

LINGUISTICS AND VIETNAMESE LINGUISTICS

SEMANTIC PROSODY
IN “DIARY OF A WIMPY KID”

DO TRUONG NHAT THINH* - TRUONG BACH LE**

ABSTRACT: This paper reported on part of a study investigating the representation of a character - Frank Heffley through semantic prosody in the first five story books of Jeff Kinney’s Diary of a Wimpy Kid series. Semantic prosody is central to this study as it is a linguistics concept and a valuable tool for deeper understanding of how people are represented in discourse. Concordance approach to analyze corpus data with the use of Sketch Engine was conducted to achieve the findings. Within the limited scope of this paper, the semantic prosody analysis of the node word “Dad” (Frank Heffley) reveals that its co-occurring collocates carry more positive than negative prosody, thereby providing further evidence for the representation of Frank Heffley. The paper concludes by proposing practical implications for English language study, English language teaching and literary analysis.

KEY WORDS: representation; semantic prosody; concordance analysis; Diary of a Wimpy kid.

RECEIVED: October, 22nd, 2024.

EDITED: November, 19th, 2024

1. Introduction

Semantic prosody is defined as a semantic phenomenon that lexical items co-occurring with other words that are positive, negative or neutral can spread connotative coloring (Partington, 2004b). Its major feature is the ability to convey the speaker's attitudes in their language choices and representation of issues and people. In addition, the investigation of semantic prosody is commonly conducted with the help of collocational phenomenon and corpus to further examine its meaning (Louw, 2000; Partington, 1998). In other words, the study of semantic prosody in fiction and prose offers a powerful tool for analyzing the representation of people, including non-fiction works like Diary of a Wimpy Kid (DOWK). This is a famous American series that follows the misadventures of Greg Heffley, a skinny middle school student who struggles navigating his life and shows readers interesting themes of adolescence, family and friendship (Santoso & Fajar, 2023). Owing to several factors, this series was well received from famous critics and won several awards and honors. This success was largely because, as pointed out by Dr. Joshua Sparrow, who is a child and adolescent psychiatrist, DOWK “captures the struggle of a child that age trying to figure out what it means to be a person” by showing readers the mind of Greg as he struggles with problems arising at school, at home with other family members and the pressure to fit in (Joshua, 2009, as cited in Tara, 2009). Despite the humor and relatability to a majority of readers, many comments on Goodreads.com and Commonsensemedia.org spark divisive debate due to Greg and other characters’ questionable and unlikeable personality and behaviors.

These have prompted the current study to explore semantic prosody by looking at obtained collocational patterns in a corpus to uncover the underlying identity, gaining a deeper understanding of how the identity of the character Frank Heffley is constructed:

Hence, this study addresses the following research question:

How do the collocational patterns and semantic prosody of Frank Heffley in Diary of a Wimpy kid shape his representation?

2. Semantic prosody

In one of the earliest studies in this field, Sinclair (1987) found the semantic environment or lexicogrammatical environment of a word and its collocates contain “good/positive” or “bad/negative” features. His illustration with SET IN shows that the subjects of this phrasal verb consistently referred to some unpleasant issues such as rot, decay, despair and hence SET IN can be

*University of Foreign Languages and International Studies, Hue University;

Email: thinhdo.freelance@gmail.com

**University of Foreign Languages and International Studies, Hue University;

Email: tbachle@hueuni.edu.vn

said to have a negative semantic profile. Hence, Sinclair (1996) contributed by far the most influential and widely-accepted account of semantic prosody with his model of five categories of co-collection of the lexical item/unit of meaning. Louw (1993) helped to coin the term semantic prosody when he related this concept to Firth (1957) phonological prosody since they both share the same process of “coloring” and he defined semantic prosody as a “consistent aura of meaning with which a form is imbued by its collocates”. His works with UTTERLY, BENT ON, and SYMPTOMATIC OF showed undesirable meanings due to a transfer of meaning from their habitual co-text.

Previous literature by scholars reveals that semantic prosody can be defined either in terms of evaluative or discourse or a conjunction of both. Evaluative prosody is defined as “a form of meaning which is established through the proximity of a consistent series of collocates, often characterized as positive or negative” (Louw, 1993) while discourse prosody refers to the attitudinal meaning or pragmatic function, which contribute to the understanding of speaker or writer attitudes.

If we examine collocation as being the main subjects of various studies, there have been three main approaches to the study of collocations, which are lexical composition, the semantic, and the structural approach. Regarding semantic study of collocation and specifically semantic prosody study, collocates are identified by concordancers, which display the node word in the center of the screen, allowing for identification of their collocates on both the left and the right.

