Semantic preference and semantic prosody- a theoretical overview

Mirna Begagić, PhD

University of Zenica

Bosnia and Herzegovina

mjasavic@yahoo.de

Abstract: *Semantic preference and semantic prosody are two notions that were carefully analysed in post-Firthian corpus linguistics and in the past few years there has been a growing interest in them. As corpora have become larger in size, and tools for extracting different lexical items for different purposes have been developed, the two terms have been addressed more frequently by linguists[1]. Throughout history, semantic preference and semantic prosody have sometimes been used for the same phenomenon but at other times the two were considered different but closely related. Previous corpus-based studies on the two terms have shown that they can be attached to many investigated lexical items. Therefore, this paper aims to present a detailed theoretical overview of the two terms in order to emphasise their immense importance for identifying the meaning of all the lexical items.*

---

[1] Studies which use corpus data to investigate semantic preference and semantic prosody have been published since the early 1990.

1. INTRODUCTION

Semantic preference and semantic prosody are two distinct yet interdependent collocational meanings (McEnery, Xiao & Tono, 2006, p.84). As it is almost impossible to examine semantic preference separately from semantic prosody, the two notions will be presented as contingent on each other.

Throughout history, semantic preference and semantic prosody have sometimes been used for the same phenomenon but at other times the two were considered different but closely related. Stubbs (2001) points out that "the distinction…is not entirely clear-cut. It is partly a question of how open-ended the list of collocates is: it might be possible to list all words in English for quantities and sizes, but not for 'unpleasant things'" (p.66). Therefore, the need for precise definitions of the two terms emerges.

Partington (2004) states that the relationship between the two terms can be described in two ways- on the one hand, semantic prosody can be described as a sub-category or special case of semantic preference i.e. it is "reserved for instances where an item shows a preference to co-occur with items that can be described as bad, unfavourable or unpleasant, or as good, favourable or pleasant" (p.149). However, some examples discussed in the literature prove that the relationship is more complex. Sinclair points out that semantic prosodies are "evaluative or attitudinal and are used to express the speaker's approval (good prosody) or disapproval (bad prosody) of whatever topic is momentarily the object of discourse (Sinclair 1996, p. 87).

On the other hand, semantic prosody can be described as a further stage of abstraction than preference.

> …semantic preference generally remains relatively closely tied to the phenomenon of collocation. As we have seen, it describes a phenomenon whereby a particular item x collocates frequently, not with another item y, but with a series of items which belong to a semantic set. (Partington, 2004, p.150)

Therefore, Partington describes the difference between the two in his claim that semantic preference and semantic prosody have different operating scopes: the former relates the node item to another item from a particular semantic set whereas the latter can affect wider stretches of text. Semantic preference can be viewed as a feature of the collocates while semantic prosody is a feature of the node word. Partington also adds that these two terms interact. While semantic prosody "dictates the general environment which constrains the preferential choices of the node item", semantic preference "contributes powerfully to building semantic prosody" (Partington, 2004, p.151).

In order to exemplify the above mentioned, two examples commonly discussed in the literature are presented. The first one of the verb break out, explained by Stewart (2010). The verb is investigated in the BNC (all inflected forms of the verb) where 1,126 occurrences were found. In the majority of cases break out showed semantic preference for 'situations of conflict', 'disease' or more broadly for 'problematic circumstances', since in the immediate environment of break out the following words are found: war, conflict, infection, crisis. As the verb cannot be classified as an item whose basic meaning is unfavourable, it is "considered to be associated with an unfavourable semantic prosody or 'aura of meaning', which is contingent upon its semantic preferences" (Stewart, 2010, p. 3).

The second example is the verb undergo, discussed by Stubbs (2001, pp. 89-95). The collocates to the right of the verb indicated that undergo expresses several semantic preferences- for 'medicine' (treatment, hysterectomy, brain, surgery, etc.), 'tests' (examination, training) and 'change' (dramatic changes, a historic transformation among others). All these preferences result in a very strong unfavourable prosody of the verb undergo, since people are forced to undergo something they would rather not.

Moreover, the verb bent on is classified as the verb with unfavourable prosody, but bent on can be also found in neutral as well as in favourable environment. Louw investigated how the speakers/writers change from the "expected profiles of semantic prosodies" (1993, p. 157). He explains that if they do that unconsciously, they are trying to sound ironic. Louw mentions an example from Small World by David Lodge:

> The modern conference resembles the pilgrimage of medieval Christendom in that it allows the participants to indulge themselves in all the pleasures and diversions of travel while apparently bent on self-improvement.

Louw explains that since the verb bent on is usually found in the environment of unpleasant items (destroying, harrying, mayhem), in the cited example the author is trying to produce ironic effect and therefore uses the verb bent on in the environment of self-improvement.

Corpus-based analyses from recent years have shown that semantic preference and semantic prosody have been considered in terms of 'priming' (Hoey 2003; Partington 2004) i.e. "as the word is learnt through encounters with it in speech and writing, it is loaded with the cumulative effects of those encounters such that it is part of our knowledge of the word that it co-occurs with other words" (Hoey, 2003, p. 5). Partington (2004) adds that the theory of priming helps us to answer one of the frequently raised question about prosody,

> ...if the favourable or unfavourable evaluation of an item said to display semantic prosody is not part of its in-built, inherent meaning- as is clearly the case for words excessive or timely – then how do language users decide to employ such items in the appropriate environment? The answer is that language users have a set of mental rules derived from the priming process, alongside or integrated with the mental lexicon, of how items should collocate (p. 132).

2. SEMANTIC PREFERENCE

The term semantic preference seems to be less problematic than the term semantic prosody. Stubbs (2001, p. 65) defines it as "the relation, not between individual words, but between a lemma[2] or word form and a set of semantically related words". In his work, Stubbs analysed the item large in the 200-million-word corpus and found out that at least 25 per cent of the 56, 000 occurrences of large collocated with words for "quantities and sizes", such as numbers, scale, part, amounts, quantities. Later, Stubbs adds that an item shows semantic preference when it co-occurs with "a class of words which share some semantic feature" (Stubbs, 2001, p. 88).

