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What is “old” and “past” in New Age discourse? A qualitative analysis of corpus evidence

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examined the collocational behavior as well as discourse prosody of two lexical items, “old” and “past”, in a specialized corpus of talks by Osho, the leader of one of the New Age movements. For our research purposes, we conducted a qualitative textual analysis of pertinent concordances from the corpus which revealed co-occurrence of “old” and “past” with collocates related to religion and society, consciousness, as well as the old and the past of humanity. In the concordance evidence, both lexical items, in the company with their lexical collocates, receive negative connotations, especially with reference to cultural institutions, as well as the old and the past, thus assuming a negative discourse prosody. Further, in the specialized corpus, “old” and “past” as well as their related concepts contrast with the positively connoted lexical items “new” and “present” and their related concepts. Overall, our findings reveal the linguistic manifestation of the ideology of the New Age movement in the concordance evidence on “old” and “past”, specifically criticism of the old cultural institutions of the past for their negative impact on humanity, advocating liberation from their effects and promotion of life in the present.

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1. Introduction

In this study, we investigated the collocational behavior of two lexical items, “old” and “past” in adposition, as well as their discourse prosody in a corpus of talks by Osho, the founder of one of the most popular and radical New Age movements. Osho's discourses made an extraordinary effect on his followers, his charisma being manifested “through his . . . public lectures, which have been transcribed into several languages in over 350 books and also recorded on videocassette” (Palmer, 1988: 121). It is noteworthy that over the past years the total annual sales of Osho's books – compilations of his transcribed talks – have increased to millions of copies which seem to indicate that his teachings still appeal to the international reader (Puttick, 2005). The Osho movement has been covered extensively by media as well as academic research, however, to our knowledge, research on the language of New Age discourse is still scarce (Askehave, 2004; Berg, 2008; Zaidman et al., 2017).

Askehave (2004) explored the origins of the emotional and intuitive approach to the argumentative rhetoric. The analysis of the ‘rules’ in the discourse of one of the New Age spiritual self-help

books revealed the “linguistic manifestation of New Age ideology in the text” (p. 28). More specifically, the study demonstrated that such linguistic features as metaphors, word definitions, personifications as well as parables were “extremely value-laden” and played a significant role in “the construction of a discourse peculiar to New Age” (p. 28). In conclusion, the author noted a strong impact of the New Age movement on society.

In the same vein, Berg (2008) also agreed that New Age philosophy “became the vogue in the Western world” (p. 361). The study conducted a qualitative content analysis of the main recommendations for a happy life in New Age books. It examined the theoretical plausibility as well as empirical conditions of happiness in order to explore the effect of 10 recommendations on happiness. Berg concluded that although the empirical evidence indirectly supported most recommendations for a happy life, there remain certain concerns to be addressed and explored by future research.

More recently, Zaidman et al. (2017) examined the use of New Age Spirituality (NAS) language by women employees working in three different sectors – education, finance and high-tech organization – in New Zealand and Israel, chosen as representatives of Western countries in which NAS is active and in similar form. The analysis of the data collected through both quantitative and qualitative instruments revealed higher involvement of women with New Age activities and thus higher use of NAS language at workplace as compared to their male counterparts. Female

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employees used NAS language at work since they believed that NAS ideas had “positive psychological effect”, and gave meaning and direction to their behavior at work. However, the study also revealed male participants’ negative attitude towards the users of NAS language at work, leading to the marginalization and silencing of NAS language.

Ways of language use are determined socially and have social effects (Fairclough, 1989: 23). The same thing can be talked about in different ways, and different choices of words and syntactic patterns can systematically be used to encode an ideological stance (Stubbs, 1998: 130). Therefore, “The study of the ways in which language is used to construct . . . realities and persuade opinion is of enormous social significance.” (Widdowson, 2000:10) Accordingly, the present study attempted to examine the language of New Age discourse, specifically the collocational behavior and discourse prosody of two lexical items, “old” and “past” in Osho’s talks (Osho, 2004). It specifically explored the role of these features in the linguistic manifestation of the New Age ideology in the corpus under investigation.

2. New Age movement and Osho

The term “New Age” is mostly associated with the American counterculture of the 1960s, even though the current version of New Age spirituality has emerged in the 1980s (Hanegraaff, 1998) presenting “a religious or semireligious option for the spiritual market consumer or metaphysical seeker” (York, 1995: 1). During the 1980s the New Age movement has transformed from “a counter-culture movement to a socially accepted and integrated phenomenon” (Hoellinger, 2006) becoming “a mass movement on a world-wide scale” through the support, sponsorship or accommodation, of its activities by publishers, colleges, business as well as religious organizations (Clarke, 2006: 39).

