A few Frequently Asked Questions about semantic — or evaluative — prosody*

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To say that there has been a certain amount of confusion and debate over the nature and function of the notion of semantic prosody would be an understatement. In this paper we attempt to address and assess, in the light of current thinking in the field of lexical grammar, some of the main issues which have been raised.

Keywords: semantic prosody, evaluation, co-selection, connotation, lexical priming, language change

The rain set early in tonight,  
The sullen wind was soon awake,  
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,  
and did its worst to vex the lake:  
I listened with heart fit to break.  

(Robert Browning: Porphyria’s Lover)

1. Introduction: Why is semantic prosody important?

1.1 Theoretical importance

Semantic prosodies provide some of the strongest evidence for the principle of co-selection, that is, the notion that speakers in normal communication select features of discourse in batches. Sinclair’s work has helped demolish the old “mail order” concept of discourse production, which saw discourse as built up one word at a time, each word delivering its separate parcel of meaning. Semantic prosody instead is the mechanism which shows how one elemental type of meaning — evaluative meaning — is frequently shared across units in discourse and, by ensuring consistency of evaluation or evaluative harmony, plays a vital role in keeping the discourse together, in its cohesion. Which, of course, in turn helps maintain
comprehensibility for the listener. Semantic prosody is thus a fundamental aspect of the idiom or phraseological principle of language production and interpretation, in particular providing convincing evidence of how elements of meaning “hunt in packs”.

1.2 Practical importance

At the rhetorical level of discourse analysis, semantic prosody can give the reader or listener an insight into the opinions and beliefs of the text producer:

(1) but at least it is a useful antidote to the contrary view still widely peddled in academic and feminist circles that anyone who dares to suggest that there might be substantial differences in skills and attributes between the sexes […] (Telegraph)

(2) The council intends to take a dim view of private dentists not behaving ethically in their commercial dealings (Independent)

In the first example the choice, the co-selection, of peddled rather than, say, advocated, along with other evaluating items in the cotext (underlined), helps to tell us that the author of this piece is most unlikely to be either an academic or a feminist. In the second example the choice of dealings rather than, say, enterprises forms an evaluative meaning “pack” with the underlined items. In stating that its semantic prosody is the basic reason an item gets used, Sinclair stresses this paradigmatic aspect of semantic prosody, that it comes about through speakers choosing particular items from a set of other possibilities (peddled not advocated, dealings not enterprises) (Sinclair 2004: 34, 140–2).

An awareness of semantic prosody can be invaluable for the translator and language learner in distinguishing among items considered to be synonyms or translation equivalents. A steadily growing body of work in several languages uses this methodology. This includes Tognini-Bonelli (2001) who analyses prosodic differences between supposedly “true friends” in Italian and English, Tao (2003) who studies the different prosody of various Chinese words meaning “occur”, Partington (2004) who finds differences in both semantic prosody and preference among a set of adverbial intensifiers in English and Dam-Jensen & Zethsen (2007) who find systematic prosodic differences between Danish verbs roughly translatable as “cause”, “lead to”, while Xiao & McEnery (2006) look at collocation, semantic prosody, and near synonymy in English and Chinese.

In what follows we make use of SiBol 05 (the Siena-BOLogna corpus, from the universities involved in its compilation), a 150-million word corpus of UK broadsheet newspaper texts from 2005.
2. Frequently Asked Questions

2.1 FAQ 1: What is the relationship between semantic prosody and evaluation?

Semantic prosody is an expression of the innate human need and desire to evaluate entities in the world they inhabit as essentially good or bad. Different terms are used in the literature: positive and negative, favourable and unfavourable, desirable and undesirable, but evaluation at its most basic is a two-term system. We argue that the drive to evaluate is innate because human beings, and probably any biological organism capable of decision making, are goal-driven, and it is essential (phylogenetically, for survival) to judge whether the outcome of any decision, or of any scenario confronted, will be beneficial or otherwise to the organism. All the other factors influencing decision-making (possibility, willingness, importance, and so on) follow upon this fundamental binary divide. Thompson & Hunston argue that "evaluation [of which semantic prosody is an expression] is essentially one phenomenon rather than several, and that the most basic parameter, the one to which the others can be seen to relate, is the good-bad parameter" (2000: 25). It is, of course, in this sense too that, from the lexical grammar viewpoint, semantic prosody is said to be what the lexical item is for.

The goodness and the badness can, of course, come in many forms. We therefore propose the adoption of a two-term Linnaean-style binomial notation in describing prosodies, for example, [good: pleasurable], [good: profitable], [good: being in control], [bad: dangerous], [bad: difficult], [bad: not being in control], and so on, where the colon is to be read “because”. The notion, by the way, of control — or lack of it — over events and one's environment, is one which is associated very frequently with good and bad evaluative prosody (Duguid: personal communication).

