

A Literature Review of Corpus-based Research on Verb-noun Collocation

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Abstract

With the rise of corpus linguistics, corpus-based collocation studies have attracted the interest of scholars both domestically and internationally, yielding a wealth of research outcomes. Corpus linguistics takes real language phenomena as its research object and employs an empirical methodology, offering a new research perspective for linguistic studies. This paper provides an overview of corpus-based verb-noun collocation studies both domestically and internationally, aiming to elucidate their research characteristics and domains, while also identifying their shortcomings. This paper holds certain implications for further research on verb-noun collocations.

Keywords— Corpus, Verb-noun collocation

I. INTRODUCTION

The term "collocation" essentially refers to the linguistic phenomenon where certain words co-occur with others. It is a key component of language learning, and collocational competence is also a crucial aspect of language proficiency (Wei, 2002). Numerous studies have shown that Chinese learners face significant challenges with collocations; even advanced learners struggle to master them, and collocational errors account for a high proportion of learners' mistakes. These errors manifest as unnatural collocations, frequent inaccuracies, lack of variation, difficulty in production, and lagging productive knowledge (Wei, 2002; Gui & Yang, 2003; Nesselhauf, 2003; Zhang & Chen, 2006).

Many researchers have also demonstrated through empirical studies that, whether in spoken or written language, errors in verb-noun collocations account for a high proportion of all collocational errors (May, 2009; Xia et al., 2014). Currently, scholars both domestically and internationally have conducted some empirical studies on verb-noun collocation errors. These studies primarily employ cross-sectional designs to examine the usage characteristics and error types of verb-noun collocations in learners' second language written corpora and the factors influencing such errors. Most studies compare existing corpora with native speaker corpora.

Research indicates that Chinese English learners lag behind native speakers in the quantity and diversity of verb-noun collocation, tending to overuse certain structures and underuse others, with a high proportion of errors in verb-noun collocation (Zhang & Yang, 2009). These studies primarily focus on college and graduate students, concentrating on argumentative and descriptive texts (Wang & Li, 2018; Laufer & Waldman, 2011), but few have analyzed the underlying causes of verb-noun collocation errors from the students' perspective (Wang & Zhou, 2020; Chen, 2024).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Definition of collocation

For second language acquisition and foreign language teaching, collocation plays a crucial role. As an important component of programmatic language (or language chunks), it can help second language learners effectively improve the fluency and naturalness of their language output (Wolter & Yamashita, 2014). Since J. R. Firth introduced the concept of collocation in the 1950s, collocation has been defined as the horizontal combinatorial relationship between words, where two words have a mutual expectation and prediction of each other. Despite nearly 60 years of research on collocation,

its definition has remained a challenge for scholars (Nesselhauf, 2005).

In general, current research on collocation definition primarily employs two main methods: frequency-based methods and phraseology-based methods. The former relies on frequency and statistical data, while the latter is guided by semantic analysis. Frequency-based research methods focus on evidence from corpora, using statistical probability to distinguish between high-frequency and low-frequency word co-occurrence relationships (Sinclair, 1994). Sinclair defines collocation as the co-occurrence of two or more words in close proximity within a text. He opposes the isolated study of words, arguing that collocation represents the linear co-occurrence of words, reflecting the individual collocation tendencies of lexical items, and that statistical methods should be used to measure the probability of word collocation. Besides, he proposed a set of concepts, such as anchor words, span, and collocation words. In contrast, phraseology research methods do not focus on frequency but define collocation as “word combinations in a specific grammatical form” (Nesselhauf, 2005). As a word combination, semantic components serve as the basis for a lexical item to select other lexical items and form acceptable collocations. Violating semantic selection restriction rules results in incorrect word combinations (Cowie, 1996).

