

Collocation of Lexical Items

In the discussion above concerning secondary and figurative senses (chapters 10 and 11), it was noted that it is the **collocates** that determine which sense is indicated in a given phrase or sentence. The word *dress* does not have the same meaning in the phrases *dress the chicken* and *dress the child*. To *dress a chicken* involves "taking the feathers off" but *Dressing a child* is "putting clothes on." Because of the **collocates** *chicken* and *child* we know the meaning of *dress*. The matter of **collocation** was only mentioned briefly above. More detail will now be given concerning what is meant by **collocation** and the implications of **collocation** for translation.

Collocation is concerned with how words go together, i.e. which words may occur in constructions with which other words. Some words occur together often, other words may occur together occasionally, and some *collocations* of words are not likely to occur. Knowing which words go together is an important part of understanding the meaning of a text and translating it well. Some words do not occur together because the combination would be nonsense; that is, it would not make sense because it is outside of reality. In English, we do not say the *cat's wings*, but we often say the *bird's wings*. Only in a fantasy with a flying cat might *cat's wings* be considered good English.

The word **collocate** means to put side by side. Combinations *of* words will differ from language to language. For example, in English, the verb *to have* **collocates** with the word *dream*. We say *I had a dream*. However, in Russian this combination would not be used. Rather, one would say *I saw (in) a dream*. Persons learning a second language often make mistakes because they **collocate** words together which go together in their first language but do not go together in the language they are learning. In English, we say *he has trouble* or *he suffers trouble*, but other languages may say *he sees trouble* or *he drinks trouble*. The meaning is the same, but different words are combined to indicate the meaning.

Special collocations

There are certain combinations of words in any language which are **fixed combinations**. They always occur in a certain order or they always

occur together. This is especially true of expressions like *spick and span*, *hale and hearty*, *to and fro*, *now and then*, and *neat and tidy* in English. Other languages will have completely different combinations which are fixed expressions.

Notice the following expressions from Gahuku of Papua New Guinea (data from Ellis Deibler) in which no specific meaning can be assigned to some of the words but the collocation as a whole carries the meaning. These special collocations are idioms in Gahuku:

<i>ne-helele</i> my-?	<i>vizekave</i>	I am afraid.
<i>no-goka</i> my-nose	<i>vizekave</i>	He fooled me.
<i>napa big</i>	<i>vizekave</i>	It got big.
<i>goive</i> sweet-potato	<i>vizekave</i>	He has measles.
<i>a-puta'</i> his-grasp	<i>vizekave</i>	He embraced him.
<i>peletani?</i>	<i>vizekave</i>	He juggled it.

In such fixed collocations, it is sometimes difficult to identify the meaning of the parts of the idiomatic expression.

Certain combinations which commonly occur together often occur in a **fixed order**. If the order is changed, the result will sound unnatural to the native speaker of the language. In English, some examples are *bread and butter*, *day and night* (other languages prefer *night and day*), *knife and fork*, *black and white*, *black and blue*, *ladies and gentlemen*, and *rant and rave*. It sounds strange to a speaker of English to hear someone say *gentlemen and ladies* unless *ladies* is an afterthought. *Rave and rant* would probably never occur. In many languages of Papua New Guinea, one says *mother and father* and *never father and mother*.

The matter of idioms has already been mentioned. Idioms are special **collocations**, or fixed combinations of words which have a meaning as a whole, but the meaning of combination is not the same as the meaning of the individual words. They often have the same meaning as other lexical items in the language but carry certain emotive connotations not expressed in the other. For example, in English, the idiom *kick-the-bucket* has the same meaning as *die*, but it shows a certain lack of

respect. *Hit the sack* means *to go to bed* but is more informal. Notice the following other English idioms and their meanings:

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|-------------------------------|--|
| <i>kick over the traces</i> | to cast off restraint |
| <i>kick up the ladder</i> | to promote to high position |
| <i>hit it off</i> | to get along well |
| <i>read the riot act</i> | to order or warn to stop something |
| <i>read between the lines</i> | to understand more than is directly stated |
| <i>pass the hat</i> | to take a collection of money |
| <i>pass the buck</i> | to shift a responsibility to someone else |

Notice, also, the following example from English and three African languages (from Barnwell 1980:56) in which the same meaning is expressed in the two languages but different verbs are used. The form is natural to the language in which it occurs but would not sound natural if translated literally into the other language.

