A Study of Collocation in English

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Abstract

We used to think of grammar as the bones of the language and vocabulary as the flesh to be added given that language consisted largely of life generated chunks of lexis. This "skeleton image" has been proverbially used to refer to that central feature of lexis named **collocation-** an idea that for the first 15 years of language study and analysis gave a moment's thought to English classroom material and methodology.

The work of John Sinclair, Dave Willis, Ron Carter, Michael McCarthy, Michael Lewis, and many others have all contributed to the way teachers today approach the area of lexis and what it means in the teaching/learning process of the language. This also seems to have incorporated lexical ideas into the teaching mechanism and highlighted that the present knowledge of the nature of English lexis and collocation in particular raises a set of important issues for teachers in the first place. Such issues are:

1. Given that grammar still rules the sentence, lexis should be one of the principle organizing parts of the syllabus;
2. The need for different strategies for vocabulary learning at different stages of learning, both in and outside the classroom;
3. The need for more developed techniques that would help the students record and store lexis in ways that could enable them to retrieve and revise the proper words for examinations, i.e., lead them to become 'lexis collectors'.

4. The need for a fresh look at bilingual dictionaries every now and then given that conventional dictionaries cannot give all the information necessary about collocation.
5. Lexis is an area where literal translation is often impossible; a collocation in English may be totally different in Spanish or German and thus the implication of translation should not be discarded as it is essential in English. (The translation skills of the non-native speaking teachers must be recognized in this area.)
6. The two main components of language (grammar and vocabulary) merge into one another and the dividing line is much less clear cut than teachers and textbooks often operate; yet accuracy must be treated as a late-acquired skill.

1. Introduction:

English is taught throughout the world, predominantly by non-native speakers. Yet, the problem for the learner of English is that there are no collocation rules that can be learned. The native English speaker intuitively makes the correct collocation based on a lifetime experience of hearing and reading the words in combinations while the non-native has a more limited experience and may frequently collocate words in a way that sounds odd to the native speaker.

This paper centers on the aspect of language called **"collocation"** which has come to be considered as a basic feature of all languages. According to Rutherford, collocation is **'what goes together with what'**, in other words, **the way words occur together in predictable ways.**

Collocations can further be defined as the collocation of words that 'fit together", i.e., the predictable patterns and phrases or groups of words that we typically use together. They include what have traditionally been considered 'vocabulary items', as well as 'structural patterns' which may seem closer to traditional grammar and

combination of words that simply "go together". So idioms like "take a break", structures like "If I had the chance, I would . . ." and words combinations like "get on a bus / get in a car" are all considered collocations.
This research describes, in other words, the class of word groups that lies between idiomatic expressions and free word combinations.

The idiomatic expressions are those in which the semantics of the whole cannot be deduced from the meanings of the individual constituents whereas free word combinations have the properties that each of the words can be replaced by another without seriously modifying the overall meaning of the composite unit and if one of the words is omitted, a reader cannot easily infer it from the remaining ones.

Last but not least, this research reviews from a linguistics point of view the main theoretical studies on 'collocations' that have taken place since 1938 when this term was first introduced by Harold E. Palmer. The research also stretches to recent studies on collocations focusing in principle on their contribution to the study of this linguistics notion and trying first to give the answer to the question of "what is collocation?", discuss some definitions and problems of collocations and Collocability and distinguish between: "idioms and collocations; Collocations in lexicography; collocations in English language learning". Collocational restrictions and types of collocations have also been approached in this paper.

2. What is collocation?

Collocation can be defined as the habitual co-occurrences of a word with certain other words of the same language.

