

# **Grammar and vocabulary: showing the connections**

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*Although grammar and vocabulary are traditionally thought of as separate areas of language teaching, new work on word patterns suggests that they can usefully be combined. All words can be shown to have patterns, and words which have the same pattern tend to share aspects of meaning. The patterns 'V by -ing' and 'V as n' illustrate this. We suggest that language teachers focus on patterns as a way of encouraging four crucial aspects of language learning: understanding, accuracy, fluency, and flexibility. Patterns contribute to the teaching of both grammar and vocabulary. They can form a part of any syllabus, but are most logically associated with a lexical syllabus.*

**Introduction** It is common to see grammar and vocabulary as separate areas of language teaching and learning. Many coursebooks have separate sections on grammar and vocabulary; syllabuses list grammatical structures and key vocabulary items separately; students are described as being 'good at grammar' but having a 'limited vocabulary', or vice versa; grammar and vocabulary are often tested separately.

Traditionally, language courses were organized around a set of grammatical points, with vocabulary selected to support the topic of each course unit. More recently, the importance of vocabulary has been widely recognized, and word frequency has been used as the organizing principle of language teaching courses (see, for example, Willis 1990, Lewis 1993), with grammar brought in as support where necessary.

Where grammar and vocabulary meet in most courses is in units which, for example, list the particular verbs which are typically followed either by a to-infinitive, a present participle, or both. For example, learners must learn that *appear* and *manage* are followed by a to-infinitive only; that *finish* and *suggest* are followed by a present participle only; that *begin* and *like* are followed by either form, with roughly the same meaning; but that *forget*, *remember*, *stop*, and *try* have different meanings when used with each form. This approach to the grammar of individual words, which we call 'patterns', can be extended far beyond these traditional observations. Focusing on patterns can, we believe, provide a more comprehensive and useful description of English than has been available to teachers up to now. What is so new about this work is that it does not rely on a distinction between grammar and vocabulary, but provides connections between the two.

Our work on patterns is based upon a detailed and extensive examination of the 250 million-word Bank of English corpus at Cobuild. There are two main points about patterns to be made: firstly, that all words can be described in terms of patterns; secondly, that words which share patterns also share meanings.

### **Words and their patterns**

All words belonging to the main word classes can be described in terms of the pattern(s) that they typically occur with. Sometimes this description is extremely simple. For example, the verb *eat*, meaning the action of chewing and swallowing, is found with two simple patterns: it occurs on its own ('He ate') or with a noun group following it ('He ate a banana'). We label these two patterns 'V' and 'V n' respectively.

In other cases, where patterns are quite lengthy and include a number of elements, the description is more complicated. This is especially true of patterns which begin with an introductory *it* (sometimes called 'impersonal *it*' or a 'dummy' subject). For example, the verb *expect* has the pattern shown by this example:

It is expected that the new owner will change the yacht's name.

The verb is passive, with an introductory *it* as subject, and is followed by a that-clause. The pattern is '*it be V-ed that*'.

The adjective *easy* has the pattern shown by this example:

It's easy to get a seat at the best shows in town.

*It* is followed by a link verb, the adjective, and a to-infinitive. The pattern is '*it v-link adj to-inf*'.

Some senses of some words have several patterns. For example, the sense of *dictate* that means 'tell someone what to do' has these patterns:

- a. He *dictated* his wife's appearance and behaviour.  
The verb is followed by a noun group. The pattern is 'V n'.
- b. He cannot be allowed to *dictate* what can and cannot be inspected.  
The verb is followed by a wh-clause. The pattern is 'V wh'.
- c. What gives him the right to *dictate* to us what we can eat?  
The verb is followed by the preposition *to*, a noun group, and a wh-clause. The pattern is 'V to n wh'.
- d. They were more or less able to *dictate* terms to successive governments.  
The verb is followed by a noun group, the preposition *to*, and another noun group. The pattern is 'V n to n'.
- e. The rules of court *dictate* that a defendant is entitled to all evidence that may help his case.  
The verb is followed by a that-clause. The pattern is 'V that'.

Although some senses of some words have several patterns, some senses have only one pattern and are identified by it. This means that a word only means a particular thing when it is used with a particular pattern.

