

‘A man is known by the company he keeps’: A critical overview of semantic prosody

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Abstract

The discipline of corpus linguistics has revolutionized the study of language in a variety of ways. In this respect, semantic prosody is one of the rapidly evolving research streams that encapsulates the incorporation of digital technology into linguistic research and deserves more scholarly attention. The paper aims to offer new insights into the study of this theoretical concept. It presents a critical review of the existing literature, delineating the major merits and challenges of this area of inquiry, and suggests novel research avenues. This article has theoretical and practical implications for the future research agenda on semantic prosody. It underscores the importance of endowing this corpus linguistics concept with more clarity and consistency as to its labeling, conceptualization, and delimitation. The paper also proposes some new applications pertaining to the investigation of the discursive construction of human referents across different text types.

Keywords: semantic prosody, theoretical/practical significance, challenges, new applications

Introduction

Corpus linguistics can be viewed as the fruitful outcome of the integration of digitalization in linguistic inquiries (Jensen, 2014). Grounded in corpus linguistics, the notion of semantic prosody represents a thriving field of research (Xiao & McEnery,

2006). Its importance at both the theoretical and practical levels of language study (Morley & Partington, 2009) arguably lies behind the heightened interest it has gained among scholars. The main benefit of identifying semantic prosodies, Partington (2015) elucidates, resides in uncovering the subtleties and covert motives of language use. Nevertheless, this concept has been subjected to criticism on a number of grounds (e.g., Bednarek, 2008; Hunston, 2007; Stewart, 2010; Whitsitt, 2005).

Against this stimulating background, this paper embarks on a detailed investigation of semantic prosody by outlining its origins, development, defining schemes, approaches, properties, related concepts, theoretical/practical significance, and challenges. The merit of the present account of this corpus linguistics term is twofold; it lies in approaching semantic prosody from a critical dimension as well as attempting to extend the frontiers of its exploration.

Origins and Development

Semantic prosody is one of the prominent fields of research in corpus linguistics (Zhang, 2010). Since its introduction by Bill Louw in 1993 — though being originally Sinclair's (1991) conception — it has attracted considerable scholarly interest and its applications have touched upon numerous fields, most notably translation studies, lexicography, and language learning and teaching (Zhang, 2010). The study of semantic prosody has admittedly been possible by virtue of the “advent of large corpora and suitable software” (Adolphs & Carter, 2002, p. 7). In fact, the most intriguing feature of semantic prosody is its tendency to be subtle and “often hidden from human intuition and so can only be explored by the powerful means of corpus linguistics” (p. 193). Native speaker intuition can, nonetheless, be considered a reliable guide to the identification of prosodies (Xiao & McEnery, 2006). In light of this, “concordance evidence serves as an aid to or corroboration of native-speaker judgement” (Morley & Partington, 2009, p. 150).

According to Partington (2004), semantic prosody was further developed in post-Firthian corpus linguistics by dint of the works of John Sinclair (1996a, 1998) and Michael Stubbs (2001a). Semantic prosody originally borrows from Firth's (1957a) concept of prosody with respect to the field of phonology (Begagić, 2013; Cheng, 2013), particularly the process of assimilation by which a given sound quality spreads over a number of adjacent sounds (Zhang, 2010). In a similar way, lexical patterns are argued to display this phenomenon of prosody at the semantic level. In this respect, Xiao and McEnery (2006) suggest that the conceptualization of semantic prosody is best encapsulated in the Chinese saying that goes as follows: 'he who stays near vermilion gets stained red, and he who stays near ink gets stained black'. Accordingly, "the consequence of a word frequently keeping 'bad company' is that the use of the word alone may become enough to indicate something unfavourable" (p. 107).

Such theoretical grounding may, however, call into question the degree to which the analogy drawn between the fields of phonology — an overwhelmingly rule-based discipline — and semantics is conceivable. The notion of meaning is, in fact, largely elusive and contingent upon various contextual factors. Having traced the origins and development of semantic prosody, the paper introduces the different definitions that have been proposed for this term in what follows.

Defining Schemes

The term semantic prosody had been initially defined as a "consistent aura of meaning with which a form is imbued by its collocates" by Louw (1993, p. 157). Various "defining schemes" (Zhang, 2010, p. 190) were subsequently advanced for this concept by several theorists (e.g., Hunston & Francis, 2000; Partington, 1998; Sinclair, 1996a; Stubbs, 1996). Semantic prosody, in Sinclair's (1996a) view, is typically "attitudinal and on the pragmatic side of the semantics-pragmatics continuum" (p.