To quote Firth," (1957) you shall know a word by the company it keeps." The way languages operate, some words can co-occur with

certain words but not with certain other words. As has been shown in the following examples, the word handsome and similarly the word pretty can co-occur with some nouns but not with some other apparently similar nouns. (See Thakur (2001):47)

A handsome man	A pretty women
A handsome woman	A pretty child
A handsome present	A pretty village
*****A handsome flower	A pretty bird
*****A handsome landscape	A pretty flower
*****A handsome view	A pretty house
*****A handsome village	*****A pretty man
*****A handsome house	*****A pretty present

The following are some more examples of Collocational restrictions on the use of adjectives: (ibid)

Affluent society	Arid region
Affluent family	Arid soil
*Affluent man	*Arid weather
*Affluent country	*Arid climate

Examples of Collocational restrictions are by no means confined to the use of adjectives; they can find in relation to all major parts of speech. The following are some of the examples of Collocational restrictions on the use of verbs. As is evident from these examples, some transitive verbs can take certain objects but not certain other similar objects: (ibid)

to gain power	to generate heat
to gain prestige	to generate electricity
to gain victory	*to generate milk
*to gain one's goal	*to generate film
to gain one's ambitions	*to generate food

Shake, tremble, shiver, and shudder are synonymous verbs and each of these verbs denotes movement.

Among these four verbs of more or less the same meaning, only *shiver* can co-occur with the adverbial *with cold*. (ibid)

He was shivering with cold
**He was shaking with cold*
**He was trembling with cold*
**He was shuddering with cold*

Similarly, the verb *tremble* can co-occur with certain adverbials but the other three synonymous verbs cannot. (ibid) . Status of English Collocations

3. Status of English Collocations

First brought by Palmer (1933) and later introduced to the field of theoretical linguistics by Firth (1957), the most commonly shared definition of collocations is: the tendency of one word to co-occur with one or more other words in a particular domain (Aghbar, 1990; Al-Zahrani, 1998; Gitsaki, 1999; Nation, 2001; Nesselhauf, 2003). In his monograph Second Interim Report on English Collocations, the father of collocation studies, linguist Palmer (1933) simply status, "Each [collocation] … must or should be learnt, or is best or most conveniently learnt as an integral whole or independent entity, rather than by the process of piecing together their component parts" (Palmer, 1933, p.4). The notion, collocation, however, is far from thoroughly described or understood as to whether it should be approached from a semantic, syntactic, or idiomatic perspective (Hsu, 2005).

4. Collocability and Collocation:

4.1. Definitions & Problems*:*

The Collocability of words, i.e. the choice of words to produce collocation is 'the most powerful contextual influence on words' (Newmark, 1991: 91; see now Sinclair, this volume, and compare

Sinclair et al., 1998). These two terms were introduced into the technical terminology of linguistics by the influential British linguist J.R. Firth, who envisioned 'elements of structure' 'sharing a mutual expectancy in an *order* which is not merely a sequence. Firth also recognised 'meaning by collocation', as compared to 'contextual meaning, which is the functional relation of the sentence to the processes of a context of situation in the context of culture' (1957 [1934-51]; xi, 195; 1968: 180).

We can start from an important general observation contributed by John McHardy Sinclair (1987), Former Director of the COBUILD Project at Birmingham University. To account for the meaning of a text in natural language, two different principles could be invoked. In the open-choice principle, a text results from the many complex choices available at each point where a unit is completed, the only constraints being those of the grammar. In the idiom principle, a text employs semi-pre-constructed phrases, each representing a single choice, even though they might be analysable into words, like 'of course' (see Sinclair et al, 1998).

Mediating between these two principles are the collocations, whereby the choice of one word favours the choices of others in its vicinity, so that these choices are neither fully 'open' nor fully 'idiomatic'. Several distinct notions of collocation have been suggested by Beaugrande et al (1998), such as:

1. 'Collocation' indicates any more or less frequent co-occurrence of words and phrases in a linear sequence. Here, definitions include 'the generic term for idiosyncratic restrictions on the distribution of lexical material' (cf. Wouden, 1992: 449); and 'a sequence of words that occurs more than once in identical form in a corpus, and which is grammatically well-structured' (cf Kjellmer, 1987: 133).

