

## On Collocative Meaning: Semantics and EFL

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### Introduction

Semantics is rather difficult to define. Linguists and philosophers alike have for decades been trying to define its intricacies, characteristics and properties. Within the realm of language, semantics is a street called meaning, which lies in the suburbs that is linguistics. Semantics with regards to this essay helps us to find meaning out of what is inputted into our brains from spoken language sources. Many linguists have tried to bottle these sources up and put labels on them, some have succeeded and some have not. Geoffrey Leech (1969) is one such linguist who has come up with seven different kinds of meaning. However, it would be helpful if there was one plain definition for collocative meaning. Though, after reviewing a multitude amount of essays and after reading dozens of books on the topic, making one informed decision on what collocative meaning is tricky. This essay will delve into collocative meaning by looking into its origins, definitions, role in semantics and role within the EFL environment. The author wishes to find out if it is, or is not, a kind of meaning, or perhaps, that it might be something else altogether.

### What is Collocative Meaning?

Within the world of semantic theory, there is a quagmire of both similar and dissimilar theories pertaining to collocative meaning. In their book *The Meaning of Meaning*, C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards (1923) offered a total of 16 main categories. Other notable linguists such as Charles Morris (1946), Roman Jakobson (1942) and Peter Newmark (1988) have discussed various models of meaning over the years as well, creating and distinguishing various classifications and categories along the way. According to Leech however, there are no more than seven types of meaning. Meaning plays a vital role in understanding what is communicated. Thus, Leech's seven types of meaning have contributed much to the field of semantics. The study of meaning is still relatively a new field; therefore its potential evolution will have much value in the analysis of meaning in the field of linguistics. Additionally, the

field of meaning in language, is at the forefront of what language is and how it works. After all elements of grammar and how language is put together to create words and sentences, meaning is what is transmitted from person to person creating understanding. Nevertheless, what can we take from this besides the fact that semantic theory is vast? The purpose of semantics is to increase or enhance our understanding of meaning conveyed by certain terms. Meaning is complicated then, as in most conversations, words are contextualised and cannot simply be understood by using a dictionary. This is where collocative meaning comes in. Words co-occur (collate) with certain words, e.g. *totally awesome* not 'exclusively awesome' or 'wholly awesome.' Therefore the purpose of collocations are to enhance our understanding of meanings brought about from verbal communication, for collocative meaning is a broad term for the many examples of co-occurrence.

What about collocations, where does it come from? Collocations have their place in linguistics because it is indeed a type of meaning that offers associations of a word with other meanings of the word in certain environments. Collocations and semantics live in symbiosis with each other, each word helping the other one to define what each other means. Hence, collocative meaning is the meaning of a word in a very specific context where it glues itself to another word to create a cohesive phrase such as: "*You are one sick puppy.*" Literally this phrase lends itself to interesting reactions but it has become an interesting way of referring to someone as demented, perverted, or not humorous and so on. Each one of the words on their own in the previous example have exact meanings but when glued together they form a completely different meaning. This is key to what collocations are and how and why they exist; furthermore, it should be investigated by educators specifically as to how collocations are used and for what reasons. In his book *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) paid close attention to how words are used within language: "The meaning of a word is its use in the language." (as cited in Biletzki & Matar, 2011, p. 10). Thus, if collocative meaning helps with regards to adding to the meaning within language, then this shows that collocations definitely refer to meaning in English and have a rightful place in semantics.

### Defining Collocation

Ball states that R.H. Robins refers to the Greek Stoics as relating collocations to semantics (1969, p. 221). According to Robins, studies on collocative meaning began 2,300 years ago in Greece. According to Namvar, Mustafa, and Nor, the Greek Stoics studied the meaning of relationships between words, and they found that words "do not exist in isolation and they may differ according to the collocation in which they are used" (2011, p. 3). According to the dictionary *Origins*, collocation shares lineage with

