

## GRAMMATICAL AND LEXICAL ENGLISH COLLOCATIONS : SOME POSSIBLE PROBLEMS TO INDONESIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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### 1. Introduction

It seems universally acknowledged in all languages that words often co-occur with other word(s) in units. However, they are not always freely combined nor individually analyzable. Their co-occurrences are adhered to some grammatical principles. The English prepositional phrase, *at the moment*, for example, is subject to grammatical choice of the preposition *at* rather than other random prepositions like *on* or *in*. Another example, verbal phrase *look forward to* is followed by gerund and not infinitive. Therefore, such phrases are also called lexico-grammatical units (Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992:8).

These unit are often confusing to learners not only because of their various semantic and syntactic requirements like the above examples, but also the double-function of their elements. Many words that combined with verbs can be used as either prepositions or adverbs, for example: *above, across, along, before, behind, off, on, over*, etc. (Thomson and Martinet, 1980:82) The examples for consideration are: (a) *He got off the bus at the corner*. *Off* in this *got off* verb combination is a preposition, and (b) *He got off at the corner*. *Off* that goes with the verb *got* in (b) is an adverb (also called adverbial particle). The co-occurrence of *off* following *got* in (a) is expressing predictable direction and therefore is not as fixed as the one following *got* in (b) which expresses new

meaning *started*. Even some prepositions, like *after, until and before* (Thomson and Martinet, 1980: 83) may also function as conjunction. It is obvious that the function of grammar in conveying meaning is not only at sentence level, but also at phrase level. This confirms what has also been suggested by Kennedy (1990:216) that to some extent collocations are considered as "grammar in terms of vocabulary."

Due to the complexity of English collocation, this paper is going to discuss the types of English collocations, their possible problems to Indonesian learners of English and some solutions.

### 2. The definition of collocation

Nattinger (in Carter and McCarthy, 1988:76) suggests that language is basically a "compositional" process in which many of its words co-occur together forming single units of meanings. He calls these as lexical phrases or word combinations; and collocations are among other terms of lexical phrases. However, collocations themselves range from "lexico-grammatical unit" to "free combination". The term "collocation" is actually only one among other terms for similar concept: word combination. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992:21) define collocations as "strings of words that seem to have certain 'mutual expectancy', or a greater-than-chance likelihood that they will co-occur in

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any text.” In addition to that, the following is an explanation by Benson, Benson, and Ilson (1986 in Bahns, 1993:57):

*In English, as in other languages, there are many fixed, identifiable, non-idiomatic phrases and constructions. Such groups of words are called recurrent combinations, or collocations. Collocations fall into two major groups: grammatical collocations and lexical collocations.*

Unlike collocations whose meanings are often unpredictable, ‘free combination’ consists of elements that freely allow substitution. For example, *decide on a boat*, meaning ‘choose (to buy) a boat’ contains the collocation *decide on*, whereas *decide on a boat*, meaning ‘make a decision while on a boat’ is a free combination. The possible combination of ‘decide’ (meaning ‘making a decision’) is limitless: *They decided —after dinner, immediately, at the meeting, with a heavy heart*, etc. A native speaker will not say: *They decided* (meaning ‘choose’) *at a boat*. To them *decided at a boat* (meaning to ‘choose’ a boat) is not collocable.

## 2.1 Grammatical Collocations

Grammatical collocations consist of a noun, or an adjective or a verb, plus a particle (a preposition, an adverb or a grammatical structure such as an infinitive a gerund or clause) (Bahns, 1993:57). The followings are the examples: *at night, extend to, good at, fall for, to be afraid that*. These examples are grammatical collocations which are lexicalized as single units whose meanings are formulaic and whose co-occurrence are highly likely. They are sometimes idiomatic, because their meanings do not reflect the meanings of the elements, such as *run out of* (to reach an end of stock, supplies) or *put up with* (tolerate). However, there are similar grammatical combinations which do not have such a “strong sense of belonging together”

(Kennedy, 1990:224): *from the outside, inside the cupboard*. These prepositional phrases are considered as free combinations.

