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Semantic Prosody Revisited: Implications for Language Learning

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In 1987, John McHardy Sinclair, in a chapter entitled “The Nature of the Evidence”, observed that the phrasal verb *set in* is often used to refer to unpleasant states of affairs. This astute observation brought to light a particular type of contextual meaning commonly described by the term *semantic prosody*, also known as *discourse prosody* (Stubbs, 2001; Tognini-Bonelli, 2001), *evaluative prosody* (Partington, 2015), and *emotive prosody* (Bublitz, 2003). Interest in semantic prosody peaked in the 1990s and 2000s, thanks to Louw’s (1993) first conceptualization of the phenomenon in his well-known article “Irony in the Text or Insincerity in the Writer? The Diagnostic Potential of Semantic Prosody”. The studies that followed investigated various aspects of semantic prosody, such as its conceptualization (see Hunston, 2007; Partington, 2004) and its importance for cross-linguistic (Xiao & McEnery, 2006), stylistic (Adolphs & Carter, 2002) and critical discourse analyses (Cotterill, 2001). More recently, studies in the neighbouring fields (e.g., psychology and cognitive science) have also embarked upon investigating the psycholinguistic reality of this phenomenon by focusing on language users and their evaluative

judgments of semantically prosodic words (Ellis & Frey, 2009; also see Hauser & Schwarz, 2016, 2018).

Surprisingly, despite this burgeoning interest during the 1990s and 2000s, the study of semantic prosody has remained on the periphery of applied linguistics research. In this commentary piece, we aim to draw attention to this phenomenon by highlighting its importance for understanding language, as well as its implications for language learning. In doing so, we discuss some of the key outstanding issues in relevant research, arguing that the study of semantic prosody and answering fundamental questions regarding the nature of this construct warrants interdisciplinary efforts.

SEMANTIC PROSODY AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

The mainstream “generative” approach that held sway for many years saw language as a set of abstract symbols that are connected through the logic of grammar (Chomsky, 1957). Such a view contributed to a misrepresentation of language acquisition as a process of learning single words and acquiring the syntactic rules that tie them together. Gradually, however, discussions on language learning started to embrace the idea that acquiring ample knowledge of a language is intertwined with understanding the semantic and thematic ties that lexical items establish with their surrounding contexts. Such a shift in perspective owes much to the work of J. R. Firth in the 1950s (also see Wittgenstein, 1953). In Firth’s view, the combinability of a lexeme with its surrounding context is a component of its meaning which can be discerned from the semantic characteristics of the company it keeps (Firth, 1957). This view sees meaning as an integral part of language that has subtle, yet important, nuances embedded in the context. From this perspective, the ability to produce meaning in a language is tightly linked to the awareness of collocational relations between lexical items and their shared semantic features.

The evolution of Firth’s view is evident in the works of his student John Sinclair and his description of meaning in language. To Sinclair, the linguistic choices made to create meaning in a language are not based on independent selections of words. Rather, language users take into account the semantic relations between words to create larger units of meaning which can serve certain communicative and pragmatic functions (Sinclair, 1991). In this view, the key dimension of meaning lies in the pragmatic function that it serves in discourse. This understanding of meaning led Sinclair to postulate the notion of semantic prosody. In essence, semantic prosody of a lexical item is the pragmatic aspect of its meaning that is created as a result of its

co-occurrence with certain items. A classic example of semantic prosody is the verb *set in* and its pragmatic association with negative contexts as a result of co-occurrence with lexical items denoting unpleasant events (e.g., *infection*, *decay*). The knowledge about the semantic association of *set in* with negative contexts is part of its representation in the mind of a “competent” speaker of English. Without access to such associational information, the speaker would not be able to use the verb in its proper context, resulting in the production of semantically incompatible and communicatively inappropriate utterances.