1.2 Classification of verb-noun collocation

Based on the selection constraints of lexical collocation, Cowie (1992) proposed criteria to distinguish collocations from other word combinations: transparency and substitutability. Transparency refers to whether the meaning of the entire combination can be inferred from the literal meanings of its internal elements. Substitutability refers to whether the internal elements of a word combination can be replaced and to what extent they can be replaced. Using these two criteria, Cowie categorizes word combinations into four major types: free combinations, restricted collocations, metaphorical idioms, and pure idioms. Free combinations are those where replacements are restricted to a specific semantic field, with all components retaining their literal meanings (e.g., drink tea). Restricted collocations allow some substitutions but impose restrictions on arbitrary replacements; at least one component does not retain its literal meaning, while at least one retains it (e.g., perform a task). Metaphorical idioms are characterized by most components being non-replaceable, the phrase having a metaphorical meaning, yet retaining a general literal interpretation (e.g., do a U-turn). Pure idioms are non-substitutable, carry metaphorical meanings, and their meanings cannot be inferred from their literal interpretations (e.g., blow the gaff). Among these, Cowie

argues that only restricted collocations constitutes collocations. Most scholars in the field of phraseology adopt Cowie's definition of collocations, but some (e.g., Howarth, 1998) do not distinguish between “free combinations” and “restricted collocations,” instead referring to both as collocations.

From a grammatical structure perspective, Nesselhauf (2003) categorizes verb phrases into the following 10 forms: VO (achieve success), VOC (make life meaningful), VOO (give you an example), VPO (participate in the talent show), VOPO (give a chance to people), VO+inf (encourage people to), VA (go to prison), VOA (put sb in prison), VC (come into existence), VCPO (fall in love with sb). This classification has been widely recognized by scholars, and subsequent studies have largely adopted it or modified it based on it (Cai, 2018; Wang & Li, 2018; Wang & Zhou, 2020).

Nesselhauf (2003) was the first to systematically categorize verb-noun collocation errors, dividing them into verb errors, noun errors, incorrect usage 1 (the collocation exists but is used inappropriately), incorrect usage 2 (the collocation does not exist), prepositional errors with verbs, prepositional errors with nouns, determiner errors, noun number errors (singular/plural), and syntactic structure errors. This classification focuses on three dimensions of collocation errors: form, meaning, and usage. However, some categories overlap, leading to the same error being classified into multiple categories. Zhang and Yang (2009) further categorized verb-noun collocation errors into verb misuse, misuse of delexical verb, misuse of fixed verbal phrases, prepositional errors with verbs, prepositional errors with nouns, determiner errors, structural errors, lexical inappropriateness, redundancy, misconcatenation, and hard-to-define categories. The inclusion of the “hard-to-define category” reflects respect for the complexity of language errors and avoids distorting the essence of errors by forcing them into rigid categories. Wang and Li (2018) adopted a more macro-level classification, dividing verb-noun collocation errors into overall errors and local errors. The former includes “stretched verb construction for verb” and “whole collocation inappropriate”, while the latter includes word selection errors, form errors, structural errors, missing components, and redundant components.

1.3 Previous study at home and abroad

In second language research, verb-noun collocations are frequently used and prone to errors (Nesselhauf, 2005). Consequently, empirical research on learners' collocational knowledge and collocational competence has developed rapidly over the past two decades. Research on verb-noun collocations mainly covers the

following two aspects: (1) the usage characteristics of verb-noun collocations; (2) factors influencing the learning and processing of verb-noun collocations. These studies consistently indicate that learners have an insufficient grasp of collocational knowledge and inadequate collocational competence.

2.3.1 Previous studies on the characteristics of verb-noun collocations

One type of study focuses on college students or graduate students. Yoon (2016) tracked six essays written by 51 relatively inexperienced English as a second language (ESL) learners over the course of a semester (including three descriptive essays and three argumentative essays) and compared them with essays written by 46 proficient native speakers (one descriptive essay and one argumentative essay). The study calculated the mutual information (MI) and frequency of these collocations to analyze the strength of noun-verb collocation associations. Over time, non-native speakers showed no change in the strength of association in either genre. Comparisons between native and non-native speakers revealed that proficient native speakers exhibited greater association strength in argumentative essays, while there was no significant difference in association strength in descriptive writing. The study found that both native and non-native speakers overused high-frequency collocations in their writing, but non-native speakers underutilized low-frequency ones. This study combined longitudinal and cross-sectional approaches to examine two genres, which helps reveal how different genres influence collocation usage but fails to uncover the underlying reasons for the greater association strength in argumentative writing.

