Collocation and semantic prosody – a gauge for bias in political discourse?

Colocação e prosódia semântica – um indicador para a parcialidade no discurso político?

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to outline the relationship between collocation, semantic prosody and political discourse, as these linguistic phenomena may appear in utterances that subliminally carry biased views. The analyses of different corpora – namely one comprised of 2016 Donald Trump's presidential campaign speeches – shows that there are indeed cases of collocation and semantic prosody that display a certain degree of bias in the speakers, mainly Donald Trump. The president's collocational patterns also suggest that his discourse falls in line with his populistic stance in politics. The paper then proceeds to discuss the dialogical relationship between the studied linguistic phenomena and society.

Keywords: Collocation, semantic prosody, politics, dialogism, corpus linguistics.

RESUMO

O presente artigo visa delinear a relação entre colocação, prosódia semântica e discurso político, uma vez que esses fenómenos linguísticos podem surgir em enunciações que veiculam, de um modo subliminar, visões tendenciosas. As análises de diferentes *corpora* (nomeadamente, um que consiste nos discursos da campanha presidencial de Donald Trump, em 2016), demonstra que há de facto casos de colocação e prosódia semântica que indicam um certo grau de parcialidade

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nos falantes, nomeadamente Donald Trump. Os padrões colocacionais do presidente sugerem também que o seu discurso é coerente com a abordagem populista à sua política. O artigo discute, depois, a relação dialógica entre os fenómenos linguísticos abordados e a sociedade.

Palavras-chave: Colocação, prosódia semântica, política, dialogismo, linguística de *corpus*.

Introduction

Language is the product and the driving force of society and thought and as organic as they are. As it reflects (on) the actions, choices and opinions of individuals and communities, the observation of its patterns may be likened to the analysis of a patient by a psychologist or psychiatrist: fears, desires, experiences, affections and aversions are expressed in both liminal and subliminal ways. It is, if we will, a part of the collective unconscious. While some linguistic patterns openly show how a linguistic community thinks (for example, English speakers think in a more qualitative way, whereas Portuguese ones are more qualitative – the former may ask 'how old are you?', but the latter directly requests a number, by asking, roughly translated, 'how many years have you got?'), others have hidden meanings that resemble word association in a psychology or psychiatry appointment. These are collocation and semantic prosody; respectively, the usual proximity between lexical units («heavy rain», «winding road»[1]) and the aura of meaning that a certain lexical unit carries and that may, inadvertently change the context of an utterance. These patterns, pervasive in a speakers' community in general, become more evident or emerge when found in either public figures or the media in general (which, in the end, is what makes those figures public), as they may expose

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1   I have decided to write down lemmas in italics and non-canonical lexical units (or utterances) in angular quotation marks (*e.g.*: *to be* / «was»). Therefore, if I refer to *to be*, I may be referring to all forms of the verb, while, if I refer to «been», only the past participle of the verb is applicable.

apparently hidden biases in their points of view. Politicians, being highly mediatic and influential in societies, often try hard to persuade their citizens. However, they fail many times, because of their actions or some curious "slips of the tongue", some more conspicuous than others. Former Portuguese Prime Minister José Sócrates, for instance, raised many eyebrows – and made many burst out laughing when he mistakenly wished for an "increasingly poor country" – he quickly corrected himself, but it had already been said. Yet, there are cases in which these lapses have to be read between the lines, because they lie deep within the realm of collocation and semantic prosody. Therefore, this work aims to establish the link between these phenomena and bias in political discourse.

First, this article will describe semantic prosody, discussing some academic points of view and, of course, presenting some examples of its occurrence. Secondly, this work will reflect on the relationship between the phenomena and political bias; it will describe the method of analysis, present and discuss cases of semantic prosody and collocation in political speeches and, finally, outline the dialogic relationship between the linguistic phenomena and society.

1. What is semantic prosody?

Semantic prosody is a lexicogrammatical phenomenon that weighs on the fact that discourse is processed in "chunks"; instead of simply processing (receiving or producing) speech act sequences in a linear, "word-by word" fashion, the speaker (or the receiver) will instead perceive lexical units in relation to one another, *i.e.*, "by storing a number of frequently-needed lexical chunks as individual whole units [that] can be easily retrieved and used without the need to compose them on-line through word selection and grammar sequencing" (Schmitt, 2000, pp. 400, 401). This will, naturally, occur in terms of syntax, semantics and pragmatics. A lexical unit occurring within a clause or sentence demands compatibility with other elements: in a

Collocation and semantic prosody – a gauge for bias in political discourse?