the Italian *allocare* (to place at or to allocate) (1990, p. 143). In addition, Yvonne Müller states that the term collocation comes from the Latin verb *collocare* (to arrange, to set in order). She states that it first appeared in 1951 by J.R. Firth: “Firth advocates the thesis that words get meaning from their collocates” (2008, p. 4). Collocates are the name for each of the words which form the collocation (Firth, 1957, p. 196). Firth also stated famously that, “you shall know a word by the company it keeps” (p. 11). Therefore collocation is a broad term which describes words that often appear together in common usage, either spoken or in text. For this reason, collocative meaning also comes under the umbrella of semantic meaning, for according to the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, lexical meaning is “the meaning of a word, without paying attention to the way that it is used or to the words that occur with it” (“Lexical meaning,” n.d.). D. A. Cruse agrees with this position that collocations are “sequences of lexical items which habitually co-occur, but which are nonetheless fully transparent in the sense that each lexical constituent is also a semantic constituent” (as cited in Sadeghi, 2010, p. 2). The fact is that collocations have a type of semantic consistency where “the constituent elements are mutually selective. For example, the word heavy in *heavy drinker*, *heavy drug user*, and *heavy on petrol* has a defined contextual environment which requires the selection of the notion of ‘consumption’ in the immediate environment” (Sadeghi, 2010, p. 2).

With regards to collocations being useful in meaning, Namvar et al., state that within the realm of language teaching that it has over time run on the ideas that if EFL learners “master the grammar system, learn lots of words, that the speaker will be able to talk about any topic” (2011, p. 1). They go on to note that “people are using grammar to do what it was never meant to do.” They say that collocations are “prefabricated chunks” stored in the “mental lexicons” of native speakers. Phrases such as *sour milk and rancid milk* are collocations which are “chunks of lexis” which “do more than name things, they also have a pragmatic element. Pragmatics are included in the fields of logic and philosophy, as they deal with the relationships between words, symbols, and expressions and who is using them. Relating to linguistics however, pragmatics primarily looks at language used in situational contexts between various speakers. Collocations enable learners to talk about things – to ‘do’ things” (p. 2). This suggests that collocations regarding meaning are quite important in speech, in that they contextually add to the semantics of a phrase or word pairing (pragmatics).

### Dictionary Definitions

Regarding collocative meaning in relation to dictionary definitions, and how it relates to collocations as a type of meaning, in her wonderfully in-depth essay *On Cognitive Synonymy*, Martina

Hoffmanová uses many dictionary definitions to help define where collocative meaning stands within Semantics. For instance, the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines 'collocation' as something that holds "a regular combination of words: (such as) *resounding victory* and *crying shame* are English collocations" (as cited in Hoffmanová, 2008, p. 26). In the *Webster's New Word Dictionary of the American Language*, Hoffmanová states that this particular dictionary looks more at the origin of the word *collocate* as a *lexeme*. *Lexeme in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary* states that a *lexeme* is "a meaningful linguistic unit that is an item in the vocabulary of a language" ("Lexeme," n.d.). This clearly means that a *collocate* creates meaning. Perhaps the best argument found in Hoffmanová's essay that collocative meaning is indeed a type of meaning comes from the *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English*: "collocation is the way words combine in a language to produce natural-sounding speech and writing" (as cited in Hoffmanová, 2008, p. 19). Collocation has its place in daily spoken English, that the use of such phrases as *utterly stupid* (adverb + adjective), *maiden voyage* (adjective + noun), and *round of applause* (noun + noun) clearly show how collocations affect meaning in English. Meaning conveys itself usually through unchangeable partnerships between two words that seem destined for each other. A problem arises with terms of meaning for the EFL student: "to a native speaker these combinations are highly predictable; to a learner they are anything but" (2008, p. vii). Therefore a phrase such as *maiden voyage* to a student studying English as a foreign language (EFL) will probably sound strange, especially after that student has looked inside his/her dictionary to try to piece the two words together. Nevertheless, with regards to meaning, Hoffmanová writes that Leech states that "collocative meaning consists of the association a word acquires on account of the meanings of words which tend to occur in its environment" (p. 28). Perhaps this is why the collocation *kick the bucket* means 'to die', or a place to die perhaps, as most buckets might be seen as cold, deep, lonely, or dark places where a dying fish might find its last breath in. The imagery sometimes exists regardless of whether we know the origin of a collocation. Imagery and thus 'meaning' plays an importance in the reason for categorizing such said phrases into collocative meaning. Steven Pinker, the well known linguist states that Ferdinand de Saussure proposed that "the word *duck* doesn't look like a duck, walk like a duck, or quack like a duck, but I can use it to cause you to think the thought of a duck...at some point in our lives (we) have memorized an association between that sound and meaning" (as cited in Pinker, 2001, p. 14). This gives much meaning to any collocation which might reference a duck because collocation and association play a huge part as to how collocations convey meaning.

