Blunt Instruments and Fine Distinctions: a Collocations Dictionary for Students of English

Diana Lea, Moira Runcie
Oxford University Press
Great Clarendon Street
Oxford OX2 6DP
UK
lead@oup.co.uk, runciem@oup.co.uk

Abstract
This paper seeks to explain the principles behind the selection and presentation of collocations in the *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for students of English* (May 2002). It argues for a pragmatic and fairly wide-ranging definition of collocation for the purposes of the dictionary, based firmly on the needs of the user. Thus, frequency was an important guide, but so were the ideas users were thought likely to want to express. Judgements were not made as to the 'predictability' of particular word combinations. The noun is taken to be the basic unit of phrase-building, although verbs and adjectives are also given due attention. Idioms are largely excluded. The presentation of the collocations in the dictionary is designed to make selection of the best collocate by the user as intuitive as possible. Where possible, grammar is 'pre-digested', with collocates presented in the form in which they are most likely to be used. Collocates are grouped (but not labelled) according to semantic categories. The aim was to make the dictionary accessible not only to keen linguists, but to all who wish to improve their writing in English, whether interested in the mechanics of the language or not.

Introduction

There are two important challenges facing the publisher of a collocations dictionary. One is how to make such a dictionary in the first place. This task may be further broken down into the twin problems of how to select the material to include and how to present it once it is selected. The second challenge is how to persuade people to buy the dictionary once it is published. This paper chiefly concerns the first challenge, but as it is necessary for a publisher to keep in mind the needs of the end-user at all times during the dictionary-making process, occasional reference will be made to the second.

Selection of Material

It is not the purpose of this paper to rehearse the reasons why collocation is important and why a good collocations dictionary is greatly to be desired (although these things are by no means so obvious to the upper-intermediate learner of English, nor even, necessarily, to that student's teacher). However, it is necessary to recognize that, in spite of considerable debate on the topic, there still seems to be no real consensus as to what exactly collocation is. It is generally agreed that collocation concerns word combinations that are restricted in some way, but still transparent as to meaning. But how restricted do they need to be? And how transparent? A dictionary publisher need not claim to have the definitive answers to these questions in order to produce a dictionary (or the dictionary would never get written at all); but a successful dictionary will nonetheless carry with it a certain air of authority. Moreover,

it is necessary to be quite definitive in deciding what collocation is for the purposes of the dictionary (or again, it will never get written): any given word combination must either be included or not. To include a word combination is necessarily to call it a collocation in some sort, although to exclude it is not necessarily to say that it is not. In deciding what to include in this dictionary, the approach taken was pragmatic. Three basic questions were asked: Is this a typical use of language? Might a user of this dictionary want to express this idea? Would they look up this entry to find out how?

Methodology: Corpus Concordances and Collocation Profiles

The first question (Is this a typical use of language?) required that all the collocations be drawn from reliable data. The main source used was the 100 million word British National Corpus. Exploring this with Keyword in Context (KWIC) concordancing tools, supplemented by T and Mi scores, compilers of the dictionary were able to check how frequently any given combination occurred, in how many (and what kind of) sources, and in what particular contexts. Figure 1 shows an extract from a concordance for the noun 'mist'. The lines have been sorted according to the word to the left of the keyword.

```
        were up early next morning. A heavy   mist   had fallen, drowning the countryside in
       around her blearily through the heavy   mist   that filled the wood. Everything was
        sun was beginning to pierce the heavy   mist   . "Like the professional assassin you
          the banquet ended. Outside a heavy   mist   obscured everything, and the departing
           which, blurred with rain and heavy   mist   , presented a uniform greyness. "Yet
          Sick Fund. <p_4> Despite the heavy   mist   nearly 40 walkers assembled at St
       the soldiers were shrouded in a heavy   mist   , suiting their purpose perfectly. <p_82>
      She moved to the door and through her   mist   of pain, Nina saw Joe standing outside,
         clammy hands. It was rather a horrid   mist   ; you felt as if it might be concealing
     sound of Man. Hootings and shouts, hot   mist   and lights … and I was numb with fear.
           had stopped now but an illuminating   mist   seemed to fill the room with a white
        of the mountain periodically hidden in   mist   , but as the sun set we had a magnificent
      vertically plunging forest, wreathed in   mist   , and for the most part deathly quiet
   vice versa, as you put it. The train, in   mist   , was unable to stop in time. The rail-
          continued. Flakstad was drowning in   mist   , backlit from the northern sky.
        Ahead of them lay the Nile, bathed in   mist   , like a white sea; behind them lay the
       <p_64> "It's no worse than driving in   mist   , " I said, to comfort him, though in fact
     into the building. She seemed haloed in   mist   , hair wet and tendrilled, clothes drip-
       hut was like a dark capsule afloat in   mist   . She walked round and lifted one of the
        a field of clover were knee-deep in   mist   . Their voices across the water were
             The riverbanks were wreathed in   mist   . The banana groves and the guava
      The moon, at its full, was swathed in   mist   . Out of the stillness, a lone nightingale
    grey, a scattering of houses shrouded in   mist   . Suddenly, I see a boat weaving its way
           looked like a ruined city, shrouded in   mist   . <p_105> The top of the hill was empty
```

