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## COLLOCATIONS AND SECOND LANGUAGE USE

### 1. Introduction

Collocations have recently received increased attention in applied linguistic studies; however, still relatively little is known about the way in which collocations are used by speakers of foreign languages. This article provides an overview of the research which has been carried out in this area, and makes some suggestions as to the directions for future investigations.

Collocations are understood here as word combinations such as *bitterly cold* or *commit murder*, that is phrases which are more restricted than free combinations (*very cold*) and less restricted than idioms (*get the cold shoulder*). Although this is, of course, a very rough definition, it will suffice for the purpose of the present discussion; any attempt at a more precise description would be the topic for a separate article, as collocations are notoriously difficult to define and different (often slightly contradictory) definitions proliferate in the literature. This overview will be restricted to studies that directly address the issue of using collocations by learners of English as a second or other language. Research dealing more specifically with other types of multi-word units, such as idioms or proverbs, will not be discussed here. Neither is there space to present psycholinguistic aspects relevant to the topic (for an overview, see Leśniewska 2006b).

### 2. Approaches to assessing collocational knowledge

Information on the collocational aspects of L2 competence can come from various sources. There are several ways of directly investigating the use of collocations by learners. Data on how L2 learners actually use collocations can be obtained by analyzing the language production of learners, either written or spoken. In comprehensive measures, particular samples of L2 writing or speech are analyzed with respect to all the collocations which occur in the available texts. Another method is to use corpora of L2 writing, in which case it is possible to analyze only specific, pre-selected collocations as they occur in a range of texts

(e.g. Granger 1998). By obtaining concordances for the investigated items, the collocational patterns of L2 texts can be compared to those in texts produced by native speakers.

Another possibility is to elicit the collocational decisions of learners for specific test items – in which case a preselected group of collocations is the focus of research, which makes it much easier to compare the results for various subjects and groups (e.g. Biskup 1992; Bahns and Eldaw 1993; Granger 1998). This can be done in the form of “open” elicitation procedures, such as gap-filling tasks, or in the form of closed tasks (multiple choice) or acceptability judgments.

Other testing techniques can be used as indirect measures of collocational knowledge. For example, psycholinguistic tests based on word association patterns could be used to indirectly investigate the structure of the mental lexicon of learners with respect to collocational links. The information obtained from all the above sources can be related to native speaker standards, and/or compared to other aspects of learners’ lexical ability (for example, to vocabulary size).

The sources of information enumerated above differ greatly with respect to what is being tested: in the case of the analysis of texts it is the actual language production; in the case of elicitation procedures it is the learners’ knowledge as evidenced by their judgment/introspection; in the case of association tests it is some manifestation of the underlying mental system.

Below, the discussion of findings from relevant studies is organized under several headings which reflect the statements that are made most often about the use of collocations by EFL learners: firstly, that collocations may be a source of difficulty even at very advanced levels (this is why they are often discussed with reference to the concept of near-native competence); secondly, that there is a specific type of semi-restricted collocations that causes particular difficulties; and thirdly, that deviations from native-speaker norms in the case of collocations often have a covert character and do not manifest themselves as errors.

### 3. Collocations as a source of difficulty for advanced learners

Collocations are generally considered to be a problem area in the teaching and learning of foreign languages, and many research studies provide evidence which seems to support this view. Among such studies is Howarth’s (1996) book-length investigation into the phraseology of non-native speakers’ writing. Howarth’s investigation was inspired by his observation that otherwise very advanced students make one particular type of errors in writing, namely collocational errors, which, according to him, “can lead to a lack of precision and obscure the clarity required in academic communication” (Howarth 1996: ix).

