
The evaluative prosody of forms of government and power -cracy and -archy, is this prosody inheritable and what are the implications for translation?

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Abstract & Keywords

English:

In the first part I discuss the methods used and observations which emerged from a couple of lessons I taught at the Scuola Superiore per Interpreti e Traduttori of the University of Bologna (SSLMIT), in which my students and I examined the evaluative prosodies of a number of items relating to forms of power, namely items which end in the word particles *-cracy*, *-cratic*, *-archy*, *-archic*. I then describe some of the further research and teaching I carried out on these topics. I investigated in particular whether new, ad hoc formations based on these particles, for example *liberalocracy*, in some way inherited the – generally negative – evaluative tendency. I hypothesise that this semi-hidden critical connotation may be the very reason for such items being coined. Finally I look at the potential for irony in the invention and use of such items, and speculate that research into the use of lookalike particles to the ones discussed here in other languages could be of interest to translators.

Keywords: evaluation, corpus-assisted discourse studies, semantic prosody, suffixes, political linguistics

1. Introduction

In the first part of this chapter I will recount a couple of lessons I taught at the School for Translators and Interpreters (SSLMIT) in Forlì, in which my students and I examined how the evaluative (often called semantic) prosodies of a number of items relating to the holding and wielding of power, i.e. items which end in *-cracy*, *-cratic*, *-archy*, *-archic*, reflect general attitudes towards the various forms of government, as expressed, in particular, in the language of the press. A four-million word corpus of newspaper articles compiled with the help of Guy Aston from the *Independent* (UK, early to mid-1990s), divided into five sections – home news, international news, arts, business and sports – was the principal corpus interrogated. Unless otherwise specified, it is data from this corpus which is being discussed. To investigate some of the less frequent lexical items, a number of other corpora were called upon, including FROWN (one million words, US), FLOB (one million words, UK) and the British National Corpus (100 million words, UK). All of these contain a considerable number of newspaper texts. I also collected examples from the *Telegraph* (UK, 66 million words, 1993) on CD-Rom.

In the second part of the chapter I will outline some of the further research and teaching I carried out on these topics. The main corpora used in these studies, the SiBol suite of newspaper corpora (described in Section 5.1), were much larger and some finer details became apparent, which confirmed and extended the earlier classroom-led research.

2. Evaluation and evaluative prosody

Evaluation is intended here in the essentialist dualistic, bi-dimensional sense of “the indication of whether the speaker thinks that something (a person, thing, action, event, situation, idea, etc.) is good or bad” (Thompson, 1996: 65), is positive or negative, is favourable or unfavourable (usually, of course, from the point of view of the speaker or writer). Goodness and badness can, of course, come in many forms: for example, “good” because pleasurable, profitable, healthy, being in control, and so on, “bad” because dangerous, difficult, not being in control, and so on.

One of the earliest and most important discoveries of corpus linguistics was that the evaluative polarity, positive or negative, of some lexical items was “non-obvious”, that is, not immediately evident to competent users’ introspection. It only becomes apparent when a sizeable number of examples of the use in context of the lexical item are collected and examined together. The concordance was the perfect tool for doing this. Sinclair was among the first to notice how this was possible. On the item *set in* he observes: “the most striking feature of this phrasal verb is the nature of the subjects. In general they refer to unpleasant states of affairs [such as] rot (3), decay, malaise, despair, ill-will, decadence, impoverishment, infection” (Sinclair, 1987: 155-156). Over time corpus linguists have uncovered a good number of such items with “non-obvious” evaluative polarity, such as *happen*, *end up with*, *deliberately*, *par for the course*, *fraught with* (all negative) and *provide*, *career*, *make a difference*, *brimming with* (all positive). The way the non-obvious evaluation is uncovered is by examining the other lexical items which occur in the context of the search word. This is why the word prosody, meaning ‘extended over a section of text’, was adopted, since the evaluation is, as it were, *spread* throughout the phrase. This, then, is what I wanted to encourage my students to do, that is, to look at lexical items expressing government and the wielding of power to see whether, when writers use them, they are expressing an “invisible” good or bad evaluation.

