

# Crucial combinations

**Živa Čeh** believes collocations are vital for building competency.

**W**hen we start learning a foreign language, we first concentrate on words and some basic structures which will enable us to put words together and, thus, to be able to communicate. After we have acquired the basics, we become interested in word combinations. There are numerous types of word combinations and the borders between them can be quite fuzzy, but no matter how we define them, these collocations are used all the time, with greater or lesser frequency.

## Idioms

Idioms occur frequently in literature and in coursebooks, although in everyday life they may not be used very often. They are fixed word combinations whose meaning is often opaque: we often cannot guess what an idiom means just by understanding the meaning of the constituent words. When we say, for example, that *somebody kicked the bucket*, we are not saying that they actually kicked a bucket rather than, say, a ball, but that they died. Native speakers don't use idioms very often, but when they do, they use them to sum up, comment, establish rapport, construct dialogue, create humour and so on. Non-native speakers of a foreign language rarely use them appropriately and many are under the wrong impression that idioms are frequently used.

## Collocations

Collocations, on the other hand, are used all the time. They are word combinations that are loosely fixed, and

whose meaning is transparent. To understand a collocation, it is usually enough to understand the meaning of the words it consists of.

In order to become a proficient speaker of a foreign language, one needs to come to grips with collocations. Putting words together can be a very difficult task: often there are no rules about how to do that and no reasonable explanation readily available. We use certain word combinations because native speakers do so. Common examples involve the verbs *make* and *do*. Most non-native speakers find it easy to remember that we *make a cake* and *do a job*, but they may be puzzled by the fact that we also *make a phone call* and *do an exam*.

The definition of a collocation sometimes varies from author to author, but they are usually described as loosely fixed and semantically transparent word combinations. Benson writes that a grammatical collocation is a phrase consisting of a dominant word (noun, adjective, verb) and a preposition or a grammatical structure such as an infinitive or clause. For example, *blockade against*, *a pleasure to do*, *an agreement that*, *by accident*, *angry at*, *necessary to do*. Grammatical collocations are more deterministic and more often found in dictionaries. Lexical collocations are more problematic for non-native speakers and also more difficult to find in dictionaries. They consist of different combinations of nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs. For example, *come to an agreement*, *reject an appeal*, *strong tea*, *alarms go off*, *a swarm of bees*, *deeply absorbed*, *affect deeply*.

## Problems

Non-native speakers have different problems with different word combinations.

Idioms, the word combinations whose meaning is not transparent, are difficult to translate from a foreign language into one's mother tongue. If we are not aware that a particular word combination is an idiom, we can translate it literally word by word. I am sure you will have spotted some very funny translations in film subtitles. Those I have seen include *it beats me* translated as 'something hit me' instead of 'I don't know' and *it fell off the back of a lorry* translated as 'it fell off the lorry' rather than 'it was stolen'.

Collocations, word combinations whose meaning is transparent, should not cause any problems to non-native speakers when translating from English into their mother tongue. However, the same cannot be said for translating from the non-native speaker's mother tongue into English. Many words can be found in a dictionary, but how do we put them together and where do we find collocations?

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If we use a wrong collocation in English, it does not necessarily cause a communication breakdown. We may get the message across, but native speakers will find the way we put the words together unusual or funny. Correct use of collocations is a very thin line non-native speakers have to negotiate to become fully proficient speakers of English. And this line is very difficult to cross.

## Dictionaries

Some linguists maintain that non-native speakers should never translate into a foreign language as they will never get it exactly right. This might be true in terms of collocations.



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## Bilingual dictionaries

It is relatively easy to find words in a bilingual dictionary, but more difficult to find information about word combinations. A bilingual dictionary for translation needs to include the kind of collocations that usually cause problems for the target users. So one would expect to find in a Slovene-English dictionary the collocations that Slovene speakers of English often have trouble with. Mistakes sometimes derive from the fact that Slovene collocations are different from English ones.

## Monolingual dictionaries

If the collocation we want to look up cannot be found in a bilingual dictionary, we can consult a monolingual English dictionary. Some of the newer ones offer plenty of grammatical and lexical collocations. If we still don't manage to find the collocation we are looking for, there are also monolingual dictionaries of collocations, offering plenty of word combinations. However, it can be a little difficult for some users to learn how to use a dictionary of collocations; the information about a collocation will be given under the dominant word (grammatical collocations) or under one of the words in a lexical collocation. The only problem with a monolingual collocations dictionary is that it is written for all non-native speakers of the language (Slovene, Dutch, French), but for none of them in particular. As a result, it might happen

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that a Slovene speaker of English will find in a monolingual collocations dictionary plenty of collocations that do not cause problems for Slovene speakers, but none that are problematic for them. Logically, a bilingual dictionary of collocations would be the right reference, but few of these exist. There isn't one for Slovene speakers, and, at least in the short term, we are unlikely to get one.

## Coursebooks

Idioms and collocations are included in many coursebooks. We can use them as a springboard for discussion of different types of word combinations and point out the differences between them. Even better, many coursebooks offer exercises using collocations, mostly different word combinations with prepositions, or verbs, nouns and adverbs. Using these, we can introduce our students to the two types of collocations and tell them where they can find information about word combinations.

