English Collocations in EFL situations:  
Towards a Lexical Approach in Foreign Language Teaching.

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The present paper deals with the phenomenon of Collocation. There are two parts: the first part gives an introduction to collocations and how they have been dealt with by linguists and lexicographers. Methodological problems in the study of collocations and possible applications of such a study are outlined.

The second part of the paper focuses on the pedagogical applications of a study of English collocations under the light of the Lexical Approach, with special reference to HFL in Greece. Greek Junior High School students of English has been chosen as subjects for a research project which aims to:

investigate how collocations are treated by the textbooks used in Greek State Junior High Schools, namely Task Way English 1, 2, 3, which have been written by a group of Greek linguists and aim to cover the needs of Greek HFL learners;

assess the Greek learners' knowledge and use of English collocations by the use of linguistic tests based on the collocations found in their textbooks;

find out how the Greek learners' needs as far as English collocations are concerned, can be catered for.
[Trans1]

1. Second/Foreign Language Vocabulary Teaching

For a long time the emphasis in second/foreign language vocabulary teaching has been on accumulating and memorising long lists of word definitions followed by gap filling exercises (Robinson 1989:276). However, vocabulary skills involve more than the ability to define a word and slot it into a sentence. In an effort to avoid an obsession with definition and with words in isolation, a new approach to vocabulary teaching could include "the examination of the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations of collocation and set between lexical items", a skill that is evident in the adult native speakers of a language (McCarthy 1984:14,16). Raising the learners' understanding of the collocations of a word is of primary importance, since "our fundamental access to meaning is the relations between words in context" (McCarthy 1984:21).

2. Collocation: Definition

Collocation is "an important organising principle in the vocabulary of any language", along with hyponymy, synonymy, and antonymy (McCarthy 1990:12).
Before proceeding to the description of the current state of the literature with respect to collocation I would like to present the meaning relations I will be talking about.

[Trans2]
Paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations are schematically represented by two axes: a vertical and a horizontal one. The paradigmatic axis is the vertical axis and comprises sets of words belonging to the same class that can be substituted for one another in a specific grammatical context. For example:
John ate the apple
orange
sandwich
steak etc.
The horizontal axis of language is the syntagmatic axis and it refers to the word’s ability to combine with other words. Collocations belong to the syntagmatic dimension of language.

The term collocation is used to refer to "sequences of lexical items which habitually co-occur [i.e. occur together]" (Cruse 1986:40). [Trans3] Examples of collocations are: 'blonde hair', 'rancid butter', 'sour milk', 'to collect stamps', 'to commit suicide', 'to reject a proposal'.

The relationship of collocation has also been described as "a marriage contract" between words (McCarthy 1990:12): a contract which characterises as inappropriate such collocations as: *make suicide, *sour butter, *hazel car.
3. Collocation in Psycholinguistics

Research in psycholinguistics and language acquisition has emphasised the fundamental role of semantic relations in the study of vocabulary. It has been shown that semantic memory in the form of syntagmatic associations appears to be more enduring than in the form of paradigmatic associations (Nebes 1989).

A series of psycholinguistic experiments also aimed to investigate the integration of new vocabulary words into semantic memory and the creation of new associations between preexisting, but previously unrelated, words. The results indicate that very extensive study is necessary for such an integration to occur and that it is easier to add a new word to memory than to establish a link between two formerly unconnected words already in semantic memory (Dagenbach et al. 1990).

Even though these studies were concerned with first language acquisition, they can still hold some relevance for foreign language acquisition. Under this scope the above results indicate the significance of teaching new vocabulary in the form of collocations from the beginning stages of second/foreign language learning.
4. Collocation in Theoretical Linguistics

Collocation as a linguistic phenomenon associated with lexical semantics was dealt with as early as 2,300 years ago. Greek Stoic philosophers, rejected the equation of "one word, one meaning" and shed light on an important aspect of the semantic structure of language: "word meanings do not exist in isolation, and they may differ according to the collocation in which they are used" (Robins 1967:21).

Along the same lines Firth, who is believed to be the 'father' of the term "collocation", highlights the fact that "meaning by collocation is an abstraction at the syntagmatic level and is not directly concerned with the conceptual or idea approach to the meaning of words" (Firth 1964:196). However his theory of meaning does not offer any organising principles that could form the basis of the study of collocations.

Structuralists, principally Chomsky, accepted "the equation of knowledge of a generative grammar with 'linguistic competence'" (Pawley and Syder 1983:192). However, such an approach to second/foreign language learning is insufficient. In order to achieve a native like control of a language along with the rules of a generative grammar a learner needs to "learn a means for knowing which of the well-formed sentences are native-like - a way of distinguishing those sentences that are normal or unmarked from those that are unnatural or highly marked" (Pawley and Syder 1983:194). Collocation, then, is a
fundamental component of native-like linguistic competence and performance.