### Collocatives in Use

However, when it comes to actual classroom use, there is not much actual practice apart from the infrequent “consciousness raising” (Laybutt, 2009, p. 22). Yet, if EFL educators can understand that collocations are rarely taught or practiced within the classroom, then it would be important for educators to try to create one unit in one semester to bring to light some example collocations. A second language learner (L2L) might then learn to pay attention to collocations and what they are or at least learn a few perhaps by memorisation or practice. Memorising even a few might instil some kind of interest within the learner to investigate what collocations are and how they can be used in speech with specifically native speakers.

Many words seem to customarily come together so often that they become idioms (to have an *iron will or nerves of steel for example*). In English we can also use the adverb *highly + complicated* and the adverb *extremely + joyful* which in turn has the adverbs portraying the same lexical functions (amplifying the force of the two adjectives). However they are not interchangeable, for *highly joyful* just doesn't sound right to the native English speaker. In adjective-noun collocations Mwihaki found, just as in English, that in Kiswahili (Swahili) attributes can be used with precise reference to either the masculine or feminine sex but can't be used interchangeably: “cases at hand are the adjectives *mrembo* ‘beautiful’ and *shujaa* ‘brave’. The term *mrembo* would describe a woman or a girl but not a man or boy. Conversely, the attribute *shujaa* would refer to a man or a boy but not a girl or woman” (2004, p. 136). Mwihaki also stated that “lexical collocation may be universal or language specific” (p. 135). This is important with regards to meaning in language for it is a necessary definition for linguists and educators alike to be able to categorise phrases such as *iron will* and *nerves of steel*.

If semantics deals with meaning, then collocative meaning should be within this elite club, for it clearly has its place vis-à-vis how native speakers put so much emphasis on it in daily speech. If we look at memes, which was coined by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976) and taken from the Greek word *mimema* which means ‘something imitated’ we can see an expression as two or more words glued together in our minds. If when teaching in an EFL class a student violates collocational rules, then the phrase can be seen as awkward and unnatural. For example, certain memes (collocations) would include *nuclear family, junk food, key to the future, starving students, and holy cow*, to name a few. Take *holy cow*. If a speaker said “Holy cow look at that crazy man!” to a group of friends who all spoke native English, it would make sense to them. On the other hand, if that same speaker said “Holy moose look at that crazy man!” those same friends might look at the speaker quite strangely, this is why teaching such collocative meanings are important both to EFL students and

native English speakers alike.

In her paper *Collocations in Practice*, Antoanela Marta Dumitraşcu states that Halliday and Hasan view collocations as 'more inclusive', that they believe collocations to include "those sets of words whose members participate in a semantic relation" (2010, p. 12). This could be used precisely with the previously stated collocation *holy cow*, because for most people, *holy cow* is also a reference to certain cows in India. These cows are viewed as holy by the Hindu faithful. Also, *junk food* creates an image of bad, greasy, oily or generally unhealthy food. In the same essay Dumitraşcu backs up this idea when she states that:

Not few are the cases when collocations are included in the classifications of other lexical patterns. Many linguists have proved that a comparative - contrastive approach of fixed word combinations from the perspective of their idiomatic nature can bring to light important aspects related to their semantic and syntactic behaviour. (p. 24)

### Collocations in EFL

In the essay *Korean EFL Language Learners*, Park hypothesises that collocations should be taught in EFL settings, as it is an important layer of linguistic semantics which can help a student understand more about an implied situational phrase. "It is necessary to teach collocations to learners. If collocation is understood and learned as a unit, learners can communicate more quickly and efficiently in both spoken and written contexts" (2003, p. 20). With regards to EFL education in Japan, for the most part students learn standard 'textbook' English and most teachers are not aware of words which co-exist together. Perhaps this is why Hodne states that there "are various ways to define it and it seems that linguists and teachers have not yet agreed upon a common description" (2009, p. 4). Using collocation is meaning indeed, but in the classroom it is usually brushed aside as being 'too colloquial' for the students to learn, (i.e.) that they should stick to learning 'standard' English. Yet many Japanese linguists are currently discussing the topic more and more. Koya states in his in-depth dissertation that "research on collocation in Japan used to be very limited because the definition of collocation was vague" (2005, p. 116). But there seemingly is a lot more interest in Japan after both native and non-native teachers alike have experienced difficulties teaching students that collocations are necessary with regards to speaking English (p. 109).

