

The Notion of Collocation in English with Reference to Arabic

Ahmed Bashir AL-Kattan⁽¹⁾

الملخص

يهدف البحث الحالي إلى دراسة و تمحيص ماهية ما يصطلح على تسميته في اللغة العربية بالمتلازمات اللفظية أو المصاحبة اللغوية (collocation) في اللغة الانكليزية بالإضافة إلى إلقاء الضوء على جملة من المسائل ذات الصلة بالموضوع انف الذكر. بعض الأمثلة من اللغة العربية سوف تعطى كلما دعت الحاجة إلى ذلك وسيتم التطرق أيضاً بصورة موجزة إلى أهم البنى التركيبية للموضوع قيد الدراسة.

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to examine thoroughly the notion of collocation in English along with explaining some other relevant points related to it. Some examples from Arabic will be given here and there, as the need arises. The main structural types of collocation will be mentioned in passing too.

⁽¹⁾ Lecturer, Dept. of English, College of Education, University of Mosul.

1. Introduction

In its essence, collocation or equally so, linguistic company, word patterns, conventional word combinations, is a matter of sequences of lexical items, which habitually co-occur (Cruse, 1986, 40). It is the linguistic company that a lexical item or word keeps with other words, phrases, prepositions and even affixes. So different grammatical units like preposition and noun (e.g. to go by train but not on foot), adjective and preposition (e.g. good at language but not in), adjective and noun (tall man but not high),...etc. are used together to create patterns (McCarthy, 2001:2). Equally so, we are used to saying in Arabic "زهير الأسد", "سهيل الخيل", "خيرير الماء", "صغير الرياح", "هدير" "حفيف الأشجار", "البحر", and so on. That is to say, speakers design their language to have some specific patterns to attribute situated identities and specific activities. These various grammatical units collocate with each other and they are called collocational patterns (Gee, 1999:29). So people, for example, used to say "swarm of bees" but not "pack" which is usually used to refer to a group of dogs or wolves. They are also used to say "harmful to" but not "for" in "smoking is harmful to health". They frequently say "beef of cow" but not, "venison" which is used with "deer". In the same way, we could probably deduce that people are used to writing, for example, "rentable" with "— able" and "corruptible" with "— i/able". And "most", for instance, may be applied to saying, "dog" but not to all adjectives or different grammatical units in general (Kearns, 2002: 238) and so on. It is then a matter of linguistic convention that is probably based on a sort of semantic fit (Persson, 1990:52). It is much like choosing certain clothes that go together or that might be suitable for some specific activities. If we thus want to use an English word naturally, we need to learn the other words that often go with it, and such word patterns can be very different from language to language (Redman, 1986: 30).

2. Aim

This paper aims at investigating the notion of collocation in English along with explaining as much as possible some other relevant

topics that are in the same or near fields of study. It will present a clear account of collocation and provide a thorough description of it. To make the picture more clear and complete, resort will be made to some examples from Arabic as the need arises. Collocation here is classified into four main types with reference to syntactic considerations. Other possible types (whether syntactic or semantic) are beyond the scope of study here.

3. Collocation and Situational Language

If we want to learn a language and if we want to know how to use a word in that language correctly and naturally, we then need to learn how individual words are combined together in different phrases and sentences. That is to say, we have to know the other words which often go with that word (word patterns) and this is where the area of collocation is met. So some adjectives like, for example, “alone”, “ready”, “sure”, “alive”, ...etc. are normally (or often) used only after a link verb:

e.g. The man wanted to be alone.

Some other adjectives like “countless”, “atomic”, “existing”, ...etc. are normally used only before a noun (attributively) (Collins Colouild New Student Dictionary, 2002: 62).

e.g., He sent countless letters to the newspaper.

To stretch it further, people used to say “a roasted meat” and “a toasted bread” but not the other way round. So collocations are combinations of words that are preferred over other combinations that otherwise appear to be semantically equivalent (Croft and Cruse, 2004, 249). Also Wilkins (1972:128) points out that when a man is sitting alone at home and hears some noises outside, he will prefer to say “strange noises” rather than “unusual” or “abnormal” noises. This is because of the collocational range of each expression. Yet, such case will not create a big difficulty for the native, but it will definitely do for a foreign learner of English. On the contrary, it will be difficult for an English foreign learner of Arabic to know that “الغيرة الخضراء” is something odd and not acceptable in Arabic, although it is quite normal in English to say “green jealousy”. It is difficult for him to know that if he wants to intensify the noun “الغيرة”, he must probably

use “الغيرة العمياء”: “الغيرة العمياء” and not “الغيرة الخضراء” because of the collocational range of the expression. So collocation is a distinct aspect of our inherited linguistic knowledge of words in that we should know (as native speakers) do which words tend to occur with other words (Yule, 1996:122). If we then ask a thousand people what they think of when we say “hammer”, most of them will say “nail”, and if we mention “table”, they will mostly think of “chair” and so on. In this way, we can probably deduce that collocation is taken to be a sort of restriction or constraint that prevents people from allowing themselves much more freedom when they use language. It is therefore usually the case in Arabic to use, for example, "نخبة" with something good like "نخبة من المبدعين", while, say, "فئة", mostly couples something bad like "فئة ضالة أو باغية".

