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LINGUISTICA

“THIS SOUNDS ODD TO ME”: ISSUES OF COLLOCATIONAL ACCEPTABILITY IN AN ENGLISH-ITALIAN DICTIONARY

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Abstract: The present work aims to assess the acceptability of a set of collocations from the point of view of a native speaker who uses the language actively. A survey of 50 Italian collocations selected from the *Il Ragazzini* English-Italian dictionary (2013 edition) was carried out with the participation of 20 native Italian speakers who were asked to judge the examples provided on the basis of acceptability and usage. Analysis of the results confirms that, when it comes to collocations, the speakers' judgments are extremely heterogeneous. Moreover, the percentage of collocations deemed questionable or unacceptable is hefty, calling for reflection on the kind of language that is represented in dictionaries. From the point of view of usage, the data are not encouraging either, as many peripheral collocations seemed to be provided. The paper reflects on the practical and theoretical implications of such findings.

Keywords: Acceptability, usage, collocations, bilingual lexicography, English, Italian

1 Introduction

● For human interaction to succeed, a good deal of cognitive flexibility is generally required, even more so in oral communication. Listeners are compelled to fill linguistic gaps continually: not only can there be acoustic interferences that call for phonological compensation, but speakers often produce sentences that do not necessarily meet the requirements of standard grammar. Yet communication does take place effectively and people seem to come to terms with such deviations from the norm and adjust to them

effortlessly, therefore accepting the linguistic output of their interlocutors after a process of adaptation.

Up to the present, the issue of acceptability¹ (i.e. at which point linguistic deformity can be accepted and dealt with) has been tackled with a clear focus upon syntax and semantics, and with the aim of eliciting judgments on grammaticality and best form practice². However, as Bartsch (2004: 77) observes: “grammaticality judgments alone cannot explain the mechanisms of underlying lexical selection, which is an important part of proficient and native-like language processing”.

Indeed, the naturalness of an utterance does not depend solely upon its degree of grammaticality but is also strictly linked to the types of lexical choices that speakers make. This is particularly evident in foreign speech production. For example, whilst the sentence *I made a photo of him yesterday** rather than *I took a photo of him yesterday* shows no signs of grammatical incorrectness, it would be rejected by a native speaker of English. The same can be said of *Gli ho preso una foto ieri**, in which the rules of Italian syntax and morphology are followed, yet the meaning of ‘taking a picture of someone’ is not properly conveyed. Moreover, such an inappropriate lexical choice could lead to misunderstanding the sense of the utterance, inducing the listener to believe that the speaker stole someone’s picture. In both examples, oddity derives from the combination of *make* and *photo* and *prendere* and *foto*, which are not standard combinations in English and Italian.

When words are combined in unnatural ways, information may either fail to get through to the interlocutor or may be misinterpreted, in both cases jeopardising communication. However, as noted by Nesselhauf (2003: 228): “native-speaker norms seem to be particularly variable in the area of word combinations”. Thus speakers belonging to the same linguistic community do not abide by the rules of lexical combinability so rigidly, even though there seem to exist boundaries that delimit the type of exceptions to the norm that can be tolerated. For this reason, it seems worth investigating the extent to which judgments of acceptability can be said to be homogenous among the speakers.

In collocation studies, the issue of acceptability is not one that has been taken into account too often³. Generally, scholars are, and have been, more concerned with trying to capture the theoretical essence of such combinations,

¹ For a philosophical reflection on the question of acceptability, see Van Dijk (1974).

² The only study that looks at the reception of collocations by native speakers seems to be Greenbaum’s (1970).

³ Collocational acceptability has been studied mainly from the L2 learner’s perspective. See, among others, Nesselhauf (2004), J. Lesniewska, and E. Witalisz (2007), Hashim Noor and Arwa Adubaib (2011).

presenting them in structured taxonomies based on certain sets of criteria, or with finding practical ways to identify and organise them. To this extent, one can understand why linguists have focused upon prototypical collocations (as well as prototypical non-collocations), such as *strong tea* vs. *powerful tea** (Halliday 1966: 150), *dark night* (Firth 1957: 196), *heavy smoker* vs. *weighty smoker** (Mel’čuk 1998: 38), *rancid butter* (Fontenelle 1992: 222) etc. However, the actual production and use of collocations by speakers would appear to add a further, yet somehow unavoidable, dimension to an already complex picture.