In Reading Concordances (2003), Sinclair gives three lessons on semantic prosody. In the first two he asks the reader-student to count up good or bad items in the contexts of, respectively, regime and happen in a sample of examples from the Bank of English; whichever comes out on top — the good ones or the bad — will give an indication of the overall semantic prosody of the two nodes in question. On the right hand column of the lists he provides, he gives an indication of how this goodness-badness is actually expressed or instantiated for each occurrence. Although there are some dangers attached to this arithmetical approach (see below), the notation style is clearly not dissimilar to our Linnaean-style two-term notation.

We can illustrate how the prosody of an item can be broken down into — and, conversely, is made up of — different forms of “badness” or “goodness” by looking at another item, fraught with, whose unfavourable prosody can be analysed into
four distinct varieties, namely, danger, difficulty, uncertainty / complication and tension. In \textit{SiBol 05 fraught with} (326 occurrences in all) is followed \textit{inter alia} by:

- danger: \textit{danger/s} (67), \textit{risk/s} (21), \textit{peril} (10) \textit{hazards} (2);
- difficulty: \textit{difficulty/-ies} (75), \textit{problem/s} (26), \textit{pitfalls} (9);
- uncertainty / complication (especially plural): \textit{uncertainty/ies} (7);
- tension: \textit{tension} (10), \textit{anxiety} (5), \textit{paranoia}.

These varieties, these sets of items, can of course be seen as expressing the semantic preferences of \textit{fraught with}. Indeed we begin here to observe how the overall semantic prosody of an item is both shaped by and expressed in its semantic preferences (Partington 2004).

The dangers in this method, mentioned earlier, are that semantic prosody is not always a simple arithmetical function of the number of positive or negative items present in the stretch of discourse. As Partington points out:

> the logical relationship of an item to its collocates is a vital consideration. Simply being primed to appear in the environment of collocates of a certain evaluative sense, good or bad, is not a sufficient condition for an item to acquire the same sense. If the relationship between the item and its collocates is one of opposition or detraction, then the combination does not acquire the evaluative sense of the collocates. (2004: 154–5)

To illustrate: the item \textit{exacerbate} displays a very obvious unfavourable prosody, co-occurring in \textit{SiBol 05} with such items as \textit{anxieties}, \textit{conflicts}, \textit{problems} and \textit{tensions}. But what of items like, say, \textit{alleviate}, \textit{heal}, \textit{repair}, \textit{reform}, \textit{relief}, \textit{relieve}, \textit{ease}? They too collocate regularly with unfavourable items (\textit{alleviate}, in fact, collocates with many of the same items as \textit{exacerbate}, including \textit{poverty}, \textit{pressures} and \textit{problems}).

If we adopt a simple definition that the prosody of an item is a simple reflection of the nature of its co-occurring items, then these too would have to be classified as associated with bad semantic prosody. This, however, would seem to be highly counterintuitive. The relationship between the node and the surrounding items, as we said, needs to be contemplated in the definition. The concept of embedded evaluation may be usefully applied in this case. The different states of affairs can be represented notationally as [\textit{exacerbate} \{a problem\}] and (\textit{alleviate} \{a problem\}), where square brackets indicate “bad”, round brackets “good”, and where the outer bracketing indicates the overall evaluation and the prosody of the key item.

After some initial confusion, especially between semantic prosody and preference, corpus linguists seem to be reaching a general agreement in appreciating the good-bad, positive-negative distinction at the heart of the notion of evaluation and prosody (Hoey 2005: 23), although this view has also been criticised for being over-simplistic (Hunston 2007). Rather than “simplistic”, we would prefer to say that the good-bad distinction is the essential simplicity at the heart of a complex
system. If one loses sight of this and treats every version, every variation of goodness and badness as a separate prosody, one loses the fundamental original insight of the concept of semantic prosody, in other words, the extraordinary unifying explanatory power regarding the function of communication that evaluation and semantic prosody provide.

Perhaps the first to have written on this insight, some time earlier even than Louw and Sinclair, was Aristotle (trans. 2006). If we revive the classical tripartite description of language as consisting of the interplay of grammar (the how), logic (the what) and rhetoric (the why of communication), evaluation and semantic prosody are, of course, bound up with the third of these. And Aristotle tells us that rhetoric is at heart epideictic, that is, a binary system of means of expressing praise for the good, or blame for the bad.

2.2 FAQ 2: What is the relationship between semantic prosody, collocation and co-selection?

Both collocation and semantic prosody are ways of describing the effects at the textual level of the process known as speaker co-selection, perhaps the single most important and revolutionary concept to arise from Sinclairian corpus linguistics.

To illustrate the principle of co-selection: only a linguist decides to start from a word/item like set in or sit through and then wonders how to use it in conversation. Thanks to the inevitable concordance format, which places the word under scrutiny at the centre of screen and of attention, corpus linguists are especially prone to this “lexical origin” fallacy (or “the curse of the concordance node”).

