

Semantic prosody of extended lexical units: A case study

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This study is the first attempt in the literature to define the semantic prosody (contextual properties) of extended lexical units (ELUs) according to the psycholinguistic variables ‘valence’ (emotional positivity), ‘arousal’ (excitement, mood-enhancement), and ‘concreteness’. The object of investigation are the verbal phrases *feel blue* (unambiguous idiomatic ELU, without a literal counterpart) and *see red* (ambiguous ELU, idiomatic or literal).

In Snefjella & Kuperman (2016) the range of semantic prosody is confined from five content words before to five content words after a core lexical unit. The statistical application of valence, arousal, and concreteness ratings obtained through crowdsourcing (Warriner et al. 2013, Brysbaert et al. 2014) to the 7 billion token USENET corpus (Shaoul & Westbury 2013) resulted in mean values for three meta-variables, i.e. ‘contextual valence’, ‘contextual arousal’, and ‘contextual concreteness’. Snefjella & Kuperman (2016) show that words tend to favour the company of words with similar affective (valence, arousal) and sensorimotor (concreteness) connotations.

The present study applies the results in Snefjella & Kuperman (2016) to ELUs. The numerical valence, arousal, and concreteness representations of *feel blue* and *see red* were obtained by using the crowdsourcing platform Amazon Mechanical Turk (60 interviews with 60 US citizens). The contextual patterns were detected by using the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the News on the Web (NOW) corpus. In the analysis multiple one-sample t-tests were conducted between the obtained contextual values, the averaged mean values of constituents (Snefjella & Kuperman 2016) and the mean values of representations.

The results clearly show that both *feel blue* and *see red* have negative representations while showing up in positively valenced contexts. In the idiom *feel blue* and the idiomatic counterpart of *see red*, there are no significant differences between the averaged mean values of constituents (Snefjella & Kuperman 2016) and the average contextual values obtained from the corpus analysis – notably *for all three variables*. This salient pattern suggests that, for the embedding of idiomatic ELUs in the respective contexts, the contextual mean values of constituent words are relevant and *not* the representational values of these ELUs.

Overall, semantic prosody is independent of the ELU representation and interpretative, at the same time. ELUs are associated to “typical scenarios in the everyday world” (Stubbs 2009: 133) at the interface of their representation and their semantic prosody (cf. a similar account of prosodic one-word units in Hauser & Schwarz 2016). For instance, *feel blue* (ELU with negative valence) typically shows up in positively valenced contexts while evoking the pragmatic scenario ‘comforting’, ‘provision’, etc. A neutral or negatively valenced context points to a scenario of ‘emotional rejection’, etc.

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