The Role of Register-Specific Semantic Prosody in ESL Advanced Instruction: "Environmental" Discourse in Academic and Journalism Registers of British English

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Abstract: This article explores semantic prosody (SP) and the pedagogical need for teaching register-specific SP to advanced learners of English as a Second Language (ESL), using the corpus linguistic analysis of the adjective *ENVIRONMENTAL* as a case study. Semantic prosody, the evaluative "aura" a word acquires from its typical lexical surroundings, is a crucial component of pragmatic competence often overlooked in L2 instruction. While dictionary definitions provide denotative meaning, they frequently fail to capture the nuanced, register-dependent evaluative associations that shape native-like language use. This paper builds on a previous study of *ENVIRONMENTAL* in general online discourse by presenting a more granular, comparative analysis of its semantic prosody across journalistic and academic registers drawn from the British National Corpus (BNC). Using a corpus-assisted methodology, the study reveals a significant divergence in narrative framing: journalistic texts frame the term with a neutral semantic prosody, balancing negative concepts like *pressure* with responses, effectively depicting a narrative of societal reaction. In contrast, academic writing employs a markedly positive prosody centered on constructive action, typified by collocates such as *performance*, *development*, and *sustainable*. These findings demonstrate that a one-size-fits-all approach to vocabulary instruction leaves learners ill-equipped for specialized contexts. The article concludes by outlining key implications for language pedagogy (glottodidactics), specifically advocating for Data-Driven Learning (DDL) strategies. It argues that fostering awareness of register-specific semantic prosody allows advanced L2 learners (above B2 level) to move beyond simple grammatical correctness to achieve pragmatic appropriateness. Ultimately, this approach empowers learners to navigate complex discourses and contribute agency-driven narratives to specialized fields such as environmental education and policy.

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Introduction

Reaching proficiency in a second language (L2) is a multi-layered process that extends beyond the memorization of vocabulary and grammatical rules. For advanced learners, the ultimate goal is the ability to produce contextually appropriate, natural-sounding language. This recognition points learners to the idea of vocabulary, not as a set of items accompanied by their denotative definitions, but as a net of words that co-occur with each other and, by doing so, acquire features that make using a given word natural and contextual. A phrase coined by J. R. Firth (1957), "you shall know the word by the company it keeps," encapsulates this idea that the competence in vocabulary use is linked to the linguistic environment of a word. A noteworthy aspect of this competence lies in understanding semantic prosody: the attitudinal and pragmatic "aura" of meaning that a word acquires from its consistent collocational environments (Louw 1993). This concept originates from corpus linguistics, notably in John Sinclair's analysis of the phrasal verb *TO SET IN*, which he found consistently co-occurred with unpleasant states of affairs, thus giving it a negative prosody (Sinclair 1987). As Sinclair (1996) noted later on, this evaluative coloring operates "on the pragmatic side of the semantics/pragmatics continuum," shaping speaker attitude and intent. Moreover, some scholars (e.g., Tognini-Bonelli 2004; Widdowson 2000) point to the hidden, covert nature of semantic prosody. For instance, a word like *TO CAUSE* appears semantically neutral in its dictionary definition. However, after examining large bodies of text (corpora) we can uncover its tendency to co-occur with predominantly negative words, such as *DAMAGE*, *PAIN*, or *PROBLEMS* (Partington 1998; Stubbs 1995). This recognition provides a rationale for inquiry, even into seemingly well-understood vocabulary, looking for additional information that helps to comprehend and produce language more proficiently. While the concept of semantic prosody is growing in popularity among corpus linguists, its application in L2 pedagogy remains underexplored. Traditional L2 instruction typically relies on dictionary definitions, which, by their nature, provide decontextualized, denotative meanings. This approach can leave learners ill-equipped to navigate the subtle connotations that differentiate near-synonyms or understand why a word may be appropriate in one context but not another (Xiao & McEnery 2006).

The challenge can become particularly demanding in specialized contexts where linguistic framing is critical to the discourse.