4. Idioms and Collocation

An idiom is a fixed group of words or it is a semantic complex with a special meaning that is different from the individual words constituting that idioms and it is difficult to understand its meaning from the meaning of the individual words. (Redman, 2002, 30). So expressions like “turn up” (meaning arrive), “break even” (meaning make neither a profit nor a loss) can be difficult to understand because their meaning is different from the meaning of the separate words in the expression. If we know the meaning of “break” and “even”, for example, this does not help us at all to understand “break even” as one semantic unit. Idioms are usually special to one language and cannot be translated word for word, although related languages may share some idioms (Swan, 1998: 243). On the other hand, knowing the meaning of words is quite helpful in collocation in that we will face no problem in understanding so many collocations. The problem with collocation then is to choose the right word that English speakers usually use in certain situations. So for example, we know “I missed the bus” means, “I couldn’t catch the bus”, but we do not know that we cannot use “lost” instead of “missed”. Equally so, we know that “a heavy smoker” means “someone who smokes a lot”, but we do not

know that we cannot use say, “strong” or “big” instead of “heavy” (Redman, 2002: 30). So the meaning of collocations is easy to understand, but the same idea may need a completely different expression (collocation) in other languages. If we therefore just translate from the source language into the target language, we may say something which is completely wrong. For example, “blue stocking woman” in English means a distinguished woman who cares much about literature and thought. As such, in a sentence like “Sharlot Brontee is a blue stocking woman”, we cannot translate it into Arabic as:

“تعد شارلوت برونتي ذات جورب ازرق طويل”

On the contrary, it should be translated as:

“تعد شارلوت برونتي ذات اهتمامات فكرية و أدبية”

because, “blue stocking” is a collocation and not two separate words. Therefore, a problem turns up here since it is apparent that many collocations depend not only on the linguistic knowledge, which includes the semantic knowledge, but on the cultural knowledge as well (cf. Kurzon, 1996: 226).

5. Collocation and Selectional Restrictions

Croft and Cruse (2004:249) state that there are some selectional restrictions on the possible combinations of words, which are frequently determined by the word, and as foreigners, we need to know such restrictions. We need to know, for example that we should say “free of charge” because “free of” collocates with charge and not with, say, “cost” or “payment”. And that “a freak of nature” cannot be substituted by, say “ a monster of nature” (LDOCE, 1990: 193).

It follows that we cannot use other words in collocations even if they have similar meanings because ? collocations are structurally fixed. We cannot therefore, say “mind’s peace” instead of “peace of mind” which is a common fixed collocation. In the same way, “pass” and “salt” collocate with each other because people often ask to pass them the salt (Dillon, 1977: 22). So it seems something related to the linguistic convention or the past use of words which are transmitted from one generation into another away from the academic learning of

words. We can thus call it a linguistic routine, and when words are combined outside the ranges of their collocation, the result will be a semantically ill-formed sentence like the famous sentence “Colourless green ideas sleep furiously” (Robins, 1982: 54). It seems to us that this is usually the case not only in English but in nearly all languages. In Arabic, for example, we used to say “إنسان وديع” to refer to “a meek man” and “حيوان أليف” to refer to “a domestic animal”. It might be acceptable, although it is rare, to say “حيوان وديع”, but it is not acceptable at all to say “إنسان أليف”, although when it is said, native speakers of Arabic will understand the intended meaning. (Lyons, 1981: 52) states that “flaw”, “defect” and “blemish” appear to have the same meaning, but some recent linguistic work shows that they are not totally interchangeable because of the collocational restriction of each. Whereas it is normal to use “blemish” or “flaw of someone’s complexions” and either “flaw” or “defect” of someone’s argument, it would be odd to use “blemish” of someone’s reasoning. Following the same line of thinking , it is definitely the collocational restriction of Arabic words that makes us say “نزف دماء” “نزف دمعاً”: “...etc. عرقاً”, so, it is deduced that the notion of collocation then has a basic effect on the definition of synonymy in that it makes it plausible for us to adopt the broad definition (partial synonymy) rather than the narrow one (total synonymy).

6. Collocation and Collateral Adjectives

Generally speaking, a collateral adjective is an adjective which corresponds to or is attached to a certain noun semantically (The Right word II Thesaurus, 1983: 245). That is to say, such adjectives are restricted in usage in that they are coupled with certain nouns in particular and not all nouns. For example, “cardiac” is the collateral adjective of “heart”, and “corporal” is the collateral adjective of “body”, “cardiac deficiency”, for instance, means a heart ailment and “cardiac attack” is also related to heart; “corporal punishment” on the other hand indicates a way of hitting people with a stick to punish them. As such, collateral adjectives lie in the heart of collocation, but they are often not readily accessible (not easily restored mentally) to many people (notably writers) since they are not within the everybody

usage of language and also because their identity is not suggested by the corresponding noun. Other examples are:

<u>The noun</u>	<u>It's collateral adjective</u>
east	oriented
ear	aural
year	annual
hand	manual
sun	solar
mother	maternal
death	mortal
⋮	⋮
⋮	⋮
⋮	⋮

We may cite some other examples from Arabic like, for example, the collateral adjective “عضال” which corresponds to the noun “داء” (داء); “جلل” which collocates with “خطب” (خطب جلل); “تمير” which is related to “ماء” (ماء نمير); “أسيل” which accompanies “خد” (خد أسيل); “ممشوق” which is attached to “قوام” (قوام ممشوق), and so on.