Waller (1993) has explored the characteristics of near-native proficiency as they demonstrate themselves in writing. The method of the research was based on collecting texts written by both native speakers of English and by near-native speakers of English and giving them to native speakers to find “errors”, or instances of unconventional usage. The evaluators commented on a variety of problems, pertaining both to syntactic and lexical usage, as well as to the rhe-

torical and cultural aspects of the texts. The writing was also analyzed statistically for lexical sophistication, variation, and density. In many cases, the raters could not distinguish between native and near-native texts. Among “lexical problems”, collocational errors formed the largest category. What is even more interesting, however, is that problems in collocational usage were found to be restricted to the texts written by non-native speakers, whereas other problems (e.g. syntactic errors, or lexical errors other than collocational) were found in both groups of texts. This means that, of all the features that could be pinpointed about the non-native speakers’ texts, collocations emerge as the most tangible marker of non-nativeness, “a foreign accent in writing” (Waller 1993: 224).

Similar conclusions can be drawn from a study by Källkvist (1998), in which she analyzed the types of collocational errors made by advanced Swedish learners of English. She found that errors in the use of verbs involve mostly semantically general verbs such as *make*, *put*, *get*. Apparently, these “high-utility” verbs, which are simple, frequent and easy to learn are often overused by learners. The most common type of error was, in Källkvist’s study, that of overextension, which resulted in awkward collocations, pointing to the unawareness of usage restrictions on the part of the students. The reason for that seems to be the fact that general verbs, such as *make* or *get*, are highly polysemous. Many of the infelicitous collocations reported in Källkvist’s study are not semantically or syntactically incorrect, but they do not conform to usage restrictions (e.g. *make something up to date* instead of *bring* or *it will get usual* instead of *become*). Because high-frequency verbs are very polysemous, the restrictions on their use, which are not predictable from their meaning, may be perceived as highly arbitrary by learners. Källkvist also found that the learners misuse transitive verbs more often, which is not all that surprising, given that intransitive verbs are not usually followed by a direct object, so fewer collocational restrictions apply to them.

Channell (1980) found that advanced students of English, who were requested to mark the acceptable collocations in a collocational “grid”, made some errors by selecting collocations which are unacceptable in English; more importantly, they also failed to mark a large number of acceptable collocations, despite their familiarity with the individual lexical items in question. “This shows how learners fail to realize the potential even of words they know well, because they only use them in a limited number of collocations of which they are sure” (Channell 1980: 120). This view has been corroborated by later studies of learner language, including corpus studies, which will be discussed below. Similar findings were obtained by Granger (1998), who also used the type of test in which subjects were asked to mark acceptable collocations.

Arnaud and Savignon (1997) compared the knowledge of rare words and complex lexical units in advanced ESL learners of French L1, and found that the learners performed better in the case of rare words than complex phrases. Such findings, while confirming the intuitive impression that collocability is a difficult area in foreign language learning, have to be interpreted with some caution as far as the precise statement of the degree of collocational difficulties is concerned. In a much-quoted study, Bahns and Eldaw (1993) found that the knowledge of collocations lags behind the knowledge of general vocabulary. They

argue that collocations present a major problem for advanced learners, therefore the knowledge of collocations does not expand at the same rate as the acquisition of individual lexical items. The concept of this “lag” is rather dubious, however: if collocational knowledge is one of the elements of word knowledge, then it is rather obvious that there are many more words in the lexicon than just those on which “full” information is available (if full information is possible at all).

#### 4. Restrictedness and difficulty

On the basis of his analysis of verb + direct object collocations in a corpus of advanced learners’ academic writing, Howarth (1998: 36) claims that the most problematic area for learners in terms of collocational knowledge is made up by the collocations which are on the borderline between free combinations and restricted ones: “It may be claimed that the problem facing the non-native writer or speaker is knowing which of a range of collocational options are restricted and which are free”. Unlike idioms and more restricted collocations, the “somewhat restricted” word combinations are not learned as wholes. “It appears that the ability to manipulate such clusters [collocations which are partly restricted] is a sign of true native speaker competence and is a useful indicator of degrees of proficiency across the boundary between non-native and native competence” (Howarth 1998: 38).