Domestically, Xia et al. (2014) conducted a case study on the characteristics of verb-noun collocational behavior among Chinese English learners (college students), with a focus on the word “ability.” Compared to native English speakers, Chinese English learners exhibited significant differences in the appropriateness of collocation usage, primarily reflected in the limited number of verb-noun collocation structures and less diverse lexical choices. There was also a noticeable tendency to overuse certain collocation structures while underusing others, particularly those with negative semantic prosody. International English learners exhibited fewer collocation errors than Chinese English learners, and their collocations were more natural, aligning more closely with those of native speakers. While the study compares Chinese learners with native speakers and international learners, it lacks in-depth exploration of collocation usage for other vocabulary, resulting in a limited scope and conclusions that may not be universally

applicable. Wang and Li (2018) investigated the use of verb-noun collocations in the writing output of high proficiency L2 learners. By analyzing 60 argumentative essays written by science and engineering doctoral students, they found that the most frequently used structure was VO, while VOC, VO+inf., and VOO structures appeared particularly infrequently. The doctoral students extensively used common phrases and delexical verbs. Approximately one-quarter of the collocations were incorrect, with local errors significantly outnumbering global errors. The most frequent errors related to word choice—particularly the misuse of synonyms and overuse of delexical verbs—followed by form errors (noun number errors and part-of-speech errors) and missing components (articles and prepositions). This indicated that even high-level learners lack collocational knowledge and exhibit collocation misuse. Research on doctoral students’ use of verb-noun collocations can provide deeper insights into language learning issues. In spoken output, Cai (2018) tracked 32 university students for two years, dynamically examining their use of verb-noun collocations in five English narrative texts. Compared to cross-sectional designs, longitudinal studies can more dynamically illustrate changes in language acquisition over time. The study provided a more scientific and detailed classification of verb-noun collocations, including not only traditional consistent collocations but also new categories: lexical inconsistency collocations, syntactic inconsistency collocations, and structural inconsistency collocations. Structural inconsistency collocations were the most poorly mastered by learners, with a significantly higher proportion of verb errors than other error types, while article errors were relatively rare (Cai, 2018). This study considered the influence of English-Chinese similarity on the use of verb-noun collocations, facilitating a deeper exploration of the cognitive differences underlying English-Chinese verb-noun collocations. Wang and Zhou (2020) found that the most frequently used verb-noun collocation type in spoken language was the VO structure—consistent with written language (Wang & Li, 2018), followed by VOPO and VPO structures. Most of the top 10 most frequently used verbs were delexical verbs. Approximately 30% of verb-noun combinations were incorrect, with local errors far outnumbering global errors. Most errors involved verbs and nouns, particularly the misuse of synonyms, while a small number involved prepositions and determiners. This study partially filled the gap in research on verb-noun combinations in spoken language.

One type of study focuses on high school students. Researchers collected essays from a monthly exam to

build a small corpus, analyzing students' English essays from the exam. They found that high school students most frequently use VO structures, relying heavily on simple collocations, overusing delexical nouns, and employing a significant number of Chinese-style English structures. Local errors were more common than global errors, with significant differences between the two. Syntactic structure errors had the highest proportion, followed by verb and noun errors (Chen, 2024). Data collection methods based on real learning contexts are more closely aligned with actual teaching environments and students' real language usage, making the results more representative and persuasive.

One type of study examines both college students and high school students. Laufer and Waldman (2011) analyzed verb-noun collocations in argumentative and descriptive writing samples from Hebrew-speaking English learners at three proficiency levels (basic: high school grades 9–10; intermediate: high school grades 11–12; advanced: university teacher training college students or English majors), finding that nearly one-third of the collocations were problematic. The study revealed that learners at all proficiency levels produced fewer collocations than native speakers, with only advanced-level learners showing an increase in collocation quantity. This study included learners across different proficiency levels, comparing not only native and non-native speakers but also learners at varying proficiency stages. This approach helps illuminate how learners use verb-noun collocations at different stages of development. However, it did not analyze the two text types separately.

Overall, verb-noun collocation poses a major challenge for Chinese learners of English. Current research has focused heavily on argumentative essays, with some studies examining both argumentative and descriptive texts, though the impact of different genres on verb-noun collocation has not been explored separately. The research primarily involves college and graduate students. In terms of output, the focus is typically on the types, frequency, and proportion of collocations used. Research findings indicate that second language learners produce fewer verb-noun collocations than native speakers, with less diversity and variation in their usage. Whether in spoken or written language, learners most frequently use VO structures in verb-noun combinations. This may be because learners rely on simple, high-frequency combinations, leading them to favor common collocations and use fewer varied structures. Learners often perceive the use of these common combinations as a safe choice, especially when they are unsure whether a specific collocation is correct. Nesselhauf (2005) refers to

these common combinations as “collocational teddy bears.”

