
SEMANTIC PROSODY

Sometimes, the collocates of a word form a semantic class which can be characterized in terms of attitudinal meaning. This is roughly referred to as *semantic prosody*, although, as the following definitions show, different authors focus on different aspects of this phenomenon:

Semantic prosody is the “consistent aura of meaning with which a form is imbued by its collocates” Louw (1993: 157, see also Sinclair 1991: 74-75);

“[I]t is becoming increasingly well documented that words may habitually collocate with other words from a definable semantic set” (Stubbs 1995);

Semantic prosody is “the spreading of connotational colouring beyond single word boundaries” (Partington 1998: 68);

“When the usage of a word gives an impression of an attitudinal or pragmatic meaning, this is called a *semantic prosody*” (Sinclair 1999)

“[A] word may be said to have a particular semantic prosody if it can be shown to co-occur typically with other words that belong to a particular semantic set.” (Hunston & Francis, 2000: 137);

Semantic prosody is best investigated initially through eyeball inspection of KWIC concordances of the word(s) in question, but once you think you have identified a prosody, a more detailed, quantitative assessment is useful.

EXERCISES

1. The following words have been claimed to have a negative (‘unpleasant’, or ‘unfavourable’) semantic prosody. For each case, investigate whether this is true.

| | | | | |
|-------------------|-----------------|----------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| <i>be bent on</i> | <i>commit</i> | <i>happen</i> | <i>peddle</i> | <i>set in</i> |
| <i>cause</i> | <i>dealings</i> | <i>make off with</i> | <i>be rife with</i> | <i>symptomatic</i> |

2. For those cases that do have a negative prosody, identify near-synonyms with a neutral or positive semantic prosody.
3. For those cases that do not have a negative semantic prosody, identify the examples that may have misled the authors who made this claim.
4. Find additional sets of synonyms that differ in their semantic prosody.

References

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