

3 Collocation and units of meaning

As seen in the previous chapter, the increasing use of corpora has allowed researchers to identify systematically sets of words frequently co-occurring in language. These sets of words have been variously defined. However, according to their nature they can be put along a continuum which sees at one extreme associations of words where one item can be replaced with no change in meaning— that is to say open collocations – and at the other extreme associations of words whose components are fixed and cannot be replaced by any other elements— that is to say idiomatic sentences.

As Firth (1951:190-215) states, words do not occur in isolation and, for this reason, they should be studied in their linguistic context and their patterns of occurrence should be systematically taken into account.

This chapter provides a theoretical and practical overview of the phenomenon of collocation and of what Sinclair (1996) defines ‘units of meaning’.

3.1 Firth and the notion of collocation

The British linguist J.R. Firth was the first to elaborate the concept of collocation. In his later works, Firth focused his attention mostly on the notions of prosodic analysis in phonology and in his paper “Modes of Meanings” (1951a:190-215 in 1957c) he paid much more attention to the lexical dimension (or mode) of meaning. The meaning that originated by this dimension was defined “meaning by collocation”(cf. Langendoen 1968c: 62).

Firth distinguishes between “general or usual collocations” and “more restricted technical or personal collocations”. He says (1951a: 195-196)

The commonest sentences in which the words *horse, cow, pig, swine, dog* are used with adjectives in nominal phrases, and also with verbs in the simple present, indicate characteristic distributions in collocability which may be regarded as a label of meaning in describing the English of any particular social group or indeed of one person. The word 'time' can be used in collocations with or without articles, determinatives, or pronouns. And it can be collocated with *saved, spent, wasted, frittered away*, with *presses, flies*, and with a variety of particles, even with *no*.

Firth assumes that the meaning of words is not fixed and independent but it is strictly correlated with the context it occurs within. His well-known slogan 'you shall know a word by the company it keeps' exemplifies this strong dependence of words on their use and on their possible collocations.

The habitual collocations in which words under study appear are quite simply the mere word accompaniment, the other word-material in which they are most commonly or most characteristically embedded. It can safely be stated that part of the 'meaning' of *cows* can be indicated by such collocations as *They are milking the cows, Cows give milk*. The word *tigresses* or *lionesses* are not so collocated and are already clearly separated in meaning at the *collocational level*. (in Palmer 1968: 180)

Firth observes that the collocation of a word is not just a 'juxtaposition' but it is an order of *mutually expectancy*. This is why he refers to 'meaning by collocation' (1957:195-196):

Meaning by collocation is an abstraction at the syntagmatic level and is not directly concerned with the conceptual or idea approach to the meaning of words. One of the meanings of *night* is its collocability with *dark*, and of *dark* of course, collocation with *night*.

Its interest in meaning by collocation is evident in its proposal for dictionary making (1957:26). He suggests collecting the collocations of the selected words into a manageable number of sets. Each group of collocations, therefore, will

suggest an arbitrary definition of the word, compound or phrase.

Firth lived in a period in which corpora had not appeared yet and for this reason he refers to 'informants' for collecting materials and definitions of words. Nonetheless his proposal to group words and their collocates sounds very modern since it represents what has been advocated for years and recently realised in modern dictionaries.

3.2 Sinclair: collocation and the principles at the basis of language

Firthian theories, briefly described above, were taken on and developed by Sinclair, who was one of Firth's students at Edinburgh University. As the title of his book 'Corpus Concordance Collocation' (1991) clearly shows, he considers the notion of collocation in the light of corpus evidence and defines collocation as follows (1991:170):

Collocation is the occurrence of two or more words within a short space of each other in a text. The usual measure of proximity is a maximum of four words intervening. Collocations can be dramatic and interesting because unexpected, or they can be important in the lexical structure of the language because of being frequently repeated. (...) Collocation, in its purest sense, as used in this book, recognizes only the lexical co-occurrence of words.

