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Semantic preference and semantic prosody of the collocation *make sense*

Semantic preference and semantic prosody are two notions that have been carefully analysed in corpus linguistics over the past few years. 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. Semantic preference can be defined as the relation between a word form and set of semantically related words, whereas the concept of semantic prosody of a given word or phrase occurs in the context of that particular lexical item with other words or phrases. This article reports on a study which analysed semantic preference and semantic prosody of one of the most common V-N collocations *make sense*. The environment of the collocation *make sense* is observed in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The procedure involves every second of the first randomly selected 100 occurrences of all the word forms of the collocation *make sense* i.e. *make sense, makes sense, made sense and making sense*. All the occurrences are manually examined and observed at the span of 10 words to the left and 10 words to the right and the results are compared.

Key words: semantic preference; semantic prosody; corpus; collocations; statistical measure MI.

1. Semantic preference and semantic prosody

1.1. *Introduction and definition*

In the last two decades there has been a growing interest in the examination of semantic preference and semantic prosody. Such research would be impossible without the advent of computers and specialized programmes for searching million-word corpora. There are almost no works on semantic preference and semantic

prosody outside the scope of corpus linguistics, as empirical data used from corpora enable the linguist to make statements that are objective and based on natural language.

Bublitz (1996: 9) states that the relationship between an item and its environment is "best, and, arguably, only revealed by applying computational methods to large corpora of discourse." Louw (1993: 159) argues that semantic prosody is "a phenomenon that has been only revealed computationally, and whose extent and development can only be properly traced by computational methods". Adolphs and Carter (2002: 7) state that the study on semantic prosody "has only become possible with the advent of large corpora and suitable software" while Hunston (2002: 142) writes that "semantic prosody can be observed only by looking at a large number of instances of a word or phrase, because it relies on the typical use of a word of phrase."

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 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'" (2001: 66). Therefore, the need for precise definitions of the two terms emerges.

The term semantic preference seems to be less problematic to define than the term semantic prosody. Stubbs (2001: 65) defines it as "the relation, not between individual words, but between a lemma[1] 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.

When it comes to semantic prosody, we can say that it 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. In the same work Sinclair states 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: 112).

[1] The lemma MAKE is realized in text by the word-forms *make, makes, made* and *making*.

The 'father' of the term semantic prosody is Bill Louw who introduced the term to public in 1993.[2] The term was coined with the reference to Firth's discussion of prosody in phonological terms. Namely, Firth noticed that the realisation 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 realisation 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*).

1.2. *The relationship between semantic preference and semantic prosody*

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 subcategory 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" (2004:149). 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: 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: 150)

Therefore, Partington (ibid.: 151) 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

[2] 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).

prosody "dictates the general environment which constrains the preferential choices of the node item", semantic preference "contributes powerfully to building semantic prosody" (ibid: 151).

In order to exemplify the above mentioned arguments, 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: 3).

The second example is the verb *undergo*, discussed by Stubbs (2001: 89–95). The collocates to the right of the verb showed that *undergo* indicates 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.

Although some of the discussed items showed strong and clear favourable or unfavourable prosody, there are also several cases where prosodies are not so strong. The verb *set in* shows unfavourable semantic prosody in almost all examples found in the investigated corpus. However, the verb *bent on* is also 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: 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*. (emphasis my own)

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 make 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). Partington (2004) adds that the theory of priming helps us to answer one of the frequently raised questions 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 (Partington 2004: 132)

Other scholars who were examining lexical items with regard to semantic preference and prosody are Sinclair (1987, 1991, 1996a, 1998, 2003), Louw (1993, 2000), Stubbs (1995, 2001a), Bublitz (1996), Partington (1998, 2004), Hunston and Francis (1999), Hunston and Thompson (1999), Tognini-Bonelli (2001), Husnston (2002), Hoey (2005), Whitsitt (2005), Hunston (2007), Bednarek (2008), and Stewart (2010).