7. The Structure of Collocation

Being an area of a wide extension, it is not easy at all to collect all the possible collocations of any language. However, the task will be more plausible if the discussion is geared towards the types of collocation with reference to its structure. The most common and widely used types of collocation are as follows⁽¹⁾:

(¹) In listing these types, we have mainly consulted (Grains and Redman, 1986), (Palmer, 1982) and (Seidle and McMordie, 1978).

- 1) Subject noun + verb.
e.g., The earth revolves around the sun (and not, for example circulate).
The lion roared (and not, for example blow or neigh).
- 2) Verb + object noun.
e.g., She bites her nails (and not for example cut or eat).
- 3) Adjective + noun
e.g., There was a loud noise (and not for example high)
She stayed there the livelong day (and not the livelong morning or year)
- 4) Adverb + past participle used adjectively
e.g., She was badly dressed (and not for example ugly)
We say fully insured (and not for example completely)

To sum up, the structure of collocation is of different types and it is our linguistic experience repeated over and over in some fixed given circumstances that makes for collocation at any language (cf. Bolinger, 1975: 103). The question whether that experience is a uniform one all over an X language-speaking society is left open. So, collocative meaning “consists of the association of a word which acquires an account of the meanings of words which tend to occur in its environment “(Leech, 1981: 127)”⁽¹⁾.

8. Some Concluding Remarks

- 1) Most of the used collocations are easy to understand but not easy for a foreign learner to produce correctly.
- 2) As such, native English speakers do not expect foreigners to speak collocationally in a perfect and correct way.
- 3) Collocation in English, and possibly in nearly all languages, follow no rules. It happened that English speakers (as part of their linguistic tradition) have chosen to use X word pattern instead of Y word pattern.

⁽¹⁾ Reproduced from Persson, (1990: 119).

- 4) The learner of English has to learn by heart the different word patterns or equally so, the conventional word combinations to express his ideas correctly and naturally.
- 5) Collocations can be very different from language to language.
- 6) To produce collocations correctly depends mostly on cultural knowledge rather than linguistic or semantic knowledge alone.
- 7) Different collocations denote that there is a sense of meaning in each word, which is mostly, reflected when it is combined with other words.
- 8) Collocation could be a constraint that prevents people from allowing themselves much more freedom when they use language.
- 9) To be familiar with collocations means, that you have a mark of high proficiency in a foreign language.
- 10) We can neither change word order in collocations nor substitute words by some other words even if they have similar or near meaning.
- 11) The notion of collocation has a basic effect on the narrow definition of synonymy (total synonymy).
- 12) The area of Collateral adjectives is a problematic one for both native and foreign speakers since they represent a sort of register which could not be mentally recalled or used mechanically.

References

- Bolinger, D (1975) Aspect of Language. USA, Harcourt press, Jovanouich.
- Collins Cobuild New Student Dictionary(2002). U. K., Harper Collins Publisher.
- Croft, W. and Cruse, A. (2004) Cognitive Linguistics. Cambridge , Cambridge University Press.
- Cruse, D.A. (1986) Lexical Semantics. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Dillon, G (1977) Introduction to contemporary Linguistic Semantics. Indiana, Indian University press.
- Grains, R. and Redman, S. (1986) Working With Words. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Gee, J. (1999) Introduction to Discourse Analysis. London, Routledge Francis Group.
- Kearns, K. (2002) Semantics. USA, Martin's Press LLC.
- Kurzon, D. (1996) "The Maxim of Quantity, Hyponymy and Princess Diana", IPRA, vol. 2, No. 2 (217-227).
- Leech, G. (1981) Semantics the Study of Meaning. 2nd ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1990).
- Lyons, J (1981) Language, meaning and Context. U.K. The Chauser Press.
- McCarthy, M. (2001) Vocabulary in Use. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Palmer, f. (1982) Semantics. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Persson, G. (1990) Meanings Models and Metaphors. Stockholm, Umea University Press.
- Redman, S. (2002) English vocabulary in Use. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Robins, R. H. (1982) General Linguistics: An Introductory Survey. New York, Longman Books.
- Seidle, J. and McMordie, W. (1978) English Idioms and How to Use Them. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

- Swan, M. (1998) Practical English Grammar. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- The Right Word 11 Thesaurus (1983). Boston, Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Wilkins, D.A. (1972) Linguistics in Language Teaching. London, Edward Arnold Ltd.
- Yule, G. (1996) The Study of English. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.daneprairie.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.