Partington (2004) examined the collocational behaviour of maximizers-absolutely, perfectly, entirely, completely, thoroughly, totally and utterly (group of items defined as such by Quirk et al. 1985). His analysis states that absolutely expresses semantic preference for items which have superlative sense such as: delighted, enchanting, splendid, preposterous, appalling, intolerable. Semantic prosody of absolutely is equally divided between favourable and unfavourable items. When it comes to perfectly, the tendency of the item to occur with pleasant things is evident (capable, correct, fit, good, happy, harmless, healthy, lovely, marvellous, natural). Furthermore, Partinton's analysis showed that completely, entirely, totally and utterly shared a large number of collocates. Utterly indicated semantic preference for 'absence' (collocates are: helpless, useless, unable, forgotten, failed, ruined, destroyed) and 'change'(changed, different, failed, ruined, destroyed). The overall semantic prosody is evidently unfavourable. Totally demonstrates semantic preference for 'absence' or 'lack of' collocating with bald, exempt, incapable, irrelevant, lost, oblivious, uneducated, unemployed, etc. but also for 'change of state' and 'transformation' words such as destroyed, different, transformed, absorbed, failed. Completely also showed semantic preference for 'absence' (devoid, disappeared, empty, forgotten, hopeless, ignored, lost, oblivious, vanished, etc.) but also for 'change' (alerted, changed, destroyed, different). Entirely expressed semantic preference for 'absence' and 'change' as well. Partington found the last maximizer thoroughly in the company of words relating to 'emotions' and 'states of mind', such as

---

[2] The lemma *make* is realized in text by the word forms *make, makes, made* and *making*

annoyed, approved, enjoyed, confused, happy, sure, disgruntled and he concluded that thoroughly evidently retains traces of its ancient sense of thorough-like.

Table 1 Summary of maximizers (Partington, 2004, p. 148)

Maximizer:	Preference for:	Prosody
Absolutely	hyperbole, superlatives	
Perfectly		favourable
Utterly	absence/change of state	unfavourable
Totally	absence/change of state	
Completely	absence/change of state	
Entirely	absence/change of state, (in)dependency	
Thoroughly	emotions/ liquid penetration	

Partington (1998, pp. 34-39) also analysed the item *sheer* in the newspaper and academic corpora. His analysis indicates that *sheer* collocated with a number of items from specific semantic sets i.e. 1. 'magnitude', 'weight' or 'volume', 2. items expressing 'force', 'strength'or 'energy', and 3. words expressing 'persistence'. Then Partington (1998, pp. 39-47) compared the behaviour of *sheer* with other items that are consider to be its synonyms- *complete, pure and absolute*, and discovered that none of them shared semantic preferences with *sheer*.

3. SEMANTIC PROSODY

The term semantic prosody was originally Sinclair's idea in 1987 (later recited in Sinclair 1991), but he did not use the term as such when he first discussed it. Sinclair was observing the lexicogrammatical environment of the phrasal verb *set in* using a corpus of about 7.3 million words and he noticed that the verb is associated with unpleasant events.

> The most striking feature of this phrasal verb is the nature of the subjects. In general they refer to unpleasant states of affairs. Only three refer to the weather; a few are neutral, such as *reaction* and *trend*. The main vocabulary is *rot* (3), *decay, ill-will, decadence, impoverishment, infection, prejudice, vicious (circle), rigor mortis, numbness, bitterness, mannerism, anticlimax, anarchy, disillusion, disillusionment, slump.* Not one of these is desirable or attractive. (Sinclair 1987, pp. 155-156)

In the same work Sinclair notes that "many uses of words and phrases show a tendency to occur in a certain semantic environment, for example the word *happen* is associated with unpleasant things- accidents and the like" (Sinclair,

1991, p. 112). Sinclair's remarks were something completely new and they were completely backed up by corpus data.

The 'father' of the term semantic prosody is Bill Louw who introduced the term to public in 1993[3]. The term was coined with the reference to Firth's discussion of prosody in phonological terms. Namely, Firth noticed that the realization of the phoneme /k/ depends on the sounds which precede it as well as the sounds which follow it, so the /k/ in word *kangaroo* is not the same as the /k/ in word *keep* because during the realization of the consonant the mouth is already making provision for the production of the next sound. In the same way, Louw (1993) claims that the expression *symptomatic of* prepares for the production of what follows i.e. something undesirable (e.g. *parental paralysis, numerous disorders*).

In his definition of semantic prosody, Gavioli (2005) also points out the connection between meaning and sound:

> The term 'prosody', which is generally used in linguistics to refer to the sound or rhythm of words, is applied here to the sound of meanings rather than phonemes and particularly to the way in which words and expressions create an aura of meaning capable of affecting words around them. Gavioli (2005, p. 46)

Several other linguists investigated the subject- they analysed several lexical items, proposed their definitions and expressed their standpoints on the topic of semantic prosody: Bublitz (1996) analysed the words *cause, commit, happen, somewhat* and *prevail*; Sinclair (1996a, 1998) analysed *set in, cause*, the idiom *naked eye*, the collocation *true feelings*, the word *place* and the verb *brook*; Stubbs (1995, 2001) investigated the lexical environment of *heritage, provide, career, credibility, accost, loiter* and *lurk*; Tognini-Bonelli (2001) analysed prosodies in both English and Italian including *proper*, expression *andare incontro* (literally "go towards") and *face*; Chanell (1999) investigated *fat* and *self-important*; Partington (1998, 2004) analysed the verb *peddle*, 'happen' words (*happen, take place, occur, set in, come about*) and amplifying intensifiers (*absolutely, perfectly, entirely, completely, thoroughly, totally, utterly*).