Intuitions about the semantic prosody of a lexical item emerge from usage, with the speaker’s mental system constructing a generalized *schema* of the recurrent social and linguistic events in which the item is frequently used (see Hoey, 2005). This schema forms the basis of the assumptions regarding the applicability of an item in certain contexts. However, in order for the speaker to arrive at such a fine-tuned understanding of a word or word sequence, he or she would need to be exposed to multiple examples of an item’s usage in various contexts (see Ellis, 2002; Siyanova-Chanturia & Spina, 2015). This has important consequences for language learning, because many, if not most, learners may never receive such rich and varied input. The challenge for learners here is to recognize the semantic associations of an item with certain contexts while they have yet to develop a representative schema of that item’s usage in their mind. This is the chief reason why learners often do not consider semantic constraints of certain lexical items, overlook implicit aspects of their meaning, and make facile assumptions regarding their applicability in various contexts (see Ellis & Frey, 2009; McGee, 2012). Moreover, it is often the case that learners confuse the collocational behaviour and semantic prosody of lexical items with those of their near synonyms. A case in point is the words *rife* and *abundant*, which have differing semantic prosodies but might be considered synonymous by second language learners. Learners with insufficient exposure to the usage of these two words may use them interchangeably and, as a result, may fail to accurately communicate their evaluative attitudes towards an entity or a proposition (see Hoey, 2000; Partington, 1998, p. 30; Tognini-Bonelli, 2001, p. 34).

Such challenges raise the question of whether there are ways of helping learners with limited second language exposure to become cognizant of semantic prosodies. Answering this question requires research in this area to not only develop an interpretive framework for understanding the concept of semantic prosody but also to set out a methodology through which teachers can raise learners’ awareness of the phenomenon. In our understanding, it is through the integration of theory and practice that the importance of semantic prosody in language learning can become self-evident. Such integration follows a

cyclic process whereby theory informs practice and practice shapes theory (Vygotsky, 1987; also see Lantolf & Poehner, 2014, p. 5). Research into semantic prosody, however, has mainly focused on the theoretical aspects of the phenomenon, attempting to resolve debates around its nature and linguistic status in discourse (e.g., Hunston, 2007; Partington, 2004; Whitsitt 2005). In fact, while the majority of these studies have also taken on the burden of providing practical underpinning for the linguistic analysis of the construct, their descriptions are not specifically geared towards building a pedagogical foundation that can meld theory and practice in this area and reflect the ecological reality of semantic prosody in language learning. This has resulted in a wide empirical gap between theory and practice in the existing literature on semantic prosody, raising a number of important issues that have thus far remained largely untouched. In the following section, we provide a brief, and no doubt selective, overview of some of these issues and discuss their importance for teaching and learning semantic prosody.

EMPIRICAL ISSUES IN SEMANTIC PROSODY

The Need for a List

Semantic prosody emerged from a tradition of scholarship that places a strong emphasis on systematic and principled aggregation of evidence (i.e., corpus linguistics). This led the phenomenon to be scrutinized for its linguistic reality for many years since its introduction (see Hunston, 2007 for a review). While crucial in developing an initial understanding of the phenomenon, such close scrutiny entailed a narrow focus on a limited number of semantically prosodic words. The major limitation of such a narrow focus is a lack of an empirically derived, pedagogically useful list of words and word sequences with semantic prosody in the English language. This paucity poses a conundrum for both teaching and researching semantic prosody. For teaching, this means that, if language instructors decide to include semantic prosody in their course syllabi, they will need to either limit their instructions to examples documented in the literature or manually examine a large quantity of corpus data to find further instances of semantic prosodies. While instructors are encouraged to take on the role of a researcher and explore corpora to develop *their own* catalogue of semantic prosodies, a ready-made list based on systematic methods and clear identification criteria can not only help instructors avoid facing the arduous task of manually identifying such items in corpus data, but also contribute to a more principled integration of semantic prosody into second language pedagogy.

