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Combinatorial collocations of the attribute PERFECT (insights from the British National Corpus)

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Abstract. The paper considers the attributive lexeme "perfect" as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon in the English language. The aim of the study is the semantic analysis of nominative collocations with "perfect", based on the material of the British National Corpus (BNC), which contained about 3000 contextual occurrences, with the application of such methods as definition analysis, semantic and functional categorisation, quantitative analysis and cognitive modelling. From the theoretical standpoint, the research is valuable for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and its semantic structure, especially in connection to its derivative "perfectionism" which is regarded as a professional term. Practically, the results can be interesting in the pedagogical context for teaching cognitive and translation studies, since "perfect" has a branched semantic structure and wide scope of use. As a result of the research, the function-based semantic structure of the concept was revealed: the immediate contextual collocations were identified; the semantic fields were described. The A+N structure, where A is filled with "perfect", and N can be potentially represented with any noun from the BNC, was in the focus of the study. The findings show that about eighteen nouns can be qualified as typical due to their high occurrence rate, while the rest are characterized by different degrees of semantic proximity and were clustered into three peripheral semantic areas. As for the cognitive modelling, nineteen conceptual categories in the "perfect" interpretation field were identified, mainly of evaluation and function. The conceptual interpretation field was extended in terms of the qualitative meaning of the attribute "perfect", owing to the interaction mechanism of pragmatic, communicative and linguistic factors which determine semantic relations of linguistic units under various contextual conditions.

Keywords: semantic analysis, semantic field, collocations, nominative relations, corpus-based study

Introduction

The main focus of semantic categorization and systematization are represented through linguistic functional structures and collocations. A semantic analysis is closely related to a wide scope of conceptual categories such cause and effect, time and space, actions and processes, goals and intentions, settings and events. It analyzes the interconnection and interdependence of conceptual structures involved in textual coherence and contextual implications, metaphorical associations and extensions, semantic fields and frames. A semantic analysis attempts to understand the philosophical issue of the language as the ability to communicate through a complex system of signs and rules.

Semantic categorization and systematization relies on cultural and social background, personal experience, and individual language consciousness. These help reveal cognition, comprehension, and mental representation under certain cultural conditions. Semantic models of mental concepts, based on language functioning, generate derivation patterns, which provide evidence to the fact that semantic processes determine word-building paradigms (Vasileva 2023).

Contextual functioning of language units is determined by communicative, pragmatic, and extralinguistic factors. Contextual analysis gives the opportunity to understand the mentality and cognition of a certain language surrounding (Goddard et al. 2022). The analysis of contextual environment reveals language models by means of establishing regular speech patterns (Malyuga 2023). Speech acts rely on pragmatic implications as a consequence of mental processing of categorical syllogisms related to the cultural worldview (Kiklewicz 2022).

Linguistic categorization is based on intellectual mapping of objects of reality. Concepts are categorized with reference to prototypes and extend from core to peripheral elements. Categorization principles include centrality, chaining, experiential domains, idealized models, specific knowledge, general knowledge, motivations. Modern studies consider a wide range of spheres where cognitive modelling reveals expected and deviating thinking types, for example, cognitive engagement in the learning environment (Dunmoye et al. 2024). Noteworthily, "linguistic categorisation of the body is subject to both universal and language-specific principles" (Enfield et al. 2006). Linguistic categorization is typical of the human mind, which reflects the way people perceive our reality and learn new knowledge.

The functional approach is aimed the contextual analysis of linguistic units and their systematization, the combination of semantics and contextual information. The functional motivation for language use is contingent on social interaction and communicative relationships, which account for the language functioning as a means of problem solving, management, persuasion, manipulation, promotion, among others. The reference to a certain functional category and conceptual field makes linguistic units meaningful. Functionally structured categories act as cognitive background for cognitive interpretation of real-life objects and phenomena (Alkhammash 2021; Kushneruk, Kurochkina 2022).

The functional paradigm in semantic studies is aimed at establishing structures and disclosing mental processes specific to certain areas of knowledge and functional language styles. Categorical meaning provides a large number of classifications; however, only factual functioning in speech can determine its dynamic characteristics, such as relevant lexical meaning, grammatical form, and context-specific value, for example, linguistic features of French advertising discourse, hedging techniques in business discourse, typical concepts in the language of PR.

