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Connotation, Semantic Prosody, Syntagmatic Associative Meaning: Three Levels of Meaning?

Summary

The paper discusses associative meaning, i.e. one existing over and above the customary denotation, specifically the type arising from a text segment larger than a single word. The idea is of fairly recent origin, focuses on negative and positive semantic effects, and stems from corpus-based findings. Dictionaries are uneven in their treatment of this aspect of meaning. It is suggested that research on this complex phenomenon of associative meaning might be conducted on any of three levels: single-word items (connotation), multiword items (semantic prosody), and broader if vaguer co(n)text (syntagmatic meaning).

Key words: connotation, semantic prosody, syntagmatic meaning, collocational prosody, collocation, multiword lexical item

Konotacija, semantična prozodija in sintagmatski pomen: Tri ravni asociativnega pomena?

Povzetek

Članek obravnava več vrst asociativnega pomena, tj. tistega, ki obstaja poleg standardnega denotativnega in se pojavlja v besedilih v kombinacijah vsaj dveh besed. Ideja o tem pomenu je sorazmerno nova; ukvarja se predvsem z negativnimi in pozitivnimi pomenskimi učinki, prihaja pa s področja korpusnih raziskav. Slovarji ta pomen obravnavajo neenotno. Avtor predlaga, da bi ta kompleksen pojav raziskovali na treh ravneh: v posamičnih enobesednih leksemih (konotacija), v večbesednih enotah (semantična prozodija) in v širšem – četudi manj jasno opredeljenem – sobesedilu (sintagmatski pomen).

Ključne besede: konotacija, semantična prozodija, sintagmatski pomen, kolokacijska prozodija, kolokacija, večbesedna leksična enota

Connotation, Semantic Prosody, Syntagmatic Associative Meaning: Three Levels of Meaning?

1. Introduction: Collocational/phraseological meaning beyond denotation

When looking at collocations as a pervasive phenomenon demonstrating and powerfully illustrating the functioning of a very significant aspect of the functioning of what has come to be known as the co-selection principle, one is struck by the fact that – unlike irregular verbs, tense usage, passives and relatives, reported speech, relative clauses, conditional sentences, and all that jazz – collocations often do not lend themselves to the familiar and charmingly simple right-or-wrong type of assessment. Indeed, it makes a lot of sense to consider the issue in relative terms, basically as one of **lexical acceptability**[1] (Ball 1987, 188), meaning that few collocations can be firmly excluded as impossible, as they range from the unquestionably acceptable to the extremely unlikely, with context often being all-important.[2] While collocations are all indicative of one type of varied patterns of mutual choice, illustrating the vagaries of combinability and its restrictions, it does seem that in collocability **semantic factors** are usually involved as well, even though they are sometimes quite slight or simply difficult to pinpoint. Accordingly, the search for collocational (a.k.a collocative) meaning regarded either as a distinct collocational contribution to lexical meaning recognized in single-word items or even as a discrete type of lexical meaning[3] has resulted in several original suggestions arguing convincingly for the existence of such a meaning. These include the fairly restricted – more specifically, one restricted to collocations – concept of **semantic tailoring** (Allerton 1984), used to refer to the process in which the polysemy of the adjectival collocator is "narrowed down" or "trimmed" by the semantics of the base noun (e.g. *an outstanding success* ['izjemen uspeh'] vs. *an outstanding debt* ['neporavnan dolg'], or *regular customer* ['reden gost', 'stalna stranka'], *regular gas* ['navadni bencin'], *regular duties* ['običajne dolžnosti'], *regular heartbeat* ['enakomeren srčni utrip'], *regular verb* ['pravilni glagol'], *regular features* ['pravilne poteze'], *regular army* ['poklicna vojska']). Another recent idea revolves around a less clearcut but intriguing semantic concept usually dubbed **semantic prosody**, but also variously referred to as **collocational prosody**, **discourse prosody**, or as **pragmatic prosody** (cf. e.g. Stubbs 2002, 65–6,

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1   James (1998, 66 74) provides a detailed discussion of *acceptability*, regarding it as a practical notion that is determined by the use or usability of the form in question: When non-linguistic factors militate against the use of a form, we attribute this to unacceptability (ibid., p. 66). Randolph Quirk discussed the concept in a pioneering lecture delivered as early as 1965 (cf. Quirk 1966). The term also has a one-page entry in David Crystal's (2003, 4 5) *Dictionary of Linguistics & Phonetics*.

2   The effect of an **unfamiliar collocation**, as Quirk observed back in the 1960s, may thus be one of diminished effectiveness in communication. He suggested that when confronted with the task of reading with understanding (or writing to dictation) the two grammatically identical and meaningful English sentences, viz. (1) *The table was of polished mahogany and it gleamed in the bright light.* (2) *The car was of corrugated plastic and it swayed in the ploughed sand.*, sentence (1) can probably be assimilated faster and with less error than (2) because *table* collocates with *polished mahogany* (and *mahogany* with *polished*) more often than *car* with *corrugated plastic* (or *plastic* with *corrugated*); polished mahogany is often said to gleam and lights are often described as bright. This implies that "when grammar is a constant, ready comprehensibility may still vary sharply, according to expectedness or unexpectedness in the selection or collocation of words" (Quirk 1968, 234 5).

3   Linguists have suggested different kinds of lexical meaning; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (2004, 456 60), for example, recognizes encyclopedic, connotative and affective, stylistic, categorial, collocative, contrastive, and implicative kinds of lexical meaning, plus its cultural aspects and aesthetic aspects (onomatopoeia).

and Stubbs 1995a).[4] In a pioneering paper, the concept has been defined as "the consistent aura of meaning with which a form is imbued by its collocates" (Louw 1993, 157). This paper focuses on the latter phenomenon, thus disregarding other possible ways of exploring the diverse effects of very real – if somewhat elusive – semantic features of words arising from their being frequently used together in a phraseologically salient, or indeed syntagmatically significant, fashion.[5]

