# Introduction to Colligation

The theory of colligation is based on the work of Michael Hoey, whose book, *Lexical Priming*, provides new ideas about the way languages are learned and the way we should be teaching. This workshop was inspired not only by Hoey's work but also by Hugh Dellar's talk at IATEFL Poland 2014, which was based on Hoey's ideas.

Hoey, who echos and supports ideas presented by Michael Lewis in *The Lexical Approach*, has done extensive research that suggests that it is primarily a speaker's choice of words that determines the structures that will be used.

> The theory reverses the roles of lexis and grammar, arguing that lexis is complexly and systematically structured and that grammar is an outcome of this lexical structure.

The choice of a certain word automatically calls up from memory other words to be used in association with that word. For example, in the preceding sentence, the word *certain* immediately came to mind to use with *word*, while synonyms of *certain*, like *sure* or *definite* did not. This kind of semantic association of one word with another is known as collocation. Also, in the **same** sentence (not *similar*, *equal* or *equivalent*), the use of the word *association* automatically called up the prepositions *in* and *with* because *association* is used in the structure "be + used + in + association + with + N/NP". This tendency for certain words to call up others for creating grammatical structures is known as colligation.

## Lexical Priming

The idea of lexical priming is about how users of the language have been primed by previous experience with it to produce certain collocations or colligations when calling up a certain word. Through extensive scientific research and experimentation, Hoey makes a strong case for lexical priming to be a key component in language acquisition. Very briefly, experiments showed that when learners were exposed to texts with certain words in conjunction with other words, they were far more likely to acquire them than if the words were noticed in isolation.

> As discussed in the psycholinguistic literature (e.g. Neely 1977, 1991; Anderson 1983), the notion of semantic priming is used to discuss the way a 'priming' word may provoke a particular 'target' word. For example, a listener, previously given the word *body*, will recognise the word *heart* more quickly than if they had previously been given an unrelated word such as *trick*; in this sense, *body* primes the listener for *heart*.

The basic argument presented in the work of Hoey and many others (especially Lewis) is that accurate or native-like use of the language is determined mainly by patterns, not rules. Hoey presents the following two sentences in his book. The first one is taken from Bill Bryson's book about travelling in Europe, *Neither Here Nor There* (1991), while the second sentence is Hoey's rewritten version of it.

In winter, Hammerfest is a thirty-hour ride by bus from Oslo, though why anyone would want to go there in winter is a question worth considering.

Through winter, rides between Oslo and Hammerfest use thirty hours up in a bus, though why travellers would select to ride there then might be pondered.

Hoey's sentence sounds strange and unnatural, like something produced by an advanced learner with little collocational or colligational awareness. Semantically, it is quite similar to the original and it is grammatically "correct", according to "the rules". However, collocations like *using up hours* are not found in the English lexicon, even though the construction is based on a logical assumption that one spends time or money and *use* and *spend* would seem to be interchangeable within that semantic concept. However, as Hoey points out, we might use time or money but we don't use hours. And if we go beyond the so-called "rules" of grammar and look at Hoey's sentence from a colligational perspective, the idea of what grammatical accuracy is becomes redefined. Analysis of word usage from a corpus establishes, for example, that unlike *consider,* the verb *ponder* is almost never used in the passive. It also reveals that Hoey used *select* in a structural way that is completely foreign to it, yet completely appropriate to its synonym *choose*. Note the colligational differences between *select* and *choose*.

| | |
|---|---|
| S + choose + object | S + choose + infinitive |
| *We chose the slower way.* | *We chose to go there.* |
| | |
| S + select + object | ~~S + select + infinitive~~ |
| *She selected the slower way.* | ~~*We selected to go there.*~~ |

As the corpus verifies, *select* is almost never used with the infinitive in the active voice. The corpus (http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/) does show that it can be used in passive constructions like "He was selected to participate in the study". The corpus also shows that *select* does not collocate with *ride*.

Hoey points out that Bryson's sentence was produced with a native-speaker's priming of how words should be used in conjunction with others, while his was purposely not. Bryson, like all native speakers and other proficient users of the language, has been primed by extensive exposure to the language to the point where the use of a word naturally and effortlessly produces collocations and colligations that are completely appropriate and acceptable. The apparent fact that it is the choice of lexis which calls up the structures leads Hoey to conclude that "... priming can be seen as reversing the traditional relationship between grammar as systematic and lexis as loosely organised, amounting to an argument for lexis as systematic and grammar as more loosely organised." Hoey points out that:

1. Every word is primed to occur with particular other words; these are its collocates.

2. Every word is primed to occur with particular semantic sets; these are its semantic associations.

3. Every word is primed to occur in association with particular pragmatic functions; these are its pragmatic associations.