The functional analysis is used to outline the semantic field of new professional terms which bear similarities to well-known terminology, however, pertain to adjacent terminological systems; the analysis of their conceptual structures ascertains the reference to the actual functional areas, culture-marked field-specific accounting terminology (Radyuk 2022). Mental representation of objects has a cross-linguistic nature, however, language classifiers are language-specific, especially as part of discourse and pragmatic contexts. Discourse contains pragmatic classifiers which could be either direct or indirect, and can be arranged according to non-linguistic categories such as gender, age, status, communicative situation, among others (Sun, Bogdanova-Beglarian 2023). Practical translation studies into interlingual interaction show the necessity for discourse optimization and adaptation for the target language due to the infeasibility of using direct equivalents, provided by dictionary entries (Achkasov 2021).

Material and methodology

The aim of the study is to analyze the semantic structure and the interpretation field of the attributive concept "perfect" as an English linguistic and cultural phenomenon. The relevance of the research is explained by the enhanced interest to the phenomena of 'perfection' and 'perfectionism' over the previous thirty years in the fields of psychology and human resource management. The paper contains a brief historical retrospect and the definition analysis of the concept. The phenomenon was studied with the application of the corpus approach by means of the syntagmatic analysis of nominal relations, quantitative evaluation, semantic categorization, functional and cognitive analyses. As a result of the contextual study, repeating patterns were identified and the semantic explication of the concept under study was obtained.

The theoretical relevance lies in the fact that the attribute "perfect" is the core morpheme of the related concepts — 'perfection' and 'perfectionism' — which are the subject of multidisciplinary researches — philosophical, psychological, sociological, among others (Filyasova 2022). The research into the core morpheme can give insight into this cognitive paradigm through the contextual analysis of real-life examples. The opportunity of studying the development of the concept "perfect", its semantic field, and identify conceptual links, which are not mentioned in dictionaries, presents its linguistic value. It is worth mentioning that the attribute "perfect", with its Latin origin, has several translation equivalents in the Russian language.

The derivative 'perfectionism', borrowed through transliteration, is mainly used as a professional psychological term. "Perfect" is of cultural interest, in addition to its linguistic significance. According to the results of the functional analysis, the findings could be utilized in the practice of teaching lexicology to students majoring in language theory, and practical English to students specializing in such academic fields as business, social studies, psychology, pedagogy, and science.

An analysis of a corpus is linguistically a highly-valued source of natural context aimed at testing linguistic hypotheses, identifying regularities in language use, and generating new scientific knowledge. A corpus analysis is considered to be based on reliable language material since it consists of real-world texts, and can be used for various goals of research. The British National Corpus (BNC) is a representative bank of language material, which includes over a hundred million word texts and different genres of the British English of the late 20th century, from newspapers, both regional and national, research papers, periodicals, and fiction books. The advantage of the BNC is its functional diversity, i. e. it contains texts which are referred to different language styles; therefore, the results are not confined to only one functional system, but can be widely ascribed to many areas, thus, giving the possibility to make generalizations.

The material for the research was comprised of the contextual examples containing the attributive concept "perfect" whose contextual realizations quantitatively exceeded 5000 occurrences; however, about half of the cases turned out to appear in similar contextual environments; therefore, for the purposes of this research, 3032 of them were selected and analyzed with the help of the following methods: definition analysis, semantic and functional categorization, quantitative analysis and cognitive modelling.

Findings

Definition analysis

Historically, the adjective "perfect" was derived from the Latin *perficere* 'to carry out, complete', *per-* 'completely' and *-ficere,* from *facere* 'to make, do'. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, nowadays *perfect* has eight major meanings and about twelve shades of meaning: a) without fault or defect, e. g. *a perfect diamond*; b) satisfying all requirements; c) corresponding to ideal standards or absolute concepts, e. g. *a perfect gentleman*, d) faithfully reproducing the original; e) legally valid; f) expert, proficient, e. g. *practice makes perfect*; g) pure, total, h) lacking in no essential detail, e. g. *complete*; i) *obsolete*: sane; j) absolute, unequivocal, e. g. *perfect happiness*; k) of an extreme kind, unmitigated, e. g. *a perfect brat*; l) *obsolete*: mature; m) relating to, or constituting a verb form or verbal that expresses an action or state completed at the time of speaking or at a time spoken of; n) *obsolete*: certain, sure; o) *obsolete*: contented, satisfied; p) relating to a musical interval: fourth, fifth, and octave; q) mature and fully differentiated, e. g. *a perfect insect*; r) biologically perfect in terms of gender maturity: e. g. *a perfect flower* (Perfect 2024a).