Sinclair considers collocation as the co-occurrence of two or more words in a span of maximum for words either on the left and on the right of the word analysed. The following example is taken from a corpus of BBC articles dealing with the economic crisis and downloaded in a period from February and March 2011. The node word chosen is *downturn*:

onal 9,000 jobs as the **global economic downturn hits** demand for raw
 said that the effects of the **economic downturn** "were difficult to
 onment of unprecedented **global economic downturn**," said the Australian
 finances have been **hit** by the **economic downturn** □ □The European
 all in UK car production □ The **economic downturn** has **hit** car production □
 have been particularly hard **hit** by the **downturn**. They account for about

Frequent collocates of *downturn* are immediately visible on its left and are constituted by *economic* and *global*. However, a closer look at the concordance also reveals the presence of another collocate, the verb *hit*, which may also be found at a distance of three or four items on the left of the node word, that is to say in a ‘maximum of four words intervening’. Words occurring in positions L - 5 (that is to say on the left (L) of the node word and at a distance of 5 items from it) and in position R+5 (that is to say on the right of the node word and at a distance of 5 items from it) are not usually collocates.

This example clearly shows how “words enter into meaningful relations with other words around them” (Sinclair, 1996:71) and make meanings by their combination. The word *downturn* means ‘a reduction in economic or business activity’ (Macmillan, 2002) but the combination with *global* and *economic* adds more details to it, thus making it acquire the meaning of global recession.

The phenomenon of collocation describes the strong attraction existing between words. According to Sinclair (1991:1996), if words attract themselves, words in texts cannot be chosen independently of one another. There exist lexical constraints which

operate at the level of word choice and since their effects are visible on repeated language patterns they can be systematically counted and analysed.

In the example below, the node word is *expected* as used in a corpus of UK weather forecasts downloaded from the website www.metoffice.gov.uk in a period ranging from February to March 2011. The use of this word in the language of weather forecasts is lexically constrained as shown by some examples reported below:

Unsettled and sometimes windy weather is expected through this period,
frosts and overnight fog. Temperatures are expected to be generally near
and central regions, the drier weather is expected to continue, with
Temperatures are expected to be close to or

The word *expected* mainly occurs with the words *weather* and *temperatures* which represent the lexical constraint in its usage. The language pattern including *expected* is

temperatures/weather + to be + *expected* + (to)

and it can be counted and analysed because it frequently occurs in this type of language. It should be borne in mind, however, that language patterns should occur a minimum of twice to be considered worth analysing.

The isolated meaning of *expected* would not help us understand the meaning of the pattern because it is the combination of the meanings of *temperatures* or *weather* plus the verb *expected* which explain the overall meaning.

If words attract themselves, therefore, complete freedom of word choice as well as complete determination is very rare. For this reason, Sinclair elaborates two principles which account for how language actually works and which explain the way in which meaning arises from language text: the *open-choice principle* and the *idiom principle* (1991;1996). According to Sinclair (1991:109), the *open-choice principle* is

a way of seeing language text as the result of a very large number of complex choices. At each point where a unit is completed (a word, phrase, or clause), a large range of choice opens up and the only restraint is grammaticalness.

The open choice principle has also been called ‘slot-and-filler’ model, in that at each slot virtually any word may occur which would be restrained only by grammaticalness. The tendency towards the open choice principle is labelled by Sinclair ‘terminological tendency’ (1996), that is to say the tendency for a word to have a fixed meaning in reference to the world. But as seen above, words enter into meaningful relations with other words and tend to retain traces of these encounters. The traces of these encounters are frequently occurring language patterns. A ‘slot-and-filler model’ does not take into account the phraseological tendency of language, that is to say the phenomenon of lexical attraction between

words. For this reason, Sinclair (1991:110) elaborates a second principle, which he calls the idiom principle:

The principle of idiom is that a language user has available to him or her a large number of semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices, even though they might appear to be analysable into segments.

Sinclair explains that the existence of such pre-packed phrases may be due to a number of reasons but what is crucial is that the idiom principle acts massively and predominantly with respect to the open-choice which functions only alternatively.