Pedro Guilherme

syntactic level, a transitive verb, for instance, will co-occur with an object. Syntactic rules and restrictions will always apply. Obviously, meaning also plays a role in this puzzle of knots and terminals: an utterance has to make sense, and semantic functions will come into play. However, the linearity with which lexical units define meaning in an utterance is also processed as a series of "individual wholes" (Schmitt, 2000, pp. 400, 401). The key is collocation and co-selection. Whereas the former is, simply put, the frequency in which a lexical unit co-occurs with others, the latter is a function of collocation. The Portuguese verb *envidar* is an extreme example of collocation. The verb, that translates to 'to endeavour' (Harper-Collins, 2014), besides being transitive, requires a very specific and invariable object: *esforços*. Not only does it have a semantic preference of 'effort', but also a syntactic preference by the concatenation of the morpheme *esforço* with the «plural» one, which is deemed colligation (Berber-Sardinha, 2000a, p. 359). In fact, a KWIC (Key Word in Context) search of the lemma *envidar* (Linguateca, 2019)[2] returned the following result: out of 242 occurrences, 209 co-occurred with «esforços» (the remaining cases were that of the regressive form *envido*, a nominalization of the verb *envidar*, as well as what appears to be typing mistakes and a co-occurrence of the verb with the pronoun *tudo*), which suggests the semantic preference of the verb. Moreover, the search returned no cases of «esforço» as a co-occurrent, a clear indication of the aforementioned colligation. Co-selection, in turn, translates into our ability, as speakers, to recognize and apply the rules of collocation; one would not, for instance, associate *trabalho* ('work') with *envidar*, as that would instinctively trigger a feeling of strangeness. In summary, collocation, colligation and co-selection play an important role on the "naturalness" of a certain language; processing it in a "word-by-word" manner will often result in outlandish utterances which hardly reflect the living and breathing reality of any language.

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2   This corpus is comprised of sections of the Portuguese newspaper *O Público.*

Semantic prosody, albeit a result of collocation and co-selection, plays a furtherly different role in language, as it extends units of meaning beyond their original lexical containers and their very own core meaning (the semantic function a lexical unit displays on its own, or that one may find in a dictionary). The phrasal verb *set in* is an example, as it was shown to occur in negative contexts such as those introduced by *rot* and *decay* (Sinclair J. , 1991, pp. 74, 75). Thus, the semantic prosody of *set in* is negative, or, according to the author, that of "an unpleasant state of affairs". Even though they are ground-breaking *per se*, these findings were of major importance due to the fact that they were attained by the examination of a linguistic corpus[3].

Yet, it is Louw, keeping up with J. R. Firth's statement that one "shall know a word by the company it keeps" (1962), who coins the term semantic prosody, due to the fact that, similarly to phonological properties that are carried over through distinct phonemes, it extends meaning beyond lexical boundaries. The phenomenon, or pattern (Berber-Sardinha, 2000b, p. 94) is thus described as "a consistent aura of meaning with which a form is imbued by its collocates" (Louw, Irony in the text or insincerity in the writer? The diagnostic potential of semantic prosodies, 1993). The relationship between semantic prosody and collocation is also stressed by Berber-Sardinha; "semantic prosody is the connotation conveyed by the regular co-occurrence of lexical items" (2000b, p. 93). Considering the example of *set in* and the contexts in which in occurs, Sinclair (2004, p. 34) states:

> A semantic prosody (Louw 1993) is attitudinal, and on the pragmatic side of the semantics/pragmatics continuum. It is thus capable of a wide range of realisation, because in pragmatic expressions the normal semantic values of the words are not necessarily relevant. But once noticed among the variety of expression, it is immediately clear that the semantic

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3   In fact, semantic prosody and collocation may only be studied properly resorting to corpus linguistics methods, as a linguist can only retrieve significant data via the computerized search of large bodies of text.