2. 'Collocation' is a fundamentally semantic unit, as when it is said to include all those items in a text that are semantically

related, as in biology terms (cf. Nunan, 1993: 29). Such a view seeks to applay the term to the study of semantics and lexical 'fields'. Yet, the Collocability of lexical items requires more than semantically similar; for example, 'issue a statement' joins two lexical items that are not semantically close to each other. Moreover, as Heliel (1990: 131f) points out, words belonging to the semantic field, including the so-called 'synonyms', rarely have the same 'Collocational range', e.g.,' announce' collocating with 'plans, result, verdict', etc., and 'declare' with 'bankruptcy, solidarity, water, etc.

3. 'Collocation' is a loosely-fixed, recruitment, and literal rather than figurative word combination that follows certain structural and usage-based patterns and constraints. Examples include 'overriding priority', 'face a challenge', 'broken promises', or 'sheer madness'. (Beagurande et al 1998)

4.2. Idiom and Collocation*:*

The term collocation will be used to refer to sequences of lexical items which habitually co-occur, but which are nonetheless fully transparent in the sense that each lexical constituent is also a semantic constituent. Such expression as (to pick a semantic area at random) fine weather, torrential rain, light drizzle, high winds are examples of collocations. These are of course easy to distinguish from idiom; nonetheless, they do have a kind of semantic cohesion- the constituent elements are, to varying degrees, mutually selective. (See Cruse 1986: 40)

The semantic integrity or cohesion of a collocation is the more marked if the meaning carried by one (or more) of its constituent elements is highly restricted contextually, and different from its meaning in more neutral contexts. Consider the case of *heavy* in *heavy drinker*.

This sense of *heavy* requires fairly narrowly defined contextual conditions: one may speak of a *heavy smoker*, or *a heavy drug user*, a car may be a *heavy on petrol*, etc. For this sense of *heavy* to be selected, the notion of 'consumption' in the immediate environment seems to be a prerequisite. In a neutral context like *It's…, heavy* has a different meaning. We are still, however in the realms of transparent sequences, because each constituent produces a recurrent semantic contrast: (ibid)

Heavy (he's a ---- smoker) = heavy (they were ---drinkers)
Light Light

Drinker (he's a heavy ----) = drinker (they're light --- s)
Smoker smoker

Semantic cohesiveness is even tighter if the meaning of one of the elements of a collocation requires a particular lexical item in its immediate context (cases where all the elements are uniquely selective in this way seem not to occur). Such is the case with, for example, *foot the bill* and *curry flavour*. With expressions such as these, we are obviously approaching another transitional area bordering on idiom. It has already been argued in some detail that *foot the bill* is semantically transparent. It is also un-idiom like in the fact that bill is fairly freely modifiable: (ibid: 41)

I'm expected to foot the bill
The electricity bill
All the bloody bills

Yet, it has some distinctly idiom-like characteristics, too. One of these is that *foot* (in the relevant sense) demands the presence of a specific lexical partner; pronominal anaphoric reference to a previously occurring *bill* apparently will not do:

Son: I've just got the bill for the car repairs

Father:? I hope you don't expect me to foot it.

Furthermore, it resists interruption:

? I'm expected not only to foot, but also to add up, all the bills.

Collocations like *foot the bill* and *curry flavour*, whose constituents do not like to be separated, may be termed bound collocations. Although they display some of the characteristic properties of idioms, bound collocations are nevertheless, as far as we are concerned, lexically complex. (ibid)

5. The Company Lexemes Keep

'You shall know a word by the company it keeps', said the British linguist J.R. Firth (1957), referring to the syntagmatic tendency of lexemes to work together ('collocate') in predictable ways. *Blond* collocates with *hair*, *flock* with *sheep*, & *neigh* with *horse*. Some collocations are totally predictable, such as *spick* with *span*, or *addled* with *brains* or *eggs*. Others are much less so: *letter* collocates with a wide range of lexemes, such as *alphabet* and *spelling*, and (in another sense) *box*, *post*, and *write*. Yet, other lexemes are so widely used that they have no predictable collocates at all, such as *have* and *got*. (See Crystal 1987: 105)