The following phrases taken from corpora are an example of how predominant the idiom principle is in language processing. They have been chosen as examples in that they frequently occur in the corpora chosen for analysis:

- *with showers or longer spells of rain* (weather forecast language);
- *with outbreaks of rain* (weather forecast language);
- *the Austrian/Dutch/eurozone/French economy shrank by ...* (news articles on economic crisis);
- *hit by economic slowdown* (news articles on economic crisis);
- *beautiful views of the countryside* (tourist websites);
- *conveniently situated for exploring* (tourist websites);
- *a car bomb exploded* (news articles on Mahgreb crisis);
- *nr. people were wounded* (news articles on Mahgreb crisis);
- *due regard to best interest of minor children* (EU documents);
- *applications for family reunification* (EU documents);

According to Sinclair (1991:112) the principle of idiom can be elevated “from being a rather minor feature, compared with grammar, to being at least as important as grammar in the explanation of how meaning arises in text”.

Following this generalization, he observes that if two words collocate significantly, they are the result of a single choice. The idiom principle suggests,

therefore, that language is not stored as individual morphemes but as chunks which are retrieved in these pre-packed sentences.

The phenomenon of collocation is at the basis of the idiom principle. However, although the concept of collocation suggests a process of crystallization of words, this fixedness is rarely absolute. Sinclair (1991:111-112) illustrates the variation within the idiom principle and points out that:

1. Many phrases have an indeterminate extent. Sinclair (*ibidem*) provides the example of *set eyes on*. This phrase attract a pronoun subject, and words such as *never*, *the moment*, *the first time*, and *has* as an auxiliary. The extent of the phrase is indeterminate as there is not a clear distinction between what is integral to the phrase and what is in the nature of the collocational attraction.
2. Many phrases allow internal lexical variation. A very frequent phrase in the Italian language of tourism is *immersione nella natura*. A frequent lexical variations of this phrase is *tuffo nella natura*.
3. Many phrases allow internal lexical syntactic variation. In the phrase *a stretto contatto con la natura*, the adjective *stretto* may be replaced by *diretto* as in *a diretto contatto con la natura*.
4. Many phrases allow some variation in word order. In the example reported above, the adjective *diretto* may occur before or after the noun *contatto* as in *a diretto contatto con la natura* or *a contatto diretto con la natura*.
5. Many uses of words and phrases attract other words in strong collocation. Sinclair (1991:112) provides the examples of *hard work*, *hard luck*, *hard evidence*, *hard facts*.
6. Many uses of words and phrases show a tendency to co-occur with certain grammatical choices. For example, the phrase *conveniently situated* is usually followed by the prepositions *to* + the infinitive form of the verb or *for* + the -ing form of the verb.
7. Many uses of words and phrases show a tendency to occur in a certain semantic environment. For example, the phrase reported above

conveniently situated for/to is usually associated with verbs describing activities, such as *tour, explore, visit*.

Language is seen, therefore, as a dynamic process, where words do not remain perpetually independent in their patterning but they “begin to retain traces of repeated events in their usage, and expectations of events such as collocation arise” (1996:82).

Biber, Conrad and Leech (2002:443) support the idiom principle and maintain that the formulaic nature of speech is reflected in ‘lexical bundles’, that is to say, sequences of words which are frequently re-used, and therefore become ‘prefabricated chunks’ that speakers and writers can easily retrieve from their memory and use again and again as text building blocks. They consider conversation as being more repetitive than written registers, for this reason, lexical bundles may be more identifiable in speech. It needs to be said, however, that academic prose makes considerable use of prefabricated blocks of text as well, but it involves different linguistic features. Lexical bundles in academic prose typically involve parts of noun phrases and prepositional phrases, whereas lexical bundles in conversation typically involve the beginning of a finite clause – especially with a pronoun as subject followed by a frequent verb of saying or thinking. Some examples of lexical bundles in conversation provided by Biber, Conrad and Leech (2002: 445) are: *I don’t know what, I said to him, I tell you what, I was going to, I would like to, you know what I, it’s going to be, know what I mean, what do you mean ...*

Milizia (2012) provides some examples of lexical bundles in the speeches of President Obama. The following examples are taken from a corpus constituted of speeches delivered by President Obama in a period ranging from 2009 to 2011:

- *to make sure that ...*
- *I want to thank ...*
- *thank you very much*
- *we are going to ...*

-
- *is going to be ...*
 - *when it comes to ...*
 - *one of the things ...*
 - *as the result of*

These phrases occur very frequently in this type of language and their frequency of usage clearly show that they come up as single choices in the mind of the speaker who utters them.