As noted by Carter (1998: 58) in a reflection on collocations and style: “questions of acceptability are much more difficult to determine than the decision over what is grammatical or ungrammatical”. Indeed, the fact that judgments might not be easy to formulate and opinions might vary is well represented by the following example. In a thread that appears on the Wordreference forum⁴ – a popular English-based mono- and bilingual online dictionary – a Russian teacher of English asks for advice on a sentence produced by one of his students:

One of my students wrote “they happened to catch rain”. I doubt that it’s correct. I would say “they happened to get caught in the rain”. Is there such an expression as ‘to catch rain’?

Three native English speakers reply:

Speaker 1 (USA): ‘To catch some rain’ is a colloquial way of expressing it, in my experience. “We caught some rain on our trip down the coast” sounds natural to me. Without “some”, though, it sounds very odd.

Speaker 2 (USA): I agree that the student’s sentence is not right. ‘to catch rain’ can be used to mean ‘to collect rainwater’. “He catches rain in a barrel to water his houseplants”.

Speaker 3 (UK): The only expression I know is ‘to be/get caught in (the) rain’.

All three speakers agree that the student’s sentence is odd; however, they take three slightly different perspectives. According to the first, acceptance of the combination *to catch rain* is conditional upon the introduction of the quantifier *some*; the second claims that the collocation does exist but with a different meaning; the third states she/he has never heard of it. Despite being all the more apparent with non-native speakers of a second language, the issue

⁴ <http://forum.wordreference.com/showthread.php?t=1818137>.

concerning the acceptability of collocations is very prominent even among members of the same linguistic community. As pointed out by Gairns and Redman: “there are inevitably differences of opinion about what represents an acceptable collocation in English” (1986: 37).

Whilst collocations are often described in literature as arbitrary (e.g. Benson 1989; Hausmann 1989), their acceptability depends, first, upon semantics and, secondly, and most importantly, upon usage. According to the semantic properties of the English lexicon, for example, *to wear a sink* is not a natural combination because the literal meaning of the verb *wear* and the noun *sink* are incompatible. Any native speaker of English would reject it on the basis of its faulty semantics. However, if we imagine that, at some point, such a combination came to be used with the metaphorical meaning of *to wear an ill-fitting, inappropriate piece of clothing*, English speakers would accept it as a natural combination in their mental inventory of set phrases. By contrast, despite being semantically equivalent to the well-established *broad daylight*, *wide daylight** has not become a collocation in English, even though that would have been technically possible.

Indeed, usage ultimately provides us with the intuition we need in order to discern between acceptable and unacceptable combinations in our mother tongue. Yet given that the linguistic experience of each individual is absolutely unique and that the factors that influence it are numerous, it is likely that there will be a grey area of disagreement in the judgment of word combinations. This phenomenon is even more amplified in English by the existence of many varieties (especially geographical) and the high number of speakers.

2. Acceptability and lexicographical practice

The fact that different speakers of the same language might have different opinions on how words should combine does have an impact on the lexicographic representation and treatment of collocations: a significant divide between the prescriptive norms represented by the dictionary and the real and multifaceted usage of these lexical units emerges. Whilst most of the material included in a dictionary can be largely accepted, there are peripheral examples of language use that might trigger disagreement.

The advent of corpus linguistics has certainly helped reduce the subjectivity of linguistic data, yet, ultimately it is still the lexicographer who makes decisions as to what should or should not be included on the basis of their *Sprachgefühl*. Moreover, corpora are mainly representative of the written language, in the form of newspapers, journals, novels, and so on, while the spoken dimension is generally confined to a section of the whole body of

texts^{5,6}. Consequently, what we derive from the analysis of corpora concerns more how we write than how we speak. Whilst the issue regarding the differences between written and oral communication has long been debated (see Chafe and Tannen 1987 for a thorough recapitulation), it is undeniable that the lexical choices we make in spoken interaction differ from those we make when we have more time to choose our words and put them together. Thus dictionaries tend to be more representative of the written language.

It has to be noted, moreover, that the employment of corpora in Italian-English bilingual lexicography has only recently become standard practice (Berti 2017) and such employment might be skewed towards English. If we add the fact that new editions of the same dictionary are never compiled from scratch, but built on existing material, which is revised, modified, and integrated but very rarely discarded and replaced by brand new definitions and examples, one can see why dictionaries are bound to present some imperfections.

