

The Linguistic Status of Collocations

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Abstract: This article delves into the concept of “collocation” exploring its origins, its role within linguistics, and its overall significance. Collocations, which refer to the natural and expected co-occurrence of words, are fundamental to understanding language structure and usage. The article offers various perspectives on defining collocations, differentiating them from other linguistic concepts such as idioms and phrases. It also highlights the practical applications of studying collocations, particularly for language learners, who can benefit from a deeper understanding of how words naturally combine. Furthermore, the article suggests potential avenues for future research in the field of collocations.

Keywords: Collocation, linguistics, lexicology, phraseology, combinatory linguistics, translation studies.

Introduction: As we take a closer look at the essence of the term collocation, we find that it was first used in the mid-15th century as collocacioun meaning “a placing together” or “arrangement.” This word was borrowed directly from Old French, which in turn derived it from the Latin word collocationem, based on the verb collocare (“to place or arrange together”). It is the noun form derived from the past participle of that verb. The term began to be used with the meanings “the act of placing together” or “a state of being placed or arranged with something” around the year 1600. As a linguistic concept, it started to be widely used from 1940 onward (Etymonline - Online Etymology Dictionary).

METHODOLOGY

To study collocations from a linguistic perspective, we first identify them by analyzing large text corpora. Then, using statistical methods, we measure the frequency and strength of these collocations. After that, we conduct a qualitative analysis from semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic perspectives to determine their meanings and functions.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The term collocation is considered one of the most ambiguously interpreted linguistic concepts. Its scope of application is so broad that a deeper understanding

requires systematic research. Despite the variety of definitions given to it, there are common features that can be identified. Over the last 50 years, collocation has remained a central subject of linguistic research. Its theoretical foundations have been extensively explored in several linguistic branches, including lexicology, corpus linguistics, phraseology, and the relatively new field of combinatorial linguistics. The problem of identifying collocations can be approached by distinguishing their specific features and position in relation to idioms, clichés, set expressions, and technical terms. In practice, collocations are especially relevant in fields such as translation studies, foreign language teaching, and lexicography. The concept of collocation primarily emerged from English lexicological and lexicographic traditions and has followed a distinct path of development.

There are three main approaches to defining the term in Western linguistics:

- As lexical co-selection or mutual expectancy at the lexical level;
- As a fixed or semi-fixed word combination;
- As a tendency for certain words to co-occur in specific contexts.

The term collocation became widely popular among linguists after it was first introduced by J.R. Firth in

1957. Since then, many scholars have provided definitions that describe collocations as “habitual co-occurrence of words” or “word combinations.” Firth himself defined collocation as a “syntagmatic abstraction” [5; p 56]. The term is used to describe sequences of lexical items that frequently occur together in a language. Although these words are often semantically or functionally related, it is important not to confuse them with idioms. Unlike idioms, where the meaning is not deducible from the individual words, the components of a collocation usually retain their individual semantic contributions. The semantic unity or compatibility within a collocation can often be observed when one (or more) of its elements becomes highly restricted contextually, exhibiting a meaning that differs from its use in neutral contexts [3; p 40]. Examples of collocations include expressions such as heavy rain, bright future, and do research. According to Nattinger and DeCarrico, collocations are sequences of words that tend to occur together with high probability and display mutual compatibility within texts [10; p 53]. Similarly, Sinclair notes that collocations involve two or more words that frequently appear in close proximity within texts [6; pp. 39–49]. Benson and Ilson classify collocations into two main types: grammatical and lexical. Grammatical collocations are formed using nouns, verbs, adjectives, and prepositions, while lexical collocations consist of combinations such as noun+noun, adjective+noun, adverb+noun, verb+noun, and verb+adverb [1; pp. 56–63].

McCarthy and O'Dell refer to collocations as combinations of two or more words that frequently occur together and whose co-occurrence is often difficult to predict. This implies that the pairing of one word with another is largely arbitrary and not easily deduced [9; p 34]. While native speakers can use collocations naturally and effortlessly, they often pose significant challenges for learners of English as a foreign language. For example, the words powerful and strong are semantically similar, meaning “forceful” or “intense.” However, learners frequently misuse them interchangeably, leading to stylistic errors. Collocations like powerful wind or a strong engine are incorrect because native speakers naturally say strong wind and a powerful engine. This highlights the importance of learning collocations in their correct, established forms within the target language. Otherwise, inappropriate usage may result in both functional and stylistic inaccuracies. A similar viewpoint was expressed by Palmer, who noted that collocations consist of words that occur together in sequence and should be regarded as unified lexical combinations, not as separate elements merely strung together. In other words, because collocations are formed from

combinations that appear to be arbitrary, relying solely on the individual meanings of words to combine them can easily lead to mistakes [12; p 4].