For example, the verb *eat* has a sense which indicates whether the food you commonly eat is good for you, bad for you, or sufficient for you. This sense has the pattern ‘verb followed by adverb’, or ‘V adv’, as in ‘I eat healthily’ or ‘We ate well’. To take a second example, the noun *face* has a sense which means roughly the same as ‘aspect’, as in ‘the acceptable face of the Cambodian government’, ‘the public face of Christianity’, or ‘the ugly face of Western authoritarianism’. This pattern can be represented as ‘*the adj N of n*’, and only this sense of *face* has this pattern.

It is also true in a more general sense that words with several senses often have different patterns in the different senses (Sinclair 1991). For example, the verb *reflect* is identified in the *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary* (1995) as having six meanings. Each meaning has its own particular set of patterns, as Table 1 shows.

Table 1: Senses of reflect

| Meaning                                     | Example   | Pattern   |
|---|---|---|
| 1 Show that an attitude or situation exists | The riots reflected the bitterness between the two communities. | V n   |
| 2 Light or heat bounces off a surface       | The sun reflected off the snow-covered mountains.               | V prep<br>(Verb followed by prepositional phrase)   |
|   | The glass reflects light naturally.                             | V n   |
| 3 Image can be seen in a mirror or water    | His image seemed to be reflected many times in the mirror.      | be V-ed   |
| 4 Think deeply about something              | We should all give ourselves time to reflect.                   | V   |
|   | I reflected on the child's future.                              | V on/upon n   |
| 5 A thought occurs to someone               | He reflected that he ought to write a line to Veronica.         | V that<br>(Verb followed by that-clause)  |
| 6 Give a good or bad impression             | The affair hardly reflected well on the British.                | V adv on n<br>(Verb followed by an adverb and a prepositional phrase beginning with <i>on</i> ) |
|   | Your behaviour reflects on the school itself.                   | V on n  |

### **Patterns and their meaning**

It may appear that in proposing a focus on patterns, we are suggesting an unreasonable additional load upon learners already struggling to remember large amounts of vocabulary and understand detailed grammatical systems such as tense usage. The ways that verbs, for instance, differ from each other appears to add complexity of an arbitrary kind to an already full learning syllabus. For example, *tell* is followed by a noun group and a to-infinitive (‘He told her to go’); *suggest* is followed by a that-clause; *apologize* is followed by *for*; *warn* is

followed by *of*; *grumble* is followed by *about*; *consider* is followed by two noun groups ('Many people consider her a saint'), but if you use the verb *regard* there has to be a preposition *as* before the second noun group ('Did they regard him as a spy?'). The amount of information that the learner has to amass about each verb seems to be enormous.

The load upon the language learner is not as great as it looks, however, because the association between word and pattern is not random. Groups of words that share patterns also tend to share aspects of meaning. This becomes apparent if, instead of taking a few examples of verbs with different patterns, as we have done above, we concentrate on a single pattern and look at all the verbs that have that pattern. The common aspects of meaning then become obvious.

For example, about 20 verbs have the pattern 'V *by* -ing', where the verb is followed by the preposition *by* and an -ing clause. Some sentences with this pattern are:

She *started off* by breeding budgerigars and cockatiels.

In hot, dry and windy weather, water evaporates from the leaves of plants which in turn *compensate* by taking more up through their roots.

Their aim is to *profit* by buying replacement shares later at a lower price.

Most of the verbs with this pattern fall into two meaning groups. They mean either 'start' or 'finish' (*begin, close, end, finish, finish off, finish up, open, start, start off, start out*); or 'respond to or compensate for something' (*atone, compensate, counter, react, reciprocate, reply, respond, retaliate*). Two other verbs (*live* and *profit*) are to do with gaining resources.

Another example is the pattern 'V *at* n', where the verb is followed by the preposition *at* and a noun group. There are many verbs (over 200) with this pattern, but again they fall into recognizable meaning groups. Here are some of the most important:

The first four groups are concerned with communicating with, looking at, or responding to someone or something.

**1** verbs meaning 'shout' or 'make a noise'

These include: *bark, bellow, growl, hiss, jeer, laugh, rage, scream, shout, snap, swear, whistle, yell*; and the phrasal verbs *blow up, go on, and keep on*, for example

One time Dorothy and Roy had a big argument. She *was screaming at him* and threw a chair at him.