Collocation should not be confused with 'association of ideas'. The way lexemes work together may have nothing to do with 'ideas'. We say in English '*green'* and *'jealousy'* (not blue, red, etc.), though there is nothing literally 'green' about 'jealousy'. Coffee can be *white*, though the colour is brown. Both lads and lasses may be well rounded enough to be called *buxom*, but this lexeme is used only with the latter. (ibid)

Collocations differ greatly between languages, and provide a major difficulty in mastering foreign languages. In English, we 'face'

problems and ‘interpret’ dreams; but in modern Hebrew, we have to ‘stand in front of’ problems and ‘solve’ dreams. In Japanese, the verb for ‘drink’ collocates with water and soup, but also with tables and cigarettes. (ibid)

The more fixed a collocation is, the more we think of it as an ‘idiom’ – a pattern to be learnt as a whole, and not as the ‘sum of its parts’. Thus we find French *broyer du noir (lit. ‘grind’ + ‘black’),* meaning to ‘have the blues’ or ‘be browned off’ – a nice instance of the arbitrary use of colour terms. (ibid)

Collocations are quite different from the idiosyncratic links between ideas that can be verbally expressed. On a psychiatrist’s couch, we may ‘free associate’, responding to *farm* with *Easter*, or *jam* with *mother*. This is not collocation, which is a link between lexemes made by *all* who speak a language. (ibid)

6. Collocation and English Language Learning

Collocation is observed between lexical items, when arranged in texts. It is the meaning relation between individual lexical items and the ones that habitually co-occur with them in the language. For instance, we might expect *bank* (where money is kept) to have a high probability of co-occurance with *cheque, cashier, accountant, transfer, ledger, etc.* but a low probability of co-occurrence with *bed, saucepan apple, etc.* lexical items involved in collocations are always, to some degree, mutually predictable (Crystal, 1987).

The relationship of collocation according to McCarthy (1995) is fundamental in the study of vocabulary. J.R. Firth is often quoted having said “you know a word by the company it keeps, (Firth, 1957). Knowledge of appropriate collocations is part of the native speakers’ competence. Collocation therefore deserves to be a central part of vocabulary learning. Effective performance of ESL learners depends on their stock of conventional collocations, which are characterized by

varying degrees of restrictedness. They range from free combinations such as:

Run a risk/ business
To fix ones like
Take the bull by the horns

Below is a spectrum of collocations adapted from Howart (1996) and Carter, (1987):

a. Free Combinations:

Run a risk / a business make an attempt/ way

b. Restricted Combinations

i. Adjective + noun – hardened + criminal – extenuating + circumstance
ii. Adverb + verb – readily+ admit – totally+ unaware
iii. Verb+ noun – renovate+ house church
iv. Noun+ verb – break+ screech – cloud+ drift

c. Multi-Word Expressions:

v. Irreversible binominals- part and parcel, leaps and bounds;
vi. Phrasal verb- pull out, give up
vii. Idioms- to take the bull by the horns, to set the ball rolling

It is clear from the spectrum of collocations presented above that lexical items in the language can be put into what J. R. Firth call "mutual expectancy".

Hill (1999:5) proceeds that "Students with good ideas often lose marks because they don't know the four or five most important collocations of a key word that is certain to what they are writing about," (Hill 1999:5) As a result, they create longer, wordier ways of defining or discussing the issue, increasing the chance of further errors. He cites the example: "His disability will continue until he dies" rather than "He has a permanent disability." (ibid)

There is no magic formula for correcting these mistakes. Collocations have to be acquired both through direct study and large amounts of quality input. The very concept of collocations is often not easy for learners. The essentially simple idea that word choice is seriously limited by what comes before and after "is perhaps the single most elusive aspect of the lexical system and the hardest, therefore, for learners to acquire" (Thornbury 2002:7)

