RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Phenomenon of Linguistic Collocation in Arabic :A Study of Its Characteristics and Structure

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Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of linguistic collocation in Arabic as a fundamental principle governing meaning, usage, and textual cohesion. It argues that collocation is not a random adjacency of words but a stable semantic system that ensures clarity and prevents ambiguity. Drawing on classical Arabic linguistic heritage and modern semantic theory, the study shows that Arab scholars intuitively recognized collocation through usage, even without formal terminology. The article highlights the role of collocation in shaping idiomatic expressions, fixed constructions, and lexical harmony. It further demonstrates the importance of collocation in translation, where literal rendering often leads to semantic loss. The study also emphasizes Qur'anic discourse as a prime example of precise collocational choice. Ultimately, the article positions collocation as a universal linguistic principle essential for f luency, accuracy, and effective communication in Arabic and beyond.

Keywords: Linguistic Collocation, Arabic Semantics, Lexical Cohesion, Meaning Construction lassical Arabic Linguistics, Translation Studies, Qur'anic Discourse,

Introduction

Language constitutes a tightly woven fabric of relations that transcends the boundaries of the isolated lexical item to form, through their mutual harmony, complex semantic configurations. Among the most prominent of these relations is the phenomenon of lexical collocations. This is a linguistic and semantic phenomenon based on the natural tendency of certain words to recurrently accompany specific other words within context, such that the presence of one automatically evokes the other in the minds of both speaker and listener (e.g., "exert effort," "grant release"). This phenomenon is not limited to being a mere lexical feature; rather, it is a cognitive and linguistic mechanism that reflects the nature of the language's semantic system and its capacity to generate meaning through cohesion and co-occurrence.

In this context, collocation emerges as an indicator of a principle of governed association rooted in obligatory co-occurrence a principle that necessarily leads to the formation of linguistic formulae. These formulae transfer structure from the realm of incidental adjacency to that of unified construction, wherein meaning becomes an indivisible whole that does not admit fragmentation into its individual lexical units. It is, therefore, a linguistic phenomenon grounded in the consistent cohesion of two or more lexical items, in a manner that bestows upon the construction a quality of stability and fixity in usage, rendering the co-occurrence of its elements a pattern resistant to change except through deviation from established linguistic convention.

1.Linguistic Collocation

The phenomenon of linguistic collocation falls within the domain of semantics, which studies word meanings within a contextual field that governs the manifestation of both literal and contextual meanings intrinsic to the lexical items under analysis. Constructions represent the highest level examined by semantics, as they constitute the ultimate point of interconnection among the smaller units that make up utterance and discourse. Yet certain meanings cannot be apprehended except through recognizing the meaning of their companions, and consequently grasping the overall meaning of the composite expression formed by collocating words.

Linguistic collocation thus renders this analytical approach an operational tool that directs us to link words to one another within the framework of discursive context, while determining their purposes and meanings. It has appeared under various terms, such as lexical co-occurrence, association, cohesion, and idiomatic association. Linguistic collocation may be defined as:

"Single lexical units that are customarily used in association with one another within a given language. Every word possesses a specific range, and it is this range that determines its meaningful usage."

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Accordingly, collocation denotes the obligatory association of a word with another word or with particular words within a set of familiar contexts, based on semantic convention and meaningful linkage, with the possibility of predicting and anticipating this lexical co-occurrence on either a broad or narrow scale. It is commonly defined as isolated, discrete lexical components that yield a restricted meaning and a contemporary semantic value.

It is, therefore, a type of habitual association among words within a given construction, constituting one manifestation of lexical co-occurrence among the components of the

sentence. Through this association, meaning becomes stabilized and, over time, transforms into a holistic meaning that does not disintegrate through the separation of linguistic categories from one another; rather, it is understood through the familiar, expected, and anticipated construction elucidated by the phenomenon of collocation.

