

A Corpus Linguistic Investigation into Lexicogrammatical Connections in the L2 Classroom

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Abstract—The paper looks at lexicogrammatical connections by investigating the grammar pattern “V. ... as ...” with the words “consider” and “regard” in British National Corpus (BNC). In the Chinese EFL context, English has been seen as an increasingly important school subject particularly since 21st century. Chinese students, though spending much time on English, tend to feel vocabulary learning quite demanding and sometimes find a difficulty in interpreting word meanings in context. In this paper, based on the analysis of a learning context, a new way of vocabulary teaching is proposed with a corpus-based investigation of the grammar pattern “V. ... as ...”, attempting to connect vocabulary (lexis) and structure (grammar) in the language classroom and help students improve the ability to apply English words successfully. Also, by examining “consider” and “regard” in BNC and comparing samples in BNC to a widely-used dictionary, it is found that words having a same grammar pattern have a tendency to share some aspects of meaning, reflecting the importance of the use of corpora in the ELT classroom.

Keywords—*corpus linguistics; ELT; lexicogrammatical connections; pattern grammar*

I. INTRODUCTION

A corpus is a collection of language used in the situations where speakers use it naturally (Brazil, 1995; Tsui, 2004; Timmis, 2015). In recent decades, research into the pedagogical applications of corpora has become increasingly wide-discussed. Since corpora provide us with a valuable source of natural language examples, they have brought many inspirations and contributed greatly to the ELT field (Bernardini, 2004; Römer, 2011; Flowerdew, 2012). In this paper, a learning problem of a group of Chinese learners of English will be described and a thought of language learning will be illustrated by a corpus-based investigation through British National Corpus (BNC), hopefully to help the group with their learning issue.

II. LEARNING CONTEXT

In China, English is compulsory subject from year 3 of elementary school to senior high school in most areas. For

national university entrance examination, students are supposed to have the knowledge about the English language in pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary (approximately 3500 words) (Chinese National Education Department, 2018). The national examination contains a written exam and a speaking test (basic communication). My previous students were from year 1 of a senior high school in Fuzhou, a major city in China. Their English was in around intermediate level but generally their reading and listening proficiency were higher than their speaking and writing, for the school put emphasis on grammar and lexis and students lacked communicative output activities in the classroom.

According to the school syllabus, teachers were expected to teach grammar and lexis separately, so the method was adapted in my classroom. However, from my experience, though the approach was helpful for students to build up the knowledge in two respective aspects, it still tended to be demanding for them to use English for certain purposes effectively. For example, in reading, they found it difficult to guess word meaning in a sentence context. Even if they understood some words (lexis) and how the sentence was structured (grammar), it was hard for them to comprehend the sentence as a whole (lexis and grammar) and to interpret unknown words in the context. To alleviate the problem, it can be useful to make students aware of the importance of seeing language as a whole by bringing in lexicogrammatical connections to the classroom. This study, therefore, will focus on the issue of lexicogrammatical connections and relevant literature will be first discussed in the following section.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Corpus Linguistics in ELT*

As summarised by Römer (2011), the use of a corpus in language teaching and learning can be classified into two types: indirect and direct applications (“Fig. 1”). In an indirect way, corpora can help teachers to decide teaching content and sequence, mainly through the teaching syllabus and teaching materials. Direct ways, on the other hand, help students and teachers who work with corpora themselves.