Semantic prosody is particularly beneficial as it examines how language is used in children's literature to convey ideologies, power dynamics, and societal norms (Knowles & Malmkjær's, 1996). Specifically, the representation of the fathers and mothers in the family in Victorian society is well-presented. Being characterized by a patriarchal family structure, the fathers were seen as the highest authority figure who is emotionally strong and responsible for providing financially for the family. This representation reinforced the perception of the fathers as the head of the household who are expected to guide their children toward proper social conduct and moral behavior. In their work in 2023, Zuraida and Simatupang examined how the two characters “dad” and “mom” are represented using two children's books by the author, Alec Greven. The research explored the semantic prosody and found that “Dad” is portrayed more positively compared to “Mom”. Given the relatively young field of research into the study of semantic prosody to investigate the identities and portraits of people, this put forward a need to conduct a study to examine semantic prosody in the representation of the father in DOWK.

3. Methodology

The study starts with the building of the corpus of Diary of a Wimpy Kid, book 1 to 5. They are Diary of a Wimpy Kid (2007), Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Rodrick Rules (2008), Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Last Straw (2009), Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Dog Days (2009), and Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Ugly Truth (2010). The texts from 5 books are extracted and stored in pdf form prior to being loaded onto Sketch engine Creating new corpus. The final resultant corpus can be named and loaded as the chosen corpus. Second, in this stage of the study, the node word “dad” is decided as chosen search terms based on a pilot study ensuring that with a small sample of the corpus.

Third, a concordance of the search term is obtained because an exceeding of thousands of concordance lines (559 lines in this study) suggests the need to look at the first 100 randomized lines in order to initially identify representations that are likely to be reasonably frequent (see Figure 1). The fourth step is a thinning process, which removes any irrelevant concordance hit that shows no relevance to the search term and reduces the investigated lines to 77. Fifth, the study of these randomized samples continues with sorting the whole concordance of each node word to the left and right. As a consequence, it is possible to look for evidence of grammatical or semantic patterns. This is followed by the note frequency of such patterns together with the annotation to create categories of presentation from them. Sixth, attempts can be made to explore semantic prosody from this information of such patterns and categories of presentations.

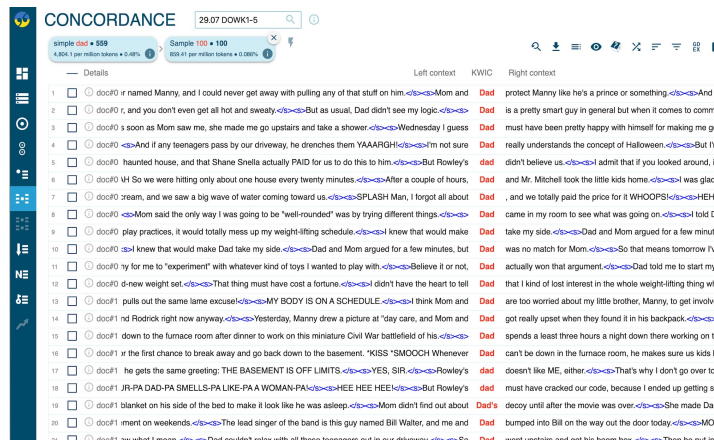


Figure 1. A random sample concordance lines of “dad”

4. Findings and discussions

Collocational patterns (adjectives, nouns and verbs) are the recurring combinations of other words that appear alongside the node words. In what follows, they are presented with the aim to provide insights into its semantic prosody and thematic associations of the node word “dad”. The 7 concordance lines being chosen as 7 examples include the node word located in the central while the collocational patterns are highlighted in bold.

4.1. Adjectives

The node word “dad” is discussed with 10 adjectives used predicatively (see Table 1).

The positive node word

Table 1 shows Greg's tendency to use 6 predicative adjectives (*pretty smart*, *too worried*, *pretty impressed*, *pretty open*, *really impressed* and *really serious*) to describe his dad's emotional states or evaluate his behaviors. The positive meanings of the six collocates fall into the theme of caring and supportive father. Example 1 below shows a positive semantic prosody as it indicates a sense of satisfaction when Dad's actions align with his intentions to make Greg go outside. This derives from his wish for his children to become more active rather than stay inside playing video games.

