A Brief Review of Studies on Near Synonyms

NI Xiu-jing

College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, 200093, Shanghai, P.R. of China

This paper first points out the deficiency of listing synonyms by some dictionaries, such as the Cobuild Dictionary and Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of Synonyms, which, however, have actually failed in distinguishing between some synonyms. Then, the paper attempts to solve the problem by providing a brief review of relevant studies in the past few decades on near synonyms with a focus on differences in denotation, connotation and semantic prosody of words as well as various definitions of semantic prosody and related researches. By evaluating the relevant research and defintions of semantic prosody, the review concluded that the alleged dictionaries would be perfected with the provision of connotations or semantic prosodies for near synonyms before suggesting out the focus of future and further research into near synonyms.

Keywords: review, near synonyms, denotation, connotation and semantic prosody

I. Introduction

The term 'synonymy' refers to a relationship of identical meaning between two words (Jackson & Amvela, 2000, p. 92). Synonymy is "one of the least understood semantic relations" (Taylor, 2003, p. 263). However, very few and perhaps no words in English were completely the same and interchangeable in all contexts. Most synonyms in English had the same general sense and were not always interchangeable in some contexts (Jackson, 1988, pp. 65-68; Tognini-Bonelle, 2001, p. 34). The emphasis on the denotational meanings of words rather than their usage made the provision of synonyms in the Cobuild Dictionary a potential trap for the learners (ibid, p. 34).

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of Synonyms claims synonyms might be differentiated in one or more ways such as implications, connotations and applications (Merriam-Webster, 1984, p. 25a). However, with obvious cases of circular definitions, the dictionary just gives simple explanations to words or provides a list of synonyms, making it difficult for learners to find such connotations or applications somewhere in the dictionary. Jackson (1988, p. 35) discussed whether or not dictionaries could be trusted as authorities on giving word definitions and reached the conclusion that they could not. Standard dictionary definition for foreign learners usually failed to include the connotation of words or the associations of a word, which a native speaker rather than a non-native one knows (Bullon, 1990, p. 27). Obviously, the practice of the reliance on synonyms rather than more detailed definitions would not be adequate owing to the absence of one-to-one meaning or usage equivalence (Ohtake & Morren, 2002, p. 2). Bally argued that synonyms with the same core meaning might have different emotional

NI Xiu-jing, Associate Professor of English, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology. His academic interests include English literature, English teaching and Corpus Linguistics.

values such as attitudes and esthetic values directly associated with the word or expression and effects based on a speech environment (Rigotti & Rocci, 2006, p. 440). These emotional values may well be connotations. However, in Merriam-Webster, a learner could hardly find the connotations of such verbs as ***attempt*** or ***try***. Some corpus-based dictionaries, such as Oxford Learner's Thesaurus: a dictionary of synonyms (OLT) and Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (the 4th Edition or the fifth Edition, the attached CD or DVD with a Longman Activator) (LDOCE), might be helpful to learners. But there might be some faults with those dictionaries. A case in point is the failure of both dictionaries to distinguish ***totally*** from ***completely***. There is no detailed information except that OLT, treating ***totally*** and ***completely*** as synonyms, the former is the most frequent in spoken American English and the latter is the most frequently used in written English. When it comes to LDOCE, neither the fourth nor the fifth edition succeeds in telling them apart except that both editions have listed some collocates from the corpus. Therefore, even in those corpus-based dictionaries, the readers could hardly find enough satisfactory information for distinguishing separate words of each synonymous pair. Conventional dictionaries provide very little extensive lexicographic information for discriminating among synonyms. Unfortunately, lexicographers have traditionally just provided comprehensive lists of words of the language rather than a comprehensive list of senses of a language for distinguishing the separate words of each, which has failed to satisfy learners' needs (DiMarco & Hirst, 1995, p. 4).

Thus, the relevant research of synonym differentiation in the dictionary may have left a gap. This study is intended to give a brief review of the past few decades on near synonyms to find the proper way of discriminating between synonyms.

II. A Brief Review of Relevant Studies on Near Synonyms

1. Denotation, Connotation and Semantic Prosody of Words

Semantics distinguishes between two kinds of meaning: denotative and connotative. Connotation is a kind of associative or attitudinal meaning based on a relation between the word and the speaker/hearer (Stubbs, 1995, pp. 23-55). Differences between connotations of terms with similar denotational meanings were especially delicate and difficult for learners to grasp. The difficulty of finding differences in connotations in a single or short sentence might be otherwise solved by observing computer concordance lines in large written texts of a corpus (Partington, 1998, cited in Corrigan, 2004). Here, it is necessary to distinguish semantic prosody from connotation. "Semantic prosody and connotation share an attitudinal/affective attribute" (Stewart, 2010, p. 29). However, the difference between semantic prosody and connotation lay in the fact that the former was a "strongly collocational" phenomenon, which could be inferred through observation of a word's habitual co-occurrences; the latter was the semantic associations people made with the word, without considering co-occurrence factors (Louw, 2000, as cited in Stewart, 2010, p. 14). Connotation, formed on the base of the word, was often thought to be more evident, less hidden, than semantic prosody due to the fact that "the latter is defined as expressed over stretches of discourse" (Morley & Partington, 2009, p. 151). The failure of lexicographers to deal satisfactorily with semantic prosodies might have resulted from their tendency to remain 'hidden' to the lexicographers' 'naked eye' (as cited in Partinton, 1998, p. 68). Raw text corpora was one source of discriminating between synonyms (Edmonds, 1999, pp. 25-26).