## Grammatical collocations

After illustrating different types of collocations with some examples, we can choose an authentic English text and find some grammatical collocations. These same collocations can later be included in exercises where students have to fill in the gaps and the missing prepositions, for example. Later on, we can apply a contrastive approach and add exercises with collocations which frequently cause problems because of mother-tongue interference. For instance, Slovene speakers will often mistakenly say 'to be interested for' because of the corresponding structure in the Slovene language: they automatically translate the Slovene preposition. Typical mistakes will vary according to the learners' L1. We also have to let students know in which dictionaries collocations can be found and under which word.

## Lexical collocations

The next step is to tackle lexical collocations. We can start by finding examples in an authentic text, go on by mentioning different types of word combinations (eg verbs + nouns), recycling the collocations in exercises. The contrastive approach can be applied later on to point out the difference between collocations in our mother tongue and English. Again we

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need to choose collocations with which speakers of our mother tongue usually make mistakes. For example, many Slovene speakers will say 'sweet water' instead of *fresh water* because they simply translate the Slovene expression.

Special attention has to be paid to the use of dictionaries. If we expect students to look up word combinations in a collocations dictionary, we have to teach them under which word to look.

On page 31 are some examples of the types of exercises I use with my students.



Of course, students should also be encouraged to use the collocations they learn when they speak, and at tertiary level we have to pay special attention: a large part of the specialist vocabulary required for ESP consists of collocations, and to be able to speak about our field we have to know them.

To sum up, collocations are everywhere: in the texts we read, in the videos we watch and in spoken language. So let's help students to remember them! 

Benson, M W, Benson, E and Ilson, R F (Ed) *The BBI Dictionary of English Word Combinations* John Benjamins Publishing 1997



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## Grammatical collocations

### a Noun + preposition

Use a dictionary and complete these noun collocations.

- 1 She was an adviser ..... the president.
- 2 They have imposed an economic blockade ..... foreign companies.  
etc

### b Noun + to infinitive, noun + that clause

Complete these sentences.

- 1 It is a pleasure .....
- 2 The negotiators came to an agreement .....  
etc

### c Preposition + noun

Complete each phrase below by using one of the following prepositions:

by in under for at

- 1 You have to pay ..... advance.
- 2 He gets very nervous ..... times.
- 3 It happened ..... accident.  
etc

### d Adjective + preposition

Complete each sentence by using an adjective from the list on the left and a preposition from the list on the right.

angry	of
sad	for
proud	with
ready	of
aware	about

- 1 He wasn't ..... people staring at him.
- 2 She is ..... her work.
- 3 What are you ..... ?  
etc

### e Adjective + to infinitive, adjective + that clause

Complete these sentences by using infinitives or clauses.

- 1 I am aware .....
- 2 We are ready .....
- 3 It was clear .....  
etc

### f Different verb patterns

Correct these sentences.

- 1 Don't forget buying the newspaper on your way home.
- 2 I was so tired, but he kept to talk.
- 3 I reminded that he would have to return the money.  
etc

## Lexical collocations

### a Verb + noun/pronoun

Match the words from the first column with those from the second to form common English collocations.

<i>to fish for</i>	<i>your chest</i>
<i>to give someone the benefit of</i>	<i>money</i>
<i>to get something off</i>	<i>compliments</i>
<i>to invest</i>	<i>a report</i>
<i>to file</i>	<i>the doubt</i>
etc	

### b Adjective + noun

Match the words from the first column with those from the second to form common English collocations.

<i>a glaring</i>	<i>taste</i>
<i>a calculated</i>	<i>conclusion</i>
<i>a foregone</i>	<i>mistake</i>
<i>an acquired</i>	<i>risk</i>
etc	

### c Noun + verb

Match the words from the first column with those from the second to form common English collocations. Find out what they mean.

<i>alarms</i>	<i>circulates</i>
<i>bees</i>	<i>go off, explode</i>
<i>blood</i>	<i>go off, ring, sound</i>
<i>bombs</i>	<i>buzz, sting, swarm</i>
etc	

### d Noun (unit) + noun

Match the words from the first column with those from the second to form common English collocations.

<i>a speck of</i>	<i>bank notes</i>
<i>a wad of</i>	<i>dust</i>
<i>a knob of</i>	<i>tongue</i>
<i>a slip of the</i>	<i>butter</i>
etc	

### e Adverb + adjective

Match the words from the first column with those from the second to form common English collocations.

<i>easily</i>	<i>disappointed</i>
<i>poorly</i>	<i>led</i>
<i>bitterly</i>	<i>qualified</i>
<i>densely (sparsely)</i>	<i>paid</i>
<i>highly</i>	<i>populated</i>
etc	

### f Verb + adverb

Match the words from the first column with those from the second to form common English collocations.

<i>invite</i>	<i>vigorously</i>
<i>forbid</i>	<i>cordially</i>
<i>protest</i>	<i>highly</i>
<i>recommend</i>	<i>categorically</i>
<i>apologise</i>	<i>sincerely</i>
etc	