I had already introduced the idea of non-obvious evaluative prosody to the class in a previous lesson. We had, firstly, contrasted the co-texts in concordances of the two items *brimming with* and *fraught with*, noting how the former is almost always found in positive contexts, the latter in negative. We will return to the concordance of *brimming with* in Section 5. As for *fraught with*, although I no longer have access to the original concordances. The following concordance of the former, from SiBol 05, a more recent newspaper corpus (see Section 5.1), demonstrates not only how the co-textual items, especially to the right of the searchword, are not only negative but fall into at least three particular categories of ‘bad’, namely, (i) danger/risk, (ii) problem/complication and (iii) anxiety.

1 The years leading up to that, however, were fraught with anxiety. While in Mexico waiting
 2 ndscape representation that is freighted and fraught with complex agendas having to do with vio
 3 res. My pregnancy would be more likely to be fraught with complications. My child would be more
 4 of violence across major American cities are fraught with contradiction and complication, not l
 5 d Central Terminal. The partnership would be fraught with dissension, design changes and acrimo
 6 cuation during Hurricane Rita must have been fraught with fear, anxiety, confusion, tension. B
 7 nd natural gas exploration is an industry as fraught with geopolitical risks as it is with geo
 8 politicians had resulted in an investigation fraught with mistakes. He pointed out that legal
 9 h the African-American community has been so fraught with mistrust and abuse and hatred on both
 10 l of bullying, online interactions are often fraught with misunderstanding because they don't
 11 and diplomatic ties. France's role has been fraught with moral peril. It pioneered brutal tech
 12 question of raises a constant challenge, one fraught with more negatives than positives.
 13 st scene depicts an uncomfortable encounter, fraught with overt and implicit racial and class i
 14 Herpes survival guide''? self-help books are fraught with peril. There is the peril of being ca
 15 not even fully automated. In fact it seemed fraught with peril at first glance. Residents driv
 16 hat there's no passage of human existence as fraught with perils and as peculiarly significant
 17 cently, but he acknowledged that it would be fraught with political and budgetary difficulties
 18 they are, their short history has also been fraught with problems -- they have caught fire in
 19 discern, because the research on the issue is fraught with problems": The ideal type of exper
 20 utifully recorded, and so those images -- so fraught with racial baggage -- went onto plates.
 21 . The international system, he suggested, is fraught with risk for Russia, not opportunity. Ru
 22 he options before the House Republicans were fraught with risks. Senate Democrats said they wo
 23 tened. But this conditional autonomy is also fraught with risks since excessive force can lead
 24 to him at their receptions. The dance comes fraught with risks, however. Some advice? Stretch
 25 w medicines to patients is a complex process fraught with setbacks, requiring years of research

Table 1. Edited concordance of fraught with, from the Telegraph section of the SiBol 05 corpus.

We also looked a concordance of the item *orchestrat** noting how the evaluative use of the item alters depending on the field it is employed in (Morley and Partington, 2009). Used non-figuratively in referring to music, the evaluation is very good, for example:

(1) And three piano Preludes from Colin Matthews's ongoing series of orchestrations are wonderful discoveries: effortlessly clothed in the soundworld of late Debussy [...]

but used figuratively in politics it becomes very bad, for instance:

(2) [...] believe that between 1915 and 1923 the Ottoman Turkish authorities orchestrated the killing of 1.5 million Armenian Christians.

whereas, when used semi-figuratively in sports it reverts to being positive again:

(3) After missing an easy penalty chance, Michalak orchestrated the fine move that saw Cedric Heymans score the first try.

All examples are from the *Guardian* section of the SiBol 05 corpus.