**2** verbs meaning 'make a facial expression or gesture'

These include verbs meaning 'smile': *beam, grin, leer, smile, smirk*; verbs meaning 'frown': *frown, grimace, scowl*; and other verbs such as *blink, nod, wave, and wink*, for example:

Alice was behind the counter and I *winked at her* without speaking.

### 3 verbs meaning 'look'

These include *gaze, glance, glare, look, peep, peer, stare*, for example:

I *stared at him* in shock as I realized he was right.

### 4 verbs meaning 'react'

These include verbs indicating pleasure or humour: *chuckle, laugh, rejoice, thrill*; verbs indicating anger: *fume, protest, rage*; verbs indicating sorrow or fear: *despair, grieve, quail, shudder*; verbs indicating distaste: *grumble, scoff, sneer, wince*; verbs indicating awe or surprise: *exclaim, marvel, wonder*, for example:

Peter *shuddered at the notion* of those two idiots controlling a missile.

The next three groups are concerned with physical actions, usually involving force or violence.

### 5 verbs meaning 'hit' or 'take hold'

These include *claw, clutch, dab, grab, grasp, hit out, knock, lash out, pluck, prod, pull, slash, snatch, stab, swipe, tear, thrash, tug*, for example:

He pulled away from me and I was left with a stick in my hands and in anger I *hit out at him*.

### 6 verbs meaning 'eat' or 'eat away'

These include *chew, chip away, eat away, gnaw, nibble, peck, pick, suck, whittle away*, for example:

I ate like a mouse, *nibbling at a sandwich*, drinking a little juice.

### 7 verbs meaning 'attack' or 'hurry towards someone'

These include *aim, fire, shoot, spit, strike*; and *come, fly, rush*, for example:

During the dramatic car chase, the gunmen *fired at the police cars*, injuring one of the policemen slightly in the foot.

There is another group of verbs that are used when talking about amounts of money or other measurable values. With these verbs, the noun group after *at* always indicates an amount of something.

### 8 verbs meaning 'have a particular numerical value'

These include verbs that indicate that something always has a particular value, such as *average out, retail, run, sell, stand, work out*; and verbs that indicate that something begins or ends with a particular value, such as *bottom out, close, finish, level out, open, peak, stabilize*, for example:

Some flights to popular resorts *work out at as little as 20 pence a mile*.

And there are two other groups of verbs.

### 9 verbs meaning 'work'

These are *beaver away, toil, toil away, work, work away*, for example:

Sinead attempted an extraordinarily difficult song. She *worked at it* and gave a very good performance.

10 verbs meaning ‘want to do something’ or ‘don’t want to do something’

These are *jump, leap*; and *balk, jib*, for example:

She *jumped at the chance* to appear in the movie.

The resources now exist to provide the teacher with ready-made lists of patterns and the words that have those patterns. Using the *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary* (1995) database, and focusing on verbs, we have been able to list for each verb pattern all the verbs which have that pattern reasonably frequently in the 250 million-word Bank of English. We have also been able to show further pattern details, such as, for the pattern ‘V at n’, which verbs often have an -ing clause following *at*, instead of a noun group, for example:

The government *balked at granting* the prisoners amnesty for crimes of violence.

Well over 100 verb patterns have been dealt with in this way.

### **Patterns and the language teacher**

Why do we recommend that the language teacher focus on patterns as an important aspect of grammar and vocabulary? We suggest that patterns are essential to four crucial aspects of language learning: understanding, accuracy, fluency, and flexibility.

#### *Promoting understanding*

Because patterns are used with words that share aspects of meaning, those patterns can themselves be seen as having meaning. This in turn is useful for a learner who, for example, is trying to guess the meaning of an unknown word in context. For instance, a learner coming across the sentence

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

may not know the word ‘hail’. The learner may, however, be familiar with the pattern ‘V n as n’ (passive ‘be V-ed as n’) as used with verbs such as *announce, classify, describe, interpret, label, portray, proclaim, and regard*. If the learner is guided towards using the pattern as a contextual clue to meaning, he or she may be able to deduce the broad meaning of ‘hail’ before perhaps checking its exact meaning in a dictionary.