Normal people start off with a topic and, since we are evaluating beings and not just conduits for information, also an attitude to the topic. Thus if, being British, we want to talk disapprovingly of the bad weather which is beginning, we might well co-select the item set in with other “bad weather words” (as in the Browning verse which opens this paper) because it carries the appropriate attitudinal-evaluative instructions-suggestions. In other parlance, we would also say it collocates with and has a semantic preference for bad weather items. Similarly if I am talking about a lecture I attended and wish to express an opinion that it was tedious and uninformative, I co-select the item sit through to express this unfavourable evaluation.

2.3 FAQ 3: What is semantic prosody for? Or rather what do speakers need it for?

We can now confront the question of what semantic prosody is for. It is the way in which speakers establish and maintain connotational or evaluative harmony within
a stretch of discourse by co-selecting items of a consistent evaluative/attitudinal force. So within the stretch we may well find items in which the evaluation is obvious and others where it works through co-selection, for instance, “some rotten (obviously bad) weather seems to be setting in” (which gets co-selected because it is consistent with the overall evaluative semantic prosody), rather than, say, beginning or commencing because these items carry neutral to good prosodic instructions.

Maintaining connotational harmony is very important to avoid sending “mixed messages”. A general is going to say to the troops: “Let battle commence” (good: enthusiasm). If he is wise, he would not choose to say: “Let battle set in”, which risks at the very least sending a confusing message. Similarly “I had to sit through a really exciting concert” might well leave the listener wondering whether the speaker was being ironic.

In this sense semantic prosody is a constraining mechanism, like so many mechanisms in grammar. You cannot simply put any old bunch of words together.

Looked at in pragmatic terms, that is, in terms of discourse participants, semantic prosody also acts as an effort-saving device. In other words, evaluative harmony lightens the processing burden on the listener and frees the speaker of the tedium of labouring a point:

(3) Like many high-altitude resorts, [Cervinia] can be pretty bleak if the weather sets in

(4) …because we see so many galleries and institutions start up with lots of energy and ideas and then entropy sets in

We do not need to be told explicitly what kind of weather, or whether entropy is a good thing to happen to a gallery.¹

2.4 FAQ 4: Where does semantic prosody reside, in the lexical item or in the discourse?

The next of our FAQs then is the question of where precisely semantic prosodies reside. According to Hunston (2007), there are two schools of thought. The first, she claims (somewhat oddly), represented in the work of Partington, sees semantic prosody as the “property” of an item which expresses itself in patterns of co-occurrence with other items, whereas the second, championed, she says, by Sinclair and also favoured by herself, considers semantic prosody to be the overall discourse function of a “unit of meaning” in text.

The dichotomy however is a false one; the above are simply two ways of viewing the same phenomenon from different standpoints, the lexical priming (essentially as a mental phenomenon) and the discoursal (Hoey 2005: 163), and both Sinclair and Partington quite clearly adopt both perspectives.²
2.4.1 *The lexical-priming perspective*

From the first of these, the lexical-priming perspective, it is indeed common, almost traditional, within the field of corpus linguistics to talk of semantic prosody as the "property" (though this needs further specification) of an item, or of items "having" a semantic prosody or being "of" a particular prosody. Louw (1993), Stubbs (1996), Partington (1998), Xiao & McEnery (2006) and Morley (2007) all do so, as do both Sinclair himself (several times, including where he talks of semantic prosody as a "component" of the lexical item) and Hunston (our emphasis):

the phrasal verb ‘sit through’ […] is an example of a lexical item with semantic prosody  
(Hunston 2002: 140)

Problems of apparent counterexamples, when a word or unit does not have the semantic prosody that is typical of it, are discussed  
(Hunston 2007: 249)

But such locutions are, in reality, useful shorthand for saying something like “this item carries with it prosodic instructions or, better, suggestions on how to use it when realised in discourse, including on the evaluative — favourable or unfavourable — force it is likely to contribute to the discourse”. Authors have sometimes also been guilty of using the shorthand “this word” when really meaning “this item”; items can of course be single orthographic words, but some work has also been done on the prosody of multi-word units. Here we will also make use of the closely related concept of lexical templates (also known as lexical schemas [schemata]).

Thus, although we might hesitate to talk of lexical items having intrinsic context-free meaning, they do carry with them a set of suggestions on how to use them, on how they normally interact with other items, that is to say, they have, in Hoey’s terminology, *primings*. Among these is the semantic prosody of an item, which is information or a suggestion, which tells the reader “when you find me instantiated in a text, you are likely to find me in combination with items of a like, consistent evaluative force, and you should read the surrounding discourse as expressing that favourable / unfavourable appraisal of the topic in question, unless there is something else around in the co-text which instructs you not to”. To borrow a metaphor from biogenetics, a lexical item’s primings are like the DNA of an organism, they are information which influence — but, as we shall see, do not determine — how an organism will behave when alive, that is, in linguistic terms, when the item is actually instantiated in discourse.