Example 1 - Line 3

take a shower. Wednesday, I guess	Dad	must have been pretty happy with himself for making me go outside yesterday, because he did it again today.
-----------------------------------	-----	--

The negative node word

Too worried, *bananas*, *too thrilled*, and *pretty tense* are evaluated as negative prosodies which clearly show Greg's thoughts of his father being overactive or irrational in the way he interacts with other people. Hence, the concept these collocates are associated with is strict parenting. The example 2 below shows that *too worried* is the collocate of the node word “dad” which carries negative prosody since this phrase suggests high level of concern and protection toward dad's youngest child.

Example 2 - Line 12

the same lame excuse! MY BODY IS ON A SCHEDULE. I think Mom and	Dad	are too worried about my little brother, Manny, to get
---	-----	---

Table 1. The semantic prosody of adjective collocates and thematic associations

No.	Concordance lines	Collocates	Positive prosody	Negative prosody	Neutral prosody	Themes
1	get all hot and sweaty. But as usual, Dad didn't see my logic. Dad is a pretty smart guy in general but when it comes to common	<i>pretty smart</i>	✓			Caring and supportive father
2	, she made me go upstairs and take a shower. Wednesday I guess Dad must have been pretty happy with himself for making me go	<i>pretty happy</i>	✓			Caring and supportive father
3	the same lame excuse! MY BODY IS ON A SCHEDULE. I think Mom and Dad are too worried about my little brother, Manny, to get	<i>too worried</i>		✓		Strict parenting
4	minute. I could tell the sound of Rodrick typing was driving Dad totally bananas. On top of that, Rodrick would come out of	<i>bananas</i>		✓		Strict parenting
5	to cash in half of my Mom Bucks to pay for it. And I don't think Dad was too thrilled with the idea of me buying a Sweet Secrets	<i>too thrilled</i>		✓		Strict parenting
6	his kids to do it on purpose. Things are pretty tense between Dad and Uncle Joe, because Dad is still mad at Uncle Joe for	<i>pretty tense</i>		✓		Strict parenting
7	the results of his experiment were gonna benefit mankind. Dad seemed pretty impressed. Or maybe he was just relieved that	<i>pretty impressed</i>	✓			Caring and supportive father
8	full-time. It sounds like a terrible plan to me, but I	<i>pretty open</i>	✓			Caring and supportive

	think Dad is pretty open to the idea. Wednesday Tonight was the big					father
9	badges and pinned them to our uniforms. When I came home, Dad was really impressed. If I would've known that this was all	<i>really impressed</i>	✓			Caring and supportive father
10	around and things won't get to this point. Thursday Well, Dad is really serious about me taking on more responsibility.	<i>really serious</i>	✓			Caring and supportive father
TOTAL			6	4	0	

4.2. Nouns

Table 2 shows that while *decoy*, *junk-food addict*, *an unpredictable guy* and *no match* are positioned as objects after the node word, the fixed expression *no offense* is positioned before the node word “dad” serves to mitigate the critical statement in comparison with mom. Example 3 shows *an unpredictable guy* carrying negative prosody with the node word “dad” as it suggests that Dad’s behavior is uncertain in previous situations so Greg may find him difficult to anticipate.

Example 3 - Line 68

because it looked an awful lot like Dad 's kind of **an unpredictable guy**, so I
his handwriting. But guess wait until Sunday to

Example 4 - Line 72

Dad's in charge of helping me with Dad , but Mom is WAY better at homework
my homework. **No offense** to help than he is. When

No offense in this example represents dad inferior to mom in the ability to help children with homework. These 5 negative nouns associate Frank Heffley with the themes of *parental authority and responsibility* in which he does involve in family matters but struggle with mom’s authority. His conflict and misunderstanding and sometimes unpredictability contribute to the theme of *strained father-son relationship*. Together with the theme of *junk-food addict*, this set a very clear negative prosody of the character's father.

Table 2. *The semantic prosody of noun collocates and thematic associations*

No.	Concordance lines	Collocates	Positive prosody	Negative prosody	Neutral prosody	Theme
1	his side of the bed to make it look like he was asleep. Mom	<i>decoy</i>		✓		Parental authority and responsibility

	didn't find out about Dad's decoy until after the movie was over.					
2	I really had was to try and find Dad. Then I remembered: Dad is a junk-food addict. I knew he'd eventually turn up at the	<i>junk-food addict</i>		✓		A junk-food addict
3	because it looked an awful lot like his handwriting. But Dad's kind of an unpredictable guy, so I guess wait until Sunday to	<i>an unpredictable guy</i>		✓		Strained father-son relationship
4	Dad take my side. Dad and Mom argued for a few minutes, but Dad was no match for Mom. So that means tomorrow I've got to	<i>no match</i>		✓		Parental authority and responsibility
5	Dad's in charge of helping me with my homework. No offense to Dad, but Mom is WAY better at homework help than he is. When Mom	<i>no offense</i>		✓		Strained father-son relationship
Total			0	5	0	

4.3.2.3. Verbs

There is a tendency of using a greater number of verbs collocated with the node word “dad” compared to that of adjectives and nouns. There are a total of 61 verbs from the concordance and the first 10 of them are shown in Table 3.

