

Crayton Walker

Dr Crayton Walker on his research

Duration: 4.07 minutes

My name's Crayton Walker and I'd like to talk about my specialist research area which is collocation. Collocation is the way that words combine or the way that we typically or frequently use combinations of words together. Sometimes it's quite logical. It's due to the semantics or the specific meaning of a word like levy. Levy a tax, levy a charge, levy a duty. There's very few things that occur with levy because it's got a very precise meaning. The items that occur with it are because of the very specific meaning of levy. But you do get a lot of things in language like tea for example. We don't say powerful tea, why do we say strong tea? Powerful engine, why don't we say strong engine? Why do we say strong wind as opposed to strong rain, heavy rain? It's all these kinds of things that at first glance appear to be rather arbitrary and idiomatic - you can't really explain them.

My research looks at these collocations using a corpus. You can think of it as a very large database of language. The one I use is the Birmingham corpus which is half a billion words. We go into this corpus and look for these combinations and also look for patterns and explanations. My particular research looks for explanations. If we can find explanations then these kinds of things can come into teaching material and could come into the classroom. Collocation becomes something which is rather meaningful to teach. Many of the high frequency words will have more than one meaning. For example, issue. You've got something like a contemporary or thorny issue. You've got something like the September issue, the latest issue, the current issue. A second meaning. You've also got share issues or bonds. A third meaning. Meaning number two and three to some extent you might be able to find more of a connection between those two meanings as opposed to the thorny or contemporary.

It's often the collocations which disambiguate an item with different meanings. You've also got high frequency words which appear very often in phrases which are very highly frequent in the language. Things like, "in my view". The word view is highly frequent because of the phrases it appears in. Aspect was another one of the words which I've looked at. Something like 70/75% of all occurrences of aspect in the corpus is actually within phrases of every aspect or just one aspect of something. You also have influences such as semantic prosody. This is the way that a word will often build up or imbibe a kind of negativity or positivity simply because of the words it's often associated or surrounded with or by. Things like 'set in'. The kinds of things that set in are usually negative. You don't get sun setting in, you get rain setting in or clouds setting in or bad weather setting in. Things which are caused are usually negative. Things that happen, for example. 70% of things that happen in the corpus are associated with negative things. To some extent, happen builds up a certain degree of negativity. This, you can see, has been exploited in this case by an insurance company - because change happens. [Crayton Walker reveals his t-shirt with the slogan Because Change Happens]. The implication here is that because of the use of happen the change is liable to be more negative than positive. They're kind of implying, typically in an advert or tagline, they'll play with language. Here, to some extent, they've probably done it slightly subconsciously. The implication is the change is a negative one and therefore you have to insure against it. That's all I'm going to show of my research today because if I go any further it might become slightly embarrassing!