Semantic Prosody in Highly Advanced Korean ESL Speakers

Sydney Christley

This study examines the relationship between demographic and educational background and awareness of semantic prosody in native Korean speakers studying at Brigham Young University. A survey asked participants about their language experience in Korean and English, and then participants rated the acceptability of sentences using the target items guarantee, set in, achieve, persist, undergo, *and* cause *with both expected and unexpected semantic prosody. The study found that participants were more often able to recognize correct prosodic sentences than incorrect sentences.*

Semantic prosody is described by Bill Louw (2000) as "a form of meaning which is established through the proximity of a consistent series of collocates, often characterizable as positive or negative, and whose primary function is the expression of the attitude of its speaker or writer towards some pragmatic situation." It is somewhat similar to the concept of connotation or Peircean indexicality; the general idea is that as words are frequently used together, they begin to carry a certain sense of meaning. According to the Corpus of Contemporary American English, the most frequent noun collocates of the verb *commit* are *suicide, crimes, murder, adultery,* and *acts* (Davies, 2008–). Two of these collocates are crimes (*crimes, murder*) or something generally considered negative (*suicide, adultery*), with only one possibly neutral collocate (*acts*). Because of its frequent association with these collocates, the verb *commit* has gained a negative prosody to English speakers, which has even risen to the public's awareness with recent calls to use the phrase *die by suicide* instead of *commit suicide*.

This study will consist of a survey to examine the ability of highly advanced Korean ESL (English as a Second Language) speakers to accurately judge semantic prosody. I will examine the variation of this feature based on factors such as English proficiency, years of education at an English-language institution, and frequency of exposure to English literature and media. I will also consider the sociolinguistic variation of this feature based on age, gender, language spoken in social networks, and national identity. Possible implications in the fields of second language acquisition and sociolinguistics will then be discussed.

Literature Review

The majority of academic literature about semantic prosody relates to its applications in second language acquisition. Since second language learners have less exposure to lexical items compared to native speakers, in an analogous model they have less experience from which they can infer semantic prosody. Therefore, in order to counteract this deficit, some researchers suggest that semantic prosody should be a focus in language teaching.

Omidian and Siyanova (2020) suggest that reference sources (such as lists of items and their semantic prosody) should be made based on genre and that corpus linguistics should be used to develop such materials. Other researchers suggest that explicit

teaching of an item's semantic prosody is more effective than expecting a language learner to use an unconscious analogy-based model. Guo et al. (2011) support this idea with data from a rather interesting experiment where they created sentences using the items *promote, cause, enhance, commit, career,* and *totally.* Each item was then replaced with a pseudo-word that followed the phonotactic rules of English, and participants judged its acceptability. The authors found that explicitly asking participants to guess the function and prosody of an item was more effective and that participants gained more explicit knowledge about an item. Data from Choi and Ma (2012) and Kim and Ma (2011) provides additional support for explicit teaching methods.

Another focus in recent research has been the relationship between awareness of semantic prosody and overall English proficiency. Dushku and Paek (2021) examined semantic prosody in low-intermediate to advanced ESL students, conducting an experiment that tested the students' ability to recognize the semantic prosody of the items *lend, restore, emphasize, gain, achieve, secure, guarantee, cause, lack, suffer, commit, fight,* and *cure.* Results indicated that participants' ability to judge semantic prosody was associated with higher English proficiency.

Korean ESL learners, specifically, have also been an area of great focus. In one study, the author used two corpora in order to examine how collocations of the amplifiers *really, very, particularly, extremely, highly, deeply, absolutely, severely, completely,* and *greatly* differed between ESL learners and native English speakers (Koo, 2018). Other examples include research performed by Choi and Ma (2012), Kim and Ma (2011), and Lee (2011, 2016, 2021).

Methodology

In order to examine semantic prosody in native Korean speakers who speak English at a highly advanced level, I created an anonymous survey in Qualtrics and administered it digitally to eleven students at Brigham Young University. Participants were found by asking for volunteers from a group of native Korean-speaking students who worked as TAs for Korean language classes. I then asked the volunteers to share the survey with friends who were also native Korean speakers.