Figure 1: from the BNC Concordance for 'mist', Sorted Left

From this it is easy to pick out 'heavy' as an adjective collocate. Sorting right (see Figure 2) gives nearly as clear a picture of verbs that immediately follow the keyword. In this section of the concordance, 'come down', 'clear' and 'cling' can be picked out.

Harder to distinguish are collocates, particularly verbs, that appear in other positions in relation to the keyword. Kilgarriff & Tugwell [2001] have described their 'Word Sketch' program which extracts collocations from a corpus for use in lexicography. Our corpus engineer developed a similar collocation profiling program, which was able to pick out collocations in particular categories, much as they are listed in the dictionary (see Figure 3). These 'collocations' are of course no more than words occurring near the keyword in significant numbers, in the relation specified. The lexicographer still needs to analyse the data and accept or reject individual items: in the case of prepositions, many of these co-

occurrences were deemed to be coincidental and not really collocational at all. Only 'through the mist', 'in/into the mist' and 'mist over something' were deemed to be significant.

```
Dalseattie, which was nice until the        mist    came down and began to make us rather
       days save when heavy rain, snow, or    mist    came down like a curtain over every-
          as he climbed higher, a thick damp   mist    came down and covered everything.
there was a night, long ago now, when a       mist    came in off the sea; we slept uneasily
              to be raised. <p_86> "Then the   mist    came nearer until it reached a man and
    of the clinging mist. <p_64> "Such a       mist    came that grim morning and with it a
        bikers. <p_39> But beware! Dartmoor    mist    can blanket everything, and some of the
been sliced off; when it's cloaked in a        mist    cap, you can almost imagine a cone-
              whispering seed and the tenuous   mist    cast a sheen of silver. . PP The oak trees
    reminded her of Japanese paintings. The    mist    changed to a warm pink and began to
       are frequently enveloped in cloud and   mist    characterized by very low pH values
                Hill. As we slowly descended, the   mist    cleared a little, and we found ourselves
                                      up." <p_10> They waited while the   mist    cleared a little in the valley, and the
the thick, creamy crest and the rainbow       mist    cleared from my eyes that I finally gave
    seaward. The weather helped. The early     mist    cleared to a fine October day, and there
come up above the eastern ridge and the       mist    clear like drifting smoke. Out of sight
   him, but he skips backwards, and as the     mist    clears I see <page=145> his eyes blaz-
to be firing their weapons. Suddenly the      mist    clears and we are now in a clearing. I
       Derry Morning </h1> <poem> <l> The      mist    clears and the cavities <l> Glow black
   icy fields, furrows of water, leaves of     mist    clinging to the metal branches of the rig
       way through the shadows of a forest,    mist    cloaking the branches of the trees
just risen above the mountain. Then the       mist    closed in again thicker than ever.
There was low cloud, white drifts of          mist    close down on the ice. But yes, I think I
Whistler's statement that when evening        mist    clothes the riverside with poetry, as with
          Down towards Lyndhurst. The ground    mist    clung closely to the hedgerows,
    crept over me. The sky was grey, and       mist    clung to the tops of the cliffs. Being late
```

Figure 2: from the BNC Concordance for 'mist', Sorted Right

The verbs do appear much more clearly here, whether they occur in some position to the left or right of the keyword, or immediately before a preposition before the keyword. This is particularly useful for a word like 'mist' where formulations such as 'shrouded in mist' and 'lost in the mist' are among the most significant collocations. The 'Compound Nouns' section gives nouns that can premodify 'mist' (grouped with adjectives in the dictionary). Figure 4 shows the dictionary entry for mist. The correspondence with the collocation profile can be clearly seen.