One example of such context is environmental education. It was recognized that the language used to discuss environmental issues is not a neutral conduit for information but a constitutive force that shapes perception, cognition, and behavioral intent (Lakoff 2010). A prior study (Klimska & Rutkowski, forthcoming) analyzed the term *ENVIRONMENTAL* in a broad, non-specialized corpus drawn from the World Wide Web, revealing a predominantly negative semantic prosody, amounting to technocratic and emotionally detached discourse. This general prosody, laden with terms of damage and risk, was identified as potentially counter-productive to the aims of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), which seeks to foster hope and agency (Ojala 2012). Equipped with this insight, non-native English users become aware of potentially negative connotations of the term *ENVIRONMENTAL* when addressing a general audience. They might choose to counteract this by involving more positive framing and/or including a message of hope in otherwise impersonal, dispassionate discourse. Equipping L2 users with an understanding of evaluative hues of meaning found in the vocabulary of the field not only makes them more aware participants of the discourse; it also gives them the linguistic tools to shape, influence and change the narrative. However, in the preliminary study of *ENVIRONMENTAL*, a crucial dimension was highlighted as needing further investigation: the variation of semantic prosody across different genres and registers found by other scholars (Cheng 2006; Tribble 2000). This article addresses that gap by presenting a comparative, register-specific analysis of the adjective *ENVIRONMENTAL*. By contrasting its use in journalistic and academic texts, this study aims to:

1. Contribute to the growing body of research on semantic prosody, adding an example of the adjective *ENVIRONMENTAL*.
2. Demonstrate the pronounced effect of register on the semantic prosody.
3. Illustrate the limitations of a non-differentiated approach to L2 vocabulary instruction.
4. Propose pedagogical implications for teaching advanced English learners how to effectively and appropriately engage in specialized discourse.

Semantic Prosody and Its Importance in L2 Pedagogy

Semantic prosody describes the subtle positive or negative connotation a word acquires through its frequent association with other words (Stubbs

2001). This "aura of meaning" is said not to be found in the word itself, but it is discoverable in the cumulation of the contexts in which it typically appears. It ought to be distinguished from the relationship between the word and another lexical item it co-occurs with (collocation), e.g., *TO PAY + ATTENTION* or the relationship between a word and a grammatical category (colligation), e.g. the auxiliary *WON'T + BUDGE* (Sinclair 1998). As in the example cited in the first section, the verb *TO CAUSE* in general corpora exhibits a strong negative semantic prosody because it habitually co-occurs with words denoting unpleasant outcomes, such as *TROUBLE* (Partington 1998; Stubbs 1995). For advanced ESL learners, being unaware of these patterns is a primary source of pragmatic error. A learner might produce a grammatically correct but pragmatically odd sentence because they have selected a word whose semantic prosody clashes with the intended meaning of the utterance. For instance, a non-native English learner could produce an utterance "This event has *CAUSED* my happiness," which complies with the dictionary definition of the verb "to serve as a cause or occasion of" (source: Merriam-Webster) but would nevertheless be recognized as awkward or unnatural by a native speaker. As has been argued, this information is "vital for non-native speakers to understand not only what is grammatically possible in their language production but […] also what is appropriate and what actually happens" (Partington 1998, 8). Notably, semantic prosody has been seen as playing a major role in irony, sarcasm, and humor, whereas these phenomena are supposed to stem from the "collocative clash" of inappropriately matched vocabulary (Louw 1993). Proficiency in decoding and deploying these forms of language use is seen as a manifestation of high language competence. The need for this nuanced understanding becomes critical at advanced proficiency levels (CEFR B2-C2), where learners are expected to differentiate finer shades of meaning even in complex or highly-specific situations and use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. At this stage, educators ought to move beyond simple denotation and equip learners with the tools to analyze language as it is authentically used. Corpus linguistics provides this methodological toolkit, allowing both teachers and students to uncover the subliminal evaluative meanings encoded in language. The following study, therefore, adopts a corpus-assisted approach to reveal the register-specific prosodies of *ENVIRONMENTAL*, providing an empirical basis for targeted pedagogical interventions.

A Register-Specific Study of the Term *ENVIRONMENTAL* in British English

Building on the findings of the initial study on *ENVIRONMENTAL* in online discourse, this analysis narrows the focus to two distinct and influential registers in British English: journalism and academia. The objective is to determine whether the term's semantic prosody shifts depending on the communicative purpose and conventions of the register in which it appears.

