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Explorations in Semantic Prosodies Study Based on Near Synonyms

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Abstract: The concept of semantic prosody was first introduced to the public by Bill Louw in 1993. From then on it has become major issue through the current research which semantic prosody can be integrated into discourse analysis, speaker's attitude evaluation and vocabulary learning, etc. In this article, the author reviews studies of semantic prosodies of near synonyms in order to introduce the special function and feature of semantic prosody in near synonym distinction and give new insights into near synonym study.

Keywords: Corpus; Semantic prosody; Near synonyms

1. Introduction

With the development and progress of computational technologies, English learning is able to benefit from globalized learning material, multi-media assisted learning methods and internationalized teaching staff. For L2 learners and teachers, a big challenge in learning words lies in mastering its pragmatic function, which leads us to seek for help of semantic prosody. Louw (1993) and Partinton (1998) state that semantic prosody's primary function is the expression of the attitude of the speaker or writer towards some pragmatic situation. For Sinclair (2000), the semantic prosody conveys pragmatic meaning and it is the junction of form and meaning. The pragmatic meaning means the reason why we choose to express ourselves in one way rather than another is coded in the prosody, which is an obligatory component of a lexical item. Therefore, Whistt (2005) treats semantic prosody as a distinct concept as it emphasizes the pragmatic function.

Moreover, Partington (1998) argues "information on prosody is particularly important for non-native speakers as they are more vulnerable to the hidden intentions of the text producer than native speakers, who probably have some sensitivity to it at a subconscious level". In some cases, "when the semantic prosody of an item is not obvious even to a native speaker's intuition, corpus data may be able to reveal its statistical tendencies (ibid.)." It is no wonder that non-native speakers most likely commit lexical collocational mistakes rather than grammatical ones (cited in Fugua, 2013). Wei (2002) and Xiao & MaEnery (2006) claim that inappropriate word choice arising from ignorance of semantic prosody is common among ESL/EFL learners. Semantic prosodic phrases and words are an important part of native speaker competence and should be included in the ESL/EFL classes. In this paper, the corpus-based or driven studies concerning semantic prosodies of near synonyms are reviewed, indicating that L2 learners tend to make errors associated with semantic prosody and call for attention of ESL teachers and researchers.

2. Semantic Prosodies in EFL Research

The term semantic prosody is borrowed by Sinclair (1987) from Firth's phonological prosody and was first introduced to the public by Louw (1993). Sinclair (1991) regarded semantic prosody as "one of the significant features of the idiom principle refers to many uses of words and phrases indicate a tendency to occur in a certain semantic environment". For example, the word "happen" is usually associated with an unhappy event such as, "accidents happen". Louw (1993) claimed it was, "a consistent aura of meaning with which a form is imbued by its collocates". He also concludes that semantic prosodies are typically negative, with relatively few of them bearing an affectively positive meaning. Stubbs (1996) referred semantic prosody as "words occur in characteristic collocations, showing the associations and connotations they have and therefore the assumptions which they embody". An example of him is "provide" usually collocates with words like care, food, help and money, to build up a positive semantic prosody. Moreover, he classified semantic prosody into three categories: negative prosody, positive prosody and neutral prosody. Hunston and Francis (2000) give quite similar definition. Plus, Hunston and Thompson (2000) bring forward that a word can have a particular semantic prosody if it can be shown to co-occur typically with the words that belong to a particular semantic set. In other words, semantic prosody is a phenomenon of node word typically co-occurring with lexical items of the semantic field. So far it has generally been accepted that semantic prosody means the affective meaning or connotational meaning produced when a key word co-occurs together with its collocates. In fact, semantic prosody is not absolute, but a matter of semantic preference. It describes the tendency of cer-

tain words to co-occur with some sense sets, which are positive, negative, and neutral in meaning or certain rhyme. Noticeably, Partington (1998) defines semantic prosody as “the spreading of connotational coloring beyond single word boundaries” and he believed English near synonyms are lexical pairs that “have very similar cognitive or denotational meanings, but which may differ in collocations or prosodic behaviors.”

3. Semantic Prosodies of Near Synonyms

Lyons (1995) says "expressions with the same meaning are synonyms". However, the problem is the non-existence of “perfect synonyms” . “Perfect synonyms,” or “absolute synonyms” for Lyons (1995), is rare: “Perfect synonyms – lexical items with the same meaning and which are therefore interchangeable in all contexts – are exceedingly rare.” Most of the synonyms are likely to be “near” synonyms rather than “perfect” synonyms. "In English there is no synonym. The basic meaning of synonyms is the same, but they all have their own features.