Overall, "perfect" is a semantically multi-faceted adjective which highlights an absolute feature; underlines some relatedness to a standard or norm; and points at a quality of a highest degree. Certain meanings refer to specific areas: linguistics (grammar-related time reference), music (producing harmony in music), and the environment (biology). A few meanings have already become old-fashioned: healthy, confident, and happy. The obsolete meaning 'happy' has become one of the most frequently collocated nominal elements: *health*, along with the other nouns, such as *fit*, *world*, and *condition*.

Frequent synonymous series stem from the core meaning *ideal*, while the other two series originate from contextual meanings of the adjective *perfect* which transmit the ideas of simplicity and inseparability.

The attribute "perfect" was a religious term in the 19th century, which characterized the human nature, granted by the God as an ideal entity, and seemed to be designed to prescribe social norms. However, it has evolved into a diverse attributive concept, which is used to describe excellent qualities of objects, things, and products of human activities, though it has preserved some prescriptive meanings. In addition, "perfect" has developed certain meanings specific for particular areas — music and biology, — in which it denotes harmony and organicity, respectively. Originally, in application to humans, "perfect" was also supposed to mean some divine gift or blessing to duplicate the nature of God in order to correspond strictly to the Creator; this subsequently implied healthy and happy existence on Earth. Nevertheless, activity is the main prerequisite of human existence; therefore, the results of human labour are supposed to precisely align with certain standards and ideal models.

Categorization principles include idealized, general and specific models. The analysis of the historical background and definitions shows that the findings can be categorized as follows: idealized — correspondence to a standard, absolutism, idealism; general — thoroughness, completeness; and specific — religion, social sphere, ethics, etiquette,

language, education, music, biology. Cognitive categorization also depends on the contextual use of linguistic units. In the following section, categories based on functional contexts, in which 'perfect' occurred, will be considered.

Corpus analysis

As it was mentioned earlier, the attribute "perfect" was analyzed in relation to the nouns (A+N) in a wider contextual environment, e. g. *perfect cake, perfect luxury, perfect slogan*; therefore, the number of the nouns coincided with the number of contexts and equaled 3032. The nominal collocations are considered as the interpretation field of the attributive concept "perfect". The repeating nouns were analyzed in order to discover the most collocated nominals and the most frequent relations which make up the semantic core, in contrast to its periphery. Following that, wider contexts were considered in terms of their thematic affiliation with the aim of identifying typical areas for the attribute "perfect" to be used in.

The absolute majority of the related nouns (2427, or 80 %) occurred more than once, some of them have a high collocability with "perfect". Therefore, 605, or 20 % of the nouns can be considered peripheral which occasionally combine with the attribute "perfect". According to the syntagmatic structure, its immediate nominal connections are represented by the following core variables: *person, time, condition, match, storm, example, sense, it (impersonal), system, way, opportunity, solution, place, competition, day, world, fit, market*. These can be considered as core connections, due to their

high frequency of occurrence. The rest of the nouns with lower degree of contextual use are referred to the semantic periphery.

The distribution of the nouns along the scale 1–80 demonstrates a clear trend towards a semantic core in the interpretation field of the concept "perfect", which ranges within twenty nouns and makes up 25 %, or a quarter of all occurrences. According to the data in Tb. 1, the rest of the scale can be divided into three peripheral areas: periphery 1 (P1) including the nouns with the average occurrence rate 14, that accounts for 17 %, periphery 2 (P2) containing the nouns with the average rate 10, amounting to 21 %, and periphery 3 (P3) comprising 37 %, where each noun appeared only once (Table 1).

