

## The Application of Corpus in Distinguishing English Synonyms

Xie Fang

(Sichuang University of Science and Engineering, Sichuang Zigong 643000)

**Abstract—** This paper mainly deals with the application of corpus in distinguishing English synonyms. Traditionally, English learners tend to rely on dictionaries or reference books to distinguish English synonyms, but it turns out that these kinds of books can be of little help. With the revival and the aid of corpus, this problem can be solved easily.

**Key words:** Synonyms, Corpus, Concordance lines

### I INTRODUCTION

One of the common and the hardest problems that English learners will meet during the process of studying English is to distinguish English synonyms. Traditionally, they tend to consult some dictionaries or reference books with the purpose of finding the meaning distinctions between or among synonyms. But to their disappointment, sometimes dictionaries and reference books can be of little help. So they are eager to find a new way that can help them in distinguishing synonyms. In order to tackle this problem, many linguists and scholars are working on the research of distinguishing synonyms from various senses. With the help of computer science, a new thing---corpus was born and is proved to be one of the most effective ways to distinguish synonyms through lots of practices. Corpus is turned to be a very useful tool not only for English learners in their studying but also for English teachers in their teaching.

### II DEMONSTRATION

As we all know, English is very rich in synonyms. What is “synonyms”? It refers to words that are close in meaning. There are many pairs or triplets of words bearing more or less the same meaning, e.g. hope and wish, rare and scarce, complete and absolute, slay and kill.

Although synonyms have meanings that are similar, total synonyms are rare. The so-called synonyms are all context dependent (Hu, 2001). The words are not able to substitute for another under some circumstances. For example, “rare” and “scarce” have the close meaning and are regarded as a pair of synonyms. Both can refer to “not often found or seen”. But “rare” usually is used to describe a thing or an event that is found or occurs infrequently and it may once have been common. For example: The panda is now a rare animal. “Scarce” refers to a thing in daily use but not easily obtained and much less than is needed. For example: Water is scarce in the desert. From the two examples we can reach a conclusion that there are no absolute synonyms in English vocabulary.

Because synonyms are very common in English, it is unavoidable that Chinese students will confront difficulties in distinguishing synonyms during their English learning. So it is worthwhile for any English learner to attach great importance to it. Especially nowadays the college students

are paying more and more attention to it. The majority of them are required to take the CET-4 and CET-6 and there are some synonyms which ask students to make a correct distinction among four choices in “Cloze”. As the revolution of CET-4 and CET-6, the vocabulary will be granted even more emphasis. That means more synonyms will appear in the test paper. How to distinguish synonyms correctly? Many students usually will ask their English teachers for help. But sometimes they cannot get clear explanations from their teachers and even feel more confused. So, for English teachers, distinguishing synonyms has gradually become of the challenges during their teaching activities.

Traditionally, English learners will consult the dictionaries or some reference books, trying to find the clear explanation for the synonyms. But to their disappointment, the dictionaries can be of little help. Partington gives some examples to improve it. He lists some words: sheer, pure, complete, utter and absolute. After consulting several authoritative dictionaries, such as the Collins English Dictionary, the Longman Dictionary and the earlier Collins CoBuild English Language Dictionary, Partington points out that dictionaries tend to define these words in similar ways and even give them as synonyms of each other (Partington, 1998). So in that case, even a native English speaker can hardly clarify differences in meaning only depending on dictionary, then for a non-native speaker, it is more difficult.

If English teachers just copy what the dictionary says in explaining the synonyms to their students. Undoubtedly, students will feel more confused than before, because they cannot get the clear distinctions at all. What’s worst is that some students are likely to doubt their teachers’ ability. So it is really a big challenge for English teachers.

As for the reference books, we cannot deny that they can really help English learners in understanding synonyms to some degree. English learners can easily get access to some comparisons about the synonyms. But these kinds of books still have some disadvantages. Firstly, just like the dictionaries, reference books clarify differences of synonyms vaguely. Some authors just use one word to explain another. Secondly, when English learners are reading the reference books, they just accept the information passively and lack their own thinking. Sometimes, they are misled by the reference book.

So, we can come to a conclusion that the dictionaries and reference books are not very reliable in helping English learners in distinguishing synonyms.