3.3 Collocation and the phenomenon of delexicalisation

The phenomenon of collocation is linked to another important phenomenon: delexicalisation.

Dealing with this phenomenon, Sinclair (1992: 16ff) starts from the assumption that the meaning of words chosen together is different from their independent meanings. This is due to the fact that words chosen together undergo a process called delexicalisation, that is to say they lose part of their meaning. Sinclair says (1991:113):

There is a broad general tendency for frequent words, or frequent senses of words, to have less of a clear and independent meaning than less frequent words or senses. These meanings of frequent words are difficult to identify and explain; and, with the very frequent words, we are reduced to talking about uses rather than meanings. The tendency can be seen as a progressive delexicalization, or reduction of the distinctive contribution made by that word to the meaning.

An example of delexicalisation is given by the word *welcome* when it occurs in the pattern frequently occurring in the language of tourism:

guests/visitors + are + welcome + to + (semantic field of activities)

In this pattern, the word *welcome* does not have the meaning indicated by dictionaries. According to the Macmillan Dictionary (2002) “if you are welcome

or a welcome visitor at a place, people are pleased that you are there”. The use of *welcome* in this pattern operates a reduction of the distinctive contribution made by *welcome* to the whole meaning. When *welcome* is followed by the preposition *to* and a verb referring to an activity, the meaning of the pattern is “you may do something if you want to” (see Macmillan Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2002). This means that the word *welcome* in this pattern is delexicalized, that is to say it has lost part of its meaning.

According to Sinclair (1991:113) “normal text is largely delexicalized, and appears to be formed by exercise of the idiom principle, with occasional switching to the open-choice principle”.

Sinclair demonstrates the phenomenon of delexicalization by analysing some adjectives, which are considered by grammars as elements which may add something to the noun, restrict it or add some features to it. Sinclair (1996:98) suggests that in everyday use “there is often evidence rather of co-selection and shared meaning with the noun”.

He considers the adjective ‘physical’ and the noun it frequently occurs with:

physical assault

physical confrontation

physical attack

physical damage

physical attributes

physical proximity

physical bodies

Sinclair (*ibidem*) suggests that the adjective *physical* does not add meaning to the noun but in a way it duplicates the meaning of the noun.

The same happens with the adjective *scientific* in *scientific experiment* and *scientific analysis* for example, the adjective is delexicalised and it is used only to dignify the following word slightly. This type of adjectives is defined ‘focusing’ (1992:16ff) in that they underline the meaning of the following noun. On the other hand, the type of adjectives which make a selection of the meaning of the noun are defined ‘selective’ (*ibidem*).

In the phrase *warm welcome*, the adjective *warm* is a focusing adjective because it duplicates and emphasises part of the meaning of *welcome*. The adjective in this

co-selection is delexicalized. Conversely, in a phrase such as *Scottish welcome*, the adjective *Scottish* is defined ‘selective’ because it represents a selection, a part of the meaning of the noun *welcome*. In this case, the adjective is not delexicalized.

Stubbs (1996:32ff) provides the example of the lemma pair *take a* searched in a corpus of over two million words. In only 10% of a total of 400 examples the verb *take* has the literal meaning of “grasp with the hand” or “transport”. In its most common use, therefore, *take* is delexicalized and in units such as *take a deep breath* the meaning is carried by the noun and not by the verb.