## 2.2 Types of Grammatical Collocations

According to Benson, Benson and Ilson (1986) in their introduction to their *The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English* grammatical collocations fall into the following combinations: noun+preposition, noun+to-infinitive, noun+that-clause, preposition + noun, adjective+ preposition, predicate adjective+ to-infinitive, adjective+ that-clause, and the English 19 verb patterns.

### 2.2.1. noun + preposition combinations

Not all noun + preposition combinations can be considered as collocations due the highly predictable meaning of some prepositions, such as *of* and *by*. So, noun + *of / by* combinations are considered free combinations. The following phrases are examples of noun + preposition collocations: *blockade against, apathy towards*.

### 2.2.2. noun + to + infinitive

There are five syntactic patterns in which *noun + to + infinitive* construction is most frequently encountered:

- It was *a pleasure (a problem, a struggle)* to do it
- They had the *foresight (instructions, an obligation, a permission)* to do it
- They felt *a compulsion (an impulse, a need)* to do it
- They made *an attempt (an effort, a promise, a vow)* to do it.
- He was *a fool (a genius, an idiot)* to do it.

### 2.2.3. noun + that-clause

The *noun + that-clause* combinations that are considered collocational are those using subject pronouns. For example:

*We reached an agreement that she would represent us in court*

*He took an oath that he would do his duty*

However, when the 'that-clause' can be replaced by 'which-clause' as that in relative clauses, such a **noun + that-clause construction** is not considered as collocational. For example: We reached into an agreement **that/ which** would go into effect in a month.

#### 2.2.4. preposition + noun combinations

Any combinations of preposition and noun can fall into this category, however the choice of preposition with certain noun is not at random. For example:

*by accident, in advance, in agony, etc.*

#### 2.2.5. adjective + preposition combinations

Some adjectives are followed by a prepositional phrase. The adjective+preposition combination that is considered collocational is the one that occurs in the predicate (verbless clause). However past participial adjective followed by preposition by is not considered collocational because this construction is regular and predictable. For example:

*They are **angry at** the children,*

*They are **hungry for** news,*

\*The ship was *abandoned (by its crew)* is not considered collocational.

#### 2.2.6. predicate adjective + to + infinitive

These adjectives occur in two basic constructions with infinitives

- adjectives with dummy subject "It" such as *It was necessary to work*; also possible *It was necessary **for him** to work* (the insertion of prepositional phrase)

- adjectives with real and animate subject, such as **She is ready to go**; or with inanimate subject, such as: *It (the bomb) is designed to explode at certain temperatures*; or with either animate or inanimate subject: **She was bound to find out** or **It** (the accident) *was bound to happen.*

#### 2.2.7. adjective + that clause

Some adjectives can be followed by that-clause. For example:

*She was afraid that she would fail her examination*

Several adjectives followed by present subjunctive in formal English are collocational, such as: *It was imperative that **we be there.***

#### 2.2.8. Collocational verb patterns

English verb patterns have 19 types, each is designated here by capital letters A to S.

- Shift of an indirect object to a position before the direct object of transitive verbs is allowed. For example:

*He sent the book to his brother -  
He sent his brother the book and  
He sent the book to him - He sent  
him the book*

If both objects are pronouns the common pattern is: *He sent it to him.*

- Shift of an indirect object to a position before the direct object by deleting to is not allowed. For example:

*They described the book to her ;  
but not \* They described her the  
book.*

Other common verbs that fit this category are: *mention, return, scream, etc.*

- Transitive verb with preposition *for* allows the deletion of *for* and the shift of the

indirect object to a position before the direct object. For example:

*She bought a shirt for her husband;*  
also possible: *She bought her husband a shirt* or *She bought a shirt for him* or *She bought him a shirt.*

- d. The verb forms a collocation with a specific preposition and an object. For example:

*They **based** their conclusions on the available facts*  
*We **adhered to** the plan*

However, the following similar constructions are not collocations, but free combinations of *verb + preposition* denoting 'location' or 'means' or 'instrument'