In point of fact, the present work was inspired by the observation that some of the collocations included in bilingual resources do not always seem totally acceptable, ranging from being slightly unusual to being, at times, incorrect. This aspect becomes even more prominent if one considers the attitude of users of bilingual dictionaries (i.e. mainly students) towards these resources (Moon 2002), which are generally perceived as normative and almost infallible. For this reason, it can be interesting to collect the judgments of a group of native Italian speakers concerning a sample of selected collocations extracted from a bilingual dictionary.

3. Methodology

When looking into speakers' judgments of acceptability, three different methods can be employed: yes/no questionnaires; n-point numerical scale tasks, and magnitude estimation tasks. In yes/no choices, judgments can only be made in a binary form, and the subject is forced to choose between one of two opposite poles. The advantage of such methodology lies in the fact that the questions are extremely easy for the subjects to understand, as only one possible interpretation is contemplated. Thus during the data analysis process one should not take into account the issue of how individual interpretations might have

⁵ Corpora of spoken material are available (e.g. *London Lund Corpus*, *Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English*) but, generally, they are not employed for the compilation of dictionaries.

⁶ In the British National Corpus written material accounts for 90% of the total, while spoken for the remaining 10%.

affected the results. Yet such a coarse-grained approach fails to capture the diversity imbued in such a multifaceted and graded phenomenon, and could lead to the formulation of unfounded generalisations. In fact, the question of how different the results would have been if other options had been available remains open.

In the n-point numerical scale, participants are asked to choose among a series of pre-formulated judgments on a progressive scale of acceptability, where each number corresponds to a ready-made judgment (e.g. from 0 = “not acceptable” to 5 = “perfectly acceptable”). After reading each example, the participants must choose the number that best expresses their thoughts. Being graded, such a method is more suited to experiments concerning acceptability and abstract properties in general, which are rarely perceived as clear-cut dichotomies. The drawback lies in the degree of restriction (i.e. participants must choose only among the proposed values) in that subjects are forced to conform to a ready-made framework, which might not necessarily represent their true intuitions.

Magnitude estimation (ME) has been the preferred method in sentence acceptability experiments for years as it is/was believed to generate more informative and less biased results (Bard et al. 1996, Cowart 1997, Featherston 2005). Using this technique, participants are not asked to conform to a given scale, but are free to assign their own values, the only constraint being that the judgments should respond to a ratio principle. For example, if a sentence is deemed twice as acceptable as one that was previously encountered, there will have to be numerical correspondence in the chosen values (e.g. if the subject previously attributed the value of 2 to sentence A, they will have to assign 4 to sentence B, if they think that the latter is twice as acceptable as the former). This method generates an open-ended scale of judgments (participants can use whatever numbers they prefer) that are in relation with one another, proportional, and modelled on a reference item. The advantage of such a technique is the high degree of flexibility, which is thought to produce more reliable results. However, recently, some scholars have questioned the status of ME with reference to the claim that such a technique produces ratio-based judgments (see Sprouse 2011 and 2008, Bader and Häusler⁷). Among the weaknesses of ME is its cognitive complexity: far from being immediate, ME requires that participants undergo some form of training, leaving the question as to whether all the subjects successfully grasp how the method works open. Moreover, it seems intuitively challenging to assign a series of ratio-based

⁷ Markus Bader e Jana Häusler, “Toward a Model of Grammatical Judgments”, *Journal of Linguistics* 46, 2010, 273-330.

numerical values that are consistent with one another to an abstract property, such as acceptability or pleasantness.

In a study aimed at investigating the real value of ME, Fukuda *et al.* (2012) compare the results of the three different response methods (i.e. yes/no, n-point scale, and ME), concluding that ME is in fact not “worth the trouble” (2012: 328), as all three methods provide very consistent results.

On such grounds, and given the number of participants in the present experiment, the most appropriate method of investigation seems to be the n-point scale. Subjects are presented with a range of possible judgments on the acceptability of a series of collocations and must choose what best represents their thoughts.

4. The pilot study

The aim of the present pilot study is twofold: on the one hand, to investigate how a group of native speakers receives and judges some of the collocations presented in an Italian-English dictionary; on the other, the study will also provide a glimpse of the more general issue of collocational acceptability among native speakers of the same linguistic community. To this end, a questionnaire comprising 50 collocations drawn from the *Il Ragazzini Dizionario Italiano-Inglese* (2013) was designed and administered to 20 native Italian speakers. Given the limited number of participants and word combinations investigated, the study cannot offer a conclusive answer to either question. Nevertheless, what it can provide is some insight into the complex phenomenon of acceptability and some of its practical and theoretical implications.

