

## FEATURES OF COLLOCATIONS AS A SYNTAGMATIC LANGUAGE UNIT

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7440691>

**Abstract.** *This article gives information about collocations as a syntagmatic language unit. We studied different theories of scholars about collocation. Linguistic features of collocation and the differences between an idiom and collocation were described in this work.*

**Keywords:** *collocation, linguistic feature, syntagmatic unit, lexical unit, semantic approach, structural approach.*

## ОСОБЕННОСТИ СЛОВСОЧЕТАНИЙ КАК СИНТАГМАТИЧЕСКОЙ ЯЗЫКОВОЙ ЕДИНИЦЫ

**Аннотация.** *В данной статье дается информация о словосочетаниях как синтагматической языковой единице. Мы изучили различные теории ученых о коллокации. В работе описаны лингвистические особенности словосочетания и отличия фразеологизма от словосочетания.*

**Ключевые слова:** *словосочетание, языковой признак, синтагматическая единица, лексическая единица, семантический подход, структурный подход.*

In the English language, collocation refers to a natural combination of words that are closely affiliated with each other. Some examples are "pay attention", "fast food", "make an effort", and "powerful engine". Collocations make it easier to avoid overused or ambiguous words like "very", "nice", or "beautiful", by using a pair of words that fit the context better and that have a more precise meaning. Skilled users of the language can produce effects such as humor by varying the normal patterns of collocation.

'Collocations' are usually described as "sequences of lexical items which habitually co-occur [i.e. occur together]" (Cruse 1986:40). Examples of English collocations are: 'thick eyebrows', 'sour milk', 'to collect stamps', 'to commit suicide', 'to reject a proposal'.

The term *collocation* was first introduced by Firth, who considered that meaning by collocation is lexical meaning "at the syntagmatic level" (Firth 1957:196). The syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations of lexical items can be schematically represented by two axes: a horizontal and a vertical one. The paradigmatic axis is the vertical axis and comprises sets of words that belong to the same class and can be substituted for one another in a specific grammatical and lexical context. The horizontal axis of language is the syntagmatic axis and refers to a word's ability to combine with other words. Thus, in the sentence 'John ate the apple' the word 'apple' stands in paradigmatic relation with 'orange', 'sandwich', 'steak', 'chocolate', 'cake', etc., and in syntagmatic relation with the word 'ate' and 'John'. Collocations represent lexical relations along the syntagmatic axis.

Firth's attempt to describe the meaning of a word on the collocational level was innovative in that it looked at the meaning relations between lexical items, not from the old perspective of paradigmatic relations (e.g. synonyms, antonyms) but from the level of syntagmatic relations. Syntagmatic relations between sentence constituents had been widely

used by structural linguists (e.g. 'John ate the apple' is an 'Subject-Verb-Object' construction), but not in the study of lexical meaning.

Up till now, studies on collocation have been insufficient in defining the concept of collocation in a more rigorous way (Cowan 1989:1). Since the term 'collocation' was introduced by Firth to describe meaning at the syntagmatic level, subsequent linguists and researchers have not often attempted to define 'collocation' in a more thorough and methodical way. Collocation is still defined as the tendency of a lexical item to co-occur with one or more other words (Halliday, McIntosh & Strevens 1964:33; Ridout & Waldo-Clarke 1970; Backlund 1973, 1976; Seaton 1982; Crystal 1985:55; Cruse 1986:40; Zhang 1993:1).

Collocation has been considered as a separate level of vocabulary acquisition. Bolinger (1968) and (1976) argues that we learn and memorize words in chunks and that most of our "manipulative grasp of words is by way of collocations" (Bolinger 1976:8). The learning of language in segments of collocation size, especially in children, is proved by the fact that "the collocates is what the young child produces if you ask him a definition", e.g. a 'hole' is 'a hole in the ground'.

Since the 1960's there have been three main approaches to the study of collocations, focusing on different aspects of the phenomenon of collocation. In this study, these approaches are referred to as:

- ❖ the lexical composition approach;
- ❖ the semantic approach;
- ❖ the structural approach.

The lexical composition approach characterizes collocation as a different level of lexical meaning. The semantic approach attempts to predict the collocates of lexical units by reference to their semantic features. The structural approach examines collocations using grammatical patterns.

Matthews' theory suggested the study of syntagmatic relations, and consequently of collocation, along the lines of transformational grammar, but it was not developed any further.

The influence of grammar on collocation was also discussed by Greenbaum (1970), (1974) who pointed out that certain instances of collocation require syntactic information. For example, 'much' collocates with 'prefer' when it is in a pre-verb position as in 'I much prefer a dry wine', but it does not collocate with 'prefer' in post-object position as in '\*I prefer a dry wine much' (Greenbaum 1974:82).

Greenbaum suggests that the collocability of words (i.e. their potential co-occurrence with other lexical items) should be "tied" to syntax, and realizes that there are certain lexical items that can occur only in certain syntactic relationships, e.g. 'His sincerity frightens us' but not 'We frighten his sincerity' (Greenbaum 1974:82). Without reference to syntax, the notion of collocability becomes vacuous - virtually any two items can co-occur at a given arbitrary distance. For example, 'sincerity' can collocate with 'frighten', but the acceptability of the combinations they produce can only be judged via syntax.

Most people confuse collocations and idioms, but there are linguistic distinguishing features between an idiom and collocation. Along the continuum with free combinations on one end and idioms on the other, collocations seem to fall in the middle as they blend together the semantic transparency of free combinations and the syntagmatic bonds of idioms. An idiom is usually described as "a constituent or series of constituents for which the semantic interpretation

is not a compositional function of the formatives of which it is composed" (Nagy 1978:296). Collocations, although they are combinations of at least two words, exhibit a degree of syntactic frozenness and resistance to lexical substitution; they are semantically transparent; and hence they are not idioms. However, there are certain lexical combinations that are semantically transparent, and therefore should be classified as collocations, but which also show a certain degree of syntactic frozenness and resistance to lexical substitution, just like idioms: for example, 'foot the bill', 'curry flavor', 'high explosive', 'highest confidence'.

## Conclusion

Investigation of collocations as a syntagmatic unit and distinguishing them rather than idioms is one of the actual issues of current modern linguistics. Furthermore, the specific area of collocation within lexis is of particular importance and forms a particular problem for language learners. Fluency in the foreign language is determined by automation of collocation. The more the learner is capable of producing the correct collocations, the less hesitation pauses he makes in long sequences of words and consequently the more competent in the language he becomes.

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