2. Various Definitions of Semantic Prosody and Related Researches

The term 'semantic prosody' was first used by Louw (1993) but it was Sinclair (1987) who first studied the phenomenon, and developed the concept in later work (Sinclair, 1996, 1998). Semantic prosody has also been studied by Stubbs (1995, 2001), Tognini-Bonelli (2001), Partington (1998), Stewart (2010), among many others. These researchers have given slightly different definitions and the areas where they researched were not completely the same.

The lexical items *happen* and *set in* co-occurred habitually with unpleasant events in the early Cobuild project and many uses of words and phrases showed a tendency to occur in a certain semantic environment where words collocated with each other, creating a certain semantic prosody (Sinclair, 1991, pp. 74-75). Semantic prosody was defined as "a consistent aura of meaning with which a form is imbued by its collocates" (Louw, 1993. p. 157). Louw used the term semantic prosody (negative prosodies and positive prosodies) to describe the collocation phenomena (Louw, 1993). The primary function of semantic prosody was to express the attitude of its speaker or writer towards some pragmatic situation (Louw 2000, p. 9; Tognini-Bonelli, 2001, p. 111). Therefore, semantic prosody might have the pragmatic function.

The node and collocates were semantically related and semantic prosody was classified into positive, negative or neutral (Stubbs, 2002, p. 225). Perhaps Stubbs preferred the term 'discourse prosody' which put strong emphasis on its attitudinal quality and creation of discourse coherence, describing the way in which certain seemingly neutral words could be perceived with positive or negative associations through frequent occurrences with particular collocations. The discourse prosody, expressing the speaker's attitude, was a feature extending over more than one unit in a linear string. Discourse prosodies tended to imply the speaker's reason for making the utterance (as cited in Stewart, 2010).

Hunston proposed semantic prosody was a meaning transferred or spread from its environment (i.e. its collocates) (as cited in Stewart, 2010). Obviously, in Hunston's view, there might be a special connection between the node and its collocates (i.e. a word or a phrase), which could transfer, spread, move, or disseminate the meaning of the collocates from one part of a context to another.

Partington found some words might have a positive, negative or neutral semantic prosody and examined the degree to which dictionaries catered or failed to cater for semantic prosody (Partington, 1998, pp. 65-78). Partington cited Cobuild 1987, which said of *peddler* "someone who is a peddler of particular ideas, often expresses these ideas to other people". Perhaps Partington was the first to have found the phenomenon of "prosody conflict" of the word *peddler* (1998, p. 71). Later, Partington (2004) further defined semantic prosody as a kind of evaluative meaning that "spread over a unit of language which potentially goes well beyond the single orthographic word and is much less evident to the naked eye" (Partington, 2004, pp. 131-132). The semantic prosody of many words might be studied by means of genre or domain (Partington, 2004, p. 153; Cheng, 2009, pp. 113-114). Hunston's research on semantic prosody was similar to that of Partington in terms of the register-specific nature of semantic prosodies. The word *cause*, which had been assigned an unfavourable prosody by other researchers (Stubbs, 1995, p. 27), might sometimes lose its associative meaning with negative evaluation in some contexts where the attitudinal meaning of a lexical item might be determined by other aspects of items in the immediate co-text (Hunston, 2007, p. 263; Morley & Partington 2009, p. 142). In other words, sometimes it was not completely safe to judge the evaluative meaning of semantic prosody of a node word from

the immediate context even if there was a high frequency of co-occurrence of the node with the immediate collocates. Sometimes people could find the semantic prosody from the immediate context. Sometimes people had to reflect on an extended context to gain the semantic prosody of a word or phrase.

The definition by Gavioli (2005, p. 46) was also worth mentioning, who thought somewhat like Sinclair, Louw, Stubbs and Hunston: "semantic prosody does not only have to do with the relationship between words, but it also involves the way words affect each other with their meanings". Semantic prosody was actually a collocational phenomenon, which created an aura of meaning capable of affecting the connotation of the node word.

To sum up, most of the researchers thought semantic prosody tended to have attitudinal or evaluative function. Those researchers were inclined to "consider semantic prosody to be the overall discourse function of a "unit of meaning" in text" (Morley, 2009) and the immediate context of a node word did not necessarily determine its semantic prosody. Researchers such as Partington, considered semantic prosody as the 'property' of an item which expressesed itself in patterns of co-occurrence with other items.

Semantic prosody, defined from the perspective of the attitudinal meaning of the collocates, focused on the contagion of connotative colouring: "semantic prosody refers to the spreading of connotational colouring beyond single word boundaries" (Partington, 1998, p. 68). Semantic prosody might not be explicitly associated with a binary distinction between positive and negative attitudinal meanings.