The notion of collocation employed is a loose one, comprising lexical and grammatical collocations, combinations of different degrees of fixedness, and involves different parts of speech.

4.1 Italian collocations in the Italian-to-English section

The starting point of this research was the Italian-to-English section of the bilingual dictionary *Il Ragazzini* 2013 published by Zanichelli. Fifty simple Italian collocations or interlocking collocations (Hoey 2005), involving different parts of speech (N + V, N + prep. + N, V + N, adj. + N, etc.), were singled out simply by going through the pages of the dictionary in alphabetical order. In the dictionary some of the collocations were presented as self-contained phrases (e.g. *abbandonare un'abitudine*), while others were embedded in clauses as part of an exemplifying sentence (e.g. *questo cappotto*

cade bene, based on the collocation *cappotto* + *cadere* [+ *bene*]). Such a difference was maintained in the questionnaire⁸.

Below is the list of the 50 word combinations extracted:

- | | |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. una bellezza che abbaglia | 26. un bosco folto |
| 2. abbandonare un'abitudine | 27. nel folto del bosco |
| 3. abbandonare gli ideali | 28. nel folto della mischia |
| 4. abbandonare l'inseguimento | 29. messa in piega a fon |
| 5. abbandonare un pregiudizio | 30. fondo per profughi |
| 6. abbandonare ogni prudenza | 31. girare il discorso |
| 7. indulgere a bacco | 32. una faccenda imbrogliata |
| 8. bada alle mie parole | 33. imbrogliare nei movimenti |
| 9. badare al fuoco | 34. un lenzuolo immacolato |
| 10. baffi spioventi | 35. eccitare l'immaginazione |
| 11. portare i baffi | 36. offrire un'immagine di |
| 12. andare a caccia di complimenti | efficienza |
| 13. cacciatore di donne | 37. rinnovamento dell'immagine |
| 14. casupole cadenti | 38. morte immatura |
| 15. questo cappotto cade bene | 39. successo immediato |
| 16. cadere bocconi | 40. immettere in ruolo |
| 17. cadere morto | 41. pubblicazione imminente |
| 18. coltivare un'amicizia | 42. linea dura |
| 19. le dimensioni di un compito | 43. linguaggio da bettola |
| 20. umile dimora | 44. mancanza imperdonabile |
| 21. trattare qualcuno con | 45. gioia malvagia |
| dimestichezza | 46. amore felice |
| 22. dimostrazione di affetto | 47. prendere passione a qualcosa |
| 23. protestare con energia | 48. rapire il consenso di qualcuno |
| 24. agire con energia | 49. sbrigliare la fantasia |
| 25. rimedio energetico | 50. raddrizzare i torti. |

4.2 *The participants*

For this pilot study, 20 native Italian speakers were involved belonging to different age groups and with different educational backgrounds (only four of them had a degree). Ten people aged between 20 and 22 are university students

⁸ The issue of acceptability goes hand in hand with that of register or style (Partington 1998; Zimmermann 1981) and is therefore context-based. Some expressions might be appropriate in formal contexts, others in more informal contexts. In this survey most of the combinations provided are decontextualized, being given as isolated phrases, but this is the way in which they are presented in the dictionary under examination and we felt we should not intervene.

of Intercultural and Interlinguistic Mediation at the University of Insubria (Italy). Six people are in their thirties, three in their forties, and only one over 50. As far as gender is concerned, the sample is made up of 11 women and nine men.

4.3 *The questionnaire*

The questionnaire asked the participants to rate the proposed collocations expressing two types of judgment: one concerning the extent to which they found a certain collocation acceptable, the other concerning its use. Information about the latter was gathered in order to provide a more thorough assessment of the type of linguistic datum provided by the dictionary under investigation. In particular, given that one of the defining traits of collocations is their high frequency in the language, it seemed relevant to shed light on the actual use that speakers make (or think they make) of a certain expression.

When asked to judge acceptability, participants were given three options: acceptable, questionable, and unacceptable. As regards use, they were asked to estimate how often they felt they use the given set phrase: often, occasionally, or never⁹.