4. Every word is primed to occur in (or avoid) certain grammatical positions, and to occur in ( or avoid) certain grammatical functions; these are its colligations.

# Implications for Teaching

As Michael Lewis pointed out, the average educated native speaker knows about 40,000 individual words and 300,000 structures. Included in the total for structures are:

- standard grammar
- collocations
- colligations

If we check a good grammar book like *English Grammar in Use*, we can get an idea of the number of grammatical structures that we overtly teach. We know them because they have names like Past Perfect Continuous, Second Conditional, Relative Clauses, Superlatives, etc. However, as we have seen, the number of standard grammar structures, which can be measured in dozens, is tiny in comparison to the thousands of colligational structures a word may appear in. These structures have no names and will not appear in any grammar book. So, if we want our students to be able to use words correctly in structures and we are only teaching the standard grammar ones, we are only giving them a tiny fraction of what they really need.

The problem is that, unlike the relatively small number of standard grammar structures, we cannot actually teach all the colligations and collocations a learner needs to become a proficient user of the language. The number is just too huge. It would take years of research to actually list the 300,000 structures and it would take many decades to teach them all. So what generally happens is that we teach the standard grammar structures and the learner gradually acquires the rest of what native speakers know over time through continued exposure. That acquisition is not conscious and comes about through the process that Hoey describes as priming. What Hoey is suggesting (and Lewis before him) is that, if we can make that acquisition process more of a conscious one for the learner, then surely the length of time required to prime any illuminated structure will be just a fraction of what it would be without that illumination.

So, what we need to do is first of all raise our students' awareness of the existence of collocations and colligations. We can illuminate some in class and then we can give learners practice in noticing the structures that words appear in. The following four-step learning process is recommended:

1. Students notice structures
2. Students analyze structures
3. Students decide if structures are useful
4. Students try to remember and use them.

For collocations, students should learn to notice them and then analyze them in terms of what parts of speech the words are. For colligations, it involves noticing that the word is used in a structure and then determining exactly what the structure is. After analyzing the structure, the learners should think about whether that structure is worth remembering. The idea with all of this is that the cognitive processing will encourage acquisition and the step-by-step process will give students a tool for noticing and acquiring other structures during exposure. So, the exposure that a learner might get to the language over a certain time might remain the same but the conscious attention to structure should accelerate the priming process to the point where they are able to produce fairly accurate and authentic language much sooner.

# Collocation vs. Colligation

Since the concept of colligation was introduced, there has been some confusion about how they differ from collocations and how to distinguish one from the other. The following explanations have been complied through research from various sources and from classroom experiments designed to make it easier for learners to notice and classify the two structures.

Collocations are formed with two main words that have a primarily semantic relationship. Collocations are formed though usage and are not bound by grammatical rules, other than that they do tend to adhere to certain basic grammatical relationships like adjectives describing nouns and adverbs describing adjectives. There is no reason why we say *have a party* instead of *make a party* other than speakers of English chose to talk about the event from the perspective of holding it rather than preparing for it.

The specific effect that the words have on each other affects the meaning. For example, *have a party* is very different from *plan a party*, *crash a party* or *enjoy a party.* Therefore using an article with a noun cannot be considered a collocation because the article has very little, if any, semantic effect on the noun.  An apple is still an apple with or without the article but a green apple is very different from a red one. Yes, and a cigar is still a cigar.

Collocations:
- two words that occur together          have parties
- from the four main POS               **V + N**
- sometimes split                    have a party
- consider phrasal verbs as one verb    take off/remove a hat
- do not include "be"                 ~~am eating~~
- do not include proper nouns         ~~South Korea~~

Colligations are about the grammatical relationships between words. A colligation is the grammatical pattern a word is used in. For example, in contrast with **have** in **have a party,** the **have** in **have eaten** does not really affect the meaning of *eat* as **have** does not have the meaning here of possession. But it tells us something about the time of the action, which is, as we know, a grammatical concept.

With the colligation *interested in,* the relationship between *interested* and *in* is primarily a grammatical one. One could argue that the prepositions *with* or *to* might make just as much sense after *interested* but, for whatever reason, the structure *interested in* has become fixed in the language and cannot be varied for other shades of meaning. It's just as much a grammatical structure as *have/has + past participle* for the present perfect. Even something so simple as an article (determiner) with a singular countable noun is considered to be a colligation because the words are used together based on their grammatical relationship

Below are some examples of relationships between words that are grammatical in nature and therefore considered to be colligations and not collocations.

