Spinning a Web of Words: demonstrating the principles of collocation with Harry Potter

Student ID number	1047459
Module Number (1-6)	1
Title of Degree Programme:	MA Applied Linguistics
Title of Module:	Sociolinguistics & Lexis
Assessment Task No.	LX/09/04
First Submission or Resubmission	First submission
Date Submitted	July 31st 2009
Name of tutor	Douglas Jarrell
Word Count	4,389

Choose a short, authentic, written or spoken text in English (about 200 - 500 words) and select at least twelve examples of collocations, including some fixed expressions. Discuss how you might use these examples to demonstrate to students the constraints on word-combinations in English.

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is a fact widely discussed and generally accepted that users of language do not always assemble sentences one word at a time, inserting vocabulary words into a mental grammatical framework to produce linguistic output that is always new and unique. Language teaching that is based entirely on this classical model is therefore outdated and inaccurate. Mental linguistic processing seems to rely heavily on associations that are not primarily grammatical in nature, and this is attested to by the phenomenon of lexical collocation: the common co-occurrence of certain words in a manner not predicted by grammatical rules. Collocation ensures that it is unrealistic to assume that any word can be placed next to any other word, and that choices are limited according to context.

In this paper I will discuss the implications of this idea for EFL teaching, before looking at a text-based approach to showing students the principles of collocation and how it limits the word-choices open to the language user.

1.1 The idiom principle

Any discussion of the constraints on word-choice in English must surely start with Sinclair's "idiom principle" (Sinclair, 1991). The idea that language users produce their linguistic output not one word at a time, but by "piecing together such ready-made 'prefabricated' units appropriate to a situation" (Carter, 1998:66) has been at the centre of language study during the intervening decades. Wray (2000:466) discusses the possibility that a very large amount of spoken language, up to 80% according to some estimates, is comprised of these pre-constructed forms, which sidestep time-consuming mental processing by being instantly

available. If this figure is accurate, and even if it is an overestimation, it is an indication of the high degree of constraint on word-choice in English. Furthermore, any attempt to teach English without consideration of this aspect of language generation would be seriously misleading as to the nature of the language. Which prefabricated units are appropriate is governed by context, and learners can be shown the workings of collocation with reference to specific contexts. These prefabricated units have been discussed at great length, as we shall see below, and cover a large range of lexical items, from highly fixed idioms to more loosely-fitted but still strongly associated word-pairs. In this paper I shall discuss the pedagogical implications of the idiom principle before focusing more specifically on individual lexical items.

2. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF FORMULAIC SEQUENCES

2.1 Terminology

This concept has been widely discussed, and in the process it has generated an expansive terminology. Wray (2000:465) provides a table of some 47 different terms, most of which overlap at least partially. She takes a broader view, using the term "formulaic sequence" to cover the range of items "used to describe aspects of formulaicity in the literature" (ibid:464), defining it as:

> "a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from the memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation and analysis by the language grammar".

This is a delicately worded definition which covers many manifestations of the idiom principle. However I think it is a little problematic when it comes to short, two- or three-word collocations. They are undoubtedly meant to be covered and the term "collocation"

appears in Wray's table of terms. However, it seems to imply that all the many thousands of collocations known to native English speakers are stored whole in the memory: that, for example, "hair style" is stored whole and separately from "hair spray". This would seem unlikely. I think what terminology is appropriate is largely determined by the particular aspect under examination. Wray is speaking of the principles underlying formulaicity, and so she employs a term which attempts to cover all aspects discussed in the literature.