Linguists and teachers, says Howarth, tend to concentrate on the two extremes of the collocational spectrum: the free, rule-governed combinations on the one hand, and fixed, stable multi-word units, such as idioms, on the other. What deserves more attention, Howarth (1998: 42) argues, is the “large and complex middle ground of restricted collocations”. He states that “...learners’ difficulties lie chiefly in this central area, since idioms and free collocations are, phraseologically, largely unproblematic. The greatest challenge lies in differentiating between combinations that are free and those which are somehow limited in substitutability” (Howarth 1998: 42).

This claim fits in with certain implications of the psycholinguistic research, namely, that fixed multi-word units, such as idioms, may be less problematic for learners than subtler kinds of restrictions. Collocations are semantically transparent, while idioms are often opaque and/or figurative. When encountered in the foreign language for the first time, the former category will not attract the attention of the learner, who has no problem with the comprehension of such collocations. Idiomatic expressions, on the other hand, attract attention and therefore are perceived as salient. They may be more easily memorized as the result of the initial difficulty in interpreting their meaning (see also Howarth 1996: 55, who quotes results from studies on figurative language which support this view). Collocations, therefore, are difficult because they are word combinations which are not completely “free” and not completely “fixed” either. It is the complex nature of restrictedness that is a problem. The explanation offered by Howarth (1996: 160) is as follows:

[The learners] are perhaps not aware that figurative senses are more restricted in collocability than are literal senses and therefore require greater precision in their use. It seems that learners may be familiar with many of the verbs characteristic of academic discourse, such as *adopt*, *follow* or *reach*, without understanding how the phenomenon of restricted collocability is related to the specific sub-senses of these verbs rather than to the verbs themselves in all their uses.

This statement has been corroborated by the findings of Nesselhauf (2003), who, after a careful analysis of the verb-noun collocations in texts written by German learners of English, found that the highest rate of mistakes occurred in the combinations with a medium degree of restriction (such as the combinations with the verbs *exert*, *perform*, or *reach*, where the verb can occur with a wide, but nevertheless restricted, range of nouns). The least problematic of all verb-noun combinations turned out to be the ones belonging to a category more restricted than the one described above, but less restricted than idiomatic expressions (such as *pay attention*, *run a risk*). Nesselhauf (2003: 234) therefore concludes that “collocations with a low degree of restriction are the most difficult kind of combinations for the learners”.

## 5. The “hidden” aspects of advanced L2 use

An important characteristic of advanced learners’ L2 production is that deviations from native-speaker norms may be very subtle, and do not often take the form of explicit errors. Advanced L2 users may produce phrases and expressions which, considered individually, are correct, in the sense that they do not violate the L2 rules of morphology, syntax, semantics, etc. However, the cumulative effect of the use of certain phrases rather than others may give the impression of non-nativeness. For example, there is nothing wrong with the phrase *very interesting*; however, if a learner uses *very* as the only adjectival and adverbial intensifier, the overall effect in a piece of writing will attract attention as the case of the overuse of *very* and – at the same time – underuse of other potential intensifiers. This rather simplistic example points to two important issues. Firstly, error analysis has some limitations as far as the analysis of advanced L2 production is concerned, because the features of language use which cumulatively may be responsible for a non-native character of the language need not necessarily be identified as errors when analyzed individually. Secondly, certain features of advanced L2 use are more likely to affect the style and register of a text rather than the straightforward correctness at the syntactic/semantic level.

The research tool which seems best suited to finding such hidden aspects of L2 use is the statistical analysis of corpora of texts. DeCock et al. (1998) used computer corpora and specialized software to automatically extract recurring word combinations (taking into consideration combinations of two, three, four and five words) from a corpus of texts written by EFL learners of French L1. Apart from giving a general overview of the use of formulae by learners and native speakers, the authors investigated one specific kind of formulae in more detail – namely, the so-called vagueness tags, or those instances of phrases such as *whatever*, *and so on* etc. which fulfill a specific pragmatic function (which

means that such phrases cannot be automatically retrieved from the corpus, because the researcher must judge whether the phrase indeed functions as a vagueness tag). What emerges from the data is statistically a highly significant underuse of vagueness tags by learners – native speakers use almost four times as many vagueness tags as the learners. There is only one striking exception: the phrase *and so on*, which appears nine times more often in the learner corpus than in the native speaker corpus.

