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Collocations and semantic prosody
Abstract

Unlike many other investigations of semantic prosody, where individual words and small groups of words are focussed, the present study attempts a more global approach, where the starting-point is semantically unconditioned. The questions addressed are

- (a) whether a formally rather than semantically selected range of word combinations will give an idea of the frequency of semantic prosody;
- (b) whether prosodies are primarily positive or negative;
- (c) how non-compliance of individual occurrences with expected semantic prosodies are to be explained.

The aim of this paper is thus to consider the phenomenon "semantic prosody" in a more general perspective than is usually done. The basis for the study is material from the CobuildDirect Corpus. After a brief presentation of the term "semantic prosody", some discussion is given over to the problem of defining a body of material that would be suitable for a study with global aspirations.

The experiment that the paper describes makes use of the relatively infrequent pattern verb + bare noun, where the noun is the direct object (e.g. *abandon ship*). The pattern, though infrequent in relation to competing patterns such as verb + determiner + noun (*abandon the ship*), nevertheless turned out to be represented by a great number of collocations, from which interesting observations could be made, observations that, it is suggested, often have a more general validity.

The objects of the verb + object collocations were classified as positive, negative or neutral. On the basis of the rate and type of the emotional colouring of their objects, the verbs were assigned a "prosodic index"; they were subsequently divided into a "prosodic" and a "nonprosodic" group in accordance with the occurrence of positive-negative polarity in their objects.

When infrequent collocations had been removed, the "prosodic" verbs were ranged along a positive-negative scale, which made it possible to compare them and to draw conclusions of a general nature with regard to their prosodic strength and polarity. Somewhat surprisingly, positive polarity appeared to be more in evidence than negative polarity. It also turned out that the majority of verbs were at some distance from the end-points of the scale, which would support the argument that prosodic meaning is to be seen as a relative, or probabilistic, phenomenon rather than as a plus-or-minus one.