

LEXICAL COMBINABILITY OF ADJECTIVES AND NOUNS EXPRESSING ELEMENTS OF APPRAISAL

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Abstract

Purposes: The present article aims to examine and analyze the nature of lexical combinability in the English language, namely collocates expressing elements of appraisal found in authentic online news articles.

Methodology: The article is based on the analysis of dozens of online news articles as they contain a plethora of adjective + noun collocates denoting elements of the appraisal.

Results: The phenomenon under study is attracting considerable interest due to its relevance in modern linguistics and practical day-to-day use. Despite this interest, many hypotheses regarding lexical combinability appear to be disputable and, in a way, ill-defined which makes further research well-founded.

Implications/Applications: As a matter of fact, combinatory linguistics has always paid special attention to adjectives expressing elements of appraisal as appraisal itself belongs to, on the one hand, much-discussed, but on the other hand, quite an intricate subject matter. The appraisal is indeed bound to be a multi-purpose linguistic category that has been scrutinized by numerous scholars in the field of philosophy, axiology, aesthetics, etc.

Novelty/Originality: It should be noted, that there are various viewpoints regarding the structure and means of representing attitudinal meaning and their tendency to combine with certain words the novelty of current work is paying to adjectives and nouns.

Keywords: *Lexical Combinability, Adjectives, Appraisal, Linguistics, Syntagmatics, Collocability, Collocates.*

INTRODUCTION

One can well imagine that language is permeated with a large proportion of word clusters which create meaning during the process of speech and text production. As noted by J. Sinclair, lexical combinability being part of the phraseological nature of language gives rise to an incredibly large number of prefabs, that is collocations, fixed expressions, and idioms which native speakers unconsciously and involuntarily operate with on a daily basis. Plenty of research has been undertaken to develop strong evidence for this phraseological phenomenon, both in written and spoken language ([Stubbs, 2001](#); [Howarth, 1998](#); [Sinclair, 1991](#); [Cowie 1991](#)).

Lexical combinability of adjectives and nouns plays a crucial role in contemporary semasiology and lexicology as a human's curious nature tends to assess and appraise its surroundings on a daily basis. In one of her works Z. Timoshenko highlights the fact that collocates expressing elements of appraisal and quality are the most outnumbered. E. Volf also comments on the specific nature of adjectives denoting appraisal saying 'they involve subjective judgments as well as lack grammatical categories which means they possess a vast semantic field'. As our research shows, the vast semantic, as well as synonymous field of adjectives affords ground for their further study ([Sinclair, 1991](#)).

METHODS

The article is based on the analysis of dozens of online news articles as they contain a plethora of adjective + noun collocates denoting elements of the appraisal. The frequency-based approach supported by the SKELL corpus database helped us compile instances of adjectives and nouns reoccurring together in journalistic texts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Lexical combinability per se is closely related to combinatory linguistics, which, as A. Vostokova notes, 'deal with linear relations of language units and their combinatory profile'. The pioneers of combinatory linguistics are considered to be L. Sherba, F. Saussure, N. Chomsky, L. Tesnière and A. Vostokova. It should be noted, that the emergence of syntagmatic, which is based on linear relations among linguistic units, initially gave rise to combinatory linguistics. During the process of its development, syntagmatic established a system of characteristics pertaining to an elementary constituent segment within a text called 'syntagm', which includes linearity and binarity as well as its interdependence with component elements and their ability to integrate.

The 20th century saw the beginning of scrutinizing the phenomenon of lexical combinability by various linguistic schools and circles. However, their viewpoints on certain issues varied considerably due to some ill-defined terms and theories. Nevertheless, one of the theories which were undeniably accepted as the basis of syntagmatic developed by Swiss linguist F. de Saussure. It primarily centered on the relations of linguistic units and described their potential prospects in excruciating detail ([Dobrovolskij, 2005](#)).

