A Corpus-Based Study of English Synonyms:

Normal, Regular, Common, Ordinary, and Usual

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Abstract

This study had two primary goals: 1) to compare and contrast the meanings, degrees of formality, collocations, and grammatical patterns of five English synonyms: normal, regular, common, ordinary, and usual; and 2) to compare and contrast data from learner's dictionaries and corpus. The following are the data sources used for this research: 1) Longman's Advanced American Dictionary 3rd edition (2013) 2) Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionaries 10th edition (2020). and 3) The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) comprising 500 sentences, analyzing the frequencies with AntConc Program. It was found that the five synonyms have the same underlying meaning but are varied in specific meanings, degrees of formality, collocations, and grammatical patterns. Therefore, the five terms cannot be used interchangeably in all contexts. In addition, it was discovered that the

corpus includes information that is not included in the two dictionaries.

Keywords: AntConc program, corpus, dictionaries, synonyms

Introduction

For second language learners, learning English vocabulary is critical since it is essential to focus on understanding and word use to avoid misinterpretation (Hemchua & Schmitt, 2006). But there are many synonyms in English, and they may or may not be interchangeable (Palmer, 1981). Furthermore, second-language learners struggle with English because utilizing synonyms in different situations and grammar usage can be perplexing. Using words with similar meanings is critical for enhancing learners' English proficiency since it helps them understand and use words in suitable circumstances (Rozakis, 2011). As a result, comprehension of language structure is important, as each language has its structure. Language learners can communicate more effectively and efficiently if they completely comprehend the structure of the language.

Five adjectives – normal, regular, common, ordinary, and usual – appeal to our research interest among plenty of synonyms. These terms are in the top 3000 most often used words and are included in the top 9000 words to learn (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2014). They often occur in many contexts and are synonyms of each other. Furthermore, students regularly inquired how to discern between normal, regular, common, ordinary, and usual during the researchers' English teaching experience. The responses they

receive, on the other hand, are purely intuitive; no intellectual support is provided. As a result, using dictionaries and corpus data as primary data sources would be useful to study these five synonyms in greater depth.

In investigating this, corpus linguistics could be applied as it plays a role in teaching English to native English speakers since it contains a great quantity of information on using the English language and differs depending on how native speakers use it (Lindquist, H. & Levin, M., 2018). Corpus linguistics is the study of language behaviour utilizing a corpus of empirical language information and providing correct data, and it is the study of language usage by evaluating actual language usage. Linguists can study the actual use of language using corpus linguistics knowledge. The use of corpus linguistics also broadens the scope of various word meanings, allowing for a better understanding of the new meaning by demonstrating its actual use (Mayer, 2009).

In the past, numerous research have been conducted to identify words in sets of synonyms. Some studies, however, focus on only a few criteria for differentiating synonyms, such as meaning and collocation, while others depend exclusively on corpus data and disregard dictionary data. As a consequence, this study answered the question how these five synonyms; normal, regular, common, ordinary, and usual are similar or different based on their meanings, degrees of formality, collocations, and grammatical patterns to fill in the blanks and gain a comprehensive understanding of how they can be distinguished by

exploring the data from both the learner's dictionaries and the corpus.

Objectives of the Study

1) To compare and contrast the meanings, degrees of formality, collocations, and grammatical patterns of the words normal, regular, common, ordinary, and usual.

2) To compare and contrast data from the learner's dictionaries with data from the corpus.

Significance of the Study

1)   Similarities and differences of the words normal, regular, common, ordinary, and usual in terms of their meanings, degrees of formality, collocations, and grammatical patterns are explained. Language learners know how to use each word correctly.

2)   EFL teachers can utilize corpora as a teaching tool for EFL learners by planning some corpus-based activities to make students aware of the differences between words in a collection of synonyms so students can use different sets of synonyms appropriately in various contexts.

Literature Review

Synonyms

Synonyms are words that are spelled differently yet have the same or very similar meanings in some circumstances. It can be described as a semantic link between related pairs

of words. Many loanwords from other languages, such as Anglo-Saxon, French, Latin, and Greek, are found in English. As a result, there are many synonyms, although they may not all be interchangeable (Palmer, 1981).