Stubbs (*ibidem*) suggests that the phenomenon of delexicalization is quite common and it is fairly visible with adjectives. The two types of adjectives ‘selective’ and ‘focusing’ are distinguished by Stubbs (*ibidem*) as follows:

SELECTIVE ADJECTIVES	FOCUSING ADJECTIVES
outward-looking	inward-looking
independent	dependent
separate choice	co-selected with noun
adds separate meaning	repeats part of meaning of noun
narrows meaning of noun	intensifies meaning of noun

The difference between selective and focusing adjectives has important implications. The more obvious is in the translation field. In fact, the two types of adjectives would require a different approach in the search for a translation equivalent. Translating a focusing adjective could be more complex than translating a selective adjective in that knowledge of the range of collocates of the noun it qualifies is crucial. Let us take the examples reported above. The combination *a Scottish welcome* can be easily and literally translated into Italian as *un benvenuto scozzese*. Conversely, the pair *a warm welcome* requires an analysis of the collocates of *benvenuto* to realize that *caloroso* more than *caldo* intensifies the meaning of the following noun.

3.4 Collocation and the definition of meaning: naked eye

The phenomenon of collocation clearly shows that the word cannot be considered as the basic unit of language and that we should rather talk about ‘units of meaning’ (Sinclair, 1996). The units of meaning Sinclair (*ibidem*) talks about are complex units which take into account four different types of attractions between the word and its linguistic co-text. These attractions are considered by Sinclair (1996) as steps towards the definition of meaning and are: 1) collocation; 2) colligation; 3) semantic preference; 4) semantic prosody. As already discussed above, 1) **collocation** is the lexical attraction between two or more words (as in *economic stimulus plan, global economic downturn, warm and friendly welcome, ...*).

2) The phenomenon of **colligation** represents a type of attraction at the grammar level, that is to say the frequent co-selection of a word with a grammatical category. In the language of tourism, the word *located*, when it is used to describe the convenience of the location to visit the attractions located nearby, strongly attracts the grammatical category of adverbs and that of prepositions (as in *ideally/conveniently situated to/for ...*).

3) The step defined **semantic preference** represents an attraction between a word and one or more semantic fields. Another example from the language of tourism is provided by the frequent pattern *guests are welcome to* which strongly attracts a group of verbs belonging to the semantic field of activities (as in *guests are welcome to stroll around the farm/to join the farm activities*).

4) **Semantic prosody** represents a further step into abstraction and it is used to describe the attraction between a word and a positive, negative or neutral evaluation of that word and its collocates. Sinclair (1987) provides the example of *happen* which usually gives the unit a negative connotation and Stubbs (2002:65) makes the example of *cause* which occurs with words for unpleasant events. Its main collocates are *problems, death, damage, concern, trouble, cancer, disease*.

These attractions explain why a word cannot be considered the basic unit of language. Words combine with other words, grammatical categories, and semantic fields and create what Sinclair (1996) calls ‘extended units of meaning’. He says

(1996:94) that the tendencies of words to co-occur with other words (collocation), with word classes (colligation), with set of meanings (semantic preference), and attitudes (semantic prosody) are so strong that we must expect the units of meaning to be much more extensive and varied than just a single word.

To expound his theories Sinclair provides the analysis of the collocation *naked eye*.

He stresses that there is no useful interpretation for this phrase based on the core meanings of the two words although the metaphorical extension may be obvious. Some examples of the concordance to *naked eye* (Sinclair 1996) are reported below:

agents too small to see with the	the naked eye	and so they much preferred
binaries that can be seen with	the naked eye	(very few of these) or through
our galaxy that you can see with	the naked eye	Now to expand our horizons: The
is like viewing the moon with	the naked eye	. You see a disk with some
of thing you could look at with	the naked eye	. 'Would you like to
it is not really visible to	the naked eye	. About five years ago, a
cannot always be perceived by	the naked eye	and said, 'As I've gotten
even though nothing is visible to	the naked eye	. We should trust our patients
the opening is not visible to	the naked eye	. Typically, the closed
photoaging changes are visible to	the naked eye	. And even more disturbing
little rooftop house. Viewed with	the naked eye	, she was nothing more than a
is visible with	the naked eye	. While stroke path can be with
outlets. These could be seen with	the naked eye	from a helicopter, and the water
human ovum is barely visible to	the naked eye	. The corpus luteum forms in the
small. It can easily be seen by	the naked eye	. The time of ovulation in
is large enough to be seen by	the naked eye	. The ovary still contains the