A considerable body of academic work has accumulated examining the evaluative prosody of such items. But far less attention has been given to the prosodic behaviour of word particles, that is, segments which go to make up other words, potentially several other words, here in particular items from the field of socio-politics. This then was not just a data-driven lesson to raise awareness of the features of non-obvious evaluation, but was an instance of group enquiry into a fresh academic research question, namely, how do writers employ these particles in the sorts of texts envisaged in this study?

3. The -cracy group of words

Bertaccini (personal communication), a colleague of mine at the time at the SSLMIT, University of Bologna (at Forli), noted in a study of an Italian-French parallel corpus of political texts from newspapers that the items *democrazia*, *democracie* and *democratico*, *democratique* tended to be associated with some kind of favourable evaluation, whereas all other items ending in *-cracy*, *-cratic* had an unfavourable evaluation. Looking at similar items in English newspaper texts, in the *Independent* corpus, *democracy* and *democratic* were also found to have an overwhelmingly favourable prosody, for example:

(4) the ideals which swept it to power: freedom and *democracy*, bread and justice. The alternative is one-man rule, thievery and special privilege

(5) I want to help South Africa become *democratic* and prosperous and avoid descending into further violence and poverty

(6) Nor do I believe in obstructing *democracy*: that is why I oppose repression and the state of emergency.

In these examples *democracy* finds itself among a number of other good things: *freedom*, *justice*, *prosperous*, and opposed to a number to a number of bad things: *violence*, *poverty* and *repression*. We can have little doubt that the writers are evaluating it very positively. The only seemingly negative environment it was found in was the following:

(7) *Democracy* is, of course, a tedious process,

But there is irony here, and the implication of the words *of course* is that democracy may be tedious, but it is also necessary.

The *Telegraph* is also capable of irony when it comes to describing other people's so-called "democracy":

(8) ...those who recall that the most recent lessons in Chinese *democracy* were handed out in Tiananmen Square.

If we look closely at the rhetoric of many of the concordance examples, *democracy* often seems to be a very vague notion, something that "all right-minded people must be in favour of", like "freedom" or "justice" or "the opposite of oppression". It means all things to all men, a fact which occasionally is made explicit:

(9) But it is the theory of *democracy as the right of the majority to rule* which is seen as central, rather than *democracy as the preservation of minority rights*.

And if democracy is "a Good Thing", then we must have more of it, and we duly find a large number of cases where *democracy* or *democratic* collocate with *more*, *greater*, *better*, *improve*:

(10) More generally, he called for *greater* 'openness and *democracy*' in the Community's institutions,

(11) its present, more vocal, leaders would be happy with a *freer*, *more democratic* and humane form of socialism.

(12) Mr Lo decided that Hong Kong was ready for a *quicker pace of democracy*

It would seem then, that on many occasions, almost the entire meaning of *democracy* and *democratic* is their favourable prosody. In fact, it could be argued that these items do not fall into the category of non-obvious evaluation. But what of other *-cracy* words?

Of the other items which finish in *-cracy*, *-cratic* present in the corpora, the most common are *aristocracy* / *-cratic* (12 and 28 occurrences respectively), *autocracy* / *-cratic* (2 and 16) and *bureaucracy* / *-cratic* (53 and 39). The last of these, as can be imagined,

is found in overwhelmingly unfavourable environments and is very definitely seen as “a Bad Thing”, something all right-thinking people deplore. It collocates with *petty, top-heavy, unnecessary, cumbersome, overweight, nightmarish* as well as - significantly, in the light of the Brexit referendum - *Brussels*. People are *burdened, ensnared, dogged*, and get *tangled up* in bureaucracy. It is found in the company of *mismanagement, barriers, blunders* and, interestingly, *spending*. In stark contrast to *democracy*, the more of it we have, the worse off we are:

(13) we none of us want a *bureaucratic*, centralised, homogenised Europe,’ Mr Hurd said

(14) To cope with such cases a ‘simple, quick, non-*bureaucratic* procedure is needed

Half the meaning of *bureaucracy* / *-cratic*, then, would seem to be its adverse prosody.