Because of the weakness of dictionaries and reference books, some linguists are working on finding some new ways to tackle this problem. They argue that synonyms all differ one way or another. According to the way they

differ, synonyms can be divided into several groups: 1. Dialectal synonyms---synonyms used to different regional dialects. For example, “autumn” is used in British English, while “fall” is used in American English. 2. Stylistic synonyms---synonyms differing in style. Here are some examples: “start”, “begin” and “commence”. “commence” is more formal, while “start” and “begin” are casual. 3. Collocational synonyms. For example, both “accuse” and “charge” can be used when we want to say that someone has done something wrong or even criminal, but they are followed by different prepositions---“accuse ...of”, “charge... with”. 4. Semantically different synonyms. For example, “amaze” and “astound” are very close in meaning to the word “surprise”, but have very subtle differences. “amaze” suggest confusion and bewilderment, while “astound” suggests difficulty in believing.

So some linguists suggest that English learners can take the above four aspects into consideration when distinguishing synonyms. After practicing them, this method is proved to be helpful to some extent. But some problems also follow. As non-native English speakers, learners are poor in understanding words semantically. They are more apt to understand words literally. Additionally, the method is somehow complicated for learners in use.

Is there no other effective way to distinguish English synonyms? The answer is : not at all. Thank for the appearance and improvement of the corpus, distinguishing synonyms is not a tough problem any longer.

“Corpus” is a new thing for many English learners. It was the wonder of computer that heralded the revival of corpus. Then what is corpus? Some linguists define it as this: corpus is a collection of linguists data, either compiled as written texts or as a transcription of recorded speech. Simply speaking, a corpus is a store of used language. It does not contain new information about language, but the software offers us a new perspective on the familiar. Most readily available software packages process data from a corpus in three ways: showing frequency, phraseology, and collocation(Susan, 2002 ).

A corpus is just like a database, a term in computer science. As we all know, computers can hold and process large amounts of information. So a corpus also stores a collection of examples of language, consisting of anything from a few sentences to a set of written texts or tape recordings. Then, how to apply a corpus in distinguishing synonyms?

Take “wish” and “hope” as examples. They are often used as synonyms, but under some specific circumstance, one cannot substitute for another, because there are some differences between them. English learners often mix them up in writing and speaking. Now, with the help of the corpus, more specifically, with the help of the concordance program, English learners can easily understand the pair of synonyms and use them correctly. Then, what is “concordance”? we know that the computer has the ability to search for a particular word, sequence of words, or perhaps even a part

of speech in a text. The computer can also retrieve all examples of a particular word, usually in context. It can also calculate the number of occurrences of the word so that information on the frequency of the word may be gathered. We may then be interested in sorting the data in some way—for example, alphabetically on words occurring in the immediate context of the word. This is usually referred to as a concordance.

Firstly, we take “wish” and “ hope” as key words respectively and get some concordance lines, thus to study them in context. Below are some concordance lines (selected at random from the Cobuild corpus).

Wish

A lady wish to see me urgently.

I wish now to give a more detailed description of the 1974 Remembrance Day march.

The authors wish to thank Ron Hochsprung at Apple for his patience and support.

One only wishes that he had spent more time gaining a perspective outside America.

I wish your teeth were larger.

I do wish they would get on with it.

I wish them all the luck in the world.

I don't want to wish any bad luck on them.

Many wish Britain to have a major influence in world affairs again.

There is some sensitive material which the depositor does not wish divulged.

Mrs. Scowcroft means that the UN is now operating as the US wishes.

When you print the briefing charts, you can also, if you wish, print the note files.

I wish for a system that respects the aspiration of the young.

Lady Littleton wishes for a room of separation between the eating room and the drawing room.

That's what had prompted Charles Babbage to groan out his famous wish for tables calculated by “steam”.

It has no wish to intervene in the internal affairs of another nation.

The NF upholds the wish of the majority of the British people.

She thinks it is not right to impose something like the poll tax against the wishes of a majority of the population.

The disposal of these “research” embryos should, as far as possible, be according to the donor's wishes.

Hope

DRI hopes to Out-Dos Ms-Dos with DR Dos.

Their lawyer hopes to take the case to the European Council.

I hope you were inspired by the march.

I hope Apple is working on the next-generation Macintosh operating system.

Let's hope he gets better and comes home.

It's hoped that it will shortly be supply 40% of South Africa's motor fuel requirement.