- | | |
|--|--|
| English: to <i>keep</i> the law | Mbembe: to <i>obey</i> the law |
| to <i>break</i> the law | to <i>spoil</i> the law |
| <i>mending</i> the nets | Jukun: <i>tying</i> their nets |
| <i>ate</i> wild honey | <i>drink</i> honey |
| he was <i>given</i> wisdom | Ezaa: he was <i>taught</i> wisdom |

Great care must be taken when translating **idioms**. A literal translation will usually result in nonsense. The translator must first be sure of meaning of the idiom and then look for the natural equivalent way to express the meaning of the **idiom** as a whole.

There are also **special collocations** which may be looked at in sets since the meaning is basically the same. Note the following sets in English (Barnweif 1980:57):

- The king *abdicated*.
- The maid *gave notice*.
- The principal *resigned*.

In all three cases, the persons *gave up their jobs*, but *abdicated* collocates with *king* and *resigned* with *principal*. One would not say *the maid abdicated* or *the maid resigned*. Note these sets also:

a teacher's <i>salary</i>	a <i>herd</i> of elephants
a minister's <i>stipend</i>	a <i>flock</i> of geese
a worker's <i>wage</i>	a <i>school</i> of fish
	a <i>pack</i> of wolves
	a <i>gang</i> of thieves
	a <i>crowd</i> of people

Sometimes it is possible to analyze the **collocations** on the basis of certain generic meaning components which occur in the words. For example, in the list of sentences below, the **collocations** are correct. If the verbs were exchanged, the result would be a wrong meaning or a metaphorical meaning. The first list **collocates** with nonhumans and the second with humans.

I <i>washed</i> the car.	I <i>bathed</i> the baby.
I <i>rented</i> a typewriter.	He <i>hired</i> a secretary.
The puppy <i>yelps</i> .	The baby <i>screams</i> .
He <i>sheared</i> the sheep.	He cut the boy's hair.

Notice the difference between English and Shilluk in display 14.1 (Nida 1964:51).

English:	<i>break</i> a stick	Shilluk:	<i>break</i> a stick
	<i>break</i> a string		<i>pull</i> a string in <i>two</i>
	<i>break</i> an egg		<i>kill</i> an egg

Display 14.1

A literal translation of the Shilluk *kill an egg* would be nonsense in English and *break an egg* would not be good Shilluk.

Translations into English from a Slavic language included these literal translations of Slavic idioms: *speaking point*, *the idea came to expression*, and *it's Chinese to me*. The correct idiomatic English would have been *point for discussion*, *the idea found expression*, and *it's Greek to me*. **Collocations** are words joined together in phrases or sentences to form semantically unified expressions. The combination which forms a semantically correct meaning in one language may not do so in another. A translator must constantly be on the lookout for idioms in the source language and translate with care so as to give the correct meaning in the receptor language.

Collocational range

Every word in a language has its **collocational range** or restrictions which limit its meaningful usage. The **collocational range** of every word will be different. No two words have exactly the same **collocational possibilities**. For example, one might expect that *horse, dog, chicken, man and child* might have the same collocations. There is some overlap. All of them occur with *eat, drink, walk, and run*. However, notice that although *horse, dog, chicken, man, and child* all occur with *run*; only *horse* and *dog* collocate with the noun *race*. *Horse race* and *dog race* are acceptable, but *chicken race, man race, and child race* do not occur in English. A list of the other words with which a word may occur is called **its collocational range**. Some words will have a very limited range and others a very large list of possible collocates.

The collocational range of equivalent words between languages will not be identical. It will overlap but not match completely. It is most likely to match in primary usage but not in secondary or figurative usages. *Run*, in its usual sense of *people* or *animals running*, has, for example, a corresponding term in Aguaruna, *tupikau*. But the English **collocations of run** with *nose, motor, stockings, and plants*, do not occur, nor do such idioms as *run into debt, run into trouble, run out of money, and run out of patience* occur as possible **collocations** with *tupikau* in Aguaruna. The **collocational range** of *tupikau* is very limited. On the other hand, in Kasem of Ghana (Beekman and Callow 1974:163), *run* collocates with *pity*. *He ran his pity* means *he took pity on him*.

