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Svetlana Vetchinnikova (University of Helsinki)

Semantic prosody as a communicative function of a unit of meaning

In this paper I am going to argue that semantic prosody is an extremely valuable concept in the form proposed by Sinclair. Unfortunately, it has been popularized as a tendency of a word or lemma to co-occur with negative or positive collocates, which is undeniably an important observation but needs a different term, something like “attitudinal preference” (Hunston 2007) as it is, arguably, not the original phenomenon Sinclair had in mind. One of my principal concerns is that when semantic prosody is conceptualized as a kind of negative/positive “prosodic valence” of words, it does not prove to qualify as a psycholinguistically important phenomenon (Ellis et al. 2009).

Therefore, in this paper I am going to take Sinclair’s approach as my fundamental starting point and show that:

1. Semantic prosody as a concept is inseparable from the search for units of meaning which in turn is inseparable from the idiom principle idea. A unit of meaning is a sequence of lexical items which is produced not as a result of subsequent paradigmatic lexical choices and application of the rules of grammar but as a single choice of meaning and an activation of internal syntagmatic associations between its elements which glue them together in this sequence – an “occasion where one decision leads to more than one word in text” (Sinclair 1987: 321). This one decision is the choice of the semantic prosody, which is “on the pragmatic side of the semantics/pragmatics continuum” (Sinclair 1996/2004: 34).
2. Only an “independent” unit of meaning can be characterized by semantic prosody. The division of lexis into orthographic words or lemmas is not relevant in this respect.
3. As an obligatory component of a unit of meaning, semantic prosody should be clearly distinguished from semantic preference which is optional. For the same reason semantic prosody is not inherently evaluative, evaluation being just one type of semantic prosody.
4. Semantic prosody is not “hidden”, what is not readily available to intuition is a usage pattern of dellexicalized words i.e. words which do not have an independent meaning of their own. Incidentally, this fact indirectly indicates that the mental lexicon is organized according to meanings rather than according to words.

In sum, semantic prosody as a kind of a pragmatic/functional meaning which keeps a unit of meaning together can serve as a bridge between corpus linguistics and psycholinguistics. It makes a unit of meaning fit into the pattern-finding and intention-reading conception of human language acquisition (Tomasello 2003).

References

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