# A Corpus-based Analysis of Semantic Prosody on Near-Synonyms

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*Abstract:* Bill Louw introduced the concept of semantic prosody to the public for the first time in 1993. Since then, integrating semantic prosody into discourse analysis, evaluating a speaker's attitude, acquiring vocabulary, etc., has become a central issue in the field of current research. The semantic prosody of near-synonyms attracts a great deal of attention because it can reveal distinctions beyond human intuition. In this article, the author analyses studies of semantic prosodies of near synonyms to introduce the unique function and characteristic of semantic prosody in distinguishing between near synonyms and to provide new insights into the study of near synonyms.

*Keywords:* Collocation; Semantic prosody; Near synonyms

## 1. Introduction

With the advent of computational technology and its advancements, English learning can take advantage of globalized learning materials, multimedia-assisted learning methods, and internationalized teaching personnel. According to Zhang (2008), the most difficult aspect of learning words for L2 learners and teachers is comprehending their pragmatic function, prompting us to seek the assistance of semantic prosody. According to Louw (1993) and Partinton (1998), the primary function of semantic prosody is the expression of the speaker's or writer's attitude towards a pragmatic situation. According to Sinclair (2000), semantic prosody conveys pragmatic meaning and is the intersection of form and meaning. The pragmatic meaning entails that the reason why we choose to express ourselves in a particular manner as opposed to another is encoded in the prosody, which is a required component of a lexical item.

In addition, Partington (1998) argues that "information on prosody is particularly important for non-native speakers because they are more susceptible to the hidden intentions of the text producer than native speakers, who likely have some subconscious sensitivity to it. " In certain instances, "when the semantic prosody of an item is not obvious even to a native speaker's intuition, corpus data may be able to reveal its statistical tendencies" (ibid.). It is therefore not surprising that non-native speakers are more likely to make lexical collocational errors than grammatical ones (Fugua, 2013). Wei (2006) and Xiao and MaEnery (2006) assert that improper word selection resulting from a lack of knowledge of semantic prosody is widespread among ESL and EFL learners. The inclusion of semantic prosodic phrases and words in ESL and EFL classes is essential for developing native-speaker proficiency.

## 2. Definitions of Semantic Prosody

Sinclair (1991) characterised semantic prosody as "one of the significant characteristics of the idiom principle, which refers to the tendency for many uses of words and phrases to occur in a particular semantic environment." For instance, the word "happen" is commonly associated with unfortunate occurrences, as in "accidents happen." According to Louw (1993), it is "a consistent aura of meaning that a form is imbued with by its collocates." Stubbs (1996) defined semantic prosody as "words occurring in characteristic collocations, revealing the associations and connotations they possess and, consequently, the assumptions they embody." In addition, he classified semantic prosody into three distinct categories: negative prosody, positive prosody, and neutral prosody. Hunston and Francis (2000) give a quite similar definition. Furthermore, Hunston and Thompson (2000) argue that a word can have a particular semantic prosody if it is shown to typically co-occur with words that belong to a particular semantic set. In other words, semantic prosody is a phenomenon characterised by the co-occurrence of node words with lexical items in the semantic field. It has been generally agreed that semantic prosody refers to the affective or connotative meaning generated when a key word co-occurs with its collocates. In reality, semantic prosody describes the propensity for certain words to co-occur with certain sense sets that are positive, negative, or neutral in meaning or cadence. Notably, Partington (1998) defines semantic prosody as "the spreading of connotational colouring beyond single-word boundaries," and he believed English near synonyms are lexical

pairs that "have very similar cognitive or denotational meanings, but may differ in collocations or prosodic behaviours." which can be used to differentiate close synonyms.

## 3. Approaches of Differentiating Near Synonyms

Typically, linguists and lexicographers distinguish synonyms through substitution, using dictionary definitions to differentiate between senses. According to the Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (2005), "words that have the same or nearly the same meaning as another word in a language can substitute each other in certain contexts." However, the issue is that "perfect synonyms" do not exist. "Perfect synonyms," or "absolute synonyms," for Lyons (1995) are uncommon: "Perfect synonyms are lexical items with the same meaning and which are spelled identically."

Most of the synonyms are likely to be "near" synonyms rather than "perfect" synonyms. Unlike descriptive research, quantitative research on near-synonyms usually involves the computation of collocations or experimental results. A computational-based approach can also be seen in Church et al. (1994), in which the verbs request and ask for are compared in terms of substitutability. Stubbs (1996) first adopted semantic prosody to distinguish English near-synonyms. Partington (1998), Xiao, and McEnery (2006), too, use collocation and semantic prosody to examine near-synonyms. Semantic prosody is best investigated initially through eyeball inspection of KWIC concordances of the word(s) in question, but once the researcher thinks he has identified a semantic prosody, a more detailed, quantitative assessment will be needed.