The survey included basic demographic information, followed by stimuli containing the target items. Participants were asked

about the language they spoke in their home growing up, the language they use most in their social life as an adult, the national identity or culture they identify with most, and the country where they attended grade school. They described their comfort level with academic English on a Likert scale and rated the frequency of their exposure to English literature and media as *never, sometimes,* or *frequently*. Participants were then asked to rate the acceptability of sentences using the target items *guarantee, set in, achieve, persist, undergo,* and *cause*. Two stimuli were given for each item—one using the item with the expected prosody (either positive or negative) and one using the item with the unexpected prosody.

Most participants were born in Korea and moved to the United States as a young child, attending elementary, middle, and high school in the US. A few attended elementary school in Korea for several years and then moved to the US, where they attended school; two participants attended high school in Korea and moved to the United States to attend university; only one participant had attended university in Korea. All spoke Korean at home, 72.7 percent continue to use Korean more than English in their social networks, and 81.8 percent consider themselves to be more Korean than American. The group consisted of seven females and four males between the ages of eighteen and thirty, with an average age of twenty-three years.

Results and Discussion

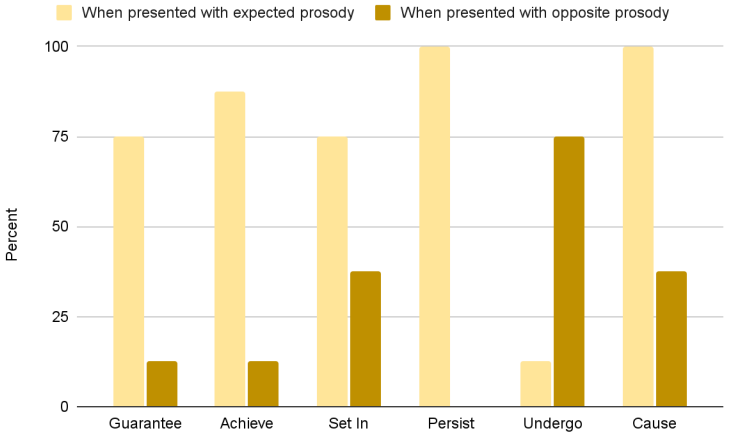
With a participant pool of only eleven individuals, it is impossible to make any statistical inferences about any single variable. However, in general, it seems that participants were very good at identifying a sentence as correct when an item was presented with the expected positive or negative prosody. When an item was presented with the opposite of the expected prosody (that is, a positive prosodic item presented with a negative consequence in the sentence or a negative prosodic item presented with a positive consequence), participants were much less likely to be able to identify the sentence as incorrect. This result may indicate that Korean ESL speakers tend to generally accept English input as correct, unless it is particularly salient that some feature is unusual.

The most interesting results come from the items *persist* and *undergo*, which break the trend of all the other items. When *persist* (which has a negative prosody) was presented with a positive

prosody, no participants were able to identify the sentence as incorrect. With all other unexpected prosodic items, at least one participant was always able to identify it accurately as incorrect. The exception is when *undergo* (which has a negative prosody) was presented with a positive prosody and the majority of participants were able to accurately identify the sentence as incorrect—the only instance where they were able to do so with an item presented with its opposite expected prosody.

Figure 1

Correct Identification of Either Positive or Negative Prosody



It seems that participants who were more comfortable with academic English or had more experience with education at English-language institutions were better at identifying the expected semantic prosody for some items (see table 1), but there does not appear to be a pattern between additional years of language experience or frequency of exposure to English literature and media. Variables such as age and gender did not seem to be correlated with participants' ability to correctly identify semantic prosody. This data provides evidence that there is a relationship between English proficiency and awareness of semantic prosody, but it does not provide evidence in favor of a relationship between any other variable and awareness of semantic prosody.

Table 1

Percentage of Participants That Correctly Identified Acceptability of Sentence

	Male	Female	Comfortable with Academic English	Reads Books in English for Fun
Achieve (+)	100%	80%	85.7%	100%
Achieve (-)	0%	20%	14.3%	16.6%
Undergo (+)	33.3%	0%	0%	16.6%
Undergo (-)	100%	60%	71.4%	66.6%

Note. Answers of both "frequently" and "sometimes" were included in the count of the categories "Comfortable With Academic English" and "Reads Books in English for Fun."

