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Alison Duguid

Control: a semantic feature in evaluative prosody

Our experience of meanings are built up from our experience and encounters in transactional contexts and relationships, from our experience of language events (Hoey 2005). The features of the meaning potential that we choose to respond to will depend very much on such priming. When examining corpus data, we can identify such features, from the situation illustrated in the co-text, which form part of the meaning potential of lexical items, but which are not always made explicit in corpus-based dictionary definition, but which many lexical items have in common. Louw (1993) notes that 'where human beings are in control of their own destiny and are shaping it transitively for themselves, the evaluative prosody is positive, but where people are at the mercy of forces beyond their control, the things which build up intransitively are negative and uniformly threatening'.

In this paper I will consider this highly important functional psychological construct, that of control or, more precisely, of being or not being in control of events and of one's environment. I contend that this is a feature closely bound up with evaluation in language in use (Hunston and Thompson 2000) This insight allows us to make a significant generalisation about evaluation and semantic prosody for a number of frequently discussed items. For example several sets of lexical items which have been observed to carry evaluative meaning and these are cited as examples of semantic or evaluative prosody: (e.g. break out, cause, sit through, set in, end up, budge, orchestrate) (Louw, 1993; Partington, 2004; Sinclair 2004, Stubbs 2001; Hoey 2005; Whitsitt 2005; Hunston 2007; Morley and Partington 2009, Stewart 2010) can be shown to have this semantic feature in common. In discussions of evaluative prosody each item is often considered separately as illustrating the theoretical point: the concept of evaluative prosody. There is however the possibility that a semantic feature, which is discoverable from examining the items in context in real discourse, in this case that of control can be seen to be a component in all the cases.

Firstly I examine the cognitive meaning component of control by examining the lexical item control itself as used in context, by consulting the SiBol newspaper corpus of 290 million words (using Wordsmith 5) to illustrate the range of meaning potential in the term. Then I will illustrate how the notion of control is inseparably bound up with evaluation going on to show how consideration of this aspect of meaning can help resolve some of the questions and difficulties which authors have identified in evaluation theory, in particular, problems in the description of evaluative / semantic prosodies.