Turning to *aristocracy* / *-cratic*, it is difficult to discern any consistent favourable or unfavourable prosody. *Aristocracy* is usually used in a descriptive sense and is frequently accompanied by an adjective specifying the particular geographical or historical identity of a group e.g. *local, Saxon, Roman, pagan* and so on. The item *aristocratic* collocates on occasion with terms expressing some sort of value judgement. When it is applied to a person, the description *aristocratic* would generally appear to be something to be proud of, e.g. “Socrates, Brazil's tall, aristocratic captain”. Only on one occasion is it found in an undoubtedly unfavourable light: “with their traditional snobbish aristocratic associations”. Both *aristocracy* and *aristocratic* are often placed in opposition to some other form of rule, such as *monarchy* or *democracy*, or some other way of seeing social relationships, e.g. *plebeian* or *egalitarian*.

Autocracy / *-cratic*, on the other hand, seems to have all the unfavourable prosody that *aristocracy* / *-cratic* lacks. There is a world of difference between possessing an *aristocratic style* and having an *autocratic* one. The term is rarely used in a descriptive sense and the incidence of the adjective being employed to pass a value judgement far outweighs that of the noun being used to describe a form of government. Those who practice *autocracy* naturally have power and *autocratic* duly collocates with *powers, ruler, ruling, leader, ultra-centralized* and *ownership*. But they do not, unfortunately, always use it well, and so we also find *vice, stern, ruthless* and *paternalistic*. They *amass* powers and “ride rough-shod over the constitution”. They are sometimes seen as *old* (twice) and *anachronistic*. There is a single positive descriptor *endearingly autocratic*, but the context is a humorous, ironic one.

A number of less common *-cracy, -cratic* words, namely, *technocracy* / *-cratic, plutocracy* / *-cratic* and *meritocracy* / *-cratic* proved to be most interesting. Given the paucity of occurrences of these items in the *Independent* corpus, we included *technocrat(s)* (6), *plutocrat(s)* (2) and *meritocrat(s)* (1) in the study. There was evidence that *technocracy* / *-ocratic* / *-ocrat(s)* possesses an unfavourable prosody for the *Independent*:

(15) Replying to Sir Leon's defence, he warned him ‘not to be deaf to others in the community in *technocratic* smugness [...]’

(16) equipped with microphone headsets and miniature televisions, the witches are played as suave *technocrats*, moving among humanity with invisible malice,

On one occasion, it is seen as even worse than *bureaucracy*:

(17) Yet now it is the *technocrats* and the Establishment against whom he rails in his attacks on Maastricht. ‘I am not denouncing bureaucracy, it exists everywhere. *Technocracy* is a system where political power is wielded by technicians. It is completely different,’

Nor does *plutocracy* / *-cratic* / *-crat(s)* seem to get a good press from either the *Independent*:

(18) The court in this version is a marble floored palace of *plutocracy*, all ringing phones and subservient yuppies,

(19) The interactions of the three groups - aristocrats, bureaucrats and stingy Western *plutocrats*

or the *Telegraph*, in which *plutocrats* are *boorish, palate-dead* and *short-tempered*. At worst they are the enemy of democracy:

(20) ...the corrupt political system, run hitherto by [...] LDP godfathers, government bureaucrats and corporate *plutocrats*

But it also often has a comic, somewhat ironic or sarcastic connotation: “at the expense of a few nobs and plutocrats”, “the plutocracy of Burnley and Blackburn” (two bleak industrial towns in the north-west of England), “although £50 was nice, it didn’t make him a plutocrat”. It also, strangely, frequently has to do with eating in restaurants - for the *Telegraph*, at least, a plutocratic experience. On the slim evidence provided by the *Independent* corpus *meritocracy* / *-cratic* / *-crat(s)* is sometimes a good thing, sometimes not, depending on the sphere one meets it in. In the sports pages it tends to mean choosing the best elements of a team and is placed in opposition to favouritism or time-serving:

(21) In Australia, selection is *meritocratic*; in England, all too often, it is hierarchical, based on seniority.