III. Conclusion

Here this review would like to attempt to summarize the various definitions above: semantic prosody, somewhat like connotation, was generally the writer's or the speaker's evaluative or attitudinal meaning; it was often hidden somewhere in the discourse and it, usually but not always, resulted from the interactions between a given node and its typical collocates; this kind of hidden meaning might be found in an extended context rather than always determined by the immediate context of a node word. Based on this review, a conclusion might be reached that the previous mentioned dictionaries would have been perfected with the provision of connotations or semantic prosodies for synonyms. Future and further research into near synonyms might be focused on how connotations might be provided in a dictionary and how near synonyms might be differentiated by discerning their semantic preference and semantic prosody.

References

Bullon, S. (1990). The treatment of connotation in learners' dictionaries. In T. Magay. et al. (Eds), Budalex'88 Proceedings. Papers from the *3rd international EURALEX Congress*, Budapest, 4-9. Retrieved from http://scholar.google.com

Cheng, W. (2009). Describing the extended meanings of lexical cohesion in a corpus of SARS spoken discourse. In J. Flowerdew & M. Mahlberg (Eds), *Lexical cohesion and corpus linguistics*. Amsterdam, Holland: John Benjamins. B. V.

Corrigan, R. (2004). The acquisition of word connotations: Asking 'What happened?' *Journal of Child Language*. Retrieved from http://scholar.google.com/scholar

DiMarco, C., & Hirst, G. (1995).*Usage notes as the basis for a representation of near-synonymy for lexical choice*. Retrieved from http://scholar.google.com/scholar

Edmonds, P. (1999). Semantic representations of near-synonyms for automatic lexical choice. Retrieved from http://scholar.google.com/scholar

Gavioli, L. (2005). *Exploring corpora for ESP learning*. Amsterdam, Holland: John Benjamins B.V.

Hunston, S. （2007）. Semantic prosody revisited. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics, 12*(2), 249-268.

Jackson, H. (1988). Words and their meaning (pp: 35-73). London: Longman.

Jackson, H., & Amvela, E. Z. (2000). *Words, meaning and vocabulary: An introduction to modern English lexicology*. Trowbridge, UK: The Cromwell Press

Louw, B. (1993). Irony in the text or insincerity in the writer?—The diagnostic potential of semantic prosodies. In M. Baker, G. Francis & E. Tognini-Bonelli (Eds.), *Text and technology: In honour of John Sinclair* (pp. 157-176). Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Louw, B. (2000). Contextual prosodic theory: Bring semantic prosodies to life. In H.S.C. Heffer & G. Fox (Eds.), *Words in context: a tribute to john Sinclair on his retirement*. Birmingham, University of Birmingham. Retrieved from http://scholar.google.com

Merriam-Webster, (1984), Introductory matter. In Merriam-Webster (Ed.), *Edotor, Merriam-Webster's dictionary of synonyms (4a-31a)*. Springfield, Massachusetts, USA: Merriam-Webster, Incorporated.

Morley, J., & Partington, A. (2009). A few frequently asked questions about semantic—or evaluative—prosody. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics, 14*(2), 139-158. Doi: 10.1075/ijcl.14.2.01mor

Ohtake, H., & Morren, B. (2002). *Bridging the gap between dictionaries and learners: From bilingual to monolingual dictionaries*. Retrieved from: http://scholar.google.com/

Partington, A. (1998). *Patterns and meanings: Using corpora for English language research and teaching*. Amsterdam, John Benjamins.

Partington, A. (2004). "Utterly content in each other's company" semantic prosody and semantic preference. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics, 9*(1), 131-156. Amsterdam, Holland: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Rigotti. E., & Rocci, A. (2006). *Denotation versus connotation*. https://doi.org/10.1016/B0-08-044854-2/01404-8

Sinclair, J. (1987). *Looking up*. London: Collins.

Sinclair, J. (1991). *Corpus, concordance, collocation*. Oxford University Press.

Sinclair, J. (1996). The search for units of meaning. *Textus, 9*, 75-106.

Sinclair, J. (1998). The lexical item. In E. Weigand (Ed.), *Contrastive lexical semantics* (pp. 1-24). Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Sinclair, J. (2004). *Trust the Text. Lnaguage, corpus, discourse*. Rouledge: London

Stewart, D. (2010). *Semantic prosody: A critical evaluation*. Taylor & Francis

Stubbs, M. (2001). *Words and phrases*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Stubbs, M. (2002). Two quantitative methods of studying phraseology in English. *International journal of corpus linguistics, 7*(2), 215-244.

Stubbs. M. (1995). Collocations and semantic profiles: On the cause of the trouble with quantitative methods. *Functions of Language, 2*(1), 23-55.

Taylor, J. R. (2003). Near synonyms as co-extensive categories: 'High' and 'tall' revisited. *Language Sciences, 25*(3), 263-284. Retrieved from http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0388000102000189.

Tognini-Bonelli, E. (2001). *Corpusl linguistics at work*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.