Types of Synonyms in English. Synonyms are divided into two categories: strict and loose synonyms.

Strict synonyms are terms that can be used interchangeably in any situation. This substitution has no effect on the message's meaning, style, or connotation (Jackson & Amvela, 2000). However, strict or real synonyms are difficult to find, if not non-existent. Real synonyms are non-existent, according to Palmer (1981), because it is nearly impossible for words with identical meanings to still be in use. Similarly, according to Kreidler (1998), no two words have all of the same linguistic features, and it would be pointless to have two words that can completely replace each other in all situations.

Criteria for Differentiating Synonyms. The English language uses the following criteria to distinguish words with the same meaning:

Degree of Formality. The formality of a synonym can be differentiated by the context in which it is employed. A term may be appropriate in one context but not in another, or a word may be appropriate in spoken language but not in written language. The following are the criteria:

- French, Latin, and Greek are frequently used in formal language. Instead, Anglo-Saxon is utilized as a colloquial language.

- Formal language is a single word that uses the phrasal verb sparingly.

- In formal language, vocabulary has a defined meaning, but informal terms have wider meanings.

- A formal language does not use first-person or second-person pronouns. The passive voice is frequently employed, with the subject usually beginning with the word "it." In addition, abstract nouns are frequently used. (Jackson & Amvela, 2000)

Collocations. Collocations are commonly occurring words that may appear with a specific word; noun collocation, adverb collocation. Moreover, words in a set of synonyms may frequently appear with various collocates. Some synonyms, according to Palmer (1981), differ due to collocational limitations.

Grammatical Patterns. A word may only be used with one grammatical structure; even if it has the same meaning, it cannot be used with the same grammatical form. Phoocharoensil (2010) developed this criterion for distinguishing synonyms. It is proposed that, despite having the same basic meaning, words in a group of synonyms do not all have the same grammatical patterns. The literal meaning of the two terms, consist of and be made up of, is " to be formed from two or more things or people " (Longman Dictionary of

Contemporary English, 2014). These two expressions, on the other hand, cannot be utilized in the same grammatical constructions.

Previous Studies

Yang (2016) used corpus-based approach to investigate two synonyms: "learn" and "acquire." Data was gathered from the British National Corpus (BNC), which contains 100 million words, and Sketch Engine (SkE) was used to analyze the data, focusing on collocations. Sketch Engine (SkE) was discovered to distinguish between these two synonyms, and the results may be used in a lecture.

GU (2017) used corpus-based approach to explore two synonyms, "obtain" and "gain," by looking at components of speech, collocations, and semantic prosody. The data was analyzed by using Sketch Engine developed by Lexical Computing Ltd., BNC Web, and Just the Word. The term "obtain" was found to be most used with nouns and passive voice with a preposition, but the word "gain" was found to be most used with an abstract noun with a positive connotation.

Panyapayatjati (2016) used corpus linguistics to investigate three synonyms: "grieve," "mourn," and "regret," concentrating on referential meaning, grammatical structure, and noun collocations. The information was gathered from the online versions of the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The meanings, grammatical structures, and noun collocations of

the words "grieve," "mourn," and "regret" were discovered to be slightly different. However, in some situations, these terms cannot be used interchangeably. Furthermore, the corpus data revealed practical language usage and additional information on the meaning, grammatical structure, and collocations.

Petcharat and Phoocharoensil (2017) studied three synonyms which are "appropriate", "proper", and "suitable", applying corpus linguistics theory to investigate meaning, degree of formality, collocations, and grammatical structure. The data from Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 6th edition (2014), Longman Advanced American Dictionary 3rd edition (2013), Macmillan Collocations Dictionary, and The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) were collected. It was found that "appropriate", "proper", and "suitable" had the same core meaning.

Using a corpus-based methodology, Aroonmanakun (2015) investigated the similarities and differences between the two synonymous adjectives, quick and fast, in terms of sense of meanings and collocations. Both the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) served as research tools for this study. The results demonstrated the close similarity between the two adjectives. Fast was less frequently employed to modify the same nouns than quick.

