

When pink is the new black and data scientists are the new rock stars: Corpus approaches to the productivity of ‘snowclones’

The concept of ‘snowclones’ has received increased interest in recent (diachronic) Construction Grammar (see e.g. Traugott & Trousdale 2013, Bergs 2019). Traugott & Trousdale (2013: 150) define snowclones as “schemas that grow from relatively fixed micro-constructions that are usually formulae or clichés”. This talk illustrates how state-of-the-art corpus methods can be used to quantify and refine a phenomenon at the interface of pragmatics and phraseology which has previously been mostly described informally.

We present a detailed analysis of two of the most well-known snowclones: [*the mother of all X*], e.g. *the mother of all traffic jams* (COCA) or *the mother of all hangovers* (ENCOW), and [*X BE the new Y*], e.g. *Big data is the new oil* (ENCOW) or *Stats is the new grammar* (ENCOW). Specifically, we investigate the productivity of these patterns by characterizing how the lexical items that can fill their open slots (X and Y) are semantically and syntactically constrained, and whether and to what extent these constraints have been loosened over time (as assumed by Traugott & Trousdale 2014).

Drawing on quantitative analyses of corpus data from the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), and the webcorpus ENCOW (Schäfer & Bildhauer 2012), we use collostructional analysis (Stefanowitsch 2013) and semantic vector spaces (Perek 2016) to show how both patterns combine with a semantically and structurally ever more heterogeneous array of slot fillers. More specifically, [*X is the new Y*] starts out with nominal slot fillers but then increasingly allows adjectival ones as well. It also comes to take more complex slot fillers, i.e. entire phrases instead of single lexical items. [*the mother of all X*] starts out with words with negative semantic prosody before it is extended to neutral and positive slot fillers like *mother of all festivals*. At the same time, however, both patterns remain semantically constrained in that [*X is the new Y*] tends to combine with nouns referring to persons or places as well as adjectives referring to colors or mental states, while [*mother of all X*] shows clear preferences for abstract concepts like *battle* and *hangover*.

We argue that the rising but nevertheless limited productivity of snowclones results from the pragmatically motivated use of the patterns. On the one hand, the constructions themselves typically contain some ‘extravagant’, i.e. “imaginative and vivid” (Haspelmath 1999: 1057), language and are thus particularly recognizable. On the other hand, speakers draw attention to their own linguistic creativity by introducing semantically and structurally novel elements into the open slots, while ensuring that those elements are still compatible with the overall constructional meaning. This in turn can help refine the concept of snowclones: We argue that the main feature that distinguishes snowclones from other partially filled constructions is that they are inherently extravagant and that speakers build on this extravagance when extending the patterns in a creative way.

References

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