Collocation and semantic prosody – a gauge for bias in political discourse?

Pedro Guilherme

> prosody has a leading role to play in the integration of an item with its surroundings. It expresses something close to the 'function' of an item—it shows how the rest of the item is to be interpreted functionally.

Therefore, if a certain lexical unit has a negative semantic prosody, its collocates are also expected[4] to convey a negative meaning, whereas, should the collocates contrast with it, this expectation is not met, leading to either a sense of irony or that of insincerity (Louw, Irony in the text or insincerity in the writer? The diagnostic potential of semantic prosodies, 1993). If a speaker were to use the Portuguese verb *cometer* (meaning 'to commit', with a meaning of 'to do' or 'to perpetuate') in a positive context, its intentions would certainly be questioned, as *cometer* has a semantic prosody of crime and transgression. This, of course, is another extreme example, because the association between the verb and its collocates is well-known by the Portuguese speakers' community. However, there are cases of seemingly neutral lexical units that considerably occur in negative contexts. Such is the case of *episódio* ('episode'), which has been found to co-occur significantly with the adjectives *lamentável* ('unfortunate' and *triste* ('sad') (Guilherme & Osório, 2014, pp. 174, 175). As a matter of fact, the whole of negative cases amounted to 63%. The semantic prosody of *episódio*, is not, however, verified within the generality of speakers. This particular case was only found in political discourse: Guilherme and Osório, while examining two distinct language corpora (CETEMPúblico and DAR-I[5]), found that only the latter returned evidence of negative semantic prosody for *episódio*, whereas CETEMPúblico only returned 28% of negative cases.

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4   Expectation in, in fact, closely associated with collocation and semantic prosody, as I will explain further in this text.

5   DAR-I, which stands for *Diário da Assembleia da República – 1.ª Série*, is comprised of transcriptions of all the meetings of the Portuguese parliament that took place between 1995 and 2013 (cf. Guilherme & Osório, 2014, p. 106).

2. Semantic prosody and bias

2.1 Corpus linguistics as a method of analysis

One of the best ways to accurately study patterns and phenomena in a language and its utterances may be to resort to corpus linguistics. These, comprised of either transcribed acts of speech or collated bodies of written text (that should not be literary, unless the linguist wishes to analyse patterns in an author's writing), are mostly available on the Internet. Some may be analysed via a web browser, although it is always best to process them in a dedicated program. Although there are many choices, my recommendation would be AntConc (2014), by Waseda University Professor Lawrence Anthony, as it is freeware and a powerful tool that can run KWIC, cluster/n-gram and collocate queries. Since some corpora are quite large (CETEMPúblico has, as of May 2020, 257.2 million words), conducting a KWIC query for collocates and therefore semantic prosody does not yield manageable results, as they may be too many. Thus, it is important to use the "collocates" query, which will let a researcher know the most significant collocates of a certain lexical unit, organizing the results by frequency or statistical measure (T-Score or Mutual Information; for further information, see (Stubbs, 1995).

2.2 Bias in political discourse: the example of Donald Trump

It is not uncommon to find, in the mass media, utterances that are tinged by semantic prosody. If a speaker were to use some of Donald Trump's most used words of phrases he/she would face the risk of being frowned upon, or that of ridicule. «Billions and billions», «huge», «great», and «believe me»[6], for instance, if used in textual proximity, would lead interlocutors to believe that the speaker was doing a caricatural impression of the 45th president of the

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6   Anyone paying attention to the news has quickly noticed the colloquial style adopted by Donald Trump, which may be a prerogative of his populistic approach to politics.

