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A Corpus-based Study on Chinese EFL Learners’ Usage of Preposition from Co-selection Theory

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Jianguo TIAN
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Abstract
This paper attempts to study the Chinese EFL learners’ usage of selected prepositions under the co-selection theory. The research selects one out of 15 most frequently used prepositions, word of, as key word searched in two corpora, CLEC (Chinese Learner English Corpus) and LOCNESS (Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays). Co-selection theory is applied so as to discover the semantic sequences and phraseology patterns of selected prepositions. First, from the perspective of co-selection between words, the paper exhibits the classifications and embodied meanings of most frequently appeared left and right collocations of the two prepositions in CLEC. Second, from the perspective of co-selection between words and grammar, the paper discovers several phraseology patterns and semantic sequences through L1-L5 and R1-R5 frequent collocations of prepositions. Comparisons in two corpora are as well presented, so that to analyze the reasons to different usage of prepositions between Chinese English learners and native speakers.

Key words
Preposition usage, Co-selection theory, Corpus-based Study

I. Introduction

Prepositions, as one of the most important parts of speech in English, have played a vital role in linking nouns, pronouns to other words in sentences. For one thing, prepositions show strong collocational competence, as it could express such meanings as possession, action, relation, direction, place, time. For the other, prepositions are of high frequency, commonality and versatility. According to Kennedy, there is at least one preposition in any English text. Judging by its rich semantic meanings and strong grammatical functions, however, preposition could be the most uneasy parts of speech to acquire for second language learners. The polysemous nature of English prepositions is hard to deal with. Their meanings are far more diverse than their Chinese counterparts.
For most Chinese teachers who teach English as a foreign language (EFL), prepositional usage is conventional, idiomatic and 'just to be learnt'. Chinese learners only pay attention to the basic meanings of an English preposition-location in space, while take no notice of other extended meanings. Thus, prepositional polysemy is reduced to homonymy, which limited learns' capabilities of mastering various prepositional meanings. Based on that, scholars around the world have conducted numerous researches on preposition from different angles, including structural linguistics, functional linguistics and cognitive linguistics. Their research laid a solid foundation for further studies on preposition by studying on its semantic meanings, grammatical usage, collocations and so forth, whereas the researches from the angle of phraseology have been hardly found.

In order to study prepositions in a broader and more scientific sense, it is inevitable to apply corpus as main methodology in the research. Undeniable, the emergence of electronic corpus provides researches convenience and feasibility for language research and teaching. The related concordance software can easily assist researchers to acquire significant statistics. With the help of corpus and concordance software, the scholars abroad have carried out some researches on prepositions, in which they discovered some prepositions tend to collocate with fixed words.

This study attempts to combine quantitative and qualitative methods, to study the Chinese English learners' usage of selected prepositions under the co-selection theory. Taking fifteen most highly appeared prepositions in Brown and Lob corpus concluded by Kennedy as the main subjects. CLEC (Chinese Learner English Corpus) has been selected as the learners' corpus, while the native speakers' corpus has been LOCNESS (Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays). Co-selection theory is applied so as to discover the semantic sequences and phraseology patterns of selected prepositions. The study is mainly conducted by following steps. First, the quantitative method has been applied to calculate the related descriptive data of selected fifteen most frequently used prepositions. Second, one out of fifteen prepositions, word of, is selected as the subjects for qualitative studies. From the perspective of co-selection between words, the paper exhibits the classifications and embodied meanings of most frequently appeared left and right collocations of the two prepositions in CLEC. From the perspective of co-selection between words and grammar, the paper discovers several phraseology patterns and semantic sequences through L1-L5 and R1-R5 frequent collocations of prepositions. Comparisons in two corpora are as well presented, so that to analyze the reasons to different usage of prepositions between Chinese English learners and native speakers.

II. Literature Review

2.1 Studies on Prepositions abroad and home

According to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, "a preposition is a
word used with a noun, pronoun, or -ing form to show its connection with another word" (2003:1180). Through years, various views have been held toward English prepositional studies by linguistics of Traditional Grammar, cognitive linguistics as well as structuralists and functionalists.