Methodology

As an introductory note, it is worth pointing out that while the term "collocate" often implies a statistically significant association, this paper adopts a frequency-based perspective, defining collocates as the most common words appearing in the vicinity of the node word. This terminological choice is made for the sake of clarity (avoidance of repetitions of the phrase "habitually co-occurring lexical items") and is justified on theoretical and pedagogical grounds in the discussion of the quantitative analysis below. This study employs a corpus-assisted methodology to compare the semantic prosody of the adjective *ENVIRONMENTAL* across two distinct registers. The data was elicited from the British National Corpus (BNC), using the BNC lab software, which is a free online resource meant to facilitate the exploration of language (Brezina, Gablasova & Reichelt 2018). The BNC corpus consists of two large corpora, one created in 1994 and the second in 2014, totalling over 100 million words of authentic British English. In order to provide sufficient instantiations of the analyzed term, and to limit the scope of the research, the diachronic considerations have not been included in the study. For the purpose of this register-specific analysis, two subcorpora were chosen:

1. Academic: Comprising the 20-million-word academic prose subcorpus.
2. Journalism: A combined corpus created from the newspapers subcorpus (20 million words) and the magazines subcorpus (15 million words). This combination was deemed appropriate as the magazines' subcorpus yielded only 3 significant high-frequency collocates of *ENVIRONMENTAL* on its own, and both text types share the broad communicative function of public information dissemination.

Subsequently, the analysis followed a two-step process:

1. **Qualitative Analysis:** The top high-frequency collocates for *ENVIRONMENTAL* in each subcorpus were identified. Each collocate was then qualitatively analyzed in context (KWIC) to assign it an evaluative load: positive,

negative, or neutral. One could justly argue that a result of such ascription is a subjective view of the author. Hence, to avoid bias to the largest extent possible, the researcher strived to analyze each instance of the word through the lens of "desired state," i.e., the question: does the term refer to a preferred outcome, as it is applied in the elicited concordance line? For example, if the adjective *NEW* would be found modifying undesired nouns (say, *PROBLEMS, or DISEASES*), it would earn the label of a negative evaluation.

2. **Quantitative Analysis:** Following the qualitative coding, the raw frequencies of the positive, neutral, and negative collocates for each register were accumulated. This quantitative summary provides a clear, data-driven overview of the dominant semantic prosody in each context. The study focuses exclusively on the highest frequency words, with no reference to statistical associative measures (such as Log Dice or MI). Following Sinclair's (1996) view that semantic prosody arises from habitual and recurrent co-occurrence, the frequency-based profile of the lexical items was deemed sufficient to reveal the evaluative tendency, and the analysis in this study focuses on the semantic field surrounding the node word *ENVIRONMENTAL* rather than on the strength of individual node–collocate relationships. Moreover, such a study design facilitates replication in the classroom settings and empowers both learners and educators to explore the language similarly using the BNC lab.

In order to analyze the immediate linguistic surroundings of *ENVIRONMENTAL,* the size of the context window chosen was L10-R10 (10 words to the left and right of the node). This design feature follows Hoey's work on lexical priming (2005), where he underlined the context size as a differentiating factor between semantic prosody and lexical priming, which was supposed to apply even to entire texts.

The Analysis of the Most Frequent Collocates

The term *ENVIRONMENTAL* occurs 29 times in the subcorpus of journalism (newspapers and magazines subcorpora) in the BNC. After the exclusion of stop words (articles, pronouns or other words deemed non-evaluative in nature), we analyzed the most frequent collocates, together with their concordance lines, and found that 3 were positive (*NEW, SINGLE-MINDED, FIRM*) appearing 7 times in total, 13 were neutral (*SAY, GAS, GROUP, IMPACT, SUBARU, RESPOND, DO, SYSTEM, WOULD, LEAD, CAR, MORE, OFFICER,*

CLUB, PIPELINE) amounting to 40 occurrences, and 3 were negative (*PRESSURE, FACE, IMPACT*) which occurred 9 times. When accumulated and compared, the lexical surroundings of *ENVIRONMENTAL* exhibit a near-perfect balance between negative collocates like *PRESSURE* and *FACE* and positive ones like *SINGLE-MINDED* and *NEW*. This could suggest a narrative structure where problems are consistently being met with responses. The overwhelming majority of collocates, however, remain neutral, reinforcing the register's primary function of reporting on the actions and statements of various actors (*SAY*, *GROUP*). Since it might be surprising that the term *FACE* was assigned with a negative load, it is worth pointing out that it was found referring to the confrontation with a negative state of affairs:

> Every car company faces *ENVIRONMENTAL* pressure

Moreover, the lexical item *MORE* was identified as evaluatively neutral, because its 2 instances were referring to either achieving positive results to a greater extent (the first concordance line), or dealing with an increasing number of problems (the second concordance line), which we decided to interpret as a "canceling out" of the evaluative aura:

> *ENVIRONMENTAL* groups say they want firms to do much more
> In terms of *ENVIRONMENTAL* impact, the cellulose fibre is potentially more of an issue

One can summarize these findings by stating that the term *ENVIRONMENTAL* in British English exhibits neutral (however, not homogeneous) semantic prosody in the register of journalism.