A few decades later, L. Tesniere was one of the first scholars to introduce the theory of valency. In one of his works, L. Tesniere expressed the idea of valency as follows: ‘One can, therefore, compare the verb to a sort of atom with bonds, susceptible to exercising attraction on a greater or lesser number of actants. For these actants, the verb has a greater or lesser number of bonds that maintain the actants as dependents. The number of bonds that a verb has constitutes what we will call the valency of the verb’.

The German school redefined the idea of valency previously developed by L. Tesniere, stating that it is a multi-level mechanism where the semantic valency is manifested syntactically and the basis of the syntactical analysis is the semantic one.

The London linguistic school, on the other hand, had a completely different perspective on the problem of valency. According to their theory, valency was attributed to anthropocentrism which is considered to be profoundly embedded in many modern human cultures and conscious acts. In other words, the members of the London linguistic school believed that language should be studied through situations which humans experience, that is, the language we produce during an act of communication is thoroughly contextual.

American descriptive linguistics, which began as an offshoot of anthropology, also contributed to the theory. A few decades later, it developed the concept of contrastive distribution which looked at combinatorial linguistics as the relationship between two different elements in which both elements are found in the same environment with a change in meaning (Cowie, 1991).

As we can well imagine, that lexical combinability is considered to be the main factor of communication between the addresser and the addressee. Words placed in certain syntactic structures create a syntagmatic scheme of discourse. Their combinability is indispensable to the textual formation. However, its role and the discourse perception varies depending on the addresser and the addressee. The addresser chooses specific linguistic means while communicating their message and ideas whereas the addressee decodes those linguistic means extracting contextual meaning.

It follows from the above that lexical combinability comprises a comprehensive list of collocations, figures of speech as well as expressions and idioms which convey meaning to both - the addressee and the addresser. Since the article touches upon the problem of collocability, it makes sense to examine its classification so that we can become more aware of their structure and characteristics.

Modern classification of collectability consists of 5 main types.

Type 1 – free collocability. This type has the largest number of collocations as enables certain adjective to take on new meanings depending on the noun component of a collocation. For instance, ‘terrific’ in the meaning of ‘excellent’ ordinarily collocate with nouns such as ‘opportunity’, ‘job’, ‘actor’, ‘view’, ‘move’, ‘enthusiasm’, etc. However, if combined with nouns such as ‘storm’, ‘increase’, ‘gunfire’, ‘explosion’ usually means ‘horrible’ or ‘serious’.

Type 2 – wide collocability, which is frequently expressed in the ability of lexemes to cooperate with other lexemes of several lexical-semantic groups and realize different seems. To exemplify, let us have a look at multiple meanings of the adjective ‘big’ when placed in certain word combinations. The following definitions and examples are taken from the ‘Cambridge Dictionary’.

1. Large in size or amount. e.g. He comes from a big family.
2. Important or serious, e.g. Tonight’s big game is between Real Madrid and Manchester United.
3. Older e.g. She has two big brothers.
4. Popular and successful e.g. Ethnic food is big in the United States.

However, a more classic example of wide collocability would be better illustrated with the adjective ‘great’. Let us scrutinize its collocates.

1. Used to talk about something that is often bigger than usual. e.g. great caravans of migration, great masses of the population, a great hole in the ground, great difficulty, great danger, great opportunity, a great advantage.
2. Very large and impressive. e.g. the Great Wall of China, The Great Niagara Falls
3. Used to talk about well-known and recognized people. e.g. a great woman/poet/scholar/writer.
4. Used to describe something that is mighty and powerful. e.g. great power/civilization/country.
5. Used to describe important events. e.g. great occasion/disaster/war.
6. Used informally in the meaning of ‘enthusiastic about something or somebody’. e.g. great admirer/reader/fan/talker.
7. Used informally to mean something that is very good or of good quality. e.g. great book/place/time/party/time.

Type 3 – group collocability. This type is primarily characterized as one able to combine with a number of lexemes belonging to one or two lexical-semantic groups.

For example, clothes-related nouns when mended are usually placed with the verb ‘to sew’ – sew a skirt, dress, suit, coat, trousers; whereas when placed with nouns such as ‘button’, ‘ribbon’, ‘pocket’, ‘bow’ the verb ‘to sew’ changes its meaning to ‘fasten something to using a needle and thread’.