Every word in a language has its **collocational range** with limitations which do not allow for other combinations. *Bright*, for example, in English, collocates with objects in which intensity of light is involved, such as *sun* and *color*. *Shiny* collocates with objects in which the surface is significant to the meaning and, therefore, *shiny coin* and *shiny floor* are correct, but not *shiny sun* and *shiny color*. The number of eligible collocations for a word often depends on its place in the generic-specific scale. *Animal*, for example, will have a larger range than *sheep* or *dog*.

Only a native speaker of the language can judge whether or not a collocation is acceptable, especially if one is trying a new collocation. Languages do change and there is constant extension and reduction of the **collocational range** of a word, but a native speaker is the one who must make the final decision on new and acceptable collocations. For example, a translator was trying to translate *white as snow* into a language that did not have *snow* as a vocabulary item. So *white as hail* was tried. The problem was that *white* did not collocate with *hail*, nor did the combination carry the same meaning. The language did have a collocation *clear as hail*, but with a different meaning. Finally, the translator simply translated the meaning directly with a phrase meaning *very white*. This is sometimes the best solution.

The Amuzgo language of Mexico has two words which are equivalent to the English word *love*. The one collocates only with higher status lower status (God to man, husband to wife, mother to child) and the other only with lower status to higher status (man to God, wife to husband, child to mother). The translator will want to use the natural collocations of the receptor language.

Collocational clashes

People speaking a language which is not their mother-tongue often make **collocational** errors. These errors may be either grammatical or lexical, but, in either case, words are put together which do not naturally go together. Sometimes verbs and nouns are confused. A letter received from a publisher, written by a nonnative speaker of English said, "We have sent the book...we are sorry for the overlook." *Overlook* is a **verb** in English and the noun *oversight* should have been used. Lexical **collocational** errors are usually called **collocational clashes**. Everyone who has learned a second language has made these kinds of errors. There are also errors which are simply bad grammar, such as saying *they are gone home* rather than *they have gone home*. These errors are not usually made by persons translating into their mother-tongue. **Collocational clashes**, however, are a bit more subtle and sometimes overlooked by the translator.

In most languages, such **collocations** as *black noise*, *noisy silence*, *the water walked*, *he ate water*, *the bird said*, and *the kettle boiled* would be **collocational clashes**. But notice that some languages, for example, Chuave, do say *ate water*; the *bird said* might be all right in certain stories or poetry or if the bird is a parrot; and *the kettle boiled* is an acceptable **collocation** in English, since it is a metonymy. The problem is that what is a perfectly acceptable **collocation** in one language may be unacceptable or even nonsense in another.

Sometimes there is a **cultural clash** between what is said in the source text and the patterns of the receptor culture. These are **not collocational clashes** of lexical items. They are **cultural clashes**. For example, in the Angkor culture of Papua New Guinea, the women go first on the trail, and the men come last. But in India the men go first and the women follow. If one were translating a story about India into Angkor which said *the men went first*, he would have to leave this fact as it is. It is true that the cultural customs clash, but the meaning of the words do not. The fact of the *men going first* must be kept and not distorted. **Cultural clashes** are not changed; that is, the story would not be changed to make the culture of India into Angkor culture. It might, however, be helpful in such instances to add a phrase in the receptor language such as *following their customs*.

Each language will have lexical collocational restrictions. For example, in some languages, *hear* collocates only with *sounds* and not *with people*. One could not translate *I heard John* literally, since *heard John* would be a collocational clash. The translation might need to say *I heard John's speech*. In the same way, there are languages where *believe* does not collocate with *people*, but with words or ideas. *I believed him* would need to be translated *I believed what he said*.

In English, we do not say *the animals' fingernail* nor do we talk about *a person's claw*. Some languages would have only one word for both *claw* and *fingernail*. In English, a person has a *hand*, but an animal has a *paw*. Attributive words will also have collocational restrictions. It is all right to say *fat dog* in English, but *not fat rope*. The correct collocation would be *thick rope*, but one doesn't usually talk about a *thick dog*. But it is not incorrect to say *thin dog* and *thin rope*, although a *skinny dog* would probably be more correct.

The translator must constantly be alert to the potential pitfall of collocational clashes in the translation. To avoid this he will consider as suspect any word not used in its primary sense. If translated literally, it will probably cause a clash. The translator will not expect to be able to translate idioms literally and he will constantly be checking with mother-tongue speakers, if he is not a mother-tongue speaker of the receptor language. Only mother-tongue speakers can best judge whether certain words may go together or not and what the resultant meaning would be. For example, a translator translating into English will always want to check with a mother-tongue speaker of English, if English is not his own mother-tongue.