2. Semantic preference and semantic prosody of the collocation *make sense*

In this part of the paper all the word forms of the collocation *make sense* are examined. I decided to look at the behaviour of *make sense* in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) for several reasons. COCA is the largest freely-available corpus of English which contains more than 425 million words. It is also equally divided between five registers: spoken, fiction, magazines, newspapers and academic journals. COCA suits my purposes since the hypotheses I wish to test are:

- that there is a significant difference in realisation of semantic preference and semantic prosody in the newspaper and academic register;
- semantic preference and semantic prosody can be inferred for the collocation *make sense*.

Firstly I looked at the frequency of occurrence of all the word forms of the colloca-

tion *make sense*, which are as follows:

Table 1. All the word forms of the collocation *make sense* in COCA.

	Newspaper	Academic
make sense (936)	821	115
makes sense (1313)	675	638
made sense (398)	224	174
making sense (234)	56	178

A glance at the table will show that *makes sense* is the most frequent with 1313 occurrences, followed by *make sense* with 936 occurrences, *made sense* with 398 and making sense with 234 occurrences.

The procedure involves every second occurrence of the first randomly selecting 100 occurrences of all the word forms in each register i.e. 50 occurrences of each word form are examined which totals 400 examples (with the exception of the word form *making sense*, where each occurrence was examined since it totals 56 occurrences in COCA). All the examples are examined manually in the span[3] of approximately ten words to the left and ten words to the right of the collocation.[4]

A study of the data also showed that *make sense* occurred with some other semantic features apart from something positive and something negative. There are numerous examples where the collocation *make sense* is used with various modals of possibility, therefore expressing the lack of certainty. Moreover, it appeared in several hypothetical constructions, again expressing the absence of certainty. However, apart from the negative and positive environment, the most common environment in which the collocation *make sense* appears is the one of difficult situa-

[3] Span is a contextual window for a node, specifying how many words to the left and right it extends i.e. number of words before and/or after the node.

[4] Jones and Sinclair (1974) did the first computational analysis of collocation in 147,000 word corpus and they determined that the optimum span for identifying collocation is up to four words on either side of the node word.

tions. For that reason, in addition to positive, negative and neutral behaviour of *make sense*, I decided to examine two more options 'difficulty' and 'possibility'.

2.1. *Make sense*

Table 2. The word form *make sense* in COCA.

	Negative	Difficulty	Positive	Possibility	Neutral	
Newspaper	20	14	4	6	6	=50
Academic	10	13	5	4	18	=50
Total	**30**	**27**	**9**	**10**	**24**	=100

Taking the newspaper corpus first, the word form *make sense* is mostly found in a negative environment. Such an environment is mostly realised when *make sense* is used in its negative form i.e. something *doesn't make sense* in 10 examples or *didn't make sense* 6 examples out of 20 examples in total. Some of the examples are:

(1) *... pay you for not returning, that just **doesn't make sense**, because then we'd have to pay everybody for striking.*

(2) *...a favour she appreciated but knew **did not make sense.** That was absurd, too... a waste of time...*

(3) *... but legally, the arms embargo **doesn't make sense.** The UN imposed an arms embargo on Yugoslavia when that state...*

In the academic corpus, the word form *make sense* is less frequent in a negative environment. This can be explained with Partington's statement that newspapers have a tendency to refer drastic and tragic events to their readers (Partington 2004).

However, the second most common environment of *make sense* in both the newspaper and the academic register is the one expressing 'difficulty'. It is mostly realised when *make sense* occurs with the words *struggle*, *help*, *try* and *attempt.* There is also a strong colligation with the preposition *of* or *out of* at R1 in almost all the examples. Some of the examples are:

(4) *... which the "popular sectors" of society **try to make sense of** their lives and their surrounding reality...*

(5) *... of the observable is done simultaneously with **attempts to make sense of***

it....

(6) *... indeed artistic expressions of the human spirit **helping us make sense of** our social world...*

(7) *... whether he has learned from his past **attempts** to make sense **out of** Hollywood...*

In several examples *make sense* is used with modals of possibility as well as in hypothetical phrases, expressing lack of certainty. The examples are:

(8) *It **can** make sense for poor women to have children when they are quite young ...*

(9) *Some moves that **might** make sense for the long-term, might also position you for a bit more safety...*

(10) ***If** you have significant assets, it **may** make sense", says Martin Corry, director of federal affairs.*

There are also several examples of *make sense* in a neutral environment, mostly when it occurs in questions where the answers are unknown and to be sought:

(11) *How does she see the world, make sense of diversity and complexity? What are the forces ...*

(12) *How should one make sense of contemporary sightings of "lost tribes" in the marginal...*

2.2. *Makes sense*

Table 3. The word form *makes sense* in COCA.