For research, such a paucity entails drawing on a narrow range of words for researching semantic prosody which can restrict the generalizability of findings. Recently, Hauser and Schwarz (2016) examined the psycholinguistic effects of semantic prosodies on readers' inferences. Due to a small number of well-documented semantic prosodies in existing literature, the authors limited their analysis to often-cited exemplars such as *cause* and *commit* which, in their words, curtailed the generalizability of their conclusions. As the authors reasonably argue, the limited number of well-documented semantic prosodies in the literature attests to the fact that extracting and compiling a definitive list of these items has not been key to corpus linguists. In fact, the only systematic compilation of semantically prosodic English words (but not sequences, more on this below) in the literature is Kjellmer's (2005). Kjellmer's list includes 20 English verbs with positive semantic prosody, as well as 20 verbs with negative semantic prosody. However, nearly half of the items on Kjellmer's list are positive or negative at their core meaning (e.g., the verb *to grant*), rendering them unsuitable for the study of semantic prosody. It is important to bear in mind that semantic prosodies are words or word sequences that are *neutral* at their core meaning yet tend to be used in a company of lexical items that perform certain (positive or negative) pragmatic functions (see Dilts & Newman, 2006; Siyanova-Chanturia & Omidian, 2020 for a discussion of issues involved in the identification of semantic prosodies). Therefore, we argue that the degree to which the evaluative polarity of a lexical item is seemingly inherent in its surface meaning is one of the main selection criteria that should be taken into account when compiling a list of semantic prosodies.

Semantic Prosody and Multiword Expressions

Another issue that warrants more attention than it has so far received is the lack of sufficient evidence about semantically prosodic strings above the word level. Research into semantic prosody has mainly focused on single words as an analytical starting point for the identification of this phenomenon in discourse. This is surprising because, as mentioned earlier, the unit of language that initially directed our attention to semantic prosody was the phrasal verb *set in*. It has long been acknowledged that words tend to co-occur in specific configurations such as phrasal verbs (*break out*), collocations (*naked eye*), idioms (*spill the beans*), and others. These configurations, referred to as *multiword expressions* (MWEs), can impart certain evaluative meanings which might be completely indiscernible to learners. For instance,

in the case of idioms, the expression *par for the course* is neutral at its core meaning,¹ yet it is often used to express negative opinions about a situation or behaviour (for other examples see Channell, 2000). The ideological schema encoded in the pragmatic meaning of the expression allows the writer/speaker to disclose their negative evaluation of the described situation or behaviour without making it explicit (see Moon, 1998, p. 161–165 for a discussion of the notion of *idiom schemas*). Learners unaware of the hidden evaluative polarity associated with such expressions might not be able to have a correct interpretation of their implied meaning and thus may use them in an entirely wrong situational context. Moreover, some MWEs may carry multiple meaning senses which can convey different semantic prosodies. The case in point is the phrasal verb *hold up* which can carry both positive and negative prosodies. For example, when used in the sentence *they are holding up quite well* (example extracted from COCA) the verb is utilized to express positive evaluations of the situation. In contrast, when employed in a passive form in the sentence *they had been held up by blizzard*, the verb is typically serving a negative pragmatic function in discourse (example extracted from the BNC). Learners with less exposure to the usage of different meaning senses of this phrasal verb may make over-liberal assumptions regarding its applicability in various contexts and come up with infelicitous expressions. In fact, we argue that semantic prosody is one of the rather elusive qualities of MWEs and that more attention should be paid to this particular characteristic of word sequences (see Siyanova-Chanturia & Omidian, 2020 for further discussion).

Semantic Prosody and Genres

The third issue to be taken up in this article pertains to the possible relationship between semantic prosody and genres. Almost all areas of human activity use language genres as a form of communicative framework to construct and deliver meaning in a way that is retrievable and understandable by the recipient. This means that to ensure effective communication of meaning in various linguistic events, individuals need to be conversant with the type of language conventionally² used

¹ It is worth noting that the metaphorical meaning that has fossilized into the expression *par for the course* can perform a positive pragmatic function when considered in its original context (i.e., golfing, *par for the course* would be a goal for a golfer). Outside this particular context, however, the expression is often used to cast a negative light on the “typicality” of a situation/behavior.