Bolinger 1976 also supports the idea that we learn and memorise words in chunks and that most of our "manipulative grasp of words is by way of collocations" (Bolinger 1976:8). The learning of language in segments of collocation size, especially in children, is proved by the fact that "the collocate is what the young child produces if you ask him a definition" e.g. a 'hole' is 'a hole in the ground' (Cazden 1972:129, sited in Bolinger 1976:11). Language learning is seen as a continuum starting at the morpheme level with word formation rules, moving to the word level and activating phrase formation rules and the last stage before storage in memory is the collocation level where words enter into collocations. This makes speakers of a language accept and generate phrases such as 'a lifetime ago' and 'somewhere else' but not '*an extended time ago' because they have not heard it, they have no memory of it (Bolinger 1976:4).

Even though linguists generally agree that collocation as a linguistic phenomenon deserves full observation and study, each one has proceeded to define a unique theory of how to study collocations. The picture so far looks like the Tower of Babel, to use Paul Meara's simile in a recent paper (1993): everybody is working their way up to the top, using their own set of tools, but the basis is not well-established, there is no general agreement on a set of fundamental principles for
the study of collocations. Eventually what has taken so long and so much effort to build may collapse. There is a need for a well-defined theory of linguistic collocation that will lead to a well-structured empirical study of collocational patterns in language. Linguists will benefit from communicating with each other in order to decide on a common set of 'tools' for a valid and 'strong' investigation of collocations.

5. The Study of Collocations: Methodological Problems

The study of collocations presents a number of methodological problems. One of them is how to collect and evaluate collocations. Machine-readable language corpora, concordancing programmes, introspection are a few ways of studying collocations. The use of computers makes searches through language corpora feasible. However, the syntactic relation of the collocating items and their meaning are not taken under consideration. Personal observation, introspection and informant experiments would have to be used (Greenbaum 1970:10).

Another problem is the classification of collocations into different categories and along a continuum from the more restricted to the more free. Here linguists so far have not found a set of rules to be used universally. Some take the lexeme as the basic unit for the analysis of collocations, others prefer the morpheme. Others classify the most
restricted collocations like 'commit suicide' as idioms, while others have not yet decided on how different or how similar collocations and idioms are (Bollinger 1976).

6. Collocations in Lexicography

Despite the problems that the study of collocations presents, collocations have played an important role in the lexicographic theories lying behind the compilation of prototypical dictionaries such as the Explanatory Combinatorial Dictionary (ECD), and the BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English.

[Trans4]
The ECD is related to the Meaning-Text theory, which defines a natural language as "a specific system of correspondences between an infinite set of meanings and an infinite set of texts" (Mel'cuk 1988:167). Each ECD entry is divided into three zones: a semantic zone, a syntactic zone and a lexical co-occurrence zone. The latter comprises of all the restricted lexical co-occurrences of the entry lexeme. For this purpose, Mel’cuk and Zholkovsky, the ECD writers, devised the concept of Lexical Functions that describe all the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations that a lexeme can have with other lexemes (Mel’cuk and Zholkovsky 1988:42). The above approach resulted in a large number of standard basic lexical functions - some of which have already been utilised
in dictionaries for several decades:
'Syn' for synonyms),
and others are new:
'Instr' - preposition meaning 'by means of', and
'Propt' - preposition meaning 'because of', 'as a result of'.

Mel'cuk and Zholkovsky are considered pioneers in their lexicographic principles and the heuristic criteria they used for the writing of the ECD which could be used as "a central component of automatic text synthesis and analysis", as a "format" for the development of textbooks, pedagogically oriented dictionaries, and reference works. In addition, it can contribute to language theory (Mel'cuk and Zholkovsky 1988:66,67). However, the ECD writers caution that the complex and sophisticated nature of ECD would make its direct use by EFL/ESL learners problematic.

[Trans5] Acknowledging the ECD's significant contribution to the treatment of collocations, Benson et al. put together the BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English. The difference between the BBI and the ECD is that the BBI includes more lexical items and a less detailed grammatical and lexical treatment. The BBI writers avoided including in their dictionary "free combinations" that are predictable and thus unneeded, e.g. the collocation of the verb 'to destroy' with a large number of nouns denoting physical objects like 'bridge', 'house', 'road' etc. (Benson 1985:66). Fifteen different types of "essential grammatical and lexical recurrent word
combinations" are defined and included in the BBI dictionary for "general use" (Benson et al. 1986:7). The BBI writers however, do not explain how they established that a word combination is recurrent enough to be included in their dictionary. Overall, the BBI dictionary can be used as a helpful guide to word collocations by EFL/ESL learners.