	Negative	Difficulty	Positive	Possibility	Neutral	
Newspaper	2	10	24	2	13	=50
Academic	1	5	26	4	13	=50
Total	**3**	**15**	**50**	**6**	**26**	=100

Table 3 indicates that the word form *makes sense* is mostly used in a favourable environment i.e. when something really makes sense or seems to be sensible thing to do. Some of the examples are:

(13) *... the goal is cleaning up the environment, makes sense, because it encourages employers to adult themselves...*

(14) *... founded to take the overflow, he said. It makes sense for them to realign because they have much in common...*

When it comes to the negative, positive, possible and neutral environment, there is no explicit difference between the newspaper and academic corpus. Although *makes sense* can be found in several non-factual environments (with modal verbs as well as in if clauses and questions), it is less frequent than in the case of *make sense*.

However, the environment of 'difficulty', as the second most common environment in which *makes sense* appears, indicates that there are certain differences between the two corpora. *Makes sense* in the environment of difficulty is less frequent in the academic corpus than in the newspaper one.

2.3. *Made sense*

Table 4. The word form *made sense* in COCA.

	Negative	Difficulty	Positive	Possibility	Neutral	
Newspaper	13	4	14	2	17	=50
Academic	8	3	19	1	19	=50
Total	**21**	**7**	**33**	**3**	**36**	=100

Although the word form *made sense* has approximately the same number of appearances in both favourable and unfavourable environment, there are certain differences between the newspaper and the academic corpus. In the newspaper corpus, *made sense* is more frequent in unfavourable environment than in the favourable one, whereas in the academic corpus it is more frequent in the favourable one.

In contrast to *make sense*, *made sense* relatively infrequently occurs with modals of possibility and hypothetical phrases, thus expressing something factual – something that really made sense. Some of the examples are:

(15) *... advanced studies at the M.A. or PhD. level it made sense to acquire keen skills in linguistics and literary analysis...*

(16) *... and arrows pointing certain ways, and all immediately made sense to*

anyone in the industry who saw it...

2.4. *Making sense*

Table 5. The word form *making sense* in COCA.

	Negative	Difficulty	Positive	Possibility	Neutral	
Newspaper	11	18	1	-	19	=50
Academic	5	10	2	-	34	=50
Total	16	28	3	-	53	=100

These results appear largely similar to those of *make sense*, although there are more neutral or general events. However, the most common environment of *making sense* is the one of difficult situations. It is mostly realised when the word form collocates with words such as *difficult, try and trouble* and it is always accompanied by the preposition *of* at R1. In contrast to *make sense*, semantic preference is realised on the both sides of the word form. Some of the examples are:

(17) *... times through the eyes of a child who had **trouble** making sense **of** everything going on around her. It was bigger...*

(18) *... substantial value by doing the important work of making sense **of the difficulty** of living in the strange new surroundings of...*

(19) *... approach to domestic politics, is having **trouble** making sense **of** issues that he never had to think about before.*

If we compare the newspaper register with the academic one, it is obvious that *making sense* is more frequent in the former. The same can be said for the environment of difficult situations, which confirms the statement from the beginning of this paper that people have a greater need to write and read about problematic events.

3. Conclusion on the semantic preference and semantic prosody of the collocation *make sense*

The first hypothesis of this paper states that there is a significant difference in the realisation of semantic preference and semantic prosody in different registers, the newspaper and the academic one. There is a clear evidence in favour of this hy-

pothesis, especially when it comes to a negative environment of *make sense* and *making sense*. All the word forms of the collocation *make sense* are more frequently found in a negative environment in the newspaper register than in the academic one (see Table 2, 3, 4 and 5). This can be explained by the fact that humans have a greater need to talk and write about problematic and tragic events, as stated by Galtung and Ruge (1982: 56) "the more negative the event in its consequences, the more probable that it will become a news item".