² It is important to note that, in the present article, the term *convention* is not used as an equivalent to linguistic norms established by a particular group of language users (e.g., native speakers). Rather, it is used to refer to the conventions that characterize the particularities of a given linguistic event.

by other participants in those events. This idea originated from Bakhtin's description of *speech genres* (in his essay entitled *The Problem of Speech Genres*) which views meaning as a link in a chain of other meaningful utterances in any sphere of communication (Bakhtin, 1986). In Bakhtin's view, a kink in this chain would mean a disconnect from the epistemological framework (genre) that is established among members in a given speech community. What lies at the heart of this understanding is that genres have the potential to shape, affect, and/or change the meaning imparted by lexical items. This implies that the semantic profile of lexical items and their "habitual" co-occurrence with certain words might change as a result of the genre in which they are used. Tribble (2000) was the first to draw attention to the possible connection between genres and semantic prosody by introducing the concept of *local prosodies*. As he notes, "words in certain genres may establish local semantic prosodies which only occur in these genres, or analogues of these genres" (p. 86). Although Tribble's proposition is intriguing and encourages more research on the genre-specific nature of semantic prosody, most studies in this area have been conducted using general corpora with no proper regard for the effect of text type on semantic prosody. To our knowledge, there is no study in the existing literature on semantic prosody that has systematically investigated the effect of genre variation on semantic prosody of lexical items. The ramifications of this paucity are primarily pedagogical. In fact, we cannot expect language instructors to prepare effective teaching materials on semantic prosody while knowing that the prosodies documented in the literature might not be consistent across all genres of language, and that learners might encounter instances of the same item with the opposite prosody in different genres. Hunston (2007) alludes to this issue by providing a cautionary note that the negative prosody assigned to certain words in the literature (e.g., *cause*, *consequence*) might not hold true in scientific genres, such as the research article.

Highlighting such variation in meaning across genres is important as it can offer learners an explicit understanding of how the communicative and pragmatic function of meaning can vary according to the situation in which it is used. It can help learners see meaning as a medium of communication which fulfils its communicative purpose only when placed within its *context of situation* (in the Malinowskian sense of the term, see Malinowski, 1923, p. 306). When put in the context of semantic prosody, this means that learners should be wary of the disparity that might exist in the quality and strength of the evaluative force of lexical items when used in different genres (Partington, 2004). O'Halloran (2007) refers to this kind of prosody as *genre prosody* and argues that certain lexical items (e.g., *erupted*, *simmering*, *swept through*) tend to have conventional pragmatic meanings which are

intimately bound up with the context of the genres in which they are used (also see Bednarek, 2008). What this means for language learning is that learners should be fully aware that utterances need the backdrop provided by the context of situation to fulfil their communicative purpose, and that lexical items in realizing their full potential (i.e., communication of thought) can give rise to systematic lexical patterns that are localized within the situation in which they are employed. Given the importance of genre approaches for developing learners' understanding and use of semantic prosody, we argue that there is an urgent need for more empirical evidence on the interaction between genre and semantic prosody.

Semantic Prosody and Lexical Knowledge

The final issue to be discussed in this article pertains to the fundamental question of how to situate semantic prosody in the context of lexical knowledge. Due to its complex nature, lexical knowledge has often posed perplexing questions such as how words enter into semantic relations with one another and create a meaningful network of utterances, or how the mental system manages to isolate the items required for establishing such meaningful relations. Such complexities have made it difficult to determine whether more abstract levels of meaning, such as semantic prosody, should be regarded as a “property” of a word or the lexical environment in which it commonly occurs. In fact, while some believe that semantic prosody is part of the semantic property of a linguistic form that shapes the affective meaning of its immediate co-text (Partington, 2004), others consider the phenomenon as a pragmatic effect produced by the juxtaposition of the semantic features that characterize both the node item and the linguistic elements around it (Sinclair, 1991). Recently, Hauser and Schwarz (2018) investigated the effect of semantically prosodic words (e.g., *totally* vs. *utterly*) on impression formation. The authors found that the evaluative information associated with such words in the mental lexicon has the potential to exert profound negative or positive influence on forming impressions of other persons. Their results also suggested that semantic prosody could be considered as a component of word knowledge. However, the authors point out that further research is needed to determine whether semantic prosody is best conceptualized as a function of collocational associations, or a property of a word's meaning that reflects its attitudinal dimensions. Answering this question is particularly important in the context of second language learning, in that it determines whether semantic prosody should be learned as part of a word's meaning, or as a semantic regularity

