An Empirical Analysis of Extended Meanings of Lexical Items in a H1N1 Corpus

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ABSTRACT

The year 2009 has witnessed a global outbreak of a new strain of influenza A virus subtype H1N1. Despite the high exposure on the mass media, few researches have been conducted on the discourse related to the H1N1 event. This study examined six frequently-occurred lexical items in a pandemic (H1N1) corpus: influenza, pandemic, cases, virus, transmission and death, using Sinclair’s (2004) descriptive model of lexical items. WordSmith 5.0 (Scott, 2010) was used to generate a keyword list and concordances. The randomly-selected concordances were then analysed from five perspectives, the core, collocation, colligation, semantic preference and semantic prosody. The findings show that the extended meanings of the lexical items are specific in the context of pandemic H1N1 event and they are interrelated in the context. It is argued that it is the study of lexical items rather than single words that enables language learners to better understand the meanings of words.

Keywords: Corpus-Driven Linguistics (CDL), Corpus of Pandemic (H1N1), Extended Meaning, Lexical Item

INTRODUCTION

The year 2009 has witnessed a global outbreak of a new strain of influenza A virus subtype H1N1. On June 11, 2009, the director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO), Margaret Chan announced the outbreak to be a pandemic one (Chan, 2009). A special term of Pandemic H1N1/09 virus has been given to the novel pandemic virus (WHO website, 2011). The H1N1 infection also got great attention from the medical experts and the health authority for its novelty and susceptibility to infection. According to a study at the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), children do not have pre-existing immunity to resist the H1N1 virus (2009) and this novel virus type is easily spreading through coughing and sneezing between people and may threaten people’s lives (Wilkinson, 2009). Events related to the infectious disease frequently occurred in the media since April 2009. The WHO and CHP (Centre for Health Protection), the official disease prevention and control centre of the Hong Kong government frequently released situation updates and press release to monitor

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the progress of the infection and keep the general public up-to-date with the H1N1-related events. However, despite the high exposure on the mass media, it is still uncertain which words are more frequently occurred in H1N1-related news reports and documents and how they are specifically used in the context of the H1N1 event.

The purposes of this study are to examine whether Sinclair’s descriptive model of lexical item can be applied to analyse the key words related to H1N1 event and whether such an analysis could bring a thorough understanding of the meanings of those key words; and to demonstrate that a combination of a corpus-driven approach and Sinclair’s model may offer more productive language description of lexical items than looking into them in isolation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Five Categories of Co-selection

In the literature, Sinclair argues that “the word is not the best starting point for a description of meaning, because meaning arises from words in particular combinations” (Sinclair, 2004, p. 148). Jackson and Amvela (2007) also argues that no matter how cautious we are in defining the concept word, it is certain to arise certain degree of vagueness or ambiguity. A word’s meaning cannot be fully realized by only looking into a single word. The context in which it occurred, the surrounding words, the word classes and the attitudes of people using it, all these can have great influence on word meanings.

In order to take all these factors into consideration, a descriptive model of lexical items proposed by Sinclair (1996, 2004) is adopted. The model is composed of five categories, the core, collocation, colligation, semantic preference and semantic prosody. Among the five, the core and semantic prosody are two obligatory categories while collocation, colligation and semantic preference are optional ones.

The core “is the invariable and constitutes the evidence of the occurrence of the item as a whole” (Sinclair, 2004, p. 141). In corpus analysis, the core word or phrase is the node, which is the subject of a query, and the words that are centrally around the node (Sinclair, 2003).

Collocation refers to the words and phrases that commonly co-occur with the core. Sinclair first defines collocation as “the occurrence of two or more words within a short space of each other in a text” (Sinclair, 1991, p. 196) and later modifies this concept as the “co-occurrence of words with no more than four intervening words” (Sinclair, 2004, p. 141). The terminology “collocation” is originally coined by Firth (1957), referring to items commonly co-occur with others in texts (Partington, 1998). Such a concept is widely accepted by other linguists but is defined from different perspectives. For example, Leech defines it as “collocative meaning consists of the associations a word acquired on account of the meanings of words which tend to occur in its environment” (Leech, 1974, p. 20). Hoey (1991) highlights another aspect of the concept, that “collocation has long been the name given to the relationship a lexical item has with items that appear with greater probability in its textual context” (pp. 6-7). Such a viewpoint is shared by Stubbs by declaring collocation as “habitual co-occurrence of words” (Stubbs, 1995, p. 245), that is, the node and its surrounding collocates (Stubbs, 2001).

Colligation is firstly proposed by Firth as the “interrelations of the syntactical categories” (Firth, 1968, p. 23). It is the “co-occurrence of grammatical phenomena” (Sinclair, 2004, p. 142), reflecting the relation between a lexical item and the grammatical environment around it (Stubbs, 2001). A word’s colligations describe “the grammatical company a word keeps and the position it prefers”, in short, it refers to “what it typically does grammatically” (Hoey, 2000, p. 234).

Semantic preference is “the restriction of regular co-occurrence to items which share a semantic feature” (Sinclair, 2004, p. 142). The semantic preference is realized when a lexis co-occurs with a class of words which belong to the same semantic field. It is a relation not between individual words, but between the
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