7. Collocational Mismatches

Collocational mismatches are frequent in the language production of second-language learning since learners never encountered a word or combinations of words with sufficient frequency to demarcate its range or narrow the item down to its more fixed partnerships. Particular difficulties result from collocations which are relatively opaque semantically (e.g. a heavy drinker) or which are restricted to particular fields of discourse (e.g. 'light pastry', 'slick gear-change'). (See Carter 1987)

Thus, explaining amicable as a synonym of *friends* does not explain why *amicable divorce* is a collocational acceptable but **friendly divorce* is not, nor why *fat pay cheque* cannot be substituted by **obese pay cheque* without producing comic results. Adjective-noun collocations are notoriously slippery but the extension of collocational partnerships over syntactic chunks can produce similarly infelicitous combinations. (ibid)

8. English Collocations in Lexicography

In the last three decades, the interest in collocations and other fixed expressions led lexicographers to compile specialized dictionaries. Among those lexicographers was Hornby (1974) who included a large number of collocations in his dictionary entitled ***Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English.*** The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English (more commonly known as the **BBI Dictionary**- the initials are those of its compilers: Benson, Benson and Ilson) was released in 1986. a later revised edition was released in 1997. ***The BBI Dictionary*** is completely devoted to English collocations. The compilers believe that even in language learner's dictionaries, the treatment of collocations is insufficient and inconsistent. The dictionary contains 90,000 combinations and phrases under a total of 18,000 entries.

Another dictionary that is fully dedicated to English collocations is **Hall and Lewis' (1997)** ***Dictionary of Selected Collocations.*** It is divided into an adverb section which lists verbs, adjectives, and their adverbs collocates and substantial section on nouns where the headwords are all nouns.

9. Collocational Restriction

"Collocational restriction" is a linguistic term used in morphology. The term refers to the fact that in certain two-word phrases the meaning of an individual word is restricted to that particular phrase (cf.idiom). For instance: the adjective *dry* can only mean 'not sweet' in combination with the noun *wine.* (See McCarthy 2002)

A more illustrative example is the one given below:

- *White coffee*
- *White noise*
- *White man*

All three instances of *white* can be said to be idiomatic because in combination with certain nouns the meaning of *white* changes. In none of the examples does *white* have its usual meaning. Instead, in the examples above it means 'brownish', 'containing many frequencies with about equal amplitude', and 'pinkish' or 'pale brown', respectively. (See Crystal 2003)
Collocational restrictions as Carter (1987) says are:

9. a. Un-restricted collocation:

This describes the capacity of particular lexical items to be open to partnership with a wide range of items. Most core words fall into such a category (e.g. *fat, bright, head*) as do structures with core verbs such as have or take in the structures: *take a look, a holiday, a rest, a letter, time, notice, a walk.* Another example would be the verb *run* which in its sense of 'manage' or 'operate' collocates, relatively, unrestrictedly with a range of animate and inanimate & concrete and abstract entities: e.g. *run a business, football team, car, shop, scheme and so on.* (ibid: 70)

9. b. Semi-restricted collocation:

This category embraces lexical patterns in which the number of items that can be substituted in different syntactic slots is more determined. Examples here would be *harbour doubt, grudges, uncertainty, suspicion, or fan* (in the sense of 'incite', 'encourage'), e.g. *fan a riot, discontent, disturbance, hooliganism.* (ibid)

9. c. Familiar Collocation:

Combinations here are between words which keep regular company with each other. There are obvious overlaps here with types of fixed expressions categorized above as stock phrases and metaphoric usage (e.g. vicious circle): *innocent bystander, unrequited love, unmitigated*

disaster, readily admit, lukewarm, reception, pregnant with possibility, amicable divorce. (ibid)

9. d. Restricted Collocations:

Partnerships in this category are generally more fixed and closed, e.g. *stark naked, pitch black.* A range of syntactic patterns are, however, involved, e.g. *consider seriously, lean meat, soft water, gin and tonic, accept defeat.* Also included here are irreversible binominals such as *cash and carry, ups and downs, hit and miss, assault and battery, swings and roundabouts.* (ibid:71)

10. Types of Collocations

In an effort to characterize collocations, lexicographers and linguists present a wide variety of individual collocations attempting to categorize them as part of a general scheme [Allerton 1984, Benson 1989, and Cowie 1981]. By examining a wide variety of collocates of the same syntactic category, researchers identify similarities and differences in their behaviour in their process coming a step closer to providing a definition.