5. Results and discussion

As can be seen at first glance in graphs 1 and 2, the distribution of both types of judgment are very heterogeneous. There seems to be little agreement in both use and acceptability, notably in the latter. The only two collocations (4% of the whole body of collocations) that gained global consensus are *dimostrazione di affetto* (see list entry no. 22) and *umile dimora* (see list entry no. 20). Yet when it came to use, one person claimed that they have never used *dimostrazione di affetto* and two people stated they use it only occasionally; *umile dimora* appears to have never been used by as many as four people (20% of the participants) and used occasionally by nine.

From a lexicographic perspective, the data concerning overall acceptability raise some issues. Out of a total of 1,000 judgments (20 speakers judging 50 collocations), half were associated with acceptable collocations, while half is almost evenly split between questionable and unacceptable combinations

⁹ Evidently, judgments concerning use are based on the participants' own subjective perception and they tell us what the speakers think they say, rather than what they, in effect, say. However, for the purpose of this survey, personal impressions need not be statistically precise and are a good enough indicator of the way in which speakers use their language.

(26.7% and 23.1% respectively). If we take a closer look at the data, we learn that in 42 out of 50 cases, the collocations presented were deemed unacceptable by at least one informant and up to a maximum of 13.

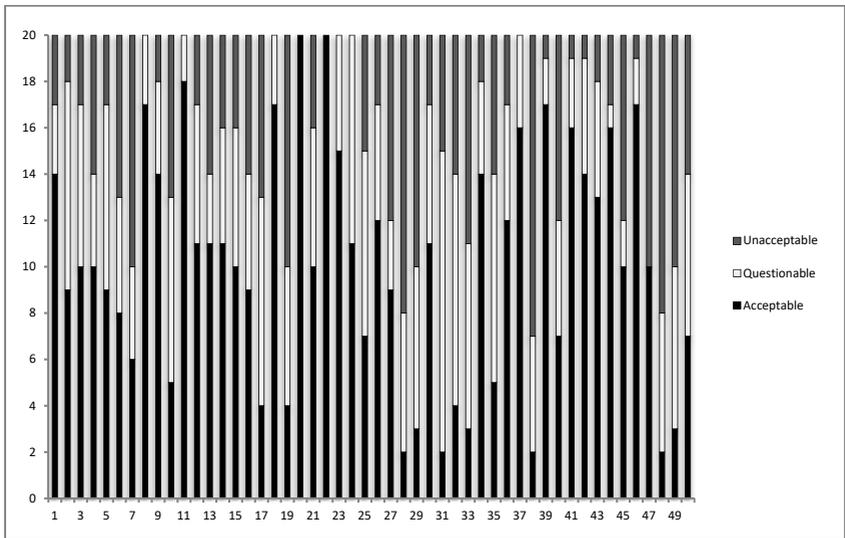
As can be observed in Graph 2, data concerning use are as diversified as that describing acceptability. However, the figures show clear predominance of the “never” option representing 56.1% of the choices, followed by “occasionally” (28.3%), and finally by “often” (15.6%). Regardless of acceptability, this datum clearly shows that some examples picked out of the *Il Ragazzini* 2013 dictionary fail to represent the language known and used by the informants.

Among the collocations that were selected as examples of prototypical word combinations in Italian, *abbandonare l'inseguimento* was considered acceptable by 10 people, questionable by four, and, surprisingly, unacceptable by six; in particular, it was the younger informants who rejected the combination or perceived it to be questionable. *Coltivare un'amicizia* and *sbrigliare la fantasia*, which would appear to be two prototypical Italian combinations, were both rejected by some: the former was deemed unacceptable by three people, the latter by as many as 10, and questionable by seven. Interestingly, as many as 19 people do not recall using the combination *sbrigliare la fantasia*.