We have so far been discussing Hoey’s theory of priming as a lexical phenomenon but, to be absolutely precise, he explains how it is a self-reproducing *mental* phenomenon whereby the normal language user learns, by repeated acquaintance with a lexical item and by processes of analogy with other similar items, the typical behaviour of that item in interaction. In particular, we learn which other lexical
items it co-occurs with regularly (*collocation*), which semantic sets it co-occurs with (*semantic association*; other authors would favour the term *semantic preference*; see Sinclair 2004: 33–4), which grammatical categories it co-occurs with or avoids and which grammatical positions it favours or disfavours (*colligation*), which positions in an utterance or sentence or paragraph or entire text it tends to prefer or to avoid occurring in (*textual colligation*) and whether it tends to participate in cohesion or not (*textual collocation*). And, of course, which evaluative prosodic patterns it takes part in.

The user then reproduces this behaviour in his/her own linguistic performance. By metaphorical extension (a process common to all descriptions of grammar), the lexical item itself is said to be *primed* to behave in these particular ways, and so priming can also be regarded as a *lexical* phenomenon. Primings are in principle always personal but members of the same discourse community tend to share very large numbers of primings, otherwise communication among them would be impossible.

It must be stressed that lexical priming does not imply that language is entirely deterministic. Hoey is, in fact, at great pains to stress that normal priming prosodies can always be switched off or overridden or exploited by users, as in one of the examples he provides: “If your supporter number ends in ‘D’, you already Gift Aid your donations.” (2005: 155). Creativity with language is largely a process of overriding or exploiting normal primings; in the example “Gift Aid”, which is normally primed to act as a noun phrase, is made to work as a verb.

The fact that we are primed to use and recognise the particular evaluative prosodies of certain items means that we have *expectations* of their behaviour. This explains the effect of prosodic *clash* where these expectations are overturned or exploited in some way. Louw (1993) gives the example *bent on self-improvement*, Hunston (2007) mentions the clash *persistent help and advice*, whilst *SiBol 05* supplies the following:

(5) *an outbreak of* (the expectation is for something bad)
   - *sanity* (at the EU)
   - *of honesty* (among Italian journalists)
   - *of good taste*

(6) *there’s much to be said for* (the expectation is of something good, or at least neutral)
   - *failure*
   - *acrimony*
   - *envy*
   - *death*
The most common effect sought, as in these cases, is the reversal of evaluative expectation (a key aspect of irony, Partington 2007). One of the crucial observations of Sinclair, Louw and other theorists of semantic prosody is, of course, that these prosodic expectations are not always fully conscious. Here, instead, we note that they are best seen, that evaluative harmony is felt most strongly — like money, food and companionship — when it is missing.

In any case prosodic or collocational clash provides very strong evidence that, from the mental-psychological perspective, semantic prosody is associated with the lexical item and expresses itself in patterns of co-occurrence.

2.4.2 Semantic prosody from the discourse perspective

Turning to the discourse viewpoint, there are, in fact, two distinct ways of looking at semantic prosody as a discourse phenomenon, firstly, the individual or textual and, secondly, the statistical. Both imply looking at items when they are actually instantiated in texts, rather than how they are held in the minds of speakers, as when prosodies are seen from the lexical perspective.

From the first discourse standpoint, that is, as a textual phenomenon, semantic prosody is definable as the evaluative intent of the speaker, that is, the attitude s/he has to his/her topic (good because desirable, because I'm in control etc; or bad because dangerous, someone else is in control of me, etc) in any individual text fragment. It is in this sense we say that the overall semantic prosody choice dictates the lower, less abstract choices of phraseology and lexis. This is the most basic “initial choice” the speaker makes and “all subsequent choices within the lexical item relate back to the prosody” (Sinclair 2004: 34). In the normal course of events, the textual semantic prosody will reflect or reproduce the semantic prosody primings of the items involved. A simple example: I wish to say that a certain situation is bad (because it is dangerous) so I normally choose to say it is fraught with danger and not, say, brimming with danger; the prosody has influenced the choice of the lexis. Conversely, from the lexical-mental perspective outlined earlier, I choose fraught with because my communicative competence informs me that its primings allow it to be used in this way. We might represent a few examples of how speaker prosodic intent affects the choice of lexis in Table 1 below (the realisations are all from SiBol 05).

However, the speaker in actual practice has three options: to activate the primings, switch them off, or exploit them in some way (Hoey 2005). One form of exploitation is the evaluative clash we have seen above. The switching off of normal prosodic priming will be dealt with below.

The second of the two discourse perspectives is the statistical or, perhaps, corpus-assisted definition. This entails analysing, via a concordance, how an item — or, if we are looking at a multi-word unit or a lexical template, its invariant core
(in Sinclair’s example, *naked eye* is the core of a template {visible} + [negative] + *naked eye*) — is actually instantiated many times in many texts (Sinclair 2004: 30–35). We are thus able to perceive both the various patterns of co-occurrence, that is, the items the speakers/writers have generally chosen to co-select, and also which semantic prosody polarity predominates, is simply numerically more frequent (in the discourse type under scrutiny) and is therefore the bedrock evaluating function the item in question performs in these texts *in general*.