***We walked in the park***  
***They came by train***

- e. Verbs are followed by *to + infinitive*. For example:

*They began to speak;*  
*She continued to write*

However, *verbs + to infinitive* meaning "purpose" are not included as collocational combination. For example: *He was running (in order) to catch the bus.*

*She stopped (in order) to chat*

- f. Verbs are followed by infinitive without *to*

These verbs, except *dare*, *help*, and *need*, are called modals. The verbal phrases *had better* and *would rather* also fit this pattern. For example:

*They must work*  
*We had better go now*

- g. Verbs are followed by second verb in -ing. For examples:

*They kept talking*  
*We enjoyed watching television*

Some verbs in this category may have synonymous construction : *He began reading* or *He began to read* are similar in meaning. And some other verbs of this category may have different construction and meaning, for example: *He remembered telling him the story* and *He remembered to tell him the story* are different in meaning

- h. Transitive verbs are followed by an object and *to + infinitive*. For example:

*They asked the students to participate in discussion*  
*They permitted the children to watch television*

Many of the verbs in this pattern can be followed by infinitive *to be*. For example, *She asked me to be punctual*. Furthermore, most of the verbs in this construction can be passivized.

- i. Transitive verbs are followed by a direct object and an infinitive without *to*. Most I-pattern verbs cannot be passivized. For example:

*We let them use the car*  
*We saw them leave the house*

- j. Verbs are followed by an object and a verb in -ing. For example:

*I caught him smoking in his bedroom*  
*We found the children sleeping on the floor*

Some verbs in this category (especially verbs of perception, like *see*, *hear*, *feel*) may have similar constructions with that of construction in I-pattern. *We saw him smoke the cigarette* beside *We saw him smoking*. J-pattern verbs usually can be passivized.

- k. Verbs can be followed by a noun or pronoun and gerund. For example:

*This fact justifies Bill's coming late*  
*They love his clowning*

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*I cannot imagine their stealing apples.*

*Please excuse my waking you so early.*

However possessive constructions are often considered awkward, more common expressions for the same meaning will use the following alternative:

*I cannot imagine them stealing apples*

*This fact justifies Bill for coming late*

*Please excuse me for waking you so early*

- l. Verbs are followed by a noun clause beginning with conjunction *that*. For example:

*They admitted that they were wrong*

*We hoped that the weather would be nice*

Some verbs always take an object noun or pronoun before the *that*-clause, such as  
For example:

*She assured **me** that she would arrive on time*

*They convinced **us** that we should invest our money*

Some verbs in this category allow the insertion of *the fact*. For example:

*He acknowledged (admitted/confirmed/etc) **the fact** that he was guilty*

- m. Transitive verb can be followed by a direct object, an infinitive to be and adjective / past participle/ noun/pronoun. For example:

*We considered her to be very capable / well-trained / a competent engineer*

- n. Transitive verbs are followed by a direct object and adjective/ past participle or noun/pronoun. For example:

*She dyed her hair red*

*He found them interesting*

Some verbs in this category may also be used with M-verb pattern, For example:

*We considered her very capable*

- o. Transitive verbs are followed by two objects. For example:

*The teacher asked the students questions*

*The police fined them fifty pounds*

- p. Intransitive / reflexive / transitive verbs must be followed by an adverbial (an adverb/a prepositional phrase/a noun phrase/a clause). For example:

*He carried himself with dignity; but not \* He carried himself*

*The meeting will last two hours; but not \*The meeting will last*

Other verbs in this category are: *come, sneak, weigh*, etc. However some of these verbs may have senses that do not require an adverbial, for example: *They are coming*, in addition to *They are coming home*

- q. Verb can be followed by an interrogative word, such as *how, what, when*, etc. For example:

*He always wants what I want*

*She knows when to keep quiet*

However, some verbs in this construction need an object, such as

*They told **us** what to do*

*She asked **me** why she had come*

- r. Dummy 'it' is followed by transitive verbs (often expressing emotions) and by *to* + infinitive or by *that* + clause or by *by* either. For example:

*It puzzled me that he never answered the telephones*

*It surprised me to learn of her decision*

- s. A small number of intransitive verbs are followed by a predicate noun / predicate

adjective. Including the verb *make*, used intransitively, belongs to this group. For example:

*She will make a good teacher*

*She was enthusiastic*

However larger group of intransitive verbs can be followed only by a predicate adjective, for example:

*The flowers smell fragrant* or *The food tastes awful.*

### 2.3. Possible Problems of Grammatical Collocations to Indonesian Learners

Among the above collocation patterns, the problems of verb transitivity and phrasal verbs seem overwhelming. In relation to English verb transitivity, learner may get confused to decide (a) which verbs are always transitive or always intransitive, and which ones can occur in both types, and (b) which structure (infinitive with or without *to*, gerund or that-clause) can follow certain transitive verbs. It takes time for learners to memorize which verbs require which structure or which alternative structure are possible.

The other problem in grammatical collocation is that of pattern 2.2.8.d. verb + adverbial particles combinations. The combinations are confusing to English learners, including Indonesian students, due to the following problems as observed by Side (1990: 144-5):

- a. Many English verb + adverbial particle combinations (also called phrasal verbs) have more than one meaning, such as *make up* ('to decide' 'to invent' and 'to put on cosmetics' and the 'cosmetics itself) and are often idiomatic. The seemingly endless list of such combinations with their various meanings is indeed threatening.
- b. Adverbial particles, whose forms are similar to preposition, of the phrasal verbs seem to be random. Therefore, learners tend to transfer the prepositions of their L1 phrasal verbs to English ones

which in fact troublesome. The transfer of the L1 prepositions may cause mistakes because of the different concept between the L1 prepositions to the English. For example, the Indonesian expression 'tertarik *dengan*' is literary transferred to English 'interested *with*'; whereas 'interested *in*' will be difficult to remember because preposition '*in*' is equivalent to Indonesian '*di*'. So, it is a learning burden to Indonesian learners to decide which English preposition/particle to transfer *di* or *dengan*.

- c. Moreover, it is sometimes difficult to decide whether the verbs of phrasal verbs are transitive or intransitive before they can decide whether the phrasal verbs can be separated (such as, *call your dog off*) or not (*take in lodgers*). Learners will likely generalize the rule of separating the transitive verb from its preposition and insert the object. For example : *It was too late to call in an electrician* can also be expressed – *It was too late to call an electrician in* or *It was too late to call him in*. This sentence pattern of phrasal verb "call in" will be over-generalized in the inseparable phrasal transitive verb, such as "call on" (ask to speak) *The chairman called on Mr. Sudjana to give report. The chairman called on him to give report* (which is still correct); Learners may also produce *The chairman called him on to give report* (which is incorrect) (Thomson and Martinet, 1980: 102). Wallace (1987: 120-1) distinguishes phrasal verb from prepositional phrase, in which the latter is definitely inseparable. Compare the following examples: *He turned down the offer* (a phrasal verb or verb-adverb combination) and *He turned down the road* (prepositional phrase or verb-preposition combination). "Turn down" in the first sentence is separable whereas that in the second is not ( Stageberg, 1971: 225).

- d. To give more confusion, the fact that there is sometimes no direct equivalent in the L1, some phrasal verbs can give learners more difficulties in understanding their meanings, such as “I am *done in*.”

#### **2.4. Lexical Collocations**

In contrast to grammatical collocations, lexical collocations do not contain grammatical elements. Benson, Benson, and Ilson (1986 in Bahns, 1993) list various combinations of lexical collocations: verb + noun (*start a family; keep a secret*); adjective + noun (*good work, strong tea*); adverb + adjective (*heavily influenced, amazingly gorgeous*); verb + adverb (*walk slowly, laugh nervously*).