Several research have focused on synonym distinguishing using corpus-based data from several large corpora, such as the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)

or the British National Corpus (BNC). Meanings and senses of meanings, collocations, grammatical patterns, and formality degree were the most prominent criteria utilized by majority of the studies to distinguish synonyms. There have also been studies that used dictionaries as a data source in addition to corpus-based data. While in some research, the data from dictionaries were compared to the data from corpora. The findings revealed that corpora, rather than dictionaries, convey more information about words in a group of synonyms. As a consequence, previous research has given light on how to distinguish terms in a set of synonyms using a variety of criteria and two data sources, dictionaries and corpora.

Methodology

Normal, regular, common, ordinary, and usual were examined in conducting this study as they are in the top 3000 most often used words and are included in the top 9000 words to learn. They often occur in many contexts and are synonyms of each other. Therefore, this research was aimed at investigating the five English verbs, with an emphasis on their similarities and differences in terms of their meanings, degree of formality, collocations, and grammatical patterns. (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2014)

Data Collection

The data were collected from the two learner's dictionaries and concordance lines. The selected dictionaries are Longman Advanced American Dictionary 3rd edition (2013) and Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionaries 10th edition (2020). In this study, these two

dictionaries provided information about meanings, degree of formality, collocations, and grammatical patterns. Apart from these, the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) was an additional data source for degree of formality, collocations, and grammatical patterns.

Data Analysis

After the data from the two dictionaries were collected, the 500 concordance lines for each synonym from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) were analyzed in terms of their frequencies by using AntConc which is a corpus-analysis application created by Professor Laurence Anthony of Waseda University. The software was used to classify synonyms in situations so they could be easily analyzed, the data were compared in terms of meaning, degree of formality, collocations, and grammatical patterns. The corpus-based data revealed information regarding word frequency, degree of formality, collocations, and grammatical patterns.

The corpus was supposed to yield significantly more information than the two dictionaries. However, this does not imply that the corpus has all information regarding these specific words, as only 500 concordance lines of each synonym were employed in this analysis. There may be certain collocations and grammatical patterns that do not appear in this concordance.

Results

The results of the study are examined in terms of meanings, degree of formality, collocation, and grammatical patterns based on the criteria used in this study.

Meanings

Longman Advanced American Dictionary 3rd edition (2013) and Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionaries 10th edition (2020) were used as a primary source of the study for meanings. It was found that normal, regular, common, ordinary, and usual share the same core meaning, i.e. typical, average, expected, not special, expectable characteristics.

Nonetheless, Normal, regular, common, and ordinary have specific meanings regarding typicality, whereas usual refers to an occurrence that occurs frequently. In addition, the results demonstrate that the definition of common is more precise than others. To clarify, if something is common, it must be shared by the majority. Conversely, if something is common, it is simple to locate a specific item. This synonym for regular can be used in the widest variety of contexts and meanings. It refers to something constant and equal.

This study demonstrates that normal, regular, common, ordinary, and usual do not have identical meanings and senses; they cannot be used interchangeably. According to Jackson and Amvela (2000), these five words can be categorized as loose synonyms in terms of their meanings.

Degree of Formality

The result indicated that the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) contains information that is absent from the Longman Advanced American Dictionary 3rd edition (2013) and the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionaries 10th edition (2020). Regarding the level of formality, each dictionary provides a single piece of information: Regular (informal) someone who often goes to the same bar, restaurant, etc. or who takes part in activity very often.

The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) does, however, provide more information about the degree of formality. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

The Comparisons between the Total Numbers and Percentage of Concordance Lines of Normal, Regular, Common, Ordinary, and Usual

| Synonyms | Total concordance lines of each synonym: 500 | | | |
| | Formal | | Informal | |
	Number of lines	Percent	Number of lines	Percent
Normal	159	31.80	341	68.20
Regular	130	26.00	370	74.00
Common	193	38.60	307	61.40
Ordinary	147	29.40	353	70.60
Usual	102	20.40	398	79.60

Normal, regular, common, ordinary, and usual appear in formal and informal

contexts with distinct concordance lines, as seen in Table 1. In terms of formal contexts, common has the greatest score (193 lines), followed by normal (159 lines) and ordinary, regular, and typical in that order. In informal circumstances, common scores the lowest (307 lines), followed by normal, ordinary, regular, and usual.