87). This definition conspicuously sheds light on the pragmatic functioning of semantic prosody. This may account for the fact that this concept, being grounded in corpus linguistics, was variously referred to as ‘pragmatic prosody’, ‘discourse prosody’ (Stubbs, 2001a), and ‘emotive prosody’ (Bublitz, 2003). In short, added to its denotative or literal meaning, a given item can have a specific type of semantic prosody encoding its “attitudinal or pragmatic meaning” (Sinclair, 2004a, p. 23).

For his part, Stubbs (1996) rather stresses the collocational aspect of semantic prosody by defining it as “a particular collocational phenomenon” (p. 176), albeit classifying it into three major groupings (negative prosody, positive prosody, and neutral prosody), depending on the type of collocates that a node frequently co-occurs with. Inspired by Stubbs’ (1996) view, some corpus linguists use the term “collocational prosody” (Gabrovsek, 2007, p. 10) to refer to the theoretical concept at issue. The approach championed by Michael Stubbs has mainly been criticized for its prime focus on the lexico-grammatical aspect of this concept, overlooking its deeper pragmatic grounding (Zhang, 2010).

As regards Partington’s (1998) conceptualization of semantic prosody, it mainly foregrounds the concept of connotation by defining semantic prosody as “the spreading of connotational coloring beyond single word boundaries” (p. 68). In view of this, node words and their collocates tend to share the same affective meaning. An illustrative example provided by Partington (1998) is the adjectival node IMPRESSIVE that exhibits a tendency to co-occur with collocates endowed with positive connotations such as ‘achievement’, ‘talent’, and ‘dignity’, thereby acquiring a favorable prosody. Underpinning Partington’s (1998) approach is the contention that semantic prosody is basically “an aspect of evaluative meaning” (Partington, 2004, p. 131), hence the use of the label ‘evaluative prosody’ in Morley and Partington (2009) and Partington (2015).

The absence of agreement on its label (semantic/discourse/pragmatic/emotive/evaluative prosody) as well as the diverging views on its conceptualization may pose a challenge for researchers interested in the investigation of semantic prosody, potentially resulting in inconsistency and ambiguity. Equally essential to the discussion of this theoretical concept is a consideration of the different perspectives from which it can be approached.

Approaches to Semantic Prosody

Morley and Partington (2009) and Partington (2015) posit that there are two possible approaches to the corpus linguistics notion of semantic prosody, referred to as the lexical-priming versus discourse perspectives.

The Lexical-Priming Paradigm

Within the lexical-priming perspective, semantic prosody is perceived as the property of a given lexical item (Louw, 1993; Morley, 2007; Partington, 1998; Sinclair, 1996b; Stubbs, 1996). This property denotes, according to Hoey's (2005) theory of priming, the lexical item's primings that serve to inform language users about its patterns of interaction with other words, including collocation, colligation (the relationship between a lexical item and a recurrent grammatical category that it co-occurs with), and semantic preference (Morley & Partington, 2009). Underlying this theory is the belief that discourse participants, in the words of Morley and Partington (2009), "are primed to use and recognize the particular evaluative prosodies of certain items" (p. 146). Language users are therefore primed to use a given lexical item in its typical context and environment mainly through the cumulative effect of their repetitive encounters with this term that ultimately becomes part of their communicative competence (Partington, 2004).

The Discourse Paradigm

The framework of semantic prosody can also be approached from a discourse perspective that conceives of “prosodies as being found over stretches of text” (Partington, 2015, p. 292) and that is two-fold, namely textual and statistical (Morley & Partington, 2009; Partington, 2015). Viewed as a textual phenomenon, semantic prosody conveys “the evaluative intent of the speaker, that is, the attitude s/he has to his/her topic in any individual segment of text” (Partington, 2015, p. 292). Consequently, the subsequent phraseological and lexical choices that the text producer makes are predominantly dictated by his/her initial choice of the type of prosody to be attached to a given lexical unit. In other words, the “speaker prosodic intent affects the choice of lexis” (Morley & Partington, 2009, p. 147).