In lexical collocations, too, there are fixed and loose combinations. Especially in verb + noun combinations, the combinations are fixed in which the choice of words that collocate each other is definite, such as: *commit a murder*, or *break the law* and these combinations: *do a murder*, or *damage the law* are unlikely. This fixed structure are idiomatic, however their meanings are still predictable from the elements of the combination. In comparison, in loose collocations the collocates are freely combined, such as: *analyze/study/witness a murder* and *practice/study law*. The meanings of these loose collocations can still be derived from their individual words. In contrast, there are fixed combinations consisting of several lexical items which are relatively frozen expressions and whose meanings are sometimes hardly derivable from their component words, such as *to scream blue murder* (“to complain very loudly”) or *get away with murder* (“someone who can do whatever they like”) (Nattinger, 1987:949); and *lay down the law* (“give other people order in a bossy way”) or *take the law into someone own hand* (“deliberately break the law”) (ibid: 817). These fixed structures and meanings collocations are called idioms.

The co-occurrence of two or more words in a lexical collocation has two important features. Firstly, there may be a constant collocational relationship between the two words that collocate although several words go in between them. For example, collocation “collect stamp” can be separated as :*They collect stamps; They collect foreign stamps; They collect many things, but chiefly stamps*, (Greenbaum, 1970 in Carter and McCarthy, 1988:34). Secondly, lexical collocation does not seem to depend on grammatical types. So, collocation “strong argument” can be expressed, for example: *He argued strongly*; or *The strength of his argument*. or *His argument was strengthened* (as exemplified by Halliday, 1966 in Carter and McCarthy, 1988:35).

#### **2.4. Types of Lexical Collocations**

The following are types of lexical collocations as categorized in Benson, et al The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English (1986: xxiv – xxviii):

##### **2.4.1. verb (usually transitive) + noun/ pronoun (or prepositional phrase)**

Most of 2.4.1 collocations are called CA collocations because they consist of a verb denoting creation or activation and a noun/ a pronoun. For example:

(denoting creation) *come to an agreement, compose a music*, etc

(denoting activation) *set an alarm, launch a missile*, etc

However, not all verbs denoting creation and activation can be considered collocable to any nouns. Combinations of verbs, such as *build, cause, cook, make, prepare*, etc + nouns are limitless, their meanings are predictable. Therefore these combinations are not considered collocations. For example: *build a house (a bridge, roads), cause damage (death, deafness)*. Similarly, there are some nouns with polysemous meanings, such as *line* needs different verbs

to collocate: *form a line* (meaning *to line up*) and *drop smb a line* (meaning *write smb a letter*)

#### 2.4.2 verb (meaning eradication and or nullification) + a noun

This lexical combination is called EN (eradication and nullification) collocations. For example:

*reject an appeal, revoke a license, annul a marriage, withdraw an offer*

Some verbs denoting similar meaning and that can be used with large number nouns are considered as free combination. For example the verb *destroy* can combine with almost any nouns denoting physical objects: *village, school, document, etc.*

#### 2.4.3 adjective + noun

In some instances, more than one adjective (or more than one form of the same adjective) can collocate with the same noun. For example:

*strong / weak tea; kind /kindest / best regards*

#### 2.4.4. noun + verb

The verb names an action characteristic of the person/things designated by the noun. For example:

*alarms go off, bees buzz; bomb explode*

Predictable combinations, such as *boxers box, dancers dance* are considered free combinations

#### 2.4.5. noun + noun

This type of collocations indicates the unit that is associated with a noun

2.4.5.a. larger unit to which a single member belongs. For example:

*a herd of buffalo, a bouquet of flowers, etc.*

2.4.5.b. the specific, concrete, small unit of something larger, more general. For example:

*a bit of advice, an article of clothing, etc*

#### 2.4.6. adverb + adjective

The meaning of most adverbs in this combination is "very". For example:

*deeply absorbed, closely acquainted, hopelessly addicted,etc*

#### 2.4.7. verb + adverb

For example:

*appreciate sincerely, argue heatedly, etc*

### 2.5. Possible problems of Lexical Collocations to Indonesian learners

Although lexical collocations seem more flexible, its greater possibility of formation may make learners feel they have the most freedom in combining words. Therefore collocational errors the learners are likely to commit are the transfers of L1 elements in their combinations which unfortunately are not always acceptable collocations. The following are possible L1 transfers

a. Learners will transfer L1 verbs in English verb + noun collocation.