Frequency as a Guide to Selecting Collocations

The emphasis on the typical led to a fairly inclusive approach in terms of the perceived 'strength' of collocations. The aim was to give the full range – from the strongest and most restricted (*wax lyrical, eloquent*), through the slightly less fixed (*attach importance, significance, value, weight to something*) to the fairly open (*great, considerable, critical, enormous, fundamental, etc. importance*: this list is by no means exhaustive, but it is ultimately finite and it would not sound right, for example, to say **big importance* or **large importance*). The dictionary does include a number of items that are so fixed that they might properly be called compounds: examples are *grey area* and *learning curve;*

Adjectives	b4 LHS prep	LHS prep	RHS prep
thick (35)	shroud (21)	through (98)	over (47)
grey (20)	lose (17)	into (68)	across (11)
white (24)	vanish (9)	above (4)	above (11)
early (26)	disappear (9)	in (215)	down (19)
fine (15)	wreathe (7)	from (29)	off (13)
red (14)	peer (7)	over (4)	around (9)
heavy (13)	loom (6)	by (30)	through (8)
thin (11)	hide (7)	up (6)	into (17)
faint (8)	veil (5)	with (31)	before (8)
dense (6)	shine (5)	of (193)	up (17)
slight (6)	emerge (6)	at (8)	from (44)
dark (7)	cloak (4)		
LHS verb	**RHS verb**	**And/Or**	**Compound Ns**
shroud (21)	hang (19)	rain (19)	morning mist (37)
swirl (15)	drift (13)	cloud (17)	sea mist (13)
lose (19)	cling (11)	fog (10)	autumn mist (6)
vanish (10)	rise (18)	drizzle (4)	dawn mist (4)
loom (8)	swirl (10)	smoke (4)	evening mist (7)
disappear (9)	lie (14)		
peer (8)	obscure (8)	**PP OF**	
wreathe (7)	shroud (7)	tear (5)	
cloak (6)	clear (14)	sleep (4)	
descend (6)	roll (8)	time (19)	
shine (6)	hide (6)		
hide (7)	hover (4)		
obscure (5)	lift (6)		
roll (6)	come (20)		

Figure 3: from the Collocation Profile for 'mist', noun

'grey' and 'curve' only take on the meanings they have here in these particular combinations. Nonetheless, these items are not only relatively frequent, they might well be sought by the learner, looking up the entry for 'area', say, in search of a more idiomatic way of expressing the idea 'uncertain area': the learner is not to know that the most appropriate expression is so idiomatic that it qualifies as a compound, and the distinction may not therefore be very useful.

Such examples as these aside, however, it is important to observe that in general the most frequent collocations are not the most fixed. Intuitively, one can see that this makes good sense: words which have such great restrictions on their use tend not to be used so often in themselves. Frequent words are more frequent because they can combine with more different words. *Wax lyrical* is certainly no less a collocation than *great importance*, but it is less frequent and is probably less useful to the learner, who may need to understand it if he encounters it, but is unlikely to suffer much from not being able to produce it. On this

mist *noun*

● ADJ. **dense, heavy, thick** *A heavy mist rolled over the fields.* | **faint, fine, light, slight, thin** | **dark, grey, red, white** *There was a red mist in front of his eyes.* | **dawn, evening, morning** *an early morning mist* | **autumn** | **sea**

● VERB + MIST **be cloaked in, be covered in, be shrouded in, be wreathed in** *The harbour was covered in a thick mist.* | **disappear into, vanish in/into** *The little town had vanished in the mist.* | **emerge from, loom out of** *A large figure loomed out of the mist.* | **break through, shine through** *Soon the sun would break through the mist.* | **peer into/through** | **be lost in** (*figurative*) *The origins of Morris dancing are lost in the mists of time.*