The statistical approach to semantic prosody, as conceptualized from a discourse standpoint, entails “analysing, via a concordance, how a node is actually instantiated many times in many texts” (Partington, 2015, p. 292). Specifically, by exploring the patterns of co-occurrence that are evidently inaccessible to the naked eye, the researcher can statistically pin down the type of semantic polarity that prevails and the evaluative force that the node acquires as a result of its collocational behavior. In biogenetics terms, this prosodic behavior will be instantiated in the DNA of the item and progressively “built up in the minds of speakers ... by the number of exposures to uses” (Morley & Partington, 2009, p. 148).

On this account, the statistical approach to semantic prosody seems indispensable to uncovering how it operates textually, conceivably as a linguistic manifestation of the text producer’s stance on the topic in question. The textual and statistical approaches thus “imply looking at items when they are actually instantiated in texts, rather than how they are held in the minds of speakers” (Partington, 2015, p. 292).

Approaching semantic prosody from a discourse perspective seems more plausible in that, within the lexical-

priming paradigm, the prosody of a given lexical item risks being merely conceived as its connotations. Critically, this may cast serious doubts on the *raison d'être* of this theoretical concept. In what follows is a brief account of the main properties of semantic prosody, with a view to gaining a richer understanding of this research field.

Properties

Drawing on Forest (2007), Partington (2015) lays out the major properties of what he labels as ‘evaluative prosody’:

- a) The notion of collocation is central to a prosody-based approach to attitudinal meaning.
- b) Speakers are not necessarily aware of the (often hidden) prosodic meanings of the words they use.
- c) Evaluative prosody is not the property of a single lexical item, as espoused by the lexical-priming approach, but rather of “groups of recurring, inter-collocating words and phrases” (p. 287), in line with the discourse perspective.
- d) The semantic preferences of a lexical item shape its prosody.
- e) The distribution of evaluative meaning operates synchronically by “spreading across the immediate co-text and coloring the overall interpretation of an utterance in context” (p. 287) as well as diachronically in that “repeated instances can contribute to semantic change (p. 287).
- f) Evaluative prosody can either be considered “an essential component of phraseological units of meaning” (p. 287) or not, owing to its variations according to syntax, discourse type, and usage (e.g., literal vs. figurative).

A fuller account of the third property is deemed enlightening, considering its contentious nature. In this respect,

it is postulated that an unfavorable semantic prosody, for instance, should not be confused with derogatory expressions that are inherently associated with negative connotations. As Xiao and McEnery (2006) put it, a given node “does not appear to have an affective meaning until it is in the context of its typical collocates” (p. 107). This being so, semantically ‘neutral’ terms are the typical target of a semantic prosody analysis (Stewart, 2010) in that their apparent semantic neutrality makes them worthy of a more extensive corpus-based investigation.

An oft-cited example in the literature is Sinclair’s (1987) ‘set in’ that empirically proved to have an unfavorable semantic prosody, importantly not on the grounds of any built-in or inherent property that this term displays, but because its common collocates (e.g., ‘decay’, ‘ill-will’, ‘malaise’, ‘prejudice’, etc.) discernibly bear unfavorable connotations. Other examples of negative and positive semantic prosodies revealed based on corpus evidence are included in Table 1.

Table 1: Illustrations of Semantic Prosodies

Author(s)	Negative prosody	Positive prosody
Sinclair (1991, 2004b)	Break out Happen Set in [Not] budge	
Louw (1993, 2000)	Bent on Build up of End up [+ gerund] Get oneself [+ past participle] A recipe for	Build up a
Stubbs (1995, 1996, 2001a, 2001b)	Accost Cause Fan the flame Signs of Underage Teenager(s)	Provide Career
Partington (1998, 2004)	Commit Peddle/peddler Dealings Utterly	
Hunston (2002)	Sit through	
Schmitt & Carter (2004)	Bordering on	

Note. Adapted from “Collocation, semantic prosody and near synonymy: a cross-linguistic perspective” (Xiao & McEnery, 2006, p. 106.)

The research findings reported in Table 1 have had important implications for the domains of language learning and teaching, lexicography, and translation, given that they provided valuable information about the meanings and usage of a number

of words and expressions in the English lexicon. After outlining the major properties of semantic prosody, the focus falls on introducing three basic terms that are closely connected to it.