2. Semantic prosody: What it is

The term **semantic prosody** was apparently first coined by John Sinclair (Partington 1998, 66–7)[6] to describe the phenomenon of a **favorable or unfavorable connotation** being contained not in a single item, but rather being expressed by that item in association with others, as e.g. in *to happen* and *to set in*, both of which are habitually associated with unpleasant events. It is "a kind of attitudinal or pragmatic meaning" (Sinclair 2004b, 23) that a lexical item has in addition to "the familiar classificatory meaning of the regular dictionary." The concept has been defined also along the following lines: "[A] word may be said to have a particular semantic prosody if it can be shown to co-occur typically with other words that belong to a particular semantic set" (Hunston and Francis 2000, 137), as "a feature which extends over more than one unit in a linear string". Moreover, "discourse prosodies express speaker attitude" (Stubbs 2002, 65). Finally, Warren (2005) suggests that it is the combinatory restrictions of words that can also be seen in terms of semantic prosodies: "That is to say, a particular word typically combines with words of a particular type of – normally evaluative – meaning which is not warranted by generalised meanings." The concept seems to have been introduced to the public by Bill Louw in 1993, with Sinclair having originally suggested it to Louw (Whitsitt 2005, 283). It is not yet to be found recorded in the standard English dictionaries of linguistics terms such as those by Crystal (2003) and Matthews (2007).

Semantic prosody indicates the phenomenon of words combining not just with chosen other words, but with **chosen meanings**, thus displaying their semantic prosodies (cf. Tognini-Bonelli 2001, 111–6) that appear to be mostly either **positive** or **negative**. In line with this observation, Partington (1998, 66–8) notes that *to commit* and *rife* both collocate with items of an unpleasant nature, so that the unfavorable connotation extends over the entire collocation. Similarly, *to set in* often signals that some undesirable process is being described. Semantic prosody "refers to the spreading of connotational colouring beyond single word boundaries" (ibid., 68) which, importantly, can only be found in certain words. In a broader framework, the term "reflects the [neo-Firthian] realisation that lexical items become infused with particular connotations due to their typical linguistic environment." Partington (1998, 66) regards it as "one particularly subtle

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4   Importantly, these terms need not be used as synonyms but may indicate different albeit related semantic phenomena (see below).

5   Thus e.g. Sinclair (1994, 23 4), in focusing on the *overall* effect of the frequency of co-occurrence, points out that the meaning of words chosen together may differ from their independent meanings in that they are at least partly **delexicalized**. This is the necessary correlate of co-selection. There is a strong tendency to delexicalization in the normal phraseology of modern English; e.g. in *physical assault/damage*, etc., the meaning associated with the adjective is duplicated in one facet of the way we would normally understand the noun. Next, in *scientific analysis*/assessment, etc., the adjective is fairly seriously delexicalized: All it is doing is dignifying the following word slightly. Finally, *full account/range*, etc., are types of reassurance more than anything else, while in *general trend/ opinion*, etc., the adjective is simply underlining part of the meaning of the noun.

6   Partington (1998, 68) points out that the term *prosody* was borrowed from J.R. Firth, who used it to refer to phonological coloring which spreads beyond segmental boundaries.

and interesting aspect of expressive connotation which can be highlighted by corpus data." It can be a crucial aspect of an item's lexical meaning, underscoring the contemporary conviction that meaning resides in typical combinations of lexical choices or "**collocability**" on the one hand, and typical combinations of grammatical choices or "**colligation**" on the other (Siepmann 2006, 9). But does this mean that semantic prosodies are merely a matter of a single-word lexical item spreading its own connotative influence, in the process imposing certain logico-semantic restrictions, on to its surroundings?

3. Review of literature

The concept of *semantic prosody* has been recently discussed at length, chiefly by post-Firthian corpus linguists following largely in Sinclair's footsteps, as part of the awareness that "we do not communicate by stringing together individual words, but rather by means of semi-prefabricated lexico-grammatical units" (Siepmann 2006, 9). These researchers include, chronologically and selectively, Louw (1993), Stubbs (1995b, 246 and 2002, 105–8, 198–206), Bublitz (1996, 11), Partington (1998, 65-78 and 2004), Rundell (2000), Cotterill (2001), Hunston (2001), Channel (1999), Schmitt and Carter (2004, 7–9, 20), Whitsitt (2005), and Dilts and Newman (2006, 233), with Hunston (2007) contributing a recent reassessment. Most of the work done on the topic has been in the monolingual mode, with English being for the most part heavily favored; however, there is an English and Chinese perspective on the phenomenon with reference to near-synonyms provided by Xiao and McEnery (2006), while Sardinha (2000) focuses on English and Portuguese. An early cross-linguistic study of this kind is Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1996). Louw's own (1993) definition of the concept, not taken up by all later researchers,[7] is that if several different words all sharing the same semantic trait are frequently used with another word, meaning will be passed, over time, from that group of words to the other word. Louw (1993) himself studied *to be bent on something*, which has a negative prosody (meaning 'to be completely determined to do something' but suggesting also 'something bad').[8] The key idea is that "constant proximity between words can lead to promiscuity wherein the meaning of one word or words will be 'rubbed off' onto another" (Whitsitt 2005, 284). Nowadays, the concept is so important that even certain textbooks treat it at some length (e.g. McEnery et al. 2006, 82–5, 148–51, passim).

4. Semantic prosody: Examples

For some reason, most authors seem to have identified a number of instances of **"negative" prosody** and far fewer cases **of "positive" prosody**, witness e.g. the frequently cited cases of *to set in* (Sinclair 1987, 155–6, passim), *to cause* (typically collocating with *problems, trouble, damage, death, pain,* and *disease*) as contrasted with *to provide* (typically collocating with *facilities, information, services, aid, assistance,* and *money*) (cf. Stubbs 1995a, also summarized in Schmitt

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7   As Whitsitt (2005, 284 5) observes, Sinclair (1996, 87) emphasized the pragmatic function of semantic prosody, thus dramatically reducing the importance of the semantic dimension as well as the idea of semantic transfer. Stubbs (2002, 65 6) seems to have abandoned both the concept and the term, preferring to use the term *discourse prosody* said to express "speaker attitude."

8   In his oft-cited paper, Louw points out that writers sometimes diverge from "the expected profiles of semantic prosodies," thus upsetting the normal collocational patterns. He suggests that when they do so consciously, it is usually with ironic intent.