2.2 Pedagogical content and analyticity in the classroom

Despite the potential confusion of terminology, however, what seems clear is that the principle of idiom, these 'formulaic' aspects of language, have important pedagogical implications. Given that "recent research puts…formulaic speech at the very centre of language acquisition" (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992:xv), how should we go about teaching it? Wray analyses and compares three proposed methods, those of Willis (1990), Nattinger & DeCarrico (1992), and Lewis (1993). All these methods attempt to create a language teaching syllabus based around lexical principles, rather than grammatical. All three put significant emphasis on teaching these 'formulaic sequences'. Wray explores the idea that there is an underlying paradox in all three approaches, summarized in the following passage:

> "In the teaching syllabuses, the intended outcome of presenting formulaic sequences to the learner is to make him/her behave in a linguistically more native-like way, but the process by which this is encouraged to occur is the breakdown of the sequences into their constituent components, the very thing that native speakers appear not to do, even though they are capable of it." (Wray, 2000, p.480)

In other words, Wray concludes that the three methods she is examining all advocate teaching the learner "formulaic sequences" in the assumption that he or she will break down and analyse these stock phrases and that this analysis will improve their "native-like" use of the language; however this is in fundamental opposition to native-speaker use of formulaic

sequences, which by their very nature bypass mental analytical processes. She goes on to discuss the consequences of embracing or avoiding such analyticity in the classroom. Embracing analyticity can advocate the inference of generic rules from learnt phrases, something which is incompatible with the irregularity of many formulaic sequences and can therefore lead to false conclusions:

> "how is the learner to know that it is possible to use *large amounts* and *largely speaking* as input for analysis and rule-building, but that *at large* and *by and large* will not succumb to that treatment and should not be analysed?" (Wray, 2000:482-3)

Avoiding analyticity, on the other hand, can lead to students who possess an admirable set of authentic stock phrases, but, having merely learnt these phrases by rote without examining their composition, lack the ability to manipulate them to ensure their relevance in a variety of real-world situations (Wray, 2000:483).

Wray rounds off this discussion with a personal communication from Willis, who approaches the dichotomy of analyticity by accepting that some measure of analysis must be included in the classroom and that, even if this leads to the sort of false conclusion mentioned above, it is "a very useful and productive overgeneralization" (Willis, personal communication quoted in Wray, 2000:484). One learns from one's mistakes, after all.

Wray's conclusion, and this last comment from Willis, suggests that a balance is needed in the classroom between analysis and lack thereof.

2.3 Selection of specific items to be taught

Bahns (1993) and Shin and Nation (2008) move into the specifics of teaching collocations, dealing with the question: assuming we are to teach collocations, exactly which ones should

we teach? Both narrow the focus of the debate from the full range of "formulaic sequences" discussed by Wray, to collocations in particular. In defining "collocation", Bahns borrows the following passage from Benson, Benson and Ilson:

> In English, as in other languages, there are many fixed, identifiable, non-idiomatic phrases and constructions. Such groups of words are called *recurrent combinations*, *fixed combinations*, or *collocations*. Collocations fall into two groups: *grammatical collocations* and *lexical collocations*. (Benson, Benson and Ilson, 1986, quoted in Bahns, 1993:57)

Bahns goes on to explain that he will focus on lexical, rather than grammatical collocations, and argues that we can narrow down the field of choice to those collocations not present in the learner's L1, as learners operate on a "hypothesis of transferability" (Bahns, 1993:61) of collocations between L1 and L2 and will automatically translate L1 collocations into L2 without needing to be taught. There are, I believe, two questions which need further clarification in relation to this idea: firstly, as there will presumably be many collocations in L1 which do *not* exist in the target language would this approach not need to incorporate some method of flagging those items that are not transferable; and secondly, Bahns used as his evidence for this a comparison of collocations in English and German. It would be interesting to see if the principle held between much less closely-related languages and much more disparate cultures.

Shin and Nation use corpus research and a strict set of six criteria to search for and analyse the most common collocations in English (or, more specifically, the collocates of the most common words in English), in order to "arrive at a list of the most useful spoken collocations for elementary learners of English." (Shin and Nation, 2008:339). The list that they create could be used by teachers and syllabus designers as a valuable starting point in deciding what lexical items to teach.

3. A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO TEACHING COLLOCATION

3.1 The everyday needs of EFL teachers

Much of the literature on the subject of teaching formulaic sequences is focused on the broad concept of developing syllabi. The three methods discussed by Wray (2000) do just that. However, many teachers are concerned less with the pedagogical theories and more with the practicalities of everyday classroom teaching. Teachers may not be so concerned with such a long-term approach, and instead may simply want to demonstrate the principles of collocation in English, in order to encourage students to develop connections and relationships amongst vocabulary items. Many teachers cannot design the entire syllabus for their students, but may want to manipulate the syllabus they have been given to provide opportunities to teach collocation. In such cases, what teachers need is practical ideas for class activities that demonstrate to students the idiom principle in action. This incorporation of aspects of collocation into a syllabus over which teachers may have no control is what I mean by a more "pragmatic approach", as opposed to large-scale syllabus design, which is not the primary concern of many teachers.