## 4. Relevant Studies of Near-Synonym Semantic Prosodies

### 4.1 Relevant Studies of Western Scholars

Stubbs (1995) examined 40000 instances of cause with the help of the Cobulid corpus and discovered cause exhibits a negative tendency towards semantic prosody. On the other hand, providing tends to co-occur with positive states of affairs such as assistance, funds, opportunities, etc.

Partington (1998) conducted a cross-linguistic study of semantic prosody by comparing near synonyms in English and Italian. The English word impressive and the Italian word impressionante are similar in spelling and meaning. However, Partington discovered that impressive exhibits positive semantic prosody by co-occurring with words such as awe-inspiring and awe-inspiring.

Xiao and McEnery (2006) conducted a comparative study of the semantic prosody of near synonyms in English and Chinese. The near synonyms are the consequence group, the cause group, and price vs. daijia. They concluded that the Chinese equivalents are "more sharply divided between the clearly negative and positive ends of the continuum".

Lemma may have various collocations and semantic prosodies, but "Chinese does not have a rich morphology that can influence collocation and semantic prosody in this manner" (ibid.).

### 4.2 Relevant Studies of Chinese Scholars

Wei first introduced three research methods for semantic prosody in 2002. He states that research methods for semantic prosodies adopt a data-driven approach and colligation, with the observation of massive authentic linguistic evidence, to reveal hidden meanings and principles. Since then, semantic prosody has aroused big attention among Chinese researchers. Some findings of semantic prosodies of near synonyms in China will be listed in the following.

Pan and Feng (2000) noted that synonyms can be differentiated based on frequency, semantic differences, and semantic prosody by examining the semantic prosody of synonyms: cause and lead to. They discovered that cause typically collocates with negative states of affairs such as failure, disease, and death, whereas lead to typically collocates with positive states of affairs. Thus, the primary distinction between the synonyms is the difference in semantic prosody, which co-occurs with both positive and negative words, such as great success and death.

Sun (2004) examined the semantic prosodies of synonymous adjectives, rather and quite, of Chinese EFL learners using a learner corpus (CLEC) and three English corpora-LOB, COBUILD, and JDEST），indicating significant differences between Chinese EFL learners and

English native speakers.

Zhang and Liu (2005) proposed three ways to differentiate English synonyms: 1) their distributions across different registers; 2) their significant collocates and the MI value and Z score between synonyms and their collocates; and 3) their collocational behaviours and semantic prosodies with regard to certain colligational frameworks, with the third one based on semantic prosody.

Yang Chunhua (2010) also conducted a comparative study on the four synonyms win, gain, earn, and obtain between the colonizers in BNC and Chinese English learners in CLEC. Her research reveals that there is no statistically significant difference in the negative semantic connotations of win, gains, earn, and obtain. As for positive prosodies，in BNC, gain, win, obtain, and earn are in descending order of positive semantic prosody, whereas in CLEC, the order is gain, obtain, win, and gain.

Zhang (2013) conducted a diachronic study on the four intensifiers awfully, terribly, dreadfully, and horribly. He demonstrated that over time, semantic prosodies have diverged, to varying degrees, from the negative pole of the semantic continuum and have come to collocate with items with neutral and even positive connotations. Louw's (1993) theory that meaning can "rub off" on another word through habitual collocation can explain this linguistic phenomenon.

Numerous other comparative studies of the semantic prosodies of near synonyms in China reveal, not surprisingly, that Chinese EFL learners lack a comprehensive understanding of the colligation, collocation, and semantic prosody of these two words.

## 5. Conclusions and Implications

From the studies reviewed, it is evident that semantic prosody has demonstrated a great capacity for distinguishing near synonyms over the past two decades, and that more and more scholars in China and abroad are conducting fruitful research on semantic prosodies of near synonyms. Near synonyms are similar in denotative meaning but differ in semantic prosody. Consequently, people can distinguish near synonyms based on their discrepancies in semantic prosody. Since semantic prosody is inaccessible to human intuition, it is necessary to conduct empirical studies to gain an understanding of semantic prosody. As ESL or EFL learners' intuition of the target language differs from that of native speakers, it is less reliable and therefore cannot help learners master the semantic prosody of a lexical item. In the case of semantic prosodies, ESL or EFL learners are dealing with forms that are functional, attitudinal, and pragmatic rather than a pure lexical items. Even though significant progress has been made, there are still gaps in current research.

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