

COLLOCATIONAL PATTERNS OF THE VERB MAKE IN BRITISH ENGLISH: EVIDENCE FROM THE BRITISH NATIONAL CORPUS

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Abstract

Collocation is one of the fundamental concepts in corpus linguistics because words do not occur randomly but tend to form recurrent combinations with other lexical and grammatical elements. The present study investigates the collocational patterns of the verb make in British English, with primary emphasis on the British National Corpus (BNC). The verb make is selected because of its high productivity and its ability to participate in a wide range of lexical, grammatical and semantic patterns. The study focuses on noun collocations, adjective-related constructions and selected grammatical patterns involving make. Particular attention is given to combinations such as make a decision, make an effort, make a mistake, make sure and other recurrent structures. The BNC is used as the principal corpus because it contains a large and varied collection of authentic British English from both written and spoken sources. The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) is employed as a secondary comparative corpus to examine whether selected collocational tendencies are shared by British and American English. The study demonstrates that corpus-based analysis provides a reliable framework for identifying recurrent phraseological patterns and for distinguishing productive grammatical constructions from conventional lexical combinations. The findings highlight the importance of collocational competence for linguistic description, English language teaching and translation.

Keywords:

collocation, corpus linguistics, British National Corpus, make, lexical patterns, phraseology, British English, COCA.

Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge involves more than knowing individual words. Fluent language users also need to know which words naturally occur together and which grammatical patterns are associated with particular lexical items. These recurring combinations are commonly studied under the concept of collocation.

The verb make is particularly suitable for a corpus-based collocational investigation. It occurs in numerous constructions and combines with a wide variety of nouns and other grammatical elements. Examples include make a decision, make a mistake, make an effort, make a contribution and make sure. Some of these combinations have relatively transparent meanings, whereas others have become conventionalised through frequent usage.

The objective of this study is to examine the collocational behaviour of make in British English using the British National Corpus as the primary source of evidence. The study also introduces selected comparison with COCA in order to identify potential differences between British and American English.

1. Collocation in Corpus Linguistics

The concept of collocation is closely associated with the observation that words demonstrate regular patterns of co-occurrence. In corpus linguistics, collocation can be investigated through statistical measures and contextual examination.

A collocate is not simply a word appearing somewhere in the same text. Corpus analysis normally considers a defined span around the node word and evaluates whether another word occurs with it more frequently than expected.

For example, when make is treated as the node word, researchers may examine nouns occurring immediately after it or within a specified window:

make + decision

make + effort

make + mistake

make + contribution

Such analysis helps identify recurrent lexical associations.

BNC-based corpus research commonly uses statistical measures such as log-likelihood to evaluate the strength of collocational relationships. Lancaster University materials on BNCweb, for example, describe the use of collocation searches and log-likelihood for examining co-occurring linguistic items.

2. The BNC as the Principal Corpus

The British National Corpus is a major source for empirical research into British English. It contains approximately 100 million words from written and spoken sources and was designed to represent a broad range of British English.

The corpus contains 96,986,707 orthographic words in its XML edition. Approximately 90% of the material is written, while approximately 10% represents transcribed speech.

The diversity of the BNC makes it particularly useful for collocational research. A lexical combination found in a newspaper, academic article or informal conversation may have different communicative characteristics. Therefore, a corpus that contains several registers provides a broader basis for analysis than a specialised corpus.

3. The Verb MAKE and Its Structural Patterns

The verb make can participate in several major structural patterns.

3.1. MAKE + Noun

One of the most productive patterns is:

make + determiner + noun

Examples include:

make a decision

make an effort

make a mistake

make a contribution

make a difference

These constructions demonstrate that make frequently combines with abstract nouns referring to actions, decisions, results or social activities.

The importance of such combinations is not limited to frequency. Some combinations demonstrate a strong degree of conventionality. For example, English speakers normally say make a decision rather than do a decision. Such combinations therefore represent an important component of phraseological competence.

3.2. MAKE + Adjective

Another important pattern is:

make + object + adjective

For example:

make it clear

make something possible

make people happy

In these constructions, make functions causatively: the subject causes the object to enter a particular state or condition.

This pattern illustrates how lexical and grammatical information interact. The verb cannot be fully described without considering the syntactic structure in which it occurs.

3.3. MAKE SURE

The expression make sure represents another highly conventional pattern. Unlike a simple combination of make and an ordinary noun, make sure functions as a relatively fixed verbal expression:

Please make sure that the door is locked.

Its frequent occurrence demonstrates why corpus linguistics is useful for identifying multi-word units.