7. Collocations in Foreign/Second Language Teaching

The inclusion of collocations in foreign language teaching has been already suggested by a large number of educators.

Tweddell 1973 reports that textbook writers usually organise learning materials around structural topics and treat vocabulary as a means for illustrating grammatical topics (Tweddell 1973:63). He also argues that vocabulary expansion should take place from the intermediate stages of FL learning and onwards in a systematic and deliberate way. However, he does realise that "the most habitual parts of language use" such as phrase-patterns and sentence patterns "need to be practised and established as early as possible" (Tweddell 1973:63). After those habits have been adequately established, new vocabulary can be assimilated into the FL patterns. A theory of collocations unquestionably could provide phrase patterns for the early establishment of language usage habits, as proposed by Tweddell 1973.
Laufer 1988 refers to the "apparent rulelessness" of collocations as one factor that interferes with foreign language vocabulary learning (Laufer 1988:8), and Korosadowicz-Struzynska 1980 reports that it is the combinations of lexical items that cause problems in vocabulary acquisition, and therefore the learner’s mastery of these troublesome combinations, rather than his knowledge of single words, should be an indication of his progress (Korosadowicz-Struzynska 1980:111). Students face intralingual and interlingual problems in the use of collocations. Grammatical errors rarely occur in the speech of advanced students who have a considerable fluency of expression in a foreign language. Collocational errors, though, would simply “crop-up...this is why modern measures of proficiency in a FL, such as ‘clozentropy’ measure first of all student mastery of collocations” (Korosadowicz-Struzynska 1980:115). She suggests that it is reasonable to teach collocations of words to learners from the beginning rather than to arrange remedial courses afterwards, when lexical errors have become fossilised (Korosadowicz-Struzynska 1980:116). This view is in agreement with Brown 1974 who suggests that an increase of the students’ knowledge of collocation will result to an improvement of their oral and listening comprehension, and their reading speed.

Views such as the above have been supported by research in second/foreign language learning.
8. Collocations in Pedagogical Research

Bahns and Eldaw 1993 carried out an experiment that supported the view that collocations should be taught to EFL learners. They used a translation and a cloze task to test the learners’ active knowledge of 15 English verb-noun lexical collocations. An analysis of their data showed that the learners’ knowledge of collocations does not expand in parallel with their knowledge of general vocabulary, and that a knowledge of collocations is necessary to full communicative mastery of English. Therefore they suggest that EFL instruction should stop neglecting collocations, and that teachers should try to raise the learners’ awareness of collocations by including in their syllabus collocations that are not easy to paraphrase, as they proved to be more necessary than those collocations that are easily circumvented.

Elkatib 1984 analysed the writing of four Arab students and found unfamiliarity of collocation as well as overuse of a few general lexical items in unsuitable contexts to be among the eight main types of lexical errors that were recorded. In the analysis of the collocational errors, Elkatib observes that the learners knew the basic meaning of the lexical item but they did not know its collocative patterns, which results to the use of an erroneous collocation. Examples given are: ‘beautiful noise’, ‘shooting stones’, ‘I increased a hundred marks’. He concludes that new words should be presented in company with their most typical collocations. The importance
of such a practice derives from the fact that "students often fail to realise the potential even of words they know well, because they use them only in a limited number of collocations of which they are sure" (Elkatib 1984:50).

Aghbar 1990 designed a writing test based on the assumption that the use of formulaic language is an important aspect of language proficiency and should be considered in assessing native and non-native English proficiency. He defines formulaic language as language chunks that are used and learnt together. He reports that "collocations are the less obvious examples of formulaic language", maybe because they are not fixed in the same way that idioms and proverbs are (Aghbar 1990:2). The test consisted of 50 sentences containing one formulaic verb-noun expression. In each of these expressions the verb was missing and the participants had to provide the verb most likely to be used in a formal written context. The results showed that ESL students did well where 'get' was the desirable word. However, they used 'get' even when other more specific and more appropriate verbs were needed. The reason for the poor ESL performance in the test was the "lack of acquisition of those language chunks that make discourse fluent and idiomatic" (Aghbar 1990:6). The results also showed that the performance of American students was similar to that of ESL students. This can be a proof of native undergraduates' inadequate knowledge of formal written language.
9. Possible Applications of the Study of Collocations

The study of collocations can have applications in the following language-related fields:

9.1 Literary Criticism

A methodology of the study of collocations will provide the basis for stylistic analysis of literary texts. Behre (1967) in his *Studies in Agatha Christie's Writings* drew attention to the collocational habits of a set of quantifiers and intensifiers.

9.2 Historical Linguistics

A study of collocations is also relevant to historical linguistics. By conducting synchronic studies of the collocations of a language and comparing them with the ones previously used in the same language one can draw conclusions on the changes that this language has undergone through time.