L2Ls depend on their translation skills to attain meaning from an English word or phrase. There are many parts of the language spectrum which help the L2L learn English. L2Ls need to practice

Table 1. Collocative phrasing with three synonymsd

Word	Subtypes	Collocative Phrase	Dictionary
<b>Polish</b>	Noun + Verb	“Your sentences lack polish.”	A Compact Dictionary of Verb-Noun Collocations
<b>Polish</b>	Verb + Noun	“Studying in France gave Yuriko’s French considerable polish.”	A Dictionary of Verb-Noun Collocations
<b>Shine</b>	Verb + Preposition	“Fred has taken a shine to the girl.”	
<b>Polish</b>	Verb + Modifier	“Polish off one’s work.”	Kenkyusha’s New Dictionary of English Collocations
<b>Shine</b>	Participle + Preposition	“Polished in manners.”	
	Verb + Preposition	“She shines in school.”	
<b>Glow</b>	Noun + Qualifier	“The fiery glow of the contest.”	
	Verb + Preposition	“Glow into enthusiasm.”	
<b>Glow</b>	Verb + Preposition	“Glow with pride.”	An English Collocational Dictionary on Prepositions
	Verb + Preposition	“I can always come in on the glow from Havana.”	
<b>Glow</b>	Verb + Preposition	“She bathed in the warm glow.”	Collocations: Dictionary for Students of English.
<b>Shine</b>	Verb + Adverb	“The sun was shining brightly.”	

conversation and learn the intricacies of speaking conversationally with native speakers to communicate fluently. Although collocations aren’t necessary for an L2L to be understood by native speakers, May Fan argues that they need to be able to have a grasp of it:

The importance of collocational knowledge in L2 competence is beyond dispute. It enables the learners to speak more fluently, makes their speech more understandable, and helps them write or sound more native-like.” (as cited in Pawley and Syder, 1983; Hunston and Francis, 2000; Wray, 2002)

But, what happens if an L2L comes across the phrases *rain or shine*, *glow with pride*, or *she shines in school*? As is shown in Table 1 below, L2Ls can use three similar words (shine, polish, and glow) interchangeably creating multiple collocations. L2Ls do have problems with collocations because while “one of the difficulties lies in the idiosyncratic nature of collocational use.” (Fan, 2008, p. 111). For example, “while *strong* has the same meaning as *powerful* in a *strong/powerful argument*, *powerful*

collocates with *car* but *strong* collocates with *tea*" (as cited in Halliday, 1966, p. 160). Perhaps the biggest problem with L2Ls is that collocations are difficult because "native speakers attain a vast responsiveness of collocation subconsciously and gradually as they grow up in their speech community, most learners, especially those who learn the second language (L2) only in the classroom environment, do not have this opportunity" (p. 111). Therefore L2Ls in non-native surroundings lack the contact with L2 that is necessary to eventually learn and comprehend the usage of collocations.

### Teaching Collocations in EFL

Teachers in EFL classrooms should be considerate of not forgetting to teach collocations and idioms for that matter. This is a side to the English language which must be exposed to students. However, out of all the many faucets of EFL education, collocative meaning is in the periphery, as most teachers are focused on the most obvious parts of EFL education such as learning verb conjugation, noun structure and article usages for example. Problems English learners have with learning collocations are two fold. These must be looked at further to see how collocations can be learned, investigated, and used.

One reason students have trouble learning them is because of first language transfer. This means, that as is typical for most EFL students they might try to translate the collocations from their native language into English and vice versa. Collocations are difficult as they often cannot be translated word for word (try translating and understanding "on the other hand" in any other language for example). This in itself is quite problematic and offers up many opportunities for educators to pursue. Opportunities which exist are lessons, activities, games and drilling. Perhaps an interesting look into collocations would reveal that they are sets or usually two words joined together to make meaning. Memorisation and drilling is key to the remembrance of such meaning. Therefore, besides students memorising set collocations on their own, they can also learn them in the classroom through repetitional games and activities. This could include using pictures on a whiteboard without the collocation written anywhere, whereby students would try to guess the collocation verbally. Additional activities could include student discovery in the class to find the etymology of the words used in various collocations. This might break down the meaning of a collocation further. Also, additional searching using the internet could help students understand where different collocation came from originally.