Type 4 – single collocability. This type is expressed in the ability of a monosemantic word or lexical-semantic variants to combine only with a certain quantity of semantically collocated words. For instance, auburn hair, hazel eyes, pale skin, bite-sized story/essay.

Type 5 – serial collocability, which features steady combinability of several series of lexemes. To visualize just a few of them - tremendously dangerous / experienced / fascinating / valuable / impressed; highly qualified / visible / guarded / variable / effective / automated (Stubbs, 2001).

The nominative nature of adjectives predetermines their ability to assess and appraise. C. Bally concluded that any linguistic category expressing those qualities stems from adjectives themselves. What is more, some scholars hold the opinion that any adjective possesses an element of appraisal and can be divided into 3 main groups:

1. Fully appraising;
2. Semi-appraising;
3. Potentially appraising.

Of paramount value in the world of media are obviously emphatic words and word combinations, which strengthen and highlight the message of the story. The journalistic style is bound to convey news and ideas in a way that speaks to its readers and evokes strong emotion - this is where adjective + noun collocates do their job.

It is necessary to emphasize that any type of appraisal has a specific structure. According to E. Volf, adjectives of appraisal acquire a certain degree of meaning when contextualized. There are 4 main components determining appraisal:

1. Subject;
2. Object;
3. Appraisal’s nature;
4. Reason.

The subject of appraisal is an individual, a community or society attaching value to the subject itself by assessing its characteristics. The subject identification poses a certain challenge as it can be perceived alternatively, that is - explicitly - through axiological predicates and implicitly - which is the complete opposite of the means described above. To identify the subject of appraisal implicitly one needs a much more comprehensive contextual framework (Fellbaum, 2007).

The objects of appraisal are the things put under assessment. As noted by N. Artyunova, ‘any object put under assessment is meant to be assessed and appraised’. While appraisal’s nature seems to be quite self-explanatory, reasons for appraisal are ordinarily based upon the aims the writer pursues when writing an article or a story.

Before we turn to adjective + noun collocates analysis, let us examine the nature of newspaper vocabulary, namely broadsheets and tabloids, which have their own features of lexical combinability.

Broadsheets possess the following lexical characteristics:

- More complex and sophisticated vocabulary;
- Extensive use of polysyllabic words;
- The vocabulary of broadsheets, namely adjectives, is semi-formal, factual and informative;
- Mainly modifiers are used to provide information rather than for emotional impact;
- Bias may be evident through the choice of lexis but it is usually more blatant;
- Individuals who feature in stories may be referred to as more formal.

Tabloids differ from broadsheets in some respects, too. Here are some of their vivid characteristics:

- Their vocabulary is simpler and more direct; it is primarily dramatic, sensational and forceful (e.g. huge, massive, detrimental, furious);
- Complex and polysyllabic words have a tendency to be avoided;
- There is extensive use of journalese (e.g. dash, clash, boost, bid);

- Modifiers often have an emotional impact (e.g. tragic, audacious, bias);
- Bias may be quite apparent through the use of words with obviously positive or negative connotations;
- Individuals who feature in stories may be referred to familiarly (e.g. use of first names).

Going back to the question of the axiological nature of any language, it should be noted that is comprised of two key elements: general appraisal elements and context-based appraisal elements. As a rule, general appraising elements express positive or negative attitudinal meanings varying in their synonymous chains ([Howarth, 1998](#)).

Among the analyzed examples of adjective + noun collocates containing general appraising elements one can notice that the adjective ‘growing’, which, according to several dictionaries means:

1. Increasing in size or/and quantity (Cambridge dictionary);
2. Used for describing things which are becoming greater in size or amount (Macmillan dictionary);
3. Getting bigger because of natural growth (Collins dictionary);
4. Undergoing natural development (Merriam-Webster);

Changes its shade of meaning when put as ‘adjective + noun’ collocates. To exemplify, let us look at the following instances and their alternative meanings found in various newspaper articles:

1. Growing fears - a serious concern
2. Growing impact - serious influence
3. Growing awareness - heightened realization
4. Growing unrest - mounting/widespread disturbance.