- S +  have eaten          (have + past participle)
- S +  am eating           (be + dynamic *-ing* verb)
- S +  is hungry           (be + adjective)
- a party               (article + countable noun)
- S + be + interested in + ing   (interested in + gerund)

# Activities

The following activities were designed to raise learners' awareness of colligations and to get them to notice, analyze and use them. Some activities are best used when the students have already had some practice with colligations.

## Determine the colligation

Use any text that you've already dealt with for comprehension and unknown vocabulary and select some words which appear in useful colligational structures. Then read the list of words to students and have them underline them in texts. In pairs or small groups, students try to determine the grammar patterns those words are used in. Elicit their ideas and clarify. Finally, ask students to select which colligations they would like to remember and use. Get some feedback and ask for reasons, if you want.

## Reproduce the colligation

Use this as a follow-up to the previous activity or, if the students have had enough experience with colligations, use it on its own. If using it on its own, tell students which words in the text you want them to find the colligation of. If you're using this in conjunction with the previous activity, the students should have already done that. Then, in pairs or small groups, students write sentences using the targeted words but varying some of the other words in the structure. You can have them write on flipchart paper or on a section of the board. Either way, they should change the writer for each sentence. When they have finished, do some error correction with their sentences and point out where they have used the correct colligation. Finally, ask students to select which colligations they would like to remember and use. Get some feedback and ask for reasons, if you want.

## Find and reproduce the colligation

This is a combination of the two previous activities and it should be used only when students are quite familiar with colligations and are able to find them in a text. Put students in pairs or small groups. Give them a text that's already been dealt with for comprehension and vocabulary. Then ask them to locate a word that is used in a particular structure. Once they've found one, they determine what the structure is and then write a sentence using the word with the essential structure but changing the non-essential words. You can have them write on flipchart paper with markers and challenge the groups to find and reproduce more colligations than any other group. Then you can stop the activity and put the papers up on the walls. Eliminate any structures that are not actually colligations and then count how many each group wrote to determine a winner. Then you can do some error correction with the sentences. Finally, ask students to select which colligations they would like to remember and use. Get some feedback and ask for reasons, if you want.

## Match the Structure to the Example

Use a text that students have already processed for comprehension and unknown vocabulary. Then put students in pairs or small groups and give them a list of the structures of colligations in the text, but with the variable words and *the target word replaced by their parts of speech*. For example, from the preceding sentence you could give the students this structure of the bolded part, with the key word underlined so students will know that they are finding the colligation of that word:

N/NP + <u>VERB</u> + prep + N/NP

The students would work together and find the structures in the text that correspond to the structures you gave them. You can make it a race to see who finds them all first. Once some students have located all of them, take up the answers. You can follow this activity with a productive one where the students create sentences using the structures. Finally, ask students to select which colligations they would like to remember and use. Get some feedback and ask for reasons, if you want.

Note that if you want to make the activity easier, you could give some meaning clues as well as form ones. For example, the above structure for "*the target word replaced by their parts of speech"* could be presented like this:

N/NP + <u>VERB</u> + prep + N/NP      It's used to talk about a change.

To make it even easier, you could give students one or more of the words in the structure, especially those that won't change. For example:

N/NP + <u>VERB</u> + **by** + N/NP          It's used to talk about a change

Or even easier still:

N/NP + **<u>replaced</u>** + **by** + N/NP     It's used to talk about a change

## Colligation Competition

This is a good activity to use with students after they have had a lot of guidance with finding and using collocations. With this activity, they practice finding and using them without the teacher's help. The idea being that it's preparing them to process colligations outside the classroom.

To start, have students use a text that they have already dealt with for comprehension. Then they work in teams and find words that have colligations in the text. They should simply underline them. When students have had enough time to do this, stop them and give each team a pile of scrap paper and a marker. Then one team chooses a word and all teams (including the one that chose the word), find the word in the text, determine the colligation and use it in an original sentence which they write with the marker on the paper. When they have all finished, get all groups to hold up their papers. Award a point to every group that used the word with the correct colligation. Continue in the same way.

## Finding Colligations in Exercises

Many teachers regular use the vocabulary and grammar exercises that are commonly found in coursebooks. However, filling a gap in with a word or two usually misses focus on the actual structure that that word is used in, i.e., its colligation. Why not have students look for those colligations once they have finished the exercise? Simply tell them which of the words that they added has a colligation worth noticing. Then have them work together to determine what the colligations are. As with the other activities in this handout, you can ask them to reproduce those collocations in writing and you can ask students to determine which would be most useful to remember. The following sentences were taken from an exercise dealing with the present continuous from *Grammar in Use Intermediate* (Murphy).

