

# Merry Birthday!

**Chris Payne** puts the random nature of collocation under scrutiny.

We say *Happy Christmas* and *Merry Christmas*, and we say *Happy Birthday*, so why don't we say *Merry Birthday*? According to linguistic convention, *merry* and *birthday* do not collocate.

In Issue 11 of *ETp*, Jimmie Hill succinctly defined collocation as 'the way words occur together in predictable combinations'. Today, it is widely acknowledged that collocations are fundamental to all language use and should figure prominently in the ELT classroom.

Michael Lewis, who developed the Lexical Approach, states that collocations, and indeed all lexical items, are essentially arbitrary and not determined by logic. Their use is either sanctioned by the native-speaker community or not, as in the above example: *Merry Birthday*. Lewis also affirms that what is arbitrary cannot and should not be explained.

However, not all proponents of a lexical approach subscribe to Lewis's view on the arbitrariness of lexis. Frank Boers and Seth Lindstromberg challenge the long-held assumption that collocations (they use the term 'chunks') are always arbitrary, and they cite factors that can be said to influence the formation of a collocation.

So this article seeks to address two questions:

- Are all collocations really so arbitrary that they defy explanation?
- If their origin *can* be explained, can language learners benefit from the explanation offered?

## Getting phonological

Boers and Lindstromberg claim that phonology can play a part in the standardisation of word partnerships. Phonological repetition, such as alliteration and rhyme, may explain why some word combinations are favoured in preference to others which could equally be considered synonymous. Examples of alliterative collocation are *time will tell* (not 'time will say' or 'time will show'), *from dawn to dusk* (not 'from dawn to sunset' or 'from dawn to twilight') and *it takes two to tango* (not 'it takes two to waltz').

Collocations or chunks that rhyme include *high and dry* (not 'up and dry'), *when the cat's away, the mice will play* (not '... the mice will come out'), *no pain, no gain* and *meet and greet*. Other kinds of sound repetition are also found in English collocations, namely assonance, eg *small talk* (not 'little talk')



and *high time* (not 'urgent time'), and consonance, eg *stark naked* (not 'stark nude'). Once learners have encountered certain collocations, an awareness of their phonological features can make word combinations more memorable and is likely to aid retention and promote durable learning.

## Hiding then seeking

Fixed, or 'frozen', binomials are a kind of collocation in which we don't normally change the word order. Some binomials may reflect the chronological order in which we usually do things: we hide first, then we seek. Further examples are: *spit and polish*, *search and destroy*, *kiss and make up* and *bed and breakfast*. The word order of a fixed binomial may also be determined by size, with the noun for the larger item being placed first, as in *fish and chips*, *suit and tie*, *cat and mouse* and *cloak and dagger*.

The above explanations are credible but, sadly, they are not sufficient, for they will not help learners to remember the order of many other binomials which don't appear to conform to the patterns just mentioned. For example: *black and white*, *knife and fork*, *neat and tidy*, *law and order*, *flesh and blood*, *rich and famous*, *thunder and lightning*, *sink or swim*, *trick or treat* and *win or lose*.

Perhaps, too, the order is influenced by which word is longer.

## Jumping the gun

Another class of chunk is that of idioms, which are a prime example of figurative language. A large number of them owe their provenance to the impact of history and traditional sports on the language community. The importance of seafaring was notable in English history and has provided us with a host of idioms, such as *in the doldrums*, *show someone the ropes*, *on an even keel*, *plain sailing* and many more. Numerous idioms can be traced to popular sports like cricket (*hit someone for six*, *on a sticky wicket* and *not cricket*), football (*be on the ball* and *score an own goal*) and horse racing (*neck and neck* and *win hands down*).

From a teaching perspective, idioms are often deemed to be peripheral to the needs of most learners, except those who have achieved a high level of English. Justification for teaching idioms is that there is evidence to suggest that idiom usage may be more common than is often assumed, and that students actually enjoy learning them. If students can identify the source and literal sense of an idiom, it is often possible to infer its figurative meaning.

Frank Boers and Seth Lindstromberg illustrate this point in the following way:

*'If one learns that the idiom "jump the gun" derives from usage in track sports where the expression refers to any case of an athlete starting to run before the starting pistol has been fired, then its figurative meaning "do something before the appropriate time" becomes quite transparent.'*

Indeed, in many cases the *meaning* of idioms can be explained. But can the same thing be said about their *form*? We can refer to both a starting pistol and a starting gun, but the accepted collocation is *jump the gun*, not 'jump the pistol'. Does the idiom just exemplified prove Michael Lewis's point that collocation *is* arbitrary? Or does the answer lie in its phonology, because *jump the gun* is an example of assonance?

## Semantic prosody

Semantic prosody describes the way in which words are perceived with particular associations, usually positive or negative, depending on how they collocate. Examples of negative prosody are the prepositional verb *set in*, eg *bad weather* and *rot*, and the verb *cause*, eg *an accident*, *damage*, *problems*, *diseases*, *panic*, *upset*, *distress*, *a crisis*, and many other mostly negative associations.

Semantic prosody may also account for collocations that express irony or understatement, as in *a bit of a*, eg *I've lost all my savings, which is a bit of a setback* and *the Spanish economy is in a bit of a mess*.

How can learners benefit from a knowledge of semantic prosody?

Well, it does give them helpful hints about which kinds of words commonly collocate. However, semantic prosody does not offer a watertight explanation, so learners still have to learn which specific words are accepted collocations. For example, *the news caused great excitement* is a use of *cause* that does not follow the frequently-occurring pattern of its negative associations.

## Statistically significant

A key strand of Boers and Lindstromberg's research is that a significant number of everyday collocations are inspired by phonological factors such as alliteration, assonance, rhyme and consonance, and they cite the following statistics to substantiate their claim: Of the 5,667 multi-word chunks that they focused on, at least 20 percent show a sound pattern relationship. Alliteration is by far the most frequently found phonological repetition, constituting 13 percent of the overall count, followed by assonance and then rhyme.

Boers and Lindstromberg's study of English idioms revealed that 23 percent of the idioms that were looked at either alliterate or rhyme, rising to 28 percent for binomials. And one final statistic: 41 percent of standardised similes alliterate or rhyme, eg *as cool as a cucumber*.

The relatively large number of 'phonological' chunks certainly warrants a focus in the classroom, and teachers can draw attention to the memorability of sound patterns.

## A happy ending?

Boers and Lindstromberg suggest some interesting reasons for the formation of certain collocations, and there is indeed robust evidence that salient phonological repetition can be a contributory factor to many chunks becoming standardised. However, it must also be conceded that there appears to be no plausible explanation for many other word combinations. For instance, a relative can be *close* or *distant*, while a friend can be *close* but not *distant*.

Although the source of some kinds of collocation can be partially explained, especially by phonology, much collocation does seem to be arbitrary, and in the absence of a theory that can be consistently applied to its formation, the learning of collocation will remain a huge but fascinating memory task.

The arbitrary nature, or not, of collocation invites further research before we can draw reliable conclusions that will enable us to provide our learners with a more profitable explanation, thus giving this story a merry – sorry – happy ending!

Boers, F and Lindstromberg, S *Optimizing a Lexical Approach to Instructed Second Language Acquisition* Palgrave Macmillan 2009

Hill, J 'Collocational competence' *English Teaching Professional* 11 1999

Lewis, M *Implementing the Lexical Approach* Thomson Heinle 2002



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