The positive node word

The verbs and verb phrases associated with “dad” are primarily action-oriented with Dad as the subject performing actions that affect others. In other words, they can be classified as “Dad + verb” in *(Mom and) Dad protect Manny, Dad did all of his shopping, Dad told us and Dad found us*. This structure generates several themes of Dad as *a caring and supportive father, parental authority and responsibility and personal interests*. Example 5 and 6 with *protect* and *told me* carries positive prosodies with the love, care and responsibility to ensure Manny’s safety and make Greg physically stronger by engaging more outdoor activities.

Example 5 - Line 1

never get away with pulling any of that stuff on him. Mom and Dad **protect** Manny like he's a prince or something. And he never

Example 6 - Line 40

There was a time that Dad **told me** I was gonna have to go outside and get SOME exercise.

The negative node word

There are 22 negative verb collocates associated with the themes of *strict parenting*, *strained father-son relationship* and *dislike for teen culture and heavy metal*. Example 7 illustrates these themes as dad disapproves of Greg's preference to a bike that he considers a girl bike.

Example 7 - Line 67

BIKE I rode the bike home and parked it in the garage. When Dad saw it, he **said it was a girl bike** and I should get rid of it. But

The mixed prosody of the verb collocates (38 positive and 22 negative and 1 neutral prosodies) reflects Dad's sophisticated role that Greg thinks of his father, both subjectively and humorously.

Table 3. *The semantic prosody of verb collocates and thematic associations*

No.	Concordance lines	Collocates	Positive prosody	Negative prosody	Neutral prosody	Theme
1	[...] pulling any of that stuff on him. Mom and Dad protect Manny like he's a prince or something. And he never [...]	<i>protect</i>	✓			Caring and supportive father
2	[...] go upstairs and take a shower. Wednesday I guess Dad must have been pretty happy with himself for making me go [...]	<i>making me go</i>		✓		Strict parenting
3	[...] he drenches them YAAARGH! I'm not sure Dad really understands the concept of Halloween. But I'm not [...]	<i>really understands</i>		✓		Strained father-son relationship
4	[...] one house every	<i>took the little</i>	✓			Caring and

	twenty minutes. After a couple of hours, Dad and Mr. Mitchell took the little kids home. I was glad, [...]	<i>kids home</i>				supportive father
5	[...] be "well-rounded" was by trying different things. Dad came in my room to see what was going on. I told Dad that Mom was [...]	<i>came in my room to see what is going on</i>	✓			Caring and supportive father
6	[...] my weight-lifting schedule. I knew that would make Dad take my side. Dad and Mom argued for a few minutes, but Dad was [...]	<i>take my side</i>	✓			Caring and supportive father
7	[...] kind of toys I wanted to play with. Believe it or not, Dad actually won that argument. Dad told me to start my wish list [...]	<i>actually won that argument</i>	✓			Caring and supportive father
8	[...] a picture at "day care, and Mom and Dad got really upset when they found it in his backpack. Mom and [...]	<i>got really upset</i>	✓			Caring and supportive father
9	[...] this miniature Civil War battlefield of his. Dad spends a least three hours a night down there working on that [...]	<i>spends at least three hours</i>	✓			Personal interests
10	[...] to the basement. *KISS *SMOOCH Whenever Dad can't be down in the furnace room, he makes sure us kids keep [...]	<i>make sure us kids</i>	✓			Parental authority and responsibility

Taken together, table 4 displays the overall result of semantic prosody analysis. Greg's dad is largely represented positively rather than negatively. His representation is a realistic portrayal of an

imperfect but with good intentions father, influenced by personal interests, generational gap, and communication difficulties.

Table 4. *The overall result of semantic prosody analysis with collocational patterns*

Node word “Dad”	Word categories	Positive	Negative	Neutral
	adjective	6	4	-
	noun	0	5	-
	verb	38	23	1
Total	77	44	32	1

5. Conclusions

The identification and analysis of 77 adjectives, nouns and verbs surrounding the node word “Dad” show that Greg’s dad is largely represented positively rather than negatively. The results emphasize the evaluative function of semantic prosody, which is the focus on identifying positive, negative and neutral prosodies associated with character father in the diary. In addition, the findings emerging from the analysis highlight the important role of collocate patterns and how the meaning of a word is affected by its habitual co-occurrence with surrounding words and phrases. This analysis contributes to the understanding of Frank’s personal interests, generational gap, and challenges in communication add layers to his character, suggesting a realistic depiction of a well-meaning but sometimes flawed father figure.