3.2 Developing a more pragmatic approach through collocation

It is important to teach students, from as early a level as possible, that they have certain options, but that these are limited by context. Students don't have to be overwhelmed with vocabulary, but can be taught that many of their choices are limited to a few words in a set. Collocation can be used to show students which words are more suitable than others, and eventually a map of over-lapping collocational clusters can be established. Studies of corpora can identify and analyze lexical patterns which can be used in the creation of these

clusters, as can students' own responses in class. Authentic texts can be used to show these collocations at work in context.

4. DISCUSSING THE TEXT AND ANALYZING THE COLLOCATIONS

4.1 Text selection

In order to demonstrate how this might be done I am using a short extract from *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, by J.K. Rowling. Which learner levels would be most suitable for this approach is an important question and a potential difficulty, as we will discuss further later, but the use of Harry Potter is guaranteed to engage the attentions of any age-group, and it has the added benefit of the film series, which could be used by the teacher to engage students' interest. The text (given in full in the appendix) is a narrative description of a stereotypical English country scene: this provides the context. The aim of the class is for students to begin to develop an understanding of vocabulary not simply as a list of words and meanings that can be used interchangeably, but as a context-dependent, inter-related web of collocating items, the use of any one of which will carry with it certain obligations on further choices.

4.2 Selection of lexical items for analysis

I have taken nine collocations and four fixed expressions from the text covering most grammatical word-classes. The thirteen items are shown in table 1. The goal is to show the students that many of the lexical choices in these examples are predictable or inevitable, given the context, and then to guide the students toward a composition task in which they will see this for themselves.

Collocations		fixed expressions
summer sky	nestled between	as…blue as a forget-me-not
sloping downhill	sloping steeply	came to a halt
velvety green lawn	brisk walk	rounded the corner
country lane	wide expanse	sure enough
broke into a trot		

4.3 Definition of terms

At this point I should define the terminology I am using. In selecting and analyzing specific lexical items from the text, I am following Shin and Nation in defining "collocation" as:

> "a group of two or more words that occur frequently together, and it is not limited to two or three word sequences." (Shin and Nation, 2008:341)

A collocation may be relatively unfixed: that is, it is not the fixedness of the word-order which identifies it, but the association between concepts. I am therefore separating it from the term "fixed expression", which I will use to refer to a string of two or more words with a degree of syntactic or grammatical fixedness. The importance of this separation will become apparent when I discuss the idea of "collocation" in its sense as an abstract noun, as the principles of lexical association that underlie Wray's 'formulaic sequences'. In this sense, collocations, as manifestations of the underlying principle, are relations *between* lexical items, whereas fixed expressions are lexical items in themselves.

4.4 A proposed warm-up activity

An interesting and fun way to get students to begin to think about collocating words is a simple word association exercise, asking them to write down the first word they think of after hearing a given word. This can be done before the text is presented, with some of the more simple words: "sky" is a good example. The results from this can be collated by the teacher

and used as the beginnings of a lexical cluster. This activity has two potential problems, which the teacher will need to be prepared for. The first is that non-native speakers may not have quite the same patterns of association and could, for example, select a phonetically associated and weakly-collocating word, rather than semantically associated word. The second is simply that, depending on the students' level, their vocabulary may be too small and may not cover the target word. As a possible solution to this problem, (using the word **lane** from the text as an example), rather than explaining the definition of the word (which would need to be done with more words, which would probably become the words most commonly associated in the students' minds) the teacher could prepare an exercise in which a number of pictures of different roads and their surroundings are shown to students, with just the road labeled (for example a picture of a city with the label "street"; a large road labeled "highway") including a picture of a country scene with the road labeled "lane". Despite the potential problems with this activity, it will guide the students towards making their own associations.

