Subprime loans, bogof offers, total spoilers and twocking cars

Investigating the Role and Development of Collocations and Collostructions in the Entrenchment of English Neologisms (working title)

Abstract
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The world is an ever-changing place of development, innovation and creation where people need an ever-changing lexicon to communicate about it. Freegans, metrosexuals and Obamaphiles need precisely these labels to accurately describe which ideals and beliefs they represent, i.e. who they are. People buy iPods and iPads because these items are fashionable; they subscribe to vlogs, phlogs, moblogs, receive spam, spin and bacn, defriend someone after having facebooked him or her or turn from a soccer mum with a nanny in a mum truck to a recessionista on staycation after too many subprimes because they adapt to society’s changes and take part in a developing world. Given the extralinguistic need to name new objects and concepts and discard others, and the linguistic means, in the form of a variety of word formation processes, to realise these needs, it does not come as a surprise that new words continually enter and leave the language. Many of these new coinages will disappear without having left a trace in the lexicon of the language and its speakers; many will remain one-off coinings, used at a particular time in a particular context by a particular person to express a particular need. Such words are called nonce-formations and are of little interest for the present research, which is concerned with the mental traces new words leave in the minds of the speakers and in society. Therefore, new words are needed that exceed their one-off occurrence and recur. This class of new words that occur more than once are traditionally known as neologisms (cf. Hohenhaus 1996, Fischer 1998, Schmid 2005, 2008).

Neologisms have been studied extensively from a number of different perspectives both within and outside the language they have entered. So far however, the emphasis has been on structural properties including phonological, semantic, syntactic and morphological features (Bauer 1983, Fischer 1998, Hohenhaus 2005, Lipka 1992, Lipka, Handl and Falkner 2004 to name but a few). As a result, research has focused on lexicalization and institutionalization processes neologisms undergo as they make their way into the speech community. Lexicalization in its
broadest sense is defined by Lipka as “the process by which complex lexemes tend to become a single unit with a specific content, through frequent use. In this process, they lose their nature as a syntagma, or combination of smaller units, to a greater or lesser extent” (1992: 107). Whereas a new word will be ambiguous regarding to meaning and transparent regarding to the word formation processes and motivation involved, it will gradually be disambiguated and become opaque. Lexicalization therefore describes the neologism’s distribution in the speech community from a structural-semantic angle. Institutionalization on the other hand, in Lipka’s view that I follow, concerns the socio-pragmatic distribution process within the speech community and its speakers (note that Bauer places institutionalization as a second step in the distribution process on the same linguistic level as lexicalization). Research so far has thus neglected the cognitive perspective, which will be of interest in the present study. More specifically the research will investigate consolidation patterns by which “pseudoconcepts” (Schmid 2008: 3) start to emerge as distinctly entrenched holistic concepts in the minds of the speakers and in the speech community, i.e. their (cognitive) “hypostatization” (Schmid 2005: 78) and (socio-pragmatic) diffusion process.

In my dissertation I will investigate two aspects of the hypostatization and diffusion process. Firstly, I will study the associative networks a neologism sets up in relation to other entries in the mental lexicon and focus on the syntagmatic and paradigmatic sense relations that a neologism in context constructs during its entrenchment process. Such patterns on the latter level include traditional structural relations like synonymy, hyponymy and oppositeness. More emphasis will be placed on the syntagmatic patterning however, where the development of collocations and collostructions will be studied. The underlying assumption is that a neologism will require a minimum of context to disambiguate its meaning and emerge as a distinct, meaningful concept (cf. Clark and Clark 1979, Nagy and Gentner 1990, Dunbar 2005); this assumption is however not shared by all researchers in the field (cf. Bauer and Renouf 2000). An important question will therefore be: How exactly, in which context, how fast and to what extent are these associative frames and patterns established and developed?