Muhammad Younes Ali defines collocation as:

"The customary association of a word in a given language with certain other words in the sentences of that language."[2]

He points to the importance of collocation by stating:

"The significance of collocation lies in its being the primary determinant of lexical meanings; some meanings of the word brave are determined by its collocation with the word man, and some meanings of the word man are determined by its collocation with the word brave. Thus, the term collocational has become according to Lyons a synonym for lexical, which many have associated with what a word denotes outside language."[3]

Muhammad Hasan Abdel Aziz states:

"It is a linguistic phenomenon that does not escape the speaker of a given language, and it generally consists in the occurrence of a word in the company of another word."[4]

Muhammad Younes Ali draws attention to a subtle feature that goes beyond the notion of mere adjacency to that of determination. Collocation here is not a rhetorical embellishment, but rather a semantic constraint that rescues the word from the ambiguity of potentiality into the specificity of meaning. If the lexicon provides us with a general semantic "root," collocation is what grants us the determinate "fruit." His example of (man and bravery) demonstrates that meaning in the case of collocation is reciprocal meaning, whereby each term borrows from the semantic shades of its counterpart what completes its contours thus transporting us from the concept of isolated meaning to that of contextual meaning.

• Dismantling the Dichotomy between Lexicon and Language

Younes Ali's position converges with Lyons's observation at a crucial point: rendering the collocational synonymous with the lexical. This proposition represents a radical shift in understanding the nature of language, as it strips abstract mental meaning (existing outside language) of its sanctity and binds it instead to habitual usage. Consequently, the meaning of a word becomes the sum of its collocational possibilities, rather than what it signifies in dictionary entries when isolated.

• Collocation and the Speaker's Linguistic Intuition

As for Muhammad Hasan Abdel Aziz, he identifies the essence of collocation as an innate linguistic competence, describing it as a phenomenon that "does not escape the speaker." This implies that collocation is what constitutes linguistic intuition, through which the proficient native speaker is distinguished from the outsider. Language is not merely an accumulation of words, but rather a compliance with the norms of "companionship" established by linguistic convention. This explains why the definition is marked by both simplicity and comprehensiveness: "the occurrence of a word in the company of another word."

Structural Synthesis

These leading scholars collectively ground the idea that collocation constitutes the security system of meaning: it prevents ambiguity, guides interpretation, and renders language a tightly woven fabric of consistent relations. On the basis of these propositions, it becomes clear that collocation is the principle that grants the text its stability, while paradox as will become evident in later chapters of this work emerges as the exception that endows the text with its element of surprise and wonder.

With this conceptual delineation, the phenomenon of linguistic collocation reveals itself as a universal phenomenon that transcends the confines of Arabic to encompass all languages. It is a comprehensive linguistic law governing human language use. Its manifestation in Arabic is both evident and eloquent: we say "a flock of sheep", but we do not sanction the expression "a swarm of sheep", as swarm is reserved exclusively for birds. Likewise, we say "the man passed away", while we say "the donkey perished" or "the plant withered", and we never interchange these verbs under any circumstances.

These seemingly simple examples direct us toward a precise demarcation between acceptable meaning and excluded meaning that is, between what may occur as a valid and expressive semantic construction and what is entirely inadmissible. This is due to the fact that language cannot function except in accordance with a pre-established conventional order, in which words are bound together by a compulsory bond imposed by usage and convention alike. Thus, the image of linguistic collocation is completed as a governing system. Indeed, anyone who examines our linguistic heritage will find that al-Thaʿālibī, in his book " The Philology of Arabic", catalogued many such collocations that refuse to occur except along the well-trodden path of transmitted usage established by the Arabs from the very outset.

More broadly, collocation falls within the domain of horizontal relations, belonging to the network of adjacency and grammatical-semantic cohesion. It constitutes the field of textual cues, fixed constructions, ready-made expressions, and linguistic formulae ll of which manifest at a horizontal level of linguistic structure, affirming that meaning is constructed horizontally just as much as it is constructed vertically.

2.Collocation in the Arabic Linguistic Heritage

Collocation was prominently present in the Arabic linguistic heritage in forms tacitly acknowledged by scholars, even though the term collocation itself was not explicitly employed in their works. Nonetheless, evidence of its existence and interconnectedness is scattered throughout their writings and treatises. This can be attributed to the fact that the Arab intellect had not yet crystallized into a phase of articulating theories and elaborating technical terminology; however, it was fully capable of practical application, producing an accumulation of rigorous scholarly work that has continued to command admiration and critical attention.