4.5 Adjective-noun combinations

In the following statistical analysis, I have used t-score as an indication of a collocation's strength. T-score is a statistical measure which compares the frequency of the collocate in close proximity to the node (the word being searched), with the frequency of the collocate word in the corpus as a whole. This is helpful as it eliminates words such as "the" which, although it might frequently appear close to the node word, is such a common word in its own right that there would be little significance in its appearance on the list of collocates. As a point of reference, the very strong collocation "swimming pool" has a t-score of 61.9, although a score this high is rather rare.

It is apparent from the table that the most common collocating combination (in this text at least) is an adjective-noun form. The simplicity and frequency of this form makes it a useful place to start. The teacher can draw attention to the example **country lane** to show that, in the text, the author has used a collocating adjective which (hopefully) was predicted by the students themselves in the exercise above (using **lane** as the node in a search of the Bank of English, **country** collocates with a t-score of 12.7[1]). **Summer sky** is an interesting example in that it is not in itself very frequent, returning only 39 matches in the Bank of English. However, when considered as part of a set we can label **(*season*)+sky**, a search of the corpus shows that **summer** collocates with **sky** more strongly than the other seasons.

Following this we have the ostensibly three word collocation **short, plump man**, in which **plump man** collocates strongly with **short,** with a t-score of 1.7. **Plump** doesn't necessarily collocate strongly with **man** (though it is perfectly possible and by no means unusual), but in this case we can treat **plump man** as a single conceptual item.

The phrase "…wide expanse of velvety green lawn…", contains a number of interrelated collocations. **Wide** is a strong collocate of **expanse**, with a t-score of 7.37; other strong collocates of **expanse** including **vast** (11.8), **large** (6.8), **broad** (6.2) and **huge** (5.6) all point to a common conceptual theme. Also present in the list are **green** (5.9) and **lawn** (3.2). **Green** is a strong collocate of **lawn** with a t-score of 10.1. Interestingly **velvety** does not appear in a list of the most common collocates of **green lawn**; nor does **lawn** appear in a list

[1] All statistical data is taken from the Bank of English corpus jointly owned by HarperCollins publishers and the University of Birmingham. The corpus stands at 524 million words.

of the most common collocates of **velvety**, although **green** appears (3.7), as do **leaves** (3.9) and **flowers** (3.8), which show a conceptual link with **lawn**.

There are two examples in the text of movement verbs used in noun form to refer to pace, and these may present slight complications to the students. To use "walk" as a noun will be unfamiliar and confusing to lower-level learners; however, once this sense is established, it can be demonstrated that **brisk** collocates strongly, with a t-score of 12.2. **Walk** as a noun has many strong collocates (34 words with a t-score of 10 or more), although many of them relate to the slightly semantically different concept of a walk as an activity, rather than a mode of movement.

The second example is "broke into a trot". Here we have **trot**, more usually used as a verb, as a noun, and it may be a new lexical item altogether for many learners. In this case the verb **broke** (specifically in the past tense) is a significant collocate, with a t-score of 3.5. **Broke** is not at the top of the list of collocates: it is down in 34th place. However, many of the terms above are sporting terms or number terms relating to the top two terms, **on** and **the**, due to the common fixed expression in sports journalism along the lines of "they won the third game **on the trot**". Outside this specific collocational context, **broke** is a significant collocate.

4.6 Other word-classes

The examples we have seen so far have been noun-based collocations. Moving on to other word-classes, we can look at the two instances of the verb **sloping** which can be used to show that lexical items in collocational clusters can be of different word-classes. A potential

problem of introducing the idea of collocational clusters to students is the potential for confusion with synonym groups, as the students are likely to be more familiar with the concept of words with the same meanings than with words that collocate. This pair can be used to show that **sloping** can collocate with either the adverb **steeply** or the preposition **downhill**. As collocates of **sloping**, **steeply** has a t-score of 6.5. Interestingly, **downhill** is not actually present on the list, although **downward** scores 7.6. Both **steeply** and **downward** score highly on Mutual Information: they are the top two items on the list with scores of 11.2 and 9.9 respectively.