● MIST + VERB **hang, hover, lie** *A faint mist hung over the valley.* | **come down, descend** *When the mist comes down it comes quickly and covers everything.* | **clear, lift** *The mist had cleared by mid-morning.* | **drift, float, rise, roll, swirl** *A grey mist floated towards us.* ◊ *a swirling mist* ◊ *a thin mist rising from the river* | **cling to sth** *Early morning mist still clung to the hollows.* | **fill sth** | **cover sth, hide sth, obscure sth, shroud sth** *A white mist obscured the top of the hill.*

● PREP. **in/into the ~** *It was hard to make out the path in the mist.* **through the ~** *The cottage was scarcely visible through the mist.* | **~over** *the mist over the lake*

● PHRASES **a curtain/veil of mist**

Figure 4: the Entry for 'mist', noun, from the *Oxford Collocations Dictionary*

broad definition of collocation, the vast majority of collocations in the language fall into the 'slightly less fixed/fairly open' categories, what Hill [2000] has called 'medium-strength' collocations. As Hill observes, it is the acquisition of these medium-strength collocations that is the real key to greater fluency for the intermediate learner. The *Collocations Dictionary* is intended as an aid to fluency, a dictionary for encoding rather than decoding. *Wax lyrical* is included, but will probably be of interest only to more advanced students. *Wax sentimental*, with only two citations in 100 million words, was not felt to be important enough: this is not to say that it is not a collocation, only that it is not particularly useful to the foreign learner of English.

Benson [1985] has argued that word combinations which, though frequent, are also 'predictable' are not worthy of inclusion in a collocations dictionary: the purpose of such a dictionary is to give those idiosyncratic combinations which a learner cannot be expected to predict. But how is the lexicographer to predict which combinations learners will find predictable, particularly learners from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds? Is *see a doctor* [Benson 1988] – not the most literal meaning of 'see' – as easy to formulate for Japanese students as Benson claims it is for Europeans? Nakamoto [1992] argues that it is not. Research carried out with Japanese high school and junior college students confirmed Nakamoto's hunch that items considered 'predictable' would nonetheless present problems

for the students. Nakamoto argues fairly convincingly for 'typicality' rather than 'unpredictability' as the central characteristic of collocation. This is not to say that all frequently co-occurring items must be collocation: *buy a car* is certainly frequent, but the range of things one can buy is so varied, and 'buy' – unlike 'see' in its *see a doctor* sense – such a basic and unmarked word, that it does become both impractical and unnecessary to list it. But caution needs to be exercised in deciding just what learners can construct for themselves from a knowledge of grammar and vocabulary alone.

It has also been observed (by the anonymous referee of this paper) that 'many collocations that spring to a native-speaker mind are not necessarily frequent'. This is certainly true, and the lexicographer's intuition comes into play, spotting items that one might have expected to find but that the corpus does not show in any significant numbers. But it is rare for any really significant gaps in the data to need plugging in this way. What learners of English really need to know are the collocations that native speakers actually use, in the course of writing and speaking on any subject but collocation; not necessarily what 'springs to mind' when a native-speaker is asked to name a collocation. The latter exercise will tend to produce results from the 'strong and restricted' end of the collocation spectrum: as we have seen, these are generally interesting, but not always the most useful kind of collocation for the learner. Casual observation suggests (and some hard research would be welcome here) that collocation is often perceived, by linguists, educators and learners, as a question of 'getting it right' as opposed to 'getting it wrong'. Why is it right to say *sour milk, rotten eggs* and *rancid butter* but not **rotten butter* or **sour eggs* [Fontenelle 1994]? Such examples of collocation versus mis-collocation are frequent enough. But a look at the 'vast hinterland of collocability' [Barfield 2001] – the area of medium-strength collocations – together with an analysis of typical student writing, reveals a further role for collocation. Students do make mistakes with collocation; but, perhaps more often, they produce language that is not 'wrong', but perhaps slightly awkward in expression, or very bland, or that does not really express what they want to say. Greater facility with collocation would help here too. It is not just a question of 'correcting' students' language but of enhancing it, and it is acquisition of the frequent, medium-strength collocations that will help most. A sprinkling of idioms and colourful restricted collocations are just the icing on the cake.