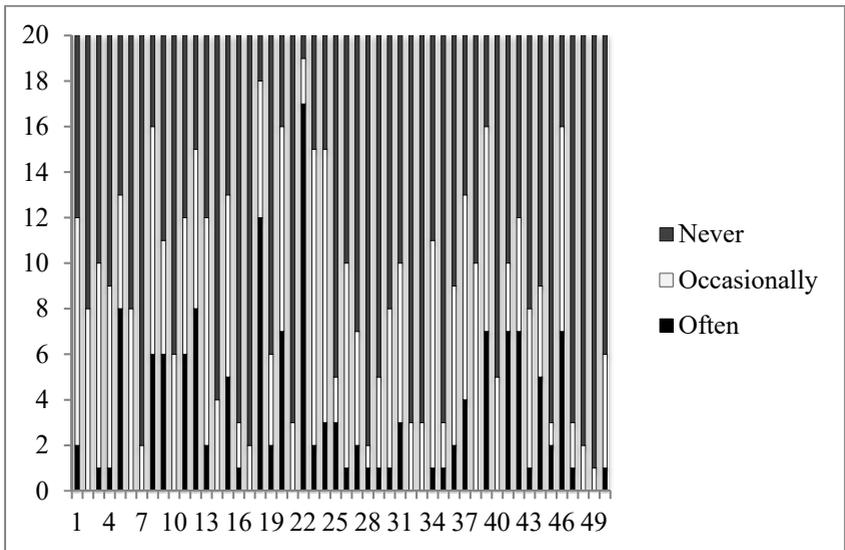
Despite its unusual nature and the existence of the much more natural *morte prematura*, *morte immatura* was accepted by two informants and considered questionable by five. A corpus search suggests that the combination exists but only in literary contexts. *Prendere passione a qualcosa* does sound slightly odd, or at least old-fashioned, yet 10 informants found it perfectly natural. The string “preso passione a” appears in Google¹⁰ more than a thousand times; this suggests that the collocation is in use but is anything but frequent. *Girare il discorso*, which was selected as a slightly odd variant of *rigirare il discorso*, was accepted by two informants and labelled questionable by 13. In Google, the string appears as many as 138,000 times. However, if we take a closer look at the occurrences we find that the meaning of the combination is mainly ‘to express a concept by means of different words’ rather than ‘to change the subject at one’s convenience’, therefore *girare il discorso* and *rigirare il discorso* seem to have two distinct nuances.

¹⁰ Google was chosen over other corpora of Italian because of its size. Whilst compiled corpora are more reliable for linguistic enquiry, Italian corpora are either too small or are made up of a limited typology of texts (e.g. newspapers).

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Graph 1. Distribution of acceptability



Graph 2. Distribution of use

5. Conclusion

Given the limited scope of this study (one bilingual dictionary examined, a small sample of collocations considered, a small number of participants involved), the conclusions we can draw cannot be overgeneralised. However, the results offer preliminary insight into a phenomenon (i.e. collocational acceptability) that calls for greater attention on the part of linguists in terms of the significant practical relevance it could have, especially for those engaged in the dictionary-making process.

From a lexicographic perspective, the fact that in 42 out of 50 cases the collocations presented were deemed unacceptable by at least one informant and up to a maximum of 13 is as interesting as it is alarming. Indeed, dictionaries are ontologically imperfect, being a simplified and static picture of something that is multifaceted and in constant transformation, yet it is surprising to learn the extent to which some of them can so poorly represent speakers' intuitions. Moreover, the data concerning use are far from encouraging as informants mainly claimed that they would not use the given collocations or that they would do so only occasionally.

It has to be noted, once again, that the degree of a dictionary's representativeness is a function of the modality of compilation: dictionaries based on corpus investigations are more dependable than those that rely solely upon the intuitions of a team of compilers. Despite their limitations, corpora provide us with solid data that should be widely acceptable, thus reducing the impact of the compilers' idiolect. Yet when it comes to the consistent employment of corpora, Italian-English lexicography appears to be lagging behind, as studies of the treatment of collocations in bilingual dictionaries suggest (Berti 2010; 2012; 2017). Furthermore, if, on the one hand the employment of English corpora has become standard practice, on the other Italian data seem to incorporate some dated material, surely assembled when corpus linguistics methods were not common practice in bilingual lexicography. Indeed, the combinations presented in this study are in all likelihood an inheritance of a rather old-fashioned way of approaching dictionary compilation.