2000, 78-9), *dealings* (Partington 1998, 72–4), and to *happen* and *to slump* as in *slumped in front of the TV* (Rundell 2000).[9] Thus e.g. the unusualness of the combination *utterly content* vs. *perfectly content* results from the fact that *utterly* typically restricts the choice of its collocates to words with some negative semantic content (hence the title of Partington's [2004] paper). Similarly, if something is *fraught with* something rather than being *full of* it, we can expect something negative (problems, difficulties, risks, ambiguities, etc.) following the preposition. It might be relevant to try and identify, in a cross-linguistic framework of EFL writing/speaking, recurrent instances of **inappropriate semantic prosodies**, as for instance in *to make an *unforgettable mistake.*

To take another look at the functioning of the semantic "**prosodic constraint,**" the verb *to harbor* ('to keep/have') is likewise largely restricted to something undesirable (such as doubts, fears, bad thoughts, and the like).[10] The same reasoning, but in a lot stronger version, applies to the verbs *to wreak* ('to cause problems or damage') and *to lurk somewhere* (not only 'to wait there quietly and secretly' but also 'in order to do something wrong'). Next, something that is *mounting* is not merely 'gradually increasing' but is typically used about things that cause problems or trouble. Also, one is *doomed to extinction/failure* etc. but *destined for a successful career.* This example, incidentally, suggests the possibility of semantic prosody being the result of grammatical (rather than lexical) collocability, or – to use alternative terminology – of colligational links, as in e.g. *to reek of* [something], 'to have a strong bad smell' in both literal and metaphorical senses. But then in such cases the role of the preposition may be difficult to determine in prosodic terms. Further, *to arouse* in one of its patterns (but not all!) demonstrates a close association with "negative" nominal heads such as *hostility, anger, resentment,* and *suspicion.* McEnery et al. (2006, 83–4) list a selection of items studied recently for their semantic prosody: *happen, set in; personal price* vs. *personal* and *price* individually; *cause, commit, peddle/peddler, dealings, end up verbing, a recipe for, get oneself verbed, fan the flame, signs of, ripe for, underage* and *teenager(s), sit through, bordering on*; *provide, career.* All but the last two – which do have a positive prosody – carry an unfavorable meaning. Could this mean that negative semantic prosody is more pervasive than its positive offshoot?

Again, while "there can be no doubt that good-bad evaluation is an important (and previously neglected) component of lexical analysis" (Hanks 1997),[11] it is a fact that not all lexical items are assessable on such a scale. Hanks (ibid.) mentions *twig* and *telephone directory* as having no good-bad semantic value, and goes on to point out that, whereas *to incite* has a negative semantic prosody in English (you incite people to bad actions), the evidence of the British National Corpus suggests that *to urge* and *to encourage* are neither positive nor negative, but neutral.

9   Sometimes, the existence of semantic prosody of a given lexical item is restricted, as it were. Thus e.g. Rundell (2000) points out that the generally negative semantic prosody of *happen* is not universal: Where the nature of the event is made explicit (by adding an adjective after the pronoun), the situation is just as likely to be "good" as "bad": *waiting for something exciting to happen, something magical has happened, nothing interesting ever happens here.* But where the pronoun stands alone, things usually look grim: *don't let anything happen, if anything happened to her mother, nothing happened to either X or Y, if something happened to X,* etc.

10   But the question is whether this results from the connotative aspects of the meaning of the verb *to harbor* itself, which should thus be seen as being responsible for the semantic restrictions, or from its typical combination with the "negative" words just cited, in which case the situation is one of a syntagm modifying the meaning of at least one of its constituents.

11   Roulet's (2007) glossary enters the term *axiological lexicon* and defines it as one that "is made of all the lexemes which express a positive (for instance, *wonderful, excellent*) or negative (*awful, ugly*) point of view of the speaker/writer."

Furthermore, there are less commonly adduced examples of semantic prosody to be found in the language, some of them illustrating instances of the "phraseological-only" semantic prosody, that is, one where the prosodic meaning is necessarily associated with a multiword item or a pattern rather than any of its constituents in isolation or a single-word lexical item. These include fixed expressions such as *to blow your own trumpet* (BrE)/*horn* (AmE), which, according to the *Longman* (Summers 2005) means 'to talk a lot about your own achievements' – but then comes a dash and a note of warning: used to show disapproval. There are also relevant phrasal items with "slots" to be filled, for instance one sense of the noun *catalog*, as employed in the pattern *a catalog of ___*, namely one that is virtually always associated with something undesirable. The *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Walter 2005) has captured this sense, illustrating it nicely with the example *a catalogue of disasters/errors/crimes/complaints*. Similarly, *the same old ___* (*story, excuse, faces*, etc.) has a negative prosody, connoting chiefly boredom. Unfortunately, even the best dictionaries are not always successful in capturing this rather elusive aspect of meaning: for example, the prosodically sensitive, as it were, advanced learners' *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Summers 2005), defines *what with sth* as follows: 'used to introduce a list of reasons that have made something happen or made someone feel in a particular way,' thus failing to indicate its negative prosody. Admittedly, the example given does suggest it, but dictionary users surely cannot be expected to conclude from a single example – aside from the well-known fact that examples of use are often virtually ignored by many dictionary users – that the prosody illustrated with it is obligatory.

5. Semantic prosody: Stemming from what exactly?

5.1 Single words

Importantly, as the above examples suggest, semantic prosodies do not necessarily constitute a semantic feature arising exclusively or chiefly from syntagmatic-collocational links. On the contrary – it is an element of meaning that need not be generated strictly on the phraseological, or more narrowly collocational, level, witness e.g. *to cause, to provide, to harbor, to wreak*, and *utter(ly)* as exemplified above. This fact is indicated in some definitions of the concept, e.g. that the most common understanding of the term *semantic prosody* seems to be "that some WORDS, or WORD GROUPS, occur in contexts which are understood by the researcher to have 'positive' or 'negative' nuances, or *prosodies*" (Dilts and Newman 2006, 233 [my emphasis]). In fact, the distinction is often made between the familiar **connotation**, a term usually used with reference to the associative/attitudinal/evaluative/emotive meaning of a single-word item, and the more recent **semantic prosody** referring to the associative/attitudinal/evaluative/emotive meaning of a multiword item. This type of analysis may include an entire set of semantically related single-word items: For example, among the adjectives expressing the concept of FULL, *complete* (and several "neutral-to-positive" synonyms such as *absolute, total, whole, entire, thoroughgoing, unqualified*) can be contrasted with the "*utter* group" comprising *utter* as well as *downright, rank, arrant, consummate* and *unmitigated*, in that the latter group will typically precede a noun indicating something undesirable (for more along these lines, cf. Gabrovšek 2005, 150, 174–5).