This verb/preposition pair takes us to the similar **nestled between**. This can be used in two ways. Firstly, it is simply another example of a verb collocating with a preposition. Secondly, it is an example of colligation, or grammatical collocation: the word **nestled** must take a preposition such as **among**, **between**, **against**, etc; in fact, as collocates of nestled these three words are in the top five, with t-scores of 6.4, 6.2 and 5.3 respectively. As a narrative starting point, a writer will be using the mental image of the house amongst the hills and trying to vocalize it in suitable words; it is more than likely a writer would use the word "nestled" in this situation, and this is exactly the point we are trying to convey.

4.7 Fixed expressions

The fixed expressions in the text can be taken individually to show some of the functions of fixed expressions generally, and the constraints on assembling and using them. **Sure enough** is a discourse-marking fixed expression: what Carter refers to as a 'connective' or 'structuring' discoursal expression (Carter, 1998:67). Its function is to show readers that what follows has been anticipated and expected in the preceding text. In this case: "The

path…seemed to be heading for a patch of dark trees a little below them" is confirmed by "the track soon opened up at the copse, and Dumbledore and Harry came to a halt…". The fixed expression tag **Sure enough** emphasizes the relationship between the two sentences. This common discoursal use is supported by corpus analysis: "enough" is a strong collocate of "sure", with a t-score of 35.8.

Another fixed expression fixed expression is "came to a halt". This has a fixed syntactic structure, although it allows for the insertion of adjectives before "halt" (came to an abrupt halt, came to a sudden halt, etc) or modifiers after the verb (came quickly to a halt, came crashing to a halt, etc). The fixedness of the expression can be seen in a corpus search using "halt" as a noun as the node. The first three collocates and their t-scores are: **a** 51.9, **to** 50.7, and **came** 19.9. Fourth on the list is **ground** 19.7, as **ground to a halt** is another common, though more value-laden form of the expression (a good example of semantic prosody for learners advanced enough to appreciate it). **Abrupt** 12.6 is ninth the list suggesting that this is, by association, an implication of the expression. Again, this can be used to show students that there are 'prefabricated' blocks to narrate certain occurrences.

Another fixed expression caused by strong collocation is "rounded the corner". A corpus search around the node **rounded** as a verb reveals a few specific functions. The first two terms on a list of collocates by t-score are **off** 16.8 and **up** 13.8, completing the phrasal verbs "round off" and "round up". **Corner** 9.1 is fourth and **bend** 6.9 is tenth, demonstrating the frequency of the term used in the text. In fact it is safe to say that a writer would be most unlikely to use the verb "rounded" (when not using it as part of a phrasal verb) other than to refer to the act of moving around a corner or bend. This absence of use in any other setting

gives this collocation the status of fixed expression, and it is the sort of stock phrase that can be used to show students the limited options available in that particular narrative scenario.

Finally, the fixed expression "as blue as a forget-me-not" can be used to demonstrate the principle of simile, and the fact that writers can emphasize certain aspects by means of comparison. This is despite the relative infrequency of the expression.

5. IN THE CLASSROOM

5.1 Statistics for students

While the Bank of English provides an invaluable research tool, it will not necessarily be appropriate to deluge students with t-scores. Statistical data can be used to determine which collocates are more significant than others, but the object here is not simply to teach collocations, but to "demonstrate to students the constraints on word-choice in English". The examples taken from the text can be used as the foundation for lexical clusters, which can be interlinked to create a collocating web of vocabulary centered around the context of the text (a narrative description of a stereotypical English countryside scene). Rather than teaching 'collocations' as de-contextualised pairs of words, this vocabulary web can be used to show how collocation, in its sense as an abstract noun, creates a lexical framework in a given context. An example of how this web might look can be seen in Appendix 2. The double line between **countryside** and **country** indicates that this is a synonymous relationship, rather than collocational. I have used this to highlight that the **country** in **country lane** refers to **countryside** rather than the sense of a nation.

Using this 'WordWeb,' students can be guided through a simple composition exercise, in which they write a short piece of narrative text using words from the web. This activity will show the students how, given certain lexical choices within a specific context, further choices are pre-empted. Rather than having a whole dictionary to choose from, endless vocabulary lists to be memorized and overwhelmed by, choices are limited to a handful of words or fewer.