that accompanies certain co-occurring words. It can be argued that addressing this question is intertwined with understanding the psychological reality of semantic prosody and how such knowledge is represented in the mind of a second language learner.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Language as a system has a large supply of linguistic means which can be understood through the complementary strengths of theoretical and empirical research. Our discussion has attempted, albeit briefly, to show that the lack of attention to the latter is increasingly conspicuous in the research on semantic prosody. In fact, as we have argued, the paucity of empirical evidence on melding theory and practice in this area has obscured the relevance of semantic prosody to language learning. In our opinion, although semantic prosody has important practical implications for language teaching and learning, this pedagogical relevance is not clear enough to shape instructional practices. The goal here is to familiarize learners with the idea that each distinct meaning in language is the product of the semantic exchange between lexical items and the context in which they commonly occur. Such knowledge would allow the learner to view language as a network that accommodates the interaction between context and meaning. Included in this view is the recognition that context, as a set of conventions through which meaning achieves its force, is crucial to the effective communication of meaning in a language (Halliday, 1975; Hymes, 1972). Achieving this goal begins with developing reference sources, such as genre-specific lists of semantically prosodic items, to inform materials design and setting out an approach through which teachers can instruct their learners to use context to make inferences about meaning. Corpus linguistics can offer powerful tools for developing such materials and provide learning techniques, such as KWIC (i.e., Key Word in Context), to raise learners' awareness of semantic prosody (Partington, 2001; Sinclair, 2004; Stubbs, 2015; Xiao & McEnery, 2006). For example, through examining recurring patterns of language use in large corpora, learners can be trained to collect clues as to how a semantically prosodic item is typically employed in a given genre. Armed with the contextual information from such a data-assisted reading, the learner would be in a unique position to see how the particularities of genres may affect the semantic profile of lexical items, their co-occurrence with certain words, and the evaluative meaning they commonly impart (see Louw & Milojkovic, 2016, p. 342 for a detailed discussion).

However, in our view, corpus data alone are insufficient for devising an effective approach for teaching semantic prosody, and corpus findings do not necessarily entail pedagogical relevance (see Widdowson, 2000). In fact, we believe that, although the role of corpus linguistics and authentic aggregation of data is key to the study of semantic prosody, understanding the various learning stages and mental processes that lie behind detecting semantic prosodies in a language extends beyond the scope of corpus linguistics. Our basis for making this case is that questions such as whether or not semantic prosody is part of a word's meaning, or belongs to a larger unit of meaning, are deeply rooted in the psychological reality of the phenomenon and its representation in the language user's mind. Therefore, we believe that the study of semantic prosody and its implications for language learning should be an interdisciplinary endeavour, bringing together corpus linguistics and neighbouring disciplines, such as psycholinguistics and neurolinguistics. By drawing on powerful techniques, such as eye-tracking and event-related brain potentials (e.g., see Siyanova-Chanturia, 2013 for a review of the two methods), experimental investigations of semantic prosody can provide important insights into the mechanisms that underlie the online processing of semantic prosodies and inform us about the cognitive processes involved in the activation of their evaluative meaning in the language user's mind.

Evidently, the nature of this piece and space limitations allowed us to barely scratch the surface of the questions specific to semantic prosody and its pedagogical relevance. It is, however, our hope that this piece will inspire more empirical investigations into semantic prosody in the future.

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