5.2 Word patterns, affixes, and collocations

Unless one observes the terminological distinction between *connotation* and *semantic prosody*, one can, then, legitimately observe that semantic prosody is observable, first, in certain single-word items, but at least occasionally as used in certain patterns only (as in *a catalog of ___* referred to above). Secondly, one can find similar semantic features even in certain affixes such as the adjective-forming suffix *-ridden*, which refers to 'something unpleasant or harmful', as in *crime-ridden* and *guilt-ridden* (Rundell 2007, 1280), or *mosquito-ridden* and *disease-ridden* (Summers 2005, 1414). Also, the suffix *-ish* can be, inter alia, 'the ending of some adjectives that show disapproval: *selfish*' (Summers 2005) or *clownish* and *mannish*. Third, semantic prosody is clearly present also in multiword sequences only, including those in which it is not to be found in the individual items making them up, e.g. *day after day* and *day in day out* mean not only 'continuously for a long time' but also 'in a way that is annoying or boring' (Summers 2005). Note, incidentally, that there seems to be no trace of such prosody in e.g. *from day to day* or *day by day*. Perhaps straddling the single-word and multiword-item situations, a look at the ways in which the concept of (COMPLETELY) FULL OF can be expressed in English, as shown in works such as *Longman Language Activator*™ (Summers 1993) and the online-only WordNet, reveals a number of options some of which display elements of semantic prosody (in the first place *rife with, overrun with/by,* and *fraught with*), but in this particular case (also) on the level of grammatical collocations:

- (a tree trunk) **alive with** (ants) {´full of people, animals, or things that are moving´}
- (roofs) **bristling with** (antennas)
- (a garden) **abounds with** (flowers)
- (a place) **teeming with** (theater-goers)
- (a house) **overflowing with** (guests)
- (slums) **rife with** (crime)
- (a book) **rich in** (ideas)
- (air) **thick with** (snow)
- (an area) **overrun with/by** (locusts)
- (an incident) **fraught with** (danger)
- (silence) **pregnant with** (suspense)
- (a desk) **flooded with** (applications)
- (a book) **replete with** (diagrams)
- (a museum) **swarming with** (tourists)
- (a person) **brimming [over] with** (confidence)
- (a person) **brimful of** (ambition).

Admittedly, it is difficult to prove that in such cases semantic prosody is to some extent dependent also on the preposition following the adjectival or participial head. In fact, in such cases prosodies would rather seem to be part of the lexical meaning of the adjectival/participial head, and thus be regarded as connotation, meaning that the noun following the preposition is selected simply in logical terms, in line with (the restrictions imposed by) its meaning. Indeed, this type of analysis can be done also with single-word near-synonyms, such as *to persist* and *to persevere*, which may have similar cognitive meanings, but widely different prosodic behavior (Partington 1998, 77).

5.3 Casting the net wider

It is quite hard even to suggest with any precision where the starting point, as it were, of this elusive semantic phenomenon might be located, that is, whether semantic prosody is to be regarded as a – largely context-free – feature arising either from

a) the single-word lexical item itself or even an affix,
b) its collocations,
c) idiomatic combinations formed with the item in question,
d) its wider patterns/patterning,
e) its typical contexts,

or indeed from some conceivable combination of these factors.

Different cases seem to call for different interpretations. Thus e.g. *never in all my life* must be selected as a fixed expression whenever we wish to emphasize how bad something was (Summers 2005, 1104). This suggests that some prosodies only come out into the open, as it were, when a "neutral" item is used phraseologically. A similar phenomenon, by the way, exists in a grammar-based framework: the *Cambridge Grammar* (*http://www.cambridge.org/elt/cge/cge/cambridge_ international_corpus.asp*) informs us that the passive voice with the verb *to get* is used much more often to convey 'bad news' than 'good news' (e.g. *He got arrested. | We got charged 20 pounds too much.*).[12] In any case, one can also find cases where the neutrality of the base item is at least questionable, as in *to cause* – and to some extent its synonym, *to spark (off)*, although the researchers do not appear to have noticed the latter one, possibly because its negative prosody is not so absolute –, where the verb itself seems to trigger off something negative following: what something *sparks (off)* is characteristically *a debate, an argument, fighting, riots, protests,* or *problems.* No context needed really. In a similar vein, Mikhail (1994, 333–7) seems to be quite at ease in offering his lists of "good personal qualities" and "bad personal qualities": The good ones in *e*, for instance, are *earnest, easy-going, effervescent, efficient, effusive, elegant, eloquent, eminent, emulous, energetic, enterprising, equable, equanimous, even-minded, even-tempered, expansive, experienced,* and *extrovert.* Here are the bad ones beginning in *e: edgy, egoistic, egotistic, envious, erotic* [sic], *evasive, evil, evil-minded, excitable, explosive, extravagant, extremist.* While not everybody is likely to agree with the essential "goodness" or "badness" of the items, many do manage to perfectly connote either of the two on their own, without any supporting co(n)text or collocation.

Whichever way you look at it, it is a fact that "the meaning of a word can often be illuminated by the other words which it tends to co-occur with" (Wierzbicka 1987, 21), so that e.g. comparing the adverbs which the verbs *rebuke, reprimand* and *reprove* tend to co-occur with, will yield important clues as to the semantic differences between them: *rebuking* tends to be done *sharply* whereas *reprimanding* tends to be done *severely*; only *reproving* can be done *gently* but cannot be done *sharply*, *severely* not being excluded though it is less likely to co-occur with *reprove* than with *reprimand.* These differences in co-occurrence support the following differences in

12   Carter and McCarthy (2006)

the semantic formulae: While all three verbs refer to some "bad" behavior by the addressee, only *rebuke* contains the component ´I feel something bad towards you because of that´; hence the "sharpness" of a rebuke. *Reprimand* is official, not personal, and so its definition refers to a category of people subordinate to the speaker; moreover, it is meant to constitute in itself a kind of punishment – and punishments can always be *severe* (though not *sharp* or *gentle*). *Reprove* does not imply "bad feelings" toward the addressee, and its purpose is purely didactic, corrective, not punitive; there is no reason, therefore, why it should not be able to be done *gently*. Note that Wierzbicka's analysis implies a semantically identifiable and stable <u>single-word</u> type of item itself associated with a prosodic value, which seems to be then only REFLECTED in the collocations on logico-semantic grounds.