Related Concepts

As postulated earlier, the concepts of collocation and connotation represent defining features of semantic prosody and thus more emphasis will be placed on them in this article. Semantic preference is another related notion that is equally worth examining.

Collocation

Broadly speaking, the “[c]ollolocations of a given word are statements of the habitual or customary places of that word” (Firth, 1957b, p. 181). Undeniably, the study of the semantic prosody of a given term basically implies the extraction and scrutiny of its typical collocates. In fact, “[t]he simplest form of ... evaluative prosody is seen in collocation, when we see the sharing of evaluative polarity between a node and its collocate” (Partington, 2015, p. 281). The negativity/positivity associated with the node can, in view of this, be characteristic of items that occur in the larger, rather than immediate, co-text (Partington, 2015).

The evaluative potential of a lexical item is thought to be best investigated throughout a corpus, given that attitudinal meanings can “only be seen in the combinatorial behavior of items, the kinds, the sets of other words/phrases it collocates with” (Partington, 2011, p. 38). In the same vein, Ebeling (2013) propounds that a researcher’s intuition is a poor guide to the study of the collocational profile and semantic prosody of words. Stewart (2010), however, points out that the identification of a given lexical item’s semantic prosody based on its collocates in a corpus is not devoid of subjectivity and can lead to “hasty categorizations” (p. 103) if the co-text and general context of text production are not adequately examined.

Connotation

At the outset, it is worth noting that the conceptualization of the notion of connotation in linguistics is said to be problematic due to the absence of agreement among scholars on its exact meaning (Bednarek, 2008). Hunston and Thompson (2000) relate the act of evaluation to three main concepts, namely connotation (Lyons, 1977), affect (Besnier, 1993), and attitude (Halliday, 1994). Hence, connotation is considered to be “[o]ne form of lexical evaluation” (Partington, 2004, p. 131). In a similar line of research, Bednarek (2008) conceives of the connotations of a given lexical item as the evaluative or attitudinal aspects associated with it.

Lyons (1977) maintains that the connotation of a word is “an emotive or affective component additional to its central meaning” (p. 176). In addition to its denotative or literal meaning, a lexical item can be used connotatively by activating its personal, cultural, emotive, and ideological associations (Chandler, 1994). The pragmatic grounding of the concept of connotation is well elucidated by Allan (2007) who ascertains that the “connotations of a language expression are pragmatic effects that arise from encyclopedic knowledge about its denotation (or reference) and also from experiences, beliefs, and prejudices about the contexts in which the expression is typically used” (p. 1047).

Viewed from this perspective, words that are associated with a connotative meaning “have obvious in-built favorable or unfavorable speaker evaluation” (Partington, 2004, p. 131). Conversely, the evaluative meaning embedded in semantic prosody stretches over a larger unit of text and, as a consequence, “connotation is often considered to be more evident, less hidden, than semantic prosody” (Morley & Partington, 2009, p. 151). The major distinction between these two terms thereby resides in the degree of their evaluative explicitness, as displayed by Figure 1.

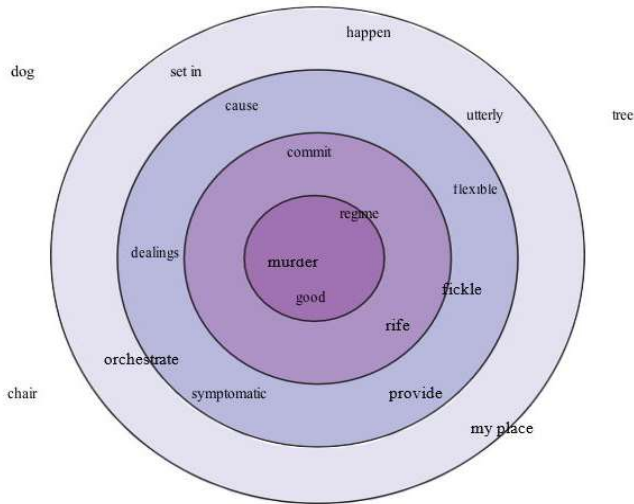


Figure 1: Evaluative explicitness expressed in terms of prototypicality.

Reprinted from “A few Frequently Asked Questions about semantic -or evaluative- prosody,” (Morley & Partington, 2009, p. 151).