1. Please don't make so much noise. I***'m trying*** (try) to work.
2. Let's go out now. It ***isn't raining*** (rain) any more.
3. You can turn off the radio. I _____ (listen) to it.
4. Kate phoned me last night. She's on holiday in France. She _____ (have) a great time and doesn't want to come back.
5. I want to lose weight, so this week I _____ (eat) lunch.
6. Andrew has just started evening classes. He _____ (learn) German.
7. Paul and Anne have had an argument. They _____ (speak) to each other.
8. I_____ (get) tired. I need a rest.
9. Tim _____ (work) this week. He's on holiday.

The following useful structures could be noted in the preceding exercise.  They would be useful as students need to understand things such as the verb *try* is followed by the infinitive for attempts to do something. In the second example, students should be aware that we talk about weather by using the pronoun *it*. In number 3, the colligation reinforces the fact that *listen* has to be followed by *to* when it has an object and number 7 emphasizes to students that *speak* is normally intransitive and needs a prepositional phrase as a complement. Often that phrase consists of the preposition *to* and a person. Number 8 shows how *get* is often used with adjectives to describe feelings.

1. S + be + trying + infinitive
2. It + be + raining
3. S + be + listening + to + object
4. S + be + having + object
5.
6.
7. S + be + speak + to + N (person)
8. S + be + get + Adj.
9.

The next exercise was taken from *Q Skills for Success Reading and Writing 1*. It requires students to match the words in bold to the definitions below the sentences. Below the exercise are some suggestions for colligations that could be focussed on.

　　1. This neighborhood has a lot of ***crime***. Be careful.
　　2. I don't like ***violent*** movies. I don't like to see people get hurt.
　　3. Every day, there are many important news events in all the world. However, our ***focus*** is often on movie stars or other famous people.
　　4. We saw a ***scary*** movie last night. I was so afraid that I couldn't sleep.
　　5. News websites usually ***report*** on news events more quickly than newspapers or TV news.
　　6. Cats are very ***common*** in this country. Many families own one.
　　7. Smoking can ***affect*** your health. I can make you sick.
　　8. Most people agree that eating a lot of fast food can have a ***negative*** effect on your health.

　　_____ (adjective) bad; not positive or good
　　_____ (adjective) making you feel afraid
　　_____ (noun) something that someone does that is against the law
　　_____ (noun) the center of attention or interest
　　_____ (adjective) happening often or found in many places
　　_____ (verb) to make something or someone change in a particular way, esp. in a bad way
　　_____ (verb) to give people information about something that happened.

1.
2.
3. Determiner + focus + on + Obj.　　　　　*Our focus is on movie stars.*
4.
5. S + report + on + Obj.　　　　　　　　　*Websites report on news events.*
6.
7. S + can + affect + Determiner + Obj.　　　*Smoking can affect your health*.
8. S + can have + Determiner + effect on + Obj.　*Eating a lot of fast food can have a negative effect on your health*

## Collocation or Colligation?

It's absolutely essential that students learn the structures associated with new words just after they learn the meaning, form and pronunciation of them. Otherwise, how will they know how to use them? This activity is designed to get students to notice collocations and colligations of words that they learn they learn and to provide them with training to do that whenever they are exposed to English.

To use this activity, the new words that students are to learn must be contextualized in sentences. It can and should be used with any text that has been dealt with in class, either a reading text or a tapescript. Once the target vocabulary has been dealt with for meaning, form and pronunciation, students should work in pairs to locate the target vocabulary in the text and decide if the words are part of collocations and/or colligations. One way that they could do it is to underline the structures in the text and designate them with either a CC or CG for collocation or colligation. You could also give students a chart to fill out similar to the one below. Note that there are two columns for collocations because sometimes a word will appear in a text in two collocations. This activity could be made competitive by awarding the pairs of students a point for each correct collocation or colligation they find.

| Word | Collocation 1 | Collocation 2 | Colligation |
|------|---------------|---------------|-------------|
| 1. | | | |
| 2. | | | |
| 3. | | | |
| 4. | | | |
| 5. | | | |
| 6. | | | |

## Homework, Homework, Homework

It's absolutely essential that students be given frequent homework involving noticing colligations as the whole idea is that we provide them with tools to use to accelerate their learning during exposure to language. Here are a few suggested homework tasks:

- Find 5 (10) colligations in a text.
- Find words you don't know, determine the meaning and then record the colligations they are used in in your notebook.
- Find words you know in a text that have different colligations. Look for alternative colligations in the text or use a dictionary to come up with the others.
- Find colligations of certain words and reproduce them in sentences.

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