9.3 Study of Register and ESP

As Sinclair has pointed out, collocation is relevant to the study of register too. For example 'vigorous depression' and
'dull highlights' may sound unusual and odd collocations, unless we place them in the registers of meteorology and photography respectively (Sinclair 1966:429).

This can also have applications in the teaching and learning languages for specific purposes. For example, according to the specific purpose a language is going to be used for, materials can be devised that will display the most appropriate and useful collocations that the students will need to know, for both productive and receptive reasons.

9.4 Language Teaching

A systematic and detailed study of collocations will also assist language teaching and the design of effective teaching materials.

10. The Present Project

[Trans7]

The designing of effective teaching materials for Greek learners of English in the Greek State Junior High Schools is the aim of the project I am presently working on.

The methodology of the project is as follows: the English textbooks Task Way English 1,2,3 that are used in all the Greek State Junior High Schools have been analysed from the
point of view of their use of collocations. The textbooks were analysed manually due to the fact that they were not in a machine-readable form, and the collocations that were found were classified in 42 categories derived mainly from those used in the BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English and in other studies. After the data have been classified, tables were created to show frequency of occurrence for the collocations found in the textbooks.

According to the data derived from the analysis of the textbooks, tests were constructed in order to test the students' knowledge and use of the collocations taught to them. The tests comprised a blank filling test, composition writing and a translation test. The latter aimed to detect collocational errors due to mother tongue interference.

The project is at the data collection stage and results are not yet available. What I aim to find out, though, is whether the Greek learners have any problems in using collocations in English that are not the same as in Greek, [Trans8] e.g. English people 'draw conclusions' while the Greeks 'vgazoune sumberasmata', in English you have to 'wait for somebody' while in Greek 'perimeneis kapion', in English you 'go on a diet' while in Greek 'kaneis dieta', or collocations that are of a more restricted nature, e.g. in English someone who drinks a lot is a 'heavy drinker' while in Greek he is a 'gero potiri'. Also Greek learners are expected to have
difficulties with using correctly the prepositions 'in', 'on', 'at', 'to' because in most of the cases, they are expressed in Greek either by 'sto' or the definite article, e.g. 'to get in touch with someone' 'erxome se epafi me kapoion', 'on your right' 'sta dexia sou', 'at a glance' 'se mia matia'.

After the weaknesses of the Greek learners with regard to the English collocations have been detected, teaching material to remedy the situation will be designed.

Such a methodology is in agreement with a recent new approach in second/foreign language teaching, namely The Lexical Approach. According to the Lexical Approach the lexis is the central organising principle of the syllabus (Lewis 1993:23). De-contextualised language is not favoured, extended text or discourse are preferred, while the importance of context is recognised. "A range of awareness-raising activities directing the students' attention to the chunks of which text is composed" are proposed (Lewis 1993:106). Texts are seen as "a major linguistic resource from which students can extract lexical items for study, expansion and recording in appropriate formats" (Lewis 1993:106) and collocation assumes an important syllabus-generating role (Lewis 1993:110).

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Vocabulary as a Language Skill

* Emphasis on the Semantic Value of Words
* Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Relations

** Syntagmatic Axis **

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Paradigmatic Axis :
John ate the apple
the cake
the chocolate
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English Collocations

Grammatical Collocations:
- preposition + noun
  - in agony
  - at anchor
- verb + to infinitive
  - decide to come
  - offer to help

Lexical Collocations:
- verb + noun
  - make an impression
- adjective + noun
  - blond hair
- noun + verb
  - dogs bark

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Explanatory Combinatorial Dictionary (ECD)

by A. Mel'čuk and A.K. Zolkovskij

Lexical Functions

Syn (to shoot) = to fire [synonym]

Syn_c (to shoot) = to machine-gun [narrower synonym]

Anti (victory) = defeat [antonym]

Oper_1 (analysis) = to perform [be the subject of]

Oper_2 (analysis) = to undergo [be the object of]

Conv (to be one's wife) = to be one's husband [conversive]
The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English

by M. Benson, E. Benson, and R. Ilson

Grammatical Collocations (8 patterns)
noun + to infinitive a pleasure to do it
adjective + preposition angry at someone
verb + verb-ing quit smoking

Lexical Collocations (7 patterns)
noun₁ of noun₂ a pride of lions
adverb + adjective closely acquainted
verb + adverb apologize humbly

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Applications of the Study of Collocations

* Literary Criticism
* Historical Linguistics
* Study of Register and ESP
* Language Teaching:

Foreign Language Teaching
Designing of Teaching Materials

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Patterns of Collocations

*S: subject,  O: object,  V: verb*

items in parentheses are optional

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