But in the other texts, *meritocrat* / *meritocratic* seems to be something alien to the ordinary folk: there are the meritocrats and then there are you and me:

(22) David democratically allotted Dave the same respectful tone which he adopted for the lists of more conventionally accepted *meritocrats* packing Westminster Abbey

(23) Ambition. It's the great driving force in a *meritocratic* society, the ruling characteristic of contemporary Britain. Who runs the country? Ambitious people. Who gets to be in charge of the big institutions? Not necessarily good people,

The conservative *Telegraph* is also none too keen on *meritocracy* but for different reasons. It smacks of all that is objectionable in the modern age, in our *hard meritocratic world*, inhabited by *hard-nosed meritocrats* where *bland meritocratic classlessness* reigns. It applies the appellation to people and groups it does not like – French, Germans and Hillary Clinton. On occasion, it seems to be a polite synonym for “lower class”: “

(24) Eddie George is the *meritocratic* Governor of the Bank of England. A man of modest origins [...]

In the US material (FROWN), interestingly, all of the five occurrences were positive. However, four of them were contained in a single text in which meritocracy was placed in opposition to positive discrimination and quota systems and the author’s personal taste was for the former.

The corpus evidence gives some comfort to the original research hypothesis that *democracy* / *democratic* enjoy a very favourable prosody and that other *-cracy* words tend not to, perhaps suffering by comparison. Of *aristocracy, autocracy, bureaucracy, technocracy, plutocracy* and *meritocracy* (plus related adjectives) only the first could be said to be neutral; all the others show a tendency to find themselves in unfavourable environments.

4. The *-archy* group of words

A second suffix indicating “form of government” is the string *-archy*, with the related adjective *-archic*. The corpora contained occurrences of *anarchy* / *-archic* (26 and 11), *monarchy* (23), *patriarchy* (2) and *matriarchy* (2). The last two are rarely used in the sense of a form of government; instead they refer to a type of society. We also find three instances of *patriarchal*, all used with a negative evaluation: for instance, “a patriarchal villain” and “his harshness as a patriarchal ruler”.

The item *monarchy*, with few exceptions, is discussed in two ways, either in a historical setting:

(25) The new Fianna Fail Party was intent on asserting Irish independence to the full by leaving the empire and providing a president to replace the *monarchy*.

or in a comparison with other forms of government, either favourably:

(26) He did, indeed, have a marked preference for a *monarchy*, arguing for it as the 'most commodious government'

or unfavourably:

(27) I've never believed that a *monarchy* is best. Leaders should be chosen by merit, not birth.

It is preceded by technical political terms such as *absolute* (3), *centralised*, *constitutional*, *divine* but also by *television*:

(28) Since it is not obvious to [the Prince of Wales] where his power exactly lies, let me remind him of the television viewing figures that have occurred every time a royal event takes place _ upwards of 200 million _ and have done so since *television monarchy* started in the 1970s.

This extract is part of a discussion of the "New Wave monarchy" which has ironic and somewhat negative overtones.

As regards the items *anarchy* and *anarchic*, what is of interest is the differences in the prosodic features of the noun when compared to the adjective. In the examples from the *Independent* corpus, the most frequent collocation of the adjective *anarchic*, is with items having to do with comedy:

(29) Babette Cole has created a whole series of *anarchic* comic heroines for the end of the twentieth century

(30) *Anarchic* humour pointing up the idiocy of human existence

(31) and emitting a manic, *anarchic* laugh, threatens to sow glorious confusion among the earnest seekers of power and status

Elsewhere it tends to describe a particular sort of inventiveness and is certainly not a negative quality:

(32) look out for Anthony Browne's Alice (1988) and Ralph Steadman's *anarchic* 1967 version, which has already become established as a collectors' classic

(33) he's like the flea under the king's nightshirt. He's *anarchic*, anti-authoritarian, devious, cynical and compassionate. An interesting mixture.