Woodward also considers collocations as words that occur together in a compatible relationship. He emphasizes that these combinations are not the result of random sequencing. Similarly, Lewis points out that the phenomenon of collocation arises when certain words tend to co-occur with others in natural texts more frequently than would be expected by chance. Both Woodward and Lewis stress that the unpredictable nature of collocations makes them a major obstacle for English learners. In short, collocations are word groupings that regularly occur together in literary, written, and spoken language contexts, and mastering them is crucial for achieving natural-sounding and fluent communication [7; p 17]. Although many linguists have reached a general consensus on the definition of collocations, learners may still find it difficult to distinguish them from other linguistic phenomena—such as idioms (spill the beans, have one foot in the grave, speak of the devil), discourse markers or modal phrases (to start with, furthermore), and figurative expressions (as light as a feather, as cold as ice)—due to their fixed and formulaic nature. This ambiguity has led to various attempts to differentiate collocations from similar categories. Spoken and written English are often interpreted through the lens of two principles: the Open Choice Principle (OCP) and the Idiom Principle (IP). Collocations exist on the spectrum between these two. To clarify, the OCP is associated with Chomsky's theory of universal grammar, which emphasizes the grammatical and semantic rules that allow for the generation of sentences. In contrast, the IP prioritizes the use of socially and lexically conventionalized word combinations. For example, the phrase crowded traffic may be grammatically and semantically acceptable, but native speakers would find it odd and prefer the conventional heavy traffic. This illustrates the need to distinguish between free combinations and collocations on the one hand, and between collocations and idioms on the other.

Free combinations—typical of the OCP—include phrases such as cook a meal, where the verb cook can be replaced with others like make or eat without disrupting grammaticality. The meaning of such combinations depends on the speaker's intent. Idioms, on the other hand, are fixed expressions with meanings that cannot be inferred from the individual words. Some collocations may appear to share the same fixed nature as idioms, but they can often be interpreted through the literal meaning of their parts. In this sense, idioms can be considered a specialized form of

collocations [4; pp. 1890–1894]. According to Tode, prefabrication —which refers to the use of ready-made, pre-constructed language chunks stored in the speaker's memory — is typically contrasted with generation, the creation of novel utterances. Simply put, prefabricated expressions (or “prefabs”) are pre-built linguistic structures used by native speakers. In this way, collocations represent naturally occurring and readily available word combinations that facilitate the fluency and speed of speech production [13; p 169]. J. Van Roey draws attention to the distinction between “collocations” and “lexical phrases,” emphasizing that although collocations may appear to be random pairings of words, they are in fact word combinations that naturally and frequently occur together in a given language. He explains that the restrictions governing collocations are not syntactic or conceptual in nature, but rather determined by conventional usage in specific contexts [14; p 46]. For instance, commit suicide is considered a collocation because these two words frequently co-occur, even though it is possible to use a synonym like end one's life. Lexical phrases, on the other hand, are more flexible and can be used in a variety of contexts.

John McHardy Sinclair introduced the concept of a “unit of meaning,” proposing it as a fundamental linguistic unit in contrast to the individual word. He identified collocation as one of the stable patterns of language use, along with other phenomena such as colligation, semantic preference, and semantic prosody. In this framework:

- Collocation refers to the lexical-level association between two or more words;
- Colligation involves the grammatical compatibility of a word with certain grammatical categories;
- Semantic preference denotes the association of a word with particular semantic fields;
- Semantic prosody evaluates whether the surrounding context of a word tends to carry a positive, negative, or neutral connotation [8; p 99].

Although the term collocation has been used with varying meanings by different linguists (including Halliday, Sinclair, Stubbs, and Moon), it is most commonly approached from two main perspectives: the phraseological and the frequency-based approaches [11; p 12]. From the frequency-based perspective, a collocation is defined as a combination of words that appear together more frequently than would be expected by chance. This approach has been supported by Firth, Halliday, and Sinclair. As for the phraseological approach, collocations are defined as “associations of two or more lexical items that occur

within certain grammatical structures” [2; p 3169].

CONCLUSION

Collocations are one of the key areas of research in linguistics, focusing on how words combine to form meaningful and natural word groupings. While these combinations may often seem intuitive, their correct usage plays a crucial role in achieving effective communication. The importance of studying collocations lies in the fact that learning a foreign language without understanding them can be challenging, as the meaning of many words often depends on the words they typically occur with. Using collocations correctly makes communication more natural and precise. Additionally, comparing collocations with related concepts such as idioms and lexical phrases helps to clarify the distinctions between them. Analyzing collocations from corpus-linguistic, statistical, and semantic perspectives is of great scientific importance. The study of collocations is significant for various linguistic fields. For example, in translation, choosing the right collocations improves the quality of the text. Similarly, knowledge of collocations is also applied in the development of computational languages.

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