

Study on the Translation of the Report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China from the Perspective of Semantic Prosody

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Abstract. Semantic prosody has become a research hotspot among domestic scholars. The repeated use of words forms habitual collocations, which in turn endows words with a consistent tone, thus creating semantic prosody. This paper compares and analyzes some vocabulary in the original text and the translation of the Report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, using a corpus to determine their semantic tendencies and the corresponding relationships of semantic prosody. The study explores the impact of semantic prosody on translation.

Keywords: Semantic Prosody; Report of the 19th National Congress; Translation.

1. Introduction

Since 2000, the issue of semantic prosody has gradually attracted the attention of domestic scholars. Semantic prosody arises from the repeated use of words, forming habitual collocations that carry the same tone as the collocated words. Collocation has long been a key focus in the study of English-Chinese translation, making the research on semantic prosody crucial for improving translation quality. Corpus studies have shown that words exhibit certain semantic tendencies, where specific words habitually attract other words with similar semantic features to form collocations (Wei Naixing, 2002).

2. Review of Semantic Prosody

The concept of semantic prosody was first proposed by Louw (1993), who argued that tone is mutually infectious and transmitted, creating a consistent semantic environment. He used the phonetic term "coloring" to describe this phenomenon of semantic contagion, referring to it as "semantic harmony." Stubbs introduced the concept of "semantic tendency," suggesting that words have preferences and exhibit selective behavior. Sinclair (1996a) proposed the "extended unit of meaning" and the "functional view" of semantic prosody, arguing that semantics are attitudinal and that semantic prosody is the combination of words and their context. Partington (1998) described semantic prosody as an extension of the semantic color beyond the word itself. Stubbs (1996) categorized semantic prosody into negative prosody, neutral prosody, and positive prosody. After Wei Naixing introduced the concept of semantic prosody to China, it gradually gained attention among domestic scholars. However, there is still no clear definition of semantic prosody in China. It is generally divided into three categories: positive, neutral, and negative semantic prosody. Alternatively, some scholars divide it into four categories, including complex semantic prosody (Wei Naixing, 2002a). Most scholars categorize semantic prosody into positive, neutral, negative, and complex semantic prosody.

3. Semantic Prosody in the Report of the 19th National Congress

The Report of the 19th National Congress is a report delivered by the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China to the 19th National Congress. It serves as an important channel for showcasing China's economy, politics, and culture to the international community and is a

crucial medium for influencing international public opinion and shaping a positive national image. The English translation of the report was the first to involve foreign experts, marking the first time since the reform and opening up that foreign experts were invited to participate in the translation process.

Morley & Partington (2009) argue that semantic prosody is a way for speakers to establish and maintain evaluative or attitudinal harmony in a discourse by selecting words with consistent evaluative meanings. "The use of negatively evaluated words with positive words can lead to semantic prosody conflicts, which are sometimes intentional for irony by native speakers but often result from non-native speakers' ignorance of semantic prosody in the target language" (Tang Yijun, 2012: 111). Therefore, understanding the semantic prosody of words and achieving semantic harmony in collocations significantly enhances the readability of the translation. This paper compares the original text and the translation of the Report of the 19th National Congress to investigate the use of semantic prosody in word choice.

Example 1

Original: 面对世界经济复苏乏力、局部冲突和动荡频发、全球性问题加剧的外部环境，面对我国经济发展进入新常态等一系列深刻变化，……取得了改革开放和社会主义现代化建设的历史性成就。

Translation: Outside China, we have been confronted with sluggish global economic recovery, frequent outbreaks of regional conflicts and disturbances, and intensifying global issues. At home, we have encountered profound changes as China has entered a new normal in economic development.

The word "面对" (face) was analyzed using the Modern Chinese Corpus, with 100 entries selected as samples. Since the left collocates of "面对" are usually personal nouns or absent, the right collocates were chosen for analysis. The results show that "面对" typically collocates with two types of words: those with concrete meanings and those with abstract meanings. When collocated with concrete-meaning words (44 instances), seven were positive, seven were negative, and the remaining 30 were neutral, indicating that "面对" has a neutral semantic prosody when paired with concrete-meaning words. When collocated with abstract-meaning words (56 instances), five were positive, 20 were neutral, and 31 were negative, suggesting that "面对" has a negative semantic prosody when paired with abstract-meaning words.

In the translation, the word "confront" appeared 693 times in the British National Corpus (BNC). A random sample of 50 entries showed that 13 were neutral and 37 were negative, indicating that "confront" has a negative semantic prosody. The word "encounter" appeared 1648 times in the BNC. A random sample of 50 entries showed that four were positive, nine were neutral, and 37 were negative, suggesting that "encounter" also has a negative semantic prosody. Thus, the semantic prosody of the original and translated texts is consistent.

Example 2

Original: 引导应对气候变化国际合作，成为全球生态文明建设的重要参与者、贡献者、引领者。

Translation: Taking a driving seat in international cooperation to respond to climate change, China has become an important participant, contributor, and torchbearer in the global endeavor for ecological civilization.