In near-synonym research, traditional approach usually involves discrete semantic features such as [+human] and [+animate]. Unlike descriptive research, quantitative research on near-synonyms usually involves computation of collocations or experimental results. Biber et al. (1998) has examined the use of begin and start using the Longman-Lancaster Corpus. A computational-based approach can also be seen in Church et al. (1994) in which the verbs request and ask for are compared in terms of substitutability. Partington (1998, 2004), Xiao and McEnery (2006), too, use collocation and semantic prosody to examine near-synonyms. Semantic prosody is best investigated initially through eyeball inspection of KWIC concordances of the word(s) in question, but once the researcher thinks he has identified a semantic prosody, a more detailed, quantitative assessment will be in need. Whether the approach is descriptive or quantitative, the ultimate goal of near synonym research is to differentiate closely related meanings.

4. Studies of Semantic Prosodies of Near Synonym

Corpus investigations of near synonyms distinction include those by Stubbs (1995,1996,2001), Partington (1998,2004), Tognini-Bonell (2001), Kennedy (2003) and Xiao and McEnery (2006), etc. The following table shows the relative research information. See table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Studies of Semantic Prosodies of Near Synonyms Abroad

Author	Positive (Favorable)	Neutral (Neutral)	Negative (Unfavorable)	
Michael Stubbs (1995,1996,2001)		Effect	Affect	
	Career	Job		
	Reason	Result	Cause Consequence	
Alan Partington(1998)	Impressive		Impressionante	
Tognini-Bonell (2001)	Flexible		Fickle	
Kennedy(2003)	Fully Perfectly Deadly Highly Very much Greatly	Entirely Absolutely Very Really Deeply	Totally Utterly Extremely Badly Heavily Severely	
Hongyin Tao (2003)		Chuxian(出现)	Chansheng(产生)	Fasheng(发生)
Alan Partington (2004)		Come about	Set in Happen Occur Take place	↓
	Perfectly		Utterly	
Xiao and McEnery (2006)	Result Outcome		Consequence Aftermath	
			Give rise to	Arouse
		Jiage (价格) Jiaqian(价钱) Chengbe(成本)	Daijia(代价)	
	Cucheng(促成) Cushi(促使)		Zhishi(致使) Zaocheng(造成) Daozhi(导致)	Niangcheng(酿成) Yinfa(引发)
Dam-Jensen&Zethsen (2007)	Lead to		Cause	
Siaw-Fong Chung (2011)	Create		Produce	

Wei (2002) introduced semantic prosodies into Chinese academics with a corpus-driven approach to reveal hidden meanings and principles. He conducted a contrastive study of semantic prosody of lexical items such as cause, incurred, utterly, probability and career. He found that cause has a stronger negative prosody in JDEST than in COBUILD corpus while career has less obvious positive prosody. Since then, semantic prosody has aroused big attention among Chinese researchers. There are many other comparative researches of the semantic prosodies of near synonyms in China. Not surprisingly, all of them show that Chinese EFL learners have not gained a full understanding of the usage of colligation, collocation and semantic prosody of these two seemingly synonyms.

5. Conclusion and Implication

From the above studies, it can be seen that for the past 20 years, semantic prosody has shown great power in near synonym distinction. Importantly, interlinguistic studies once again are of evidence that as ESL/EFL learners' intuition of the target language is different from that of native speakers for less reliable and thus cannot help learners to master the semantic prosody of a lexical item. In the case of semantic prosodies, ESL/EFL learners are dealing with forms, which are functional, attitudinal, and pragmatic rather than pure lexical item. Based on the authentic data obtained from corpora, rather than intuition, studies of semantic prosodies of near synonyms, from various aspects, such as frequency, attitude, function, etc. help a lot in solving the problems encountered by learners. Therefore, Hunston (2002) concludes that "vocabulary teaching needs to take account of semantic prosody".

Near synonyms are the focus and difficult point in language teaching and learning. Near synonyms are similar in denotative meanings but differ in semantic prosody. Hence, people can distinguish near synonyms based on their discrepancies in semantic prosody. Since semantic prosody is inaccessible by human's intuition, it is necessary to conduct empirical studies to gain an insight into semantic prosody. Hopefully, more and more empirical studies will be carried out to provide theoretical implication as well as give language-learning pedagogy.

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