Conclusion

This research may suggest that explicit teaching about the semantic prosody of specific items may be beneficial to ESL learners at highly advanced levels. All participants were ESL students capable of speaking and writing English at the high level required to attend an English-speaking university in the United States; many had acquired English as children and spoke with a noticeable lack of L1 Korean influence. Nevertheless, since participants in this study found it difficult to identify when an expected semantic prosody was violated, it may be useful for advanced ESL speakers to focus on this awareness in their continued English study.

Future research with a large group of participants would allow statistical tests to be performed in order to see if the relationships between demographic variables, language experience, and awareness of semantic prosody are statistically significant. Another possible limitation of this research is participant fatigue; the survey consisted of twelve stimuli, and it is possible that participants may have guessed some answers in order to end faster. It is also possible that the instructions in the survey, which asked participants if the stimuli sentence was "grammatically correct," were misleading. Some participants may have recognized that the sentence sounded unnatural but may have still marked it as grammatically correct. Clearer instructions would have instead asked if the sentence sounded unnatural or strange.

There are many possibilities for future research about semantic prosody in the field of sociolinguistics. At the conscious level, Korean ESL learners may choose to suppress stigmatized features that contribute to accentedness, such as Korean phonetic influence. They may also choose to emphasize features such as slang and lexical items in order to identify themselves with American culture and society. As with many other communities who speak a different language or dialect, the use of code switching in different contexts and environments provides a rich field of study.

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Appendix

Survey Content

1. What year were you born?

2. Where were you born?
    a. the United States
    b. Korea
    c. other

3. How do you describe yourself?
    a. male
    b. female
    c. non-binary/third gender
    d. prefer to self-describe
    e. prefer not to say

4. Where did you attend elementary school?
    a. the United States
    b. Korea
    c. both

5. Where did you attend high school?
    a. the United States
    b. Korea
    c. both

6. Where did you attend college?
    a. the United States
    b. Korea
    c. both

7. I grew up speaking mostly _____ at home.
    a. Korean
    b. English

8. Today I speak mostly _____ in my social life.
    a. Korean
    b. English

9. I read books in English for fun.
    a. frequently
    b. sometimes
    c. never

10. I watch movies and TV in English.
    a. frequently
    b. sometimes
    c. never

11. I am comfortable speaking academic English.
    a. strongly disagree
    b. somewhat disagree
    c. neither agree nor disagree
    d. somewhat agree
    e. strongly agree

12. I consider myself to be _____.
    a. more Korean than American
    b. more American than Korean
    c. equally Korean and American
    d. prefer not to say

13. Is this sentence grammatically acceptable?
    I think that good planning guarantees success.
    a. yes
    b. no
    c. not sure

14. Is this sentence grammatically acceptable?
Starting late in a race usually guarantees failure.
    a. yes
    b. no
    c. not sure

15. Is this sentence grammatically acceptable?
Financial relief finally set in when I won a scholarship.
    a. yes
    b. no
    c. not sure

16. Is this sentence grammatically acceptable?
While he was in the hospital, a terrible infection set in.
    a. yes
    b. no
    c. not sure

17. Is this sentence grammatically acceptable?
The runner finally achieved her goal two years later.
    a. yes
    b. no
    c. not sure

18. Is this sentence grammatically acceptable?
I achieved a terrible score on the test even though I studied for it.
    a. yes
    b. no
    c. not sure

19. Is this sentence grammatically acceptable?
The wonderful smell of cookies persisted in the house for hours.
    a. yes
    b. no
    c. not sure

20. Is this sentence grammatically acceptable?
The rainy weather persisted throughout the whole soccer match.
    a. yes
    b. no
    c. not sure

21. Is this sentence grammatically acceptable?
After that busy week, she underwent a peaceful day at the spa.
    a. yes
    b. no
    c. not sure

22. Is this sentence grammatically acceptable?
She underwent a painful surgery to repair the torn muscle.
    a. yes
    b. no
    c. not sure

23. Is this sentence grammatically acceptable?
This painting causes happiness every time I look at it.
    a. yes
    b. no
    c. not sure

24. Is this sentence grammatically acceptable?
The hurricane caused a lot of damage to the boat.
    a. yes
    b. no
    c. not sure