In absolute contrast, *anarchy* is almost unremittably seen as an extremely negative thing. Nations *slide*, *lapse* or *disintegrate* into anarchy; people *suffer* it, while at best one can only *provide an antidote* to it. It provides the conditions for nefarious deeds, for example, "some of its companies took advantage of anarchy in Somalia to dump toxic waste in its waters". It is rarely preceded by an adjective - the only one to be found is *violent* - almost as if its negativity is taken for granted. It is, on the other hand, accompanied by *danger*, *destitution*, *ethnic conflicts* and *chaos*. One explanation for this difference in evaluative prosody is that the noun tends to be used in a literal sense, while the adjective is generally being used figuratively. It has been noticed elsewhere, in the discussion of *orchestrat** in Section 2, how an item's evaluation can change radically depending on whether the setting is literal or metaphorical.

5. Further research

5.1 The productivity of word particles

This episode of data-driven classroom research led me to further reflections on a couple of the phenomena we had noticed, namely, the frequency of the use of these items for ironic effect and secondly the potential of word particles such as these to be evaluatively *productive*.

Taking the second of these first, the starting hypothesis is that, if any such particle has a tendency to express one or other of the two evaluative tendencies, then it may well be the case that creative coinages of words where they are combined with other new stems will be made in order to exploit this prosody. In other words, writers can coin new items ending in --*cratic* or --*cratic* and --*archy* or --*archic*, and rely on their readers to carry over the particular associated prosody to the new coinage.

However, the corpora used in the early classroom research were too small to be able to follow up such introspections. In the following years, however, I was involved in the construction of the SiBol suite of corpora ('SiBol' is a portmanteau of the two universities, Siena and Bologna, where the corpora were compiled) consisting of SiBol 93, SiBol 05, SiBol 10 and SiBol 13. The first three contain all the texts published by the three major UK broadsheet newspapers, the left-leaning *Guardian*, the right-leaning *Telegraph* and the centrist *The Times*, in the respective years 1993, 2005 and 2010. They each contain between 120 and 150 million words of running texts. The first two were downloaded from the newspapers' own CD-Roms, but this technology was discontinued and SiBol 2010 was compiled by downloading articles daily from the Lexis Nexis archive website. The fourth member, SiBol 13 was considerably expanded and contains the original three papers but also the UK tabloids, the left-leaning *Mirror* and the right-leaning *Sun*, two US publications of different political leanings, two English-language newspapers from the Arab world, *The Times of India* and the *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), all from the year 2013 and also all downloaded from Lexis Nexis. The aim of the compilers, the SiBol Group,[1] is to provide corpus material to study recent language change, political linguistics and linguistics in general. The compilers have made them publicly available and accessible on SketchEngine.[2]

The phenomenon of particle productivity has, in the meantime, been noted by Morley and Partington (2009), using principally the SiBol 05 corpus, with regard to the particle --*monger* which they also discuss as a good example of evaluative meaning change. The *Oxford English Dictionary's* entry on *monger* defines the item: "dealer, trader ... From the 16c onwards, chiefly one who carries on a petty or disreputable 'traffic'". Before that time we find several neutral, descriptive, non-evaluative uses, including *peach*, *feather*, *ballad* and *ceremony mongers*. Modern corpus evidence (SiBol 05) sees it combining with a certain number of traditional trades: *fishmonger*, *ironmonger* and *cheesemonger*, but all newer coinages are heavily unfavourable: *warmonger*, *doom-monger*, *hatemonger*, *scaremonger* and *gossip-monger*. It would seem that speakers are able to retain a one sort of evaluative priming for the well-worn traditional items and yet also know that, when *monger* is used productively, it will have a different sort of priming, especially that it carries a negative evaluative prosody.

