

A Comparative Study of the Usage of Synonyms Based on BNC—Taking Assessment and Evaluation as Examples

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The discrimination of synonyms has always been one of the great challenges for English learners. Taking *assessment* and *evaluation* as examples, this study analyses the similarities and differences of the two words, as well as their usage from the perspectives of frequency, stylistics, collocation and semantic prosody with the help of British National Corpus, and demonstrates the importance of corpus retrieval tools in synonyms discrimination. Furthermore, this paper will give some suggestions for English learners and teachers in English vocabulary teaching.

Keywords: corpus linguistics, synonyms, frequency, stylistics, collocation, semantic prosody

Introduction

According to scholars in linguistics, the number of synonyms accounts for more than 70% of the total vocabulary in the English language, which form a large English vocabulary system with the similarities of word meaning and usage. Over the years, the discrimination of word meaning, especially the discrimination of synonyms, has been a major difficulty in English teaching and examinations. There are only subtle differences between many English synonyms, however, it is these nuances that enable them to be applied in different contexts and styles, and also bring lots of confusion to many English learners in the process of distinguishing synonyms. That will not only affect the accurate expression of English learners in spoken and written English, which is easy to cause ambiguity, but also give listeners and readers a vague feeling, which has become one of the urgent problems that contemporary English learners and English teachers need to solve. However, the learning of synonyms still has certain problems in traditional teaching, which is mainly attributed to the teaching methods of traditional English teachers who mostly distinguish synonyms based on their own learning experience or a subjective intuition, that is, the sense of language spoken by language learners. Besides, in the traditional vocabulary teaching classroom, teachers often explain the differences between words by comparing the semantic differences of a set of synonyms, and give corresponding example sentences. However, most of these paraphrasing and example sentences come from dictionaries that lack real context and have limited example sentence entries. To some extent, this method of language teaching is detached from the real context, which has a negative impact on the effective input of English acquisition.

Linguistics, as a historic language science, has developed rapidly in the 21st century. With the mature development of corpus linguistics, China has also continuously introduced and expanded related research, and the use of corpus for foreign language teaching research is also increasing. In terms of research content, corpus is widely used in translation, lexicography, vocabulary, teaching, semantics and grammar. New achievements have been made in the study of linguistic phenomena in depth and breadth. In terms of foreign language teaching, corpus resources and related research methods were first used in vocabulary teaching, so corpus research occupies a pivotal position in English teaching, which cannot be underestimated.

Research Background

Corpus linguistics is a discipline of language research based on text corpus (Firth, 1957, pp. 1931-1951), which was introduced into China in the 80s of the 20th century with its vigorous development. More and more scholars in China also began to use corpus for research, making corpus an important means for linguistic research. Corpus-based teaching can improve the authenticity, pertinence and effectiveness of foreign language teaching (Firth, 1957, pp. 1931-1951). At present, domestic corpus research covers lots of fields, and the research in teaching mainly involves theoretical guidance and methods of corpus-assisted foreign language teaching, the teaching practice of language components assisted by corpus, and subjects teaching practice based on corpus.

Research Design

Research Objects

Using corpus to distinguish the semantics and usage of synonyms is a new perspective and method for foreign language teaching, which can bring new inspiration to traditional vocabulary teaching, and corpus-based analysis and research will also provide an objective and powerful basis for identifying synonyms, thereby providing a new pattern for future English teaching. Given the difficulties most English learners encountered in the process of identifying synonyms, the author selects the nouns *assessment* and *evaluation* as the research subjects of this paper, and uses the British contemporary monolingual corpus BNC to analyze the synonyms from the aspects of frequency, stylistics, collocation and semantic prosody.

Research Questions

Based on British National Corpus, this study intends to conduct research and analysis on the following three questions:

- (1) What's the difference between frequency distribution of *assessment* and *evaluation* in different styles?
- (2) What is the difference between the collocation of the two words?
- (3) What's the difference between the semantic prosody of the synonyms?

Research Tool

This study adopts the research tool of corpus, which can store and analyze the use of a large number of natural languages that cannot be counted artificially with the assistance of computers. British National Corpus collects corpora from various English publications in the UK between 1960-1993, as a monolingual corpus of native English speakers, BNC can provide 90 million words of written text and 10 million words of spoken text. Therefore, the corpus covers a wide range of article types, which makes the analysis of *assessment* and *evaluation*

in this study more scientific and credible. The author used BNC to retrieve the synonyms *assessment* and *evaluation* respectively, and then compared and analyzed the research data.

