

A Corpus-Driven Perspective on the Verb Valency Structure of Chinese EFL Learners: A Case Study of “Suggest” and “Advise”

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This paper investigates the verb valency structure of English that is used by English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners from a corpus-driven perspective. Specifically, it focuses on the usage of the verbs “suggest” and “advise” in a selected corpus. By analyzing a sample of written and spoken texts, this study attempts to investigate the similarities and differences in the patterns of verb valency between native English speakers and Chinese EFL learners. The findings of this research can contribute to a better understanding of the challenges faced by Chinese EFL learners in acquiring accurate verb valency structures and provide insights for language teachers in designing effective pedagogical approaches.

Keywords: valency structure, vocabulary teaching, synonym distinction, corpus-driven

Introduction

In second language learning, correctly distinguishing synonyms is always a difficult point. It is the difference of two different languages that makes the synonym learning impediment. For example, the English words “empty”, “vacant”, and “hollow” can be translated by the same Chinese expression “Kong de”. Therefore, learners are inclined to be confused about the usage of these synonyms. In this case, it is important for teachers to find efficient ways to help their students distinguish synonyms and acquire new vocabulary.

Vocabulary teaching is closely correlated with lexicology that plays a central role in the study of corpus linguistics. Traditional universal grammar assumes that the operation of language relies primarily on a set of grammatical rules, but researchers have gradually discovered that universal grammar fails to explain many linguistic phenomena, such as collocations, idioms, or phrases in language (Chen & Liang, 2017). In order to figure out how vocabulary and grammar correlate with each other to construct meaning units, some research paradigms such as “collocational framework” (Sinclair, 1991), meaning shift unit, and “pattern grammar” (Hunston & Francis, 2000) were put forward. “Pattern grammar” highlights the interdependence of vocabulary and grammar by pointing out that not only does a word have a certain number of patterns, but a pattern also limits the set of lexical items that fit that pattern and that patterns are highly correlated with meanings, and there is a similarity in meaning between shared patterns of lexical items (Hunston & Francis, 2000). However, “pattern grammar” shows its limit through merely focusing on one aspect of grammar category—part of speech, but neglecting other aspects, such as voice and subject.

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On the basis of “pattern grammar”, “valency grammar”, firstly put forward by Tesnière (1953), is developed to remedy the deficiency, firstly coming up with the concept “valency grammar”. It emphasizes on the syntactic structure in a context, so as to learn the collocational and semantic properties of a lexical item. The main theoretical assumption of valence grammar is that verbs occupy the central position in a sentence and determine the number of occurrences of other components, so they are jointed to construct a grammatically correct sentence. However, only learning the pattern is not enough. Obviously, the sentence “We prevent him from being a clever boy” is grammatically correct but it rarely happens. It is significant for English learners to learn both grammatical collocation and semantic collocation. To summarize, English learners have a tendency to make linguistic mistakes due to the semantic ambiguity of rule patterns. Nevertheless, valency grammar has an advantage of elaborating on those rules from the perspective of syntax and semantics.

“Valency grammar” refers to a linguistic framework that focuses on the relationship between verbs and the arguments they take. It analyzes how verbs can dictate the number and type of arguments they require to form a grammatically correct sentence. In valency grammar, every verb is associated with a specific valency pattern that determines its argument structure. The valency of a verb indicates the number and type of arguments it can take, such as subjects, objects, or prepositional phrases. By examining the valency patterns of verbs, valency grammar provides a systematic way to describe the syntactic and semantic properties of sentences in different languages.

In valency grammar, the verb is taken as the core of a sentence. According to the number of the elements that are linked by the verb, the structure can be categorized into different types.

