SEMANTIC PROSODY

Sometimes, the collocates of a word form a semantic class which can be characterized in terms of attitudinal meaning. This is roughly referred to as semantic prosody, although, as the following definitions show, different authors focus on different aspects of this phenomenon:

Semantic prosody is the “consistent aura of meaning with which a form is imbued by its collocates” Louw (1993: 157, see also Sinclair 1991: 74-75);

“[I]t is becoming increasingly well documented that words may habitually collocate with other words from a definable semantic set” (Stubbs 1995);

Semantic prosody is “the spreading of connotational colouring beyond single word boundaries” (Partington 1998: 68);

“When the usage of a word gives an impression of an attitudinal or pragmatic meaning, this is called a semantic prosody” (Sinclair 1999)

“[A] word may be said to have a particular semantic prosody if it can be shown to co-occur typically with other words that belong to a particular semantic set.” (Hunston & Francis, 2000: 137):

Semantic prosody is best investigated initially through eyeball inspection of KWIC concordances of the word(s) in question, but once you think you have identified a prosody, a more detailed, quantitative assessment is useful.

EXERCISES

1. The following words have been claimed to have a negative (‘unpleasant’, or ‘unfavourable’) semantic prosody. For each case, investigate whether this is true.

   be bent on  commit  happen  peddle  set in
   cause  dealings  make off with  be rife with  symptomatic

2. For those cases that do have a negative prosody, identify near-synonyms with a neutral or positive semantic prosody.

3. For those cases that do not have a negative semantic prosody, identify the examples that may have misled the authors who made this claim.

4. Find additional sets of synonyms that differ in their semantic prosody.

References

Louw, B. 1993. Irony in the text or insincerity in the writer? In M. Baker et al. (eds) Text and Technology. Amsterdam: Benjamins.