This can then be described as the background or default prosody against which it becomes possible to discern and study counterexamples. The occurrence of counterexamples can be accounted for by renewing the biogenetics analogy. Inherent DNA instructions are not always, in actual practice, carried out by the living discourse organism, as it were; they can be countermanded or “switched off”, as Hoey puts it, by some stimulus exerted by the actual environment the piece of discourse finds itself in.

This statistical definition leads us back full circle to the mental lexical priming definition we started out with. In a sense primings, including semantic prosody priming instructions-suggestions, are built up in the minds of speakers in a quasi-statistical way by the number of exposures to uses. Thus the more often, say, we hear an item employed in a negative environment the more likely we are to associate it with negative evaluation. There may well, of course, be a time-weighting to these encounters, the early ones being the most important in laying the foundations.

**Table 1.** How speaker prosodic intent can influence the choice of lexis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What I want to say</th>
<th>The attitude (positive or negative) I wish to convey</th>
<th>Realisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A situation is developing</td>
<td>It is bad because dangerous</td>
<td>…<em>fraught with danger</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prague is a musical city</td>
<td>Approval</td>
<td>Prague is a city <em>brimming with</em> great musicians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A period of weather appears to begin</td>
<td>I do not like this weather</td>
<td>…the rains <em>set in</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting old</td>
<td>Dislike</td>
<td>…the usual ailments of late middle age <em>set in</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A person/group has contacts with another/others</td>
<td>Disapproval</td>
<td>…libel action over a story that he had <em>dealings with</em> a prostitute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>…investigated allegations that Kofi Annan had <em>dealings with</em> a Swiss company <em>…</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.4.3 Some problem cases

This combined lexical-discourse description of how semantic prosody works, coupled with notions from the theory of lexical priming, would appear to solve some of the problematic cases raised by Hunston (2007). She argues that previous studies on semantic prosody have tended to ignore or downplay the question of “good or bad from whose point of view?”. She discusses the template *not + budge* which, as Sinclair (2004) has pointed out, carries the normal priming information “this lack of movement is a problem, something bad, for someone” (Sinclair 2004: 142–147). Hunston (2007) however presents a couple of instances where the use is clearly favourable:

(7) The Prime Minister rejected resounding calls for the resignation of the government, “I will not budge”, he said

(8) He [Otis] chose the New York Exposition to demonstrate his device, standing on an open lift high above the ground as his assistant cut the cord supporting it. The lift did not budge

Priming theory can help explain how the reader interprets these countercases. When the subject in the template instantiation is first person as in (7), the unfavourable priming is likely to be switched off because, firstly, our knowledge of the world tells us that speakers rarely in the normal course of affairs speak ill of themselves, and secondly *I* or *we* is the entity *in control*, a good thing from its point of view (namely, here, the PM). In addition, our knowledge of politics primes us to know that causing something bad, creating problems for one’s political opponents, is a good thing for you, so there may well be a dose of ironical evaluation reversal in the PM’s utterance.

In the case of the unbudging lift in (8), two contextual features combine to switch off the usual negative prosody. Firstly, we see proceedings from the perspective of the device-maker who demonstrates that he is in control over affairs and, as we have stressed, being in control very generally coincides with positive evaluation. Secondly, *not + budge*’s other primed sense of “to not move *in the slightest*”, is overriding important in this context, more important to what the writer is trying to say than its usual background negative prosody. Note that it is the context, including and especially readers’ knowledge of the world, and not the surrounding phraseology which determines the evaluation here; there are no other explicit items in the cotext indicating favourable evaluation.

Hunston’s overall argument that semantic prosody *depends on* point-of-view needs to be interpreted with great caution. The semantic prosody is, as we have said, in the DNA of the item. The point of view in an individual instantiation can, of course, influence the *activation* of the semantic prosody, can switch off
or can exploit the basic semantic prosody, but this is an entirely different matter. The confusion derives from a failure to distinguish between the individual textual definition of semantic prosody (discourse definition 1) and the overall statistical definition of semantic prosody (discourse definition 2), that semantic prosody is a generalisation, is the “independent” evaluative polarity, and can only be ascertained either by (a) native-speaker judgement or (b) looking at large numbers of occurrences in context, where individual points of view are “ironed out” (which, of course, does not eliminate the need for native-speaker judgement: concordance evidence serves as an aid to or corroboration of native-speaker judgement). The underlying semantic prosody clearly persists, even and especially, in collocational clashes such as an outbreak of sanity or bent on self-improvement; otherwise they could not be read as creating special rhetorical effects, such as irony and the like.

Finally, here, a general word needs to be spent on semantic prosody and point of view. In conversation, the default point-of-view, the standpoint taken unless another is specified or implicit, is normally that of the speaker or of some group the speaker projects him/herself as part of (frequently “everybody” or “all right-thinking people” or “Guardian readers”, and so on). It is reasonable, then, when attempting a lexical-grammar description of the prosodic priming information associated with an item, to assume the default point of view is the speaker’s, in other words, that the entity for whom something will be projected as good or bad by the use of the item is the speaker. When the item is instantiated in discourse and interacts with the contextual features, including other participants, then things of course may well change. This is the case for all evaluative connotational meaning, of which semantic prosody is a part (see FAQ 5 below). Put simply, if a situation is fraught with difficulties for me, this is bad; if it is fraught with difficulties for my enemy, this is, of course, bad for him but good for me.