Some patterns have such a clear meaning of their own that even when unusual verbs are used with them, the overall meaning is clear. For example, the pattern ‘V n into -ing’ is usually used with verbs such as *blackmail, bribe, charm, coerce, deceive, flatter, fool, force, frighten, galvanize, manoeuvre, provoke, talk, trick*, for example:

She charmed the town fathers into letting her plant bulbs along our village streets.

He forced a junior official into allowing him to telephone the president.

The meaning of the pattern is that someone does something as a result of the persuasion, charm, or trickery of someone else. Even when a verb with a very different meaning is used in this pattern, the meaning of the pattern remains the same. For example, in the Bank of English, the verb *debate* is used only once with this pattern, but anyone knowing the pattern can understand the sentence.

I [worked at improving my mind] as if by doing so I could debate him into loving me.

*Promoting accuracy* A knowledge of which patterns are used with which words is essential to the accurate use of English. Teachers can help raise learners' awareness of patterns in at least three ways: by asking them to identify given patterns in texts used in reading classes; by giving (short) lists of words that share a pattern and asking learners to identify for themselves the meaning groups; and, if learners have access to English outside the classroom, by asking them to look and listen for a particular pattern over a given period of time, noting the words it is used with.

Adopting a 'pattern approach' to vocabulary can lead to more helpful recording of new vocabulary by learners, as verbs can be grouped according to their pattern(s) as well as according to their meaning. Learners are then encouraged to learn the new vocabulary item as part of a phrase (such as 'he balked at doing something') rather than as an individual item. This in turn encourages accurate use of the new item later.

*Promoting fluency* Fluency—the ability to produce substantial stretches of language without an undue number of hesitations or false starts—can be helped if the learner has access to a mental lexicon consisting of more or less ready-made 'chunks' of language. Several writers have suggested lists of phrases which it is useful for the learner to learn as extended vocabulary items (see, for example, Pawley and Syder 1983; Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992). The notion of words and their patterns takes the 'ready-made chunk' principle a good deal further, because it accounts for a lot more language. Some of the more complex verb patterns, for example, structure quite long stretches of language, and so can support fluent output. Table 2 shows some examples.

Also, language can be seen as 'flowing' from the pattern associated with one word to the pattern associated with another, and so on. For example, an utterance such as

He understood that she wanted to quarrel with him

is made up of three verb patterns: V that (*understood that*) + V to-inf (*wanted to quarrel*) + V with n (*quarrel with him*). Learners who remember patterns as phrases associated with particular words can link the patterns together with fluency.

Table 2: Some longer patterns

|              |                        |                        |   |  |
|--------------|------------------------|------------------------|---|--|
|              | <b>V</b><br>verb group | <b>n</b><br>noun group | <b>about</b>  | <b>n</b><br>noun group                       |
| Always       | see                    | a doctor               | about   | hearing loss                                 |
|              | <b>V</b><br>verb group | <b>it</b>              | <b>adj</b><br>adjective group                           | <b>that</b><br>that clause                   |
| They         | find                   | it                     | astonishing   | that he has made no attempt to talk to them. |
| <b>there</b> | <b>V</b><br>verb group | <b>n</b><br>noun group | <b>prep/adv</b><br>prepositional phrase or adverb group |  |
| There        | was                    | a fat baby             | in the pram.  |  |

**Promoting flexibility**

Words that share a pattern often share aspects of meaning. However, the converse is not true: one area of meaning is not expressed by only one pattern. By introducing vocabulary and pattern together, teachers can encourage learners to develop flexibility in expressing ideas. For example, to describe someone as liking an idea, we might use any one of the patterns shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Several ways to express an idea

| 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. |

**Conclusion**

In short, then, we argue that patterns are the building blocks of language, and that they eradicate the artificial divide between vocabulary and grammar that impoverishes the teaching of both. Each word has its associated patterns, and it is these patterns that go together to make idiomatic English. Patterns are not simply idiosyncracies of form: they also have meaning.

Patterns can form an integral part of a structural or notional syllabus, but their association with lexis make them a natural accompaniment to a lexical approach. They can be seen as putting the grammatical 'flesh' on to the 'bones' of a lexical syllabus.

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