The word forms *make sense* and *making sense* occur more frequently in a negative environment than other two word forms, whereas *makes sense* and *made sense* occur more frequently in a positive environment. Therefore it cannot be stated that the collocation *make sense* has an overall negative prosody.

The second hypothesis of this paper also proved to be true, i.e. that semantic preference and semantic prosody can be inferred for the collocation *make sense*. All the word forms collocate with several verbs such as *try, attempt, help and struggle*, thus clearly constituting the semantic set of 'difficulty'. Semantic preference for difficult situations leads to unfavourable semantic prosody, especially of the word form *make sense*.

Apart from semantic preference for difficulty, the word form *make sense* showed semantic preference for 'uncertainty' through its collocation with modal verbs as well as the fact that it is commonly found in hypothetical phrases. However, *makes sense* and *made sense* are used in more factual and definite environments, thus indicating a rather favourable semantic prosody.

The basic meaning of the collocation *make sense* may seem to be favourable at first sight. If we check the meaning of *make sense* in the Collins-Cobuild Dictionary, no explanation can be found under the entry of the verb *make*. Under the entry of the noun *sense* there are three definitions of the collocation *make sense* and those are:

1. If something *makes sense* you can understand it.
2. When you *make sense* of something, you succeed in understanding it.
3. If a course of action *makes sense*, it seems sensible.

This paper agrees with the fact that several definitions should be placed under the entry of the collocation *make sense*. However, it has proved that one of the most important and central uses of the collocation *make sense* is in difficult situations, when the collocation is accompanied by the preposition *of*. This aspect of use, as well as numerous examples where the collocation *make sense* is used in uncertain situations, seem to be completely ignored by the Collins-Cobuild diction-

ary. Although some of the already existing definitions appear to be true, some other uses of the collocation *make sense* should be added in order to get a more precise definition of the collocation.

Therefore the need for examination of many more lexical items with regard to semantic preference and semantic prosody inside the scope of corpus linguistics emerges, since such investigations could help in forming a more precise and complete picture of the meaning of items in question.

This paper in another piece of evidence in support of the claim that million-word corpora are the only true sources that provide accurate and objective information about natural language.

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SEMANTIČKA PREFERENCIJA I SEMANTIČKA PROZODIJA KOLOKACIJE *MAKE SENSE*

Semantička preferencija i semantička prozodija dva su pomno analizirana pojma u korpusnoj lingvistici tijekom proteklih nekoliko godina. Kako su se povećavali obimi korpusa te napredovali alati za pronalaženje različitih leksičkih pojmova za različite svrhe, lingvisti su počeli detaljnije analizirati ta dva pojma. Dok se semantička preferencija može definirati kao odnos između određenog oblika riječi s nizom semantički povezanih riječi, semantička prozodija određene riječi ili izraza realizira se u kontekstu u kojem se određeni leksički pojam pojavljuje s drugim riječima ili izrazima. Ovaj članak osvrće se na istraživanje u kojem su analizirane semantička preferencija i semantička prozodija jedne od najčešće korištenih kolokacija glagola i imenice *make sense*. Okruženje u kojem se pojavljuje kolokacija *make sense* promatrano je u Korpusu suvremenog američkog engleskog jezika (COCA). Od prvih 100 kolokacija pronađenih slučajnim odabirom analizirana je svaka druga i svi oblici kolokacije uključeni su u istraživanje, tj. *make sense, makes sense, made sense* i *making sense*. Svi su oblici kolokacije analizirani pojedinačno, promatrani u kontekstualnom okviru od 10 riječi s obje strane kolokacije te uspoređeni. Rezultati ukazuju na vrlo važnu ulogu dvaju pojmova, semantičke preferencije i semantičke prozodije, prilikom definiranja jasnog značenja kolokacije *make sense*. Ovo istraživanje također podržava stav da su milijunski korpusi jedini pouzdani izvori koji pružaju točne i objektivne informacije o prirodnom jeziku.

Ključne riječi: semantička preferencija; semantička prozodija; korpus; kolokacije; statistička mjera MI.