Tab. 1: 20 Most Common Collocates of *ENVIRONMENTAL* in the Journalistic Register

Collocates of *ENVIRONMENTAL*	Frequency of Occurrence
SAY	6
GAS	4
GROUP	4
IMPACT	4
SUBARU	3

RESPOND	3
PRESSURE	3
DO	3
SINGLE-MINDED	3
SYSTEM	3
WOULD	2
LEAD	2
CAR	2
MORE	2
NEW	2
OFFICER	2
FACE	2
CLUB	2
PIPELINE	2
FIRM	2

In the BNC's academic register, the word *ENVIRONMENTAL* occurs 75 times (2,5 times more often than in journalism). An analysis of the most frequent collocates and their concordance lines revealed that 7 of those were positive (*PERFORMANCE, DEVELOPMENT, GOAL, PRACTICE, GOOD, SUSTAINABLE, DEVELOP*) totaling 45 instances, and 12 were neutral (*CITY, INFRASTRUCTURE, SOCIAL, CAN, PROJECT, MORE, LEAD, CHANGE, YEAR, POLICY, REGULATION, HOST*) accounting for 98 occurrences. Notably, only one of the collocates (*IMPACT*) was found to be negative, totalling 7 occurrences. The list of top collocates is dominated by words associated with constructive, solution-oriented action: *PERFORMANCE* (used synonymously with improving the ecological situation), *DEVELOPMENT*, *GOAL*, *SUSTAINABLE*, *GOOD*, and *PRACTICE* (appearing in the phrases akin to *GOOD PRACTICE*):

> European Commission to celebrate *ENVIRONMENTAL* performance within European cities
> European cities promoting *ENVIRONMENTAL* values and good practice

The only negative item—*IMPACT*—was seen in the phrase *ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT*, referring to the influence humans have on the environment, similarly to the journalism register.The semantic prosody of *ENVIRONMENTAL* in the academic register of British English is markedly positive. The discourse is not one of conflict but of systematic, rational, and positive endeavor.

Tab. 2: 20 Most Common Collocates of *ENVIRONMENTAL* in the Academic Register

Collocates of *ENVIRONMENTAL*	Frequency of Occurrence
CITY	17
INFRASTRUCTURE	12
SOCIAL	12
CAN	8
PROJECT	8
PERFORMANCE	8
DEVELOPMENT	7
MORE	7
IMPACT	7
GOAL	7
LEAD	6
CHANGE	6
YEAR	6
PRACTICE	6
POLICY	6
GOOD	6
SUSTAINABLE	6
REGULATION	5
HOST	5

The Comparative Analysis Between the Registers

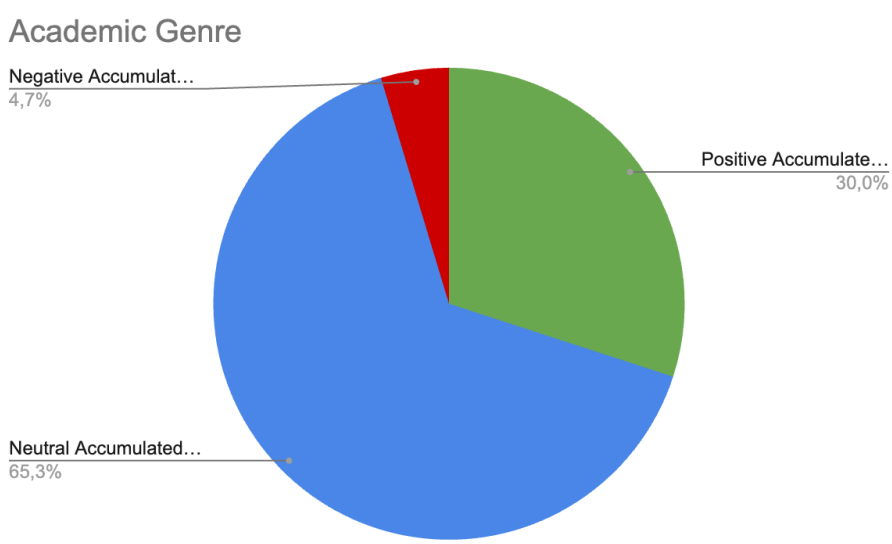
The comparison between the lexical surroundings of the term *ENVIRONMENTAL* across the registers of academic prose and journalism in British English reveals a fundamental divergence in semantic prosody. While journalistic writing frames