---

[3] Bill Louw introduced the term semantic prosody in his article *Irony in the text or insincerity in the writer?: The diagnostic Potential of semantic prosody* (1993)

Table 2. The chronological review of the literature on semantic prosody.

Study	Examined lexical Items	Semantic prosody	Definition / contribution	The most important standpoints
Sinclair (1987, 1991)	set in happen		-semantic prosody was Sinclair's idea, although he did not use this very term when he first discussed it	-many uses of words and phrases show a tendency to occur in a certain semantic environment; the words happen and set in are associated with unpleasant things
Louw (1993)	symptomatic of utterly bent on		Louw was the first to use the term semantic prosody, connecting the term to Firth's discussion of prosody in phonological terms	-Louw was interested in irony produced by deviations from habitual co-occurrence patterns (pp.157) -He also made few allusions to diachronic considerations claiming that prosodies are undoubtedly the product of a long period of refinement through historical change (pp.164)
Stubbs (1995)	cause		Cause is near the stage where the word itself, out of context, has negative connotations. (1995:50)	-made reference to diachronic consideration related to the word cause
Bublitz (1996)	cause happen commit somewhat prevail		-node may be coloured by its habitual co-occurrences acquiring a "halo" of meaning as a result	-prosodies vary according to the different basic meanings of any given word -diachronic emphasis on semantic prosody
Sinclair (1996a, 1998)	naked eye true feelings brook		A semantic prosody… is attitudinal, and on the pragmatic side of the semantics/pragmatics continuum. It is thus capable of a wide range of realization, because in pragmatic expressions the normal semantic values of the words are not necessarily relevant. But once noticed among the variety of expressions, it is immediately clear that the semantic prosody has a leading role to play in the integration of an item with its surroundings. It expresses something close to the 'function' of an item- it shows how the rest of the item is to be interpreted functionally. (Sinclair 1996a:88)	-in his work from 1996, Sinclair explained semantic prosody within his model of extended unit of meaning -in 1998 Sinclair stated that semantic prosody is one of the obligatory elements of the unit of meaning along with the 'core item', which is invariable, and constitutes the evidence of the occurrence of the item as a whole. (1998:15)

Partington (1998)	peddle green fundamentalism/ fundamentalist		-focuses on similarities and differences between semantic prosody and connotation -Partington is interested in prosodies within the political discourse in newspapers
Hunston and Francis (1999)		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. (1999:137)	-the importance of semantic consistency of lexical profiles
Hunston and Thompson (1999)		The notion of semantic prosody (or pragmatic meaning) is that a given word or phrase may occur most frequently in the context of other words or phrases which are predominantly positive or negative in their evaluative orientation…As a result, the given word takes on an association with the positive, or, more usually, the negative, and this association can be exploited by speakers to express evaluative meaning covertly. (1999:38)	-the importance of the evaluative quality of semantic prosody -the words 'take on' meaning from their surrounds
Chanell (1999)	regime par for the course fat self-important off the beaten track	Speakers and writers cluster negative items so that there is a mutually supporting web of negative words (Channell 1999:44)	-she does not refer to items with less obviously evaluative meanings -fat and self-important are also to be found in undesirable company -she adopts the expression 'evaluative polarity' -focuses on unfavourable prosodies
Louw (2000)		A semantic prosody refers to a form of meaning which is established through the proximity of a consistent series of collocates, often characterized as positive or negative, and whose primary function is the expression of the attitude of its speaker or writer towards some pragmatic situation. A secondary, though no less important attitudinal function of semantic prosodies is the creation of irony through the deliberate injection of a form which clashes with the prosody's consistent series of collocates. (2000:60).	-Contextual Prosodic Theory which would seek to elucidate through semantic prosodies the Firthian view that that situational and linguistic contexts are co-extensive. (2000:48) -makes the difference between semantic prosody as strongly collocational phenomenon from connotation which he considers to be more 'schematic' in nature.
Tognini-Bonelli (2001)	proper largely broadly (to) face		-importance of strict relation between lexical and grammatical choices -stresses that the pragmatic dimension is central

Stubbs (2001a)	accost amid amusement backdrop care cause commit community deadlock distinctly soar heritage lavish loiter lurk proper provide somewhat standard undergo untold discoveries expression mutual career launch	A discourse prosody is a feature which extends over more than one unit in a linear string… Discourse prosodies express speaker's attitude. If you say that something is provided, then this implies that you approve of it. Since they are evaluative, prosodies often express the speaker's reason for making the utterance, and therefore identify functional discourse units. (2001:65)	in 2001 Stubbs switched from 'semantic prosody' to 'discourse prosody'
Stubbs (2001b)	sit through		
Hunston (2002)		Semantic prosody…refers to a word that is typically used in a particular environment, such that the word takes on connotations from that environment. (2002:141)	semantic prosody is a result of transferred meaning
Sinclair (2003)		As corpus enables us to see words grouping together to make special meanings as to the reasons why they were chosen together. This kind of meaning is called a semantic prosody; it has been recognized in part as connotation, pragmatic meaning and attitudinal meaning. (2003:178)	
Partington (2004a)	'happen words' (happen, take place, occur, set in, come about) absolutely perfectly entirely completely thoroughly totally utterly	Semantic prosody is a type of evaluative meaning which is spread over a unit of language which potentially goes well beyond the single orthographic word and is much less evident to the naked eye. (2004a:131-132)	-Partington also discusses the interaction between semantic preference and semantic prosody
Hoey (2005)		Priming prosody occurs when the collocations, colligations, semantic associations, textual collocations, textual semantic associations and textual colligations of words chosen for a particular utterance	-Hoey points out that the words are primed in all sorts of different ways, and that results in priming prosody -states that the boundaries between semantic preference