5.4 A brief look at recent insights and dictionary treatment

The concept of *semantic prosody* has been criticized recently (Whitsitt 2005) as being unconvincing – and not only because it has been defined in at least three distinctly different ways that remain largely undiscussed. And there is at least one valiant attempt that was made not long ago to place it on an objective rather than subjective footing (Dilts and Newman 2006).[13]

However that may be, a balanced view of this intriguing phenomenon can be found in Bartsch's (2004, 156–8) analysis of semantic prosodies in collocations. Here are the results of her corpus-based study of adverb collocates of communication verbs and their positive (=P) or negative (=N) prosodies (ibid., p. 157):

categorically	*claim; assert; state*	N (strong rejection)
coldly	*enquire; query*	N (without emotion)
flatly	*reject; deny; state*	N (complete rejection or blunt statement)
fluently	*speak; communicating; cajoling*	P (with great ease)
highly	*acclaimed; rated*	P (approbation)
strictly	*speaking*	P (stringent)
widely	*acclaimed; recognized; acknowledged; reported*	P (approbation of an event or achievement)
argue	*Cogently*	P (convincing)
declare	*Ruefully*	P (repentance)
talk	*incessantly*	N (stretching the patience of the listener)
deny	*strenuously*	N (leaving doubt)

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13   Note, by the way, that there are linguists who are opposed to Sinclairian linguistics, such as Lindstromberg (1996), whose cognitive approach to teaching prepositions and directional adverbs "is almost diametrically opposed to that described in … the corpus-based, lexical phrase approach" (p. 225).

Sadly, dictionaries are far from being equally successful in capturing this rather elusive semantic feature. Likewise, they do not always address the issue in similar terms, and sometimes they even flatly disagree about the type of semantic prosody involved, or indeed about its very (non)existence – witness e.g. the treatment of the verb *to glint* in the sense that collocates with *eyes* functioning as the subject in some of the leading monolingual learners' dictionaries[14] of English:

Macmillan (Rundell 2007)	'if someone's eyes glint, they show a strong emotion such as anger'
Longman (Summers 2005)	'if your eyes glint, they shine and show an unfriendly feeling'[1]
Cambridge (Walter 2005)	'when someone's eyes glint, they look bright, expressing a lively emotion': *She smiled at him, her eyes glinting with mischief*
Oxford (Wehmeier 2005)	'if a person's eyes glint with a particular emotion, or an emotion glints in a person's eyes, the person shows that emotion, which is usually a strong one': *Her eyes glinted angrily.* ◊ *Hostility glinted in his eyes.*

By contrast, most of the leading native-speaker-oriented English dictionaries treat this sense – quite logically, at least to some, given that semantico-prosodic information typically forms part of native-speaker linguistic competence – much more concisely; witness e.g. the 2000-odd-page *American Heritage Dictionary* (Pickett 2000), which defines the verb *to glint* simply as 'to gleam or flash briefly'. One of them, however, namely the *Oxford Encyclopedic*, contradicts the learners' dictionaries (as does, as is observed in footnote 10, an online version of the [learners'!] *Collins COBUILD*) as to the type of prosody involved:

Collins (Butterfield 2003)	'to gleam or cause to gleam brightly'
Merriam-Webster (Mish 2003)	'to look quickly or briefly : GLANCE'
Oxford Encyclopedic (Hawkins and Allen 1991)	'flash or cause to flash; glitter; sparkle; reflect' (*eyes glinted with amusement*)
New Oxford (Pearsall 1998)	(of a person's eyes) 'shine with a particular emotion': *his eyes glinted angrily*

Can semantic prosody be detected in compounds too? There is no reason in principle why it should not be, though a single example must suffice at this point: While the noun *flame* would seem to have almost none, Paul McFedries's Word Spy web page[15] contains, inter alia, the following entry:

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14 The print version of the *Collins COBUILD* (Sinclair ed. 2003) does not recognize this sense, which is why the dictionary is not to be found included in the table. However, an online version of the work does enter it: 'if someone's eyes glint, they shine and express a particular emotion': *... her eyes glinting with pride...* (at *http://www.collinslanguage.com/results.aspx?js=on&dictionary=cobuild&text=glint* ; accessed on 19 December 2007).

15 Available from *http://www.wordspy.com/words/dictionaryflame.asp*.

dictionary flame noun. A negatively-charged message that complains about a person's spelling mistakes, word usage, or grammar.

Admittedly, perhaps this example is not overly typical. Nevertheless, and in a more serious vein, phrasal items can also show this semantic feature: If you *put somebody through something*, it has to do (but only if the entire sequence is used!) with making someone do or experience something difficult or unpleasant (Summers 2005, 1337). Likewise, *much-vaunted* seems to have a negative prosody on its own, meaning as it does '[of a plan, achievement, etc.] one that people say is very good or important, especially when this may not be true' (Summers 2005, 1079), and so does, say, *self-indulgent*, 'allowing yourself to have or do things that you enjoy but do not need, especially if you do this too often' – used to show disapproval (ibid., p. 1489). Similarly, *to fragment* is not only defined ('to break something, or be broken into a lot of small separate parts'); after a dash, there is also the comment used to show disapproval (Summers 2005, 639). Indeed, an earlier edition of the *Longman* (viz. Summers 1995, but not the current [4ᵗʰ] edition, Summers 2003/2005) treats the adjective *utter* in a "fully prosodic-collocational" manner: There is no customary decontextualized definition at all, but rather the sequence **utter failure/rubbish/fool etc** followed by the definition 'a complete failure etc' indicating the semantic restriction of the common English pattern *utter* + a "negative" noun, i.e. one indicating something undesirable.[16] Finally, if something *breaks out*, and *sets in*, it just has to be something bad; likewise, in [of somebody] *to be in for something*, that *something* just has to be unpleasant – but again only in that particular combination.