Methodologically, these questions are answered with the help of a close longitudinal study of neologisms in co(n)text. Two important implications arise: the neologisms have to be as clean and new as possible and the context needs to be sufficiently varied. The first requirement is met with the help of the Oxford English Dictionary, who have been kind enough to cooperate and provide us with those newly discovered neologisms that have not been recorded in print in any of the major dictionaries. Attention will paid to the linguistic and extralinguistic diversity of the sample. This means that neologisms belonging to different word classes and word formation processes, different
styles, different origins and displaying different degrees of “nameworthiness” (Downing 1977) are included. The second requirement is met the Internet as a corpus, which will be equipped with a Googlecrawler (© Jan Bobeth), scanning the Web for the set of neologisms under consideration in context. In addition, the Oxford English Corpus will serve as a reference corpus. After downloading and storing these pages, a detailed linguistic analysis of topic, style, medium and cotext is conducted (see Hohenhaus 2005 for a similar approach). Since this study aims at the establishment of such patterns and their spreading over time, the Googlecrawler will repeatedly scan the Internet for the same neologisms set during regular intervals (7 days) over an extended time span (18 months); this longitudinal approach allows for a closer investigation of total and distributed frequencies.

The second aspect of my dissertation will focus on investigating the role of such paradigmatic and syntagmatic patterns on the entrenchment of neologisms in actual language use. Drawing again on the previous research on the importance of context for interpretation and meaning construction (see above for references), the hypothesis arises that neologisms embedded in collocational and collostructional patterns are more likely to develop into automatised, entrenched holistic concepts than neologisms that cannot rely on such strong cotextual clues and need to be disambiguated and constructed on-line upon each encounter. This hypothesis seems justified in the light of a recent study by de Vaan, Schreuder and Baayen (2007) that revealed a reduced degree of entrenchment for semantically ambiguous neologisms.

Since the present research is breaking new ground in this aspect, an appropriate methodology needs to be constructed along the way. In a first step, neologisms and their syntagmatic patterns are extracted from a database of neologisms between 1999 and 2009 that I compiled from several neologism-observation sources and that is being continually updated. Additionally, the Internet will be searched and filtered with a modified Googlecrawler to eliminate, among others, dictionary definitions that do not reflect actual usage as well as the Oxford English Corpus. These sources include MacMillan’s Buzzwords (previously Word of the Week), the Among the New Words column in American Speech and Oxford’s Bubbling Under archive. A certain degree of familiarity with or advertency of the neologism was deemed necessary to ensure the collocation and collostruction had been sufficiently established to produce entrenchment effects. Therefore, the neologisms needed to have been recorded by such institutions. Similar to the selection parameters above, the sample will consist of expressions from different word classes, word formation processes and semantic types of meaning construction (more precisely metaphor, metonymy and humor), different degrees of
nameworthiness, different kinds of extralinguistic referents (persons, objects, actions) and different topics (lifestyle, politics, economy, computer), styles and origins (deliberate and natural coinings).

The influence of collocations and collostructions on the entrenchment of neologisms in the minds of individual speakers will be tested with psycholinguistic experiments. At present, primed and non-primed visual lexical decision and self-paced reading tasks are planned to investigate processing time. Furthermore, by means of meaning elicitation tasks, the interpretation of neologisms will be studied. In these experiments, a given neologism in a stable con- and cotext will be presented in contrast to its syntagmatically furnished counterparts, e.g. to tweek vs. to twock a car. Both types of experiments are carried out as longitudinal studies, tracing the effect on the entrenchment process over time. A second strand of investigation will be concerned with frequency studies on the Internet. In order to objectify the findings, statistical significance and correlations tests will be performed.

To conclude, my dissertation aims to investigate the development of syntagmatic and paradigmatic patterns in neologisms on their way into the mental lexicon of the speaker and the speech community at large. More specifically, my research focuses on the development of collocations and collostructions and their role in the entrenchment process. These objectives are pursued by means of a corpus study using the Oxford English Corpus and the Internet to ascertain linguistic and stylistic diversity. The latter will be equipped with the Googlecrawler to eliminate potential biased results and facilitate the detailed linguistic analysis of the neologism in con- and cotext. The sample will consist of neologisms that are selected according to linguistic and extralinguistic parameters. The second of part of my research, which investigates the role of collocations and collostructions on the entrenchment, will supplement frequencies obtained from the two corpora with evidence from psycholinguistic experiments.
Bibliography