Distinctions are made between grammatical collocations and semantic collocations. Grammatical collocations often contain prepositions including paired syntactic categories such as verb + preposition (e.g. come to, put on), adjective + preposition (e.g. afraid that, fond of), and noun + preposition (e.g. by accident, witness to). In these cases, the open-class word is called the base and determines the words it can collocate with.

Often, computational linguists restrict the type of collocations they acquire or use to a subset of these different types, (e.g. Church et al 1989). Semantic collocations are lexically restricted word pairs, where only a subset of the synonyms of the collocator can be used in the

same lexical context. Examples in this category have already been presented.

Another distinction is made between compounds and flexible word pairs. Compounds include word pairs that occur consecutively in language and typically are immutable in function. Noun + noun pairs are one such example, which not only occur consecutively but also function as a constituent.

Cowie (1989) notes that compounds form a bridge between collocations and idioms, since, like collocations, they are quite invariable but they are not necessarily semantically opaque. Since collocations are recursive, collocational phrases including more than just two words can occur. For example, a collocation such as by chance, in turn collocates with verbs such as *find, discover, notice*, etc. Flexible word pairs include collocations between subject and verb or verb and object; any number of intervening words may occur between the words of the collocation(ibid).

11. The Conclusion

This research summarized the main theoretical studies on collocations that have taken place since 1930's. It also showed that there a significant definition of collocations among different linguists, as some linguists make distinction between a collocation and an idiom. It also showed several distinct notions of collocation.

It has, moreover, reflected the relation between collocation and English language learning. The interest in collocations by lexicographers was also discussed.

This research suggested that although a collocation is a combination of at least two lexical items that demonstrate a level of frozenness/restrictedness and like idiomatic expressions, show a resistance to substitution of the constituents of the combination.

Nevertheless, collocations are semantically transparent, that is, one can tell the meaning of the whole collocation form at least one of the constituents parts of the combination. Therefore, collocations are not idiomatic expressions.

This research has examined the ways collocations have been treated by linguists in the English language.

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لخلاصة

يلخص هذا البحث الدراسات النظرية الرئيسة حول تراصف المفردات منذ الثلاثينيات. لقد بين الباحث عدة تعاريف عن مفهوم تراصف المفردات لعدد من اللغويين، حيث وجد بعضهم اختلافاً بين تراصف المفردات والمصطلح. كما يظهر بأن هناك مفاهيم أخرى مميزة لتراصف الكلمات. وتطرق البحث ايضاً الى العلاقة بين تراصف الكلمات وتعلم اللغة الانكليزية. كما اهتم واضعو القواميس بهذه الظاهرة اللغوية.

لقد بين الباحث انه على الرغم من ان تراصف الكلمات يشير الى مزج كلمتين في الأقل، وهو مايؤدي الى التجمد او التحجر، كالتعابير الاصطلاحية، الا انها تبدي مقاومة او ممانعة لاستبدال مكوناتها المزجية.

وعلى الرغم من ذلك، فان تراصف الكلمات يتمتع بشفافية دلالية، اي امكانية استخلاص المعنى العام للكلمات المتراصفة من الكلمات المكونة للعبارة المتراصفة. مما يدل على ان تراصف الكلمات لاعلاقة له بالتعابير الاصطلاحية. وفي الختام، فقد استعرض البحث طرق تعامل علم اللغة الانكليزية مع تراصف الكلمات.