On the other hand, a recent thesaurus (Jellis 2002) provides, inter alia, a "compare-and-contrast" boxed feature, where a selection of semantically related single-word items sharing a "core meaning" are given and their semantic specificities briefly discussed. Thus e.g. the article on the "core meaning" TALKING A LOT (p. 893) first provides the entries (*talkative, chatty, gossipy, garrulous, loquacious*), and then goes on to briefly indicate the semantic differences between them:

talkative willing to talk readily and at length; **chatty** talking freely about unimportant things in a friendly way; **gossipy** talking with relish about other people and their lives, often unkindly and maliciously; **garrulous** excessively or pointlessly talkative; **loquacious** (*formal*) tending to talk a great deal.

Gossipy and *garrulous* are the likeliest candidates for negative prosody; moreover, in line with Wierzbicka's treatment (cf. final section of 5.3), in many cases it appears to arise largely from the core meaning of the single-word item itself. Thus a similar boxed feature (also p. 893) comprising the items *talent, gift, aptitude, flair, bent, knack, genius*, illustrating the core meaning of THE NATURAL ABILITY TO DO SOMETHING WELL, shows no trace – clearly on account of the core meaning itself – of negative prosody rearing its ugly head. Should these items, then, be regarded as all carrying positive prosody? Not likely: for isn't the positive aspect of meaning rather (part of) denotation? After all, we need no collocation, phraseology, or co(n)text to establish it.

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16   Phraseological analysis often combines semantic and structural features: The adjective *rife*, e.g., expresses the meaning 'something undesirable is too common,' and the sequence in which it is embedded typically has the structure SOMETHING UNDESIRABLE is/are *rife* in LOCATION/TIME (Schmitt and Carter 2004, 8).

It is not uncommon for dictionaries to ignore this "added" semantic element, so that most dictionaries define, say, *to put an end to something* routinely as 'to finish something,' while few elaborate on that prosodically: 'to stop an activity that is harmful or unacceptable.' In general, learners' dictionaries fare much better in this respect than do native-speaker-oriented works. This, by the way, applies also to single-word items, so that e.g. *Longman* (Summers 2005), unlike most native-speaker dictionaries, notes that *terse* – unlike *brief* or *concise* – not only means 'using very few words' but also 'often shows that you are annoyed.'

In any case, matters prosodic are not always interpretable in absolute terms: Aside from the conflicting dictionary evidence given above, I can offer some pertinent evidence coming from the Internet (Netscape, spotted on 21 October 2004), about actor Christopher Reeve's widow saying that "it is COMPLETELY unfair, but life can be that way" (my emphasis). Similarly, Schmitt and Carter (2004, 8) report that *bordering on* carries the "prosodic" meaning of 'approaching an undesirable state (of mind)' in 57 instances of the 100 instances in the British National Corpus, whereas 27 instances refer to a physical location.[17] It is also used to express positive evaluation, but only in nine instances out of the 100 (ibid., 20). However, other instances of semantic prosodies are easier to capture in absolute terms, e.g. *to undergo* and *to experience* in a 1990s version of the *Longman*: you typically *undergo* a change or something bad but *experience* an emotion, physical sensation, a situation, or a problem (Summers 1995).

6. Further relevant issues

6. 1 Relationship with connotation

Apparently, words can have a specific **profile**, either good and pleasant or bad and unpleasant; whenever such a word is uttered, it prompts hearers to expect a following word with a clear (un)pleasant sense – it "sets the scene" for a particular type of subsequent item. Yet it is often difficult to show convincingly the role of collocation in the creation and continued existence of semantic prosody. What linguists frequently refer to as **connotation**, or **connotative meaning**,[18] is, after all, to be found in many single-word items and phrasal verbs (e.g. *compact, lean, slim, lanky, skinny, notorious, to drone on, to show off*).[19] Second, one might wonder whether prosody is equally at work in colligational combinations, such as *in league with*?[20] Also, is its creation related to onomatopoeia? Moreover, and perhaps more to the point, connotation itself is not quite as clearcut as one might

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17 Cotterill (2001) has studied the semantic prosodies of some of the words and phrases used to describe domestic violence at trial, in the O.J. Simpson double homicide case. She contrasts the respective lexical representations of domestic violence in the prosecution and defense arguments.

18 Also known in the literature as attitudinal/emotive/affective/evaluative meaning, sometimes regarded as being either synonymous with or part of a broad-based pragmatic meaning. It is <u>not</u> always restricted to the single-word item, witness e.g. the following definition of *connotation*: 'the additional meanings that a word or phrase has beyond its central meaning. These meanings show people's emotions and attitudes towards what the word or phrase refers to' (Richards and Schmidt 2002, 108).

19 Note the following chapter heading from Partington (1998, 68): "Connotation and Semantic Prosody" (65 78). Significantly, for him semantic prosody represents "the spreading of CONNOTATIONAL colouring beyond single word boundaries" (my emphasis). This seems to imply that it all starts with the single-word item's connotation that spreads its semantic influence, so to speak, by starting to "tailor" the items in its vicinity – or does it?

20 Here is a fitting example coming from a learners' dictionary: "If you say that someone is **in league with** another person to do SOME-THING BAD [my emphasis], you mean that they are working together to do that thing" (Sinclair ed. 2003, 814, s.v. **league**).

suppose: It is defined in the standard sources as "an additional meaning" that is indicative chiefly of "emotional associations (personal or communal)" a lexical item has beyond its central meaning, usually referred to as denotation (e.g. Richards and Schmidt 2002, Crystal 2003). But does this really DEFINE the concept? For example, if *December* and *child*, selected in the two reference works just cited as illustrations of connotation, are good examples of items with connotative meaning, how is it that they are not labeled as such in any of the English dictionaries? Second, if the nouns *argument* and *quarrel* are connotation-free near-synonyms, is the closely related *feud* different in that it exhibits negative prosody, or is it rather that its special semantic features ("long," "violent"), and/or its frequent use in the collocation *a bitter feud* and in the compound *blood feud*, show its intensity or duration without contributing anything semantically negative?