In terms of Traditional Grammar, scholars take complex implications of prepositions into their main considerations. They analyze prepositions and their anomalous collocations with numerous word types, so as to discover the descriptive functions of prepositions in sentences and texts. From the cognitive linguists’ side, they asserted that the various meanings of English prepositions are reasonably interrelated and form a continuous meaning chain. One of the main achievements cognitive scholars acquired is that distinct senses of prepositions are interrelated and thus establish a radical network with links defined by the transformation of image schemas and conceptual metaphors. (Lakoff, 1987; Dewell, 1994; Taylor and Evans, 2001) Encouraged by their discoveries, Chinese pioneers like Yang Dafu (1997), Cai Jianping (1999) and Tao Wenhao (2001) have as well conducted English preposition studies by applying relevant cognitive theories. They have reached their agreements that the multiple meanings of English prepositions are easy to understand if they are connected to the understanding of polysemous prepositions.

*In Metaphors We Live By*, written by Lakoff and Johnson, they argued “Spatial orientation coming from the interaction between human being and nature is the most basic concept that we live by, such as up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off ...” The relationship between multiple meanings of an English preposition is successfully established through metaphorization. Though cognitive methods presents a new picture of English prepositional studies, the deficiencies is obvious as linguists fail to link their theoretical framework to practical teaching. In order to improve that, structuralists and functionalists have carried out their studies. According to structural linguists, prepositions have more functional meanings than lexical ones. In their opinions, prepositions are functioned as structural words and changed into either adjectival modifiers or adverbial modifiers (Qu, 2003:36). Besides, from functional linguistics’ side, like Halliday, prepositions are put forward as one of the three primary word classes, which functioned similarly to verbs. On the whole, structuralists and functionalists have illustrated the functional properties of the English prepositions, while shed no light on their lexical meanings.

### 2.2 Studies on Phraseology

Phraseology can be loosely defined as "the study of the structure, meaning and use of word combinations". Phraseology is the study of set or fixed expressions, such as idioms, phrasal verbs, and other types of multi-word lexical units. Some terminologies are designed for corpus-based or corpus-driven studies, including "lexical bundles" (Biher, 2003), "recurrent word combinations" (Altenburg, 1998), "phrasological

2.3 Studies on Co-selection theory

In recent years, more and more scholars tend to put forward researches to describe the internal mechanism of the usage of English phrases. The phraseology has been regarded as one significant research area in western linguistic world, which is inseparable with the establishment and development of co-selection theory. Using corpus as the research instrument is originated from Firth. In the year 1957, Firth first pointed out that the meaning of words should be explained from collocations (Firth, 1957). Affected by his ideas, in 1966, Sinclair emphasized the necessity of establishing word pattern with the aid of computers. Later, he continued to develop his theories, in which co-selection theory and semantic Stubbs also argues that co-selection is the core mechanism to describe language use (Stubbs, 2009). Therefore, co-selection theory could be the most important theoretical elaboration in new Firth corpus linguistics. (Sinclair, 1991).

Influenced by the western researches, Chinese scholars as well have made their contributions to the establishment and development of co-selection theory. Wei Naixing concluded in his study that, in the process of communication, the basic co-selection includes two aspects, the selection between vocabularies themselves, and the selection between vocabularies and sentences.(Wei,2012) Some assert that the co-selection can be found in the academic texts, that “co-selection is the core mechanism many academic authors implement in their studies in order to carry out the discourse functions”(Li Jingjie, 2013). Hua Xiaoqin put “color word+NP” as the main specific research subject, so as to study the semantic tendency of color word for Chinese English learners(Hua Xiaoqin, 2011). These experts have inherited and developed the linguistic heritage of Sinclair’s theory.

III. Research Design

3.1 Research questions
This study attempts to answer the following three research questions:
1) Are there any significant differences between Chinese EFL learners and native speakers in preposition acquisition?
2) What are the phraseological characteristics in Chinese EFL learners’ usage of word of? Compared with the native speakers, is there any significant difference?

3.2 Research subject
The study selected fifteen most commonly used prepositions in BROWN and LOB corpus as key words to be searched in texts, namely, of, to, in, for, as, with, on, by, at,
from, about, into, over, between, through. Of will be the main subject for further qualitative studies.