Concordance

We have already seen that a word will probably be translated in as many ways as the senses in which it is used. Each sense will need a different word for the translation. If a given word was translated the same way every time it occurred in the source language text, the translation would be full of collocational clashes and wrong meanings. There cannot be complete concordance between the words of the source language text and the words of the receptor language translation. Concordance means consistent matching of lexical items. Because of all the mismatch between language structures, there will never be complete concordance between a text and its translation.

In order to understand this clearly, it is important to focus on the two kinds of concordance. There is real concordance and there is pseudo concordance. Real concordance occurs when within a document the same word or expression is used repeatedly to refer to the same concept; that is, it has the same meaning each time it occurs. There is real concordance in this paragraph:

The boy *ran* to the store, *ran* up to the storekeeper, and asked for a can of milk. Then he *ran* out into the street and, holding the milk tightly, *ran* home as fast as he could *run*.

Each occurrence of *run* has more or less the same meaning. It is used over and over to give the feeling of urgency. It is likely that the translation of each occurrence of run; (*ran*) will be with the same lexical item (with changes for tense, etc.) in the receptor language. However, it is possible that some languages would not use *run* for all five occurrences. Now notice the following paragraph where the word *run* is also used, but the concordance is not real concordance. *Run* has a different meaning each time:

The motor of his car stopped *running*. The man didn't know what to do. He was near a brook which was *running* under the road through a culvert. He thought about using some of the water to cool the engine. But he decided he would *run* back to town and see if he might *run* into someone who could help him.

In this paragraph, the concordance between the forms of *run* is not real concordance. Each sense is different. In translating the four occurrences, each would be translated with a different word. In Aguaruna, the words *make noise*, *go*, *run*, and *encounter* would be used in the translation.

The following paragraph is translated from the Choi language of Mexico. One word, *juc'*, has been left in the Choi form to show the concordance which occurred in the original Choi text (from Beekman and Callow 1974:153).

The Lopez family is always working. When we visited them, the father *was juc'* a board, the mother *was juc'* clothes, the oldest boy was *juc'* his machete, and the oldest daughter *was juc'* soap on her dog.

Although the same word is used four times, it will need to be translated four ways in English. When collocated with *board* it means *to plane*, when collocated with *clothes* it means *to iron*, when collocated with *machete* it means *to file (sharpen)*, and when collocated with *soap* it means *to rub*. It is not possible, nor desirable, to keep the pseudo concordance of this text when translating it into English. The English should read:

...the father was *planing* a board, the mother was *ironing* clothes, the oldest boy was *sharpening* his machete, and the oldest daughter was *rubbing* soap on her dog.

The meaning of the English is the same as the Choi and sounds natural. If the translator attempted to keep the concordance by using *plane* in all four places, the English would be misunderstood. No attempt should be made to keep pseudo concordance in translation. The very nature of secondary sense and collocational range make this impossible.

However, real concordance, which is the deliberate reoccurrence of the same word with the same sense, should be kept. The author may have used it to show the topic, theme, some discourse feature, or for style. If a word is part of the theme in the source language and various words are used to translate it in the receptor language it may be hard to follow the theme of the text. Real concordance should be kept when possible. However, the structure of languages is such, and mismatching is such, that it may not always be possible. Some languages do not repeat the same word within a single paragraph or episode but use synonyms and substitute words instead.

For example, we mentioned above that Amuzgo has two words for *love*, one for higher status to lower status and one for lower status to upper status. If the source text has one word *love* and the receptor language has two, the two words will need to be used correctly in the context to convey the right meaning even if there is less concordance as a result. Greek has several words to refer to the meaning included in the English word for *love*. The translation from Greek to English will be more concordant than the source text because one word will be used to translate several.

There will always be some loss of concordance in translation. However, the important matter is that the meaning of the translation be equivalent as nearly as possible to the meaning of the source language and that words which are thematic and intended by the author to be concordant be kept concordant, if doing so does not distort the meaning. There will be some gain of concordance in cases where alternate words used in the source text have more or less the same meaning and are translated by a single word in the receptor language.

EXERCISES—Collocation of Lexical Items

A. In each of the following, there is a single form, but different meanings, signaled by the linguistic context (the whole sentence). What is the meaning of each usage? Which meaning is primary?