6.2 "Definable semantic sets"

More broadly, as Stubbs (1995a; cited in Schmitt 2000, 78–9) points out, words may habitually collocate with other words from a **definable semantic set**. The words in these sets may carry either positive or negative connotations: e.g. *to cause* typically collocates with unpleasant things such as *problems, trouble, damage, death, pain, disease*, whereas *to provide* collocates mainly with positive things such as *facilities, information, services, aid, assistance, money*. Using *work* with the two words provides further illustration of the difference: *to cause work* is usually considered a bad thing, while *to provide work* is usually looked upon favorably. When examining items such as *cause* and *provide*, one is certainly tempted to conclude that semantic prosody[21] indeed comes close to the more traditional semantic notion of connotation referred to in the preceding paragraph. Further, if e.g. *to credit* is "neutral" in semantic terms, *to credit somebody with (doing) something* invariably refers to something good and is thus "inherently" positive. In traditional terms, however, connotation has received attention almost exclusively as an element of the lexical meaning of individual single-word lexical items.[22]

6.3 Semantic prosody and pattern, and point of origin reconsidered

Semantic prosody[23] seems to be related to yet another recent notion, namely that of **pattern**.

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21   Studies of the phenomenon of semantic prosody include those done utilizing specialized corpora. For example, Nelson (2004) has studied semantic prosody in business English.

22   "**Semantic prosody** refers to the positive or negative **connotative meaning** which is transferred to the focus word by the **semantic fields** of its common **collocates**." Hatim and Munday (2004, 251)

23   The concept (and the terminology used) remains rather complex. It can be seen either as being synonymous with *semantic preference*, as being related to it (Partington 2004), or even as being unnecessary, to be replaced by *semantic association* (Hoey 2005, 22 4). Alternatively, *semantic preference* itself may be interpreted as a broader term (Stubbs 2004, 121): For example, in adjective-noun constructions, *persistent* is often used of medical conditions (semantic preference), whereas in terms of speaker attitudes, it is used of unpleasant topics (semantic/discourse prosody). Maher (2004) says it refers to an "additional layer of perceived meaning, over and above that accorded by lexical and grammatical patterning alone"; "it posits an initial selection of word or phrase in relation to which choices are realised at the lexical, grammatical and semantic levels." She goes on to discuss Sinclair's example (given in Tognini-Bonelli 2001, 104) *barely visible to the naked eye*, which is said to reflect an expression of semantic prosody (difficulty experienced implied by *barely*), a lexical choice (the notion of seeing), and the requisite colligation (*to the*). I, for one, believe that *semantic association* and *semantic preference* could be used synonymously, to systematically indicate the frequent co-occurrence of a lexical item with a group/class of semantically related items often referred to as *lexical set*, with *semantic prosody* standing for a different – more specific – semantic syntagmatic notion coming close to connotation.

Thus e.g. two patterns of the verb *to claim*, viz. *claim* + *that*-clause (e.g. *He claims that he has discovered the ideal rock band*) and *claim* + object noun (e.g. *Several nations now claim linguistic independence*), may be indicative of two different prosodies, the former rather negative ('he may say so, but it is likely not true'), the latter neutral ('they are calling for linguistic independence'). Moreover, it is difficult to determine whether prosodic meaning is to be related broadly to any string where it seems to apply, or more narrowly to collocation and perhaps some other phraseological word combinations, and indeed, as a consequence, whether it arises from

(a) an item's lexical meaning, in which case it can be regarded as being virtually synonymous with connotative meaning

(b) various types of phraseological units, notably collocations, or indeed

(c) context (or rather co-text) in general terms, perhaps considered in a kind of pragmatic-textual extralinguistic/experiential framework.

6.4 Difficulties

Even more to the point, even one and the same item is not always necessarily associated with a certain type of semantic prosody; that is, one and the same item can be prosodically different: Warren (2005) observes that *to look forward to a meeting* has a positive prosody, not because of the noun *meeting*, which is evaluatively neutral, but because "as a complement of *look forward to* a positive feature is coerced." However, she adds that these constraints can be cancelled: It is e.g. possible to modify *look forward to* with the adverbial *with mixed feelings*, yielding *Peter is looking forward to the meeting with mixed feelings*, which brings about a change of the interpretation of *meeting* (ibid.). Next, Partington (1998, 77, citing Louw 1993, 171) observes that even different forms of the same lexical item may display different prosodic behavior: "*to build up* confidence" (transitive) is favorable, while "resistance *builds up*" (intransitive) is unfavorable. Hoey (2003), too, provides an example of the way that **semantic association**, defined as the tendency of a word to keep company with a semantic set or class (some members of this set or class will usually be collocates), works. Using *consequence* as an example, he notes that it has semantic associations with concepts of logic, with (un)expectedness, with negative evaluation, and with markers of (in)significance. Of the four, only the third is related to semantic prosody:

a] logic: unavoidable, inevitable, inexorable, inescapable, ineluctable, direct, ultimate, long-term, immediate

b] (un)expectedness: likely, possible, probable, natural, unintended, odd, strange, planned-for

c] negative evaluation: awful, dire, appalling, sad

d] significance: serious, important, dramatic, enduring, prominent.

Many – but not all – of the adjectives in these semantic categories are also collocates of *consequence*, concludes Hoey (2003).

Not all lexical items display highly regular prosodies such as *to set in* or *to peddle*. Thus Partington (1998, 72) refers to Sinclair's work where the word *happen* is shown to have a general tendency to collocate with unpleasant events, but this characteristic is not binding, as *happen* occasionally collocates with neutral or even pleasant occurrences.

Finally, *semantic prosody* remains a "contentious term": Many writers use it to refer to the **implied attitudinal meaning** of a word, whereas Sinclair uses it to refer to the **discourse function of a unit of meaning** (Hunston 2007, 249). Moreover, there seems to be something of a foundational controversy here: While Sinclair (1996) refers to semantic prosody as the outcome of all the choices that a speaker or writer makes, Hoey (2005, 163) envisages the complete opposite of this – the initial impulse to inform, contradict, praise, etc. If the semantic prosody matches the original intention, presumably the speaker/writer is satisfied.

