms and states that NNES learning the synonyms of known words is easier than learning those for unknown words. NNES learners are able to learn the known synonyms better if they occur in repeated encounters in context. Sadeghi (2009), who researched Iranian EFL students, states that beginning NNES learners should learn high frequency collocations and that the intermediate and advanced level learners should focus on the low frequency collocations along with some high frequency ones throughout their college careers. Which collocations to include seem to be unanswered in the current research? It is, "clearly impossible to teach all (or even most) of the collocations in a language" (Nesselhauf, 2003, pp. 238).

A teacher can offer texts that include collocations in context for NNES learners as well as utilizing collocations in class activities. If practice activities for collocations, semantic prosodic words and phrases, and near synonymous words and phrases are included in more EFL textbooks in the future then it would be very beneficial to the EFL practitioner. NNES also need to be aware of the L1-L2 differences because even if they learned the proper collocation they are likely to produce the L1 equivalent if not taught properly. Nesselhauf (2003) states, "…an L1 based approach to the teaching of collocations seems highly desirable" (pp. 240). The best way for NNES to learn semantic prosodic words and phrases, collocations, and near synonymous words and phrases is for them to be taught explicitly. A teacher can accomplish this by combining words into chunks, repeated encounters with such features in context, preferably taught in their L1, and extensive reading of works of literature in English. Another aspect to consider is the NNES culture and background. Namvar, Nor, Ibrahim and Mustafa (2012) researched Iranian EFL postgraduate students writings and found that the students culture and background influenced the choice of collocation. Therefore, can the collocation be considered wrong by the NES because it was produced by the influence of the learner's culture and background? Future research needs to address the culture related factors of collocations and their effects on student's word choices when writing.

8. Conclusion, implications, and suggestions

Semantic prosody can affect communicative competence of NNES, the different positive and negative collocations of specific words, and their impact on NNES bilingual dictionaries. The positive and negative connotations of specific semantic prosodic words and their effects on NNES written works from various countries is addressed. Textbook and dictionary writers should be meticulous in their choice of words and phrases to assist in NNES use of semantic prosody. The implications of not properly learning semantic prosodic words and phrases, collocations, and near synonymous words and phrases results in the NNES learners having troubles with their communicative competence in English. Overall, the NNES learners must be made aware, by the teachers, of the phenomenon of semantic prosody and the concept of lexical patterning that it necessitates.

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