3.3 Corpus

Table 1 Basic introduction to CLEC corpus and LOCNESS corpus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Word tokens (total number)</th>
<th>Sample Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CLEC(ST3 &amp; ST4)</td>
<td>46,178</td>
<td>Chinese university non-English majors' Test paper with time and topic limits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOCNESS</td>
<td>22,796</td>
<td>British &amp; American university students' essays</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3.1 CLEC

*Chinese Learner English Corpus* (CLEC), regarded as the first learners' corpus in China, was established in 1997 by a group of researchers guided by Professor Gui Shichun from Guangdong University of Foreign Studies and Professor Yang Huizhong from Shanghai Jiao Tong University. It contains over one million words. The samples come from compositions written by college students and high school students, which are specifically divided into five different English levels. Considering the purpose of the study, only ST3 and ST4 under the CLEC corpus are selected as main research source.

3.3.2 LOCNESS

LOCNESS (*The Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays*) is built by the university Catholique de Louvain, which includes argumentative essays on a great variety of topics written by native British and American students. The corpus can be further divided into three different sub-corpora, respectively, British high school students' A level essays, British university students essays and American university students' essays. In this study, high school students' essays are extracted.

The LOCNESS is selected as the reference corpus based on the following reasons. First, the corpus meets the requirements of the research, which make data collection in a more scientific and academic sense. Second, given the high commonality and frequency of the subjects, the corpus size is appropriate to research on propositions under phraseology perspective. Third, the samples in two corpora are collected from similar academic level and are of similar genres. The intervening variables are largely controlled.

3.4 Instruments

This paper mainly takes usage of software powerconc1.0, developed at the National
IV. Results and Discussion

4.1 Analysis on selected preposition under co-selection theory

From the above, co-selection theory could be divided into two aspects, the selection between words themselves and the selection between word and grammar. Guided by the theory, the following part will deliver a detailed qualitative analysis on preposition word of, so as to make a clear comparison between Chinese EFL learners' and native speakers' usage condition.

4.1.1 Analysis on preposition of

A. Co-selection between word and word

1) Left and right collocates to of

Taking the word of as key word, the researcher first extracted index lines in the two corpora. Then a detailed collocation analysis is conducted by the software BFSU collocator. According to Hunston, the collocations can be regarded as strong ones if their mutual information value (MI3 value) is larger than three. Based on this principle, the following table presents top 15 immediate left and right collocates of the preposition of, in which the researcher rank them in the order of MI3 value.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Left collocates---Of</th>
<th>Right collocates---Of</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CLEC(ST3&amp;ST4)</td>
<td>LOCNESS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word</td>
<td>MI3 value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>development</td>
<td>18.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kind</td>
<td>17.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kinds</td>
<td>17.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lot</td>
<td>15.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shortage</td>
<td>13.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>most</td>
<td>13.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>because</td>
<td>13.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>number</td>
<td>13.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>care</td>
<td>12.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>out</td>
<td>11.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improvement</td>
<td>11.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 presents the top 15 left and right collocates to preposition word of in CLEC and LOCNESS corpus. Under the co-selection theory, there is a strong interrelationship between a specific word and other words, which later form strong collocations. Therefore, the collocations presented above are selected based on two standards—frequency are more than 5 and MI3 value are larger than 3. The statistics present a significant difference between two corpora, which can be concluded as follows.

First, in terms of 15 left collocates to the word of, development, kind and kinds are three most frequently used words in CLEC, while part, because, out rank first in LOCNESS; Words like afraid, importance and full are lowly used in CLEC, while end, aware, form rank the last in LOCNESS; Only three words because, number, out are equivalent used in LOCNESS, while the other twelve are non-equivalent words in the reference corpora.

Second, in terms of 15 right collocates to the word of, the, fresh, them are three most frequently used words in CLEC, while a, course, all are top three words for native speakers; Words like job, life, our and crime, abortion, AIDS are lowly used in CLEC and LOCNESS respectively; Compared to the reference corpus, none of the strong left collocates native speakers frequently use have been found in CLEC.

The above statistics have revealed a clear picture. The words native speakers tend to collocate with the preposition of differ greatly from Chinese EFL learners. From the perspective of co-selection between word and word, nouns play a dominant role as frequently used left and right collocators to the preposition of. However, from the left collocates to of, it can be concluded that Chinese learners tend to use more fixed and more complicated words, like development, shortage and improvement, while native speakers like using more common and easier words like idea, sense, end and form. On the contrary, from the right collocates to of, the researcher discovered that native speakers tend to select more crucial and complex words, like America, corporal, cleverland and so forth, whereas Chinese learners prefer words as people, industry, job.

