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Investigation on Productivity of Synonym Words with Different Semantic Prosody in English

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Abstract

"Semantic prosody" has been researched since the first claim of Sinclair in (1987). Since then, semantic prosody became one of the most important issues in language studies as a linguistic phenomenon. In 1993, Louw defined semantic prosody as a special tendency of words, which might be in a pleasant environment that creates a 'positive semantic prosody' or in an unpleasant environment that creates a 'negative semantic prosody'. The current research is based on a corpus analysis design, in "COCA" and "COHA". Two synonym pair words of "Start/Begin" and "Guide/Lead to" were chosen as a case study. Representative number of each word was estimated by "Cochran's formula". This study is concentrated on investigation of the fact that while negative semantic prosodies are much more frequent than words with positive semantic prosody, but based on the linguistic positivity bias and "The Pollyanna hypothesis" which is introduced by Boucher and Osgood (1969), in English, the productivity of words with positive semantic prosody in synonym pairs, is more than productivity of negative semantic productivity. This fact might be due to the social interactions, the emotional content of words and linguistic behavior. It is notable to say that people tend to talk more about the brighter side than the darker side of life. This discrepancy makes words' choosing somehow problematic for translators and English learners.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of semantic prosody was highlighted by Sinclair (1987). He claimed that some words have a special aura of meaning like the verb "set in," which most of the time exists in negative environments. Sinclair (1987) pointed out a specific "semantic environment" for each word or phrase. This phenomenon was termed "Semantic Prosody" by Louw (cited in Zhang 2010). Louw (1957) linked semantic prosody to phonological prosody as for the process of "Phonological Coloring'. Louw (1993) also pointed out that semantic prosody has diachronic nature, and it is "the product of a long period of refinements through historical change." Bublitz (1996) said: "Words can have a specific halo or profile, which may be positive, pleasant and good, or else negative, unpleasant and bad."

The words that occur in an unpleasant environment called negative semantic prosody and the words that come in a pleasant environment have positive semantic prosody. Stubbs (1995), based on "Corpus Study," which is the study of languages in corpora (samples) of "real world" texts, examined the semantic prosody of a significant number of words and changed the term "semantic prosody" to "discourse prosody" because he thought it can better describe pragmatic

functions of semantic prosody. As mentioned before, semantic prosody is often 'positive' or 'negative.' Words with negative semantic prosodies are much more frequent than positive ones (Louw 2000). Stubbs (1996) proposes that some words have negative prosody in the classification of semantic prosody, a few have positive prosody, and many more words are neutral or mixed prosody (Cheng 2012). Louw (2000) mentioned that it is not a big surprise to see that contented human beings utter much less than discontented ones. Usage of words that are synonymous but with different semantic prosody is highly due to the psychology and all of these prosodic units create different emotional expressions (Kehrein, 2003). Many types of research show that the overall frequency of the words is negative (Jiang 2015).

Also due to Louw and Stubbs's expression, words with negative semantic prosodies are more frequent than words with positive semantic prosodies which is based on linguistic positivity bias (the human tendency to use positive words rather than negative words). For example: the tend to use "adorable" is more than "dreadful". The reason for this bias can be politeness, emotional content, the average information content (Garcia, Garas, and Schweitzer 2012), social interactions, the emotional content of words, linguistic behavior, or even tend of people to talk more about the brighter side than the darker side of life (Augustine et al., 2011).

This fact might be different in other languages with different cultures. The present investigation proves the fact that the pair words with the same meaning but different semantic prosodies have different productivity in language and the words with positive semantic prosody are more common.

1.1.The Importance of this Research

After years of study, the focus of semantic prosody was not only on its term but also on other aspects of this corpus study and some cross-cultural perspective aspects have been concentrated of some researches. There are many types of research in the semantic prosody of the words and their features, but there is not a wide range of research on the different productivity of synonym words with different semantic productivity. The result of this study helps the English translators and language learners have a better understanding of the English language and achieve a higher quality in their communications.