		harmonise with each other in such a way as to contribute to the construction and coherence of the utterance. (2005:166)	and semantic prosody should be avoided -favours the term 'semantic association' instead 'semantic preference' only because he thinks that the term 'semantic preference' leads to a psychological preference on the part of the language user and may lead to confusion
Whitsitt (2005)			-focuses on the synchronic/ diachronic questions, on the function of intuition in identifying prosodies
Hunston (2007)			-discusses whether semantic prosody should be regarded as the property of a word or a longer unit of meaning; whether the binary distinctions should be used (favourable vs. unfavourable prosody); whether semantic prosody can be transmitted from one context to another -gives overview of the literature on both, semantic preference and prosody
Bednarek (2008)			-stresses the importance of the role of different registers for realisations of both semantic preferences and semantic prosodies
Stewart (2010)	make sense		-presents extensive literature overview of the literature on semantic prosody
Begagić (2013)	initial/preliminary following/subsequent sufficient/adequate		-More uses of the collocation are found than provided by dictionaries -Semantic prosody for 'difficulty', almost always accompanied by the preposition of
Wei & Li (2014)			-A word may be associated with more than one group of semantic features thus designating different prosodies
Hu (2015)			-Sematic prosody of a word cannot be accurately detected until its collocates are carefully scrutinized in the text -An apparently negative collocate might indicate a positive connotation

Throughout literature, semantic prosody is mostly described as a type of meaning. However, several authors defined it rather as a process. For example, Baker et al. in their *Glossary of Corpus Linguistics* (2006, p. 58) define it as a term "relating to the way that words in a corpus can collocate with a related set of words or phrases, often revealing (hidden) attitudes". Coffin et.al (2004, xxi) also define semantic prosody as "a way in which apparently neutral terms come to carry positive or negative associations through regularly occurring in particular collocations". Both authors refer to semantic prosody as the ways that contributes to establishing meanings. Berber-Sardinha (2000, p. 94) refers to semantic prosody as a pattern, while Lewandowska-Tomaszcyk (1996, p. 153) refers to it as a phenomenon.

From the literature review it can be said that semantic prosody includes some type of reference to its evaluative or attitudinal quality. It is described as an aspect of evaluative meaning, which is defined by Hunston and Thompson (1999, p. 5) as "the speaker or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities and propositions that he or she is talking about". Though this definition seems to be too broad, some other authors defined the term in a more restricted sense, i.e. with emphasis on lexical expressions of the speaker's/writer's emotional attitude (see Conrad and Biber 1999 and Martin 1999).

As stated in Table 2, according to both Sinclair and Stubbs, prosodies express speaker attitude. Stubbs claims that if something *is provided*, then you approve of it, "since they are evaluative, prosodies often express the speaker's reason for making the utterance" (Stubbs 2001a, p. 65). Sinclair (1994) states that semantic prosody is attitudinal, and on the pragmatic side of the semantics/ pragmatics continuum and continues that:

> It is thus capable of a wide range of realization, because in pragmatic expressions the normal semantic values of the words are not necessarily relevant. But once noticed among the variety of expressions, it is immediately clear that the semantic prosody has a leading role to play in the integration of an item with its surroundings. It expresses something close to the 'function' of the item- it shows how the rest of the item is to be interpreted functionally. (Sinclair 2004, p. 22)

According to the above mentioned, Stewart (2010) follows that when speakers use items like *naked eye*, *true feelings*, *provide*, *commit*, *set in*, *undergo*, *happen*, *cause*, *symptomatic of*, they make some type of evaluation or convey some type of attitude.

> In this way an utterance such as *the cold weather set in* might be considered more obviously attitudinal than, for instance, *the cold weather started*; *John Smith had to undergo an operation* more attitudinal than *John Smith had to have an operation*; and *symptomatic of management inadequacies* more attitudinal than *indicative of management inadequacies* (Stewart 2010, p. 22).

However, there are certain examples that prove this does not have to be that way. Sinclair (1996a, p. 87) ascribed the prosody of difficulty to item *naked eye*, and the evaluative element does not seem to be of huge importance at all[4]. Stewart (2010) also mentions example of the item *cause*, which has been assigned an unfavourable prosody in the literature, since it co-occurs with *accident, problem, chaos*, etc. Nevertheless it seems problematic to postulate that some sort of attitude has been expressed in certain examples, such as in the following examples:

- The door closed and then Elaine pulled the magazine in, *causing* the letter box to snap shut smartly.
- The inhibitors might therefore be *causing* amnesia not because they prevent protein synthesis but because of their effect on increasing animo acid levels.

<div align="center">(Stewart 2010, p. 23; examples taken from the BNC)</div>

The fact that the notions of evaluation and attitude are the complex one is proved by the following citation from Bernardini and Aston (2002, p. 291):

> Would this be the speaker as principal, author or animator (to use Goffman's (1981) famous breakdown of the speaker discourse role (Levinson, 1988)? In contexts of reported speech, it is clear that prosodies may indicate the evaluation of the cited speaker, not the citing one, as the author (but not animator) of the text in question.

It can be concluded that in most of the examples the two elements are present, evaluative and attitudinal quality of an item, however not in all cases. Each item in question should be carefully analysed in its environment in order to be claimed that evaluative and attitudinal qualities are pivotal for its semantic prosody.

Apart from the evaluative and attitudinal quality, element that is found in almost all definitions and discussions on semantic prosody is its hidden nature. Most of the authors mentioned in Table 1 refer to semantic prosody as to something subliminal, covert or unconscious. Louw (1993, pp. 169-171) writes that semantic prosody can reveal speaker attitudes even when the speaker tries to conceal them, and Tognini-Bonelli, citing Louw's statement argues that "semantic prosodies are mainly engaged at the subconscious level". Hunston and Thompson (1999, p. 38) state that semantic prosody "can be exploited by speakers to express evaluative meaning covertly" and Hunston (2001, p. 21, 2002, pp. 61,

---

[4] While analysing the idiom *naked eye*, Sinclair used The Bank of English as corpus which contained 211 million words of current English. Sinclair found 154 instances of *naked eye*, but since 3 pairs of lines were identical he used 151 lines. Words *see* and *visible* (and their variations) are evident on position N3 which prove the clear semantic preference for visibility. Since the words *visible* and *see* are in 85 per cent of instances combined with words such as *small, faint, weak* and *difficult,* Sinclair concluded that the idiom *naked eye* indicates semantic prosody of difficulty.