By analysing the collocation profile of these two words he identifies in 95% of the examples the presence of the definite article *the* at position N – 1, thus establishing that *the* is an inherent component of the phrase *the naked eye*. At position N-2 he identifies two frequent prepositions *with* and *to* and other less frequent preposition for a total of 90%. The word class preposition is thus an inherent component of the phrase and we will refer to this component not in term of collocation, but of colligation, that is to say the co-occurrence of grammatical choices (Firth 1957). At position N-3, two words dominate the picture, *see* and *visible* together with verbs and adjectives which refer to the semantic field of “visibility”. The attraction between a word or a set of words and a given semantic field is called semantic preference (Louw 1993; Stubbs 1996; Sinclair 1997; Hoey 1997).

The traces of repeated events retained by this unit of meaning can be summarized as follows:

“visibility” + preposition + *the* + *naked* + *eye*”

At this point, another step in abstraction should be taken, because at closer examination one more regularity attached to the node words seems to come up. Around the unit “visibility” + preposition + *the* + *naked* + *eye*” there is an aura of meaning which refers to difficulty. This is made clear by the presence of words such as *small*, *faint*, *weak*, *difficult* in association with *see*, or such as *barely*, *rarely*, *just* with *visible*. Furthermore, the concept of *visibility* is also frequently associated with a negative or with modal verbs such as *can* or *could*. This aura of meaning around the unit is called semantic prosody (Louw 1993) and it is said to play a leading role in the integration of an item with its surroundings. It is the pragmatic meaning of an item. Semantic prosody may be negative, as in this case, positive or neutral and it exerts a powerful influence on words like a sort of contagion that they carry with them even when associated with other words.

Going back to *naked eye*, Sinclair maintains (*ibidem*) that this word is used to express some kind of difficulty in seeing something. At this point, a difference with the Italian counterpart *a occhio nudo* should be mentioned. The aura of meaning around the Italian items is not negative at all (see Sinclair 1996), since the unit is used to stress that something is so obvious and visible that could also be seen *a occhio nudo*.

This example shows that the relationship between lexis, grammar, semantic and pragmatic choices is strong and impossible to be divided: lexis and grammar are interdependent and strictly interrelated, no dichotomies can be accepted.

The example provided below considers the node word *immigration*, as it is used in a corpus constituted of documents downloaded from the Official

Journal of the European Union¹⁸.

The most frequent collocates of *immigration* are *illegal, policy, policies, legal, irregular*. The instances reported below exemplify the lexical attraction between *immigration* and *illegal*.

Policy priorities in the fight against illegal immigration of third-country up the fight against all these forms of illegal immigration in a number of he comprehensive EU approach to combat illegal immigration is guided by a set mediate aim of reducing and preventing illegal immigration, this also 11. A firm policy to prevent and reduce illegal immigration could strengthen ence of such rules may in itself reduce illegal immigration by offering it would be unrealistic to believe that illegal immigration flows can be should be included in the fight against illegal immigration. In the context of eral interest of the Union in combating illegal immigration shall fully respect A central tenet of how the EU addresses illegal immigration is the removal of ation on harmonising means of combating illegal immigration and illegal