1.2. Research Question

The following research question guides the current study:

1. Is the productivity of semantic prosody the same in two synonymous words?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1.Semantic Prosody

Semantic prosody has been researched since the first work of Sinclair (1987). He had worked on the phrasal verb "set in" and noted that the subjects of the phrasal verb "set in" are always referred to as some unpleasant situation. He defined this phenomenon as a special tendency that words have to occur in the environment. Louw (1993) put the term "semantic prosody" and linked semantic prosody to the "phonological prosody" then defined semantic prosody as a "consistent aura of meaning with which collocates imbue a form." Louw (1993) wrote a book (Contextual Prosodic Theory: Bringing semantic prosodies to life) and claimed some features of semantic prosody. He wrote, "Semantic prosodies are often 'positive' or 'negative' and negative semantic prosodies are much more frequent than the positive ones". He also noted that meaning can " rub off on another word through habitual collocation and

explained this linguistic phenomenon. Another definition of semantic prosody from Louw (1993) is “a consistent aura of meaning with which a form is imbued by it collocates”. Semantic prosody can be observed only by looking at a large number of instances of a word or the phrase because it relies on the typical use of a word or phrase”. Bublitz (1996) mentioned the relationship between words and the environment Hunston, (2001). Since then, semantic prosody has come to attention as a most important issue. Sinclair (2004) suggested that “the initial choice of semantic prosody is the functional choice which links meaning to purpose and all subsequent choices within the lexical item relate back to the prosody.” Partington (2004) defined semantic prosody as a kind of evaluative meaning which was “spread over a unit of language which potentially goes well beyond the single orthographic word.” Hoey (2005) worked on “lexical priming” and related this issue to semantic prosody. Xiao and McEnery (2006) defined semantic prosody as “the way that words in a corpus can collocate with a related set of words or phrases, often revealing (hidden) attitudes.” Hunston (2007) said whether semantic prosody’s attitudinal meaning is best expressed as a binary distinction (positive vs. negative, favorable vs. unfavorable) or whether its characterization should ideally be conceptually more specific”. Stewart (2010) gave a summary of the features of semantic prosody, many of which are observed to stem from either Sinclair’s or Louw’s tradition. Stewart (2010) mentioned that semantic prosody is “a feature of words alone, or a word and co-text environment.

2.2.Corpus study

Corpus linguistics or computer-aided is the study of language based on extensive collections of words in real life. Language in use is stored in corpora sites created for linguistic and general language studies. Corpus study is also known as corpus-based studies. Linguists define Corpus linguistics as the study of language in corpora or sample of language that use in everyday life, whether spoken or written and in many genres. Corpus linguistics can be used as a study of any particular aspect of language. And it is an area that concentrates on a set of methods, for studying in all fields of English such as translation studies, language acquisition, or all branches of linguistic studies. It may also enable the researcher to use theories that need to be studied with a large sample or case study. Corpora are tools that allow users to search through them rapidly and reliably. Some of these tools, namely concordances, allow researchers to look at words in context, production, and frequency of words. For example, a word frequency list is a list that shows all occurrences of a specific word in a given sample. Many corpora sites facilitate the study with corpus analysis design but the most complete and popular ones are “COCA” (Corpus of Contemporary American Language) and “COHA” (Corpus of Historical American English), (McEnery & Hardie 2011; Hu, 2015).

2.3.Linguistic positivity bias

The human tendency to use positive words ("adorable") is more than negative words ("dreadful") and this fact is called the “linguistic positivity bias” (Augustine, Mehl, and Larsen 2011). The tendency to use words with positive semantic is more than the familiar word with negative semantic prosody and it is originally called “the Pollyanna hypothesis” as proved by Boucher and Osgood (1969). this hypothesis asserts that “there is a universal human tendency to use evaluatively positive words (E+) more frequently and diversely than evaluatively negative words (E-) in communicating” (Boucher & Osgood 1969). This linguistic and psychological phenomenon has many reasons and is somehow related to social interactions, the emotional content of words, linguistic behavior, and as mention in (Augustine, Mehl, and

Larsen 2011) people, tend to talk more about the brighter side than the darker side of life. This discrepancy makes word choice problematic for translators and English learners. The Barnum effect, also called the Forer effect noted that human tendency is toward positive words (cited in Oostdijk & Jan, 1994).

2.4.Productivity

In linguistics, productivity is the degree to which native speakers create and make use of a special word. The best synonyms for productivity are in terms of generality (Katamba, 1993). The difference between productivity and frequency is that productivity refers to "being productive", or "efficient", while frequency is (uncountable) "the rate of occurrence of anything", or the relationship between incidence and time.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Design of the Study

This research was conducted based on the qualitative approach and with a corpus analysis design.

3.2 Instruments

The present study analyses the productivity of two pair words with the same meaning but different semantic prosodies. These two words were selected from the "Longman dictionary". "COCA corpus of contemporary American English" is the main material in this research. "Cochran formula", by identifying represent number for each word helped to recognize the semantic prosody of synonym words. Two corpora sites of "COCA" and "COHA" were used to calculate the total productivity of words.

