Meaning and Phraseology: a Corpus-Driven Approach

Patrick Hanks

Interesting aspects of the meaning are revealed by corpus-driven lexical analysis. The typical function of nouns is to create referring expressions—terms that either refer to objects in the world or denote abstract concepts. The typical function of verbs, on the other hand, is to create propositions, in which noun phrases play roles that are mediated by a verb. According to the Theory of Norms and Exploitations (Hanks, 1994, 2004, 2013), a verb has only **meaning potential** (not *meaning* as such) until it is put in context. There is no 'semantic invariable' that is common to all normal uses of a verb. Consider the verb *blow*. '*A gale was blowing', 'They blew up the bridge', 'He blew his nose',* and *'She blew the whistle on government malpractice'* have little in common semantically, but all four sentences represent realizations of conventional lexico-syntactic patterns of English. The meanings lie in collocation and phraseology, not in the words themselves.

Different questions must be asked about nouns and verbs, and different apparatuses are required for corpus analysis of these two categories. When ***shower*** is used as a noun, we can ask how many different kinds of shower there are—*rain showers, snow showers, spring showers*, etc., as opposed to *bathroom showers* and *power-driven showers*. What distinctive properties or common features does each category have? On the other hand, if ***shower*** is used as a verb, relevant question are prompted by the collocates and syntagmatics: for example, 'Is it normal to say in English, "It showered yesterday"?' Patterns with prepositions such as *with* and *on* prompt questions such as 'Who showers what on whom?' 'Who showers whom with what?' 'What is the relationship between such patterns?' In this way, we can start to compile an inventory of patterns of word use that seem to be already available to the unconscious minds of users of a language.