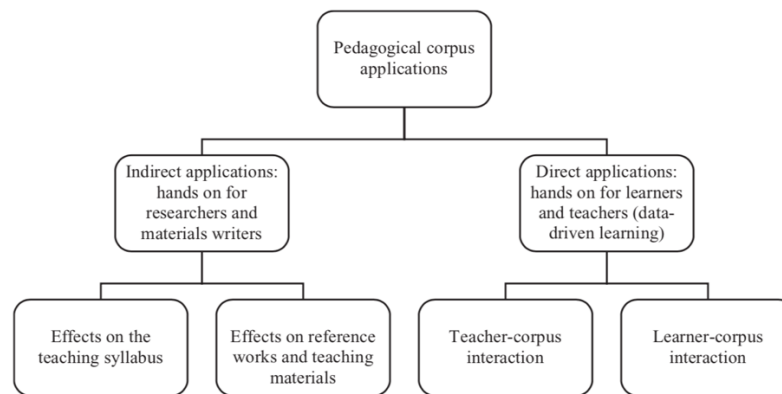


Fig. 1. The indirect and direct applications (Römer, 2011).

1) *Indirect applications:*

Because corpora are how language is used in real situations, they can provide invaluable resources of the input of language descriptions and usages for language learning (Barlow, 1996). Thus, they tend to have a large influence in teaching syllabi and materials.

On one hand, corpora have inspired syllabi to put more focus on language from real-time communicative situations (Römer, 2011). Corpus-driven “lexical syllabus” raised by Willis (1990) is an example. With the help of corpora, it looks at “commonest words in the language occur with the commonest patterns” in a natural language (Willis, 1990, Introduction), such as lexical patterns and repeated word combinations. The emphasis on lexis in the concept tends to largely influence grammar teaching, because rather than emphasizing form and structure, many syllabi include more lexical elements through looking at grammar within sentence contexts (Conrad, 2000).

On the other hand, the development of corpora brings inspirations to the design of teaching materials. Traditionally, some textbooks are influenced by “intuition or anecdotal evidence” (Conrad, 2000, p. 553), and this leads many scholars to consider the issue of “authenticity” of textbooks in their corpus-based studies in some aspects such as vocabulary frequency, accuracy of grammatical descriptions and features of spoken discourse (see e.g. Conrad, 2000; Römer 2004; Burton, 2012). To bring more authentic language in use to classrooms, Römer’s (2004, p.152) builds an EFL textbook corpus (using textbooks in a German grammar school) which contains what she calls as “ideal learner input”, and compares it with BNC which is made up of “real language learner input”. She identifies that those textbooks tend to have inauthentic and simplified English, and some invented sentences in the coursebooks may rarely appear in real-life conversations (e.g. the sentence “are they playing” from a textbook only occurs once in BNC).

2) *Direct applications:*

The corpus-driven direct approach is “either an interaction between the learner and the corpus or, in a more controlled way, between the teacher and the corpus” (Römer, 2011, pp. 211-212). The way is usually called “data-driven

learning” or “discovery learning” in which students use an inductive strategy to discover the target language in corpora (Bernardini, 2004). Students can be asked to do some activities such as comparing a pair of near-synonyms (e.g. “high” and “tall”) or looking at examples to explore grammar patterns (e.g. “be ADJ. about”) (Römer, 2011). In the next section, the idea of lexicogrammatical connections related with the latter activity (i.e. grammar patterns) will be discussed in more details.

B. *The Connections of Lexis and Grammar*

1) *Lexicogrammatical connections in ELT:*

Traditionally, grammar and lexis are treated as two separate components in ELT (Lado, 1961; Hunston, 2002; Timmis, 2015). However, with the influence of corpus linguistics, their close connections tend to be identified (e.g. studies about word patterns, see Hunston et al., 1997; Hunston and Francis, 1998; Hunston and Francis, 2000). In vocabulary teaching/learning, it brings the idea of looking beyond individual words. As Jones and Durrant (2010) argue, the development of corpus linguistics reminds us of the importance of building lexicalized phrases, treating grammar and lexis as a whole, in a lexicon. In grammar teaching/learning, corpora provide the evidence for identifying more frequent grammatical items and accurate grammatical descriptions (Timmis, 2015). Stranks (2013, cited in Timmis, 2015, p.75) criticized ELT material writers nowadays tend to choose grammar structures and their examples without carrying out enough investigations into “the lexis which typically co-occurs with these structures”.