Literature Review

There is another grammar-described approach revealing the specific relation beyond those co-dependable words, which is called “local grammar” (Gross, 2007). Influenced by “local grammar”, valency grammar focuses on how to describe the features of valency structure, which takes vocabulary as the entry point. According to Teubert (2007), valency grammar is a system of syntax, which emphasizes that the verb in a language unit plays a decisive role in a sentence structure. He proposed that it is valency grammar that makes local vocabulary and grammar connected. Herbst (2004) wrote the first English valence dictionary called *A Valency Dictionary of English*. He described valence as the ability of the word to combine with other lexical items, and the word was not only the verb but also the adjective, and the noun. He pointed out that valency grammar is a key method to portrait English grammar and is beneficial to analyze how a sentence is constructed. Zhen and Yang (2015) studied the relationship among valency grammar, meaning, and translation equivalence through a case study of the English verb “Consider”. Reichardt (2014) conducted a monolingual research by comparing verb “consider” with the synonymous words “believe”, “feel”, and “think”, and comparative analysis with German translation equivalents. Taking the high-frequency verb “agree” as an example, Sun and Niu (2022) examined the collocational patterns used by Chinese learners and native speakers based on corpus data. The results reveal significant differences in the frequency distribution of collocational patterns between learners and native speakers. These findings suggest that learners have not fully mastered the variation of collocational patterns of “agree”.

In both domestic and international research fields, many scholars have been studying verb valency structure in a more objective and accurate way through corpus-driven approaches. However, the current research on valency pattern in second language acquisition study is still few but increasingly popular. Moreover, there are few studies on verb synonyms to perceive English as Foreign Language (EFL)’s second language acquisition from the perspective of valency patterns at home and abroad. Therefore, this paper is going to focus on the corpus-

driven approach and use two common verbs, “suggest” and “advise”, as the objects of study to explore in depth the difficulties Chinese foreign language learners have in the selection and use of these two verbs. To more detailed, this paper will make a contrastive interlanguage analysis of the valency pattern of the two synonym verb “suggest” and “advise” in Corpus BAWE and Corpus CLEC to see whether Chinese EFL learners can distinguish the two synonym verbs.

Research Design

Research Questions

This paper is going to discuss three questions:

- (1) What are the most classic valency structures of the two synonyms “suggest” and “advise”?
- (2) What are the valency structures of these two verbs used by Chinese EFL learners?
- (3) How are the valency structures of British Academic Written English (BAWE) different from those of Chinese Learner English Corpus (CLEC)?

Data Collection

In this paper, two corpora will be used, one of which is BAWE, and the other is CLEC. The British Academic Written English Corpus (BAWE) consists of 2,761 pieces of student academic writing. The total volume of the vocabulary is 6,506,995 words, of which the number of words per piece ranges from 500 to 5,000. The four main fields of study are humanities and arts, life sciences, physical sciences, and social sciences, covering 35 disciplines. CLEC, Chinese Learner English Corpus, collects different essays that were written by Chinese English learners with different levels, such as middle school students and those who have taken part in CET-4, CET-6, TEM-4, and TEM-8. There are more than one million words in this corpus. Many researchers make full use of this corpus to develop studies on second language acquisition.

Analysis Steps

First of all, two synonyms are respectively typed into the two corpora BAWE and CLEC. Since there are different participle forms, the two synonyms with suffix “-s”, “-ed”, and “-ing” are all observed. Secondly, Wordsmith is used to calculate the frequency of key words. Thirdly, based on the data represented, this paper tries to analyze the differences between two synonyms’ valency structures combining with quality analysis and quantitative analysis.

Analysis Method

This paper employs the combination of quantitative analysis and quality analysis. In terms of quantitative analysis, it is necessary to collect the statistics about the frequency of the valency structure of each verb in the two corpora. As for the quality analysis, some reasonable inference will be made to analyze the factors that cause the differences among the use of valency structure.

Analysis

The reason why the two synonyms “suggest” and “advise” are chosen as the research objectives is because the total frequency of all forms of “suggest” valency pattern in BAWE is more than 50% while the meanings of “advise” are similar to “suggest”. Before analyzing the valency structure of the verbs “suggest” and “advise”, the author preprocessed the concordance lines: only keeping the index lines where the two verbs serve as the main predicate verb in the sentence and deleting other index lines that do not meet the requirements, including cases

where “suggest” and “advise” serve as non-predicative verbs. After manual processing, a total of 100 valid index lines in BAWE were randomly selected.

Different patterns bring out different meanings. Sub V Obj-nom is a two valency structure with a subject and an object. The object is a noun or noun phrase. In this structure, the subject and object are closely related, and the former restricts the lexical choice of the latter, which in turn affects the meaning of the verb “suggest”.

