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COLLINS COBUILD GRAMMAR PATTERNS 1 AND 2

Since the late eighties many linguists and ordinary teachers of English have followed the developments of the COBUILD project with great interest. For the first time in the history of lexicography, the COBUILD staff used a computational database when compiling the first edition of the Collins COBUILD English Dictionary, published in 1987. This was followed by the various grammar and usage books, all of which tried to exploit the potentials of the rapidly expanding corpus. By the time of the second edition of the dictionary in 1995 the number of data stored in the Birmingham computer centre was ten times bigger than eight years before: 200 million words from spoken and written, British and American English. (The corpus now comprises 330 million words, with plans to expand it to 400 million during 1999.)

Anyone who has ever had a chance to get access to their corpus once or occasionally must have felt how much it would be necessary for most linguists and teachers of English to have regular access to the data, preferably in an electronic on-line way, or at least to the results of some analysis in a printed form. The latter might be preferred especially by people who have some aversion to new technical devices or those who can't afford to subscribe to the use of the database, but the results of some systematic analysis of the corpus should also be of interest for those who use the database more or less regularly, but do research in some other field of computational linguistics.

The results of computer-assisted linguistic research concerning the typical patterns of English verbs, nouns and adjectives have been summarized by the COBUILD linguists in two volumes in recent years. 'Collins COBUILD Grammar Patterns 1: Verbs' was published in 1996 when their database (The Bank of English) stood at 250 million words. It was followed two years later by 'Collins COBUILD Grammar Patterns 2: Nouns and Adjectives' at the time of the 350 million-strong corpus. The former was complemented by a practice book in 1997. ('Verbs: Patterns and Practice') It offers teachers ideas in what ways the grammar patterns could be exploited.

As there hasn't been sufficient time since the pattern books came out (and they aren't even available in most Hungarian bookshops), the aim of the

present review cannot be some kind of summary of accumulated experience in using them. Instead, I would like to write about the motives and intentions of the editors of these books; why they decided to compile them and how they see the potential in using such books when teaching or learning English.

It cannot be expected that reference books with such a new approach will be immediately used by a great number of language teachers and learners. In my opinion what is more likely is that first people with some academic interest will study the books, and only their gradual introduction to language teaching can be envisaged.

Though the idea of using grammar patterns is not completely new (the older generation of English teachers will remember Hornby's 'A Guide to Patterns and Usage in English' (OUP, 1954)), the present volumes are revolutionary in at least two ways. One is that they are the first comprehensive surveys of English verb, noun and adjective patterns based on the most complete analysis ever undertaken. The other is that the correlation of pattern with meaning is made obvious through computer evidence for the first time. As the mastermind behind the whole COBUILD project, John Sinclair sees it, it is very likely that continuing research will bring meaning and pattern closer and closer together. (CCGP 2: IV)

Since Hornby's book, however, grammar patterns have gone out of fashion and the editors of the new COBUILD books have had to convince the readers again that it makes sense to use patterns. They define 'pattern' in the following way: '...a pattern is a description of the behaviour of a lexical item, or one of the behaviours of that item, as evidenced in a record of large amounts of language use. This evidence is most readily obtained from a large, electronically-stored corpus.' (Hunston and Francis, forthcoming) The patterns described in these books are usually of the complementation type, i.e. in most cases - especially with verbs - they show what follows the word, but with nouns it is often important what comes before the word, so modification can also be part of the pattern.

The authors prefer their approach to be called 'corpus-driven'. It means the observation of a large number of electronically-stored data, which does not mean simply a quantitative change in the raw material, but it consists of data (words, shown in their environment by concordance lines) that have actually been used in the written or spoken language and not invented by some linguist. This fact makes it possible to draw more reliable conclusions than it was the case in the past, and this new approach might lead to questioning old beliefs and inspiring new theories.

The compilers hold the view that lexis and syntax are both important when describing a word, so 'grammar' should give information about both. The phenomenon that *want* is often followed by *to* would be difficult to

define as a fact about lexis or a fact about grammar. In structural linguistics grammar was the most important, while lexis was often seen as a separate entity. Even the most comprehensive grammar books, like those of Quirk et al, tend to downplay the role of the lexical side of grammar, they don't distinguish between what is possible and what is typical, either because they do not find it important or because they did not have access to enough information. (Hunston and Francis, forthcoming)

The change in the method of observing data (the use of the concordance lines of a computational database) can also easily lead to the change in theory. Though at this stage we still cannot expect the authors to come up with some final theoretical conclusions, they have already observed certain tendencies in the correlation of meaning and form (pattern). Some of these are the following:

1. When a word has more than one meaning, the meanings tend to be distinguished by having different patterns, but there is a lack of one-to-one correspondence between pattern and meaning.

2. Words with the same pattern share aspects of meaning. But the lists of words that have the same pattern are divisible in several ways, and different researchers could end up with different groupings. (Hunston and Francis, forthcoming)

So, it is no wonder that looking at the different groups we might find these divisions often arbitrary. And there will always be words that do not fit into any group. Still, we cannot say that attempts at grouping words in this way would be useless.

This problem is similar to the dilemma of lexicographers, who have to separate the various senses of a word when compiling their dictionaries, in which patterning plays an important part, but not the whole.

It is still to be seen whether the use of corpora (records of language use) will lead to a theory based on phraseology and coexist with other theories or some earlier theory will evolve, perhaps using the new evidence.

With the help of their practice book and in some papers the authors of the grammar patterns series also try to give ideas to teachers and learners of English in what ways their books could be used in learning English as a second or foreign language.

They started giving lists of verbs, nouns, adjectives in a given pattern as early as in the 1990 edition of the Collins Cobuild English Grammar, and this has been taken to its logical conclusion in the grammar pattern books. Though the authors claim that a pattern approach can be adapted to any type of syllabus, they also point out that the lexical approach is the most suitable for this purpose.

It is difficult to imagine building a lesson around a pattern and using the traditional Presentation-Practice-Production model. Instead patterns should contribute to grammatical consciousness-raising, vocabulary building or checking accuracy. The authors give examples of these in the 'Advice for teachers' section of their pattern books.

These volumes do not state explicitly what can or cannot be said (which is often impossible to state), they rather concentrate on what is typically, often, or sometimes said. 'The primary use of the Grammar Patterns volumes is to give examples of words that behave in the same way and share an aspect of meaning.' (Hunston and Francis, forthcoming) And while the compilers of such volumes have to try to give as complete lists as possible, the learner or teacher of English can select the most frequent and useful words from the lists.

In some papers the authors have defended their views concerning the importance of patterns against those who think non-native speakers can do without phraseologies native speakers use, and speak some simplified 'International English' instead. They believe patterns are a necessary feature of language. Most words have no meaning in isolation (or only an ambiguous one), but have meaning when they occur in a specific phraseology. Pattern is therefore central to the meaning and is essential both to fluency and accuracy.

I think we can agree with the conclusions of the authors that while we must still wait for a definitive theory of language based on corpora, the new findings and methods offered in these books can be recommended with greater confidence to teachers of English.

References

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