3.3 Procedure

Two synonyms' words were selected from the Longman Dictionary and were ensured that they are synonyms and have the same connotative meaning. Then by putting them in the "COCA" corpus of contemporary American English and "COHA" corpus of historical American English to find their frequency from "1910-2019" in all genres and both spoken/written in all forms of the third person, simple past, infinitive and continues. With the help of the Cochran formula calculated a number for each word that represents the whole time in which each word was repeated. Then 10 sentences were randomly selected from COCA for each word. By recognizing the selected sentences, their semantic prosody was determined. In the end, the productivity of these words was estimated from "COCA, COHA" and the average range of repetition of each word had been calculated. With the help of "Cochran's formula", it was possible to determine the representative number for each word.

Note: Just some sample sentences for each word were selected and gathered in the tables. They show the tendency environment of each word.

Cochran's formula: $\boldsymbol{n = \frac{Nz^2pq}{Nd^2+z^2pq}}$

z = 1.96, p = q = 0.5, d = 0.05, N = variables

4. FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Start, Begin

Table1. sample sentence to show semantic prosody of verb" begin".

BEGIN
1. The gentle way is really **beginning** to hurt.
2. I'm **beginning** to suspect.
3. Roman's offense was **beginning** to get criticized.
4. Japan is **beginning** to unravel the disastrous.
5. **Beginning** to forget.
6. **Begin** shooting in rural Urshittinme.
7. If Western states **begin** official arms supplies.
8.they do **begin** to fight.
9. Words **begin** to fail.

Table2. sample sentence to show semantic prosody of the verb "start."

START
1. He will **start** and say.
2. That **start** of wonder.
3. He would **start** suddenly awake.
4. Then it's time to **start** printing.
5. Does it **start** as windowed or Fullscreen?
6. Job seeker who wants to **start** your career here
7. I went to **start** my own company in the future
8. You can **start** to appreciate.
9. People can **start** to learn new patterns of behavior.
10. We just need to **start** listening to ourselves.

Table 3. comparison of two synonym words "start, begin"

Verb	Longman dictionary definition	Productivity value in COCA	Representative number	Semantic prosody	COCA productivity average range	COHA productivity average range	Total average productivity
Start	to begin doing something	643473	384	Positive	643473	161663	402568
Begin	the start or first part of an event	421901	384	Negative	421901	234630	328266

Guide, Lead to

Table 4. sample sentence to show semantic prosody of "guide'

Guide
1. Our support team has **guided** the creator.
2. The coach **guided** them to two national championships.
3. New Chairman, **guided** by our organizing leader Dr. Minnis.
4. **Guiding** the development of a new mind is a task.
5. **Guiding** us along a safe path.
6. **Guiding** your journey.
7. The tour **guides** you through the facility.
8. **Guides** to this body of knowledge.
9. **Guide** to the straight path.
10. God **guides** those who believe in the truth.

Table 5. sample sentence to show semantic prosody of "lead to"**.**

Lead to
1. That should **lead to** inquiry and the blame fall on the fool.
2. The paths which **lead to** this frightening place.
3. That does not **lead to** absurdity.
4. Investigation would **lead to** the discovery of the real criminal.
5. Might **lead to** those disasters and disorders.
6. My conduct shall **lead to** a mistake.
7. Certain vices **lead to** poverty.
8. It will **lead to** danger.
9. Hey called on Tatobam to **lead to** the fight.

10. Subject might **lead to** a discussion that would interrupt the harmony.

Table. 6 comparisons of two synonym words “guide, lead to”.

Verb	Longman dictionary definition	Productivity value in COCA	Representative number	Semantic prosody	COCA productivity average range	COHA productivity average range	Total average productivity
Guide	lead, guide somebody along/through etc.	552912	384	Positive	552912	112571	332472
Lead to	lead somebody into something	111708	383	Negative	111708	30142	70925

Easy, Ease

Table. 7 sample sentences to show semantic prosody of the adjective “easy”.

Easy
1- So they are not too **easy** to live with after all
2- **Easy** to get off track a little bit, but we had it right the first
3- Making a successful product isn't an **easy** or short process.
4- Dick story can be an **easy** place to start for a convoluted film, and this one's a doozy
5- Growing plants is not as **easy** as it may seem

6- There are so many people looking for **easy** ways to get comms right now it's ridicules
7- It's not an **easy** read by any means
8- Make an **easy** photo collage that will preserve your memories forever in fun,
9- This cheap and **easy** craft idea is appropriate for kids of all ages.
10- Mitt Romney elected to first use him and then let him fall **easy** prey

Table 8. sample sentences to show semantic prosody of the verb “ease”.