Perhaps the clearest concept in the works of early Arab scholars that parallels collocation is found in the thought of al-Thaʿālibī, particularly in his book " The Philology of Arabic and Its Hidden Secrets". There, he assigns to every word a specific companion without which meaning is corrupted, grounding this principle in explicit transmission from authentic Arab speech namely, in the pathways and conventions of Arab linguistic usage. Al-Thaʿālibī states:

"Iq-tamma is used of what is eaten entirely from the table; ishtaffa of what is completely drunk from a vessel; amtaka of the young camel when it drinks all the milk of its mother; nahaka of the she-camel when all her milk is drawn; nazafa of a well when all its water is extracted; saḥafa of hair when it is completely scraped from the skin; iḥtaffa of what is fully consumed from a pot; and sammada or sabbada of hair when it is entirely removed."[5]

From this passage, it becomes evident that each word occupies its precise position and does not depart from it. One cannot say iqtamma unless the entire table has been consumed this is a clear indication of collocation and the inseparable convergence of meanings. He further states:

"Every creature that strikes with its tail stings (yalsʿu), such as the scorpion and the wasp; every creature that strikes with its mouth bites (yaldaghu), such as the snake and the gecko; and every creature that grips with its teeth mauls (yanhashu), such as beasts of prey."

Thus, it would be incorrect to say "the scorpion bit me", as this represents an erroneous collocation in linguistic transmission; the correct expression is "the scorpion stung me", since striking from behind entails stinging, not biting. Reversing this usage is impermissible.

This demonstrates that the Arab linguistic consciousness was fully aware of the idea of collocation, even if it did not coin a specific term for it. Scholars contented themselves with applying models while leaving the phenomenon itself unnamed. As one scholar observes, it is a phenomenon:

"to which linguists and men of letters were alert, as evidenced in works known as fiqh al-lugha, semantic dictionaries, and stylistic lexicons, revealing their deep awareness of it and their extensive documentation of its examples, even if they neither named it nor singled it out as a distinct category."[6]

These constraints articulated by scholars of fiqh al-lugha unequivocally attest to the rootedness of collocation in the Arab intellectual tradition. Al-Jāḥiẓ echoes al-Thaʿālibī's insight when he states:

"Do you not see that God Blessed and Exalted mentions hunger in the Qurʾan only in contexts of punishment or extreme poverty and manifest incapacity, whereas people mention privation and mention hunger in contexts of well-being and security? Likewise with rain: you will not find the Qurʾan employing the word rain except in contexts of retribution, while the common people and even many of the learned do not distinguish between maṭar "Rain" and ghayth "Life-giving rain"."[7]

He adds:

"In the Qurʾan there are meanings that scarcely ever separate, such as prayer and almsgiving, hunger and fear, Paradise and Hell, estrangement and awe, the Emigrants and the Helpers, jinn and humans."[8]

From this, we conclude that al-Jāḥiẓ and al-Thaʿālibī were closely aligned in their treatment of collocation as we understand it today, even though they neither explicitly identified nor formally named it.

Sībawayh, too, alludes to the phenomenon of collocation in his discussion of sound, impossible, and false speech, when he states:

"As for sound but false speech, it is such as saying: 'I carried the mountain' or 'I drank the sea.' As for sound but ugly speech, it is to place the word outside its proper position, such as saying: 'Zaydan I saw,' or 'so that Zaydan may come to you,' and the like."[9]

This passage clearly indicates the notion of proper linguistic placement, collocation, and association between words affirming that lexical items must cohere and harmonize to produce an intelligible and acceptable meaning; otherwise, they fall into the realm of impossibility or stylistic impropriety.

Abū Hilāl al-ʿAskarī similarly addresses this issue in Linguistic Distinctions , noting that distinguishing between similar meanings depends, among other factors, on differences in usage and on the prepositions with which verbs are constructed.[10] Ibn Fāris, in al-Ṣāḥibī, makes a similar observation when he distinguishes between initial inquiry and Follow-up questioning , noting that each occupies a distinct functional context.[11] He further enumerates collocational constraints, stating:

"Eulogy applies only to praising a man while alive; "I was angered by his death" is said only of the dead; fornication applies specifically to slave women; rākib refers specifically to one riding a camel; alja applies to camels, khalaʾat to she-camels, ḥarana to horses; sheep nafash at night and hamalat by day."[12]

He adds:

"One says ẓalla fulān yafʿalu when the act occurs by day, and bāta yafʿalu when it occurs by night."[13]

These usages represent the conventions and pathways of Arabic, grounded in the speakers' awareness of linguistic positions and their underlying rationales. They reflect a refined sensibility that enables the selection of one word over another to harmonize with its collocational partner.