□2. Addressing illegal immigration of third-country its intention to 'address the issue of illegal immigration with a s responsible for combating facilitated illegal immigration and human ect to carriers' obligations to prevent illegal immigration, Article 26 of the part of how the EU continues to address illegal immigration. Informal exchange ration comes the challenge of combating illegal immigration and human on more effective to prevent and combat illegal immigration, and to strengthen last but not least, the need to tackle illegal immigration. with it new demands on policy. Fighting illegal immigration requires particular the action of Member States in reducing illegal immigration flows. But the ation and determined measures to combat illegal immigration are two sides of ress has been made in the fight against illegal immigration through the use of gration policies and measures to combat illegal immigration lose much of their o riguarda: □Effective measures against illegal immigration will involve the needs and provide a real alternative to illegal immigration and the informal n measures on how to effectively tackle illegal immigration, addressing both isation measures and measures to tackle illegal immigration; plan on legal migration, fight against illegal immigration, future of the Policy priorities in the fight against illegal immigration of third-country riminal organisations help to encourage illegal immigration; policy priorities in the fight against illegal immigration of third-country

A closer look at the concordance shows the presence of other types of attractions apart from the lexical one. The collocation *illegal immigration* is almost always preceded by the grammatical category of verbs. This means that verbs are its colligates. These verbs are: *fight (against), combat, reduce, prevent, tackle,*

¹⁸ available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu>

address. All these verbs are semantically correlated because they describe ways of facing unpleasant situations or conditions and represent the semantic preference of the node word. The semantic prosody of the language pattern identified is obviously negative as suggested by the verbs in its co-text and by the preposition *against*.

A further example considers the word *attacks* in a corpus which collects articles from the websites of BBC News and Sky News in the period April to May 2010. The instances provided below have been grouped according to the most frequent collocates.

The first set of examples considers *attacks* collocating with different forms of the verb *claim*:

claimed responsibility for recent bombing attacks in Baghdad. The Taliban **claims** suicide attacks on Kabul hotels has **claimed responsibility for** any of the attacks, the North Caucasu The Taliban **claimed responsibility for** the attacks, which President **claimed responsibility for** being behind the attacks. But Russian Taliban has **claimed responsibility for** the attacks. Zemer Bashary, llah Mujahid **claimed responsibility for** the attacks on behalf of the **claimed responsibility for** either of this week's attacks

As visible above, the noun *attacks* is embedded in the language pattern:

name + *claimed responsibility for the attacks (in/on)*

thus providing a perfect example of the predominance of the idiom principle in text production. The collocation *claimed responsibility for* also collocates with the singular *attack* and with the synonymous word *assaults*.

Another collocate of *attacks* is the verb *blame*, as visible below:

another station, killing 10 people. Both attacks were **blamed on** ed in a series of apparently co-ordinated attacks **blamed on** al-Qaeda Qaeda is **blamed for** many of the deadliest attacks in Iraq in recent ndia **blames for** the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks that killed 166

However, different forms of the verb *blame* are lexically attracted by *attacks* in

two different language patterns:

(1) name + (to be) + *blamed for* + *attacks*

(2) *attacks* + (to be) + *blamed on* + name

The verb *carry out* is another frequent collocate of *attacks* as exemplified in the instances reported below:

The Taliban said they would **carry out** more attacks across the country. Militants - have also **carried out** revenge attacks against fellow militants. Persecuted minority Sectarian attacks have been **carried out** there. This assault will prove larger than attacks **carried out** last year. Militants are believed to have **carried out** the attacks on trains that had been reported. The investigators believed the attacks had been **carried out** by militants. It is unclear who **carried out** the attacks, but suspicion

The analysis of collocates suggests the presence of two language patterns featuring the lexical attraction between *attacks* and *carry out*:

(1) (name) + *carry out* + *attacks*

(2) *attacks* + (to be) + *carried out*

Other collocates, which will not be analysed here, are *bomb*, *suicide*, *killed*, *wounded* (as in *killed in attacks* or *attacks that killed 85 people*), *launch* (as in *militants launched a series of attacks*), *hit* (as in *were hit by three bomb attacks*), *stepped up* (as in *militants stepped up attacks*) and other less frequent items.

To sum up the analysis of *attacks*, let us consider in detail the four steps towards the definition of meaning:

- Collocation: *claim*, *responsibility*, *blame*, *carry out*, *bomb*, *suicide*, *killed*, *wounded*, *launch*, *stepped up*;
- Colligation: verbs, adjectives;
- Semantic preference: 1. items referring to attribution of responsibility (*claim*, *blame*, *responsibility*, ...), 2. items referring to damage (*killed*, *wounded*, *hit*, *stroke*, *battered*, ...), 3. items referring to actions (*carry out*, *launch*, *step up*, ...);

- Semantic prosody: mainly negative, due to the co-occurrence with negative adjectives and verbs.