Lorenz (1998, 1999) and Granger (1998) investigated adjective intensification in corpora of English texts written by native speakers and by learners of German and French L1 backgrounds, respectively, and found various patterns of underuse and overuse of adjective intensification. Lorenz (1998, 1999) found that the learners use more adjective intensifiers. In his analysis, he took into account any lexical item or phrase that was found to intensify an adjective, rather than focusing on a pre-determined set of adjectives and intensifiers. In an attempt to find the reasons behind the observed pattern of overuse, Lorenz analyzed the kinds of adjectives which were intensified most often. They turned out to be roughly the same for both groups, with *important* and *good* being intensified most often. Therefore, it could not be argued that adjective intensification had a different function for the two groups. Another possible explanation – that of a cultural difference between the groups – was not borne out either. Although the native speakers in the study were British and could therefore stereotypically be argued to be prone to understatement, it was not found that the learners overused maximizers and boosters more than minimizers. The most plausible explanation is that because of a generally more limited vocabulary, the learners used adjective intensification to make the adjectives they have more “versatile”. However, the corpus provided evidence to the contrary: it was the learners who used more variants along a semantic scale, such as *tiny*, *gigantic*, *minute* etc. Lorenz (1998: 59) explains the overuse of intensifiers in terms of a more general tendency for a kind of linguistic “over-zealousness” on the part of the learners who, anxious to make an impression and conscious of the limitations of their linguistic repertoire, “... might feel a greater need than native speakers to stress the importance – and the relevance – of what they have to say”.

Granger (1998) investigated the use of adverbs ending in *-ly* and functioning as amplifiers of adjectives in the French sub-corpus of ICLE and in a native speaker corpus (all the words ending in *-ly* were automatically retrieved and then manually sorted). The comparison revealed a statistically very significant underuse of amplifiers in the non-native speaker corpus, both in terms of the number of tokens and types – a finding which is in direct contrast to that of Lorenz (1998, 1999). The most striking differences occurred in the case of three particular amplifiers: *completely*, *totally* (both overused) and *highly* (underused). Granger (1998: 148) observes that one of the possible reasons for the wide range of *completely* and *totally* in learner writing – their use as “safe bets”, or all-round amplifiers – is that “they have direct translation equivalents which are very frequent in French – *complètement* and *totalement* – and which display similarly few collocational restrictions. There may be an equally feasible interlingual explanation for learners’ underuse of *highly*, whose literal equivalent, *hautement*, is only used in formal language and is relatively much less frequent.

It is striking that the few combinations that the learners actually used – such as *highly developed* / *civilized* / *specialized* / *probable* – translate very nicely into French”.

Certain observations regarding the “hidden” aspects of language learners’ collocational competence can also be made on the basis of studies involving elicitation procedures. For example, I have found that very advanced Polish learners of English, when asked to intensify adjectives by means of adverbial boosters, made no errors and used the same words as native speaker controls. However, in quantitative terms, the Polish group significantly underused restricted intensifiers (ones that combine with a limited number of adjectives, such as *glaringly*) and overused “general-purpose” intensifiers such as *extremely*, *totally*, *strongly*, etc. (Leśniewska 2006a). These findings are in agreement with Granger’s conclusion, mentioned above, that learners are more likely to use “all-purpose” intensifiers than restricted ones.