119, 141-142) makes several points to how semantic prosody conveys covert messages and hidden meanings. Partington (2004a, p.131) also states that semantic prosody "is much less evident to the naked eye".

Most of the authors interested in semantic prosody analysed lexical items that are neutral in semantic sense i.e. that have neither positive nor negative meanings. It seems that literature review suggests that the meaning of the item in question must be hidden, otherwise the prosody cannot be ascribed to it. However, there are still some examples that prove that the lexical item in question does not need to be semantically neutral in order to possess semantic prosody (e.g. verb *brook*). This study will also test weather only the neutral meanings of investigated items possess semantic prosody.

As stated above, most of the authors investigated 'neutral' lexical item (*happen, cause, break out, set in, undergo* etc.) and to most of them the unfavourable prosody is ascribed (*cause, set in, happen, break out, load of, undergo…*) while only a few of them revealed positive or favourable semantic prosody such as *provide* and *career*. Saying this, it should be mentioned that several linguists noticed the importance of registers and genres in revealing semantic prosodies of certain lexical items. Hunston (2007, p. 263) argues that the verb *cause* "loses its association with negative evaluation when it occurs in 'scientific' registers". Bednarek (2008) also mentions the importance of analysis of items in different registers:

> ..for instance, an analysis of concordance lines for *responsibility for* in the Bank of English shows a negative semantic preference (it co-occurs with *recent bombings, Sunday's suicide bombing, one of the murders, some of the explosions, the killing, these murders, the Holocaust, the kidnapping, the worst act of terrorism*) while an analysis of the same lexical expression in a business English corpus does not (here *responsibility for* collocates with *budgets, a major functional area, the product, a new stream of scheme, outcomes, decisions, aspects, the technical aspects, scale/up and operation, outcomes*)(Walker 2004 in Bednarek 2008,p. 126)

Analogous to O'Halloran (2007) this could be called register or genre preference i.e. semantic preference that is register or genre dependent. O'Halloran claims that there is a greater likelihood of some lexicogrammatical patterns in certain registers than others and as example she mentions the item 'erupted' saying that "the fact that 'erupted' in the past tense has largely positive associations in the sports report register, but largely negative ones in the hard news register, provides evidence for seeing 'erupted' in register prosody terms" (O'Halloran, 2007, p. 12). At this point, it is important to define the word 'register'. According to Halliday and Hasan (1985, pp. 38-9) registers are varieties of language which are "typically associated with a particular situational configuration of field, tenor and mode". Genre, on the other side is mostly treated at a 'higher level' than register, as Wales (2001, p. 338) states that "genres are groups of texts which perform a similar function". However, in this study all the

newspaper texts found in COCA are considered to belong to the newspaper register, whereas the academic texts belong to the academic register.

Partington (2004) anlaysed words that belong to the *happen* semantic group with the hypothesis that not only *happen* and *set in* have unfavourable prosody but all the other words from that group as well. Therefore he looked at the behaviour of *set in, happen, occur, come about* and *take place* in two corpora, one of the academic texts and the other of the newspaper texts. Partington presented the frequency of occurrence of all the 'happen' words as follows:

Table 3. The analysis of *happen* words (Partington, 2004, p.134)

Academic (one million words)		Newspaper (four million words) Total	Per million words
Happens	70	187	47
Happen	80	230	57
Happened	67	326	82
Totals	217	743	186
Occurs	125	27	7
Occur	221	32	8
Occurred	114	112	28
Totals	460	171	43
Comes about	2	2	1
Come about	16	9	2
Came about	9	5	1
Totals	27	16	4
Takes place	25	47	12
Take place	39	87	22
Took place	44	68	17
Taken place	23	38	9
Totals	131	240	60
Sets in	1	4	1
Set in	8	9	2
Totals	9	13	3

After the analysis of each *happen* word separately (he decided to examine only the examples from the academic register), Partington confirmed his hypothesis that all investigated *happen* words have unfavourable prosody, although there are different degrees of unfavourable prosody among the items in the group. "*Set in* has the worst prosody, followed by *happen*, followed by *occur* and *take place*,

while *come about* does not seem to evince any particular inclination" (Partington, 2004, p.144). Partington also states that there are register differences among the investigated lexical items "probably linked to cohesive function, i.e. more formal items like *occur* are used for extended cohesion more often than less formal ones such as *happen*" (ibid.).

Most of the linguists discussing semantic preference and semantic prosody agree that semantic prosody is primarily contingent upon semantic preference and that "semantic preference 'feeds' semantic prosody" (Stewart 2010, p.88, citing Hoey 2005, p.16ff). When Sinclair (1996) analysed expression *true feelings* he found out that there is a clear semantic preference for 'expression'-verbs: *express, communicate, show, reveal, share, pour out, give vent to, indicate, make public.* Hunston and Francis (1999, p. 137) stated that "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", while Louw (2000, p. 57) writes that "semantic prosody refers to a form of meaning which is established through the proximity of a consistent series of collocates".

On the other hand, when Stubbs (1995) analysed the word *provide* in the 200-million word corpus, he found that some of its top collocates were *information, service(s), support, help, money*….It cannot be argued that there is an obvious semantic set in other words clear semantic preference, but there is definitely favourable prosody (which is interesting, since most of the investigated lexical items in literature review on semantic prosody have unfavourable prosody). The necessity to investigate more examples emerges, in order to claim that semantic preference is obligatory element in constituting semantic prosody.

