

## DISCOVERING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT SYNONYMS FROM CORPORA

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**Abstract:** Since the early 1990s there has been an increased interest in using corpora in language pedagogy. One of the areas where corpora can give valuable information is semantics. By studying selected concordance lines learners can find out the different meanings of semantically similar lexical items. This paper discusses the importance for learners to know the difference in meaning and use of semantically related words and describes possible activities that will enrich learners' knowledge of the meaning of sets of synonyms, the registers in which they are used more frequently, the collocates of these words, and so on. Such activities will help learners realize that although some words have similar meaning they cannot always be used interchangeably.

**Key words:** corpora, synonyms, collocations, concordance lines, authentic language samples.

### Introduction

The advancement of corpus linguistics has had a considerable effect on language learning and teaching. Corpora have enabled linguists and researchers to base their discussions about the language on naturally occurring language data instead of intuition. They have also enabled material designers and teachers to use authentic language samples instead of made-up examples in order to illustrate the use and meaning of language items. The possibility of exploring authentic language use has turned learners into explorers and active participants in the learning process instead of passive recipients of knowledge. The advantage of presenting words and phrases in concordance format is that it allows the user 'to observe regularities in use that tend to remain unobserved when the same words and phrases are met in their normal contexts' (Hunston, 2002: 9). As the focus of the latest language learning methods is the development of communicative competence that will enable learners to use the language in authentic situations, corpora and concordancers can help learners gain insights into the way native speakers use the language and learn the idioms, phrases, collocations and longer strings of words that represent the natural use of the language. This is important because research has shown that there is difference between the type of English presented in textbooks and the type found in corpora (Adolphs, 2006: 9; O'Keeffe & Far, 2003: 390).

### Corpus-based language learning and teaching

There are many ways of using corpora in language teaching and learning. Leach (1997) mentions direct and indirect use of corpora in teaching. McEnery et al. (2006: 97) discuss the direct use of corpora in teaching which includes 'teaching about', teaching to exploit' and 'exploiting to teach'. 'Teaching about' refers to the teaching of corpus linguistics as an academic subject. 'Teaching to exploit' means teaching students how to use corpora for their own purposes, to find the answers to their own questions, and to develop the necessary knowledge and techniques of corpus-based language study that will enable them to become independent learners. 'Exploiting to teach' refers to the use of 'a corpus-based approach to teach language and linguistic courses which would otherwise be taught using non-corpus-based methods' (McEnery et al, 2006: 97). In addition to the direct use of corpora in language teaching, corpora have also been used in indirect ways through the writing of dictionaries and reference books, materials development and language testing