Local errors are more common than global errors. In both spoken and written language, errors involving verbs and nouns are prevalent, particularly the misuse of synonyms, while errors involving articles and other elements are relatively less frequent. This suggests that learners may mistakenly believe that words with similar meanings are interchangeable, lacking awareness of the restrictive nature of collocations. Among these issues, the overuse or confusion of verbal collocation patterns is particularly noticeable. Compared to native speakers, Chinese students with intermediate to advanced English proficiency use significantly fewer types and quantities of delexical verb-noun collocations (Deng & Xiao, 2005). Beginner learners show a lower willingness to use delexical verb combinations, with their collocations carrying the most concrete meanings. Intermediate learners tend to overuse delexical verb combinations, while advanced learners demonstrate the highest richness and abstractness in their collocations (Yan & Gao, 2023). Additionally, Chinese learners not only avoid using uncertain delexical verb combinations (Fu & Chen, 2022) but also create non-standard ones (Wang & Li, 2018). Advanced and intermediate learners produce more erroneous collocations than beginner learners. This may be because advanced learners are more confident and willing to experiment with more collocations, resulting in more errors (Laufer & Waldman, 2011). However, the proportions of error types vary between high school students and other learner groups. For example, doctoral students have the highest proportion of word selection errors, while high school students have the highest proportion of syntactic structure errors. This may be due to high school students' weaker foundational knowledge and limited proficiency in mastering words and syntactic structures, making their verb-noun collocations particularly worthy of research.

Methodologically, existing learner corpora are compared with native speaker corpora, or data is collected independently. Error types are identified using dictionaries, large corpora, or native speaker judgments. Corpus software such as AntConc is used to examine concordance lines, and SPSS is employed to test for significant differences between error types. Statistical criteria are applied to ensure the objectivity and reliability of results.

2.3.2 Previous studies on factors affecting verb-noun collocation errors

From the perspective of factors influencing errors in verb-noun collocations, factors such as native language transfer,

neglect of the restrictive nature of collocations and non-lexical components, and misuse of target language rules are important causes of collocation errors (Nesselhauf, 2003, 2005; Laufer & Waldman, 2011; Xia et al., 2014; Zhang & Yang, 2009; Wang & Zhou, 2020).

There has been extensive research on the influence of native language transfer. While all studies acknowledge that negative native language transfer is a significant cause of verb-noun collocation errors, they differ in their understanding of this transfer phenomenon. Laufer and Waldman (2011) found that over half of the abnormal collocations in second language writing are influenced by the native language, and the extent of negative native language transfer increases rather than decreases as second language proficiency improves. Two native Hebrew speakers (who are also English teachers) reviewed the errors and marked those they believed were influenced by Hebrew. While manual annotation of native language influence can address complex semantic phenomena, relying solely on second language corpora to infer the meaning learners intended to express, and then using intuition to determine whether the error stems from native language transfer, is not a rigorous method. Jia (2017) examined the differences in conceptualization between Chinese and English and their impact on Chinese English learners' verb-noun collocations from a cognitive grammar perspective, using a translation test method. The study found that differences in Chinese and English conceptualization (in terms of level of detail, prominence, and conceptual structure) are important causes of verb-noun collocation errors. While translation tests can reflect learners' language production abilities, they may not fully simulate language expression in real-life contexts, which could affect the authenticity of the results. Some studies have used interviews to analyze the causes of errors. Eight students were randomly selected for semi-structured interviews to explore their cognitive processes regarding verb-noun collocations and the causes of errors. The results indicated that learners are influenced by their native language, but the interview examples were insufficient, and the study did not delve deeply into multifaceted influences (Chen, 2024). Wang and Zhou (2020) conducted retrospective interviews with 12 students after an oral task, playing back the students' oral recordings during the interviews. The analysis of the interview data focused on the causes of error production, learners' awareness of collocations, and their perceptions of the role of collocations. The results indicated that reliance on native language thinking and the misuse of synonyms were important causes of collocation errors. Another category of research focuses on the impact of native language transfer on the processing of verb-noun