For example, Indonesian learners will think 'make a conclusion' is the only acceptable word combination because in BI 'membuat kesimpulan' is an acceptable collocation. They will hesitate to adopt 'to draw a conclusion'. Moreover 'membuat persetujuan' has its acceptable English equivalent: 'make an agreement'. Therefore learners transfer the verb 'membuat' as 'make' which is not always acceptable verb for certain nouns, or avoid using 'make' + noun because in BI structure other verbs are more likely used. For example: English 'make the bed' requires different use of

verb, “*membersihkan/merapikan tempat tidur*”. Lower level learners will likely use ‘clean’ or more acceptable verb ‘tidy up’ to express the same meaning, but will hesitate to use ‘*make the bed*’

- b. The transfer of L1 adjectives that collocates with nouns

Because in BI, an expression ‘*kopi kental*’ is acceptable, learners will likely find the equivalent of the adjective ‘*kental*’: ‘thick’ or ‘heavy’, whereas ‘strong coffee’ is the acceptable English collocation. Adjectives with similar and or opposite meanings are also often confusing to learners when they have to combine them with particular nouns: should they choose ‘light coffee’ or ‘mild coffee’? Should they choose ‘weak dish’ or ‘mild dish’ when their intention is that the food is not spicy?

- c. The transfer of L1 adverb ‘*sangat*’ in most ‘adverb + adjective’ combinations

Most English adverbs that precede adjectives have the same meaning of ‘*sangat*’ in BI which is equivalent to English ‘very’, therefore learners will likely play safe by avoiding using adverb but will overuse adverb ‘very’ with most adjectives.

### 3. Some possible solutions

The above brief description of the nature of the English collocations seems so bewildering and unpredictable; furthermore, their numbers are endless. Many Indonesian English teachers may think this aspect of vocabulary is indeed intimidating. Therefore, many of them prefer addressing them when they meet these word combinations as by-product of other skills they are teaching. When this is the case teachers should not forget to introduce the combinations as lexical units, not as individual word. Usually teachers are very well aware of giving the

grammatical collocation of phrasal verbs or prepositional phrases as lexical units, however when it comes to lexical collocations, they might be introducing a part of the combination or do not emphasize the collocationality of the word combination. It is very important for teachers to raise their advance-level students’ awareness and sensitivity of word collocationality

Besides, when students look up new words in their dictionary (the most commonly used is the *Oxford Student’s Dictionary of Current English*), they should be encouraged to also look at words that usually go with the word in question. Dictionary may immediately help for receptive task, such as reading comprehension, but when it comes to the learners’ need to use collocation in a productive fashion, for instance in writing task, they need a dictionary which provides good coverage of collocation, such as *The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English* or *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*. Dictionaries are supposed to be useful resources, but very often learners cannot make much use of them, especially when it comes to collocation. First, the learners often do not know how to use the dictionary to meet their need; secondly, they do not know which collocation are most useful for productive purposes; thirdly, they do not know where to start to find the collocation they need, whether the first part or the second part of the collocations. A good bilingual dictionary can help but the learners should always be encouraged to check the expression in the monolingual L2 dictionary with good collocational entries.

### 4. Conclusion

English collocation is divided into grammatical and lexical collocations. Grammatical collocations consist of noun, verb, or adjective plus a particle, adverb, or a grammatical structure, such as an infinitive, gerund or clause. Lexical collocations are combinations of *adjective +*

*noun* ; *adverb + adjective*; *verb + noun*, etc. Each type of collocation may impose difficulty or confusion on learners of English. This is due to the fact that there is hardly clear-cut guideline for non-native learners to decide which combinations are exactly acceptable and whose co-occurrence are highly predictable; or which ones are possibly acceptable for creative purpose, or which one are simply unacceptable. The only way to get better grasp of English collocations is building up awareness of it and experiencing it receptively and productively.

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