The differences might relate to the certain writing topics or fixed expressions. Chinese EFL learners may memorize certain writing patterns or fixed expressions so as to gain higher scores in the examination writing. Phrases like “With the development of”, “with the rapid development of”, “with the growing development of”, “with the increasingly number of” have been surely overused. “Part of”, “Lack of”, “aware of”, “instead of” are quite underused by Chinese learners. For example, the words like water, life, shortage may have come from the writings entitled Global Shortage of Fresh water. Besides, from the right collocates to the preposition word of, determiners like a and an have been
seldom used by Chinese EFL learners, instead, determiner *the* is their best choice. The phenomenon is closely related to many improper usage of the determiner by Chinese learners. For instance,

1. Second reason is the development of the economy, people can
2. statistics, the life expectancy of the people has increased from
3. food which builds the body of the people in developing countries
4. the improvement of the level of the people’s life
5. we can see the changes of the life expectancy and infant
6. -1] many. First because of the improvement of the level
7. First because of the improvement of the level (wd3 = -2)
8. It caused the improvement of the level of life and the change of the structure of food.

Fig. 1 Examples of improper usage of the determiner by Chinese EFL learners

From the examples 2 to 4, the right collocates the should be deleted. Learners get used to adding *the* in front of nouns, while ignoring to use indefinite determiners or numerals.

2) Analysis on semantic sequence of “Noun of Noun” from phraseology

As mentioned above, nouns occupy a large proportion in collocations to *of* in both corpora. To better understand the phraseological pattern of “* of *”, 200 index lines have been randomly selected by BFSU powerconc software. The data will be dealt with in two steps. First, the structural patterns are found and concluded. Second, every structural pattern will be further analyzed under the theory of semantic sequences to dig out its meaning. The different structural patterns are shown in the following figures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N of N</td>
<td>For most students of the universities, it is a ...</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V of N</td>
<td>...consists of various contents...</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADJ of N</td>
<td>African countries are suffering from lack of fresh water.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be of N</td>
<td>The Reform and Open policy is of necessary...</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From table 4, it is clearly shown that on the whole, in most circumstances, Chinese learners tend to use preposition *of* in complex noun phrases when they conduct their English writings. Besides, patterns like “V of N”, “ADJ of N” and “be of N” are seldom found in the corpus, which presents the simplicity and rigidity of Chinese EFL learners’ usage of prepositions. Therefore, in this part, the paper tries to analyze the representative semantic sequences of the pattern “Noun of Noun”.

In 182 out of 200 samples, the frequencies of left and right collocates to proposition of are first calculated in the following table to present a clear comparison. Besides, in order to make a clearer analysis of different semantic sequence, the nouns appeared are
further classified into several categories.

Table 4 Detailed Classifications of left and right nouns to preposition of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Property</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>condition, situation, knowledge</td>
<td>Experiences</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>work, practice, life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>kinds, lot, millions</td>
<td>Object/subject</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>money, people, water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>development, changes</td>
<td>Actor</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>students, people, teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>consideration, thinking</td>
<td>Phenomenon</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>injustice, pollution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>idea, opinion</td>
<td>Fact</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>facts, death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>sadness, happiness</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>seven, eleven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>time, period</td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>speaker, writer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>speaker, writer</td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the above table shows, the left collocates to the word of could be further developed into seven categories, respectively, property, number, changes, process, concept, feeling and time. The highest one is property, in which nouns can describe the possessiveness or property of the right collocates to the word of, such as the condition of their work, the situation of the society, the pain of the patients and so forth. Followed by is the number category, which has been mentioned before, as Chinese learners prefer to use some fixed phrases, including kinds of, lot of, lots of and so forth. Moreover, Chinese learners as well prefer to use nouns to express changes, processes, knowledge and idea.

In terms of the right collocates to the word of, six categories including experiences, object, actor, phenomenon, fact, number occupy the most. Among them, experiences and objects appear most frequently. Learners tend to use left collocates to present their relationship to the right collocates, or discuss the experiences and practices. In this kind, the preposition of realize its meaning as “belong to something”. However, the frequent emergence of words water, pollution may partly due to the limit of written thesis.