United States of America. Although these lexical units (or groups thereof) did not themselves carry semantic prosody when first uttered by Trump, the frequency with which they have been used, when perceived by the community, may have caused that phenomenon to emerge. One such case is that of «believe me»: by analysing a corpus of 2016 presidential campaign speeches[7] (Brown, 2017), I found the striking number of 275 iterations of the phrase. Repetition of certain lexical units has, of course, a long history in political discourse. John F. Kennedy is well-known for that: his famous speech that galvanized the USA about NASA's space program is famous for the repetition of «because», which amounted to six iterations. That repetition has the clear objective to imbue the speech with a sense of validation and determination:

> We set sail on this new sea because there is new knowledge to be gained, and new rights to be won, and they must be won and used for the progress of all people. […]
> We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too. […]
> Many years ago the great British explorer George Mallory, who was to die on Mount Everest, was asked why did he want to climb it. He said, "Because it is there." (Kennedy, 1962)

Although *because* is not known to have semantic prosody, its effect in this speech likens the phenomenon. The very same thing (or the opposite) happens with Donald Trump's repetition of the imperative «believe me». Such an imperative (usually preceded or followed by a comma in writing) may aim to avert an expected feeling of incredibility on the receiving end of the speech

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7   This search was conducted via AntConc 3.4.4w (Anthony, 2014).

act, as some of the results from a KWIC search on the British National Corpus (Davies, 2020), unrelated to Trump, show:

Table 1. Results (truncated) of a search on BNC (", believe me").

in the family way, all them as could be in it. Mm **, believe me** all trying to get rid. Was. (laugh) I'd got two pals
'm not gon na mention their names now but er quite a few characters **, believe me**. Er I were telling you about the pianos, in one particular terrace
employed three years before they were accepted into the pension scheme but you know **, believe me** I'm glad that I paid in for it. It was a bit
David observed.' And a lot of people knew him very well indeed **, believe me**.' Peggy was all too aware of that. Questions of Morality and
You can think about that, all by yourself in your room. Because **, believe me**, Andrew, there will be an apology.' He just turned his
of a lot more rent. No, that sort of money is needed **, believe me**.' McLeish, who had a built-in prejudice, well supported by experience
seem to have your share of crime. And those instructors aren't joking **, believe me**. They really teach them how to hurt." So I've
,' he said.' Work will ease the pain, in time **, believe me**.' He meant well but how could Hari ever get over the shock
to me.' He stood before his mother.' I'm innocent **, believe me**, Craig has fooled you but he can't fool me, he wanted
smiled.' I understand. Together we will make it work, Hari **, believe me**, we shall have the finest business in the country.' Hari moved
individual suddenly to become' free'. Their structures would crumble. And **, believe me**, Ari, if you have developed as I hoped, you are truly
there isn't a hope in hell of getting access. I've tried **, believe me**. I've got as good a nose as any other man on the
to believe they've got power within themselves but it isn't like that **, believe me**. Just take my advice..." What's that?"
must stop writing to each other, Donald. I know it's hard **, believe me**, but continuing will only make life harder and harder if we are never
sipped at his glass of white wine.' Ascot will soon be forgotten **, believe me**." Either that or I'll be dead.' Nick shook

Moreover, the number of "hits" displayed on the Trump section of the Clinton-Trump Corpus (Brown, 2017) contrasts deeply with those of the Corpus of Presidential Speeches[8] (Brown, 2016), which amount to only 29. On the other hand, Trump's iterations of «I believe», which convey certainty and confidence, add up to 54. Yet, deeming this a case of semantic prosody could be debatable, although public awareness of the use of «believe me» by Donald Trump could lead to a case of semantic prosody that, even if not eliciting a negative context, has the possibility to introducing a humorous one. Such a case happened in Portugal, when a group of comedians satirized football coach Paulo Bento's overuse of *tranquilidade* (Guilherme & Osório, 2014, p. 20); this comedic sketch led speakers to either utter or receive the lemma with a chuckle. Semantic prosody, therefore, carries an evaluative meaning (Stubbs, Words and Phrases: Corpus Studies of Lexical Semantics, 2001, p. 65) that surpasses the good/bad dichotomy suggested by Morley and Partington (2009, p. 141). Nonetheless, the president's speeches boast, of course, cases of semantic prosody.

Let us discuss the case of «totally». This lexical unit, which has gained popularity within younger generations, is often used as what one may call a "crutch word". Alongside other peculiarities perceived in Trump's wording, his extensive usage of «totally» triggered my instincts: does it occur in mostly neutral situations or does it associate with more nefarious contexts? The fact that Donald Trump alone made this utterance three times more than the remainder presidents combined[9] instantly raised a flag. The search

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8   This corpus is comprised of the speeches of all presidents who preceded Trump, *i.e.*, from George Washington to Barack Obama.

