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Yen Yu Lin and Siaw-Fong Chung

National Chengchi University, Taiwan

A Study on the Semantic Preference and Semantic Prosody of "CHALLENGE"

Partington (1998, p.8) once said that it is crucial for ESL/EFL learners to understand not only what is grammatically possible but also what is appropriate. Here, 'appropriate,' refers to the correctness of connotations with the right speaker's attitude. These constitute the definition of 'semantic prosody,' referring to a node word that is typically co-occurring with particular sets of lexical items of the same semantic field, such that this word takes on connotations from that environment (Stubbs, 2001). This paper aims to investigate the word, CHALLENGE, which, according to SYNONYM.COM (<http://www.synonym.com/>), is synonymous to the words like *difficult*, *dispute*, *quest*, and *object*, all of which possess a negative connotation. However, when resorting to dictionary definition, CHALLENGE was found to also possess positive senses such as "stimulating, arousing competitive interest, thought, or action."

Using data from ukWaC, a web-based corpus containing 1,565 million words, the semantic profile of CHALLENGE as verb, noun and adjective was extracted. As a preliminary study, the top forty collocates of CHALLENGE in each grammatical relation (e.g. objects of CHALLENGE, subjects of CHALLENGE, etc.) were coded and categorized into various sense-groups based on the shared semantic features. The percentage calculation of each group upon the accumulated frequency of the top forty collocates clearly informs us of the sense-group ranking. Through interpreting the statistics and the nature of each group, the semantic prosody of CHALLENGE becomes apparent.

The results showed that CHALLENGE bears a mixed prosody. Neutral and positive prosody occur much more frequently than negative prosody. When CHALLENGE serves as a verb, the most frequent sense group of its objects was found to possess a neutral sense (CHALLENGE+notion/perception/thinking) with the percentage frequency of this top-ranking sense group reaching 48% upon all collocates. When serving as a noun, CHALLENGE is more likely to collocate with adjectives with positive prosody (e.g. big/major/key+CHALLENGE, CHALLENGE+is/are+immense/enormous/considerable), which carry the sense of "extremely large in size or degree". Moreover, it was found that CHALLENGE also reveals a strong positive prosody when connecting to other words in the same part of speech by conjunction:

(1) use interactivity and games to stimulate, challenge, and

absorb learners

(2) focused and looking for a career full of challenges,

and rewards

(3) would like career opportunities which challenging,

exciting, and rather, well very cool

In addition, the verbs preceding CHALLENGE often indicate directionality (e.g., face, pose, encounter).

Comparatively, negative prosody occurs less frequently. For example, when CHALLENGE serves as a verb, its objects which portray an unfavorable meaning

(CHALLENGE+stereotype/preconception/racism) account for merely 18.14% of the accumulated frequency. Similarly, when CHALLENGE serves as a noun and when it connects with other words with the same part of speech (cf. (1) (3) above), only about one-fourth of the total occurrences of collocates were labeled with negative sense.

In summary, the corpus data show that, although CHALLENGE is categorized as words possessing negative senses, the prosody of it is found to be positive or neutral. Pedagogic-wise, the findings herein can serve as the base for language instructors to design teaching materials and help EFL/ESL learners to avoid making overgeneralization in their use of semantic prosody.

Reference:

Stubbs, Michael. (2001). *Words and Phrases*. Oxford:Blackwell.

Partington, A. (1998). *Patterns and meanings: Using corpora for English language research and teaching*. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.