In addition, the New Age movement of the 1960s and 1970s has been regarded as “New Age sensu stricto” whereas the New Age movement of the 1980s as “New Age sensu lato”. The followers of the earlier movement were mainly adolescents who rebelled against the social values and norms of the older generation, used “psychedelic” drugs for their spiritual practices and believed in and fought for left-wing political ideas, while the adherents of the New Age movement of the 1980s were people of all ages who emphasized meditation rather than drug use as a consciousness expanding technique, and were not committed to the left-wing ideals of the 1960s counterculture (Hanegraaff, 1998: 10–12).

Also, the counter-cultural New Agers of the 1960s tried to escape, liberate themselves from the contaminations, from the institutions of modern society representing materialistic desires, “ego-derived temptations and attachments” since these were incompatible with “self-actualization or enlightenment” (Heelas, 1993: 105). On the other hand, the “Self- or mainstream-empowers”, in other words, the New Agers of the 1980s rejected the idea that the capitalistic mainstream was contaminating the Self, and believed in the compatibility of spiritual growth with material prosperity. The prosperity seekers – the Self-empowers adopted “an instrumentalised form of spirituality” offered by the popular prosperity courses, seminars, and publications; they believed in the necessity of unlocking mental, spiritual, and physical potential to be used as a means to achieve material prosperity, to enjoy best of both the inner and outer worlds (Heelas, 2001: chap.3).

Another difference between the early and the present versions of the New Age movements was based on the view of the former version as an “apocalyptic”, “discursive” emblem of the seekers of alternative spirituality, whilst the latter as a spiritual, humanistic idiom of “mind, body and spirit”, hence becoming a “contempo-

rary popular religion containing a little bit of just about everything” (Sutcliffe, 2003: 3, 30). In this regard, it was maintained that

New Age concepts such as “transcendence”, “self-realization”, “meditation” and “holism” (which in the 1960s were restricted to the hippies and their mind-expanding drugs) have now become fully accepted, widely acknowledged and, not least, used by people both inside and outside the New Age community.

[Askehave, 2004: 5]

Thus, New Age encompasses various groups and identities whose major expectation has been a universal change “founded on the individual and collective development of human potential” (York, 1995: 1–2). The fundamental beliefs of New Age have been as follows: contemporary society is facing a profound crisis due to predominant mechanistic and materialistic orientations, to be surmounted by “a new consciousness, which is based on a holistic worldview and on the belief in a higher spiritual reality” (Hoellinger, 2006: 62). New Age is not regarded as a unified ideology, however, “all New Age trends, without exception, are intended as alternatives to currently dominant religious and cultural trends. There is a persistent pattern of New Age *culture criticism*, directed against what are perceived as the dominant values of western culture in general, and of modern western society in particular” (Hanegraaff, 1998: 515).

Earlier spiritual movements, for example New Thought, the American metaphysical tradition, American Transcendentalism, Theosophy, Swedenborgianism, and New Thought are regarded as some of the antecedents of New Age (Clarke, 2006). However, what makes New Age distinct from its predecessors is “its own self-consciousness as a new way of thinking, as part of the so-called ‘quantum leap of consciousness’ that is thought to be part of and in part the cause of an imminent new age – often referred to as the Age of Aquarius” (York, 1995: 1). In this regard, the major goal of New Agers is to “awaken’ from the dream and ‘reprogram’ our ingrained beliefs and culturally-conditioned assumptions about reality”, to regain “unlimited’ consciousness” (Hanegraaff, 1998: 292, 341). Moreover, New Age movements promote the sacralization of the self, and the provision of the means for self-actualization, for liberation of the self from the contaminations of cultural institutions (Hanegraaff, 1998: 514–517), from social inhibitions and roles (Wallis, 2006: 51).

Of the New Age religions the Eastern-based ones claim to “typically seek to experience simple pleasures fully and without guilt in here and now” (Hexham and Poewe, 2000: 124); accordingly, the ultimate perfection is associated with the present, with living at the moment. One of the highly organized Eastern New Age movements, with its leader’s “specific doctrines and practices” (Hanegraaff, 1998: 14), is the Osho (Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh) movement emphasizing “the present”, encouraging “participants to make the most of their present experience, to live for the present rather than future aims or past aspirations” (Wallis, 2006: 49–50).

Osho/Rajneesh movement founded by Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (1931–1990) has been regarded as “the most controversial and the most radical of all the Neo-Hindu movements” (Clarke, 2006: 253). Osho was an Indian professor teaching philosophy at Jabalpur University until leaving his teaching post in 1966 to become a spiritual teacher. He founded ashrams in Poona in 1974 and in Oregon in 1981 and thus spread his teachings to Indian and Western spiritual seekers.

Osho strongly criticized social and religious institutions for keeping individuals under pressure and stress, he challenged the moral codes of society and gave shocking discourses on sexuality (Carter, 1987; Urban, 1996, 2000). He was known as a “materialist

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