Having analyzed the adjective ‘growing’ placed next to the nouns ‘fears’, ‘impact’, ‘awareness’ and ‘unrest’, one can easily notice the adjective’s slight changes of meaning despite having the same imagery in mind which is given by the various dictionaries cited above ([Yorio, 1989](#)).

Let us now turn to some more adjective + noun collocates expressing elements of appraisal and assessment.

The adjective ‘rapid’ can be found in many of the analyzed articles combining with numerous nouns. It makes sense to emphasize the difference among words synonymous to ‘rapid’ (such as ‘fast’ and ‘quick’) as their peculiarities determine their frequency in newspaper and tabloid articles.

According to Oxford Learner’s Dictionary,

‘Fast’ is used to describe a person and/or thing that is able to move at great speed and is usually found in the following collocates: a fast car/train/pace/lane/rate/speed/tempo.

‘Quick’ is more often used to describe something that is done in a short time or without delay and is usually found in the following collocates: a quick look/glance/decision/break/movement/step/question/answer/return/solution.

‘Rapid’ is mostly used to describe the speed at which something changes and is usually found in the following collocates: a rapid change/development/growth/improvement/progress/recovery/rise/increase/turnover/decline/expansion/advance

Since the purpose of the media is to keep society informed about the latest events and occasions, the adjective ‘rapid’ is indeed the word that perfectly fits in the context. The example sentences listed above provide certain contexts where the adjective ‘rapid’ showcases its various shades of meaning ([Hoey, 2012](#)).

- The event came as concerns grew that rapid advances in such technologies could spin out of human control and become detrimental to society. (From an article on ‘Artificial Intelligence’);
- This is especially true for countries experiencing rapid population growth. (from an article on ‘massive caravans of migration to the US’);
- The rapid increase of pharmaceutical solutions is causing many problems (from an article on ‘Terminal diseases’);
- Over such periods high growth rates, and rapid improvements in living standards, are dependent upon an increase in productive capacity rather than on temporary changes in the level of demand. (From an article on ‘Economic growth in the US’);
- Many software and hardware companies enjoyed rapid expansion before the bubble burst and market growth slowed. (From an article on ‘Financial accounting’).

The adjective ‘grueling’ can be traced in many articles on sports, health, technology and politics in general. Here are some of the excerpts, demonstrating various contexts as well as shades of meaning with adjective + noun collocates regarding the word ‘grueling’:

- Middlesbrough brought faces a grueling ten-match programme in April. (From an article on ‘football competition’);
- In his grueling work schedule, sixty-year-old Garrett continues at a rate that would tax many men half his age. (From an article on ‘NHS in the UK’);
- The Original Mountain Marathon is one of the most grueling events imaginable. (From an article on ‘jogging in the UK’);
- Post-stroke care is absolutely essential for the well-being of patients, not only in the first few hours but also in the grueling months that follow. (From an article on ‘healthcare’);
- These incredible Army veterans have completed a grueling 1000-mile expedition across Australia. They’ve been reunited in Sydney to meet the Duke and Duchess of Sussex to talk about their amazing achievement. (From an article on ‘Meghan Markle and Prince Harry’s tour across Australia’);

The excerpts provided above perfectly illustrate how context can tweak the meaning of the word depending on the purpose of the article or the message of the story. In the first two examples as well as the last one, the adjective ‘grueling’ is synonymous to the word ‘challenging’ when combined with the nouns ‘programme’, ‘schedule’ and ‘expedition’, whereas the remaining ones express the idea of how ‘excruciating’ the ‘events’ and ‘months’ are.

CONCLUSION

Overall, our results appear consistent with the scholars’ observations listed at the beginning of the article and prove the fact that collocates expressing elements of appraisal and quality are the most outnumbered. Our data, however, suggest that we still have a long way to go to unravel the complexity of the lexical combinability of adjectives reoccurring together in journalistic texts. Future investigations are necessary to validate the kinds of observations that can be made in this study.

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