Lexicographers, too, treated collocation and lexical co-occurrence as a foundational principle in their works. Ibn Manẓūr notes:

"It is said of a man who speaks eloquently: aʿraba… all of this applies to the inarticulate adult, not to the child; of the child one says afṣaḥa."

This decisively demonstrates the collocational restriction of aʿraba to adults and afṣaḥa to children.

Grammarians likewise devoted extensive discussion to obligatory association between predicate and subject, and between verb and agent. Ibn Hishām states:

"The verb and the subject are like a single word; thus, it is their right to remain connected."[14]

Among further examples of Arabic collocation are expressions such as: "grace in the mouth, sweetness in the eyes, beauty in the nose, and wit on the tongue."[15]

These numerous examples reveal how deeply embedded the concept of collocation is in Arab linguistic thought, underscoring their awareness of its necessity as a principle governing association, sequence, and semantic cohesion. As has been observed:

"Lexical items in the lexicon are organized into classes, some of which co-occur with one another while repelling others. Verbs form classes that co-occur with certain nouns and repel others."[16]

This is the essence of what rhetoricians mean by assigning a verb to its appropriate agent. Hence, it is unacceptable to say "the stone understood the problem", because understanding requires a rational agent; nor "the thread broke", since a thread's flexibility precludes breaking; nor "I painted the air with Zayd", since air cannot be painted and Zayd is not paint. Such constructions contain mutually incompatible words and thus fail to convey meaning, even if they are grammatically analyzable.

This confirms that semantic validity is achieved through linguistic collocation, not merely through grammatical correctness. This aligns with Sībawayh's notion of impossible speech and corroborates Abū Saʿīd al-Sīrāfī's (d. 368 AH) rebuttal of Mattā ibn Yūnus (d. 328 AH), when the latter claimed that mastery of noun, verb, and particle sufficed for meaning. Al-Sīrāfī replied that one remains dependent on arranging these elements according to the ingrained conventions of native speakers, fully aware that word order alone is insufficient for comprehension.[17]

Thus, Arab linguists consistently emphasized the strong bond among these lexical collocations, which constitute the phenomenon of collocation itself realized within grammatical relations through semantic cohesion arising from proximity and co-occurrence. This includes particles of meaning and certain nouns that bind sentence elements together, governed by fixed positions and functional necessity. Grammatical cohesion, akin to collocation, underlies composition and syntactic arrangement, as explicitly articulated by ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, who asserted that words attain eloquence only through their attachment to one another, forming the very foundation of syntactic style grounded in orderly composition and structured association.

3.Collocation among Modern Arab Scholars

The concept of collocation took shape at the hands of Ibrāhīm al-Yāzijī, the author of the well-known lexicon Nujʿat al-Rāʾid wa-Sharʿat al-Wārid fī al-Mutarādif wa-al-Mutawārid (on synonymy and recurrent co-occurrence). In it, he included many lexical pairings as

examples of the semantic network enacted by the idea of linguistic collocation an idea he referred to as lexical co-occurrence.

Muḥammad Ḥasan ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz has noted that the first to pioneer the use of the term "collocation" was Muḥammad Aḥmad Abū al-Faraj, pointing to this when he said: "Dr. Muḥammad Abū al-Faraj was the first to present Firth's concept of collocation to the Arab reader; indeed, he is the originator of the Arabic term al-muṣāḥabah, which he coined as an equivalent to Firth's term collocation."[18]

Abū al-Faraj discusses this idea and highlights Firth's contribution, stating: "Our teacher J. R. Firth spoke of this in language and called it Collocation. Long ago al-Jāḥiẓ sensed this type of distinction in Arabic between certain words that specifically accompany others rather than alternatives that may share their meaning because a language may choose to collocate certain words with others without that necessarily blocking their use in syntax or meaning."[19]

From this, it becomes clear that Abū al-Faraj was ahead of his time in articulating the notion of collocation and lexical co-occurrence, and in showing how it may be used to uncover meaning from dictionaries and to expand semantic analysis through the study of recurrent lexical pairings and patterned constructions. He approached these structures through a method that interprets the overall architecture of the idiomatic expression rather than dismantling it, because dismantling destabilizes the structure of collocating units and undermines it indeed, it may leave the expression with no meaning outside the framework of structural co-occurrence.