Very interesting example analysed by Sinclair (1996) is the one of the verb *brook*. Its dictionary meaning is something like 'tolerate' as Sinclair analysis shows that " 'tolerate' can replace *brook* in all the examples without disturbing their message" (Sinclair, 1996, p. 91). Sinclair points out (ibid.) "since it always appears with some form of negative, e.g. *brook no interference, will not brook any attack*, it is used by speakers to indicate not tolerance, but intolerance." Regarding this it could be concluded that the item expresses an unfavourable prosody. However, Sinclair's analysis confirms that the verb *brook* expresses "the intolerance of intrusive behaviour by another" (ibid.). The overall prosody does not tend to be unfavourable but favourable. It can be concluded that although some words have negative basic meaning it is possible to find out that they reveal positive semantic prosody.

Another interesting verb is *alleviate* which has positive meaning although negative semantic prosody can be ascribed to it. Stewart (2010) analysed this verb in the BNC and from his analysis it is obvious that the verb is associated with negative prosody "in view of the fact that its co-text is peppered with seriously undesirable elements", but he adds that "we could not by any stretch of the

imagination argue that they have negative connotations" (Stewart, 2010, p. 73). Accordingly, it can be said that the verb *alleviate* has a positive basic meaning although it is mostly mixed with bad company (collocates with the words such as *pain* and *suffering*). Therefore, *alleviate* has not been 'contaminated' by its unpleasant co-occurrences.

Stewart (2010) analysed the lexical environment of *intuition* in the BNC (British National Corpus) as well as in the other, the corpus of semantic prosody. On the one hand, in the BNC he found out that *intuition* seems to be neutral or even leaning towards the favourable prosody (according to the OED *intuition* is defined as our instinctive, immediate 'feel' for language). On the other hand, in the corpus on semantic prosody, *intuition* has thoroughly unfavourable prosody "occurs in the company of, *unreliable, wrong, stranglehold, not reliable and accurate, chancy and unreliable…*" (Stewart, 2010, p. 122). If this is observed from the diachronic view, we can say that a good word *intuition* has fallen under the influence of bad company and has been contaminated by its bad influence. The word *intuition* can also be observed from synchronic view and in that case it shows unfavourable prosody in the corpus of semantic prosody.

It seems important to mention that the work, in which examples for the corpus on semantic prosody are gathered, is the book *Semantic Prosody* written by Stewart. Most of the scholars who dealt with the topic of semantic prosody agree that intuition is a poor guide to revealing semantic prosody as follows:

"speaker's intuition is usually an unreliable guide to patterns of collocation and that intuition is an even poorer guide to semantic prosody" (Xiao & McEnery, 2006, p. 103).

"attested data are required in collocational studies, since native speaker intuitions are not reliable source of evidence" (Stubbs, 1995, p. 24)

"analysis of evaluation can be removed from the chancy and unreliable business of linguistic intuitions based in systematic observation of naturally occurring data" (Channell, 1999, p. 39).

"semantic prosodies are difficult, if not impossible, to determine on the basis of intuition alone" (Adfolphs & Carter, 2002, p. 7).

"The quantitative analysis of text by computer reveals facts about actual language behaviour which are not, or at least not immediately, accessible to intuition" (Widdowson, 2000, p. 6).

"It may well turn out to be the case that semantic prosodies are less accessible through human intuition than most other phenomena to do with language" (Louw, 1993, p. 173).

"SPs are open to introspection in principle...but native speakers have no reliable and accurate intuitions about them" (Bublitz, 1996, p. 8).

Considering the historical development of language, the roots of the synchronic and diachronic approach can be seen in the works of Breal (1897), Saussure (CLG) and Bloomfield (1933). Breal, who is usually considered to be the father of semantics, differentiates between what is the synchronic and the diachronic study of a language, however his statements remained within the realms of historical linguistics[5]. Saussure recognised one of the major distinctions in linguistics, between synchronic and diachronic study of a language where the latter relates to the historical dimension or the outside world[6]. However, Bloomfield restricts the object of linguistics to the decriprion of language in a synchronic way, even when the decription aims to study the historical development of a language (the historical development is considered to present series of synchronic slices of evidence at different times)[7].

When mentioning synchronic and diachronic approaches, it seems important to point out that the corpora used to evidence the existence of semantic prosody have always been synchronic.

As Stewart notices (2010) the diachronic dimension seems to be of huge importance in descriptions on semantic prosody, though it has never been entirely central. The interests of all the mentioned linguists interested in the subject were somewhere else, and the diachronic analyses are almost entirely absent.

> Sinclair describes semantic prosody using synchronic criteria, while most other authors approach the subject using both diachronic and synchronic criteria, with scarcely acknowledgement that a single appellation (semantic prosody has been adopted to denote distinct phenomena). Diachronic explanations tend to...favour the folkoristic notion of good being contaminated by evil. (Stewart, 2010, p.55)

An issue that is commonly discussed among linguists is whether semantic prosody resides in a single word or in several words. Bublitz (1996, p. 9) claims that "with prosody we refer to the fact that a feature extends its domain, stretches over and affects several units...something that accords with Firth's idea that meaning is regularly dispersed in context". Partington (2004a, pp. 131-132) also describes semantic prosody as a type of evaluative meaning which is "spread over a unit of language which potentially goes well beyond the single

---

[5]Breal (1897) outlined new scientific criteria for the study of language based on observation.

[6] According to Saussure, the meaning of a word is no more just the relationship between a word and a concept or thing, but the set of relationships that a specific word may entertain within a relational network.

