Beyond frequency: on the dictionarisation of new words in Spanish

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Abstract

The most recent literature on neology has discussed the criteria that must be taken into account in order to include new words in dictionaries (Metcalf 2002, Barnhart 1985, Cook 2010, Ishikawa 2006, O'Donovan & O'Neill 2008, Freixa 2016, Sanmartín 2016, among many others). Although there are other factors that must be considered, such as morphologic features or semantic transparency (Adelstein & Freixa 2013, Bernal et al. 2018), authors broadly agree that frequency plays a central role, given that high frequency in corpus may be taken as evidence of the institutionalization of a lexical unit. However, it has also been pointed out that frequency is a complex criterion in itself, and, therefore, aspects such as stabilization in use (Cook 2010) or a possible longitudinal change in frequency (Metcalf 2002, Ishikawa 2006) must also be taken into account when measuring frequency in corpus.

In this presentation, we approach lexical frequency as a criterion to evaluate whether neologisms must be included in Spanish dictionaries from a new point of view. Specifically, we compare data concerning change in frequency of neologisms through time with the speakers' perception about their newness —which is known as 'neological feeling' in the specialized literature (Gardin et al. 1974, Salayrolles 2003). Data about speakers' perception are obtained from on-line questionnaires carried out within the framework of the Neómetro project[1] (Bernal et al. in press). A set of questionnaires was launched in which 100 subjects evaluated their perception about 130 neologisms in Spanish according to four different criteria (correct formation, frequency, novelty and necessity of inclusion in dictionaries). On the other hand, frequency data are taken from an extensive corpus of texts from the press, FACTIVA, which provides histograms of frequency through time.

For this study, we analyze 40 neologisms: those that were perceived as the most and the least frequent in the questionnaires. We analyze the frequency curve of these neologisms through time in FACTIVA in order to find correlations between stabilization in time and speakers' perception about their institutionalization. The data allow us to improve the predictive capacity of frequency as a measure to decide which neologisms must be included in dictionaries, as it introduces factors (formal, semantic or of use) that favor or hinder its institutionalization in the equation.

Kew words: Spanish, neologism, frequency, histogram, institutionalization

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