2.5 FAQ 5: Is semantic prosody connotational?

The term ‘connotation’ is used with various overlapping meanings in semantic linguistics. Backhouse (1992), for instance talks of situational (we would say “of register”), cultural and expressive forms of connotation. Here we will limit our reference to evaluative connotation (roughly equivalent to Backhouse’s expressive form). In any case the other forms of connotation exist largely in reference to the basic evaluative form.

It has been traditional in semantic studies to talk of “connotations” in relation to a single word/item, whereas here we have defined semantic prosody, in the discoursal sense, as residing in the collocational patterns of items in a text. We can resolve the issue by speaking about “(evaluative) connotational meaning”, of which we consider semantic prosody to be an aspect:
Often the use of a word in a particular context carries extra meaning of an emotive or attitudinal nature […] This kind of meaning is sometimes called "connotation" and is structurally important, and essential for the understanding of language text. We will call it SEMANTIC PROSODY (Sinclair 2003: 117)

In addition, connotation is often considered to be more evident, less hidden, than semantic prosody. This would appear to be a product of the fact that the latter is defined as expressed over stretches of discourse, whilst by and large lexicographers — and probably most normal (literate) people too — find it easy and natural to think in terms of individual word meaning.

The “obviousness” of evaluative connotation is best considered as a cline. Items such as **cellow** and **venerable** seem to express fairly clearly unfavourable and favourable connotation / evaluation respectively. Items such as **peddle**, **commit** and **fraught with** are somewhere in the middle, whereas [not] **budge**, **border on** and **dealings with** and the different evaluative polarities of **build up** [NP] and [NP] **builds up** were entirely obscure until assistance came to hand in the form of corpora. We might represent this by borrowing an illustration from prototype theory (Rosch 1977), where the items closest to the centre are those with the most evident and consistent evaluative connotation, whilst those closer to the outskirts have an evaluative connotation which is less obvious and consistent and which is perhaps more likely to be switched off or overturned when contextual requirements demand:

**Figure 1.** Evaluative connotation expressed in terms of prototypicality. The items closest to the centre are those with the most evident and consistent evaluative connotation.
2.6 FAQ 6: Can semantic prosodies be a result of diachronic processes, in other words, can we see them develop over time?

One issue that much exercises Whitsitt (2005) is how work on semantic prosodies has traditionally assumed that they can develop over time, that an item can acquire, can come to have a certain evaluative force it previously did not have. He correctly identifies this as an empirical matter and dismisses Sinclair’s claim that “processes of change are inescapably obvious” (1996:113). But processes of diachronic change, claims Whitsitt, “[cannot] be derived from the observations made of a synchronically organized corpus” (2005:287–8). This implies that we have no proof that evaluations can gradually spread from item to environment or from environment to item, as many theorists of semantic prosody believe.

The argument, so far as it goes, is seductive and it is certainly also the case that precious little empirical work has been done on tracing the diachronic development of semantic prosodies. However Whitsitt himself turns a blind eye to the considerable body of work carried out in the field of diachronic linguistics on meaning change which may well impinge on this issue.

Louw mentions briefly the diachronic concept known as contagion (1993:159). Just as important here are meaning pejoration and amelioration, central notions in historical linguistics. Other well-researched processes such as narrowing and broadening of meaning, metaphorisation and metonymisation, as well as newer ideas such as delexicalisation, may also play useful roles in explaining the development of semantic prosodies, as they do in explaining other forms of meaning change.

One useful source of information on meaning change over time is the “paracorpus” of examples contained in the electronic version of the OED (see Hoffmann 2004 on using the OED in corpus linguistics). When used in combination with a modern synchronic corpus, we can begin to discern how previous usage of an item has led to modern meanings.

Modern corpus evidence shows that both fraught and fraught with have overall unfavourable associations today (cf. FAQ 1 above) which they seem in previous incarnations to have lacked. In early OED citations, fraught with occurs in many non-negative environments and seems to mean simply “laden with”, “full of”, for example, fraught with temperateness, A demy-God …fraught with an aged-like wisedome, full fraught with most nourishing food.

We can express the development as one of prosodic pejoration through narrowing of meaning which happens when the item in question begins to co-occur in steadily more restricted environments — in terms of lexical grammar, when it becomes primed to occur with a more specialised set of items or, put another way, when the variety of its semantic preferences becomes smaller. From being able
to co-occur with a very wide set of items, from having a considerable number of semantic preferences, it gradually began to co-occur with a narrower set, and all of the remaining preferences came to share a similarly unfavourable evaluation. This is further evidence of how the semantic preferences and the prosody of an item affect each other.