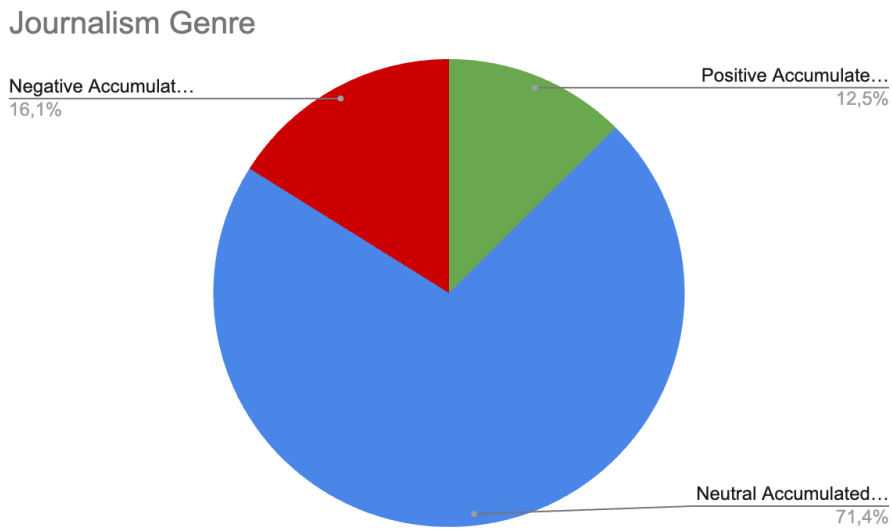
the term through a lens of conflict and reaction—balancing negative collocates like *PRESSURE* with positive ones like *SINGLE-MINDED*—academic discourse constructs a significantly positive narrative centered on systematic, solution-oriented action, typified by collocates such as *PERFORMANCE* and *SUSTAINABLE*. Moreover, this narrative divergence is quantitatively significant: academic writing not only contains over six times as many instances of positive collocates (45 vs. 7) but also a proportionally smaller share of negative ones (4.7% vs. 16.07%), underscoring a clear discursive shift from a focus on reporting to one of constructive solutions.

Tab. 3: Accumulated Frequencies of the Collocates of *ENVIRONMENTAL* in the Academic and Journalism Registers

Register	Positive Collocates (N)	Neutral Collocates (N)	Negative Collocates (N)
Academic	45	98	7
Journalism	7	40	9

Fig. 1 The Evaluative Dimension of the Collocates of ENVIRONMENTAL in the Academic (below) and Journalism (on the following page) Registers





Discussion

The contrast between the registers provides insight into native-like usage of the term *ENVIRONMENTAL* in British English. The journalistic register constructs a narrative of environmental reaction, where society is *FACING PRESSURE*. The academic register, however, builds a narrative of environmental construction, where the focus is on achieving *SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT* and disseminating *GOOD PRACTICES*. The understanding of such register-dependent variation is beneficial to advanced ESL students. First and foremost, it has been argued that semantic prosody for near-synonyms (e.g., *COMETER* vs. *COMMIT*) varies across languages, e.g., Portuguese and English (Berber-Sardinha 2000), which renders extrapolating the evaluative load from one's native language futile. Moreover, if a learner's primary exposure to English is through news media, they would likely associate *ENVIRONMENTAL* with different collocates and therefore construe an underdeveloped attitudinal "feel" for this term. This learner would be ill-prepared for academic contexts, where this word exhibits distinct evaluative patterns. This demonstrates that teaching the meaning of *ENVIRONMENTAL* without reference to semantic prosody (and its register-dependent nature) provides learners with an incomplete understanding of the term. This could impact their communicative competence, as they may unintentionally import a journalistic, problem-focused