[7] Bloomfield accepts that "in some cases a transferred meaning is linguistically determined by an accompanying form" (1933, p. 150)

orthographic word" and Sinclair (2003, p. 117) claims that "semantic prosody typically ranges over combinations of words in an utterance rather than being attached just to one". Although many of the authors agree that semantic prosody does not reside in a single word but in several words, there are still several who argue for the opposite. Stewart (2010, pp. 57-58) summarizes their statements as the following:

- *"utterly* has an overwhelmingly bad prosody" (Louw, 1993, p. 160)
- *"affect* has a clearly negative prosody" (Stubbs, 1995, p. 45)
- "the lemma *cause* has a strongly unfavourable prosody...the word *provide*, on the other hand, had a favourable prosody in the *Cobuild* corpus material" (Partington, 1998, p. 68)
- "we know that the English equivalent of *forarsage*, namely *cause*, has an overwhelmingly negative prosody" (Dam-Jensen & Zethsen, 2007, p. 1618)
- "The negative semantic prosody of *cause* has been widely observed" (Xiao & McEnery, 2006, p. 114)

However, Cotterill (2001, p. 291) refers to "the SP of a word" and to "the semantic prosodies of words" (p. 293), whereas later assigns semantic prosody to "lexical items" (p.297). It seems that another open question remains and the need for more lexical items to be investigated in other to claim the former or latter.

Another interesting question regarding semantic prosody that arises is whether connotation is a synonym of semantic prosody. In order to connect this term to the notion of semantic prosody, several definitions of the connotations are presented:

- connotation of a word is "an emotive or affective component additional to its central meaning" (Lyons, 1977, p. 176)
- connotation implies "emotive or evaluative meaning" (Palmer, 1981, p. 92)
- the main application of connotations "with reference to emotional associations (personal or communal)which are suggested by, or are part of the meaning of, a linguistic unit, especially a lexical item" (Crystal, 1991, p. 74)

On the one hand Partington (1998), Berber-Sardinha (2000) Stubbs (2001), Hunston (2002) and Whitsitt (2005) all agree that semantic prosody is connotational. Partington, while analysing concordances of the verb *commit* says "unfavourable connotation can be seen to reside not simply in the word *commit* but over a unit consisting of *commit* and its collocates" (1998, p. 67). Partington continues that "connotation would locate the meaning within a word, while semantic prosody would locate meaning as spread[ing] across words" (p. 68). Berber-Sarinha (2000, p. 93) states that "semantic prosody is the connotation

conveyed by the regular co-occurrence of lexical items" whereas Hunston (2002, p. 142) writes that semantic prosody "accounts for 'connotation': the sense that a word carries a meaning in addition to its 'real meaning' ". While analysing the verb *cause*, Stubbs concludes that "*cause* has overwhelmingly unpleasant connotations" (2001a, p. 49) and Whitsitt (2005, p. 285) states that semantic prosody is defined in three different ways and one of these "which is very widespread, treats semantic prosody as if it was a synonym of connotation".

On the other hand Louw (2000, p. 49-50) argues that "semantic prosodies are not merely connotational" as "the force behind SPs [semantic prosodies] is more strongly collocational than the schematic aspects of connotation" and he indicates that that semantic prosody is more strictly attitudinal than connotation. Louw's remarks suggest that semantic prosody is dependant on the relationship between the item and its lexical environment, whereas connotation is related to the single word and the experience the speaker/hearer associate with that word. Besides Louw, Sinclair is another important person to be mentioned, who does not seem to support excessive overlap between connotation and semantic prosody. Sinclair (1996, p. 34) stated that:

> But once noticed among the variety of expressions, it is immediately clear that the semantic prosody has a leading role to play in the integration of an item with its surroundings"...and he continues (ibid., p. 39) "The major structural categories that have been proposed here- collocation, colligation, semantic preference and semantic prosody- and their inter-relationships, will be elaborated and will assume a *central rather than a peripheral role in language description* (emphasis my own).

Therefore, according to Sinclair, semantic prosody is completely central to the unit of meaning and has nothing to do with something peripheral.

A statement claimed by McEnery, Xiao and Tono (2006, p. 85) represents the link between the two views above mentioned, as they argue that "connotation can be collocational or non-collocational whereas semantic prosody can only be collocational".

To sum up, the notions semantic preference and semantic prosody have been addressed frequently in several past years. The two prominent names to be found in relation to the two terms are Sinclair and Louw. Stewart (2010) presents the most common features of semantic prosody prioritised by Sinclair's and by Louw's approach.

Element's prioritized by Sinclair's approach:

- it is central to the unit of meaning, one of the two obligatory elements
- it is considered within a synchronic framework
- it is a feature of a unit which is larger than the single word/expression
- it is not restricted to semantically 'neutral' lexical items

- it is not restricted to descriptions in terms of 'good' and 'bad'

Elements prioritized by Louw's approach:

- it is transferred or attached meaning
- it is considered within both a diachronic and synchronic framework
- it is a feature of the word
- it is associated above all with more semantically 'neutral' lexical items
- it is generally expressed by means of a binary distinction whose primary terms are 'good' and 'bad' (positive / negative, favourable / unfavourable)

(Stewart, 2010, p. 161)

Their approaches can be described in different ways, and other linguists interested in the topic are either influenced by Sinclair or by Louw. Still most of the issues related to the two terms and mentioned above are open for further discussion.

4. CONCLUSION

From the literature review it is evident that some basic problems concerning semantic preference and prosody are yet to be solved. There is evident necessity for more examples, lexical items, to be analysed in this way in order to prove or refute some of the conclusions that have already been reached. In sum, the following are some of the open and much disputed issues that can serve as the commencement for the further research for the linguists interested in the subject:

- the possibility of the existence of semantic prosody in the targeted V-N collocations
- 'neutral' meaning is necessary when revealing semantic prosody
- hidden element is (not) crucial for semantic preference
- semantic preference is (not) obligatory element in identification of semantic prosody
- connotation is (not) the synonym of semantic prosody
- semantic prosody resides (does not reside) in the single word
- semantic prosody can be considered in a diachronic framework as well

REFERENCES

Baker, P. (2006). *Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis*. London and New York: Continuum.