The idea reflects the significance of integrating lexical elements into grammar teaching, and it shares similarities with the concept of “lexicalism” from Chomsky (1986) which Hudson (1990) describes as shifting teaching focus from grammar constructions to lexical components. Owen (1993), based on their ideas, proposes lexical approaches to teaching grammar through using resources such as lexical phrases and collocations from corpora as direct input in classrooms.

2) *Main streams in lexicogrammatical connections:*

Having discussed lexicogrammatical connections in ELT generally, it can be necessary to take a closer look at the

ways of linking lexis with grammar. In this section, three important notions will be discussed: lexical chunks, lexical bundles, and pattern grammar.

a) Lexical chunks and lexical bundles:

According to Timmis (2015, p. 26), a lexical chunk refers to “a frequent meaningful sequence of words that may include both lexical and grammatical words”, such as “by the way” or “to some extent”. However, different from lexical chunks which are meaningful, lexical bundles, though they are also word units, may be “a sequence of words found together without a clear semantic or pragmatic meaning” (ibid.). Besides, they do not usually “represent a complete structural unit” (Biber et al., 2004, p. 277), such as “on the” or “in the”.

b) Pattern grammar:

Pattern grammar refers to how words are usually connected with each other and how the structures can contribute to meaning (Römer, 2009). From data in corpora, patterns can be summarized as the way “if a combination of words occurs relatively frequently” (Hunston and Francis, 2000, p. 37). Through corpus-based investigations of verb patterns, Hunston and Francis (1998) identify that verbs with a same pattern probably share some similar meanings (e.g. see “Table I”), and some verbs in the same pattern may be close synonyms, such as “scream”, “shout” and “yell” in “Table I”. Meanwhile, meaning and pattern do not always have to be “one-to-one” (Hunston, 2002, p. 139), so one aspect of meaning can be conveyed by more than one pattern (e.g. see “Table II”) (Hunston et al., 1997). Those findings tend to emphasize the notion of “pattern”, which can also have implications for ELT in helping students with language accuracy and fluency. For example, Hunston et al. (1997) suggest “pattern approach” in vocabulary teaching. Through the approach, students tend to learn new words as a chunk instead of separate vocabulary items and they may not need to make sentences by putting individual words into them when using language for communicative purposes.

TABLE I. VERBS AND PHRASAL VERBS MEANING “SHOUT” OR “MAKE A NOISE” (HUNSTON ET AL., 1997)

Verbs	bark, bellow, growl, hiss, jeer, laugh, rage, scream, shout, snap, swear, whistle, yell, etc.
Phrasal verbs	blow up, go on, keep on, etc.

TABLE II. SEVERAL WAYS TO ADDRESS A SIMILAR IDEA (HUNSTON ET AL., 1997)

Pattern	Example
V. N.	She liked the idea.
V. to N.	She warmed to the idea.
V. N. N.	She thought the idea a cracker.
V. N. ADJ.	She considered the idea brilliant.
V. N. as ADJ.	She regarded the idea as brilliant.

Moreover, though a pattern usually has some words commonly appearing in it which can express a similar meaning, such as “bark at”, “bellow at” and “growl at”, words from the same pattern can also be chosen to convey a different or extra meaning (Hunston and Francis, 2000). Hunston and Francis (2000, p.106) discuss the pattern “V. N.

as N.” and indicate that verbs in this pattern such as “consider”, “describe” or “interpret”, often convey that “the description, interpretation etc. is a matter of opinion, not of fact”. However, not all words in this pattern express the same meaning, and they give an atypical usage of the pattern: “Society must be predisposed to panic about crimes. There has already to be a tendency to discover crime as the cause behind worrisome social ills.” Instead of being understood as an opinion, “discover N. as N.” in the example may better be interpreted as “thinking the statement as a fact” (ibid).