Occasionally the OED is explicit about evaluative meaning change. For instance, its entry on *monger* defines the item: “dealer, trader … From the 16c onwards, chiefly one who carries on a petty or disreputable ‘traffic’”. Before that time we find several non-negative uses, including *peach*, *feather*, *ballad* and *ceremony mongers*. Modern corpus evidence (*SiBol 05*) sees it combining with a certain number of traditional trades: *fishmonger*, *ironmonger* and *cheesemonger*, but all newer coinages are heavily unfavourable: *warmonger*, *doom-monger*, *hatemonger*, *scaremonger* and *gossip-monger*. It would seem that speakers are able to retain a certain set of primings for the well-worn traditional items and yet know that, when *monger* is used productively, it will have a different set, especially that it carries particular negative evaluative prosodic instructions—suggestions. The historical meaning change seems to be pejoration by a combination of broadening/extension together with metaphorisation. The item has adopted a fresh set of semantic preferences in addition to the original one of saleable goods. The items making up these sets of preferences — war, negative emotion, gossip and so on — are treated metaphorically as commodities.

A similar but much more recent and convoluted path seems to have been trod by the various forms of the verb *orchestrate*. In the OED, following the definition of the headword *orchestrate* as a technical musical term, we find the metaphorical extension: “to combine harmoniously, like instruments in an orchestra”, which is labelled *fig.* (that is, “figurative”), and which suggests the item has a favourable evaluative force (“harmoniously”). We thus have a first indication of meaning change, extension through metaphorisation.

However, a glance at the OED’s examples, reveals that something is afoot. Historically recent examples tend not only to involve the participle-modifier form of the verb, but indicate that it carries evaluative instructions which may not be so favourable, for instance:

(9) The enthusiasm that greeted them was as carefully orchestrated as the march itself.

The OED has a separate entry for *well-orchestrated* and the one non-musically related, figurative example, which is also the most recent, is highly unfavourable:

(10) Why has such a well-orchestrated masking of political repressions been necessary?
Examining the use of *orchestration*, *orchestrate* and *orchestrated* in SiBol 05 reveals a more complex picture still. The noun — *orchestration* — is very rarely used figuratively, that is, outside the field of music. The related verb forms are also used in talking about music, but also very frequently, figuratively, in the fields of sport and politics. In sports prose they co-occur with *move, a win, goal chance* and so on, and retain the very favourable prosody of “effective harmony”, for example (the field is rugby union), … *the fly-half […] orchestrated the backline superbly*.

In politics and current affairs, on the other hand, the verb forms of *orchestrate* co-occur with *campaign, attacks, threats, violence, fraud* and suchlike, and are most frequently found in combination with other indications of bad evaluation: *found guilty of orchestrating a …* (10 occurrences), *the Ottoman authorities orchestrated the killing of 1.5 million Armenians, … a campaign is being orchestrated to destroy the credibility of…, pandering to the climate of fear orchestrated by populist politicians*. Even when no other explicit criticism is apparent in the immediate co-text, a sense of the writer’s or speaker’s disapproval of some form of deviousness, sham or illicit self-interest can still hover in the air:

(11) He also alluded to “a carefully orchestrated campaign” against the club chairman

Again, even when not explicitly condemned, a sense of disapproval of whoever is doing the orchestrating is often discernable, as in example (9) above, or in:

(12) BBC insiders point out that only 14 of the complaints were received by post, suggesting that a large number were the result of orchestrated email and phone campaigns

To summarise, then, speakers are primed with information on how to use items differently in different registers and fields or sectors of experience; put conversely, items can clearly have different sets of primings in different registers (Stubbs 2001: 106; Partington 2004: 153–154).

The process of pejoration of *orchestrate* in political discourse begins with a metaphorical departure from the original musical sense. In the new sphere it is free to adopt entirely new sets of semantic preferences, though retaining an underlying sense of organisation. Influenced perhaps by speakers’ healthy suspicion of those who wish to over-organise and so *control* our political thought and activity, the item steadily consolidates its role of conveyer of negative prosodic instructions-suggestions. But when the metaphorical departure is into a different field, that of sporting endeavour, one perhaps less distant from the original — a sports team has something in common with an orchestra — different constraints apply and the original positive prosody survives.

Finally here, we might look at the process of development of the group of superficially similar premodifying intensifying adverbs, namely, *terrifically,*
tremendously, awfully, terribly and dreadfully. The OED establishes that they all had earlier meanings of the type “so as to excite terror / awe / dread”, which it supports in each case with suitable quotations, for example, tremendously rebuk’t by Christ, a most terrifically dirty inn, moost terribly and fearfully.