Ease
1- The purpose of arguments is not to put you totally at **ease**.
2- He’ll give you something to ease the pain.
3- This should ease the burden on busy teachers
4- Measures to ease congestion in the city
5- The agreement will ease the way for other countries to join the EU
6- He eased his way through the crowd
7- The easing of restrictions on non-refundable fares
8- Let’s try to **ease** the pain together
9- **Ease** Up on the Restrictions
10- They gave Marvel to **ease** their suffering.

Table 9. comparison of two synonym words" easy, ease".

5. DISCUSSION

In this study, a comparison was made among two synonymous pair words which despite having the same meaning, have different semantic prosodies. Two pairs of chosen words were selected in the "Longman dictionary" and made sure that they are synonyms. The semantic prosody of these two words was recognized with the help of the "COCA" corpora site. In the

Verb	Longman dictionary definition	Productivity value in COCA	Representative number	Semantic prosody	COCA productivity average range	COHA productivity average range	Total average productivity
Easy	without difficulty or effort	231305	384	positive	231305	67582	298,887
Ease	absence of difficulty or effort.	30717	379	negative	30717	20028	50,745

"Cochran formula" (number 1), the number which can be representative of all occurrence of words was calculated. As it is clear in (Table.1), the total occurrence of the word "start" was "643473", the total occurrence number for "being" was "421901" and the representative number for both two words estimated by the "Cochran formula" was "384". To recognize the semantic prosody of the words, 384 sentences for each word were selected randomly in COCA. By investigation on selected sentences, semantic prosody of words was recognized. The reason for not involving the "COHA" corpora database in recognizing semantic prosody of words, is the fact that semantic prosody of words may change during periods and this research is focused on the present semantic prosody of synonym pairs.

These sequences were repeated in the same way for each word. the information for the word "guide" shown in (Table. 3) for the word "begins" in (Table. 2) and the word "lead to" is (in Table. 4). For more variability, the research examined the productivity and frequency of two synonym word "ease" and "easy" which is shown in the table. The results showed that, "start" and "guide" have positive semantic prosody and "being" and "lead to" have negative semantic prosody. In the final step for clearing out the fact that despite existence of more words with negative semantic prosody in English (Louw), the productivity of positive semantic prosody is

more than negative (linguistic positivity bias). Therefore, the average productivity of these two pair words was calculated in two corpora sources "COCA" and "COHA".

In calculation of total productivity of both synonym words, it is clear that total usage or productivity of "start" is more than "being". This recognition can prove the fact mentioned by (Boucher and Osgood 1969) which is the total frequency of negative words is more in language, but people have a tendency to use positive words more than negative words. So, the productivity of positive words is more than negative ones. This fact was examined for the two other synonym words of "guide" and "lead to". To have a more valid study, generally, the result proved the fact that while the words with negative semantic prosody are more than words with positive semantic prosody in the English language, but in synonym words the preferred option is using the positive words.

6. CONCLUSION

The term "Semantic prosody" was introduced to the public by Sinclair in (1991). Since then, semantic prosody has become one of the most important concepts in corpus linguistics (Whitsitt 2005). Corpus pragmatics is a methodological framework that allows the interpretation of spoken or written meaning, with an emphasis on providing empirical evidence for this interpretation (Clancy and O'Keeffe 2015). Semantic prosody of a word is the tendency of it to occur in a special environment. The semantic environment can be positive or negative. This phenomenon provides clear pictures of the co-selection of the words' principles. Stubbs (1996) proposed that some words have negative prosody, a few have positive prosody and Lauw(1993) mentioned the total frequency of the words with negative semantic prosody is more in English. However, the fact is that while words with negative semantic prosody in the English language are more than the words with positive semantic prosody, the productivity of words with positive semantic prosody among synonym pairs is more than the words with negative semantic prosody.

This study showed that two verbs of "being" and "lead to" have less productivity than their synonyms, "start" and "guide". Most of the words in English have negative semantic prosody but when people want to choose between two synonym words, they tend to choose a word with positive prosody, which refers to the "Linguistic Positivity" bias. This fact might be caused by the impact of positive emotions on communication and social links. Due to this finding, the productivity of two words with the same meaning is toward the positive one. It is notable to say that the frequency of word use is not only determined by the word length, information content, and its emotional content (Garcia, Garas, and Schweitzer 2012). This result might not be the same in other languages. The difference is because of the contrasts in linguistic, cultural, or phycological perspectives. The different tendency of people to choose words among languages is problematic and causes difficulties for international translators and language learners. It would be better if every language had a special dictionary in the field of semantic prosody to guide their learners toward choosing the best word in different situations.

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