What has been discussed so far tends to underline the significance of lexis in the concept of pattern grammar, because it is impossible to identify any pattern without the enough amount of lexis (Hunston and Francis, 1998). As claimed by Hunston and Francis (1998, p. 62), “syntax and lexis are completely interdependent” and they can be treated as an alternative approach of interpreting the same situation. For example, non-free or fixed phrases can be seen as special instances of patterning in which lexis is extremely confined (Hunston and Francis, 1998; Hunston and Francis, 2000). Due to its importance to lexicogrammatical connections and ELT, the following section will further illustrate the lexically-based concept by analyzing a grammar pattern and discuss possible implications.

IV. THE CORPUS-BASED INVESTIGATION OF PATTERN GRAMMAR: “V. ... AS ...”

As mentioned previously, words with the same word pattern can share similar meanings (Hunston and Francis, 1998). Following the idea of patterning, my students, with appropriate guidance, may be able to make use of a word pattern to understand the meaning of a new word in the sentence context (their learning issue has been discussed in section 2). For better addressing it, in this section, “V. ... as ...” is chosen as the pattern by putting two specific verbs in it “consider ... as ...” and “regard ... as ...” to investigate to what extent the two verbs in the same pattern can convey similar meanings and how this can help solve my students’ problem.

A. Corpus Data from BNC

To analyze whether the two words that have the same pattern can share some parts of meanings, the main tools used in this paper were British National Corpus (BNC) containing 100 million words including both written and spoken texts of British English, and Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner’s English Dictionary (2006). During the corpus investigation, the tokens of the two words including all the inflections were used (i.e. consider-considers-considered-considering; regard-regards-regarded-regarding). Here are basic findings:

- “Consider” appears 30,263 times in BNC. “As” co-occurs with “consider” 1,904 times and it is not a very strong collocate.
- “Regard” appears 16,717 times in BNC. “As” is the most significant collocate of “regard” which appears 8,983 times.

Then 250 samples of “consider” collocating with “as” in BNC were looked at and it was found that there were two main structures “V. ... as ...” and “be V.-ed as ...” (passive form) in this pattern. In the discussion below, all the citations are selected as examples of the pattern, which may include cases of some different features from the Collins dictionary that were discovered during the investigation. Besides, insignificant citations will be excluded such as:

1. ...if only to ensure (**as considered** above) that the firm's finances...
2. You wouldn't **consider** giving me a clue **as** to what this is all about?
3. ...voluntary work will be **considered** work just **as** much as paid work...

(Citations from BNC)

1) “Consider”: V. N. as ADJ./N.:

Here are some examples below.

1. ... have thought that I had ever **considered** her **as** my wife. Did I ever give...
2. It was medicinal, she said. She **considered** all strong spirits **as** medicine.
3. ... it becomes possible to **consider** chronic diseases either **as** acute illnesses...
4. ... there could be merit in **considering** such a location **as** a means of educating...
5. ...decide first whether we are **considering** its value **as** a means or its value in itself.
6. ... performance. Anyone who **considers** such trivial questions **as** humour or...
7. ... Judi's memories. He **considered** Anne **as** a child, as a schoolgirl, as...
8. ... enables us all, young and old to **consider** old people **as** useless, incontinent...

(Citations from BNC)

Examples above belong to “consider N. as ADJ. /N.” (“consider N. as N.”: lines 1-7; “consider N. as ADJ.”: line 8). They all tend to convey the meaning of “having a personal opinion or attitude towards something or somebody”, which corresponds to the description from the Collins dictionary. Based on the data, it is noticed that the usage of “consider N. as N.” is much more frequent than “consider N. as ADJ.” (line 8 is the only example that can be found among 250 samples). Nevertheless, whereas there is no example of “consider N. as N.” given in the dictionary, the only example that can be found there belongs to “consider N. as ADJ.”: “... I consider activities such as jogging and weightlifting as unnatural...” (COBUILD Advanced Learner’s English Dictionary, 2006, p. 296). Apart from this finding, a tendency of adding a paralleling component in this pattern can be noticed from the investigation, which does not appear in dictionary. Line 7 is

an example, having “as a child, as a schoolgirl, as...” behind “consider” and the object “Anne”.