Drawing on prototype theory (Rosch, 1997), and Morley and Partington (2009) represent this relationship visually by placing items with explicit and evident evaluative meaning (associated with positive/negative connotations) closer to the center and those with a less explicit and obvious attitudinal meaning (associated with positive/negative semantic prosodies) closer to the outskirts.

Semantic Preference

Lexical units, in Stubbs’ (2001a) view, can be bound together along four different relationships: collocation, colligation, semantic prosody, and semantic preference. This paper probes more deeply into the last two types. Semantic prosody and semantic preference denote terms that are intricately

related, though admittedly not identical. The distinction between them is therefore seen as subtle and “not entirely clear-cut” (Stubbs, 2001a, p. 66). This distinction, Partington (2004) argues, was best delineated by Sinclair (1996a) and Stubbs (2001a). Accordingly, semantic preference is definable as the relationship “between a lemma or word-form and a set of semantically related words” (Stubbs, 2001a, p. 65), that is to say, collocates which belong to a specific semantic set. In contrast, the core aspect of semantic prosody is its attitudinal and pragmatic grounding (Sinclair, 1996a). In short, “semantic preference may be in favor of any definable semantic field, but semantic prosody is always either for positive or for negative evaluation” (McEnery & Hardie, 2012, p. 137).

Another layer of comparison lies in the fact that semantic preference is less abstract than semantic prosody, given that the former is strictly associated with the process of collocation while the latter goes a step further in terms of its discursive functioning. In the spirit of this argument, semantic preference is “a ‘narrower’ phenomenon — relating the node item to another item from a particular semantic set — than prosody which can affect wider stretches of text” (Partington, 2004, p. 151). This can be illustrated with Stubbs’ (2001a) example of the lemma UNDERGO which expresses multiple semantic preferences, as its collocates chiefly belong to the semantic fields of medicine (e.g., undergo brain surgery), change (e.g., undergo dramatic changes), and tests (e.g., undergo medical examination). These semantic preferences thus build up an unfavorable semantic prosody for this verb.

The absence of a clear-cut distinction between the concepts of semantic preference and semantic prosody constitutes another site of ambiguity in the study of the latter phenomenon that necessitates further research, with a view to attaining more clarity and consistency. Attention, at this stage, shifts to a discussion of the importance of semantic prosody both theoretically and practically.

Theoretical and Practical Importance

The theoretical importance of semantic prosody stems from the contention that this concept is the “mechanism which shows how one elemental type of meaning — evaluative meaning — is frequently shared across units in discourse and, by ensuring consistency of evaluation ..., plays a vital role in keeping the discourse together, in its cohesion” (Morley & Partington, 2009, p. 139). In other words, semantic prosody helps discourse participants avoid the confusion that underpins “mixed, confusing messages” (Partington, 2015, p. 301), as it is the case with collocational clashes. Interestingly, flouting this “evaluative consistency” (p. 284) does equally urge the addressee to dig deeper into the subtle intended meaning. Semantic prosody, on this account, can unveil the linguistic tools through which evaluation infiltrates not only a part of text, but also an entire corpus.

With regard to the practical significance of semantic prosody, in Morley and Partington’s (2009) view, it fundamentally manifests itself in the rhetorical and pragmatic dimensions of language use, for the choices of writers and speakers of specific wordings from a much larger set of linguistic options are partly guided by their awareness of the prosodies attached to these terms. In their turn, readers and listeners can gain insight into the attitudes of a given text producer via the activation of their knowledge of semantic prosody (Hauser & Schwarz, 2016; Sinclair, 2004b).

Viewed as such, a word’s semantic prosody can act as a “useful shorthand” (Partington, 2015, p. 292) that provides “suggestions on how to use it when realized in discourse, including on the evaluative ... force it is likely to contribute to the discourse ... as expressing that favorable/unfavorable appraisal to the topic in question” (Morley & Partington, 2009, p. 145). This shorthand is intriguingly the equivalent of the DNA of an organism in biogenetics, providing information which can significantly “influence ... how an organism will behave

when alive, that is, in linguistic terms, when the item is actually instantiated in discourse” (p. 145). Having addressed the role played by semantic prosody textually and communicatively, this article highlights the major problems identified in the body of research that has so far been developed on this concept.