Analysis and Discussion

Definitions of *assessment* and *evaluation* in the Dictionary

In traditional vocabulary teaching, teachers often use synonyms of the taught word to explain the word, supplemented by corresponding example sentences, and learners often use the method of word meaning association to understand and remember words. On the surface, students can understand the vocabulary they have learned through the Chinese and English definitions of the vocabulary and the example sentences given by the teacher, but in fact, they do not have a good grasp of its use, and the distinction between some synonyms is still ambiguous. Therefore, most English learners need to pay more attention to the discrimination of synonyms to deepen their understanding of word meanings and usage context.

The definitions of *assessment* and *evaluation* in Collins COBUILD ADVANCED LEARNER'S ENGLISH-CHINESE DICTIONARY are listed below:

Assessment: an assessment is a consideration of someone or something and a judgement about them.

Evaluation: consider something or someone in order to make a judgement about them, for example about how good or bad they are.

According to the dictionary, the meaning of the two synonyms has a lot of overlap, but just as there are no two identical leaves in the world, even for synonyms, there are no two words with exactly the same meaning. So their usage, applicable contexts, pragmatic functions and collocations are naturally different. However, that is often ignored by English learners, which results the misuse of words and hinders the progress of English learners. Therefore, in order to enable learners to grasp the subtle differences of the synonyms and master their usage, this paper uses BNC to explore the similarities and differences between the two words *assessment* and *evaluation* in depth from the perspectives of frequency, distribution in different genres, collocation and semantic prosody.

The Frequency of *assessment* and *evaluation* in BNC

Frequency is an important concept in corpus linguistics, which refers to the frequency of occurrence of a word or phrase per million words in the corpus, also known as standard frequency (桂诗春, 2010, pp. 419-426). Taking the plural forms of the two words into consideration, the author retrieved *assessment* and *evaluation* in BNC respectively, selected the chart analysis to obtain their total frequency, the results are as follows:

Table 1
Word Frequency of the Two Nouns

Word	Frequency
assessment	7783
evaluation	3002

According to Table 1, the frequency of *assessment* and *evaluation* is 7,783 and 3,002 respectively, which shows that the frequency of the two words are extremely high. And the data shows that the frequency of *assessment* is almost 2.5 times as large as that of *evaluation*, which means in English language between the two terms *assessment* occupies absolute advantages. The survey results show that learners can use corpus to analyze the use of synonyms in each language domain. In the actual language communication, the priority principle of

vocabulary use can be adopted to avoid lexical misuse caused by the mechanical Chinese-English meaning equivalence to use vocabulary exactly.

The Distribution of *assessment* and *evaluation* in Different Styles

The distribution pattern of vocabulary is very important for language learners, and the distribution of synonyms is different in different genres. Understanding and analyzing distribution differences of synonyms in different styles can cultivate learners' stylistic awareness, so as to give priority to the most appropriate words under specific styles. Therefore, the study of frequency distribution of synonyms is of great significance for language learners. The author retrieved the frequency of the two node words in different styles, and the data is listed in Table 2.

Table 2
Word Frequency in Different Styles

	assessment		evaluation	
	frequency	Per mil	frequency	Per mil
spoken	317	31.82	124	12.45
fiction	107	6.73	9	0.57
magazine	103	14.18	38	7.3
newspaper	262	25.03	22	2.1
academic	2888	188.37	1318	85.97

According to the data, we can know that:

- (1) Besides academic, assessment occurs relatively equably and it doesn't fluctuate much in each style, which shows it is usable in every situational context;
- (2) Both assessment and evaluation occur the most frequently in academic, which means that people tend to use assessment and evaluation in formal texts;
- (3) Evaluation occurs at a very low rate in fiction, magazine and newspaper, which shows that it is rarely used in daily reading texts.

