COLLOCATION AS A TYPE OF MULTIWORD UNIT

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Words put together make phrases or word groups. It will be recalled that lexicology deals with words, word-forming and word groups, it can be said that the word is the basic lexical unit. The smallest two facet unit to be found the word is the morpheme. The largest two facet lexical unit comprising more than one word is the word-group observed on the systematic level of analysis, e.g.: in the analysis of various the words are joined together to inseparable such word groups that are usually described as phrases, idioms, phraseological units, compound words and collocations which are traditionally regarded as the branch of lexicological science. The component members in other word groups e.g. a *week ago*, *man of wisdom*, *take place*, *take lessons, kind to people* seem to possess greater semantic and structural independence.

Word groups of this type make up single self-contained lexical units. The degree of structural and semantic cohesion of word-groups may vary. Some word groups, e g. *at least, point of view, by means, take place* seem to be functionally and semantically defined as free word groups or phrases. Collocation is an expression consisting of two or more words that correspond to some conventional way of saying things. Or in the words of Firth: "Collocations of a given word are statements of the habitual or customary places of that word".

Collocations include noun phrases like *strong tea* and *weapons of mass destruction*, phrasal verbs like *to make up*, and other stock phrases like *the rich and powerful*. Particularly interesting are the subtle and not-easily-explainable patterns of word usage that native speakers all know: why they say a stiff breeze but not a stiff wind (while either a strong breeze or a strong wind is okay), or why they speak of broad daylight (but not bright daylight or narrow darkness) [1, p.89].

Collocations are characterized by limited compositionality. It can be called a natural language expression compositional if the meaning of the expression can be predicted from the meaning of the parts.

Collocations are not fully compositional in that there is usually an element of meaning added to the combination.

In the case of *strong tea*, *strong* has acquired the meaning rich in some active agent who is closely related, but slightly different from the basic sense having great physical strength. Idioms are the most extreme examples of non-compositionality. Idioms like *to kick the bucket* or *to hear it through the grapevine* only have an indirect historical relationship to the meanings of the parts of the expression [2, p.32]. They are not talking about buckets or grapevines literally when used in these idioms. Most collocations exhibit milder forms of non-compositionality, it is very nearly a systematic composition of its parts, but still has an element of added meaning. It usually refers to administrative efficiency and would, for example, not be used to describe a cooking technique although that meaning would be compatible with its literal meaning. There is much interest in collocations partly because this is an area that has been neglected in structural linguistic traditions that follow Saussure and Chomsky. There is, however, a tradition in British linguistics, associated with the names of Firth, Halliday, and Sinclair, which pays close attention to phenomena like collocations. Structural linguistics concentrates on general abstractions about the properties of phrases and sentences. In contrast, Firth's Contextual Theory of Meaning emphasizes the importance of context: the context of the social setting (as opposed to the idealized speaker), the context of spoken and textual discourse (as opposed to the isolated sentence), and, important for collocations, the context of surrounding words [1, p.11]. These contextual features easily get lost in the abstract treatment that is typical of structural linguistics.

A good example of the type of problem that is seen as important in this contextual view of language is Halliday's example of strong vs. powerful tea it is a convention in English to talk about strong tea, not powerful tea, although any speaker of English would also understand the latter unconventional expression. Arguably, there are no interesting structural properties of English that can be gleaned from this contrast. However, the contrast may tell us something interesting about attitudes towards different types of substances in English culture (why do they use powerful for drugs like heroin, but not for cigarettes, tea and coffee?) and it is obviously important to teach this contrast to students who want to learn idiomatically correct English.

Frequency-based search works well for fixed phrases. But many collocations consist of two words that stand in a more flexible relationship to one another. Consider the verb knock and one of its most frequent arguments, door. Here are some examples of knocking on or at a door:

a. *she knocked on his door;*
b. *they knocked at the door;*
c. *100 women knocked on Donaldson's door;*
d. *a man knocked on the metal front door* [2, p.26].

The words that appear between knocked and door vary and the distance between the two words is not constant so a fixed phrase approach would not work here. But there is enough regularity in the patterns to allow us to determine that knock is the right verb to use in English for this situation, not hit, beat or rap. A short note is in order here on collocations that occur as a fixed phrase versus those that are more variable. Verbs with little semantic content like *make*, *take* and *do* are called **light verbs** in collocations like *make a decision* or *do a favour* [2, p.27]. There is hardly anything about the meaning of make, take or do that would explain why it have to say *make a decision* instead of *take a decision* and do *a favour* instead of *make a favour*, but for many linguists purposes the correct light verb for combination with a particular noun must be determined. Verb particle constructions or phrasal verbs are an especially important part of the lexicon of English.

Many verbs in English like *to tell off* and *to go down* [3, p.115] consist of a combination of a main verb and a particle.

These verbs often correspond to a single lexeme in other languages. Proper nouns (also called proper names) are usually included in the category of collocations although they are quite different from lexical collocations. They are most amenable to approaches that look for fixed phrases that reappear in exactly the same form throughout a text. Collocation is applied to let us point to the many different degrees of invariability that a collocation can show.

At one extreme of the spectrum we have usage notes in dictionaries that describe subtitle differences in usage between near synonyms like *answer* and *reply* (*diplomatic answer* vs. *stinging reply*) [4].

This type of collocation is important for generating text that sounds natural, but getting a collocation wrong here is less likely to lead to a

fatal error. The other extreme are completely frozen expressions like proper names and idioms.

Here there is just one way of saying things and any deviation will completely change the meaning of what is said.

An important area that we have not been able to cover is the discovery of proper nouns, which can be regarded as a kind of collocation.

Proper nouns cannot be exhaustively covered in dictionaries since new people, places, and other entities come into existence and are named all the time. Yet another approach to discovering collocations is to search for points in the word stream with either low or high uncertainty as to what the next (or previous) word will be. Points with high uncertainty are likely to be phrase boundaries, which in turn are candidates for points where a collocation may start or end, whereas points with low uncertainty are likely to be located within a collocation.

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