Bednarek, M. (2008). Semantic Preference and Semantic Prosody re-examined. *Corpus Linguistics and Linguistic Theory*, 4/2, 119-139.

Begagić M. (2013). Semantic preference and semantic prosody of the collocation *make sense*. *Jezikoslovlje* 14(2), 403-416.

Berber-Sardinha, T. (2000). Semantic prosodies in English and Portuguese: a contrastive study. *Cuadernos de Filologia Inglesa* (University of Murcia, Spain), 9/1, 93-110.

Bernardini, S. and Aston,G. (2002). Review of Michael Stubbs: Words and Phrases. Corpus Studies in Lexical Semantics. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 7/2, 283-295.

Bloomfield, L. (1933). *Language*. London: Allen and Unwin.

Bublitz, W. (1996). Semantic prosody and cohesive company: somewhat predictable. *Leuvense Bijdragen: Tijdschrift voor Germaanse Filologie*, 85/1-2,1-32.

Chanell, J. (1999) Corpus-based analysis of evaluative lexis in S. Hunston and G. Thompson (eds.), *Evaluation in Text: Authorial Stance and the Construction of Discourse.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 38-55.

Coffin, C., Hewings, A. and O'Halloran, K. (eds.) (2004). *Applying English Grammar. Functional and Corpus Approaches*. London: Arnold.

Cotterill, J. (2001). Domestic discord, rocky relationships: semantic prosodies in representations of marital violence in the O.J. Simpson trial. *Discourse and Society,* 12/3, 291-312.

Crystal, D. (1991). Stylistic profiling. In K. Aijmer and B. Altenberg (eds.) *English Corpus Linguistics.* London: Longman, 21-38.

Dan-Jensen, H. And Zethsen, K. (2008). Translator awareness of semantic prosodies.
Target, 20/2, 203-221.

Gavioli, L. (2005). *Exploring Corpora for ESP Learning*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Halliday, M. and Hasan, R. (1985). *Language, Context and Text: Aspects of Language in a Social-Semiotic Perspective.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hoey, M. (2003). Lexical Priming and the Properties of Text. Available from www.monabaker.com/tsresources/Lexical/PrimingandthePropertiesofText.htm (1-15).

Hoey, M. (2005). *Lexical Priming: A New Theory of Words and Language.* London and New York: Routledge.

Hu, M. (2015). A semantic prosody analysis of three adjective synonymous pairs in COCA. *Journal of Language and Linguistics Studies, 11(2) ,* 117-131.

Hunston, S. and Francis, G. (1999). *Pattern Grammar: The Principles and Practice of Corpus-driven Grammar.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Hunston, S. and Thompson, G. (1999). *Evaluation in Text: Authorial Stance and the Construction of Discourse.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hunston, S. (2001). Colligation, lexis pattern and text, in M. Scott and G. Thompson (eds.), *Patterns of Text: In Honour of Michael Hoey.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 13-33.

Hunston, S. (2002). *Corpora and Applied Linguistics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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

Lewandowska-Tomaszcyk, B. (1996). Cross-linguistic and language-specific aspects of semantic prosody. *Language Sciences*, 181/1-2, 153-178.

Louw, B. (1993). "Irony in the text or insincerity in the writer? The diagnostic potential of semantic prosodies" in M. Baker, G. Francis and E. Tognini-Bonelli (eds), *Text and Tecnology: In Honour of John Sinclair.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins. 157-175.

Louw, B. (2000). Contextual prosodic theory: bringing semantic prosodies to life, in C. Heffer and H. Suaunston (eds), *Words in Context: In Honour of John Sinclair*. Birmingham: ELR 48-94.

Lyons, J. (1977). *Semantics.* Vol.1,2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Martin, J.R. (1999). Beyond exchange: APPRAISAL systems in English, in S. Hunston and G. Thompson (eds), Evaluation in Text: Authorial Stance and the Construction of Discourse. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 142-175.

McEnery, T., Xiao, R., Tono, Y. (2006). *Corpus-based Language Studies: An Advanced Resource Book.* London and New York: Routledge.

O'Halloran, K.A. (2007). Critical discourse analysis and the corpus-informed interpretation of metaphor at the register level. *Applied Linguistics* 28, 1-24.

Palmer, F. (1981). *Semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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, 131-156. Sinclair, J. (1987). *Looking up*. London/ Glasgow: Collins.

Sinclair, J. (1991). *Corpus, Concordance, Collocation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sinclair, J. (1996a). *Lexis and Lexicography*, J.A. Foley (ed.) Singapore: Unipress.

Sinclair J. (2004). *Trust the Text: Language, Corpus and Discourse*. London: Routledge

Stewart, D. (2010). *Semantic Prosody: A Critical Evaluation.* London and New York: Routledge.

Stubbs, M. (1995b). Corpus Evidence for Norms of Lexical Collocation. In Cook and Seidlfofer (eds.), 245-256.

Stubbs, M. (2001). *Words and Phrases: Corpus Studies of Lexical Semantics*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Tognini-Bonelli, E. (2001). *Corpus Linguistics at Work*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Wales, K. (2001). *A Dictionary of Stylistics*. Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd.

Walker, C. (2004). Factors which influence the collocational behavior of business English nouns and verbs. Paper given at the annual meeting of the British Association of Applied Linguistics (BAAL) at Kings' College, London, September 9-11, 2004.

Wei, N. & Li, X. (2014). Exploring sematic preference and semantic prosody across English and Chinese: Their roles for cross-linguistic perspective. Corpus Linguistics and Linguistics Theory, 10 (1), 103-138.

Whitsitt, S. (2005). A critique of the concept of semantic prosodies. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 10 (3), 283-305.