Along with the increase of noun occurrence, the diversity plunges, being reduced to 1–3 different nouns in the semantic core; diversity recovers in the first peripheral area up to 4 units; it increases sharply to 20 units in the second periphery, and, ultimately, soars exponentially to 840 in the farthest peripheral area, which makes it difficult to establish any strong connections to the attribute "perfect". The examples of the nouns from each periphery were as follows:

Periphery 1: *order, balance, record, model, performance, English, harmony, partnership, life, score, instrucment, pitch, method, house, room, body, view, song, setting, foil, positon, job, control, gift*, etc.

Periphery 2: *word, picture, excuse, machine, law, image, idea, substitute, hair, guys, actor, gentleman, combination, candidate, answer, relationship, knowledge, health, technology, girl, design, cime*, etc.

Table 1. The number of occurrences and their distribution

Immediate Context	The number of all nouns	The number of different nouns	The rate of occurrence
(20–89) Core	(751)	(18)	(42)
80–89	80	1	80
70–79	0	0	0
60–69	127	2	64
50–59	164	3	55
40–49	91	2	46
30–39	193	6	32
20–29	96	4	24
(1–19) Peripheries	(2281)	(996)	(2)
10–19 P1	503	37	14
(1–9)	(1778)	(959)	(2)
4–9 P2	635	119	10
1–3 P3	1143	840	1

Note: * The data in brackets show generalized sums of the nouns.

Periphery 3: *career, food, friend, game, happiness, hedge, implementation, key, jewelry, leader, manners, measures, murder, music, nature, name, portrait, precision, skin, speech, trade, summer*, etc.

The semantic distribution trend is as follows: the nouns from the semantic core of the "perfect" interpretation field belong to English for general and basic academic purposes, while drawing to the periphery, specific terms become more common. That could be the evidence of a strong semantic potential of the attribute "perfect" which tends to be used in the formal language.

It is worth mentioning that about 7 % of all nominal collocations have a negative meaning, either expressed grammatically: e. g. *parents / people / conditions are not perfect*; or lexically, e. g. *perfect swine, perfect magpie, perfect fudging, perfect victim, perfect chowderheads, and perfect hindsight bias*. Whereas the use of grammatical means for expressing negation can be explained by extralinguistic reasons, the collocability of nouns with negative semantics and "perfect" as an attribute at the lexical level produces the effect of oxymoron, which testifies to the fact that the attribute under analysis is apt to extend its functional field as a linguistic unit.

Another important feature is the occurrence of the attribute "perfect" as part of the following idiomatic expressions: *perfect storm, perfect match, perfect pair, practice makes perfect, good is better than perfect, perfect stranger, make perfect sense, in perfect lockstep*, which comprise 6 % of all contexts. Idioms as language signs fixed in form present figurative meanings; however, there are several types of idioms in terms of losing the meaning of its constituents and acquiring some new meaning based on frequent use and historical semantic modifications; the more distant the meaning, the less recognizable the constituents are as separate lexical elements. In the idioms that were found in the corpus, "perfect" still preserves its primary meaning mentioned in the dictionary — 'ideal, absolute, complete'; hence, the idiomatic expressions are quite transparent, characterizing "perfect" as an attribute inclined to establish itself in the English language in the paroemiological meaning.

Functional analysis

The semantic structure of the attribute concept "perfect" comprises the following areas — minimal information structures which represent categories of objects, phenomena and processes. Similarly to the principles of Gestalt psychology, which state that the human mind construes a single complex object from seemingly fragmented perceptual sensations, the interpretation field of the concept "perfect" is built on both nominal collocations and semantic areas they occur in. Due to polysemy and contextual relationality, each word can be potentially referred to several or even many topics under various pragmatic conditions and communicative situations, for instance, the adjective ROUND can be conceived of with reference to any round object, whereas the verb RUN possesses a narrower semantic scope and is immediately associated with a runner or business owner. In this research, the nouns were subsumed under the following categories in compliance with the functional principle: humans, the human body, family, clothes and accessories, house, space, time, leisure time, travel, sport, food, design, education, language, abstract notions, social characteristics, social sciences, psychology, methodology, art, music, business, PR and advertising, the media, human resources, law, IT, science, geometry, nature, animals, indefinite pronouns. The most typical examples of each category are presented since not all members have the same status. For native speakers, it is obvious that certain examples are better representatives of a category than others. The selection of the most usual members relies on the following principles: frequency, order of learning in ontogenesis, closeness to an ideal or certain quality, stereotypicality, family resemblance, evaluative motives, verification speed and priming.