Let us, by way of conclusion, note briefly that semantic prosody is considered by linguists of the "narrower semantico-prosodic persuasion" to be only <u>one</u> of two kinds of semantic relationships obtaining between collocates, the other being **semantic feature copying**, which is the tendency of e.g. adjectives to collocate with nouns that they share a semantic feature with, e.g. [PHYSICAL] in *physical attack* or [SCIENTIFIC] in *scientific study/experiment* (Bublitz 1996, 6–10). In any case, many combinations are not easy to analyze in such terms, due largely to the interplay of semantics and combinability/usage factors.

7. Conclusions

Is semantic prosody real and worthy of scholarly interest? Definitely. And in language teaching? Another yes, but with a proviso: it is a part of advanced-level L2 skills. In any case, it is significant, being a component contributing to the overall meaning of certain multiword units. Yet there are (still) vexing questions: Is it really (and necessarily so) – and to what extent – collocational, or indeed more broadly phraseological, in nature, and does it really stand for a type of meaning that has "a life of its own," existing over and above the "basic" denotative (also known as referential, conceptual, or cognitive) meaning of an item that one can actually dissociate it from? This one – doubtless a key issue – is more difficult to answer in absolute terms. To begin with, Hoey (2005, 23) points out that the claim made for semantic prosody that words are colored by their characteristic surroundings has been challenged. Thus it is hardly surprising that semantic prosody has been associated

(1) more or less absolutely with single-word items considered out of context for their attitudinal meaning existing besides denotation (e.g. *utter, to cause, to provide*),
(2) sometimes with multiword items only (e.g. *to break out, to cause uncertainty/concern, to go in for something, day after day*), whose constituents on their own either do or do not contain an element of attitudinal meaning, or

(3)   occasionally more vaguely with a lexical item in co(n)text. In line with this view, the translator Taylor (1998, 326), for one, defines *semantic prosody* as 'the semantic content or force of a lexical item in a given context.'

Furthermore, on another level, semantic prosody <u>can be</u> a kind of "additional," "separable" meaning, that is, one existing separate from the denotation (e.g. *to credit somebody with [doing] something, to put an end to something, to fragment*), and yet in other cases this does not seem to be the case (*much-vaunted, self-indulgent*). But can this be determined in a foolproof manner? Hardly. However this may be, the analysis can be also carried out in a broader-based if vaguer fashion: Thus e.g. the very term *semantic prosody* can be used to acknowledge the fact that the habitual collocates of the core unit of meaning *naked eye* – more specifically, their semantic constituency – are capable of coloring it; in this case, the coselection of the unit with verbs/adjectives related to the notion of 'visibility' activates a semantic prosody which suggests DIFFICULTY (González and Macarro 2000, 107).

Significantly, semantic prosody does not always exist as a straightforward binary yes-no affair, witness e.g. *to get* as used in the passive, or the conflicting dictionary pronouncements about the emotion conveyed when *one's eyes glint*. Moreover, it is unclear when exactly it exists over and above the denotation in a way that makes it "separable," and when it is an inseparable part of the denotation. Furthermore, and more theoretically, one might wonder whether the existence of semantic prosodies in phrasal items is a signal that such units should be viewed as holistic units precisely because of that, or also because of that? Next, when and under what conditions can semantic prosody affect wider stretches of text? And finally, the situation is just as unclear when it comes to considering the provenance and "direction": is semantic prosody a feature of a single-word item (connotation) that extends to its surroundings, in the process coloring some of the items in its vicinity, or is it the other way around (semantic prosody proper)? The evidence suggests that the pendulum can swing both ways: *cause* and *provide*, for example, lend themselves to the single-word-item-spreading-its-influence type of analysis, while e.g. *day after day* and *to put somebody through something* do not.

It seems wise to try to break down the topic into smaller and more manageable components, and thus to restrict oneself to concentrating on

a)   **connotation** as the "additional" meaning of single-word items, identifiable as their semantic property, whether or not considered in a given context

b)   **semantic prosody** as the semantic property arising syntagmatically from certain multiword items (typically but not exclusively collocations[24]), where a distinction should be made between two subtypes: those where the prosodic feature is present in a constituent (*to cause a fire*) and those where it is not (*day after day*), and

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24   Not everybody is likely to go for the broader interpretation, witness e.g. the following explanation from a recent textbook: Semantic prosody refers to the collocational meaning hidden between words, in or Louw's (2000, 57) terms, 'a form of meaning which is established through the proximity of a consistent series of collocates'. (McEnery et al. 2006, 148)

c) **syntagmatic meaning** as a semantic feature only brought into being in a given co(n)text, only observable in a specific string. Thus Taylor (1998, 85) points out that in the utterance *I would stay clear of that rat Jones!*, "the listener would not conjure up an image of a rodent interlocutor, but of a mutual acquaintance reputed, at least by the speaker, to have a deceitful or vindictive nature."

Aside from varying the terminology (such as by introducing *discourse prosody* instead of *syntagmatic meaning*, and *collocational prosody* as a special subcategory; using *semantic prosody* as the cover term, as I have done in some parts of this survey paper), one might find it wise to try to come up with a catchall term for the three. ***Associative meaning***? Or perhaps it is only the last two – semantic prosody and syntagmatic meaning – that are in need of a cover designation, in which case ***discoursal meaning*** could well fit the bill. Secondly, is this kind of meaning always necessarily negative or positive?[25] Intuitively, one would be tempted to say no – but then the binary, dichotomous treatment (good or bad, left or right, rich or poor, big or small, and all the rest) seems to be ever so close to the human mind, and ever so efficient, especially when the categories involved are comfortably broad, as in this case.

If anything, semantic prosody is a significant if complex phenomenon, showing that denotative and associative levels of lexical meaning are both real and diverse while being also strongly interactive, and that in syntagmatic terms the extent of semantic prosody (the stretch of text influenced by it) varies considerably. It is, then, only logical that it should also exist as such, and be treated as such.

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25 Göran Kjellmer (2005) has suggested a "more global approach" to studying semantic prosody, "where the starting-point is semantically unconditioned."

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