There is of course a danger in relying too uncritically on corpus data. This arises when the corpus data is itself skewed in some way: data always needs to be evaluated (and sometimes rejected) using editorial judgement. For example, among the words most frequently combining with 'miner' in the BNC are 'redundant', 'unemployed' and 'striking', reflecting fairly clearly what was a preoccupation of the British media and British society in the early 1990s when much of the corpus data was collected. These combinations were not included in the dictionary and possibly show the limitations of a corpus of material taken from a limited time period. The limitations of an individual lexicographer's judgement, however, are even greater. The *Oxford Collocations Dictionary* lists well over 200 collocations for the word 'word'. It is quite impossible that a lexicographer could have arrived at all these through intuition alone. Intuition cannot always make up the deficiencies in a too-limited corpus: it can adjust for imbalance, but not for a lack of material. The *LTP Dictionary of Selected Collocations* [Hill & Lewis 1997], ultimately based on the Brown Corpus of the 1960s, with only one million words, amid much material that is sound, also includes such idiosyncratic

combinations as *smouldering suspicion* and *fritter away the gains*. These are certainly not mis-collocation, but they are not really collocation either. Neither is attested in the BNC, and they do not readily spring to my mind, although they obviously did to somebody's. A few of the collocations included in the *Oxford Collocations Dictionary* have as few as three citations in the 100 million word BNC: editorial judgement confirmed that they were significant. The compilers of what became the LTP dictionary must have been relying on single citations (or none at all) for some of their collocations. There are also examples of frequent collocations, which one might expect to find, which their corpus and intuition between them apparently did not pick up. There are probably examples of this in the *Oxford Collocations Dictionary* too, but I believe they are much fewer.

The Range of Language Covered

I have already touched on the role of the dictionary as an encoding dictionary for foreign learners of English and the second question asked when deciding which collocations to include: might a user of this dictionary want to express this idea? This consideration led to a focus on current English. It was also felt that, for productive use, students were better concentrating on one variety of English and British English was chosen. Consideration was also given to the kind of texts that students might be wishing to write. Primary attention was given to what might be called 'moderately formal language' – the language of essay and report writing, and formal letters, treating all subjects at the level of the educated non-specialist. In addition, the dictionary includes some of the most important collocations from some specialist areas, particularly law and medicine; collocations from popular fiction, particularly useful in treating more personal subjects such as feelings and relationships; informal collocations and those very frequent in spoken language; and a few of the most frequent collocations from British journalism. Technical, informal and journalistic uses are labelled as such. The 9,000 headwords include most of the commonest words in the language that an upper-intermediate student will already know, plus some words that they will start to encounter as they move to a more advanced level of English. The headword list was arrived at by first taking all the nouns, verbs and adjectives from our intermediate learner's dictionary, the *Oxford Wordpower Dictionary*, numbering about 14,000 in all. Somewhat over half of these were found, upon examination, to have significant collocation patterns. The remainder of the 9,000 were drawn from the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* and these tended to be more recent or more technical words: computing is an area particularly rich in collocation.

Items that were Excluded

The third question that was asked (Would a user look up this entry to find this expression?) anticipates the whole issue of how to present the material once selected. However, it also led to a number of policy decisions on items that might reasonably be excluded. Chief among these were most idioms. *All in the same boat* has nothing whatever to do with boats and it is inconceivable that any learner, never having met the idiom, would look up 'boat' in the hope of finding it. Exceptions to this rule are idioms that are only partly idiomatic: *drive a hard bargain* is very much about bargaining even if the expression as a whole can be considered an idiom.