However, according to SiBol 05, in modern times both terrifically and tremendously premodify predominantly, though not exclusively, items with a favourable connotation, such as clever, engaging, entertaining, funny, good, successful and useful and, even when premodifying an apparently unfavourable item, they often carry the instruction-suggestion to look around the context for something being approved:

(13) Tennant makes a terrifically deranged villain

(14) […] but thanks to Thornton’s laconic delivery and some tremendously tasteless jokes […] this is a thoroughly enjoyable little film

Both awfully and terribly are also found to premodify items with favourable connotations, though proportionally less frequently. Concentrating on terribly, it is found to premodify, in approving contexts, the following: amusing, appreciative (I’m terribly appreciative just the same), attractive (it’s terribly attractive in the sunshine), beautiful, classy (a terribly classy floral [arrangement]), hard-working (not cheap, these lawyers, but terribly hard working), and many other similar items.

The collocational behaviour of dreadfully is in stark contrast; of 203 occurrences there is not a single unequivocally positive evaluative use recorded in SiBol 05. Nevertheless it certainly does not always contribute a sense of “fill with dread” to the discourse. It frequently seems to be simply co-selected with bad items to maintain a consistent harmony of evaluative prosody, for example, dreadfully cross/sad/shy.

If we compare these adverbs with their adjective counterparts, terrific and tremendous have developed into items expressing generally very favourable evaluations, whilst awful, terrible, and dreadful have all retained something at least of their earlier unfavourable senses.

The process of amelioration of the premodifying adverbs terrifically, tremendously, terribly and awfully can be explained by making use of the concept of delexicalisation (also known as grammaticalisation [Hopper and Traugott 1993], or semantic “bleaching”), defined as the reduction over time of the independent lexical content of an item or, in this case, group of items, so that it comes to fulfil a particular grammatical function — in the present instance, intensification — but has little or no independent meaning other than this to contribute to the utterance in which it occurs. Once the independent lexical meaning has been lost the way is open for changes in evaluative weight, including in prosodic behaviour.
Since delexicalisation is a drawn-out historical process, it is entirely predictable that items will be found at different stages along the cline of more complete lexicalisation, where some independent meaning can still be expressed (as dreadfully and perhaps terribly), and almost complete delexicalisation (the case of terrifically and tremendously). In addition, we might note that, since several items have followed this historical route, there seems to be a general human psycholinguistic tendency to connect the concept of “capability of eliciting strong emotion (even if very negative)” and simply “very much of something”. The item awesome seems to have begun shuffling along the same path relatively recently. Intensifier delexicalisation would seem to be closely bound up with collocational widening or extension; the greater the number and kinds of items the intensifier can premodify, in general, the lesser the degree of independent lexical meaning it brings to the utterance (Partington 1993:182–184; and Ito & Tagliamonte 2003, who describe experimental support for this process).

Of course on a day-to-day basis, it is not necessary to study particular instances of semantic prosodies from a diachronic perspective. Like a doctor, who can do her job equally well whether she is a creationist or an evolutionist (it makes no difference for most doctoring, since she is only interested in the state of the patient in the here and now, not whether his organs developed over time or sprang into existence at God’s command) so too the synchronic corpus linguist can live her life completely ignoring the diachronic forces which shaped the language in the past, because she is only interested in the contemporary state of the language.

But for a theorist of language, studying diachronic processes can be of great value in providing insights into how and why the language is in the condition it is today. Moreover, we suspect that such insights can provide strong evidence for some of the basic ideas underpinning synchronic lexical grammar theory.

Until now, almost all diachronic study of meaning change has concentrated on “internal” changes, changes in the semantics of single words. If, instead, we can show that the co-occurrence behaviour of items like fraught with and tremendously — or, if we prefer, the co-selecting behaviour of speakers — can change, can “evolve”, over time, we are providing strong corroborating evidence that item and environment do interact and affect each other, that repeated usage of an item in new environments will alter the priming instructions-suggestions of the item itself. If, on the other hand, the collocational, especially the prosodic, behaviour of items were found to be immutable and, as it were, “god-given”, we could not say that the environment of use ever affected the primings of an item, we could not state that item and environment ever interacted in any meaningful way. From this perspective, adopting “evolutionism” or “creationism” makes a great deal of difference. In this brief study of semantic prosody change, we have uncovered strong evidence that they do indeed interact.
Notes

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1. At times, instead, we may want to labour a point, as in the Browning verse that opens the paper. Here too, semantic prosody can play its part.

2. “There seem to be two fundamental dynamic processes involved in the production of spoken and written interaction. One [is that] every lexical choice starts off a series of options and predilections that result in an amazing fluency in any situation in which the speaker has been primed to perform. The other is the discoursal, and this is the process whereby we decide that we shall speak or write and what we want to say” (Hoey 2005: 163).

3. For instance, when we declare that ‘x is a noun’, this is a metaphorical statement whose literal meaning is that ‘x is generally employed by speakers to fulfil a set of functions conventionally associated with the set of items we denominate nouns’. All of which shows just how useful metaphorical language can be.

4. We might quibble a little with the wording “extra” as a description of attitudinal meaning, in fact:

   A word like pig-headed only exists because it has an expressive connotation of disapproval, there is nothing “secondary” about this implication. Similarly, the sole purpose of the term venerable is to put old age in a good light, and that of callow to express disapproval of youth (Partington 1998: 66).

References


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