

* Collocation in language learning

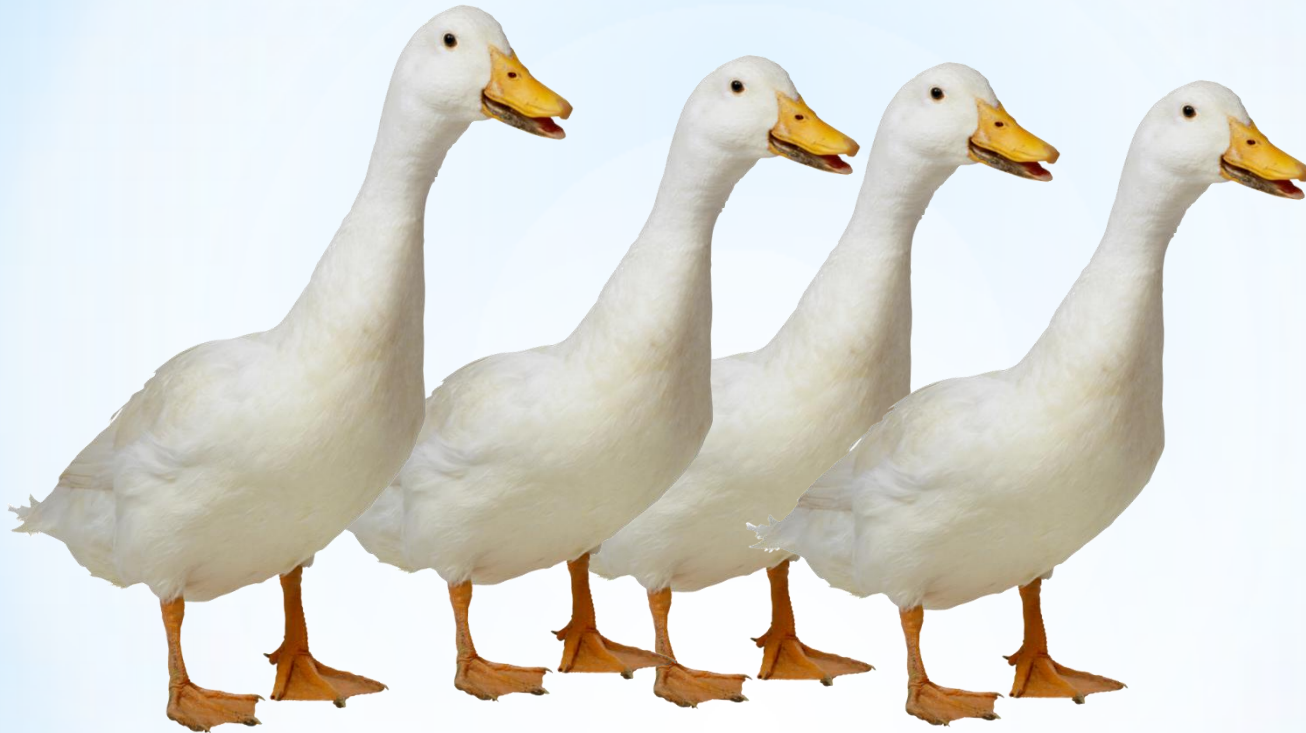
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Birds of a feather flock together

Do you know this idiom?
Can you guess what it means?

Birds of a feather flock together



Answer: People of the same sort or who share the same interests are to be found together. They naturally socialise.

Il raduno per i rossi di capelli - Rcd



This can be taken to
extremes...

It's true for words too!

In languages, it has been found that almost **no words** are **random** in their **natural distribution**. Words have **favourite companions** too - certain words make partnerships with others, and stick to each other, according to criteria that we may not quite understand.

Native speakers choose words which go together naturally as part of their innate language competence.

But what about the **language learner**?

Natural partnerships

I can say “he made **a strong case** for keeping Britain out of the eurozone”, but can I say I had a “**strong argument**” with him?

You **can**, if you like, say *I had a strong argument* with him, but it sounds *odd*.

Why?

The adjective ‘strong’ doesn’t collocate with the noun ‘friendship’, so a native speaker would be unlikely to use the two together.

*Collocation

What is collocation?

It is the natural tendency of words to occur together with certain other words. Knowing which words collocate is one way of sounding more natural when you speak or write English.

Does it matter?

Do you care about sounding natural as a language learner? Are you interested in knowing how native speakers talk? If it doesn't matter to you, then collocation is irrelevant.

But if you want to learn a language, apart from learning grammar, appropriate collocations are one of the keys to sounding natural and fluent.

*How can a teacher teach collocations?

Arm yourself first with the **right tools**.