The result, he hoped, would be happy.

This, it is hoped, might provide an economic incentive for

conservation.

I put the key into what I hoped was the right lock.

But chemists hope for a breakthrough in at least one area of research.

Those two defeats effectively ended any hopes Britain had of winning the group.

This revived hopes of a further interest rate cut.

If it is, there will be no hope for the youngsters in the village.

Then there's the stream of day-trip Klondikers who descend on the Highland rivers in the hope of becoming rich overnight.

The young men are deserting to Douala and Yaounde in hope of work and betterment.

This has been interpreted as an offering to the goddess in the hope that she would increase the supply of flint.

According to the concordance lines, we can reach some conclusion: a. Both "wish" and "hope" can be followed with "to do something" when they are used as transitive verbs. But "wish to do something" implies that "do something" happens "now" or "then"; while "hope to do something" means having a desire to do something in the future. Besides, "wish to do something" can express politeness and formality; while "hope to do something" doesn't bear such meaning. b. As transitive verbs, "wish" means having as a desire that is unfilled or unlikely to be fulfilled. The predicate verbs in the clause only have two tenses: the past perfect and past time. While predicate verbs used in "hope" that-clause don't have this kind of limits as "wish", they can be used in several tenses. c. "wish" can be used in "wish sb sth", but there is no such structure as "hope sb sth" among the concordance lines. d. "hope" can often be used with "in" in the structure "in (the) hope of doing something" and "in (the) hope that + clause", "wish" can not be used like this.

Now, after studying "wish" and "hope" respectively in context, we can be enlightened. What these lines show is that: "wish" and "hope" have their different and obvious rules when they appear in sentences. If the English learners know and master the rules, it's not difficult for them to distinguish between the two words and use them correctly in writing and speaking. It is proved that corpus is very useful in English studying, so we can distinguish any synonyms by use of the corpus. Compared with consulting dictionaries and reference books, corpus has many advantages.

First of all, a corpus software is easy to operate. Because such programs have been designed by technicians, all you need to do is to type the synonyms which you want to distinguish on the computer screen, then you can get the concordance lines immediately. All of these steps only take several seconds to finish. By contrast, consulting dictionaries and reference books will take more time. So using corpus can save a lot of time for us.

Secondly, a corpus offers us a large amount of information about language. One can get hundreds of concordance lines about the key word from the database.

While what we can get from the dictionaries and reference books is so limited. So the corpus is more reliable.

In the third place, a corpus plays a positive role in English learning. As we have discussed in the above paragraphs, when students meet difficulties in distinguishing synonyms, they will turn to the dictionaries, reference books or teachers at once without thinking for themselves. With the help of a corpus, students have access to a lot of information about any word through reading the concordance lines. Thus they can analyze and summarize some rules about the words by themselves. So the corpus gives scope to the students' initiative and creativeness and can foster their ability to study on their own. On the contrary, dictionaries and reference books are negative in training students' creativeness to some degree.

Every coin has two sides. The corpus also has its own disadvantages in distinguishing synonyms.

Firstly, the corpus is a really useful tool for English learners, but not every learner can easily get access to it. Some corpora are hard to get because of the high price. In some poor-struck areas, students have little chance to get access to the computer, so how can they apply a corpus to help their study? It is still a long way to popularize the use of corpus in the whole world.

Next, we know that one of the advantages of the corpus is offering a large amount of information about language, but too much information is not always a good thing for English learners. They may feel tired of reading so many concordance lines one by one to find only one word's meaning. So it requires learners to filter the information, and it is not an easy job.

As a new thing, the corpus cannot be perfect. But many linguists and technicians are working on improving it so as to make it more effective in use. The society is moving forward, and the science is developing, the wisdom of human being will not stagnate.

### III CONCLUSION

In a word, compared with dictionaries and reference books, using the corpus is the most effective and simplest way in distinguishing synonyms so far. By way of studying the concordance lines, English learners can easily and quickly find any word in a context circumstance. After analyzing these lines, they can know some rules about word's usage and thus easily distinguish synonyms by themselves. Therefore, learners' initiative and creativeness can be prompted. Although the corpus still has some disadvantages, we believe that with the development of computer science and the hard work of the linguists, it will be improved continuously so that we can make good use of it to help our English learning in the future.

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