9   A search carried out on the Corpus of Presidential Speeches (Brown, 2016) shows that «totally» is only used 67 times, while Trump alone – although the corpus is titled Clinton-Trump Corpus, only Trump's speech transcriptions were loaded into the program - used the word 200 times during his campaign speeches (Brown, 2017).

for collocates immediately after «totally»[10] indicate that this lexical unit significantly occurs in negative contexts; therefore, this lexical unit displays a clearly negative semantic prosody, even though it could be argued that this can simply be a result of the widespread usage of «totally» by American English speakers in general as a "crutch word" along with Trump's aggressive stance. Even if the correlation shown by the results is open to debate, this pattern is prone to have been repeated by the public in general (mostly Trump's supporters, who were probably more receptive and attentive to his speeches), with the semantic prosody of «totally» being created or consolidated at this point. The list of main collocates is as follows:

10   This search was conducted via AntConc 3.4.4w (Anthony, 2014). Its results were sorted via the T-Score measure (chosen due to the relatively meagre size of the corpus).

Collocation and semantic prosody – a gauge for bias in political discourse?

Pedro Guilherme

Rank	Freq	Freq(L)	Freq(R)	Stat	Collocate
1	21	0	21	4.56627	open
2	14	0	14	3.72336	dishonest
3	9	0	9	2.97759	rigged
4	8	0	8	2.82549	unfit
5	6	0	6	2.44271	false
6	5	0	5	2.21584	depleted
7	5	0	5	2.20711	corrupt
8	4	0	4	1.96908	failed
9	4	0	4	1.94211	under
10	3	0	3	1.71983	divided
11	3	0	3	1.71911	protected
12	3	0	3	1.71025	renegotiate
13	3	0	3	1.68413	totally
14	3	0	3	1.67694	getting
15	3	0	3	1.67023	lost
16	2	0	2	1.41275	unhinged
17	2	0	2	1.41275	destabilized
18	2	0	2	1.41216	discredited
19	2	0	2	1.41099	construction
20	2	0	2	1.41069	unlimited
21	2	0	2	1.40834	loyal
22	2	0	2	1.40365	destroying
23	2	0	2	1.40365	controlled
24	2	0	2	1.40336	phony
25	2	0	2	1.40130	disastrous

Total No. of Collocate Types: 99   Total No. of Collocate Tokens: 200

Concordance | Concordance Plot | File View | Clusters/N-Grams | **Collocates** | Word List | Keyword List

Search Term ☑ Words ☐ Case ☐ Regex
totally
Advanced
Start | Stop | Sort
Sort by ☐ Invert Order
Sort by Stat

Window Span ☐ Same
From... 0 To... 1R
Min. Collocate Frequency
1

Collocation of «totally» on Donald Trump's campaing speeches

Even though almost every type of discourse is biased to a certain extent, politics are obviously fertile in partiality. Donald J. Trump is one of the most interesting case studies in this matter, as his speeches, as well as his general stance, are a far cry from being neutral or cautious. Even the sole case of «totally», as well as its collocates, may elicit a twofold conclusion: the President's wording is lax and aggressive, which falls in line with his populistic attitude towards politics and may have served to appeal to the common people. After all, if a billionaire candidate (and then president) is able to adopt speech patterns prevalent in the masses, they will be more likely to follow him and accept his biased views on different matters[11].

2.3 The dialogic factor

A large part of language production and acquisition lies upon a certain degree of replication. While an infant will learn how to speak by acquiring lexicon and functional patterns from his or her environment, an adult will also remain doing so. As one's behaviour is a result of experiences, so does language: if a speaker experiences (*i.e.*, receives) certain language patterns, he or she is bound to replicate them. However, when a speaker makes use of a linguistic sign, its signified (or meaning) is not the same as that of another speaker's utterance. The use of the lemma *dog*, while directing to an animal of the *canis canis* species, will not be perceived in the same fashion by every speaker; some may think of different sizes, colours or breeds, or experience distinct emotions, like fondness, aversion or fear. This happens because every speaker has had different experiences that will create different utterances. Yet, these experiences may be shared within the speakers' environment, resonating

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11 It is curious that the president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, who is an outspoken admirer of his North American counterpart, managed to surpass both Trump's verbal laxism and aggressive stance on 22 April 2020 in a cabinet meeting, during which he uttered a large number of profanities while voicing his hostile opinion towards mayors and governors who defended a lockdown to counteract the Covid-19 outbreak.