2) “Consider”: be V.-ed as ADJ./N.:

Here are some examples below.

1. ... open fire or a gas fire would **be considered** as fire damage, but if it was an...
2. ... cook, and very soon I **was considered** as one of the family. The Signore...
3. ... recent World Cup should not **be considered** as official one-day internationals.
4. ... created which **was considered** by many as inhuman, unjust...
5. ... excretion studies, which **are considered** by some as the 'gold standard'...
6. ... genuinely thrilled to **be considered** on the same level **as** these 'famous'...
7. ... medical viewpoint, a woman **is considered** during her first pregnancy **as** a..
8. ... many issues should **be considered**, I think, **as** a traditional..

(Citations from BNC)

These examples correspond to the structure of the passive form “be V.-ed as ...” with line 4 as “be V.-ed as ADJ.” and the rest as “be V.-ed as N.”. It can be seen that the structure contains the meaning of “somebody or something is thought in a particular way”, which is similar with the meaning of the previous structure. However, from the investigation, it is found that some samples have additional information between “consider” and “as”, for example, lines 4-8.

As illustrated, both structures (i.e. active and passive form) tend to share the same meaning. Nevertheless, based on the evidence from BNC, the passive form “be V. as ADJ. /N.” (occurring approximately 107 times in 250 samples) is used more frequently than “V. N. as ADJ./N.”. Besides, the tendency of the ellipsis of “as” can be seen in some samples, which does not appear to influence their literal meaning such as:

1. *Anopheles* are now **considered** important as carriers...
2. ... the whole of life was **considered** sacred, **as** were...
3. ... such **as** finger scanners are **considered** safer...
4. ... voluntary work will be **considered** work just **as** much...
5. ... **as** substrate has been **considered** the most important...

(Citations from BNC)

In terms of “regard”, likewise, 250 samples of the word were investigated in BNC. Two structures “regard ... as ...”

and “be regarded as ...” were then identified. According to Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner’s English Dictionary (2006, p. 1207), their meaning is “if you regard someone or something as being a particular thing or as having a particular quality, you believe that they are that thing or have that quality”. In the investigation of “regard”, two issues are particularly focused as to whether the samples from BNC can reflect the same meaning with the dictionary, and whether it shares some aspects of meaning in the same pattern with “consider”. Again, all the citations in the following discussion are chosen as examples of the pattern, and unrelated examples will be removed such as:

1. ... *be screened*; **as regards** advertising, it established that...
2. ...*European firms with regard to such factors as capitalisation*...
3. ...*programmes highly regarded by students, as it appreciably*...

(Citations from BNC)

3) “Regard”: V. N. as ADJ./N.:
Here are some examples below.

1. ...*conclusion.* <p><p> *I don't regard my engagement to Peter as any sort of mistake.*
2. ...*fixed information subjects may regard the film as a whole to be unfamiliar*...
3. *Though born in Britain, he regards himself as a citizen of Europe and Italy as his*...
4. ...*doing this task themselves. They regard it as an ideal way to familiarise themselves*...
5. ...*which we would normally regard as 'cognitive' rather than 'neurological' or*...
6. ...*and time.* <p><p> *If what we regard as real depends on our theory, how can we make*...
7. ...*knowledge. They regarded as 'ill-chosen' the focus of the traditional*...

(Citations from BNC)

It is clearly seen that lines 1-4 belong to “regard N. as N.” and lines 5-7 are based on the structure of “regard N. as ADJ.”. Similar with the meaning of the pattern in “consider”, the structure of samples shows the meaning of “having an opinion towards something or somebody”, which corresponds to its explanation in the dictionary. Noticeably, what is different from the Collins dictionary in the corpus evidence is that whilst “regard N. as N. /ADJ.” can be both identified in BNC, the dictionary only demonstrates “regard N. as N.”.