3.4. MAKE + Abstract Nouns

A notable characteristic of make is its ability to combine with abstract nouns. Examples include:

- make a decision
- make a choice
- make an attempt
- make an assumption
- make a suggestion
- make a statement

Such combinations are especially important in academic and formal English because they allow speakers and writers to express actions and communicative processes without using a simple lexical verb.

4. Functional Classification of MAKE Collocations

The collocations of make can be grouped according to semantic function.

The first group involves decision and choice:

- make a decision
- make a choice
- make a judgement

The second group involves effort and action:

- make an effort
- make an attempt
- make a contribution

The third group involves error and evaluation:

- make a mistake
- make an error

The fourth group involves communication:

- make a statement
- make a suggestion
- make an announcement

The fifth group involves change or effect:

- make a difference
- make an impact
- make progress

This classification demonstrates that collocational patterns are not random. They often form semantic networks in which one lexical verb participates in groups of related expressions.

5. Register and Genre

The BNC enables researchers to investigate whether collocations are associated with particular genres.

For instance, expressions involving make a statement, make a contribution or make an assumption may be particularly relevant to formal or academic contexts. Other expressions, such as make a mistake, may be widespread across both spoken and written communication.

The important point is that corpus-based research should not assume that a collocation has the same distribution in every context. Its frequency and communicative function may vary according to genre.

The BNC's design is particularly useful here because it includes newspapers, academic books, fiction, letters, conversations and other forms of language.

6. Comparison with COCA

COCA is used in the present study as a secondary source for comparison. It contains more than one billion words covering 1990–2019 and includes spoken, fiction, magazine, newspaper, academic and web-based materials.

The comparison between BNC and COCA is useful because *make* is common to both British and American English, while its collocational patterns may demonstrate differences in frequency or register.

For example, combinations such as *make a decision*, *make an effort* and *make a mistake* are expected to be established in both varieties. The comparative task is therefore not simply to determine whether a collocation exists, but to examine its relative prominence and contextual distribution.

Such comparison should take corpus design into consideration. The BNC represents British English primarily from the late twentieth century, while COCA provides more recent American English data. Therefore, observed differences cannot automatically be interpreted as purely geographical differences.

7. Methodological Considerations

A systematic investigation of *make* can be conducted through the following procedure.

First, the lemma *make* should be selected rather than only the individual form *make*. This allows different grammatical forms such as *make*, *makes*, *made* and *making* to be distinguished according to the research question.

Second, the researcher should identify frequent lexical collocates, particularly nouns occurring after *make*. Third, the collocational strength of candidate combinations should be evaluated through an appropriate statistical measure.

Fourth, concordance lines should be examined manually. Statistical association alone cannot determine the semantic function of a construction. Contextual analysis is necessary to distinguish genuine collocations from accidental co-occurrence.

Finally, selected BNC findings may be compared with COCA in order to establish whether the patterns are characteristic of British English or widely shared across English varieties.

8. Discussion

The analysis shows why *make* is an important object of phraseological research. Its high productivity does not mean that all combinations are equally predictable. Some combinations are highly conventional and therefore require explicit learning.

For language learners, the difference between *make a decision* and *do a decision* is not easily explained through the individual meanings of *make* and *do*. It is primarily a matter of conventional usage. Corpus evidence makes such conventional patterns visible.

From a pedagogical perspective, teaching high-frequency collocations may improve both fluency and accuracy. Learners can be encouraged to learn vocabulary in phraseological units rather than as isolated words.

From a translation perspective, collocation is equally important. A literal translation of individual words may produce an unnatural expression in the target language. Identifying conventional combinations in authentic corpora can therefore support more natural translation choices.

Conclusion

This study has examined the collocational patterns of the verb *make* in British English, with the British National Corpus serving as the principal source of linguistic evidence. The analysis demonstrates that *make* participates in a broad range of recurring lexical and grammatical patterns.

Particular attention has been given to *make* + noun, *make* + object + adjective and the conventional expression *make sure*. The noun collocations can further be grouped into semantic categories involving decisions, efforts, mistakes, communication, contribution and effect.

The BNC is especially valuable because it provides extensive authentic evidence from different genres and includes both written and spoken British English. COCA can complement this analysis by providing a large comparative sample of American English.

The study confirms that collocation is an essential component of lexical competence and that corpus-based methods provide an empirical foundation for investigating phraseological patterns. Future research may extend the present analysis by conducting quantitative comparisons of collocational strength, register distribution and diachronic change in BNC and COCA.

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