What then of --*cracy* and --*archy*? I decided to search for new coinages in the SiBol 13 UK newspaper texts using the *WordSmith* Concordance tool and check whether they were being used to express evaluations and, if so, of what kind. The evidence collected so far would predict they carried over largely negative evaluations from the already standard uses. The concordance of the *Guardian* supplied the following:

(34) The appearance of any senior executive at the Daily Mail on TV to defend its journalism is rare. Dacre has long espoused the view that editors must be "outsiders" and that he will not indulge what he calls the "*liberalocracy*" who he believes run Britain.

The voice to whom the term *liberocracy*, presumably meaning rule by a liberal elite, is attributed clearly views it as a bad thing. The same newspaper, the left-wing *Guardian*, also carries mention of *Murdochocracy*, a humorous allegation of rule by Rupert Murdoch, the right-wing media proprietor of whom it virulently disapproves. Finally, we find the following, whose negative evaluation is made entirely explicit:

(35) I was going to say that we must admit that we are living in a *kleptocracy*, like Russia or many developing-world tyrannies. We are so used to a vague notion that people in Britain are basically honest, that we don't care to acknowledge we are being robbed blind by a small group [...] Such as bankers. Maybe we should call it a "*wankocracy*" since it benefits the stupid, the boorish and incompetent.

No new coinages were found in the 2013 UK newspaper which express positive evaluations. The evidence then suggests that new coinages do indeed preserve this particle's negative evaluation. Indeed, the prosodic tendency is so strong that any attempt to coin a new positive term ending in --*cracy* would probably be seen as humorous and ironic (see below).

As regards --*archy* the only new coinage I found was (Tory) *squirarchy* in the *Telegraph* 2013:

(36) Society [in the 1970s] was divided, a fact mirrored by the absence of a meaningful centre-ground in politics, where the two main parties split between Tory *squirearchy* and a Labour party whose instincts erred closer to Trotskyism than social democracy.

which is presented as negative in its political extremism and anachronistic nature. Though hardly a new coinage, the item *oligarchy* also appeared several times in the concordances and the co-texts indicated that it was generally viewed negatively. In the *Guardian* data, for example, it co-occurred variously with *corrupt* (2), *brutal*, *military dictators*, *betrayed by*. Again, the overarching negativity of the particle *-archy* is confirmed.

5.2 Evaluative prosody and the potential for irony

We have already noted on a good number of occasions the use of *-cracy* and *-archy* particles to create ironic effects. These include:

Democracy is, of course, a tedious process
recent lessons in Chinese *democracy* were handed out in Tiananmen Square
endearingly *autocratic*
New wave *monarchy*

The irony of course lies in the reversal of expected evaluation, for instance the Chinese “democracy” (positive evaluation) of the first instance consists in fact of the violent suppression of any popular voice (negative evaluation). Reversal of evaluation is an essential feature of irony, at least in the UK and US use of the term (Partington, 2007).

As already mentioned, although I no longer have access to the concordances of *fraught with* and *brimming with* which I used to illustrate the notion of evaluative prosody with the class in Forlì, I have used similar concordances with other classes more recently. We looked at the evaluations of *fraught with* in Section 2. Here we might look at a concordance of *brimming with*, from the *Telegraph* section of SiBol 05 (tab. 2).

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1 t they will be up against a side brimming with all the good things in football.
2 generally cheap and periodically brimming with bargains, drawing in low-to-middle
3 ited's manager, once left Monaco brimming with bonhomie after a 0-0 only for Dav
4 c and metal waste packaging, and brimming with bright colours and high spirits,
5 ssume that the BBC's coffers are brimming with cash, and that therefore I need n
6 m feeling apologetic, Mr Bush is brimming with confidence. He was flanked by his
7 s capable of fitting into a team brimming with confidence. With Chelsea having 1
8 Elsewhere, the music-making was brimming with energy and passion. The first mov
9 land on the windrush in 1948, is brimming with excitement. Her agent, David Gros
10 " Autumn/winter collections are brimming with heritage fabrics and country-hous
11 r possibly. Certainly hostleries brimming with home-brewed beer and Cornish past
12 oughout recorded history, are now brimming with hope. The world's two most popul
13 or every athlete. I'm absolutely brimming with it, which is why I've worked so h
14 kling Thames. Craven Cottage was brimming with its traditional goodwill, noisy,
15 us just how great and modern and brimming with life-force as a screen actor Cagn
16 he season, which climaxed a move brimming with refined thought, touch and moveme
17 tion proves, the British public, brimming with seasonal bonhomie, do not seem to
18 f-mocking and original, her eyes brimming with tears as she describes the dreadf
19 s is a genuinely brilliant work, brimming with wit and wisdom, and I can hardly
20 er 30, Ponting's side are hardly brimming with youth, once the trademark for Aus
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Table 2. A concordance of the first 20 occurrence of brimming with from the Telegraph section of SiBol 05.