There are now several dictionaries of English collocations. The most recent are:

The Oxford Collocations Dictionary (with CD Rom) 2009

Macmillan Collocations Dictionary (2010)

*Is there a best way?

There are several approaches to teaching collocations but you need to find out what works best for you.

E.g.

1) You could start from an incorrect collocation and Investigate both elements (e.g. strong + argument)

2) You could start from a topic and investigate typical Vocabulary around that topic, making sure you teach vocabulary not as single words but as typical phrases, e.g. adjective + noun.

* Approach 1: starting from the mistake

Student text: I had a strong argument with my dad last night.

The student means “una discussione accesa”.

Here there are three important elements to consider:

- a) we could concentrate on the *adjective strong* to see if it collocates with the noun *argument*;
- b) we could look up the noun *argument* to see which adjectives collocate with it;
- c) do we say to *have* an argument?

* Strong in the Macmillan Collocations Dictionary (MCD)

NB One useful trait of the MCD is that it divides collocations according to the meanings they express.

Strong ADJ - has three main meanings (collocates are in **bold**)

- a) Firmly believed, or firmly based on facts
- b) Of a high degree or level
- c) Unlikely to end or be defeated

At first glance, meaning b looks closest to our example. We will look at a) and b).

- a) Firmly believed, or firmly based on facts

ADJ + NOUN (indicating feeling or opinion)

Commitment, conviction, desire, feeling, opinion, sense

People admire your strong sense of responsibility.

- Case or argument - **argument, case, evidence**

There is a strong case for doing nothing in this situation.

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Here we see you can say “strong argument” - but it means one that is firmly based on facts.

Meaning b) strong - of a high degree or level

ADJ + N - **emphasis, focus, interest**

A strong emphasis on customer focus led to the huge success of telephone Banking.

Meaning c) strong - Unlikely to end or be defeated

ADJ + ADJ **economically, financially, mentally, physically, spiritually, Technically.**

The club is financially strong and we want to keep our sound.

ADJ + N **position base, foundation, position, reputation, tradition**

Considerable on-going investment would be required to maintain the market's strong position in the future.

Relationship **connection, link, partnership, relationship**

There are strong connections with departments working in the same area.

NEITHER OF THESE MEANINGS ARE RELEVANT TO OUR EXAMPLE

* Starting from the noun *argument*

The collocates of *argument* are divided into groups starting from the two broad meanings of the noun:

- 1) An angry disagreement between people
- 2) A set of reasons used for persuading others

1

ADJ + N - involving a lot of anger - **bitter, fierce, furious, heated, impassioned**
After a heated argument, a shot is fired...

Silly or pointless - **petty, pointless, ridiculous, silly**

Please let's not get into a petty argument about American spelling!

VB + N - have an argument - **engage, get into, have**

I overheard all the bridesmaids having a furious argument...

2 ADJ + N strong - **compelling, convincing, persuasive, powerful, strong, valid**

There are compelling reasons that it may divert scarce aid resources.

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This is the meaning our student wanted to convey: strong is not the right adj. but there are plenty of others!

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VB + N - have an argument - **engage, get into, have**

I overheard all the bridesmaids having a fun argument.

2 ADJ + N strong - **compelling, convincing, strong, valid**

There are compelling arguments for...

To have an argument is possible, and so is to be strong, valid
And there are other verbs too.

* Reflecting on the methodology

1) As Michael Lewis (The Lexical Approach) says, never be afraid to spend time on a word - it's not wasted!

While investigating the collocations of *strong* and *argument*, we have discovered many other 'strong' collocations along the way. It's an intensive learning time for the teacher.

2) Clearly, the teacher needs to decide how many collocates need to be introduced to the students. If you photocopy a page of the dictionary, the students might get lost.

However, you could usefully represent some collocate information in reduced form, e.g.

ADJ + NOUN a heated, furious, argument

ADJ + NOUN a silly, pointless argument

VB + N to have an argument, to get into an argument

And devise vocabulary exercises around this (Gap-fill, crosswords, scrambled words, dictation, etc.)

Which three of these adverbs are used with the verb *love*?

- * Dearly
- * Strongly
- * Passionately
- * Truly
- * Effectively
- * highly

Which three of these adjectives are used with the noun *memory*?

- * Colourful
- * Vivid
- * Untidy
- * Painful
- * Fond
- * Bright

Now write out some sentences using the correct three collocations from each box.

*Possible exercises

Unscramble the adjectives that collocate with argument

- * Peytt
- * lidicurous
- * Illys
- * lointpess

Complete the adjectives that collocate with *argument*

- * That's a comp_____ argument he presented for the new building scheme.
- * After a bit___ argument with his wife, he decided not to buy the Porsche after all.
- * There's a st_____ interest in archery after the Olympics.

* **More exercises**