1. The *bill* dropped from his wallet.
The *bill* was very small for such a large bird.
He received a *bill* for the rent. The *bill* passed
by a small margin.

2. The *house* passed the motion.
His *house* is on the edge of town.
I belong to the *house* of Israel.
3. A book was on the *table*.
There is a good *table* in the book.
They want to *table* the motion.
4. I stop *by* the bookstand in the evening.
I was stopped *by* the policeman.
I sat *by* the fireplace.

B. In each of the following, the word *fired* has a different meaning depending on the words it collocates with. If translated literally into another language, it is probable that a collocational clash would result in the receptor language. Think about how each of these sentences could best be translated into the second language which you speak.

1. The man *fired* his stove/furnace.
2. The *boss* *fired* his secretary.
3. The manager *fired* up his team,
(preparation)
4. The *book* *fired* his imagination.
5. The hunter *fired* his gun.
6. A. J. *Foyt* *fired* up his car.
7. The student *fired* off a letter to the editor.
8. The *catcher* *fired* the ball to second base.

C. For each of the above in A and B, tell what **collocate** in the linguistic context helps identify the meaning. What is the relationship between the word and the **collocate**?

ex. The *bill* dropped from his wallet.

Bill refers to money because it occurs with wallet which is used to carry money (is in the same semantic domain).

- D. Translate the sentences in A into a language other than English.
- E. The following translation into English has many **collocational clashes**. The wrong English word was chosen in the translation into English. First, rewrite the paragraph changing each word that has a number by it, using a word which would collocate better and be more natural English. After you finish, read the notes below the text to see if you found all the changes needed. (Data from David Strange.)

Today (1) morning as I was walking down the way (2) I saw my first (3) friend a small (4) way ahead of me. I accelerated and caught above (5) with him. When I arrived (6) up with him I tumbled (7) into stair (8) adjacent (9) to him but he was in such a haste (10) that I could not keep up with him. Therefore (11) I said, “Stroll (12) more slowly you are strolling (12) also (13) fast.”

- 1 We say *this morning* not *today morning*.
- 2 The usual word is *road* not *way*.
- 3 *First* would mean *first* in time, not importance; *best* is the right word.
- 4 The phrase we use is *a little way* not *a small way*.
- 5 *Caught up* with him is the right phrase; *above* does not collocate with *caught*.
- 6 *Arrive* does not collocate with *people*. *Arrive* is used only for places. The correct word would be *caught up with*.
- 7 The idiom is *fell into step*; *tumble* will not fit here.
- 8 *Stair* and *step* mean the same in some contexts but only *step* fits here.
- 9 *Adjacent* is generally only used about things and usually in a more technical type of context. *Next* is the proper word when collocating with *him* (people).
- 10 *Haste* and *hurry* mean the same but English uses *a hurry* but never *a haste*.
- 11 *Therefore* might be used in speeches or books but not in ordinary conversation. Most people would say *so*.
- 12 *stroll* means to *walk slowly* so it does not collocate with *slowly*. *Walk* is the word that should be used.
- 13 *Also* and *too* can mean the same. However, in this context the meaning is "comparative" rather than "in addition." *Also* lacks the meaning of "comparison" which *too* has. The word here has to be *too* not *also*.

F. Make a list of objects which collocate with each of the following verbs in English: *get*, *reach*, *pull*, *drive*, and *take*. Then, without looking at the English list, make a list of objects which collocate with the equivalent word in another language. Do the lists match?

G. Is the **concordance** (the italicized word) in each of the following **real concordance** or **pseudo concordance**?

1. A good scholar is full of *ideas*. New *ideas* come to him daily. He is always open to the *ideas* of other people as well.
2. As I was *running* the water in the sink, I could tell by the sound that the refrigerator wasn't *running* very well.

3. I *saw* the teacher frown as he *saw* through what was going on.
4. The mother *dressed* her baby, put her on her back, and went out to *dress* a chicken for dinner.
5. John *ate* all the meat he could, and then gave some to his son to *eat*. After they had *eaten*, they gave some to the dog to *eat* also.
6. John *took* a trip to Europe. He wanted to *take* a look at the beautiful cathedrals. As he was going up the stairs of one of them, he *took* a tumble and ended up in the hospital. He *took* a chance and got up before he was well because he was tired of *taking* naps all day long.