It should first of all be noted that all instances are figurative in use and all engage in positive evaluations, with the exception of line 18, where the non-figurative *brimming tears* are produced by memories of atrocities in the Serbia-Kosovo conflicts (another reminder that evaluation can alter dramatically from figurative and non-figurative usage). But when the same item, *brimming with* was concordanced from the *Guardian* section of SiBol 05, several anomalous occurrences leapt out, for example:

(37) In truth, the project itself to build a restaurant [...] from scratch was absolutely *brimming with* jeopardy. It was a Matterhorn of jeopardy.

(38) Cologne has been gripped with religious fervour in anticipation of the Pope's visit. Cafes are *brimming with* priests, nuns and monks, while youths roam the streets wearing T-shirts bearing the slogan “I love Jesus”.

In the first, we find a straightforward reversal of evaluation by placing *brimming with* alongside an item *jeopardy*, which we might expect to co-occur with *fraught with*, given the latter's semantic preference for the lexico-semantic set of danger/risk (Section 2). The effect being sought here is one of humorous hyperbole.

The second is slightly more complex. *Brimming with* is not normally used for humans and has the effect of dehumanising the religious groups mentioned. The item *roam* too is often used for animals, whilst *religious fervour* is not something the left-wing *Guardian* normally approves of. The whole passage is sarcastically mocking and, indeed the *Guardian* is not known for any special affection for the Catholic Church.

All this was a reminder of the potential of items of a particular prosody to be used for particular ironic and dramatic-humorous effect, as first noted by Louw (1993). What was original about this research was the discovery that similar mechanisms apply to at least some word particles and that the capacity to be involved in the expression of irony can be handed down to - inherited by - new coinages which contain these particles.

6. Afterthoughts and a question

Since I gave this lesson in Forlì – in the early – 1990s - on evaluative prosody in English, a great deal of corpus-assisted research has been done on prosodies in other languages. There is also a growing body of work which uses corpora to compare and contrast the evaluative prosody of “lookalike” items or supposed “translation-equivalent” items in different languages. Partington (1998) and Tognini-Bonelli (2002) worked on Italian and English items, Berber Sardinha (2000) on Portuguese and English items, Xiao & McEnery (2006) and Wei and Li (2013) on Chinese and English items, Munday (2013) on Spanish and English items, Ebeling (2013; 2014) on Norwegian and English items.

Many of the lexical items we looked at in that lesson and have discussed in this paper most certainly have supposed translation equivalents in other languages. It would be an interesting exercise to examine, using suitable corpora in the two languages, whether the evaluative prosodies of the supposed translation equivalents are the same or whether they vary. For the English part recent corpora could be employed, such as the freely-available on-line Contemporary Corpus of American English (COCA), which includes items not found in my small 1990s corpora, such as *theocracy* and *oligarchy*. I keep repeating the word “supposed” translation equivalent because the question then arises: if a pair of lexical items differ in their evaluative prosody, to what degree can they be considered translation equivalents? My favourite example of this – since their entire meaning lies in their evaluation and the variance is so extreme – is the evaluative difference between Italian *egregio* (“very fine”, “esteemed”) and English *egregious* (“deplorable”, “execrable”).

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Notes

[1] www.lilec.it/clb/

[2] www.sketchengine.co.uk

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