collocations. Cai (2018) studied the dynamic changes in native language transfer over time in Chinese university students' use of verb-noun collocations in spoken discourse. Thirty-two university students completed five picture-based speaking tasks over a two-year period. The study found that among the three types of transfer in verb-noun collocations, positive transfer had the highest percentage, followed by inhibitory transfer, and finally interferential transfer. This study explores the potential positive transfer effects of similarities between the native language and the target language on second language acquisition, which holds significant implications for both theory and practice. However, this study has some limitations: it only used picture description tasks to examine changes in native language transfer in college students' use of verb-noun collocations, and the assessment of transfer relied solely on corpus data. Additionally, the "psycholinguistic model of second language vocabulary production" discussed in the study remains to be validated through experimental research. Zhan and Ni (2024) used an eye-tracking experiment to investigate the influence of Chinese proficiency and second language proficiency on the processing of English verb-noun collocations among 66 Chinese English learners (graduate students). Previous studies have primarily employed traditional psychological methods, such as vocabulary judgment tasks, while eye-tracking technology allows for more direct observation of real-time cognitive processing during reading. The study found that the influence of Chinese on the processing of verb-noun collocations by high-level English learners was more significant, showing a preference for Chinese-English consistent collocations over English-specific ones, and for English-specific collocations over Chinese-specific ones. This finding provides new insights into the role of the native language in second language collocation processing (Zhan & Ni, 2024).

Intralinguistic errors are also an important cause of verb-noun collocation errors (Altenberg & Granger, 2001; Xia et al., 2014). For example, Altenberg and Granger (2001) compared the usage of "make" in the LOCNESS subcorpus (comprising English texts by native speakers) with that in the ICLE (International Corpus of Learner English), focusing on university students whose native languages were French and Swedish. They found that learners made the most errors in the delexical usage of "make." Some of these issues were common to learners from both native language backgrounds, stemming from insufficient understanding of the complexity of these structures. Methodologically, such studies often involve researchers examining concordance lines in corpora, which allows them to understand the specific contexts in

which errors occur but provides limited insight into learners' actual learning situations and their cognitive understanding of verb-noun collocations.

Overall, research on the two influencing factors—native language transfer and intralingual errors—is relatively abundant. Researchers not only acknowledge negative transfer from the native language but also use dynamic methods to demonstrate the positive transfer effects of the native language. Methodologically, translation tests, corpus analysis, and interviews are employed to analyze causes. Translation tests, to some extent, detach from specific contextual analysis and overlook the complexity and diversity of language use. The combination of corpus analysis and interviews, however, provides both contextual information and learners' subjective perceptions. Retrospective interviews can better explore the causes of verb-noun collocation errors produced by learners.

III. CONCLUSION

In summary, a review of the above studies reveals the following shortcomings in research on verb-noun collocations in second language acquisition.

First, regarding corpus collection methods, the primary approaches include guided tests, self-collection, and the use of learner corpora. Guided tests may be detached from context, making it difficult to fully reflect students' collocational competence and vocabulary usage skills in real-life language environments. From a corpus perspective, learner-generated corpora are most effective in reflecting learners' actual use of verb-noun collocations. While learner corpora have the advantage of large volumes, researchers cannot access specific information about second language learners. Additionally, the writers, essay topics, and content of each sub-corpus vary, leading to weak comparability between sub-corpora and between learner corpora and native English speaker corpora. Second, in terms of genre, previous studies have primarily used argumentative and descriptive texts. In written language, some researchers have simultaneously studied argumentative and descriptive writing but have not conducted separate analyses. Third, regarding the target population, most studies have focused on Chinese university students or advanced learners, with limited research on beginner and intermediate learners (Laufer & Waldman, 2011; Cai, 2018; Wang & Li, 2018; Wang & Zhou, 2020). For example, Chen (2024) found that syntactic structure errors were most common in high school students' verb-noun collocations, while verb errors and noun errors were more prevalent among college students (Wang & Zhou, 2020), indicating differences in

verb-noun collocation errors between high school students and college students. As future college students or advanced English learners, high school students merit focused research. Last, methodologically, most studies employ corpus-based quantitative analysis to examine learners' verb-noun collocation patterns, while few consider the causes of errors from the students' perspective (Wang & Zhou, 2020; Chen, 2024). Therefore, research on verb-noun collocations can be conducted from multiple perspectives, and there is still significant room for development in this field of study.

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