The findings drawn from the current research have significant implications for English language study, English language teaching and literary analysis. Students who are majoring in English language can benefit greatly from the enhanced comprehension of sophisticated English (improved vocabulary usage, collocational awareness and reduce inappropriate language use) as the use of semantic prosody reveals what features may be ignored. There is also a possibility that incorporating semantic prosody and English language curricula enhance student’s ability to interpret and produce language effectively. Furthermore, analyzing semantic prosody in literary works may reveal the intention of author’s language use to build up the representations of characters, strengthening plausible interpretation and evoke reader’s engagement and emotions alike.

REFERENCES

1. Firth, J. R. (1957), *Papers in linguistics 1934–1951*. Oxford University Press.
2. Knowles, M., & Malmkjær, K. (1996), *Language and control in children’s literature*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
3. Louw, B. (1993), Irony in the text or insincerity in the writer? The diagnostic potential of semantic prosodies. In M. Baker, G. Francis, & E. Tognini-Bonelli (Eds.), *Text and technology: In honour of John Sinclair* (pp. 157–175). John Benjamins.
4. Louw, B. (2000), Contextual prosodic theory: Bringing semantic prosodies to life. In C. Heffer & H. Saunston (Eds.), *Words in context: In honour of John Sinclair* (pp. 48–94). ELR.
5. Partington, A. (1998), *Patterns and meanings: Using corpora for English language research and teaching*. John Benjamins.
6. Partington, A. (2004), Utterly content in each other’s company: Semantic prosody and semantic preference. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 9(1), 131–156.

7. Santoso, H. D., & Fajar, D. A. (2023), GREG HEFFLEY'S ROLE CONFUSION IN THE DIARY OF A WIMPY KID (2007): A PSYCHOSOCIAL ANALYSIS. *Lire Journal (Journal of Linguistics and Literature)*, 7(1), 140–150. <https://doi.org/10.33019/lire.v7i1.189>.
8. Sinclair, J. (1987), *Looking up: An account of the COBUILD project in lexical computing and the development of the Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary*. Collins.
9. Sinclair, J. (1996), The search for units of meaning. *Textus*, 9, 75–106.
10. Tara, P.-P. (2009, October 12), *Behind the 'Wimpy Kid' Phenomenon*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/13/health/13well.html>
11. Zuraida, I., & Simatupang, E. C. (2023), INVESTIGATING THE COLLOCATION OF THE WORDS “MOM” AND “DAD” IN ALEC GREVEN'S NOVELS: A CORPUS LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF SEMANTIC PREFERENCES AND PROSODY. *English Review: Journal of English Education*, 11(3), 667–674. <https://doi.org/10.25134/erjee.v11i3.8818>.

Thi pháp ngữ nghĩa trong “Nhật ký chú bé nhút nhát”

Tóm tắt: Bài báo này trình bày một phần của nghiên cứu về hình tượng nhân vật Frank Heffley thông qua thi pháp ngữ nghĩa trong năm quyển đầu tiên của loạt truyện Nhật ký chú bé nhút nhát bởi tác giả Jeff Kinney. Thi pháp ngữ nghĩa đóng vai trò quan trọng trong nghiên cứu này với vai trò là một hiện tượng ngôn ngữ và là một công cụ giá trị để hiểu sâu hơn về con người được thể hiện trong diễn ngôn. Phương pháp phân tích chỉ mục với sự hỗ trợ của hệ thống Sketch Engine được sử dụng để thu về kết quả nghiên cứu. Trong phạm vi hạn chế của bài báo này, việc phân tích thi pháp ngữ nghĩa từ khóa “Dad” (nhân vật người bố Frank Heffley) cho thấy các từ đồng hiện của nó mang tính tích cực nhiều hơn tiêu cực, từ đó cung cấp thêm bằng chứng làm rõ hình tượng nhân vật Frank Heffley. Bài báo kết luận với việc đề xuất các ứng dụng thực tiễn cho việc học, giảng dạy tiếng Anh và phân tích văn học.

Từ khoá: Thể hiện nhân vật; thi pháp ngữ nghĩa; phân tích chỉ mục; Nhật ký chú bé nhút nhát.