Aḥmad Mukhtār ʿUmar likewise mentions the concept in his book (Semantics). He refers briefly to the notion of "co-occurrence" and "lexical chaining/arrangement" as an alternative to collocation, stating: "There are proponents of this theory who focused on linguistic context and co-occurrence (or arrangement). Although this view may be considered an extension or development of context theory, some have regarded it as an independent theory (Collocational theory), given its distinctive judgments and the rules laid down for it… Arrangement has been defined as the habitual association of a word with certain other words, or the use of two separate lexical units whose usage is customarily linked together. An example is the association of the word molten (munṣahir) with words such as: iron, copper, gold, silver… but not with leather at all."[20]

For this very reason this compatibility and co-occurrence words do not occur except with their customary companions. Aḥmad Mukhtār ʿUmar framed this within "arrangement" or "co-occurrence," and saw in the idea of collocation an echo of the naẓm (syntactic-semantic ordering) and arrangement discussed by ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī in Dalāʾil al-Iʿjāz.

He also points to types of arrangement and clarifies their issues, saying: "Firth distinguished between two types of arrangement:

a) ordinary arrangement, widely found across various kinds of speech;

b) non-ordinary arrangement, found in certain special styles and in the language of particular writers."[21]

On this basis, purely syntactic analysis is insufficient for such collocational clusters and arranged sequences, since the phenomenon concerns semantic relations between co-occurring words linked by meaning. Yet this cannot occur without acceptability among members of the speech community; therefore, agreement and convention are required regarding which words collocate, and these must be interpreted from a semantic perspective that explains the meaning-relations arising from their association.[22]

Among the key features of this theory, according to Aḥmad Mukhtār ʿUmar, are the following:

Providing a criterion for distinguishing homonymy from a single lexical item with one delimited semantic field.

Helping to identify and analyze idioms and linguistic formulae; lexical clustering may be treated as a criterion for a "single word" (i.e., a single unit) upon which analysis can be performed.

Revealing fields of use for habitual linkages among these collocational sequences within pragmatic contexts, and helping uncover synonymous and co-occurring items an important matter for translation work.

The methods of lexical arrangement are characterized by practicality, precision, and objectivity, as affirmed by one of Firth's followers.[23]

Among Arab linguists who also paid close attention to collocation is Muḥammad Ḥasan ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz in his book al-Muṣāḥabah fī al-Taʿbīr al-Lughawī (Collocation in Linguistic Expression), in which he devoted an independent study to collocation and applied sound procedures that reveal the compatibility between words and their habitual linkage. He states: "Collocation is a linguistic phenomenon present in Arabic just as it is present in other languages."[24]

Conclusion

In concluding this study, we have examined the phenomenon of linguistic collocation as a foundational pillar in the construction of the linguistic fabric. It is not a mere accidental adjacency of words; rather, it is a precise system that reflects the genius of Arabic and the breadth of its semantic capacity. The study has demonstrated that mastery of collocations is a central pathway to achieving fluency and precision in expression whether in literary texts or in everyday usage opening new horizons for researchers in computational linguistics and language pedagogy.

Summary of Findings

This study arrives at a set of results:

Precision in semantic delimitation: Collocation functions as a primary criterion for determining intended meaning with accuracy; a word acquires its semantic specificity through its lexical "partner" in context.

Textual cohesion: Lexical collocations represent one of the strongest means of lexical cohesion that bind a text's parts and render it an integrated whole.

Distinguishing collocations from idioms: Collocations are broader than idiomatic expressions; the meaning of a collocation can often be inferred from its components, whereas an idiom is a fixed semantic unit.

Impact on translation: The findings show that literal translation of collocations often results in the loss of semantic value, requiring translators to search for an equivalent collocation in the target language rather than translating individual words.

The significance of Qur'anic eloquence: Applied studies especially in the Qur'an have shown that the choice of collocations reflects extraordinary mastery of composition, such that no word can substitute for another in its position.

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