Collocation and semantic prosody – a gauge for bias in political discourse?

Pedro Guilherme

in one another: a speaker who loves dogs may hear gruesome stories about people who have been attacked and develop a certain degree of aversion towards the species, and vice-versa. This interplay may be called dialogism:

> Any concrete utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication of a particular sphere. The very boundaries of the utterance are determined by a change of speech subjects. Utterances are not indifferent to one another, and are not self-sufficient; they are aware of and mutually reflect one another... Every utterance must be regarded as primarily a response to preceding utterances of the given sphere (we understand the word 'response' here in the broadest sense). Each utterance refutes affirms, supplements, and relies upon the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account... Therefore, each kind of utterance is filled with various kinds of responsive reactions to other utterances of the given sphere of speech communication ... [and with] dialogic overtones, and they must be taken into account in order to fully understand the style of the utterance. After all, our thought itself – philosophical, scientific, artistic – is born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggle with others' thought, and this cannot but be reflected in the forms that verbally express our thought as well (Bakhtin, 1986, pp. 91, 92).

If we reflect on these words, we may conclude that collocation, colligation and semantic prosody are a product of dialogic relations. A certain collocational pattern comes from the repetition of frequently juxtaposed lexical units and its subsequent awareness, total or partial, by the speakers' community. The same will happen to semantic prosody: if a number of speakers is exposed to the occurrence of a certain lexical unit in specific types of contexts (mainly positive or negative, although there are nuances, as I have explained above), they are likely to replicate this pattern, thus consolidating it. On the other hand, should this pattern, once consolidated, be violated, the result will be that of perceived irony or insincerity. Louw (2000) presents the example of «fan the flames», which, of course, has negative semantic prosody:

Collocation and semantic prosody – a gauge for bias in political discourse?

Pedro Guilherme

> The conclusion we reach as we unravel this line [President Clinton fanned the flames of optimism in Northern Ireland] becomes an act of critical literacy. For a split second the form is rejected as incoherent on the basis that optimism bears no resemblance to the normal collocates of this fixed expression. However, within a further split second, the critical message of the writer is unraveled: the peace process is, ironically, almost as aggressive as the war it is designed to end. The line has to be an intentional comment on US foreign policy.

Moreover, it is possible to find, in certain cases of semantic prosody, symptoms of a society in disrepair. Pedro and Osório (2014) found the striking case of the semantic prosody of *enriquecimento* ('enrichment', in the sense of becoming wealthy), finding that, in both political and journalistic discourse, it co-occurs with «illicit», «illegal», «personal», etc, which is a clear indication of widespread corruption in Portugal.

Conclusion

Language is, of course, both an indicator and an origin of thought, private or societal. As a result, analysing its patterns and phenomena, specially when semantics and pragmatics come into play, allows us to assess the current *zeitgeist* and predict its direction. While political figures, especially the most populist ones, aim to please the masses by saying what they want to hear, the masses will, to a degree, mimic their leaders' behaviour, including their linguistic patterns. In Portugal, for example, during the crisis of 2008 (and beyond), the umbrella term *sustentabilidade* ('sustainability') was widely used in the media, having developed a very positive semantic prosody. Surprisingly enough, when the government levied taxes in order to counteract the crisis (and observe the austerity imposed by the International Monetary Fund), a new tax emerged with the moniker *taxa de sustentabilidade* ('sustainability tax') (Guilherme & Osório, 2014). While the name may appear innocent, it is legitimate to believe that the name was picked solely because *sustentabilidade* was a "chic" word widely associated with ecological concerns.

Collocation and semantic prosody – a gauge for bias in political discourse?

Pedro Guilherme

Therefore, linguists may take semantic prosody and, obviously, collocation as a way to check the society's pulse, as its collective conscious (and maybe its unconscious) is often read between the lines.

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Collocation and semantic prosody – a gauge for bias in political discourse?

Pedro Guilherme

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