Collocation

Collocation, a typical combination of words, refers to a sequence of words that achieves a certain non-idiom meaning in the text and follows the combination in a certain grammatical form (卫乃兴, 2001, pp. 19-23). Firth once stated that "You shall know a word by the company it keeps" (Firth, 1957, p. 12). So it is an effective research method to distinguish the differences of synonyms by researching and analyzing their collocation words. This paper applied BNC to search for collocations with high frequency of the two node words, and the more frequently the same collocation appears, the stronger its relevance to the node word and the greater the collocation strength. In addition, the concept, mutual information (MI for short) is also be used as a reference to analyze the pairing strength, which is aimed to compare the probability of two words appearing at the same time and the possibility of appearing separately. More specifically, if the MI value is 0, it means that the two words are basically not matched; if the MI value is higher than 3, it means that the two words often appear at the same time, that is, they usually collocate with each other. The higher the MI value, the greater the influence of the node word on its vocabulary and the stronger the attraction to its co-occurrence word.

Collocation with adjectives

According to grammatical rules, nouns usually collocate with adjectives, so the author retrieved the adjective collocates of the two node words and selected the first 20 adjectives whose MI value are higher than 3.

Table 3

The First 20 Adjective Collocates of Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment	Evaluation
Environmental, standard, additional, national, selective, accurate, graded, criterion-referenced, annual, functional, multidisciplinary, affirmative, valid, graduated, fair, strategic, separate, colonic, consistent, diagnostic	Illuminative, conceptual, various, European, negative, empirical, moral, statistical, positive, sociological, modular, economic, historical, major, internal, comparative, educational, optimal, judicial, psychometric

Based on Table 3, we can conclude that *assessment* usually collocates with adjectives in macro respects, such as national and environmental. In addition, it tends to collocate with medical adjectives, e.g. colonic, diagnostic; and assessment also collocates with adjectives related to time as well as durative adjectives, such as annual, consistent and continuous.

For the word *evaluation*, it usually collocates with adjectives related to discipline or certain field, such as educational, historical and economical. Furthermore, evaluation tends to collocates with adjectives related to law and ethic, such as judicial and moral.

Collocation with verbs

In order to understanding the differences between *assessment* and *evaluation* more comprehensively, the author retrieved their verbal collocations in BNC and selected the first 15 verbs that co-occur with them the most frequently.

Assessment: providing, ensure, involve, submitted, teaching, developed, making, learning, base, provided, passed, agree, determined, depend, encourage;

Evaluation: subjected, recommends, planning, mean, monitoring, think, needed, setting, argues, aid, assist, means, follow, discussing, applied

From above we can know, firstly, the verbs collocated with *assessment* and *evaluation* are of different tenses, and *assessment* collocates with verbs of past tense more frequently than that of *evaluation*. Secondly, the verbs related to pedagogic activities usually collocate with *assessment*, such as learning and teaching. Thirdly, the choices of verbs collocated with *assessment* are more than that of *evaluation*.

Collocation with nouns

In addition to adjectives and verbs, the two node terms also can collocate with nouns. The author set the collocation number of both left and right as 4, and searched for their collocation nouns whose MI value is more than 3. Because of the text limitation, Table 4 only listed 50 collocation nouns of the two node words. Based on the retrieved data, the author analyzed and classified the nouns into different categories. Firstly, there are some nouns that are equally frequent collocated with both assessment and evaluation, such as procedures, curriculum, performance and criteria. Secondly, the nouns collocated with assessment are mainly divided into 5 categories:

- (1) collocated with negative nouns, such as damage and risk;
- (2) collocated with nouns related to teaching activities, such as examinations, testing and coursework;
- (3) collocated with nouns referring to people, such as panel, self, pupils, teams and individuals;

(4) collocated with financial nouns, such as property, spending, value, credit and tax;

(5) collocated with medical terms, such as diagnosis and emergency;

Thirdly, the nouns collocated with *evaluation* can be divided into 7 categories:

(1) collocated with nouns related to places, such as library, classroom, workshop and laboratory;

(2) collocated with nouns referring to guiding principles, such as criteria, guideline, principles, strategies;

(3) collocated with nouns related to results, such as results and feedback;

(4) collocated with terms in humanities, such as culture, art and literature;

(5) collocated with nouns referring to tools, such as tool, kit, instruction;

(6) collocated with nouns related to career, such as job and performance;

(7) collocated with nouns related to ethic, such as reputation, accountability and commitments

Although the total frequency of *evaluation* in BNC is much less than that of *assessment*, its collocation nouns are more flexible and various. From above, we can see that *evaluation* frequently collocates with nouns related to career and ethic, which shows that *evaluation* tends to be used in judging people. And *assessment* frequently collocates with financial terms, which reflects that *assessment* has a tendency to be used in enterprise and business. For deepen our understanding and mastery of synonyms, it is necessary for English learners to figure out the collocation differences in the process of synonyms discrimination.

