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Palmer, Firth and Internet: Drawing together collocational threads

In corpus linguistics, the contribution of Palmer to collocation studies is often overlooked. However, Palmer's Second Report on English Collocations published in Japan in 1933 has been the inspiration for many major threads in phraseology, even if few have actually had access to the work itself. When Firth started looking into collocation, he almost certainly had never heard of Palmer.

Thus were the parallel worlds of overseas ELT and British academia at a time before Internet made data exchange and cross-disciplinary exchange easy. The consequence is that traditional phraseology, and much pre-corpus lexicography, and corpus linguistics developed on parallel lines. Those lines were effectively drawn together in the COBUILD initiative, although the Palmer connection remained largely forgotten.

Part of the cause lies in the fact that these two approaches are based on radically different visions of language. Phraseologists and lexicographers seek to tame language so as to list and classify for inclusion in published works. This requires an essentially static vision of collocation where phraseological units are treated as if created ex nihilo and are simply found and classified on purely linguistic grounds as to what may and what may not be termed as a collocation.

The Neo-Firthian approach developed by John Sinclair within the context of corpus linguistics is very different in that it places collocation at the heart of language as an essentially dynamic process in which meanings are created and exploited within textual contexts. This requires a much wider vision of collocation rather than simply reducing it to a series of part of speech groupings, with occasionally a smattering of pragmatic or linguistic considerations. The advantage of corpus linguistics is that it allows an analysis of dynamic collocation whilst providing the material for more reductive phraseological or computational exploitation of the data.

This paper intends to look at three issues; the development along parallel lines of phraseological and corpus linguist collocation, reinstating the place of Palmer whilst underlying the centrality of collocation as a language phenomenon, an overview of criteria for restricted collocation and finally how the threads can be drawn together in the extraction and analysis of collocational data from Internet.