4) “Regard”: be V.-ed as ADJ./N.:
Here are some examples below.

1. ... *which is doing the repression, this is regarded as a separate agency. But nevertheless*...

2. ... *designed to organize. This could be regarded as a pragmatic approach to the design*...
3. ... *Similarly, the standard can be regarded as the ultimate in the development*...
4. ... *Points 6 and 7 advocate what is regarded by many as an opposite way of looking*...
5. ... *Yeah. So your mother was regarded in the neighbourhood as someone*...
6. ... *understanding of number was regarded as more important than the ability to*...
7. ... *in other words, entities are regarded as basic, and places are said to be*...

(Citations from BNC)

Previous examples represent the structures of “be regarded as N.” (lines 1-5), and “be regarded as ADJ.” (lines 6-7) which is not written in the Collins dictionary. Based on the data from BNC, it can be seen that it shares the same feature of “be considered as ...” in terms of showing additional information between verb and “as” (e.g. lines 4 and 5).

B. Summary

It is shown that under the pattern of “V. ... as ...”, “consider ... as ...” (passive form: “be considered as ...”) and “regard ... as ...” (passive form: “be regarded as ...”) share the same meaning of “having an opinion or attitude towards somebody or something”, which is in line with the explanations in the Collins dictionary. In the current investigation, it can be evident that words sharing the same pattern can share some parts of meanings.

What were discussed are two example words in the pattern of “V. ... as ...”, nevertheless, different situations may occur in the same pattern. According to Francis and his associates (1996, p. 348), there are two categories under the pattern of “V. ... as ...”: “Verb with Object and prepositional Object Complement” and “Verb with Object and prepositional Complement”. The two words explored in this paper are likely to fall into the category of the first type, considering the preposition phrase and the object in the pattern tend to be equivalent parts (Hunston and Francis, 2000) such as:

She considers all strong spirits as medicine.

(“all strong spirits” = “medicine”)

They regard it as an ideal way to familiarize themselves.

(“it” = “an ideal way to familiarize themselves”)

(Citations from BNC)

However, there are words from the other type (Verb with Object and prepositional Complement) which do not seem to share the similar meaning with “consider ... as ...” and “regard ... as ...” Hunston and Francis (2000) argue that in the second type, the prepositional phrase tends to be

equivalent with the subject rather than the object. For example:

He always struck me as a very dispassionate and calculating sort of man.

(“He” = “a very dispassionate and calculating sort of man”)

(Hunston and Francis, 2000, p. 168)

V. TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

The idea that words “sharing a pattern also share aspects of meaning” can be used in alleviating my students’ difficulty in guessing the meaning of a new word in a sentence (Hunston and Francis, 1998, p. 46). For example, with pattern knowledge, they can probably interpret the sentence (an unknown word “hail”) successfully:

This work has been hailed as an important step in trying to understand how life evolved.

(example from Hunston et al., 1997, p. 213)

“Been hailed as” in the example belongs to the pattern “V. ... as ...” (passive form: “be V.- ed as ...”). If students have learnt the pattern and known some words which have the pattern such as “consider” or “regard”, they can be “guided towards using the pattern as a contextual clue to the meaning” before they obtain the meaning from dictionary (Hunston et al., 1997, p. 213).

VI. CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion about corpus linguistics in ELT and lexicogrammatical connections, the paper has investigated the grammar pattern “V. ... as ...” and given several suggestions as to how it may be helpful to the teaching practice. Indeed, the development of corpus is beneficial for us as language teachers in that it brings more possibilities to language classrooms through direct access to authentic language resources. But nevertheless, since “no corpus can be a totally accurate sample of a language” (Sinclair, 2004, p. 2), it can be important for us to stay a critical mind and always be careful about how to make good use of it to benefit our students.

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