The word "应对" (respond to) was analyzed in the CCL Modern Chinese Corpus, appearing 12,215 times. A random sample of 50 entries showed that seven were positive, 10 were neutral, and 33 were negative, indicating that "应对" has a negative semantic prosody. The translation "respond to" appeared 1854 times in the BNC. A random sample of 50 entries showed that one was positive, 24 were neutral, and 25 were negative, suggesting that "respond to" has a negative-neutral complex semantic prosody. The translation does not conflict with the semantic prosody of the original text.

Example 3

Original: 全面从严治党成效显著。全面加强党的领导和党的建设，坚决改变管党治党宽松软状况。

Translation: We have achieved remarkable outcomes in ensuring full and strict governance over the Party. We have made sweeping efforts to strengthen Party leadership and Party building, and taken strong action to transform lax and weak governance over the Party.

The word "成效" (results) is inherently positive, referring to the desired good effects or accomplishments. The word "outcome" in the Cambridge Dictionary is defined as "a result or effect of an action or situation," and its examples are neutral. In the BNC, "outcome" appeared 3630 times. A random sample of 50 entries showed that six were positive, 13 were negative, and 31 were neutral, indicating that "outcome" has a neutral semantic prosody with a slight negative tendency. Since the original text intends to convey a positive semantic atmosphere, it is suggested that "outcome" be replaced with "result" or "success" to better match the intended semantic tone and emotional attitude of the original text.

Example 4

Original: 鸦片战争后，中国陷入内忧外患的黑暗境地，中国人民经历了战乱频仍、山河破碎、民不聊生的深重苦难。

Translation: But with the Opium War of 1840, China was plunged into the darkness of domestic turmoil and foreign aggression; its people, ravaged by war, saw their homeland torn apart and lived in poverty and despair.

The word "经历" (experience) appeared 29,058 times in the CCL Corpus. A random sample of 50 entries as a verb showed that three were positive, five were negative, and the remaining 42 were neutral, indicating that "经历" has a neutral semantic prosody. The word "ravaged" in the translation, meaning "destroyed or devastated," is inherently negative. Although "经历" has a neutral semantic prosody, the translation accurately conveys the intended negative attitude of the original text, with no semantic prosody conflict.

4. Semantic Prosody and Translation

From the above analysis, it is evident that the translation of the Report of the 19th National Congress, which involved foreign experts, largely meets the reading habits of the target language audience. However, since "semantic prosody is an emerging direction and focus in foreign language research, it is still not widely introduced in China" (Li Fanglan, 2017: 78). Many translators neglect semantic prosody, leading to semantic conflicts. Hunston (2007) argues that "this (semantic conflict) can explain why non-native speakers' speech or writing sometimes misleads or amuses native speakers." In translation, paying attention to semantic prosody can significantly avoid semantic conflicts, thereby enhancing the readability and quality of the translation.

4.1 Semantic Prosody and Collocation

For non-native learners, the collocation of English words is a challenge. "In learning a word, learners should not only know its pronunciation and literal meaning but also how to use it, i.e., what words it can collocate with" (Yang Yan, 2008: 98). In the translation of the Report of the 19th National Congress, many words have formed fixed collocations, creating a semantic atmosphere.

Chinese learners often fail to recognize the semantic atmosphere between words, and their misuse of words often stems from a lack of knowledge of semantic prosody (Xiao & McEnery, 2006). This leads to frequent semantic conflicts in collocations. Xiao & McEnery (2006) argue that teaching semantic prosody to learners can not only help them use words more effectively but also help them understand the deeper meanings intended by the authors.

4.2 Semantic Prosody and Synonym Discrimination

There are many words with similar meanings in English. Chinese learners primarily distinguish them based on grammatical collocations, phrase collocations, and subtle semantic differences. Scholars such as Wang Haihua & Wang Tongshun (2005), Wei Naixing (2006), Ma Zheng (2010), and Lu Jun & Wei Naixing (2014) have studied the word usage of Chinese learners. Their research shows that Chinese foreign language learners still have significant gaps in collocation and semantic prosody accuracy compared to native speakers.

From the above analysis, it is evident that analyzing the semantic prosody of synonyms or near-synonyms can help select appropriate words in collocations, thereby largely avoiding semantic conflicts. For example, "befall" and "come" both mean "to happen to," but "befall" is often associated with negative events. Understanding their semantic prosody makes it easier to distinguish between them in use.

4.3 Semantic Prosody and Translation

In translation, we often encounter difficulties in choosing words with similar meanings. Speakers and authors always have certain purposes when speaking or writing, whether to convey meaning, express emotions, or call to action. Therefore, translations must rely on the original text to express the same emotional attitudes and values as the original author.

"The primary purpose of discourse is to convey the speaker's attitude and viewpoint, which is achieved through semantic prosody" (Stubbs, 2003: 90). In translation, semantic prosody should be the primary consideration for word discrimination and collocation. Since semantic prosody is not widely studied in China, translators rarely consider it. According to Tang Yijun's (2012) research on a government white paper corpus, only two out of 35 items related to "persistent/persist in" met the criteria for semantic harmony; the remaining 33 likely constituted semantic conflicts, accounting for 94.2% of the total.

Studying semantic prosody helps distinguish synonyms and select appropriate words for collocations in translation, thereby enhancing the readability and nativeness of the translation.

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