6. THE ISSUE OF LEVEL

An issue to be addressed in the teaching of collocation is the question of level. How difficult is this idea for students, and at what stage can it be realistically introduced to them? The debate enshrined in the literature discussed above considers collocation to be a fundamental keystone of language learning and the proposed lexical syllabi of Willis, Nattinger and DeCarrico, and Lewis would introduce this lexical approach to L2 learning covertly from the earliest levels, and could help to develop natural patterns of language use. However, the pragmatic approach I am taking to this question, that of language teachers looking for ways to introduce the idea of collocation to their students without necessarily thinking in such "big-picture" terms, assumes that this topic is a useful pedagogical tool that can help students pick their way through the complex lexical forest and come out the other side clutching the most suitable words to express themselves. In this light it seems most appropriate and useful to be introduced at intermediate to advanced levels, when students have a reasonably-sized vocabulary and need to make choices between possible lexical items.

7. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have discussed the continuing debate about the role of 'formulaic sequences'

in language teaching, with reference to some ideas current in the literature. Most of these ideas advocate the creation of large-scale lexically-based syllabi with which to teach EFL. I have then looked at the idea that many teachers may not be concerned with such large-scale thinking and may want a more pragmatic approach to incorporating collocation in their lessons. With this in mind I have looked at a specific text and analyzed a selection of collocations therein, with a view to using these examples in an interactive lesson in which students can see how the principle of collocation can govern word-choices in narrative writing. This, of course, is only one context, and the topic could be taken a good deal further, showing how different contexts demand different collocations and show different constraints. However, I believe I have chosen a useful starting point to the topic, with a sample text that students around the world will recognize, identify with, and enjoy.

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APPENDIX 1: FULL TEXT USED FOR ANALYSIS

They were standing in a country lane bordered by high, tangled hedgerows, beneath a summer sky as bright and blue as a forget-me-not. Some ten feet in front of them stood a short, plump man wearing enormously thick glasses that reduced his eyes to molelike specks. He was reading a wooden signpost that was sticking out of the brambles on the left-hand side of the road. Harry knew this must be Ogden; he was the only person in sight, and he was also wearing the strange assortment of clothes so often chosen by inexperienced wizards trying to look like Muggles: in this case, a frock coat and spats over a striped one-piece bathing costume. Before Harry had time to do more than register his bizarre appearance, however, Ogden had set off at a brisk walk down the lane.

Dumbledore and Harry followed. As they passed the wooden sign, Harry looked up at its two arms. The one pointing back the way they had come read: GREAT HANGLETON, 5 MILES. The arm pointing after Ogden said LITTLE HANGLETON, 1 MILE.

They walked a short way with nothing to see but the hedgerows, the wide blue sky overhead and the swishing, frock-coated figure ahead. Then the lane curved to the left and fell away, sloping steeply down a hillside, so that they had a sudden, unexpected view of a whole valley laid out in front of them. Harry could see a village, undoubtedly Little Hangleton, nestled between two steep hills, its church and graveyard clearly visible. Across the valley, set on the opposite hillside, was a handsome manor house surrounded by a wide expanse of velvety green lawn.

Ogden had broken into a reluctant trot due to the steep downward slope. Dumbledore lengthened his stride, and Harry hurried to keep up. He thought Little Hangleton must be their final destination and wondered, as he had done on the night they had found Slughorn, why they had to approach it from such a distance. He soon discovered that he was mistaken in thinking that they were going to the village, however. The lane curved to the right and when they rounded the corner, it was to see the very edge of Ogden's frock coat vanishing through a gap in the hedge.

Dumbledore and Harry followed him onto a narrow dirt track bordered by higher and wilder hedgerows than those they had left behind. That path was crooked, rocky, and potholed, sloping downhill like the last one, and it seemed to be heading for a patch of dark trees a little below them. Sure enough, the track soon opened up at the copse, and Dumbledore and Harry came to a halt behind Ogden, who had stopped and drawn his wand.

APPENDIX 2: Vocabulary web