## 6. The underlying mechanism of language production

While many interesting observations have been made about the way in which EFL learners use collocations, it is still uncertain how the language production of learners differs from that of native speakers as far as collocations are concerned. Sinclair (1991) made an influential distinction between two modes of language production: the idiom principle (retrieval of chunks) and the open-choice principle (creating new combinations of words in keeping with syntactic and semantic rules). It was considered a possibility that language learners may operate more according to the open-choice principle than the idiom principle. This possibility has not found much support from empirical studies, however. Suggestions have been put forward (Weinert 1995; DeCock et al. 1998) that learners use the idiom principle to a comparable extent as the native speakers, but that the chunks they use are different. DeCock et al. (1998), in the above-mentioned analysis of a subcorpus of ICLE, find that advanced learners use “prefabs” just as much or even more than native speakers. Among the multi-word combinations listed by the researchers there are many phrases in common to the two populations, although they occur with different frequencies. “Consequently, they can be said to apply the idiom principle, but the chunks they use (1) are not necessarily the same as those used by native speakers, (2) are not used with the same frequency, (3) have different syntactic uses, and (4) fulfill different pragmatic functions” (DeCock et al. 1998: 78).

In her study of the French sub-corpus of ICLE, Granger found that the learners significantly *overuse* a certain type of sentence builders which function as macro-organizers in discourse, such as *I think that...*, *I truly believe that...*, *I would say that...*, *we must not forget that...*, etc. “Clearly then, while the foreign-soundingness of learners’ productions has generally been related to the *lack* of prefabs, it can also be due to an excessive use of them” (Granger 1998: 155). According to Granger, the overuse of familiar prefabs can be explained in terms of Dechert’s (1984: 227) notion of the “islands of reliability” or “fixed anchor-

age points, i.e. prefabricated formulaic stretches of verbal behaviour whose linguistic and paralinguistic form and function need not be ‘worked upon’”. Because of the demanding nature of foreign language production, learners seem to rely on familiar expressions, which, recalled as wholes, contribute to fluency.

While there is no empirical support for the view that the learners use fewer formulaic expressions, there is evidence that they use fewer restricted collocations. Granger (1998: 151) notes that the learners seem to be using amplifiers “more as building bricks than as parts of prefabricated sections”, producing acceptable collocations which are often free combinations rather than those typical of native use.

The most significant findings concerning the proportion of conventional language in native speaker and learner production come from Howarth’s (1996) study of English academic texts written by natives and non-natives (postgraduate students at the University of Leeds, from various L1 backgrounds). The proportion of all the verb+direct object collocations which were classified as conventional (restricted collocations and idioms) was 38% in the native speaker corpus, and significantly lower (25% on average) in texts written by non-native speakers. Howarth quotes findings by Cowie (1991, 1992) concerning journalistic writing in English, where the proportion of collocational “density” was found to be above 40%. This figure, together with Howarth’s data, suggests that there is a stable norm of “mature native phraseological use”, whereas learners’ writing contains fewer restricted collocations.

## 7. Directions for future research

In future studies, an effort must be made to define collocations and types of collocational errors, as well as constructs such as the “advanced” level of proficiency in L2, as precisely as possible, in order to enable a comparison of the results from different studies.

Corpus approaches are invaluable because they make it possible to investigate the learners’ actual language production, including patterns of avoidance, underuse or overuse of certain collocations, and the investigation is not limited to a pre-selected group of items. The main problem with corpus approaches is the same as in any investigation of the lexical characteristics of texts: the results may depend on how comparable the texts are in terms of the subject matter, length, time constraints on production, etc. For example, Howarth (1996: 140) observes that learner writing, especially academic writing, is “adulterated”: the learner is likely to draw on a range of phrases and expressions which occur in the sources used. Even if references and direct quotations are removed from the texts in the corpus, as it was done by Howarth in his research, the writing is not exactly the learner’s own output.

The main methodological challenge in studies based on elicitation techniques and judgement tests is establishing a valid selection of collocations to be tested, which would justify meaningful generalizations about the L2 users’ phraseological competence in general.