As a pioneer in learner corpora, Granger (1998) introduced the method of interlanguage comparison analysis, believing that by comparing native language corpora with learner corpora, the developmental characteristics of learners’ interlanguage can be revealed. This article takes the Chinese Learner English Corpus (CLEC) as an example to examine learners’ valency knowledge and explore the syntactic and semantic characteristics of learners’ language output. As for the word “suggest”, learners use the one valency structure that fails to appear in the native corpus and the tree valency structure accounts a larger frequency. When it comes to the verb “advise”, compared with the native corpus, the two valency structure in CLEC increases a lot while the three valency structure decreases to some degree.

Based on the analysis of the usage of “suggest” and “advise” in BAWE and CLEC, it is found that Chinese learners demonstrate the following characteristics in the use of valency structures. Firstly, in terms of overall frequency, unlike native speakers who tend to use bivalent structures more frequently, Chinese learners tend to use trivalent structures excessively, with a significantly lower frequency of bivalent structure usage. Secondly, in terms of accuracy in valency structure usage, learners make more errors in the usage of valency structures, not only in omitting objects in some bivalent structures, but also in making significant errors in choosing the form of words in trivalent structures, such as misusing nouns, verb infinitives, and the base form of verbs. They also fail to differentiate between the active and passive voice of verbs, indicating a less than satisfactory grasp of phrase knowledge. Thirdly, in terms of the semantic classification of collocational words, there are some differences between learners and native speakers. The collocational words used by learners mainly belong to the category of daily life vocabulary.

In view of the differences between English and Chinese language characteristics, it is helpful to adopt an explicit teaching method to highlight the connection between language form and meaning. It is important to consciously enhance learners’ attention to both aspects and accurately grasp different valency structures and their expressive meanings. Additionally, we can guide students to observe learner corpora, where learners themselves act as researchers to analyze their own language output characteristics and observe instances of language misuse, such as erroneously using the base form of a verb after a preposition. This exploratory learning mode helps improve learners’ autonomous learning abilities.

Discussion and Significance

As for the previous studies, a large part of researchers focus on the analysis of a singular verb from the perspective of valency grammar. Therefore, the characteristics of the verb’s valency structure are amply described. Moreover, some of them make further study, which correlates valency structure with the acquisition of second language. The higher the frequency of a particular phrase or structure in the learner’s language input, the easier it is for them to acquire and produce these phrases or structures.

Nevertheless, in this paper, two synonyms are taken as the research objectives. The result shows that both the second valency structures of “suggest” and “advise” are increasingly employed by EFL students, which

possibly reveal it has a tendency that learners are perplexed with the use of these two words. The structure of one will unconsciously be applied to that of the other one.

In traditional vocabulary teaching, teachers mainly resort to the meaning in the English-to-Chinese dictionary to explain the vocabulary that they are going to teach or tell student the idiomatic usage and fixed collocations merely based on their teaching experience, which is far from the context the word lies in. Therefore, when it comes to synonyms, students are inclined to be confused about distinguishing the meanings of synonyms. This paper reveals that although the two words are described as synonyms, their valence structures are sharply different. It is their different valence structures that lead to their different usages and distinctive features.

Conclusions

Based on authentic data extracted from corpora, this article examines the syntactic and semantic features of the high-frequency verb “suggest” and its synonym “advise” in both a native speaker corpus and a learner corpus, by comparing the usage of valency structures. The study explores the characteristics of valency structure usage in the learner corpus. The analysis indicates significant differences between the typical valency structures used by learners and native speakers. Chinese students tend to use trivalent structures more frequently.

In foreign language teaching, corpus data can be utilized to help students acquire accurate and comprehensive valency knowledge. This article focuses on valency grammar and explores the performance of Chinese foreign language learners in distinguishing synonyms in second language acquisition. However, due to limitations in time and manpower, this study only provides a summary of valency structures based on 100 randomly selected examples from the BAWE corpus for each of the two words. Therefore, there are certain limitations, and future research can expand the sample size to enhance the accuracy of valency structure.

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