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What makes a good antonym pair?

A corpus study of patterns of use in context

KEYWORDS: opposition, adjectives, symmetry, scale

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Recent research has established that there are a number of opposable words in language that have special status as canonical antonyms (Paradis et al. 2009). Antonym canonicity is defined as the degree to which antonymous word forms are entrenched in memory and conventionalized as pairs in language. Examples of antonym pairs that are strongly canonical are also expressive of properties of a salient dimension, e.g. SPEED *slow–fast*, LUMINOSITY *dark–light*, STRENGTH *weak–strong*, SIZE *small–large*, WIDTH *narrow–wide*, MERIT *bad–good* and THICKNESS *thin–thick*. Corpus-driven as well as corpus-based investigations, using the BNC for English data, show that these pairs are frequent in language as individual words, and they co-occur significantly more often in the same sentence than other semantically related word pairs.

In search for robust answers to *why* some antonymous word pairs have special status as canonical antonyms, this paper presents the results of a corpus investigation of the pairwise usage patterns of 18 pairs in terms of the semantics of the adjectives themselves, the nominals they modify, the constructions in which they are used, and the extent to which they are used in metaphorical contexts or not. The fact that they are all high frequency words in language, suggests that they are ontologically versatile and useful across a wide range of different contexts, genres and registers, and their high co-occurrence frequencies, in particular in frames (Murphy, Paradis, Willners & Jones 2009), are indicative of symmetry of usage patterns across the members of the pairs. This paper explores the hypothesis that symmetry of usage is an important factor for antonym canonicity. We investigate the usage profiles of the above-mentioned pairs of canonical antonyms in English in order to find out to what extent their usage patterns are symmetrical across the above 18 pairs. The data consist of 500 randomly selected occurrences of each adjective in their contexts (approx. 18 000 occurrences). Descriptive statistics points to similarities across the pairs, but a regression analysis will be carried out in order to establish to what extent the usage patterns are symmetrical across all 18 pairs.

References

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