Sinclair (1996) also provides the example of the collocation *true feelings* to exemplify the four steps of analysis. Some instances are reported below:

incapable of experiencing true feelings . And not just as a man, but
moment ago to share his or her true feelings with a team. Courageous
and loneliness to mask her true feelings . As the day passed she
the Princess of Wales show her true feelings . The thousands standing
He may not want to admit his true feelings of ambivalence because he
in his efforts to conceal his true feelings . "I'm not ill," she said.
Chaucer, is to disguise his true feelings : 'And softe sighed, lest
If they were his true feelings . Perhaps he was suffering
and happy hero reveals his true feelings for his friend Willie
charmer will never reveal his true feelings ; he has to appear hard,
to his audience and hiding his true feelings behind careful
said Taylor was aware of his true feelings for Alison, but admitted
a man who resolutely kept his true feelings under wraps, he also manages
Now I had to confront my true feelings about my body, another
because I had betrayed my true feelings . I picked up the glass and
the people who mattered. My true feelings had to be buried, the
so careful about expressing my true feelings and told them things that
you do share your true feelings . Then you can go on to make
have been unable to share your true feelings with him. As a result, it
be time for you to show your true feelings , and stop pretending you're
dreams can help indicate your true feelings at the moment - take heed of
you were forced to hide your true feelings during childhood and became
you cannot communicate your true feelings means you put out stress
but abruptness betrayed their true feelings . Were they disappointed to
seething, hiding their true feelings in adolescent petulance? I
less open about showing their true feelings and noticeably less polite
have little regard for their true feelings about topics they know
the lovers who conceal their true feelings behind barbed witticisms at

Try to identify the extended unit of meaning in which *true feelings* is embedded by looking for collocates, colligates, semantic preference and semantic prosody.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has described the phenomenon of collocation and the four steps towards the definition of meaning. The examples provided show that language should be interpreted as a dynamic process where words are strictly interrelated with their co-text and their context. For this reason, a single word cannot be considered as the basic unit of language because words frequently occur with

other words and meanings arise from their combination. The Italian word *soffrire* may intuitively be associated with a negative semantic prosody due to its collocation with major or minor diseases (as in *soffrire di depressione*, *soffrire di disturbi alimentari*, ...). However, it also collocates with *solletico* which, however frustrating, cannot be considered a disease and does not carry with it a negative connotation. This further confirms what has been described in this chapter and explains how the meaning of *soffrire* both at the lexical and pragmatic level is, therefore, strictly dependent on the words it combines with. Another example which explains how useless considering the isolated meaning of a word may be, is provided by the word *imbottigliato*. When it collocates with *vino* it usually has a positive or neutral connotation and basically refers to a liquid which has been bottled (as in *questa dicitura assicura che il vino è stato imbottigliato nello stesso luogo dove è stato vinificato*). However, when its collocate is *traffico* it obviously acquires a negative connotation and means ‘stuck in a traffic jam’ (as in *sono rimasto imbottigliato nel traffico*).

Implications of the strict relationship between the item and its environment (Tognini Bonelli 2001) are visible in the process of translation as described in the following chapter. Students who are taking their first steps in the translation field are usually and too often inclined to translate word for word and consider the isolated meaning of words rather than the extended unit of meaning. If we consider the examples reported above, possible results of a word for word translation would be *I remained bottled in the traffic* whose final aim or function would not be that of describing a state or a condition or a justification for being late but of making our English-speaking interlocutors laugh.

Similarly, language learners should avoid to learn lists of words both because they need details on their usage (their collocates, semantic preference, semantic prosody, ...) if they want to use them properly and in the right contexts, and because learning pre-packed phrases as single choices help improve fluency in speaking, reading, and writing.