Headwords were limited to nouns, verbs and adjectives, with nouns much the most heavily represented. Noun collocates were excluded from the verb and adjective entries. When

framing their ideas, people generally start from a noun. You might think of 'rain' and want to know which adjective best describes rain when a lot falls in a short time. You would be unlikely to start with the adjective 'heavy' and wonder what you could describe with it (rain, breathing, damage, gunfire?). Similarly, you might be looking for the verb for what you do in response to a 'challenge'. But you would not choose 'meet' and then decide what to meet (a challenge, an acquaintance, your death, the expense). Some very common words – such as the verbs 'make' and 'do' – do not merit entries of their own. This is because these verbs have no real collocations of their own. They themselves *are* the collocations of lots of nouns, and appear in the entries for those nouns. (There are also two pages of exercises in the central study section addressing this notorious area of difficulty.)

Presentation of Material in the Dictionary

The two problems of the selection and presentation of material were very much interdependent and were worked on in tandem over a number of years, to the extent that what was included was partly determined by what it proved possible to show. The final dictionary is rather more modest in its scope and ambitions than the original conception.

The basic structure of entries is similar to that of the two other English collocations dictionaries currently available [Benson, Benson & Ilson 1997; Hill & Lewis 1997]. Each headword is divided into a number of 'slots' according to the part of speech or function of the collocating word. The basic categories covered are as follows (see Figures 5, 6 and 7):

adjective + noun: *bright/harsh/intense/strong light*
quantifier + noun: *a beam/ray of light*
verb + noun: *cast/emit/give/provide/shed light*
noun + verb: *light gleams/glows/shines*
noun + noun: *a light source*
preposition + noun: *by the light of the moon*
noun + preposition: *the light from the window*
adverb + verb: *choose carefully*
verb + verb: *be free to choose*
verb + preposition: *choose between two things*
verb + adjective: *make/keep/declare sth safe*
adverb + adjective: *safe from attack*
plus short phrases including the headword: *the speed of light, pick and choose, safe and sound*

The dictionary is quite literal – even unintelligent – about these slots, so that verb + noun means 'a verb or verb phrase followed by the noun headword'. This may well be a simple verb + noun object combination (***hold** a conversation*), but the noun may be the indirect

light *noun*

1 brightness

- ADJ. **clear, good | bright, harsh, intense, strong | blinding | full** *In full light, you could see Alison was well over forty.* **| bad, dim, faint, feeble, murky, poor, uncertain, weak | subdued | failing** *We could hardly see the ball in the failing light.* **| gentle, pale, soft, watery | mellow, warm | cold, cool** *in the cold light of morning* **| early | artificial | natural | infrared, ultraviolet** *film that is sensitive to ultraviolet light* **| visible**
- QUANT. **beam, ray | burst, flash, gleam, glimmer** *There was a flash of light followed by an explosion.* **| patch, pool**
- VERB + LIGHT **have** *Have you got enough light for reading?* **| generate, produce | cast, emit, give (out), provide, shed** *light emitted by a star* **| be bathed in | be sensitive to**
- LIGHT + VERB **gleam, glow, shine | come, fall, pour** *Light from a tall lamp fell in a pool on the desk.* **| reflect** *The light reflecting off the snow was dazzling.* **| grow stronger, increase | fade, fail | blind sb, dazzle sb** *We were momentarily blinded by the light of the sun.* **| catch sth** *You could see the imperfections in the repair when the light caught it.*
- LIGHT + NOUN **level | source | beam**
- PREP. **against the** ~ *She held up the letter against the light.* **by the** ~ **of** *They managed to see where the door was by the light of the moon.* **into the** ~ *Bring it into the light and we'll have a look at it.* **in the** ~ *The place looked calm in the golden evening light.* **| ~ from** *the light from the kitchen window*
- PHRASES **(at) the speed of light** *Nothing can travel faster than the speed of light.* **a point of light, a source of light** *The lamp was the only source of light in the room.*

Figure 5: from the Entry for 'light', noun, from the *Oxford Collocations Dictionary*

choose *verb*

- ADV. **carefully** *He chose his words carefully.* **| freely** *They can choose freely from a wide range of courses.*
- VERB + CHOOSE **be able to, be free to, can** *You are free to choose whichever courses you want to take.*
- PREP. **between** *She had to choose between giving up her job or hiring a nanny.* **from** *There are several different models to choose from.*
- PHRASES **pick and choose** *You have to take any job you can get—you can't pick and choose.*