This implies that the degrees of formality of normal, regular, common, ordinary, and usual are not the same. Common looks to have the maximum degree of formality, whilst usual appears to have the lowest. In other words, common is more frequently used in formal contexts than other words. In contrast to other terms, usual appears to be employed less in formal circumstances and more in informal contexts.

Collocation

Palmer (1981) proposed that words in a list of synonyms co-occur with certain terms and are constrained by collocations. This study shows that normal, regular, common, ordinary, and usual co-occur with the same and different noun and adverb collocates. This study collected noun and adverb collocates of these five synonyms from the Longman Advanced American Dictionary 3rd edition (2013), the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionaries 10th edition (2020), and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA).

Table 2

Noun Collocates of Normal, Regular, Common, Ordinary, and Usual from Longman

Advanced American Dictionary 3ʳᵈ Edition (2013), Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionaries

10ᵗʰ Edition (2020), and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)

Synonyms	Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 3ʳᵈ Edition (2013), Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionaries 10ᵗʰ Edition (2020)	The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)
Normal	Way /Life/ Circumstances/ People/ Saline (5 words)	Life/ People/ Times/ Human/ Course/ Circumstances/ Stress (7 words)
Regular	Meetings/ Intervals/ Basis/ Exercise/ Customers/ Use/ Duties/ Pattern/ Features/ Arrangement/ Barber/ Haunts/ Pasta (13 words)	Season/ Basis/ Intervals/ Exercise/ Guy/ Teacher/ Mail/ Education/ Person/ Life/ Class/ Army (12 words)
Common	Causes/ Flowers/ Goal/ Language/ Seasonings/ Birds/ People/ Borders (8 words)	Sense/ Ground/ Law/ Cause/ Core/ Interests/ Knowledge (7 words)
Ordinary	People/ Camera/ Way/ Prisoner/ Car (5 words)	People/ Americans/ Citizens/ Life/ Men/ Things/ Folks/ Day/ Matter/ Language (10 words)
Usual	Way/ Time (2 words)	Suspects/ Way/ Care/ Position/ Amount (5 words)

According to Table 2, it is evident that the Corpus of Contemporary American

English (COCA) has a number of noun collocates that are absent from the two dictionaries.

Evidently, regular has the most noun collocates (thirteen from the dictionaries which some

are overlapping with twelve from the corpus), followed by common (eight from the

dictionaries and seven from the corpus). As indicated in the preceding section, regular

encompasses a broader sense of normal, common, ordinary, and usual.

As indicated in Table 3, it was discovered that these five synonyms share several

noun collocates.

Table 3

Shared Noun Collocates among Normal, Regular, Common, Ordinary, and Usual

Shared Noun Collocates			
Normal, Ordinary, and Usual	Normal, Common, and Ordinary	Normal, Regular, and Ordinary	Normal and Usual
Way	People	Life	Time

Comparing Table 2's total number of noun collocates to Table 3's total number of

shared noun collocates, it is evident that only a little number of noun collocates are shared.

The noun collocates way, people, and life are shared by three synonyms. Moreover, it is

demonstrated that collocates of nouns that co-occur with other synonyms can occur with

normal. In addition, normal and ordinary shared the majority of noun collocates. In terms of

noun collocation, the results imply that normal is closer to ordinary than other synonyms.

In addition to noun collocates, the adverb collocates of these five synonyms were

found. Table 4 demonstrates the results:

Table 4

Adverb Collocates of Normal, Regular, Common, Ordinary, and Usual from Longman

Advanced American Dictionary 3ʳᵈ Edition (2013), Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionaries

10ᵗʰ Edition (2020), and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)

Synonyms	Longman Advanced American Dictionary 3ʳᵈ edition (2013), Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionaries 10ᵗʰ edition (2020)	The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)
Normal	Perfectly/ Quite/ Completely/ Fairly/ Pretty (5 words)	As/ Perfectly/ Completely/ Quite/ Pretty (5 words)
Regular	-	Just/ Very/ Fairly (3 words)
Common	-	Most/ More/ As/ Less/ Very/ So/ Increasingly/ Quite (8 words)
Ordinary	Very (1 word)	As/ Just/ Very/ Perfectly/ Most (5 words)
Usual	-	As/ More/ Very (3 words)

The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) provides adverb collocates

for the five synonyms not found in dictionaries, as shown in Table 4. Evidently, common has

the greatest number of adverb collocates (eight from the corpus), followed by normal (five

from the dictionaries which are overlapping with five from the corpus).