Table 4

Fifty Collocation Nouns of Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment	Evaluation
procedures, risk, process, impact, curriculum, management, methods, performance, examination, spending, unit, procedure, forms, arrangements, criteria, purposes, tasks, tax, coursework, modes, council, damage, certification, pattern, panel, ability, credit, home, competence, emergency, protection, teams, authority, diagnosis, individuals, value, property, examinations, techniques, instruments, damages, pupils, competence, schemes, testing, objectives, rehabilitation, self, interview, instrument	job, book, investment, source, theory, library, culture, librarians, agencies, map, outsides, reputation, art, product, commitment, example, share, process, criteria, analysis, judgement, performance, methods, project, results, interpretation, techniques, effectiveness, curriculum, processes, testing, schemes, programmes, alternatives, strategies, implementation, literature, principles, tool, instruction, laboratory, phases, accountability, feedback, kit, risks, guideline, peer, workshop, classroom.

Semantic Prosody

The phenomenon semantic prosody was firstly noticed by Sinclair and Louw formally adopted the term semantic prosody in 1993, defining it as the atmosphere of a word's meaning influenced by its collocation (Louw, 1993, pp. 156-159). Simply put, semantic prosody is a collocation tendency of words, which habitually attracts terms with the same or similar semantic characteristics and forms a collocation relationship with them. The semantic prosody formed by word collocation can be divided into three categories: negative semantic prosody, neutral semantic prosody and positive semantic prosody (Stubbs, 1995, pp. 23-55). In the analysis of synonyms, the concept semantic prosody plays a good explanatory role in determining the attitudinal identification function of synonyms (张继东, 刘萍, 2005, pp. 53-56). According to the retrieved data in British National Corpus and Table 3, Table 4, we can draw a conclusion that:

(1) The collocation verbs of *assessment* and *evaluation* are mainly of neutral semantic prosody;

- (2) The collocation nouns of *assessment* which reflect neutral semantic prosody rank first, nouns of negative semantic prosody come second, for example, damage; by contrast, the collocation nouns of *evaluation* mainly reflect neutral prosody;
- (3) Most of the collocation adjectives of *assessment* are of neutral semantic prosody, and only a small group of nouns reflects positive semantic prosody, such as fair. The collocation nouns of *evaluation* that reflect neutral semantic prosody rank first, and nouns of positive semantic prosody come second, such as optimal and positive; the rate of nouns reflecting negative semantic prosody is the lowest.

Conclusion

Based on British National Corpus, this paper did a comparative study of the synonyms *assessment* and *evaluation* from the perspectives of frequency, stylistics, collocation and semantic prosody. The findings can be concluded as following: (1) The frequency of *assessment* and its frequency distribution in different styles are much more larger than that of *evaluation*, and *assessment* has a relatively equable frequency in every register; (2) for collocation, *assessment* usually collocates with medical adjectives and nouns, such as colonic and diagnosis while *evaluation* tends to co-occur with words related to law and ethic, such as judicial; (3) for semantic prosody, both of *assessment* and *evaluation* mainly reflect neutral semantic prosody, showing positive and negative semantic prosody only in a few cases. In conclusion, this study adopts corpus to analyse the differences between synonyms, which is an efficient and convenient tool for language research, providing strong support for applied research such as lexicography and language teaching. Furthermore, there are some suggestions for language teachers and learners in the process of synonyms discrimination. On the one hand, teachers are supposed to impart the collocation characteristics and semantic prosody of each term to students to make up for the limitations of textbooks, which will make great contributions to deepen students' understanding and mastery of synonyms. On the other hand, a corpus-based empirical study will allow English learners to clearly observe the subtle semantic differences between synonyms, which are difficult to detect even by native speakers. Therefore, language learners should learn how to make full use of corpus to help their second language acquisition.

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