Figure 6: the Entry for 'choose', verb, from the *Oxford Collocations Dictionary*

safe *adj.*

● VERBS **be, feel, seem | become | remain, stay | play**
(it) *Does good marketing mean playing safe* (= avoiding
risks) *and staying traditional?* | **make sth, render sth**
The army experts made the bomb safe. | **keep sth** *Keep
your money safe by carrying it in an inside pocket.* | **con-
sider sth, declare sth, deem sth** *The water was not con-
sidered safe to drink.*
● ADV. **all, extremely, really, very** *Don't worry—he'll be
all safe and snug in the barn.* | **absolutely, completely,
perfectly, quite, totally** *a completely safe and secure envir-
onment for young children* | **not entirely** *The wood is
never entirely safe for women on their own.* | **compara-
tively, fairly, pretty, reasonably, relatively | enough** *You
should be safe enough, but don't go too far.* | **environmen-
tally** *She claimed that nuclear power was the most environ-
mentally safe form of energy.*
● PREP. **from** *They were safe from attack.* **with** *Your
money will be safe with me.*
● PHRASES **better safe than sorry, safe and sound**
They returned from their adventure safe and sound.

Figure 7: the Entry for 'safe', adjective, from the *Oxford Collocations Dictionary*

object (***deny sb compensation***) or there may be an intervening preposition (***whoop with
delight; engage sb in*** conversation). The verb may be in the passive (***be considered a
delicacy; be riddled with bullets***). The collocations are presented, not in traditional
dictionary citation form, but, as nearly as possible, in the form in which students will want to
use them, with the minimum of transformation required. It may not be possible to bypass
grammar altogether, but the aim is to guide users into the correct grammar as unobtrusively
as possible – preferably without them being aware that this is happening.

Another example of the somewhat cavalier approach to grammar is that we have quite
cheerfully put into the 'adj.' slot items which are actually pre-modifying nouns (***tax benefit;
takeover bid***), whilst predicative adjectives quite frequently find themselves in the noun +
verb slot (*compensation **is payable***). This is done on the basis that the user is thinking not of
the word but the idea they want to express, which is adjectival, or verbal, even if the
realization of that idea is in fact a noun or a predicative adjective.

The organization of the entries goes beyond the level of these quasi-grammatical slots.
Within each slot the collocations are grouped into sub-slots according to meaning (*a
bright/intense/piercing/powerful beam*) or category (*electron/laser/searchlight/torch beam*).
This system may be compared to (and was partly inspired by) Mel'čukian slots, but with
heavy qualifications. There is no attempt to name or define the sub-slots. Whilst in some
cases it might be easy to do so (for example 'brightness/power' for the first example from
'beam'), in others it is much more difficult. And to apply the same range of sub-slots to all
nouns, for example, is practically impossible in a dictionary of this modest size. It also

leaves one open to the temptation of trying to fill all the sub-slots for each word. Just as there must be grammatically possible utterances that no one has ever uttered, there are combinations of ideas that no one has ever wanted to express. To ask what the correct collocation *would be* in such a case is to miss the point entirely.

Within each sub-slot collocations are listed alphabetically. This was a simplification arrived at reluctantly, when it was found impossible to indicate the relative frequencies or strengths of collocations in any meaningful way. Frequency is useful as a blunt instrument (is this a typical combination or not?) but it cannot be used to make fine distinctions. What students really need to know is which collocate in a group is most appropriate and this will vary according to the context. Examples and short notes can help to indicate the most typical context and any peculiarities in usage. For further information reference will have to be made to a general learner's dictionary such as the *Oxford Advanced Learner's*, which has space for much fuller information on register, grammar and usage – and, of course, meaning.

Conclusion

The aim of this dictionary is to be a practical tool – not just (or primarily) for applied linguists, interested in collocation as a phenomenon – but for students of English, or academics or business people obliged to write in English, who may not be very interested in the mechanics of the language, but do wish to be able to express themselves elegantly and precisely in that language. To this end we have designed a dictionary that presents the required information in as simple and accessible a way as possible, where the theory and grammar, though (we hope) sound, have been 'pre-digested' so that users do not have to negotiate them but can proceed directly to what they actually want to say.

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