More generally, as regards the issue of collocational acceptability, the data collected in the present study are in keeping with Greenbaum's (1970) findings that native speakers of the same language tend to disagree when asked to produce acceptability judgments concerning set phrases. In fact, none of the 50 collocations administered to the informants were given a homogeneous assessment, not even seemingly the most and least prototypical. This diversity of judgment surely depends upon variables such as the informants' background, age, provenance, education, and so on and compels scholars to restate the extremely subjective nature of each speaker's linguistic experience. Indeed, a

person’s idiolect is a unique realisation of a language, being the result of years of exposure to a series of distinctive stimuli. Therefore, no two people speaking the same language can be said to have exactly the same linguistic knowledge. Regarding collocations, if we visualise the idiolects of three speakers (A, B, C) from the same linguistic community as three circles (figs. 1, I_A , I_B & I_C), the intersection will generate the large set of word combinations that the speakers all recognise as natural (figs. 1 area I_A , I_B , & I_C), and thanks to which mutual intelligibility is possible. However, depending upon the speakers’ own linguistic experience, some collocations will be shared only between A and C (figs. 1 I_A & I_C), others between A and B (figs. 1, I_A & I_B), still others between B and C (figs. 1, I_B & I_C). The remaining peripheral areas comprise collocations that might be shared with other speakers but are not shared between A, B, or C.

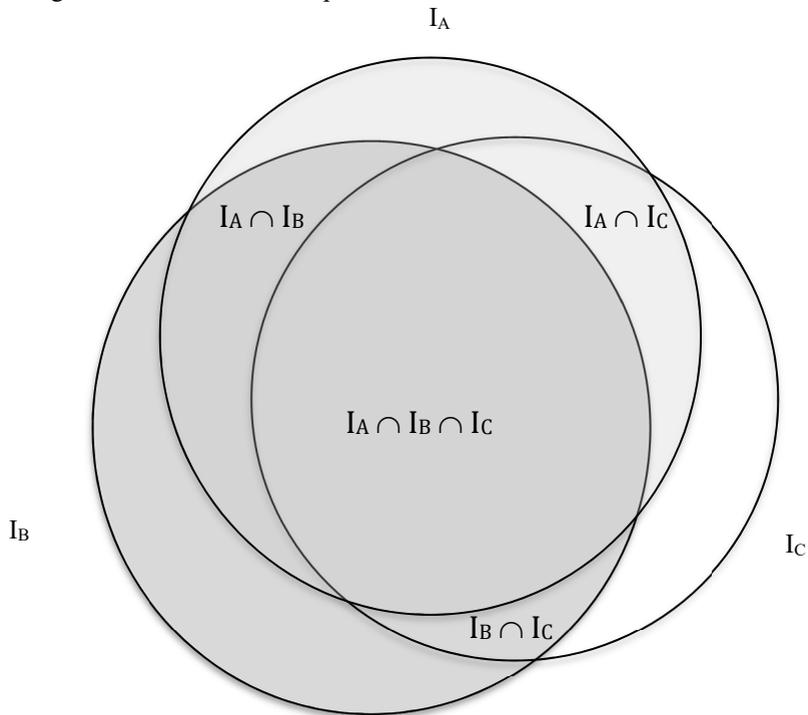


Fig. 1. Representation of the interaction among three speakers’ idiolects

Aside from diatopic and diastratic variations, there could be another factor that might have played a key role in the completion of the task, and concerns how the assignment was interpreted. In fact, the concept of acceptability can be understood either in a broad or a narrow sense. In the first, informants judge whether the given expressions make sense in their mother tongue, thus focusing upon overall semantic acceptability. Alternatively, they might gauge whether the word combinations sound recurrent, habitual, natural, emphasising the idiomatic dimension. The dichotomy between these two interpretations could be condensed in the following questions: “Could you (potentially) say XY in Italian?” vs. “Do you (actually) say XY in Italian?”. Indeed, depending upon which question the informant chooses to answer, their perception of acceptability changes, and so does the judgment accordingly. It is, therefore, possible that, in this survey the people who focused upon the idiomatic dimension were more fastidious, thus rated the combinations ‘questionable’ or ‘unacceptable’ more often; conversely, those who focused upon semantics perceived the combinations to be generally more acceptable.

What is certain is that acceptability should be thought of as a cline. Each speaker, according to their own linguistic experience, decides at which point the phrase should be located. Consequently, one could imagine using a visual method to conduct a large-scale survey on collocation acceptability that could prove to be more intuitive.

In conclusion, if on the one hand it is undoubtedly true that agreement on collocations seems to be rare among native speakers of the same language, as far as dictionaries are concerned, the employment of corpora, investigated by means of statistical tools, should ensure the selection and inclusion of more broadly acceptable material, thus limiting the presence of collocations that belong in peripheral areas of a language.

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