tone into academic settings that value a more constructive and solution-oriented discourse. Consequently, their ability to build credible arguments and participate effectively in specialized fields might be compromised. This highlights the fact that true language proficiency lies not just in knowing a word's meaning, but in mastering its context-driven pragmatic use.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged, which in turn open up avenues for future research. First, the findings are specific to British English, as the analysis relies exclusively on data from the British National Corpus (BNC). Consequently, the semantic prosodies identified for the term *ENVIRONMENTAL* may not be directly generalizable to other varieties of English. Furthermore, the corpora used for this study were compiled in 1994 and 2014. Given that language is dynamic, particularly in discourse surrounding rapidly evolving topics such as environmentalism, it is possible that more contemporary corpora might reveal different lexical patterns and evaluative shifts. Given the fairly young nature of register-specific semantic prosody studies, further investigation is essential to build a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and compile a larger body of case studies. Future research should aim to replicate our findings across a wider range of corpora, first by examining other contemporary collections of British English to validate the patterns observed here. Crucially, research must also move beyond this language variety to explore others, such as American or Australian English. A comparative, cross-varietal analysis would be of practical use for L2 pedagogy in a global context, where learners are exposed to diverse forms of English and require a more nuanced understanding of vocabulary in use.

Implications for Advanced ESL (and Other L2) Learners

The findings carry implications for language pedagogy, particularly for advanced learners (B2+) who need to operate in specific academic or professional domains. The differing semantic prosodies of *ENVIRONMENTAL* in journalism and academia provide a rationale for the role of register-specific instruction for advanced ESL learners. This paper demonstrates that the evaluative meaning of a word is tied to its generic context—a concept often missed in traditional language teaching. Addressing this register-specific variation is therefore

advantageous to fostering true pragmatic competence and enabling ESL learners to become confident, effective communicators in their chosen fields. Moreover, the inclusion of semantic prosody into L2 curricula, as a supplement to dictionary-based instruction, becomes a worthwhile avenue for educators. Consequently, educational systems could move from incorporating a single, homogenous semantic prosody for a given word to exploring its register-specific prosodies. Educators should guide learners to understand that a word's evaluative meaning is not fixed but dynamic and context-dependent. This aligns with the necessity for advanced learners to understand how language functions differently across various communicative contexts (Tribble 2000). However, instead of simply providing rules, educators can empower learners by introducing them to user-friendly corpus tools (such as the BNC lab introduced in this article). By conducting their own simple analyses, students can actively discover these linguistic patterns for themselves. This data-driven learning (DDL) approach fosters analytical skills, promotes deeper processing of vocabulary, and helps learners build an intuitive "feel" for the language that mirrors native-speaker competence (Mansoory & Jafarpour 2014). For instance, similarly to this study, an ESL learner could be tasked with comparing the top collocates of *ENVIRONMENTAL* in a news corpus versus a science corpus to identify and internalize the difference in the evaluative load of the word. Another benefit of incorporating semantic prosody into L2 pedagogy is fostering critical linguistic awareness among learners. By examining how words such as *ENVIRONMENTAL* are framed in different registers, learners can become more critical consumers of information. They can learn to identify the underlying attitudes and ideologies present in a text, whether it is the conflict-driven narrative of a newspaper or the solution-oriented narrative of a policy document. This skill is useful not just for language learning, but for academic and civic engagement. Lastly, for ESL learners involved—or wishing to get involved—in sustainability or environmental protection, this analysis provides a linguistic blueprint for action. As argued in Klimska & Rutkowski (forthcoming), a default negative framing of environmental issues can lead to "cognitive dissonance and fatalism." By consciously shifting to the more empowering and solution-oriented language found in academic discourse (e.g., focusing on *ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE*, *INNOVATION*, and *SUSTAINABILITY*), English users can create a linguistic environment that fosters agency and constructive hope.

Conclusion

The concept of semantic prosody offers a way of enhancing advanced L2 instruction, as demonstrated on the example of British English. The comparative analysis of the term *ENVIRONMENTAL* in two distinct registers offers the view that the evaluative aura of a word is not monolithic but is shaped by the register in which it is used. The journalistic framing of "environmental reaction" stands in contrast to the academic framing of "environmental construction," and ESL learners should be empowered to navigate this variation. For glottodidactics, this requires a shift in approach: from teaching static vocabulary lists to fostering a dynamic, inquiry-based exploration of language in use. By incorporating corpus-based methods and a focus on register-specific analysis, educators can provide learners with a more accurate and nuanced understanding of their target language. Ultimately, discovering and teaching semantic prosody is not just about preventing pragmatic errors; it is about giving learners the linguistic tools they need to become confident and effective communicators in their chosen fields.

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