It seems that the studies which investigate the phraseological competence of EFL learners most thoroughly are the ones which combine corpus approaches and carefully controlled judgment / elicitation techniques. Granger (1998) complemented the above-mentioned corpus study with a test given to French learners of English and to native speakers of English. The test required the subjects to judge the correctness of various combinations of adverbial amplifiers and adjectives. The subjects were also asked to indicate the collocations which they perceived as the most frequent, which provided an indication of which combinations seemed salient to them. It turned out that the learners recognized significantly fewer combinations as "frequent" than the natives, while marking a greater number of combinations as "correct". Generally, the type of marked combinations showed that "the learners' sense of salience is not only weak, but also partly misguided" (Granger 1998: 152).

An important issue which remains to be investigated is the extent of cross-linguistic influence upon the learners' use of collocations. Some studies (such as Granger 1998; Nesselhauf 2003) provide evidence of the cross-linguistic factor at work. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to ascribe a particular collocational error to the underlying process. Therefore, although instances of collocational errors which show transfer from L1 have been identified by some researchers (e.g. Biskup 1992), it is difficult to assess the overall extent of cross-linguistic influence with respect to collocations. In the case of corpus studies, in order to reach any conclusions about the extent of L1 influence, one needs to take into account a comparable corpus in L1. So far, analyses of the "hidden" aspects of the learners' use of collocations have not yielded much information on the extent of cross-linguistic influence. DeCock et al. (1998), in the study mentioned above, list three possible reasons for the underuse of vagueness tags by learners: systematic differences in the way vagueness tags are used in French and in English, the influence of teaching, and the "lack of contact with native speakers", without venturing further into the subject. Unfortunately, we do not learn from the article whether there is any evidence of cross-lexical influence playing upon the learners' use of formula, since the analysis does not include a comparable corpus of texts in French. It is therefore not possible to say whether the overuse of one particular phrase is related to the frequency of occurrence of its equivalent in the learners' mother tongue. As in the case of the study by DeCock et al., Lorenz's study does not include a comparison between the corpora of native speakers' and learners' writing with comparable texts in German, therefore it is difficult to exclude with absolute certainty the possibility that adjectives are generally intensified more often in German, and the overuse of adjective intensification by learners writing in English is due to some kind of cross-linguistic influence. Clearly, in order to answer the question about L1 influence on phraseology in terms of "hidden" characteristics, the methodology of research would have to include not only the analysis of native and non-native corpora, but also of texts written (preferably by the same subjects) in L1.

The research studies quoted above confirm the difficulty learners have with collocations, and the fact that some aspects of collocational knowledge seem to elude even very advanced foreign language learners, whose proficiency in the L2 may otherwise be native-like. However, the extent of such problems has not

yet been convincingly quantified, and the very possibility of such quantification is rather remote. Therefore, until more is known, statements such as “collocations are the most difficult aspects of vocabulary knowledge” need to be made with caution.

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## Streszczenie

### Kolokacja a użycie języka obcego

Artykuł poświęcony jest przeglądowi badań empirycznych dotyczących używania kolokacji (syntagm konwencjonalnych) przez osoby uczące się języka angielskiego jako obcego, zwłaszcza na poziomie zaawansowanym. Z przeglądu tego wynikają trzy główne wnioski. Po pierwsze, kolokacje to często problem typowy dla zaawansowanych użytkowników języka obcego, których zakres słownictwa jest stosunkowo duży, natomiast nie dorównuje mu poziom wiedzy kolokacyjnej. Ponieważ granica pomiędzy znaczeniem słowa a jego restrykcjami kolokacyjnymi jest niewyraźna, zrozumiałe jest przenoszenie asocjacji leksykalnych z języka ojczystego na język obcy. Po drugie, odchylenia od normy frazeologicznej nie muszą być postrzegane jako błędy; mogą mieć bardziej subtelny i często „ukryty” charakter, więc dopiero przy analizie dużej ilości tekstów okazuje się, że częstotliwość użycia pewnych związków frazeologicznych jest inna niż w przypadku rodzimych użytkowników języka. Po trzecie, zaobserwowane różnice występują głównie w kolokacjach o średnim poziomie łączliwości i niskim poziomie idiomatyczności.