The functional categories are further clustered into four groups on account of their semantic proximity. The first group includes humans and their physiological, social, psychological characteristics and needs (human, the human body, psychology, family, house, social features, clothes and accessories, leisure). The second group consists of humanities with certain application profiles, such as music, art, design, education, language, travel, and social sciences. The third group presented combines fundamental categories: abstractions, time, space, nature, science, geometry, and methodology. Finally, the fourth group comprises topics of the economic profile: business, PR and advertising, human resource management, information technologies, law, food, ad sport. Let us consider a few examples (Perfect 2024b):

> *The photocopied documents are described as absolutely* **perfect** *and impossible to detect by the ordinary detectives.* (Law)
> *There is something lighter than pure Italian. She said she had a* **perfect** *childhood, an almost miraculous childhood.* (Fiction)
> *The notion is based on the assumption of a* **perfect** *financial market, with* **perfect** *knowledge and complete certainty about the future.* (Business)

*It is actually called a **perfect** octave, but they never worry about the **perfect** when you're talking about an octave.* (Music)
*As a student you have a **perfect** opportunity — use your lecture.* (Education)
*MDS2000 is a multidimensional GC system which has a fully programmable microprocessor unit and is **perfect** for resolving difficult to separate complex mixtures.* (IT)

The interpretation field of the concept "perfect" is multifunctional from the standpoint of the attributive meaning per se. It includes different qualitative characteristics which provide distinct descriptive zones: evaluative (the human), e. g. *perfect wife, husband, children, parents*; aesthetic (art, music), e. g. *perfect contour, sculpture, blackness, fusion of image and sound, sounds, melody, guitar, interval*; emotional (human-related categories), e. g. *house, dinner, fabric, evening dress, manicure, embroidery, yacht*; intellectual (language), e. g. *perfect description, expression, narrative, explanation, conclusion, understanding*; moral (the social sphere), e. g. appearance, reputation, behavior, judgment, manners, curtsy, demeanour; functional (business, science, IT), e. g. *perfect competition, strategy, target, plan, integration, application, technique, weight, machine, wave, mould, substrate, corner, liquid, randomization, storage device, chip, data*; regulative (law), e. g. *perfect trial, clue, proof, legislation*; paroemiological (idioms), e. g. *perfect storm, perfect match, perfect pair, practice makes perfect, good is better than perfect, perfect stranger, make perfect sense, in perfect lockstep.*

Discussion

"Perfect" as an attribute tends to be used with nouns of general English with academic background, and social-economic terminology. An extensive number of nouns refer to people, their mental perceptions, personal needs, which generally indicates its anthropocentric bias; consequently, it sounds natural that perfectionism as a derivative term is a basically a psychological phenomenon. In terms of topical categorization, the human and broad business-related academic area can be considered as the semantic core of the concept. The periphery should be interpreted as a gradually dissolving circle which embraces various fields of human activity — from the social sphere as the most intensive further on to law, sport, nature, art, travel, science, and leisure activities. In other terms, the human and broad business-related academic terms are typical examples and social stereotypes which create the semantic core of the concept "perfect", while other areas are potentially able to develop into core spheres but at the present moment, they constitute its sporadic peripheral background.

The semantic structure of the attribute concept "perfect" consists of the following relationships. Obviously, they exceed in number those, presented in the dictionary:

— *Business*: market situation, monetary and credit relations, economic forecasting, financial monitoring, business relations and alliances, government regulation, mortgage lending, investment opportunities, risk hedging.
— *Human resources management*: strategic planning, recruitment and staffing, training and development, teambuilding, employee relations, staff retention, compensation and benefits.
— *PR and advertising*: media relations, brand management, public speaking, marketing.
— *Society*: status and growth prospects of the public sector, relations between society and the state, social relations in certain regions, basic foundations of society, issues of social security, social institutions, social control as a form of managerial regulation.
— *Abstractions*: similarities and differences, comparison and analogy, symmetry and equilibrium, opportunities and implementation, dichotomy and dualism.
— *Science*: genetics and selection, materials science and technology, modelling and prototyping, mechanical engineering.
— *Geometry*: square, circle, parallel.
— *IT*: information system and technologies, programs and applications, automatic recognition and data storage, database administration and protection, algorithmisation and programming.
— *Education*: students and teachers, examinations, academic degrees, research activities, training courses.
— *Language*: phonetics, language styles and genres, grammar, syntax, text structuring.
— *Sport*: infrastructure, games and competitions, participants, sports equipment, sports elements and movements.
— *Food*: beverages, food products, dishes.
— *Art*: painting, sculpturing, colour design, reproduction.
— *Design*: combinations design elements and colours.
— *Travel*: flying, accommodation, living conditions.
— *Law*: criminal cases and investigations, participants in legal proceedings.
— *Music*: musical intervals, musical genres, musical instruments.
— *Nature*: natural disasters, weather conditions, plant species.

— *Method*: technique, measure, way, instrument, tool.
— *Time*: time periods of different length.
— *Space*: place, site, location, area.
  The characterization of a person:
— *Human types*: person, people, man, gentleman, woman, lady, maid, girl, guy, boy, babies.
— *The human body*: body, teeth, shape, build, hair, eyesight, face, lips, nose, skin, nails, toes, hand, mimics, tan, complexion, kidney, voice, health.
— *Psychology*: character, abilities, mood, emotions.
— *Family:* members, wedding occasions, relations.
— *Social feature*: manners, name calling, ethics of conduct.
— *Clothes*: types of clothes and accessories, manicure, combinations of clothes, types of fabric.
— *Leisure*: humor, reception and hospitality, leisure activities.
— *House*: types of house, rooms, furniture.

The most numerous group of nouns belongs to the category of business with such subgroups as human resources and advertising. "Perfect" as a cognitive concept characterizes business phenomena and objects as the most suitable for particular markets, companies, consumers, and individuals who pursuit certain goals. The second category with multiple nouns includes society-related terms, which gives evidence of the concept "perfect" as a social feature and, probably, one of the modern trends that distinguish the importance of high-level needs, relevant for the modern generation. The third most notable category was comprised of abstract notions from general contexts without any specific specialization. Potentially, the abstract notions are able to appear in any context, and characterize any communicatively marked situation. It is worth mentioning that the first group generally refers to the human as a biological species with strong cognitive skills. Despite the fact that this group consists of several thematic categories, many of them directly qualify the human perspective; hence, it can be inferred that the concept "perfect" lies deep in the human mind and represents one of its core values and 'reference points' that produce idealistic models which people strive to implement into practice during their practical activity. The idea of an ideal pattern is first actualized in the near circle — the human body, appearance, family, leisure activities, and then it expands further onto wider social groups and professional occupations.

Conclusion

The semantic structure of the first-level slot, with "perfect" as an attribute in the nominal structure A+N, is multifunctional in terms of contextual attribution and qualitative meaning. The latter constitute an interdependent system of interrelated elements whose interaction is contingent on the semantic features of the conceptual interpretation field. According to the dictionary definitions, the attribute "perfect" possesses mainly the evaluative (primary) and functional (secondary) meanings: *ideal* and *thorough*. The contextual analysis demonstrates that the combination of pragmatic, communicative and linguistic factors launches a type of interactive mechanism that generates emergent qualitative categories, typical for certain contexts: emotional, aesthetic, moral, intellectual, regulative, and paroemiological, which can be related to the novel characteristics of the concept. These factors enter into meaningful interaction depending upon the situational imperative.

In conclusion, the attributive concept "perfect" can be genuinely considered as a cultural phenomenon represented in the English language, since it penetrates almost all spheres of human activity with different degrees immersion. The cognitive model of "perfect" as a mental concept was studied on the material of real-life speech acts which rely on pragmatic implications based on language functioning; therefore, the examples describe those areas where its expression can be more vividly observed as a characteristic feature, and where its interpretation field characterizes the immediate contextual connections. The semantic analysis demonstrates the most typical connections which constitute the semantic core of its interpretation field as opposed to multiple peripheral spheres. It can be inferred that "perfect" is one the fundamental terms which are responsible for prioritization of personal and social values in the human mind.

List of Abbreviations

BNC — The British National Corpus.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest, either existing or potential

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