Therefore, based on Zen's method (2012) and the table above, various semantic sequences of the pattern “Noun of Noun” are shown in the following charts.
Table 5 Detailed semantic sequences of pattern “Noun of Noun”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semantic Sequence</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>property + of + objects/experiences</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>the condition of their work; the size of your shoes; the pain of your life etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>number + of + objects/experiences</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>all kinds of jobs; millions of people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>changes + of + subjects</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>development of the society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>time + of + fact</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>the time of death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feelings + of + actors</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>the sadness of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>the concepts of doing something</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B. Co-selection between word and grammar

In terms of co-selection between word and grammar, the scholars argue that once a word has been selected, its related grammar relationship thus be established. Take the Sinclair’s word “brook” as an example. The literal meaning of word brook is “to bear or stand”. However, when Sinclair searched the word in corpus, he found that the word brook usually be used in sequences like “V no N” and “Not V N”, which has built up new meaning chain “never bear or stand something”. (Sinclair, 1996) Based on the understanding, from the co-selection between word and word, the researcher found one semantic sequence is of high frequency in Chinese EFL learners’ corpus, the sequence “be * of”. Search the pattern “be * of” in powerConc, the results are as follows.

1. \[ ST_3 \] s- ] don’t be afraid of failure, just make practice
2. \[ ST_3 \] 2- ] , you will be fond of it (sn1,
3. \[ ST_3 \] one hand, we should be aware of the importance of fresh water
4. \[ ST_3 \] fresh water. We must be aware of fresh water is in shortage
5. \[ ST_3 \] river. Every body should be aware of the shortage of water,
6. \[ ST_3 \] global shortage. We should be conscious of saving fresh water. On
7. \[ ST_3 \] water, we will not be afraid of the shortage of fresh water
8. \[ ST_3 \] should educate the people to be aware of the importance of refresh [ ]
9. \[ ST_3 \] seems that we will never be short of fresh watch [ fm1 ,
10. \[ ST_3 \] Thus, we will not be short of fresh water in [ pp2
11. \[ ST_3 \] - ]. We should be aware of [ ec3 , 2-2 ]
12. \[ ST_3 \] sure that we will never be short of fresh water. In fact
13. \[ ST_3 \] truth that we will never be short of fresh water? In effect
14. \[ ST_3 \] that fresh water will never be out of use [ wd3 , s-
15. \[ ST_3 \] the earth. We should be warned of making good use of fresh

Fig. 2 index lines of pattern “be* of”

The above results reveal some conclusions. Most of the middle words in the Pattern “be * of” are adjectives which describe some feelings (like aware, conscious, afraid) or conditions (like short). The left words to the pattern “be * of” often include modal verbs like will, should and must, and negative words like never, not, don’t. The right words to
the pattern usually consist materials, entities or objects, like the shortage of fresh water. Therefore, the pattern "be* of" can be rewritten as model verb +no+be+Adj+ of+N, which can be further explained as "should or must not have feelings toward something". Owing to the limited sample size, the paper only presents a proposal to form co-selection relationship between a certain word and grammar.

V. Conclusions

This paper studies the Chinese EFL learners' usage of selected prepositions under the co-selection theory. CLEC (Chinese Learner English Corpus) has been selected as the learners' corpus, while the native speakers' corpus has been LOCNESS (Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays). The co-selection theory has been applied to guide the analysis. The results and conclusions can be summarized as follows.

1) In terms of co-selection between word and word, the researcher found that the words native speakers tend to collocate with the preposition of differ greatly from Chinese EFL learners. From the perspective of co-selection between word and word, nouns play a dominant role as frequently used left and right collocators to the preposition of. Differences arise might relate to the certain writing topics or fixed expressions, Chinese EFL learners may memorize certain writing patterns or fixed expressions so as to gain higher scores in the examination writing.

2) To better understand the phraseological pattern of "* of *, 200 index lines have been randomly selected by BFSU powerconc software. In most circumstances, Chinese learners tend to use preposition of in complex noun phrases when they conduct their English writings. Besides, patterns like "V of N", "ADJ of N" and "be of N" are seldom found in the corpus.

3) In terms of co-selection between word and grammar, sequence "be * of" has been made a detailed analysis. From the results, the pattern "be* of" can be rewritten as model verb +no+be+Adj+ of+N, which can be further explained as "should or must not have feelings toward something".

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