Secondly, students of EFL lack the awareness of collocations to even realise that they should be learning them. This lack of awareness may be due to it not being taught as part of an ESL program



back in a students' home country. There are obviously so many areas of English which need to be learned especially with regards to communicative English. However, many students who learn English in a country where English is not the first language, tend to learn very grammatical so-called textbook English. This is quite common with regards to how most people learn a second language. Yet, when it comes to attaining native level English, and understanding what native speakers are saying country to country, it is paramount that EFL students learn collocations as well as idioms, sayings, jokes, puns, and colloquialisms. As most learners of an L2 know, perhaps the only true way one can learn such elements of language, is by living in a country where the target language exists because many students who have learned EFL in their native country might not even encounter them until they travel or live abroad.

Finally, collocations are arbitrary. They lack rules and reason for their existence. Perhaps EFL educators are to blame as many state they are too hard to teach because they in turn receive too many questions from students asking "but why!" In the end, educators have to be able to tell their students that "best wishes" is a set pair, and that "high wishes" or "exuberant wishes" just isn't the way native speakers convey the certain meaning that "best wishes" invokes in the minds of native English speakers! This is of course confusing to the L2L as even most teachers are unable to correctly explain why a collocation is a collocation. Perhaps some parts of language have evolved to a point where they exist in the lexicon to a point where explaining them is impossible. Sometimes language evolves to a point where its evolution is very difficult to follow. Set phrases in particular are often not delved into by educators.

### **Lexical Association**

Linguists use the term lexical association which refers to the association between words as a key point of interest to those delving into collocational meaning. Pavel Pecina places three types of association under this lexical association ceiling: collocation, semantic and cross-language association. Here collocational association refers to words in phrases or pairings (e.g. *maiden voyage*). Semantic association according to Pecina, reflects the "semantic relationship between words (*sick-ill*)" (2009, p. 2), and cross-language association refers to "potential translations of words between different languages (*maison* (FR) - *house* (EN))" (p. 3). Pecina offers up this view of the importance collocations have in the field of semantics. Meaning is indeed inferred in certain utterances, and are most definitely meaningful to the native speaker, and eventually to the L2L as well. Peter Matthews also discusses how semantic and lexical association affect collates. Matthews argues that "*toasted* and *roasted* describe essentially

the same process, but are restricted in their acceptable combinations” (1982, p. 250). If we take a look at *roasted meat* and *toasted bread* they are ‘semantically compositional.’ If a native English speaker were to say ‘roasted bread’ or ‘toasted meat,’ both utterances wouldn’t sound natural at all, yet the context would stay intact because native speakers would most likely have an image of cooked or crispy toast and cooked meat: “typically, collocations are expressions that can be interpreted more or less out of context” (p. 254). Finally as we have seen, collocations are word pairings or “combinations of words” that speakers prefer “over other combinations that otherwise appear to be semantically equivalent” (Croft & Cruse, 2004, p. 249). Thus, collocative meaning enhances meaning within a language.

### Conclusion

Although collocations can be difficult for both native speakers and L2Ls alike to understand, meaning or imagery as De Saussure stated, can help us to learn collocations. Both semantic and lexical meanings take many shapes and are sometimes very difficult to expose within words while grammatical meanings are usually quite structured. This understanding of structure versus unstructured is key when understanding how collocations work. Collocations evolve and take shape over time, regarding English specifically, considering many countries have it as their first language, collocations often move beyond borders and oceans. This movement of collocations adds to the confusion of where they come from originally and how they were constructed. Furthermore, collocative meaning helps English speakers to better enable themselves to communicate freely and creatively. Additionally, collocations can also act as a barometer to a native speaker when listening to a speaker of English. The reason for this is instinctual, and tells the listener where the speaker might be from or if the speaker is a native speaker or not or furthermore about the speakers social status even. Collocations are in our lexicons to assist in our ability to communicate more clearly a meaning or idea. Even though L2Ls may have a hard time *getting their heads around* collocational meaning, it is imperative that they try to learn a few phrases as to reach their goal of speaking more meaningful and fluent English.

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