Table 5

Shared Adverb Collocates among Normal, Regular, Common, Ordinary, and Usual

Shared Adverb Collocates						
Normal, Common, Ordinary, and Usual	Regular, Common, Ordinary, and Usual	Common and Ordinary	Common and Usual	Normal and Common	Normal and Ordinary	Normal and Regular
As	Very	Most	More	Quite	Perfectly	Fairly

Comparing Table 4's total number of adverb collocates to Table 5's total number of shared adverb collocates reveals that the large proportion of adverb collocates are shared. There are four synonyms for the collocates as and very. Furthermore, it is shown that collocates of adverb that co-occur with other synonyms might occur with common. Additionally, the majority of adverb collocates were shared by normal, common, and ordinary. In terms of adverb collocation, the results indicate that normal is more closely associated with common and ordinary than other synonyms.

Accordingly, it is obvious from the data that normal, regular, common, ordinary, and usual co-occur with the various noun and adverb collocates. Although they share certain collocates, these collocates make up a minor portion of the total. It implies that these five synonyms are distinct. Nonetheless, it is evident that not all possible collocates of these synonyms are represented in the three data sources; there may be additional collocates outside of these sources.

Grammatical Patterns

This study examined the shared grammatical patterns of the terms normal, regular, common, ordinary, and usual. The results are shown in Table 6:

Table 6

Shared Grammatical Patterns of Normal, Regular, Common, Ordinary, and Usual from Longman Advanced American Dictionary 3rd Edition (2013), Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionaries 10th Edition (2020) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)

Synonyms	Shared Grammatical Patterns
Normal	Normal/ Regular/ Common/ Ordinary/Usual + noun
Regular	
Common	Linking verb + Normal/ Regular/ Common/ Ordinary/Usual
Ordinary	
Usual	

These five synonyms share two grammatical patterns, as seen in Table 6. These five synonyms appear to be interchangeable in all grammatical contexts since they have the same syntactic patterns, yet each synonym has its own grammatical structure. Therefore, this may not be sufficient proof that these five synonyms are interchangeable. The results of this study are consistent with what Phoocharoensil (2010) stated, namely that terms in a collection of synonyms cannot be employed in all the same grammatical patterns, despite sharing a

common core meaning. However, there may be grammatical patterns that are absent from dictionaries and the five hundred concordance lines employed in this study.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates how corpora can contribute to the study of synonyms. This study examined five synonyms, namely normal, regular, common, ordinary, and usual, to determine the similarities and differences between them. Data was collected from two dictionaries and the Corpus of Contemporary American English. The results indicate that normal, regular, common, ordinary, and usual have the same core meaning but differ in meaning, degree of formality, collocation, and grammatical patterns. The results also indicate that the corpus contains some information that is absent from the two dictionaries.

There are several pedagogical implications of this study. To utilize the right words in different settings, EFL students must first be aware of the variations and applications of synonyms. Dictionary entries on vocabulary may fall short of describing the distinctions and applications of synonyms. To use synonyms appropriately, EFL students should study more about them in the corpus database for a better understanding. Second, in addition to using dictionaries, EFL teachers should use the corpus database as a tool to provide more information on words for teaching English language. The corpus database is compiled from real-world written and spoken materials produced by native speakers. As a result, the material from the corpora helps learners increase their understanding of synonyms, which will

enhance their English language abilities.

Suggestions for Future Research

Other variables, such as dialect and implicit meaning, can also be used to differentiate words with the same meaning, but they were not included in this study. There are also numerous linguistic corpora to be analyzed, including British English, Australian English, and other varieties. They can be compared to the findings of this study to determine any parallels or discrepancies.

Acknowledgments

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