Summary of Challenges

Though promising and intriguing, the study of semantic prosody is fraught with challenges. Looking at this phenomenon through a critical lens, one can pinpoint inconsistency and ambiguity as the main weaknesses in the line of scholarship that has so far addressed it. In fact, as discussed throughout this paper, the lack of consistency and clarity pertains to not only the labeling and conceptualization of this corpus linguistics term but also its delimitation with respect to other related concepts such as semantic preference and connotation. Endowing this domain with more conceptual clarity and coherence thus represents the major recommendation put forth by the present paper for future research on semantic prosody. On this account, the aforementioned problematic areas in this field of inquiry need further scrutiny. Importantly, proposing novel directions in the investigation of this concept can accentuate its theoretical and practical significance and strengthen its overall impact.

New Applications

This paper propounds that the study of the semantic prosodies of human referents across texts can open new research horizons for corpus linguists investigating this concept. Semantic prosody, in this respect, constitutes one of the linguistic tools that may be deployed to unravel the representation strategies of specific participants in various discourse types such as politicians in a news corpus, protagonists in literary texts, etc. This contention is founded on the premise that semantic prosody is not a built-in property of lexical items, but they acquire it on the basis of their patterns of co-occurrence (Partington, 2015).

The collocational analysis of nodes referencing human subjects and the exploration of their respective semantic preferences were the subject of few CADs¹ such as the work of Bondi (2007) which revealed that the lemmas **TERRORISTS**, **UNIONIST**, and **REPUBLICAN**, referring to some of the participants reported in the Bloody Sunday Inquiry,² have a semantic preference for “police/military actions” (p. 418). Nevertheless, it seems that the act of extending the discussion of the collocational patterns of lexical items denoting human referents to a consideration of the semantic prosodies they can be associated with still remains an unexplored territory. In fact, even when deployed in CADs to examine the construction of particular groups, like Muslims, in the mass media (e.g., Baker et al., 2013), the term ‘semantic/discourse prosodies’ was roughly used interchangeably with ‘themes’ or ‘topics’.³ Equally important, the cited work did not follow the formal procedure — a polarity-based classification of collocates — typical of the study of semantic prosodies. The author’s forthcoming study (Ben Ghozlen, in press) on the evaluative prosodies of political actors in *The Wall Street Journal* coverage of the 2016 U.S. election will therefore pioneer research in this direction.

Two considerations are finally worth underscoring regarding the proposed area of inquiry. Firstly, due to the fact that participants in text can be referenced through a range of potential realizations (e.g., first name, title, pronoun, etc.) a canonical referring expression — the one most frequently used in the analyzed corpus — can act as the node whose semantic prosody is to be examined. Secondly, the identification of the

¹ Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies

² An inquiry investigating the tragic event known as ‘the Bloody Sunday’ that took place in Londonderry (1972).

³ This argument is best illustrated with the following excerpt: “examination of concordance lines reveals two clear discourse prosodies surrounding Muslim community. The first occurs with collocates like ... These collocates construct the Muslim community as having the potential to be offended ... A second discourse prosody of Muslim community concerns the view of the Muslim community as separate from the rest of Britain ... **Other common topics** associated with Muslim communities are the notion of a backlash or attacks on them” (Baker et al., 2013, pp. 270-272, emphasis added).

evaluative polarity of the extracted collocates should not be solely premised on their general denotative and connotative meanings. Rather, it needs to take into account the meanings that may arise from the specific context of text production. Interpreted through the lens of a particular socio-economic, cultural, and political background, collocates that do generally exhibit neutrality can, in fact, impart favorable/unfavorable meanings.

Conclusion

This research has tackled a thriving field of study in corpus linguistics, notably semantic prosody. The exploration of this phenomenon is believed to be highly important in a number of respects. Firstly, it captures one of the interesting ways in which linguistic inquiries, and the humanities in general, are keeping abreast of the digital revolution. Secondly, a critical overview of the theoretical underpinnings, development, and applications of semantic prosody has been offered, underscoring the need for more clarity and consistency in this area. Thirdly, and most importantly, this article has laid the theoretical foundation of a new trajectory for future research (e.g., Ben Ghozlen, in press) on this concept. Accordingly, the paper postulates that semantic prosody constitutes a viable theoretical framework for unveiling the attitudinal positioning of text producers vis-à-vis human subjects in texts across a range of discourse types. In view of this, the present research has implications for future studies on the theory and practice of the corpus linguistics notion of semantic prosody.

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